

## THE THEORY OF BIRTH AND DEATH IN EARLY BUDDHISM

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The early Buddhism, like Jainism and Hinduism, recognizes that men pass from one life to another in accordance with the nature of their deeds (*karma*). How they pass from one life to another this Buddhism explains by introduction of the doctrine of *dvādaśāṅga*. According to it, there are twelve causal links of *dvādaśāṅga*. They are ignorance (*avidyā*), impression (*samskāra*), consciousness (*vijñāna*), name and form (*nāmarūpa*), six sense organs (*ṣaḍāyatana*), sense-object-contact (*sparsa*), feeling (*vedanā*), desire (*tṛṣṇā*), clinging to existence (*upādāna*), being (*bhava*), birth or rebirth (*jāti*), and old age and death (*jarāmarana*). It is said that the cycle of twelve causes extends over the periods of three lives. The first two causes are said to belong to past life, the last two to future life and the rest to present life. Not only this, it is also said that although all these twelve causes are interdependent<sup>1</sup> and form the cycle of birth and death (*janma-marana-chakra*) but ignorance (*avidyā*) among them is the root cause of all human sufferings. Since Buddhism advocates the view that ignorance is the root cause of all human sufferings, therefore it says that the acquisition of right knowledge can alone ultimately make the recipient of *dukkha* free from the cycle of birth and death. When ignorance is dispelled by right knowledge, the Buddhism says that the succeeding links of the chain of birth and death snap one after another automatically. But when Buddhism says it, it does not undermine the importance of action. Because it clearly says that *nirāṇa* from all kinds of *dukkha* is possible only when we follow the doctrines of triple path and *astāṅgika mārga*. The doctrine of triple path consists of right wisdom (*prajñā*), right conduct (*śīla*) and right concentration (*samādhi*). The doctrine of *astāṅgika mārga* consists of the steps

of right faith (*samyagdrsti*), right resolve (*samyagsankalpa*), right speech (*samyagvāka*), right action (*samyagkarmānta*), right living (*samyagājiva*), right effort (*samyagvyāyāma*), right thought (*samyagsmṛti*), and right concentration (*samyagsamādhi*). Regarding the nature of the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* there is disagreement among the Indian thinkers. Some Indian thinkers, like S.N.Dasgupta<sup>2</sup> and M.Hiriyanna<sup>3</sup>, say that the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* is a doctrine of causation. While other thinkers, like S.S. Barlingay<sup>4</sup>, do not accept this view. They say that the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* is not a doctrine of causation at all. It is a doctrine of symptoms. Which view between the two is correct and which one is no doubt a matter of philosophical debate. But my objective in this paper is not to examine this debate. My objective in this paper is only to show that the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* does not, and cannot, form the cycle of birth and death. Because even if we assume the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* as a doctrine of causation, it does not establish that the causal connection holding between the links of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* forms a cycle of birth and death as Buddhism advocates. What the causality of *dvādasāṅga* in fact establishes is merely this that there is succession from one *āṅga* to another. But it does not establish that the succession which holds between the links of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* forms a cycle of birth and death. To establish this point, let me first begin with the analysis of the Buddhist account of causality embodied in the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* itself.

When we reflect critically upon the Buddhist concept of causality holding between the links of a chain of *dvādasāṅga*, we find that its nature is a dyadic in character because it holds between the two links of chain of *dvādasāṅga* and any relation which holds between the two terms, no matter whether the terms of relation are events or things or actions or agent and action or anything else, is characterized as a dyadic relation from the point view of logic. The dyadic nature of causality is of such kind that it is neither reducible to nor identical with the terms of its relation. In fact, it is the relation of causality which makes one term as cause and another as effect. The term which comes first in the order of the sequence of causality we call it as cause and the term which comes just after it we call it as effect. So when the Buddhists say that ignorance is the cause of *karma*, they say it not on the ground of this because ignorance and *karma* possess in themselves some unique characteristics but on the ground of this because the relation which brings them

together as parts of a system of *dvādasāṅga* itself possesses the property of causality. It is the property of causality which makes the terms of ignorance and *karma* as cause and effect respectively in relation to one another in the system of *dvādasāṅga* and none else. But even then the relation of causality which holds between them always remains different and distinct from the terms of its relation. It is neither reducible to the term of cause nor to the term of effect. It has its own distinct logical status which the terms always require for to be called as the terms of causality. But to say that the relation of causality which holds between the links of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* is dyadic in character is not to say that whatever is dyadic is causal in character because a dyadic relation may or may not be a causal relation. But its vice versa is not true because whatever is causal is dyadic in character. This is analytically true in the light of the meaning of the concept of causality itself. Because the concept of causality is of such kind that it always exists between the two terms and any relation which exists between the two terms is bound to be a dyadic relation by definition.

