

Dependent Origination and the Four Noble Truths: the Core Teaching of the Buddha¹

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1. Introduction

In general, there are two doctrines which refer to the central concepts of traditional Buddhism. Firstly, dependent origination, one of the most important Buddhist principle, is the doctrine that describes the law of nature in which all things are interconnected and effecting to each other. Moreover, this doctrine relates closely to the Four Noble Truths, a significance Buddha's teaching about truth of the nature.

On the basis of the Buddha's own statements, we can see a very close relationship between the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination. What is it that the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination have in common? And why should we call them the central teaching of the Buddha? Let's now start at the dependent origination.

2. Dependent Origination

The word *paṭiccasamuppāda*² has been translated into various English terms such as dependent origination, dependent arising, interdependent co-arising, conditioned arising, etc. To be correctly translated, means, "The Arising of Result Depending on a Cause".³ Yet the most common translation is dependent origination or DO.

Dependent origination is most described that everything arises in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions. All things, either mentality or corporeality, are interconnect and arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions. All things mutually support each other, nothing standing alone by itself.

The Dīgha Nikāya

To better understand dependent origination, what we should do is to pay good attention to a dialogue between the Lord Buddha and venerable Ānanda. The teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda* struck venerable Ānanda with enthusiasm "Wonderful, lord, and marvelous it is, that whereas this doctrine of events as arising from causes is so deep

¹ Sanu Mahatthanadull, Ph.D., "Dependent Origination and The Four Noble Truths: the Core Teaching of the Buddha", Selected Works in Buddhist Scriptures, Teaching Document, (IBSC: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014). (Mimeographed)

² In Sanskrit term used as "prāṭīyasamutpāda".

³ Paṭhamakyaw Ashin Thiṭṭila (Setṭhila) Aggamahāpaṇḍita (trans.), **The Book of Analysis (Vibhaṅga)**, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p. xxxiv. (introduction).

and looks so deep, to me it seems as clear as clear can be !⁴”. Then the Lord Buddha replied:

Say not so, Ānanda, say not so ! Deep is this doctrine of events as arising from causes, and it looks deep too. It is through not understanding this doctrine, through not penetrating it, that this generation has become a tangled skein, a matted ball of thread, like to munja-grass and rushes, unable to overpass the doom of the Waste, the Woeful Way, the Downfall, the Constant Round⁵

To us, the Lord Buddha could say these words in the same manner since the teaching of Dependent Origination is profound and not to be understood easily. In other words, only the noble one who has omniscient knowledge realizes this nature of Dhamma.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya

Once at Sāvatti, the Exalted One spoke to Bhikkhus about the arisen phenomena, as appeared in Paccaya Sutta:

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. A Tathāgatas awakens to this and breaks through to it. Having done so, he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyses it, elucidates it.⁶

This statement can be clearly comprehended whether it is un-penetrated before and after the arising of Tathāgatas, or penetrated when they have arisen, that element (Dependent Origination) still persists. So that we can say such phenomena is, absolutely, not created by the Tathāgatas, except aging-and-death always occurs through birth as its condition. That is to say, a Tathāgatas simply discovers this nature of dhamma and proclaims this, but he does not create or invent it.

The Mahāvagga:

At the very first page of the book of the discipline (Vinaya Piṭaka), volume IV.⁷, it is mentioned that during the first watch of the night, the Exalted One paid attention [yonisomanasikāra] to dependent origination in direct and reverse order:

conditioned by ignorance⁸ are the habitual tendencies⁹; conditioned by the habitual tendencies is consciousness¹⁰; conditioned by the consciousness is

⁴ D.II. 55.

⁵ D.II. 55.

⁶ S.II. 25.

⁷ I.B. Horner (trans.), **The Book of the Discipline (VINAYA-PIṬAKA)**, Vol. IV. (MAHĀVAGGA), (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2000).

