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On the so-called Chain of Causation of the Buddhists

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"Chain of Causation" is the title given by Occidental students to the formula which embodies the Buddha's effort to account for the origin of evil. The formula itself is as follows:

"On Ignorance depend he *saṃkhāras*;
on the *saṃkhāras* depends Consciousness;
on Consciousness depends Name-and-Form;
on Name-and-Form depend the Six Organs of Sense;
on the Six Organs of Sense depends Contact;
on Contact depends Sensation;
on Sensation depends Desire;
on Desire depends Attachment;
on Attachment depends Existence;
on Existence depends Birth;
on Birth depend Old Age and Death, Sorrow, Lamentation, Misery,
Grief, and Despair."

Chain of Causation is an unfortunate title, inasmuch as it involves the use of Occidental categories of an exacting kind into which to fit, as into a Procrustean bed, Oriental methods of thought. As a natural consequence, this same Chain of Causation has proved a stumbling-stone and rock of offense to some of the best European scholars, Oldenberg, for example, in his *Buddha* (Hoey's translation pp. 226-7) says:

"The attempt is here made by the use of brief pithy phrases to trace back the suffering of all earthly existence to its most remote roots. The answer is as confused as the question was bold. It is utterly impossible for anyone who seeks to find out its meaning to trace from beginning to end a connected meaning in this formula. Most of the links of the chain, taken separately, admit of a passable interpretation; many arrange themselves also in groups together, and their articulation may be said to be not incomprehensible; but between these groups there remain contradictions and impossibilities in the consecutive arrangement of priority and sequence, which an exact exegesis has not the power, and is not permitted, to clear up."

R.S. Coplestone, Bishop of Colombo and President of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, in his book *Buddhism*, which has just appeared,

also gives up the problem in despair, saying (p. 122) "Who will attack a metaphysical puzzle which he [Prof. Oldenberg] declares insoluble?"

Now a great deal of the difficulty experienced by these scholars appears to me to arise from the too strict way in which they use the word "cause" and from the idea which they labor under that Time plays an important part here, whereas it would appear to have but secondary role.

The term "cause" should be used in a very loose and flexible way, and in different senses, in discussing different members of this series. The native phrase of which Chain of Causation is supposed to be a translation is *paṭicca-samuppāda*.^[1] *Paṭicca* is a gerund, equivalent to the Sanskrit *pratītya*, from the verbal root *i* 'go,' with the prefix *pruṭi* 'back;' and *samuppāda* stands for the Sanskrit *samutpāda*, meaning 'a springing up.' Therefore the whole phrase means 'a springing up [into existence] with reference to something else,' or, as I would render it, 'origination by dependence.' The word "chain" is a gratuitous addition, the Buddhist calling it a wheel, and making Ignorance depend on Old Age etc. Now it is to be noted that, if a thing springs up — that is to say, comes into being — with reference to something else, or in dependence on something else, that dependence by no means needs to be a causal one. In the Pāli, each of these members of the so-called Chain of Causation is said to be the *paccaya* of the one next following, and *paccaya* is rendered 'cause.' But Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhi-Magga*, enumerates twenty-four different kinds of *paccaya*, and, in discussing each member of the *paṭicca-samuppāda*, states in which of these senses it is a *paccaya* of the succeeding one.

The Pāli texts very well express the general relation meant to be conveyed by the word *paccaya* when they say "If this one [member of the series] is not, then this [next following] one is not."

I will now run over the Chain of Causation, member by member, in reverse order, giving my own explanation of the relation of each member to the one before it, and show how comprehensible become the relations of the different members to each other if the term "cause" be used in a more flexible manner, and if Time be considered as only incidentally involved. I begin, then, with the bottom of the series.

Old Age etc. are said to depend on Birth. The relation here between Birth and Old Age etc. is that which we should express by the term "antecedent condition." The fact that I am born as a man or human being does not make me necessarily arrive at Old Age; yet, as the natives say, if there were no Birth, there would be no Old Age. etc.

Birth is then said to depend on Existence. Now by Existence is meant existence in general, not this or that particular existence, but all existence

whatsoever to which transmigration renders us liable. The relation, therefore, of Birth to Existence is simply that of a particular instance to a general category.

Next, Existence is said to be dependent on Attachment, and Attachment in its turn on Desire. I group together these two members of the series, as they mean much the same thing. Desire being the more general term, and the four divisions of Attachment are four classes of Desire considered in the light of tendencies. Existence, therefore, is said to depend on Desire. Of this Desire it is said: "Where anything is delightful and agreeable to men, there Desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root:" that is to say, all pleasurable objects to which we cling become so much food to create and perpetuate our being. It may seem strange to put Desire and Attachment before Existence, but the existence here meant is sentient existence, and the assertion is that, wherever Desire and Attachment develop themselves, there *ipso facto* we have sentient existence. The relation, therefore, of Existence and Desire or Attachment is that of effect to cause, and that of Attachment to Desire is identity.

