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The Special Theory of *Pratītyasamutpāda*: The Cycle of Dependent Origination¹

by Geshe Lhundub Sopa

“Whoever sees dependent origination
sees the Dharma. Whoever sees the
Dharma sees the Buddha.” (*Majjhima
Nikāya*, 1:28)

The idea of dependent origination, the seeing of which is said to be coextensive with the seeing of the Dharma itself, is clearly one of the most central theories in all of Buddhism. There is both the general theory and a special theory. The former is coextensive with the spectrum of particularly Buddhist theories accounting for genesis in general. The latter refers to a special application of the general theory to an explanation of the genesis of a living sentient being in *saṃsāra* and the means of that being’s potential release from such a *saṃsāric* birth. It is to this special theory of dependent origination that the above-cited *sūtra* passage refers.

This special theory is that of the cycle of the twelve *nidānas*, or twelve components of dependent origination. Having already dealt briefly with the general theory of dependent origination in a previous paper (JIABS Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 125 ff.), we proceed then to look at the cycle of twelve components, beginning with ignorance and ending with ageing and dying.

I. *Avidyā*

Thus, what is the nescience (*avidyā*) of which it is said that “because of nescience formatives (*saṃskāra*) arise”?²

Nescience generally means simply not knowing something or just a state of unknowing. However, within the traditions of Buddhism, this nescience is not a mere absence of knowing or

an absence of a true understanding, but rather the contrary of or incompatible to true understanding. It is just as untruthfulness does not mean a mere absence of speaking the truth but rather a speaking something which is the opposite of the truth, i.e., lying, or just as the unfriendliness between two persons does not mean a mere absence of friendliness but rather the opposite of friendliness, i.e., their enmity. Thus, it is stated in the *Abhidharmakośa*, “Nescience is a quality which is a contrary to understanding, like untruthful, inimicable, etc.,”³ Likewise, the *Pramāṇavārttika* says, “. . . because it is a contrary to knowing, and because it is a perception under the influence of a secondary mental component (*caitta*), nescience is a wrong perceiving.”⁴ In answering the question, “What is nescience?”, the *Pratītyasamutpāda-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa-sūtra* says,

Not knowing the limits of the past, and not knowing the limits of the future . . . not knowing actions and their maturations . . . not knowing misery, and not knowing its genesis . . . and not knowing cause . . . and not knowing virtue and nonvirtue, and not knowing transgression and nontransgression, and the to-be-cultivated and the not-to-be-cultivated . . . etc. . . .⁵

On the surface, the sūtra seems to be signifying a mere absence of knowing the past, future, cause and effect, the four truths, good and evil, etc. However, the commentaries, like Asaṅga’s *Abhidharmasamuccaya* and Vasubandhu’s *Pratītyasamutpāda-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa* rightly explain the sūtra’s real meaning of “not knowing” as that kind of not knowing which falsely misapprehends these objects. Thus, generally speaking, nescience refers to a secondary mental condition, or *caitta*, which because of its natural delusion misapprehends its own proper object.

Nescience may further be subdivided from the point of view of the two truths (*satya dvaya*) into a perverse misperception of conventional objects like cause and effect, etc., and a perverse misperception of the ultimate reality of no-self.

Here, the former, nescience in general, is called in the *Abhidharmakośa* a ground of enormous affliction (*kleśa*) because it is a concomitant of every single afflicting mental moment⁶ and consequently it may be present to both sense perception and to mental consciousness.

The latter, on the other hand, because it is the grasper of a self, is present only in mental consciousness, but not in sense perception. Here, the *Abhidharmakośa* says:

In the desire realms (*kāmadhātu*), attachment should be known as a concomitant of all the six consciousnesses. Nescience also, like attachment, should be understood to be so.⁷

Moreover, all the schools of Buddhism, both upper and lower, agree that the nescience which binds sentient beings to saṃsāra and which is the root of all the other afflictions, like attachment, etc., is the innate grasping of “me” and “mine” or the nescience which is a misperception of the reality of no-self (*nairātmya*). On this, the *Pramāṇavārttika* says:

