NOTE

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION, FREE WILL, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

by — Nathan Katz

The law of dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda) is the manner in which things come to be. All things (meaning both objects and events) are conditioned, e.g., they do not come from nothing. Being proceeds from beings, not from non-being. However, “being” might imply some entity which is abiding and permanent, so we would be more correct in saying that “becoming” proceeds from “becoming”. If we say that something is (implying being), we are in fact contradicting the law of dependent origination.

To say that something is implies that it always has been and always will be; for how can something “not-be” at any time that now is? This implies that creation is denied by this principle and such is indeed the case. “Being” implies “non-being”, for if something is, we are able to conceive of it not-being. And how can we proceed from not-being to being without creation? Thus Buddhist speak of “becoming” rather than “being”.

An event “becomes” from other “becomings”. Consistent with the doctrine of trilakshana (that all things are impermanent non-essential and unsatisfactory, the law of dependent origination points to the moment. Something is only for an infinitesimal moment in time. We can never, in fact, pin something down long enough to say that it “is”. Reality, then, is ultimate momentariness.

In human terms, dependent origination accounts for changes in life (every moment is change), for the origin of change (from a prior link, or nidana, of the chain), and for the fruit of change (as a later nidana of the chain). All of this is described in a very general manner. We see that any action which can be traced back to the root-cause of ignorance (as can all unenlightened actions) yields some binding result, however vague. Here we see the beginning of the controversy of free will and moral responsibility. Moral responsibility applies inasmuch as our actions yield fruits. Governed by the imperious law of karma, these fruits are unavoidable and absolutely moral. No “immoral” god can alleviate us of our karma by means of grace (as is the case in Vaishnavism and Christianity).

By the same token we are free. We are free to act in such a manner so as to have healthy fruits (more properly, we may do healthy actions which yield concomitant fruits). While the past to some
extent determines the present, by nature of the very momentariness of
the present we are free to act in any manner to create our future. How-
ever, the emphasis of the Buddhist notion of freedom is not the future;
freedom lies in the moment in which we act. Our past actions lead
us to the moment, but in this moment we are free. Yet we remain
responsible for the fruits of our actions in the future.

All of this points to an interesting restatement of the problem.
Can there be free will without moral responsibility? Certainly there is
no moral responsibility unless there is free will, as the Ajivika philoso-
phers have demonstrated. (For a discussion of Ajivika doctrine, see
Barua, History of Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy.) Since everything in
their system is pre-determined, man must act as he acts and there is no
question of free will. But does free will imply moral responsibility?

Western philosophers have distinguished between "freedom
from" and freedom for". The former is a negative notion, as "fre-
dom from" something implies merely that we should rid ourselves of
the thing from which we want to be free (such as social convention, the
academic world, or military service). It also implies being in as
much as we have broken a link of causation: that by this action we have,
become free from it, and thus our action is no longer conditioned; i.e.,
is no longer in the chain of dependent origination and to which we may
then apply the concept of "being" as opposed to "becoming".

"Freedom for" is a much more positive concept. It implies
that we want freedom to do something (e.g., social service,
become free, etc.). Here "becoming" is affirmed, at this notion of free-
dom remains conditioned and conditioning. With which type of free-
dom is Buddhism concerned?

Early Buddhists speak of freedom from dukkha, e.g., nirvana.
By removing the causes of suffering one becomes free. This has wide
implications. According to the law of dependent origination, freedom
from suffering implies freedom from ignorance which implies wisdom,
or natsana. The early Buddhists apply the category of "being" to
nirvana. This is one approach to the problem.

Mahayana Buddhists, by the Vow of the Bodhisatta, imply
freedom for something, e.g., leading all sentient beings to nirvana,
freedom for the practice of mahakarma. This implies moral respon-
sibility for, according to Mahayana Buddhism, no other "freedom" is
truly free. This also implies "becoming", as freedom conditioned by
mahakarma is in turn conditions the leading of all beings to nirvana. One
must act according to the principle of mahakarma, and in this lies free-
dom. Thus Mahayana Buddhists do not apply the category of "being" to
nirvana; rather it is in the negation of all four categories of "being" that
nirvana is found. (See Negi, Mahadevi, Buddha-Buddhism).

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According to early Buddhism, we are free if we truly recognize momentariness and all its implications. But this does not imply that this free, momentary action does not yield fruit. A free action has its consequences. We are told that Lord Buddha is free from suffering (suffering might mean the fruit of action). Yet it is inconceivable that the Enlightened One would act contrary to morality, although he is not bound by good and evil. Perhaps we must make the long jump to Japanese Zen Buddhism, where the Master is asked if the Buddha is bound by kamma. The reply is that the Buddha is one with (e.g., non-differentiated) kamma. I think that the Theravadin, like the Mahayanaist, would not disagree with this statement.