The statement that Desire depends on Sensation hardly requires any special elucidation. In order that we should have Desire, there must be objects of Desire — that is to say, pleasurable sensations. Thus Sensation is the necessary antecedent or condition of Desire.

Sensation is said to depend on Contact. Contact means the contact of the organ of sense with the object of sense. The Buddhist explanation of vision, for instance, is that the eye and the form or object seen come into collision, and that from this contact results the sensation of sight. The relation, therefore, of Contact and Sensation is that of cause and effect.

Contact is said to depend on the Organs of Sense. This statement hardly requires any comment, for, of course, if there were no eye, there would be no eye-contact and resultant vision. The Organs of Sense are, therefore, the necessary antecedent conditions of contact.

The Organs of Sense are said to depend on Name-and-Form. By Form is meant the body, and by Name certain mental constituents of being. It is therefore perfectly natural to say that the Organs of Sense depend on Name-and-Form, for the organs of the five senses are, of course, part of the body; and, as the Buddhists hold that there is a sixth sense, namely the mind, having ideas for its objects, this is naturally dependent on Name. Name-and-Form are therefore the material cause of the Organs of Sense. (I connect Name-and-Form with hyphens, as in Pāli they are usually compounded into one word, and declined in the singular.)

Name-and-Form depend on Consciousness, or better, perhaps, on the

Consciousnesses. There are many different Consciousnesses; those belonging to the organs of sense, the eye-consciousness or sight, the ear-consciousness or hearing, etc., and many more besides, such as the Consciousness connected with the Trances. Now these Consciousnesses and Name-and-Form constitute the entire human being. Without these consciousnesses Name-and-Form would be lifeless; and, again, without Name-and-Form the Consciousnesses would not be possible. Therefore the Consciousnesses and Name-and-Form are interdependent, neither of them being able to exist independently — that is to say, in the case of the human being.

The Consciousnesses depend on the *saṃkhāras* or *karma*. *Samkhāra* and *karma* are much the same thing; *karma* is from the root *kar*, and means 'deed' or 'act'; and *saṃkhāra* is from the same root, and means 'doing' or 'action'. This *karma* may be good, bad, or indifferent, and performed by the body, voice, or mind; but Buddhaghosa says they can all, in the last analysis, be reduced to thoughts or mental activity. Any dwelling of the mind on an object is a *saṃkhāra*, and the Consciousnesses result from such *saṃkhāras*. The the *saṃkhāras* are really also consciousnesses, but some thirty-two are marked off as the results of the others, and called *vipāka-viññānas* 'resultant consciousnesses.' Thus the relation of these thirty-two consciousnesses to the others called *saṃkhāras* is that of effect to cause.

The *saṃkhāras* are said to depend on Ignorance, and by Ignorance is meant the want of knowledge of the evil nature of all things. So long as we remain ignorant of the unsatisfactoriness of all objects of sense, we continue to occupy our mind with them — that is to say, we continue to perform *karma*. Ignorance, then, is the antecedent condition of the *saṃkhāras*.

I have thus gone over the Chain of Causation, and shown how variously the members of the series depend on each other, and that only in three instances was this dependence efficient cause.

My readers will also please notice that I have not assigned one part of the series to one point of time, say to one existence, and then the subsequent part to the following existence — the reason being that I consider the accounting for re-birth only a special application of this formula. For instance, some of the Consciousnesses may depend on the *saṃkhāras* of a former birth; others (*e.g.* those of the Trances), on *saṃkhāras* of the present one; also the Existence which depends on Desire and Attachment may be a renewed existence, or it may be such an existence as is given temporarily by the Trances (*i.e.*, existence in the realm of Form by the four lower Trances, or in the realm of Formlessness by the four next above).

The Chain of Causation would thus appear in some sort to repeat itself, the

assertion that Existence depends on Desire and Attachment being the more general statemet of how all existence originates; while the description of the Consciousnesses evolving from the *saṃkhāras*, and, in the case of re-birth, embodying themselves in Name-and-Form, is the specific one of how the human being comes about.

[1] See R.C. Childers, Pāli Dictionary, p 359; the same, in Colebrooke's Essays. 1.453; Böhtlingk and Roth, vii. 723, and the references to Burnouf there given