All these evils originate from a (false) view of the perishable aggregates. This is nescience. From this (nescience), attachment arises, and from this (attachment), aversion and the like arise.⁸

Likewise, Nāgārjuna states in the *Ratnāvalī*:

As long as one grasps the aggregates, so long will one apprehend an I. If there is the grasping of an I, there is action (karma), and from that (action) again there is birth.⁹

In the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Candrakīrti says:

On seeing with true discernment that without exception the afflictors and their ills arise from a (false) view of the perishable aggregates, the yogin, by utilizing the self as an object, will nullify the self.¹⁰

Also,

I prostrate myself to compassion for those who, like the turning of a water wheel, go through saṃsāra involuntarily, first becoming fond of a self called “I” and creating attachments to things called “mine.”¹¹

Tsong kha pa, one of the great Mādhyamikas of Tibet says in his *Praise of Dependent Origination*:

Nescience is the root of whatever misfortune there is in the world. Dependent origination is taught to be that by the seeing of which one brings about a reversal.

Like this, one might go on quoting similar passages from the Buddhist sūtras and commentaries for a very long time.

Thus, for reasons already mentioned above, that nescience which is the first of the twelve components of dependent origination may be defined simply as a mental component which is delusion as to reality and which is a prime motivator of a seeding action (karma).

In the Tibetan literature dealing with the subject, a number of interesting discussions arise. For example, the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* of Asaṅga states:

Delusion (*moha*) is twofold: delusion as to the ripening of a result, and delusion as to the real. On account of delusion as to the ripening of a result, unmeritorious actions are accumulated. On account of delusion as to the real, meritorious and immutable (*acala*) actions are accumulated.¹²

Thus, it is stated that unwholesome actions are impelled by nescience as to cause and effect. Isn't this statement then inconsistent with the above definition of nescience as delusion as to the real which is a motivator of a seeding action? On close examination, there is actually no inconsistency here, for Asaṅga's statement about the impulsion of unmeritorious actions by delusion as to cause and effect is made from the point of view of the motivation which is synchronic with the action itself. On the other hand, it is from the point of view of a primary causal motivation that he explains the nescience which is delusion as to the real, i.e., the nescience which grasps a self and which is the motivator of a seeding karma. It is, moreover, just this primary causal motivation which is the actual impeller of the action, whereas the synchronic motivation is mainly the train of ideation which occurs simultaneously with the actions. This kind of Abhidharma discussion is often rather difficult to render into English briefly in an easily understandable way. The import here is that Asaṅga's two statements are from the point of view of two different modes of causality, and we are left with delusion

as to the real as that nescience which is the nescience signified by the first of the twelve components.

II. *Samskāra*

The second component of the cycle is variously called the formative (*saṃskāra*) of dependent origination or formative action (*saṃskāra-karma*). Like nescience, a formative action is a mental component, or *caitta*. It is a thrust, or proclivity, or inclination, or impulse (*cetanā*). Generally speaking, it is an impulse which is motivated by nescience and which projects or seeds that future life which is its own proper projectory or target. It is threefold: a meritorious act which seeds a birth among the fortunate transmigrants in the desire realms (*kāmadhātu*); an unmeritorious act which seeds a birth among the unfortunate transmigrants of the desire realm; and thirdly, an *acala karma*, or act which is immutable as to its outcome and which seeds a birth among the transmigrants in the two higher realms, i.e., the realms of form and of no-form.

Again, this formative action is often explained as twofold, i.e., impulse action and gathering action.¹³ Here, it is said in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, "What is action (karma)? It is impulse action and gathering action, for this is the epitome of action."¹⁴ Also, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, "Impulse is a mental action, and from this there develops bodily and vocal action."¹⁵ Here, moreover, impulse action is a mental action, whereas gathering action is explained as bodily and vocal action. The Vaibhāṣika and Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika schools of Buddhist thought regard this gathering action of body and speech as corporeal. The Sautrāntika, Yogācāra, and Svātantrika Mādhyamika schools, on the other hand, accept it as a mental component which occurs together with the activity of body and speech.