⁸ The “causal chain” occurs, with explanations of its terms, at S.ii. I ff. See also Mrs. Rhys Davids, Manual, P. 76 ff. - see foot note 7, V.IV. 1.

psycho-physicality¹¹; conditioned by psycho-physicality are the six (sense-) spheres¹²; conditioned by the six (sense-) is awareness¹³; conditioned by awareness is feeling; conditioned by feeling¹⁴ is craving¹⁵; conditioned by craving is grasping¹⁶; conditioned by grasping is becoming¹⁷; conditioned by becoming is birth¹⁸; conditioned by birth, old age and dying, grief, sorrow and lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair come in to being. Such is the arising of this entire mass of ill.”¹⁹

From the passage, an elucidations of dependent origination, by exhibit the arising of each conditioned factors or by demonstrate the occurrence of suffering (samudaya-vāra), are called “anuloma paṭiccasamuppāda” (direct Dependent Origination). In the other hand, the elucidations in opposite direction from what mentioned above, are to be called “paṭiloma paṭiccasamuppāda” (reverse Dependent Origination) wherewith they demonstrate the cessation of suffering in each conditioned factors (nirodha-vāra). They, therefore, can be called “Dependent Extinction”. Please observe the following text:

But from the utter fading away and stopping of this very ignorance (comes) the stopping of habitual tendencies; from the stopping of habitual tendencies the stopping of consciousness; from the stopping of consciousness the stopping of psycho-physicality; from the stopping of psycho-physicality the stopping of the six (sense-) spheres; from the stopping of six (sense-) spheres the stopping of awareness; from the stopping of awareness the stopping of feeling; from the stopping of feeling the stopping of craving; from the stopping of craving the stopping of grasping; from the stopping of grasping the stopping of becoming; from the stopping of becoming the stopping of birth; from the stopping of birth, old age and dying, grief, sorrow and lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair are stopped. Such is the stopping of this entire mass of ill.”²⁰

Herein, the twelve factors (links) of dependent origination have particular Pāli Terms. They can be exhibited from ignorance, the habitual tendencies, to old age and dying;

⁹ saṅkhāra. - see foot note 8, V.IV. 1.

¹⁰ viññāṇa - see foot note 9, V.IV. 1.

¹¹ nāmarūpa, name and shape. - see foot note 10, V.IV. 1.

¹² saḷāyatana, the six senses; sense-bases; sense-organs; sen-spheres.

¹³ phassa, perhaps contact. It is the known or realized impingement of a sense-datum on its appropriate sense-organ. - see foot note 11, V.IV. 1.

¹⁴ From here to “dejection and despair come into being”, cf. D.I. 45. - see foot note 12, V.IV. 1.

¹⁵ taṇhā, craving; desire; thirst.

¹⁶ upādāna, attachment; clinging; grasping.

¹⁷ bhava, becoming; existence; process of becoming; state of existence.

¹⁸ jāti, birth; rebirth.

¹⁹ V.IV. 1.

²⁰ V.IV. 1.

Table 1: The Twelve Factors of Dependent Origination in Different Terms

No.	English Terms	Pāli Terms	Thai Terms
1	ignorance	avijjā	อวิชชา
2	the habitual tendencies	saṅkhāra	สังขาร
3	the consciousness	viññāṇa	วิญญูญาณ
4	psycho-physicality	nāmarūpa	นามรูป
5	the six (sense-)	saḷāyatana	สฬายตนะ
6	awareness	phassa	ผัสสะ
7	feeling	vedanā	เวทนา
8	craving	taṇhā	ตัณหา
9	grasping	upādāna	อุปาทาน
10	becoming	bhava	ภพ
11	birth	jāti	ชาติ
12	old age and dying, grief, sorrow and lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair	jarāmaraṇa, soka, parideva, dukkha, domanasa, upayasa	ชรา มรณะ โสกะ ปริเทวะ ทุกขะ โทมนัส อุปายาส

