

Pre-Buddhist Theories of Causation

The Vedic hymns exemplify how Āryans developed the ideas of causal theories within a long period of time. Natural phenomena such as rain were considered as some kinds of actions controlled by divine powers. This is how they defied the nature by positing inner wills or agents in them. This phenomenon can be taken as the primitive stage of the origin of various causal theories. Some lines of a Vedic hymn can be quoted as an example.

Give us, O Maruts, the rain of heaven; pour forth the streams of your stallion. Hither with this thunder come, pouring down waters as the divine spirit our father...
Thou hast shed rain: now wholly cease; thou hast made the deserts passable again. Thou hast made the plants to grow for the sake of food; and though hast found a hymn of praise from [thy] creatures.

Later on during the period of henotheistic belief, the cosmic law (ṛta) or the regularity of functioning of all phenomena was considered as unalterable and it is controlled by deities like Indra, Varuna, Mitra and etc.

When we refer to the Buddhist and Non-Buddhist teachings we can identify various types of causal theories existed in Pre-Buddhistic India. Both Vedic and non-Vedic teachings and Buddhist sūtras provide us details about those causal theories. In early Vedic period, people believed that external powers or various gods are responsible for running the nature and functioning of phenomena. The idea of polytheism was due to that thinking and eventually the idea of creator God came into existence and thereafter Vedic people gave the authority to the God and believed that everything is due to divine creation. Not only about the external world but also the fate of the human being also was decided by the God. However, various other theories of causation came into existence in the course of time about the origin of the world, happiness and unhappiness and the self. There were four kinds of causal theories in the time of the Buddha. The Udānapāli explains about these four theories.

There were four kinds of causal theories in the time of the Buddha. These four theories are:

- i. Self causation - *Sayaṃkataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ attā ca loko ca*
- ii. External causation - *Paraṃkataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ attā ca loko ca*
- iii. Internal as well as External causation - *Sayaṃ katañca paraṃ katañca attā ca loko ca*
- iv. Neither internal nor external but fortuitous - *Asayaṃkāraṃ aparaṃkāraṃ adhiccasamuppannaṃ sukhadukkhaṃ attā ca loko ca.*

The theory of ‘self causation’ or the ‘self-caused’ is the first causal theory. As Prof. Kalupahana points out this theory is intimately connected with two concepts, the concept soul (Ātman) and the concept of evolution. “The basic assumption of this metaphysical

postulate was the cause and the effect are identical in essence”¹ Referring to dukkha, this theory explains that it is due to self-causation that we are having dukkha but nothing else.

The second concept is external causation (**paramkata**). The external cause means something external such as the God. **Paramkata** theory is criticized in Buddhism specially, because of the denial of validity of human exertion by positing a principle external to man as the cause of his pleasure and pain.

The third causal theory is **sayam katham ca param katham ca** which means a combination of the first two theories of self causation and external causation. The fourth concept is neither internal nor external causation but fortuitous (**asayamkaram aparamkaram** or **adhiccasamuppannam**). **Adhiccasamuppanna** theory is opposite of **Paṭiccasamuppanna** theory, which Buddhism presents and stands for. The **Adhiccasamuppanna** theory denies all forms of causation.

The theory of self causation can be traced back to the **Ṛg-Vedic** period. The idea of the creative evolution was taught by **Brahmins**. However the theory of self causation prevailed in India before the theory of creation. The theory of evolution came to be associated with the theory of creation. The theory of divine creation is a pre-buddhistic theory. The omniscient and omnipotent God is the cause and creator of everything.

Later on some new theories came up against Brahmanical or Vedic theory. There were three types of Naturalism theories.

- i. Materialism (lokāyatavāda) by **Cārvākas**, **Lokāyatas** or **Bṛhaspatya**
- ii. **Ājīvaka** theory (niyativāda - fatalism)
- iii. Normal naturalism (svabhāvavāda) by **Makkhali Gosāla**

Materialists considered matter as the ultimate fact and all phenomena including consciousness also taken as matter. Four heretics out of six **Ajitakesakambali**, **Pakudhakaccāyana**, **Pūrṇakassapa** and **Makkhali Gosāla** accepted the theory of naturalism of determinism (**svabhāvavāda**).

Ājīvakas also accepted materialism and they also believed in determinism or **niyativāda**. **Makkhali Gosāla**'s theory of naturalism is elaborated in **Sāmañaphala Sutta** as follows.