In the *Śālisambhava-sūtra*, the Buddha explains *saṃskāra* by way of analogy with causation in the external world. The accumulation of seeding actions refers to the planting of the wholesome and unwholesome seeds which project the births of sentient beings in any of the fortunate or unfortunate realms respectively by the power of the nescience (*avidyā*) which grasps a self. Here, the meaning of "to project a birth" is to cause whatever

birth occurs to occur modally, as that kind of sentient being who is born when the seeding cause encounters the appropriate germinative conditions such as craving (*trṣṇa*), appropriation (*upadāna*), etc. It is analogous to a farmer's planting at the very outset the various kinds of seeds, such as rice, wheat, barley, etc.

This seeding action is accumulated by every kind of common individual (*prthagjana*) but is not accumulated by the āryan, or Buddhist saint, for by the power of the āryan's direct perception of the reality of no-self, the potential of accumulating seeding action becomes quite debilitated, even though there still remains a residuum of a subtle self-grasping. It is just as, in a struggle, a weak person does not defeat a powerful one. Here, Nāgārjuna says, "To one who sees the truth there is no sowing. To one who is free of craving there is no rebirth."¹⁶

In the life of the āryan, there is no fresh accumulation of seeding action, even though the potentials of previous seeding actions sown formerly while that being was still in the stages of ordinary individuality are aroused from dormancy by germinative action and craving.^{16a} From the stages of the attainment of the āryan path up to the achievement of arhantship, saṃsāric birth still occurs under the power of action and afflictors, for as is taught in the above, each and every saṃsāric birth must be roused from latency by germinative action and the moisture of craving.

Thus, even though seeding actions have been accumulated, unless they are aroused from dormancy by the three—craving, appropriation, and becoming—they will not produce rebirth in saṃsāra, just as a dry seed without moisture will not produce a sprout. Therefore, Nāgārjuna's *Pratītyasamutpādahṛdaya* says, "For one who is free from craving there is no rebirth," for with the attainment of arhantship there is the realization of nirvāṇa and the eradication of rebirth in saṃsāra.

Again, actions are threefold: seeding actions, germinative actions, and completing actions. By a seeding action, just the nature which may be ripened is made to emerge. By a germinative action, the actual ripening is made to occur. By a completing action, the life which is made to arise by seeding and germinative actions is furnished with its individual peculiarities of fortune and misfortune. On this, the *Abhidharmakośa* says, "One life is sown by a single seeding action, but it has many completing actions."¹⁷

Thus, four possibilities of birth in saṃsāra may be discussed with respect to wholesome and unwholesome seeding and finishing actions. First, both seeding and completing actions are wholesome, as in the birth of deities and the most fortunate of humans. Secondly, both are unwholesome, as in the births of the three unfortunate realms. Thirdly, seeding action is wholesome, whereas completing actions are unwholesome, as in instances of the births of humans whose lives are impoverished, ailing and short. Finally, seeding action is unwholesome, whereas completing action is wholesome, as in the instances of the births of animals who live as pets in ease and comfort under someone's loving care.

III. Vijñāna

The third component of the cycle of dependent origination is consciousness, and it is explained as twofold: as a consciousness at the time of the cause, or a causal consciousness, and as a consciousness at the time of the effect, or an effect consciousness. Here, a causal consciousness refers to the prime consciousness on which is fixed the impression deposited by a seeding action. Whenever either a wholesome or an unwholesome seeding action is done, its impression or seed has to continue on without interruption from the time of the last moment of the action until the time of the ripening of the seed of that action. The kind of consciousness which is the depository or keeper of the seed is a causal consciousness.

When, then, the impression or seed ripens and gives rise to some sort of birth later on, that first moment of consciousness becoming conjoined with a life in a mother's womb is what is meant by an effect consciousness. According to the Yogācārins, this kind of causal and effect consciousness is *ālayavijñāna*, or foundation consciousness. In the systems of both the Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika, as well as in those of the Mādyamika, it is a stabler sort of mental consciousness, or *manovijñāna*.