The Buddhistic dyadic conception of causality itself possesses the logical properties of asymmetry, irreflexivity and transitivity. This is quite evident from the fact of the Buddhistic conception of causality itself because Buddhism defines the concept of causality in terms of temporality and temporality itself possesses the logical properties of asymmetry, irreflexivity and transitivity. It possesses the logical property of asymmetry in the sense that the way in which the cause is related to the effect, the effect is not in that way related to the cause. The cause is related to the effect as predecessor and the effect is related to the cause as successor and the relation of predecessor and successor is an asymmetrical relation unlike spatial relation. Spatial relation is a symmetrical relation and being symmetrical relation it is reversible unlike the relation of temporality. We can pass from one point of space to another and come back from the second to the first. But the relation of temporality is an asymmetrical relation and being asymmetrical relation it is irreversible. We can pass from past life to present life and from that to future life but we cannot come back from future life to present life and from that to past life. Not only this, the relation of temporality of causality also rules out the logical possibility of the simultaneity of cause and effect. Because the relation of temporality of causality always admits some gap between the sequence of

antecedent and consequent of the causal events, no matter whether the time gap continuity between them is practically possible to measure or not. Above all, the relation of antecedent and consequent of the causal events is of such kind that it is the event-cause which not only temporally but also ontologically comes prior to the existence of the event-effect and what comes temporally and ontologically prior to cannot be said to be causally grounded or dependent on that what comes temporally and ontologically after it. So if the event A is said to be the cause of the event B, then the event B cannot be said to be the cause of the event A. The event B is logically bound to be the causal effect of the event A. Likewise, if the event B is said to be the causal effect of the event A, then the event A cannot be said to be the causal effect of the event B. The event A is logically bound to be cause of event B. This is analytically true in the light of the asymmetry of causality itself which brings the causal events of A and B together as parts of a system of causality. In fact according to the Buddhistic causal account, the event-cause vanishes just after producing the event-effect. And if it is true that the event-cause vanishes just after producing the event-effect, then the cause and the effect cannot be simultaneous and reciprocal. If the cause and the effect cannot be reciprocal, then *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* also cannot be said to be determining each other's existence. And if it is true that the *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* cannot causally determine each other's existence, then the *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* cannot be said to be interdependent at all as it is said.

But to say that the Buddhistic account of dyadic causality which holds between the links of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* itself possesses the logical properties of asymmetry and irreversibility is not to say that uncaused cause is impossible, nor does it mean to say that what causes is not caused or what is caused does cause something. The reason for it is that because what causes may or may not be caused and what is caused may or may not cause anything at all. All this is perfectly quite possible because the notion of cause does not conceptually involve in its meaning the notion of being caused, nor does the notion of effect involve in its meaning the notion of causing. The notion of cause conceptually involves in its meaning the notion of causing and the notion of causing does not have any meaning unless it causes something. The notion of effect conceptually involves in its meaning the notion of being caused and the notion of caused has no meaning

unless there is something to cause it. One can say from this point of view that the notions of cause and effect are relative notions and hence can be understood only in reference to one another. However, whatever the case might be, the fact still remains that the notion of causing is conceptually quite different from that of the notion of being caused. Although the Buddhistic notion of cause does not conceptually involve in its meaning the notion of being caused but the notion of event being an event conceptually involve in its meaning the notion of being caused according to this account. And to say this is not to say that the notion of event being an event does conceptually involve in its meaning the notion of causing. Because the notion of event is conceptually quite different from that of the notion of cause. If the notion of event were not different from the notion of cause in the Buddhistic philosophy, Buddhism would have advocated this thesis that every event necessarily causes another event which the Buddhism does not advocate. What it advocates is this that every event has a cause. And to say that every event has a cause is equivalent to saying that there is no event uncaused. And to say that there is no event uncaused is to saying that uncaused event is logically impossible. And to say this is not to say that every event necessarily causes another event. For any event to be the cause of another event it must have a causal efficacy power according to the Buddhistic account. This means that the way in which the Buddhistic notion of event is related to the notion of cause, the notion of event is not in that way related to the notion of effect. So if we say that every event by definition causes another event, then it would amount to saying that it is logically impossible for any human being to attain *nirvāṇa* from the cycle of *dvādaśāṅga* which Buddhism advocates. Because in that case each succeeding link of a chain of *dvādaśāṅga* would go on in turn producing another event and the process of the causal cycle of *dvādaśāṅga* would never come to end. But Buddhism believes that the attainment of *nirvāṇa* is possible by removing the cycle of *dvādaśāṅga* and the cycle of *dvādaśāṅga* according to it can be removed by following the doctrines of triple path and *astāṅgika mārga*. Therefore it would be incorrect to say that on the Buddhistic account the notion of event conceptually involves in its meaning the notion of causing. According to the Buddhistic theory of causality, that is, *pratityasamupāda* the possibility of producing effect always depends upon the casual efficacy of an event and its conditions. And to say this