There is neither cause nor basis for the impurity of living beings; they become impure without cause or basis. There is neither cause nor basis for the purity of living beings; they become pure without cause or basis. There is no deed performed either by oneself or by others, no human exertion or action, no strength, no courage, no human endurance or human prowess. All beings, all that have breath, all that are born, all that have life are without power, strength, energy; have evolved according to destiny (**niyati**), species

¹ The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p.5

(**saṅgati**), and nature (**bhāva**); and experience pleasure and pain in the six types of existence.²

In the **Devadaha Sutta** of **Majjhima Nikāya** five causal theories are found.

- i. **Pubbekatahetu** - Jain theory of kamma – past karmic determinism
- ii. **Issaranimmānahetu** – The theory of creation
- iii. **Saṅgatibhāvahetu** – Theory of nature
- iv. **Abhijātihetu** – The reason of destiny
- v. **Diṭṭhadhammahetu** – **Upakkamahetu**, the validity of human exertion.

The **Pubbekatahetuvāda** is belonged to Jainism. Their view is that everything happens due to past kamma. Therefore, they advocated rigid austerities to torture the body. They practised self-mortification Because of two reasons. One reason is in order to get rid of past kamma and the other one is not to create any new bad kamma. By practicing rigid austerities they try to liberate the soul. Even though Buddhism rejects both extremes, eternalism and materialism, the Buddha had critical view on materialism but He had more sympathy towards eternalism than criticism. The reason is the materialism leads the way to immorality. Therefore, the Buddha used three strong words, **hīno** (inferior), **gammo** (rustic or vulgar), and **pothujjaniko** (worldly) to criticize it. The terms, **anariyo** (ignoble) **anatta saṃhito** (fruitless) are common to both extremes while the word **dukkho** (suffering) used only for self mortification. Self mortification is devoid of above mentioned three asocial features, inferior, vulgar and worldly. But certainly it is suffering (**dukkho**), ignoble (**anariyo**) and fruitless (**anatta saṃhito**). Other four theories **Issaranimmāna**, **Saṅgatibhāva**, **Abhijāti** and **Diṭṭhadhamma** are also criticized in Buddhism. While rejecting all heretical views the Buddha explained the theory of **Dependent Origination** concerning all phenomena.

The Buddhist Causal Theory (**Paṭiccasamuppāda**)

The teaching of **Paṭiccasamuppāda** can be considered as the heart of Buddhist teaching or the central teaching of Buddhism. This specific teaching is unique to Buddhism and it is one of the distinguished teachings which Buddhism differs from other religions. According to the **Brahmajāla Sutta**, in the 6th century B.C. sixty two heretical philosophical views were prevailing in India. All these views were belonged to either **Sassatadiṭṭhi** (the view of eternalism) or **Ucchedadiṭṭhi** (the view of nihilism). But the Buddha explained His new teaching without falling into these two extremes. He used the middle path to explain His teaching. That is nothing but the theory of **Dependent Origination** or the doctrine of middle way. According to **Kaccāyana Gotta Sutta** of **Saṃyutta Nikāya** the Buddha addresses **Kaccāyana** as follows. “*The world, O kaccāyana proceeds on a duality, of (the view of) existence and (the view of) non-existence. ... Not approaching either extreme the Tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle (tathāgato majjhena dhammam deseti)*”³

² The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p.32-33

³ Sa yutta Nik ya, II, p.17

According to Buddhist teaching, nothing can be arisen through a single cause but due to causes and conditions. Everything is interdependently arisen; nothing is independently arisen. Buddhism explains about both external and internal world standing on this theory of causation or causality. But Buddhism focuses much on internal world while paying less attention of the origin of external world. That is why the Buddha said that we can find the Four Noble Truths within this fathom long body. “**imasmimyeva byāmatte kalebare sasaññimhi samanake lokañca paññapemi lokasamudayañca lokanirodhañca lokanirodhagāminiñca paṭipadanti**”.⁴ Therefore each individual is a separate world. According to Buddhist teaching nothing can be existed in the universe behind the theory of dependent arising. Therefore, **paṭiccasamuppāda** teaching is the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism.