IV. Nāmarūpa

The name/form (*nāmarūpa*) of the cycle of dependent origi-

nation is the fourth component. Very roughly speaking, it corresponds to what in the non-Buddhist systems might be called body and soul, or at least a phase of it. Buddhism, of course, avoids such a label because it is referring specifically to a temporal or developmental phase of a multiple composite. We may take the example of a human life. From the time of a consciousness' first union with an embryo in the mother's womb up to the time of the evolvment of the six sense organs, the five psycho-physical aggregates—the five skandhas of Buddhism—are already present. Among these five, the body, consisting of the mixed parental blood and semen, is designated "form," whereas the remaining four mental aggregates as they exist in this developmental period are designated "name" because they form a basis or referent for naming.

All the schools of Buddhism accept that in the realms of desire and of form there is both name and form. However, some of these schools accept that corporeity is entirely absent in the realm of no-form (*arūpyadhātu*), and for these there exists only name, or the four noncorporeal aggregates in the formless realm. On the other hand, the others accept that whereas there is no gross body in the formless realm, there is nonetheless an extremely subtle corporeity. For these, both the name and form are present even in the formless realm. Such differences notwithstanding, for the Buddhist schools the principal basis or primary referent which is being designated by names like "sentient being," "life," "person," "personality," etc., are the four mental aggregates and not form or body.

V. *Ṣaḍāyatana*

The six sense organs (*ṣaḍāyatana*) of the cycle of dependent origination is the fifth component. Again, we can look at a human life as the example. During the period of gestation in the mother's womb, the sense organs develop gradually in stages. Thus, "the six sense organs" refers to the developmental phase from the time of the completion of the evolvment of the sense organs up to the drawing together of object, organ, and consciousness—albeit in a diffuse manner—up to the time of the development of the capability of experiencing an object as attrac-

tive, unattractive, or neutral. Buddhism distinguishes four modes of birth: from a womb (like humans); from an egg (like birds); from warmth and moisture (like certain insects); and by a miraculous birth (like gods). In instances of the three former kinds of birth, the sense organs are said to develop in stages. In instances of divine birth as well as birth in the intermediate state (*antarābhava*, *bardo*), it is said that there is no gradual evolution of the sense organs but that they occur wholly and all at once. Thus, with the completion of name and form, an essential aspect of embodiment is realized. Next, with the completion of the organs of sense the specific physical properties of such embodiment are realized, and thereby the physical components become utilizable instruments.

VI. *Sparśa*

Contact (*sparśa*) is the sixth component. This contact depends on the meeting or drawing together of the three, an outer object of cognition, an inner sense organ, and a moment of consciousness or cognition. In dependence on this meeting there arises the capacity to utilize fluctuations of the object-field in terms of attractiveness, and neutrality, and this is contact. Six kinds of contact are distinguished: tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and mental.

VII. *Vedanā*

Feeling (*vedanā*) is the seventh component of the cycle of dependent origination. This feeling is the appearance of any pleasant, disagreeable, or indifferent feeling consistent with the realization by contact of the threefold fluctuation of the object field. This is simply to say that on encountering an attractive object there arises a pleasant feeling; on encountering an unattractive object there is a disagreeable feeling; and on encountering a neutral object the feeling is one of indifference. Thus, contact is the object side of experience, and feeling is the subject side, on the latter of which the ripening of action (*karma*) primarily occurs. Consequently, when these two are completed, then

the full potentiality of experiencing is also completed.

From nescience up to here constitutes one set of components of the cycle of dependent origination, i.e., a causal sequence which is based on seeding action. From the point of view of the cause of seeding action, there is a threefold series of causes consisting of nescience, formatives, and consciousness. From the point of view of the effect or the result sown, there is the fourfold series consisting of name and form, the six sense organs, contact, and feeling.

In the *Śālisambhava-sūtra*,¹⁸ these are explained on the analogy of the production of a crop. Thus nescience is comparable to the farmer who sows a field, formatives or formative action to the field itself, and consciousness to the seed sown, from which arises the sprout of name and form. Similarly, from the point of view of the causes which are the sower of a birth, nescience is the sower because it is the prime mover of an action. Then, just as from the field various good and bad crops are produced, from action also there is a production of various good and bad maturation results, and so these actions are like the field, and consciousness, because it contains the potential to produce the fruit of action, is like the seed. Thus, with these three are completed the principal causes on which depend the sowing of a saṃsāric birth or life that will not be untouched by misery.

