

4. Interpretations of Dependent Origination

The teaching of Dependent Origination may be summarized as follows:

1. An explanation describing the evolution of the world and the cycle of all life, by interpreting some of the Buddha's words in a more literal way, for example the Buddha's teaching on the 'origin of the world' (*loka-samudaya*).¹

2. An explanation describing the birth and death of human beings and the origin and cessation of human suffering. This explanation can be sub-divided into two further categories:

A. A broad description of one life to another: the passing from one realm of existence to another. This is also a literal explanation and it is commonly found in the commentaries, where it is systematized and described in great, and sometimes intimidating, detail.

B. A description of a cycle present at each moment of life. This description offers an interpretation of this teaching implicit in the previous description (2.A), but it focuses on a deeper meaning of specific Pali terms, or on their practical significance. This interpretation explains the whole cycle of dependent origination in terms of present experience, which is considered to be in line with the Buddha's intention and the real objective of this teaching, as evidenced by many discourses of the Buddha, including the Cetanā Sutta,² the Dukkhanirodha Sutta,³ and the Lokanirodha Sutta.⁴ [85] In the Abhidhamma an entire section is dedicated to the complete sequence of dependent origination arising in a single mind moment.⁵

In reference to explanation #1, some people interpret Dependent Origination as a theory of the origin ('genesis') of the universe, declaring ignorance as a 'first cause'⁶ in a process followed and completed by the remaining eleven factors. This interpretation leads to the view that Buddhism resembles other religions and philosophies that posit a prime agent, for example a creator god, who is the source of all beings and all things. According to this interpretation, the only difference is that these theistic doctrines portray the creation and governing of the world by a

¹ E.g.: S. II. 73.

² S. II. 65.

³ S. II. 72-3.

⁴ S. II. 73.

⁵ The Abhidhamma-bhājanīya of the Paccayākāra-Vibhaṅga: Vbh. 138-92.

⁶ [Translator: a form of 'cosmological argument' or 'argument from first cause.'] Some proponents of this argument define *avijjā* as an 'unknowing entity,' which refers to materiality as the origin of life. Others translate *avijjā* as the 'unknowable' or the 'unfathomable,' equating *avijjā* with God. And the term *saṅkhārā* (the second factor) is occasionally misdefined as 'all conditioned phenomena.'

force outside and above nature, while Buddhism describes a causal, natural process. This interpretation, however, is inaccurate, because any teaching that professes a first cause or prime agent contradicts the teaching of Dependent Origination or of Specific Conditionality. The teaching of Dependent Origination offers an objective account of causality, that all conditioned things are interrelated and interdependent. They arise in a successive, causal process without beginning or end. A first cause, either a creator god or other agent, is impossible. Therefore, the explanation of Dependent Origination as describing the evolution of the world is only suitable in the context of explaining a natural, causal process of continual growth and disintegration, without beginning and without end.

One way of determining whether an interpretation of Dependent Origination is correct or not is to consider the Buddha's intention in teaching the Dhamma. The Buddha focused on things that can be applied to bring about well-being, that are relevant to everyday life, and that solve real life problems. He considered attempts to reach the truth through metaphysical speculation and debate to be fruitless. Determining what is truly Buddha-Dhamma thus requires a consideration of a teaching's ethical and practical value. [86]

To find success and fulfilment, a person cannot rely on hope, desire, fate, divine beings, or supernatural powers. One only reaches success through concerted action, which has three attributes. First, one must be self-reliant and generate the conditions that lead to success. Second, to generate these conditions, one must properly understand each factor within the dynamic of nature in which one is engaged as well as the mutual relationship between factors; wisdom is therefore an essential element in the process. Third, the knowledge of causal connections reduces or eliminates the mistaken identification with things as a 'self.' This knowledge promotes an appropriate relationship to things and leads to inner freedom.

The worldview that stems from explanation #1 of Dependent Origination, above, is suitable and accords with the aims of Buddha-Dhamma. It provides a broad perspective that things proceed according to cause and effect, that they depend on natural conditions, and that they neither originate from a creator god nor do they arise randomly or by accident. Nevertheless, although the explanation of Dependent Origination as describing a beginningless and endless evolution of the world is acceptable, its practical value is limited. It is not yet secure or stable enough to guarantee the three attributes mentioned above (especially the third attribute of promoting freedom).

To truly benefit from this broad interpretation of Dependent Origination, one must refine one's investigation by discerning the causal, interdependent nature of all conditioned phenomena. When one develops this clarity in every moment of one's life, the three attributes mentioned earlier are complete, and at the same time one reaches the true objective of the interpretation related to the evolution of the world.

The explanation of Dependent Origination as the evolution of the world, either in its broadest sense or in a more refined way, is a contemplation of external phenomena. The second explanation, on the other hand, emphasizes the internal life of human beings, including the dynamic of human suffering.

The first sub-division (2.A) is favoured by the commentaries, where it is explained in great detail.⁷ The commentaries coin many new descriptive terms for this process in order to construct a clear, organized system. The disadvantage, however, is that this system can appear inflexible, and to students new to Buddhism, rather arcane. The second sub-division (2.B) is directly linked to the first (2.A), as will be described below. [87]

⁷ See: Vism. 517-86; VbhA. 129-213 (pages 199-213 illustrate the complete process of dependent origination in a single mind moment.)