The Vibhaṅga:

The book of analysis (Vibhaṅga)²¹, chapter “Analysis of Dependent Origination” (Paṭiccasamuppādavibhaṅga)²², each of Dependent Origination’s factors are described in the following manner:²³

- 1. Ignorance** (avijjā) means absence of knowledge of the Four Noble Truths.
- 2. Activities** (saṅkhāra) mean activity producing good resultant (puññābhisāṅkhāra), activity producing bad resultant (apuññābhisāṅkhāra), activity producing unshakeable resultant (āneñjābhisāṅkhāra), bodily activity (kāya-saṅkhāra), verbal activity (vacī-saṅkhāra), mental activity (citta-saṅkhāra).
- 3. Consciousness** (viññāṇa) means eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mind consciousness.
- 4. Mind and matter** (nāmarūpa), mind means the aggregate of feeling (vedanā-khandha), aggregate of perception (saññā-khandha), aggregate of mental concomitants (saṅkhāra-khandha). Matter means the four great essentials (mahābhūtarūpa) and the material qualities derived from the four great essentials (upādāyarūpa).

²¹ Paṭhamakyaw Ashin Thitṭila (Setṭhila) Aggamahāpaṇḍita (trans.), **The Book of Analysis (Vibhaṅga)**, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995).

²² There are two modes of analysis; Suttanta and Abhidhamma methods, this paper has mentioned only the first method according to Suttanta., Vbh. 135-138.

Abhidhamma methods gives explanation in fourteen categories; 1.Causal Tetrad 2.Root Tetrad 3.Association Tetrad 4.Reciprocity Tetrad 5. Causal Tetrad 6.Root Tetrad 7.Association Tetrad 8.Reciprocity Tetrad 9.Exposition of Bad States 10. Exposition of Good States 11. Exposition of Neither-Good-Nor-Bad States 12. Exposition of Good States Rooted in Ignorance 13. Exposition of Resultants Having Good Roots 14. Exposition of Resultants Having Bad Roots. Therefore, the reader may see more details for further studies in, Vbh. 139-192.

²³ Vbh. 135-138.

5. The six bases (saḷāyatana) mean eye base (cakkhāyatana), ear base (sotāyatana), nose base (ghānāyatana), tongue base (jivhāyatana), body base (kāyāyatana), mind base (manāyatana).

6. Contact (phassa) means eye contact (cakkhu-samphassa), ear contact (sota-samphassa), nose contact (ghāna-samphassa), tongue contact (jivhā-samphassa), body contact (kāya-samphassa), mind contact (mano-samphassa).

7. Feeling (vedanā) means feeling born of eye contact (cakkhusamphassajā-vedanā), feeling born of ear contact (sotasamphassajā-vedanā), feeling born of nose contact (ghānasamphassajā-vedanā), feeling born of tongue contact (jivhāsamphassajā-vedanā), feeling born of body contact (kāyasamphassajā-vedanā), feeling born of mind contact (manosamphassajā-vedanā).

8. Craving (taṇhā) means craving for visible, craving for audible, craving for odorous, craving for sapid, craving for tangible, craving for ideational.

9. Attachment (upādāna) means the attachment of desire (kāmuṇṇāpādāna), the attachment of wrong view (diṭṭhupādāna), the attachment of wrong habits and practices (sīlabbatupādāna), the attachment of soul-theory (attavādupādāna).

10. Becoming (bhava) by way of twofold division:-

1) action-becoming (kammabhava)

Action-becoming consisting of activity producing good resultant (puññābhisaṅkhāra), activity producing bad resultant (apuññābhisaṅkhāra), activity producing unshakeable resultant (aneñjābhisaṅkhāra).

