

## NOTE

### DEPENDENT ORIGATION, FREE WILL, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

by — Nathan Katz

The law of dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) 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 Buddhists 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 impersonal 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. However, 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 philosophers have demonstrated. (For a discussion of Ajivika doctrine, see Barua, *History of Pre-Buddhistic 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 "freedom 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 inasmuch 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 in order to do something (e.g., social service, teaching, etc). Here "becoming" is affirmed, as this notion of freedom remains conditioned and conditioning. With which type of freedom 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 *nirvana*. The early Buddhists apply the category of "being" to *nirvana*. This is one approach to the problem.

Mahayana Buddhists, by the Vow of the Bodhisattva, imply freedom *for* something, e.g., leading all sentient beings to *nirvana*, freedom for the practice of *mahakaruna*. This implies moral responsibility for, according to Mahayana Buddhism, no other "freedom" is truly free. This also implies "becoming", as freedom conditioned by *mahakaruna* in turn conditions the leading of all beings to *nirvana*. One must act according to the principle of *mahakaruna*, and in this lies freedom. 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 Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyanika-karika*).

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 *karma*. The reply is that the Buddha is one with (e.g., non-differentiated) *kāma*. I think that the Theravadin, like the Mahayanist, would not disagree with this statement.