The Dependent Origination or **paṭiccasamuppāda** exists in the world whether the Buddhas born or not born. The Buddha said: “**Uppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ , t̥hitāva sā dhātu dhammat̥hitatā dhammaniyāmatā idappaccayatā.**”⁵ “Whether there is an arising of Tathāgatas or no arising of Tathāgatas, that element still persists, the stableness of the Dhamma, the fixed course of the Dhamma, specific conditionality”. According to this interpretation it is clearly shown that the theory of Dependent Origination is not limited for any particular time or period. It is the process of nature which is common for all phenomena in three periods of time: **atīta** (past), **paccuppanna** (present) and **anāgata** (future). No one can deny this universal truth. Here the Buddha uses another three names to introduce Paṭiccasamuppāda. They are **Dhammat̥hititā , Dhammaniyāmatā** and **Idappaccayatā**. Many people misunderstand that **Paṭiccasamuppāda** means only the twelve factors or twelve links. The twelve factors only describe the process of life and death or saṃsāric life process. Then what about the whole phenomena? We can apply this theory for any thing in the universe because everything origins according to causality. Before we go to that point we will observe the twelve links **Paṭiccasamuppāda**.

Avijjāpaccayā sañhkārā- From dependence on ignorance arise karma formations.

Sañkhāra paccayā viññānaṃ - From dependence on karma formations arises consciousness.

Viññāna paccayā nāmarūpaṃ - From dependence on consciousness arise mind and matter.

Nāmarūpa paccayāsalāyatanaṃ - From dependence on mind and matter arise the six sense-bases.

Salāyatana paccayā phasso – From dependence on six senses bases arises contact.

⁴ *Saṃyutta Nikāya, Rohitassa Sutta, Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā CD ROM*

⁵ *Saṃyutta Nikāya II, Pccaya Sutta*

Phassa paccayāvedanā- From dependence on contact arises feeling.

Vedanāpaccayātanhā- From dependence on feeling arises craving.

Tanhāpaccayā upādānaṃ - From dependence on craving arises grasping.

Upādāna paccayā bhavo – From dependence on grasping arises becoming.

Bhava paccayā jāti – From dependence on becoming arises birth.

Jāti paccayā jarā-maraṇa-soka-parideva-dukkha-domannssu-pāyāsā sambhavanti. Evametassa kevallassa dukkhakkhandassa samudayo hoti. – From dependence on birth arises decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair will arise. Thus all mass of suffering arises.

In the process of Saṃsāra these twelve links are combined together. When we talk about Saṃsāric life, it is easy to get a clear picture through the understanding of short form sūtra or formula.

That is: **Imasmim sati idaṃ hoti. Imassa uppādā idaṃ uppajjati.**

Imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti. Imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.

When this is, that is; this arising that arises.

When this is not, that is not; this ceasing that ceases.

We called this formula **idappaccayatā** or the theory of dependent arising. According to this theory we can explain about all phenomena and its arising and ceasing.

If we talk about any phenomena we can analyze it according to the theory of **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. For an instance, the process of recognizing a form is described in the **Mudhupiṇḍika Sutta** as follows. “**Cakkhuncāvuso, paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ. Tinnāṃ saṃgati phasso. Phassa paccayāvedanā. Yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti. Yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakkheti. Yaṃ vitakkheti taṃ papañceti ...**”⁶

The literal meaning of this passage is thus. “*Brethren, dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of these three contact arises. Dependent on contact feeling arises. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates*”. **Paṭiccasamuppāda** theory is clearly can be seen in this process. We can quote another instance from the **Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta**. In this Sutta it explains how problems occur in the society due to poverty. “**Iti kho bhikkhave adhanānaṃ dhane anuppādīyamāne dāliddiyaṃ vepullamagamāsi. Dāliddiyaṃ vepulla gate adinnādānaṃ vepullamagamāsi. Adinnādāne vepulla gate satthaṃ vepullamagamāsi. Satthe veulla gate paṇātipāto vepullamagamāsi ...**”⁷

The meaning is; *when the money is not coming to the needy, the poverty arises. When the poverty has arisen theft arises. When the theft has arisen weapon arises. When the weapon*

⁶ Madhupi ikasutta , Cha hasa g yan CD ROM

⁷ Cakkavattis han dasutta , Cha hasa g yan CD ROM

has arisen killing arises... Numerous problems occur in this world in this way. So we can apply this theory for any kinds of process whether external or internal.

Is it all that Buddhism explains about the arising of phenomena? Certainly not, having shown the arising of the life and death or *sa s ra*, Buddhism teaches the way to get rid of all kinds of suffering as well. That is the most important part. There are two methods of **Paṭiccasamuppāda**, which are called **onward** and **backward** or the **ascending order (samudaya)** and **descending order (nirodha)**. In ascending order it explains the arising of sufferings while descending order explaining the way of cessation of suffering. For an instance we can explain like this. *Through the total fading away and extinction of ignorance, karma-formations are extinguished. Through the extinction of karma-formations, consciousness is extinguished.* Following this method we can find the answer for any type of problem. Proper understanding of the factors or causes of whatsoever conflicts, problems can be resolved using this theory. When we eradicate the cause there is no more result to be found.