2) resultant-becoming (upattibhava)

Resultant-becoming consisting of becoming in the plane of desire (kāma-bhava), becoming in the plane of form (rūpa-bhava), becoming in the formless plane (arūpa-bhava), perception-becoming (saññā-bhava), non-perception-becoming (asaññā-bhava), neither perception nor non-perception-becoming (nevasaññā nāsaññā-bhava), single aggregate becoming (ekavokāra-bhava), four aggregate becoming (catuvokāra-bhava), five aggregate becoming (pañcavokāra-bhava).

11. Birth (Jāti) means birth, genesis, entry, full existence, the appearance of the aggregates, the acquiring of the bases.

12. Ageing and death (jarāmaraṇa), aging means ageing, decrepitude, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, the dwindling of life, decay of the controlling faculties. Death means decease, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, the completion of the life-span, the breaking up of the aggregates, the laying down of the body, the destruction of the controlling faculty of vital principle.

Sorrow (soka) that which to one afflicted by misfortune through relatives or to one afflicted by misfortune through wealth or to one afflicted by misfortune through disease or to one afflicted by misfortune through (corrupted) morality or to one afflicted by misfortune through wrong view or to one possessed of one misfortune or another or to one afflicted by one painful thing or another is sorrow, burning of the mind, mental pain, the arrow of sorrow.

Lamentation (parideva) that which to one afflicted by misfortune through relatives or to one afflicted by misfortune through wealth or to one afflicted by misfortune through disease or to one afflicted by misfortune through (corrupted) morality or to one afflicted by misfortune through wrong view or to one possessed of one misfortune or another or to one afflicted by one painful thing or another is crying, lamentation, the act of crying, the act of lamentation, the state of crying, the state of lamentation,

(sorrowful) talk, senseless talk, wailing, sorrowful murmuring, the act of sorrowful murmuring, the state of sorrowful murmuring.

Pain (dukkha) means bodily uneasiness, bodily pain, uneasy painful experience born of bodily contact, uneasy painful feeling born of bodily contact.

Grief (domanasa) means mental uneasiness, mental pain, uneasy painful experience born of mental contact, uneasy painful feeling born of mental contact.

Despair (upayasa) that which to one afflicted by misfortune through relatives or to one afflicted by misfortune through wealth or to one afflicted by misfortune through disease or to one afflicted by misfortune through (corrupted) morality or to one afflicted by misfortune through wrong view or to one possessed of one misfortune or another or to one afflicted by one painful thing or another is despondency, despair, the state of despondency, the state of despair.

Above are the explanations of dependent origination that appeared distinctly in the Pāli canonical text.

The Exegetical or Commentarial Works

The turn has now come for the explanations of Dependent Origination from the commentarial aspects. Commencing from the very distinguish work of Visuddhimagga which composed by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa.²⁴ He describes word “dependent” (paṭicca) that indicates the combination of the conditions, thus there are nothing occurred by itself, but they are states in the process of occurring exist in dependence on the combining of their conditions. Whereas the word “origination” (samuppāda) indicates the arising of the states. When combine two words together, its represent the denial of the wrong views of eternalism, no-cause and nihilism etc.²⁵

The Pali exegetical tradition²⁶ comprehensively described on the Dependent Origination as the three periods (addhā), the four groups (saṅkhepa or saṅgha), the three connections (sandhi), the three rounds (vaṭṭa), the twenty modes (ākāra), and the two roots (mūla) as following table:

²⁴ Vism. 517.

²⁵ Vism. 522.

²⁶ Vism. 517., Comp. 188.