is not equivalent to saying that the Buddhistic notion of causality itself possesses the property of inherence, nor is it equivalent to saying that the causal efficacy of an event spring from some external agencies. It only means that even if an event possesses the causal efficacy of producing another event, the event-effect does not automatically or naturally come into existence from it on the Buddhistic account unless some external conditions also operate upon it. We can say from this point of view that the Buddhistic account of causality is conceptually quite different from that of *svabhāva-vāda* which regards the necessity to cause the effect as inherent in the cause.

If it is true that dyadic causal relation holding between the *angas* of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* itself possesses the logical property of asymmetry, then no *anga* of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* can have it to itself because asymmetrical relations are irreflexive in character and the property of irreflexivity rules out the logical possibility of any *anga* of the *dvādasāṅga* to be the cause of itself. the notion of self caused is a self-contradictory notion and self-contradictory notions are meaningless notions. But to say that asymmetry of causality itself possesses the logical property of irreflexivity is not to say that it itself possesses the property of identity. The property of identity is incompatible with the properties of asymmetry and irreflexivity.. But on the ground of this the relation of causality cannot be said to be expressing the relation of identity between the terms of relation. Besides the logical properties of asymmetry and irreflexivity, the Buddhistic conception of causality also possesses the logical property of transitivity in the sense that if it holds between ignorance and *karma* and *karma* and suffering, it also holds between ignorance and suffering. In other words, if ignorance causes *karma* and *karma* causes suffering, then ignorance also causes suffering. It is on the basis of the principle of transitivity of causality Buddhism upholds the view that ignorance is the root cause of the cycle of birth and death. Since the notion of causality itself possesses the logical property of transitivity, therefore it can form a chain of causality of *dvādasāṅga*. But to say that the notion of causality itself possesses the property of transitivity is not to say that the chain of causality which it forms itself possesses the property of circularity. What in fact follows from the transitivity of causality is this that it can pass from one particular term to the second and from the second to the third and so on; and that forms a chain of causality in which each succeeding term causally

term causally depends upon the preceding term and not vice versa. But to maintain this view is not to say that the chain of causality which it forms is circular in character. In fact it is because of the possession of the logical properties of asymmetry, irreflexivity and transitivity the chain of causality is logically bound to be a liner in nature. Which means in other words, that the asymmetrical transitive property of causality rules out the logical possibility of the circularity of the chain of *dvādasāṅga*. Instead of establishing circularity, it establishes that the causal chain of *davadasanga* is a liner in character. If this be so, then it is incorrect to say that *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* are causally interdependent and form the cycle of birth and death<sup>5</sup>. Even if we accept for the sake of argument that *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* are causally interdependent and form the cycle of birth and death, it does not validate in any way the Buddhistic thesis that ignorance is the root cause of all human sufferings. What it in fact validates is this that in the cycle of a chain of causality of *dvādasāṅga* no *anga* could be said to be the root cause of the other *angas*. Because in the process of the circularity of *dvādasāṅga* each *anga* would be both cause and effect in relation to its preceding and succeeding *angas*. Ignorance would be causing *karma* and *karma* would be causing ignorance at different time, and hence would be causally interdependent. Not only this, if it is true that the cycle of *dvādasāṅga* is circular in character, then it can be removed by removing any one of *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* which Buddhism does not seem to advocate. It rather advocates the view that suffering can be removed for all time to come from one's life only when we remove ignorance which is the root cause of all sufferings.

The Buddhists circularity thesis of *dvādasāṅga* can be refuted not only on the ground of the logical properties of asymmetry, irreflexivity and transitivity of causality but also on the ground of the Buddhistic doctrines of impermanence (*anityata*) and momentariness (*kṣaṇabhanga*). Because according to these doctrines the existence of twelve causes of a chain of *dvādasāṅga* are perishable and momentary. Since they are perishable and momentary, therefore they cannot be said to be interdependent and form the cycle of birth and death of human suffering as Buddhism advocates. Because if the event-cause does have only a momentary existence and vanishes just after producing the succeeding event which in turn again vanishes after producing the next succeeding event and so

the cycle of birth and death? Because for to be interdependent and form the cycle of birth and death, they will have to have existence nor that a moment which they do not have according to the Buddhistic doctrines of impermanence and momentariness. Above all, unless we assume that there exists some conscious entity in human beings which persists throughout in the causal process of *dvādasāṅga*, the question of suffering of human beings from one life to another does not simply arise at all which Buddhism advocates.