Even though it is easy to explain or talk about **Paṭiccasamuppāda**, it is indeed difficult to realize it. There are hundreds of prominent Buddhist scholars in the world both ordained and lay. They explain **Paṭiccasamuppāda** in various and colorful ways. But it is very difficult to find a person who has realized this profound teaching. That is why the Buddha told to **Ven. Ānanda** not to take it as an easy teaching. Having heard the profound teaching of **Paṭiccasamuppāda** once **Ven. Ānanda** expressed his idea as follows. *“It is amazing, lord, it’s astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be”* Retorting **Ven. Ānanda** the Buddha advised not to think like that because people are reborn in this *sa s ra* due to lack of understanding **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. *“Don’t say that Ānanda. Don’t say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations.* In **Mahānidāna Sutta** we find this exhortation. *“Māhevaṃ , Ānanda, avaca, māhevaṃ , Ānanda, avaca. Gambhīrocāyaṃ , Ānanda, paṭiccasamuppādo gambhīrova bhāso ca. Etassa, Ānanda, dhammassa ananubodhā appaṭivedhā evamayam pajā tantākulakajātā kulāguṇṭhikajātā , muñjababbaja bhūtā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ saṃsarati nātivattati”*⁸

The Buddha emphasized the importance of **Paṭiccasamuppāda** giving it the top most place in Buddhism. The Buddha said: *“one who sees Paṭiccasamuppāda sees the Dhamma. One who sees the Dhamma sees Paṭiccasamuppāda.”*

**“Yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati – so dhammaṃ passati
Yo dhammaṃ passati so - paṭiccasamuppāda passati.”**⁹

⁸ Mahānidāna Sutta, Chatṭhasaṃgāyanā CD ROM

⁹ Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta, Chatṭhasaṃgāyanā CD ROM

To realize Dhamma we have to realize **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. **Samsara** or the process of repeated existence only can be stopped understanding this universal truth. *If one sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha. If one sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma.* The Buddha gave this advice to Ven. Vakkali who was pious and used to see only the Buddha's physical body without practicing the Dhamma. “**Yo kho, vakkali, dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati, Yo maṃ passati so dhamma passati...**”¹⁰

Hearing the very first sermon of the Buddha Ven. **Koṇḍañña** realised the truth. Describing what he understood, the **Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta** explains: “...And when this exposition was propounded, the Venerable **Koṇḍañña** obtained the pure and spotless eye of the Truth (that is to say, the following knowledge): ‘Whatsoever is subject to the condition of origination, is subject also to the condition of cessation.’ “**Imasmiṃ ca pana veyyākaraṇasmim bhaññamāne yasmato koṇḍañña assa virajaṃ vītamalaṃ dhammacakkhuṃ udapādi: “yañkiñci samudaya dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammanti”**”¹¹ Here **Dhammacakkhu** is nothing but understanding of **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. **Dhammacakkhu** or the eye of the truth arose in Ven Koṇḍañña when he realised the truth of conditioned phenomena. We can quote another instance to support this idea. Just after hearing only one stanza from **Thera Assaji**, the **Wanderer (paribrājaka) Upatissa** or **Sāriputta** realised the truth. What did he realise? According to **Mahāvagga** he too realised the theory of **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. The Dhamma exposition of **Thera Assaji** was based on **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. Actually it talks about the Buddhist causal theory. The stanza uttered by arahant Assaji is thus.

**“Ye dhammāhetuppabhavā-tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha
Tesaṃca yo nirodho - evaṃ vādi mahā samaṇo”**¹²

‘Of all objects which proceed from a cause, the Tathāgata has explained the cause, and He has explained their cessation also; this is the Doctrine of the Great samaṇa.’

Then to **Wanderer Sāriputta**, as he heard this Dhamma exposition, the dustless, stainless, Dhamma eye arose in him: Whatever is subject to origination they all subject to cessation. Therefore, definitely we can come to a conclusion clearly, considering all these instances. That is, one who sees **Paṭiccasamuppāda** sees the Dhamma. One who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha. One who sees the Buddha sees the **Paṭiccasamuppāda**.

¹⁰Vakkalisutta, Cha hasa g yan CD ROM

¹¹Dhammacakkapavattanasutta, Chan hasa g yan CD ROM

¹²Mah vagga, Cha hasa g yan CD ROM