Table 2: Explanation on Dependent Origination According to the Pali Exegetical Tradition ²⁷

12 Factors	3 Periods (addhā)	4 Groups (saṅkhepa/saṅgaha)	3 Connections (sandhi)	3 Rounds (vaṭṭa)	20 Modes (ākāra)	2 Roots (mūla)
1.ignorance 2.volitional formations	past	past causes			5 past causes 1, 2, 8, 9, 10	ignorance from past to present
3.consciousness 4.name-and-form 5.six sense bases 6.contact 7.feeling	present	present effects	past causes with present effects (between 2 & 3)	defilements 1,8,9	5 present effects 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	
8.craving 9.clinging 10.existence		present causes	present effects with present causes (between 7 & 8)	kamma 2,10 (part)	5 present causes 8, 9, 10, 1, 2	craving from present to future
11.birth 12.aging-and-death (sorrow lamentation pain grief despair)	future	future effects	present causes with future effects (between 10 & 11)	results 3,4,5,6,7,10 (part),11,12	5 future effects 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	

²⁷ See S.II. introduction., Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), **The Connected Discourses of the Buddha A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya**, (Oxford: The pali text society, 2000), p. 519., Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto), **Dictionary of Buddhism**, 19th edition, (Bangkok: S.R. Printing Mass Product Ltd., 2010), p. 254.

From the table, Phra Buddhaghosa called “The Wheel of Becoming” (bhavacakra), he described:

*Becoming’s Wheel reveals no known beginning;
No maker, no experience there;
Void with a twelvefold voidness, and nowhere
It ever halts; forever it is spinning.*²⁸

This is mean the wheel of becoming should be understood to have not known neither the beginning, nor the end. Whereas the exposition from such commentaries could be presented from the three periods to the two roots respectively as follows:

The three periods: the past, the present and the future. The two factors ignorance and formations belong to the past period, the eight beginning with consciousness belong to the present period, and the two, birth and ageing-and-death, belong to the future period.²⁹ Meanwhile, **The three connections** consisting of cause, effect, and cause. First, between volitional formations and consciousness (2 & 3). Second, between feeling and craving (7 & 8). Last, between existence and birth (10 & 11). Next, **the four groups** are determined by the beginnings and ends of the connections. Ignorance / volitional formations is first group; consciousness / name-and-form /six sense bases / contact / feeling is the second; craving / clinging / existence is the third; and birth / ageing-and-death is the fourth. Then, **the twenty modes** comprise of 5 past causes, 5 present effects, 5 present causes, and 5 future effects. And **the three rounds;** defilements (1,8,9), kamma (2,10), and results (3,4,5,6,7,10,11,12), are to spin, revolving again and again, forever, for the conditions are not cut off as long as the round of defilements is not cut off. Last, **the two roots,** are ignorance from past to present, and craving from present to future.

3. Dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths

A very close relationship between the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination can be considered by dividing The Four Noble Truths into two groups. Suffering and the causes of suffering as the first group, the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering as the second group:

1 st Group	2 nd Group
Suffering	The end of suffering
The causes of suffering	The path to the end of suffering

Dependent origination, as mentioned earlier, has been expressed in two modes; direct and reverse order. This is to say, direct order indicates the arising of the (whole mass of) suffering, reverse order indicates the cessation of the (whole mass of) suffering. Thus, 1st group is in line with Dependent Arising and 2nd group is in line

²⁸ Vism. 576.

²⁹ Vism. 579.

with Dependent Extinction. The two groups of the Four Noble Truths covered all the process of the dependent origination:

The Core Teaching	1st Group	2nd Group
Dependent Origination	Dependent Arising	Dependent Extinction
The Four Noble Truths	suffering + the cause	The end + the path of suffering

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, from the enlightenment of the Buddha until today Dependent Origination, the twelvefold sequence of causation, and the Four Noble Truths, the doctrine of truths, have been expounded to the world and forthright disproved against the theory of “self” or “atman” which proposed that the self exists in dependence upon causes and conditions.³⁰ Such doctrines advocate the Buddha’s teaching that there are no permanent. Moreover, they break down all the philosophical speculations and reveal the ultimate truths of all nature. The two basic teachings shared by all schools of Buddhism, they truly are the Buddhist central teaching.

³⁰ Mattis Namgyel, **The Power of an Open Question: The Buddha's Path to Freedom**, (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 15-19.

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