The same is the case with regard to the production of the saṃsāric result. From the point of view of the genus or type of birth, this is just name and form or the actualization of the five skandhas. From the point of view of the further specifics of the life, there is the body and the range of experience. Of these, the body is subsumed by the six sense organs, and the range of experience by contact together with feeling, the former referring to the objective experience component and the latter to the subjective component. In this manner, the result or that which has been sewn into saṃsāra may be explained as fourfold.

VIII. *Trṣṇa*

The eighth component is craving (*trṣṇa*). In Buddhism, crav-

ing in general is seen as threefold: desire-craving, as in wishing to meet with happiness; apprehension-craving as in wishing to avoid the miserable; and existential-craving as in being covertly attached to one's body and bases of personality. Here, as the eighth component of the cycle of dependent origination, craving is particularly the craving which springs from the experiencing of feeling which is the mature fruit of a seed sown in previous life and which first awakens from dormancy the seeds or propensities sown by a seeding action. On account of this latter characteristic, craving initiates a series of germinative causes.

IX. *Upadāna*

The appropriation (*upadāna*) of the cycle of dependent origination is the ninth component. This refers to the attachment which greatly augments the above craving and strengthens and assists the actualization of the potency of a propensity deposited by a seeding action. Four kinds of appropriation are distinguished: appropriation by desire; appropriation by false views; appropriation by a perception of a self; and appropriation by false ethics and false religious activity. Examples of these are as follows: of the first, desire for attractive shapes and sounds, and for life; of the second, attachment to bad views, with the exception of the wrong view which grasps a self; of the third, the wrong view which grasps a self; and finally, the fourth is attachment to worthless systems of ethics and to worthless religious methods and duties.

X. *Bhava*

The tenth component of the cycle of dependent origination is a mode of existence (*bhava*). The previous two, craving and appropriation, have already aroused from dormancy and strengthened the proclivity deposited by a seeding action. Now, there is a further germinative action which actualizes a future life, and this action, which straightaway without an interruption or intervention of any other life actually brings about the future life, is called "existence" or "mode of existence" (*bhava*). Again,

using the analogue of external causation, this is just as warmth, moisture and all the other necessary causes ripen and condition a seed so that a sprout is straightaway produced without the seed's lying dormant for any longer period of time.

Thus, to accomplish the production of a saṃsāric birth, there is a need for two distinctive periods of causation, both a period of seeding and a period of germination, or of actualization. These two kinds of action are like father and mother, and each period requires a complete set of afflictors coupled with action. For the period of seeding causes, nescience is the afflictor and formatives are the action. For the period of germinative or actualizing causes, both craving and appropriation are the afflictors, and existence, or mode of existence, is the action. Here, Nāgārjuna says, "The first, eighth, and ninth are afflictors. The second and tenth are action."¹⁹ Likewise, Vasubandhu states in the *Abhidharmakośa*, "There are three afflictors and two actions."²⁰

Generally speaking, this existence (*bhava*) and saṃsāra, or the round of suffering existences, are synonyms. When one subdivides them, there are four subperiods constituting the round of existence, i.e., intermediate existence, natal existence, pre-death existence, and dying existence. The first period, or intermediate existence, is the period between the dying existence of the former life and the natal experience of this life. The second period is just the first moment of conception in the mother's womb. The third is from the moment immediately following the first moment of conception to the moment just before death. The fourth is the actual moment of death.