One might say that the above argument does not hold good because what Buddhism denies is the two extreme views asserted by the eternalist (*śāśvata*) and the annihilationist (*uccheda*) and to say this is not to say that Buddhism denies the existence of *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* or consciousness more than a moment. If this be so, then the Buddhistic circularity theory of *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* remains in tact. We can say that the being who experiences the fruit of a deed in one life is neither the same nor different from the being who performed that deed in one life. But this line of argument to my mind does not hold much water. Because even if we assume it, it only proves that the *angas* exist more than one moment, that is, for certain periods of time. It does not prove that they stand in the relation of circularity. Moreover, Buddhism not only claims that whatever happens in human life concerning the matter of suffering happens due to the causal factors of *dvādasāṅga* but also says that *karmas* are transferable from one individual's life to another individual's life which is logically impossible to maintain with consistency without assuming the theory of conservability of *karmas*. And this Buddhism cannot do because assuming this would amount to mean discarding of the doctrine of impermanency (*antyatā*) and momentariness (*kṣaṇabhanga*) which it itself advocates. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* is a valid doctrine, the Buddhistic doctrine of inherited *karma* cannot be said to be a valid doctrine at all. Because according to the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* all sorts of human suffering result only from the individual's causal factors of *dvādasāṅga* to which the doctrine of inherited *karma* does not subscribe. It rather says that human beings are liable to suffer because of the inherited *karmas* of their ancestors and relatives without even their being morally responsible. A man generally is held morally responsible on account of what he earns by his deeds. He is not held morally responsible on account of what he inherits from his



forefathers because what he inherits, he does not earn and what he does not earn, he cannot be held morally responsible for it. so if the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* is a valid doctrine, then it rules out the logical possibility of the transferability of *karmas* from one individual's life to another individual's life which Buddhism advocates. To preserve the validity of the doctrine of inherited *karmas* Buddhism will have to discard the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* because what the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* asserts the doctrine of inherited *karma* denies. The doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* is a self - centric doctrine because it asserts that all causes of suffering lie in the agent and his actions alone. There are certain sufferings whose causes lie outside of him. While the doctrine of inherited *karma* asserts that all causes of suffering do not lie in the agent and his actions alone and not outside the agent and his actions. Not only this, the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* on the Buddhistic account also possesses the property of circularity and the property of circularity is opposed to the property of linearity on which the validity of the doctrine of inherited *karma* rests. Because of these reasons Buddhism cannot uphold the validity of both the doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* and inherited *karma* consistently without discarding one of the doctrines. What I have said also follows from the doctrine of *patityasamutpāda*. Because according to the doctrine of *patityasamutpāda* every event causally depends upon its cause but no cause causally depends upon its event because cause vanishes just after producing the succeeding event and this process continues. If this be so. then there cannot be any causal co-dependency among *angas* of the *dvādasāṅga* which can be said to be forming the cycle of birth and death as Buddhism maintains in *Dhammapāda*.

If whatever I have said so far is correct, then from this it is quite clear that the Buddhistic doctrine of *dvādasāṅga* does not, and cannot, form the cycle of birth and death even if it is assumed as a doctrine of causation. The Buddhistic doctrine of causation establishes merely this point that the process of birth, death and rebirth is continuous process. Birth is a causal condition to rebirth and rebirth is a causal condition to another birth and so on which can come to an end only when we achieve the state of *nirvāṇa* by removing the chain of *dvādasāṅga*. And to say this is not to say that the process of birth, death and rebirth is a cyclic process. The Buddhistic notion of '*chakra*' occurring in the phrase of '*janma-marana chakra*' does not in fact contain in it the notion of circularity as it is said.

It contains in it only the notions of the process of continuity and linearity and the notions of the process of continuity and linearity are conceptually quite different from that of the notion of circularity. So when we say that birth gives rise to rebirth and rebirth gives rise to birth which again in turn gives rise to rebirth, we do not use the terms 'birth' and 'rebirth' to refer to the same periods of life. When we use them, we use to talk about the different periods of human life. In other words, the process of birth-death and rebirth is a continuous and linear process. It is not a circular process. The problem arises when we take the concept of *chakra* in a literal sense and think that the process of birth, death and rebirth form a cycle of life which it does not. The Buddhistic conception of *chakra* should be understood merely in the sense of a continuous process and not in the sense of a cyclic process as it is said.

### NOTES

- 1 S. N. Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, P. 92.
- 2 *Ibid* 89.
- 3 M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, 148.
- 4 S. S. Barlingay, *The Concept of Dukkha, Trsna and Vaira as found in Dhammapada*, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 3., 1985, P. 225.
- 5 Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhistic Thought*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1933, P. 68.