

2. Significance of Dependent Origination

The Buddha presented the principle of Dependent Origination as a law of nature, which does not rely on the emergence of a Buddha for its existence. The Buddha presented Dependent Origination as a natural truth in the following way:

Whether Tathāgatas arise or not, that principle of specific conditionality¹ is constant, certain and a law of nature. Having fully awakened to and penetrated to this truth, a Tathāgata announces it, teaches it, clarifies it, formulates it, reveals it, and analyzes it. And he says: ‘See! With ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations....*

Thus, bhikkhus, this actuality (tathatā), this inerrancy (avitathatā), this invariability (anaññathatā)—this specific conditionality (idappaccayatā)—this is called dependent origination.²

*Tathāgata = a Buddha

The central importance of Dependent Origination is evident from the Buddha’s words:

One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.³*

Bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple has a knowledge about this that is independent of others: ‘When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises’... When a noble disciple thus understands as they really are the origin and the passing away of the world, he is then called a noble disciple perfected in view, perfected in vision, who has arrived at this true Dhamma, who possesses a trainee’s knowledge, a trainee’s true knowledge, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma, a noble one with penetrative wisdom, one who stands squarely before the door to the Deathless.⁴ [80]

¹ ‘Specific conditionality’ = *idappaccayatā*. This is another name for Dependent Origination. It can also be translated as the ‘convergence of conditional factors.’ In the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries, dependent origination is usually referred to as ‘mode of conditionality’ (*paccayākāra*).

² S. II. 25-6. ‘Principle’ = *dhātu*: literally, ‘element.’ This is an almost identical presentation to the Buddha’s teaching on the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*). [See: ‘The Three Signs,’ a translation of chapter 3 of *Buddhadhamma*, translated by Robin Moore © 2007.]

³ M. I. 190-1.

⁴ E.g.: S. II. 78-9.

Those ascetics and brahmins who understand these things (the factors of dependent origination), the origin of these things, the cessation of these things, and the way leading to cessation of these things ... those ascetics and brahmins are deserving of the acknowledgement as ascetics among ascetics and brahmins among brahmins. By realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, they are recognized as in this very life reaching and abiding in the goal of asceticism and the goal of brahminhood.⁵

*Sanskrit: *Dharma*. The word *dhamma* has many definitions; the most common are: Ultimate Truth, teaching, doctrine, nature, law, and 'phenomenon.'

On one occasion, the Buddha warned Venerable Ānanda not to misjudge the complexity of dependent origination:

Ānanda: 'It is wonderful, venerable sir! It is marvelous, venerable sir! This dependent origination is so deep and appears so deep, yet to me it seems clear and easy to understand.'

Buddha: 'Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This dependent origination is deep and appears deep. It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this truth (Dhamma) that this generation is afflicted and become like a tangled skein, like a knotted ball of thread, like matted reeds and rushes, and is unable to transcend the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the lower worlds, and the round of rebirth (saṃsāra).⁶

Readers who are familiar with the Buddha's life story will remember his reluctance soon after his awakening to proclaim the teaching (Dhamma):

Bhikkhus, this thought arose in me: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, difficult to see, difficult to realize, peaceful, excellent, not accessible by reasoning, to be known by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, takes pleasure in attachment, rejoices in attachment.⁷ It is hard for such a generation delighting in attachment to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent origination. And it is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the abandonment of all foundations for suffering (upadhi), the end of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna. If I were to teach the Dhamma and others would not truly understand me, that would be wearying and troublesome for me.'⁸

⁵ S. II. 16, 45-6, 129.

⁶ S. II. 92.

⁷ Ālaya: attachment, obsession, dependency; reliance on external conditions.

⁸ Vin. I. 4-5; M. I. 167-8.

This passage mentions both dependent origination and Nibbāna, emphasizing both the importance of these two truths and also the difficulty in realizing them. The Buddha awakened to these truths and explained them to others. [81]