XI. Jāti

The eleventh component of dependent origination is birth, which here in the cycle of the twelve designates the state of the matured five aggregates at the moment when by the force of the above mode of existence they first become conjoined in birth. Buddhism explains the places of saṃsāric birth as four-fold, i.e., womb birth, egg birth, heat and moisture birth, and magical creation birth. Denizens of the hells, deities, and the beings of the intermediate state are only magically born. Pretas

are generally magically born, although some are said to be womb born. Men and animals are said to share all four places of birth. Here, the *Abhidharmakośa* says, "Among the four places of the births of sentient beings, birth from eggs, etc., men and animals share the four. Hell denizens, deities, and the beings of the intermediate state are magically born. Pretas are born from the womb also."²¹

XII. *Jarāmaraṇa*

The twelfth component is age (*jarā*) and death (*marāṇa*). From the second moment of birth until death, the now matured five aggregates become older and older, and this aspect of theirs is the ageing of the cycle of dependent origination. The destruction of the continuum of the seemingly identical individual is what is signified as death in the cycle. The two are counted as one, since death may occur without the white hair, wrinkles, etc., which are conventionally understood by the process of ageing. Also, the sorrow, lamentation, misery, despair, and anguish, even though they are explained as the concomitants of old age and death, are not reckoned as separate from the twelfth component, for the similar reason that these do not inevitably arise in every experiencing of the death of the life which was born from action and afflictors, for there are some who, like monks who maintain an excellence of *śīla*, die with their minds and bodies at ease. Nonetheless, these are taught together with old age and death in order to show the objectionableness of birth in *samsāra*.

With this we come to the end of our abbreviated description of the twelve components of the cycle of dependent origination.

Many essentials remain yet to be set forth, for the cycle of the twelve components does not come to life until one looks at their traditional groupings and distributions as causes and effects. Some of the major of these patterns of causation need especially to be looked at, in particular: their grouping into a seeding cause and effect and a germinative cause and effect; into a threefold, afflictors (*kleśa*), actions (*karma*), and miseries (*duḥkha*); into the realities of misery and its genesis; and finally

into sets of one and two lives. Thus, these twelve are variously seen to form a cycle of causal genesis which perpetually renews itself. Moreover, for Buddhism, there exists the possibility of the cycle's being stopped by the extirpation of the nescience by which it is perpetuated. These are subjects which I hope to be able to treat at some little length at another time.

NOTES

1. This paper is a continuation of a treatment of the subject of dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) originally begun in "The Tibetan *Wheel of Life*: Iconography and Doxography," *JIABS* Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 125–145. It was delivered at the IABS Conference at Bologna, Italy in July of 1985. I wish to thank Elvin W. Jones for his literary and editorial assistance.

2. *Tibetan Tripitaka, Peking Edition* (TTPE) ed. D.T. Suzuki (Tokyo-Kyoto, 1957), v. 34, p. 306. Also, see my translation in *JIABS* Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 137–140.

3. TTPE, v. 115, p. 119.

4. TTPE, v. 130, p. 87.

5. TTPE, v. 34, p. 306.

6. E.g., "Delusion [i.e., nescience], heedlessness, lack of faith, mental sloth and fascination are always present to an afflicted mind." TTPE, v. 115, p. 118.

7. Tibetan Tripitaka, sDe dge edition, preserved at the Faculty of Letters University of Tokyo (TTDG) (Tokyo, 1980).

8. TTPE, v. 130, p. 81.

9. TTPE, v. 129, p. 174.

10. TTPE, v. 98, p. 104.

11. TTPE, v. 98, p. 100.

12. TTDG, v. 12, p. 43.

13. "Impulse action" and "gathering action" are a free translation, or rather a paraphrase, of *sems pa'i las* and *bsam pa'i las* respectively.

14. TTDG, v. 12, p. 43.

15. TTPE, v. 115, p. 120.

16. TTPE, v. 120, p. 302.

16a. Having already identified an important distinction between actions (and likewise causes) as seeding and germinative, we continue to identify these distinctions analogically as "seeding" and "germinating" rather than use the more common "projecting" and "actualizing," which literally translate *'phen byed kyilas* and *'grub byed kyilas* respectively.

17. TTPE, v. 115, p. 122.

18. TTPE, v. 34, p. 305.

19. TTPE, v. 115, p. 119.

20. TTPE, v. 115, p. 119.

21. Pretas are generally said to be born magically, however, in the Abhidharma system some are said to be born from the womb, and this is the meaning of the "also."



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