
The 12 innen

Conditioned coproduction or the Twelve Interdependent Causes

Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech in the temple La Gendronnière, August 2005

Understand suffering and its causes, to understand the way to cure it, and nirvana, that means stopping suffering. This other way was more accentuated in Mahayana Buddhism. Generally in the origins of Buddhism, monks concentrated on the study of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. With the development of the Great vehicle five centuries later, the presentation of the reality of life was used more through the teaching of causation as a relative truth (which will be detailed further), explaining the karmic process and transmigration into the six worlds, the six paths of suffering, and also the possibility for liberation.

With Mahayana Buddhism, and especially with Nagarjuna, causation became the base of a deeper concept of reality, which is called "profound reality" or "absolute", the latter not really making sense. In any event, it became the foundations for a new understanding of vacuity, and therefore, liberation.

I must insist on the following point: If, taking into account the evolution of the understanding of Dharma, some of these aspects were valorized more than others, it doesn't mean that there were hidden teachings of the Buddha, or that his way of teaching was initially superficial, for shallow disciples, because the profound teachings of the Great Vehicle had been rediscovered five centuries later. Before dying, Shakyamuni said: "I have left nothing hidden." The Dharma was completely transmitted from the beginning. This is what we will see with the study of these twelve interdependent causes (the twelve linked chain of causation).

The Four Noble Truths present the life of transmigration in somewhat of an immobile way: suffering, which is described in great detail, the causes of suffering, essentially meaning ignorance, hate and desire (the Three Poisons), the possibility of being liberated from them which is called nirvana and the way of the eightfold path. But since the beginning, during the night of his awakening, the Buddha had another vision of what he called the middle path between extreme asceticism and giving in to sensual desires. This middle path is expressed through the Eightfold Path. But it is also the middle path between two extremes, existence and non-existence. Causation allows one to understand this middle path.

During this night of awakening, Buddha wondered: Where does old age and death come from? Where does the fact of having to die come from? What causes it? So he went back to the fact of birth. Birth is the cause of death. If there is no birth, then there is no death. It is said that realizing awakening is realizing non-birth, non-birth and obviously non-death. Then he wondered what causes birth. Birth comes from a desire to become, to continue existing. And he went all the way back to ignorance. For pedagogical reasons, he explained it going backwards. To demonstrate that this was at the heart of his teaching from the beginning, without waiting for Mahayana and Nagarjuna, we shall refer to the Acela Sutra, in which an ascetic named Kashyapa, questions him while doing a beggar's round.

Kashyapa's question, which is also ours, is the following: "Is the suffering of an individual created by himself? Are we the cause of our suffering?" Sometimes we believe that karmic law implies that we are responsible for our own suffering. This is not the middle path. The Buddha answered: "No, an individual is not the cause of his suffering."

The ascetic asked: "Do we suffer because of someone else?" Shakyamuni answered: "No, someone else is not the cause of our suffering."

"Does suffering appear by chance?", asked the ascetic. The Buddha replied: "No, it's not by chance."

The ascetic asked: "If it doesn't appear by oneself, nor by someone else, nor by chance, do you mean that suffering is inexistent?" And Shakyamuni replied: "That isn't what I mean."

The ascetic was overtaken with doubt and then asked: "Maybe you don't know what suffering is then?" The Buddha answered: "No, it's not that I don't know what suffering is."

The ascetic insisted and during the beggar's round, the Buddha then decided to explain it to him by saying: "If you think that an individual's suffering is created by himself, you are mistaken by believing that an individual is eternal, since it would then be the same individual who created the karma and who bears its fruit. This is not the path which I teach, because it's extremist to think that an individual is eternal. If you believe that suffering is caused by someone else, then you are wallowing in nihilism."

For Shakyamuni, the theory of original sin would be a nihilistic theory. Because of Adam and Eve committing an error long ago, we pay for the consequences now. That would mean that an individual could do something, then disappear without ever having to receive the results of his/her action. For Buddha, this is a nihilistic theory, which leads to the refusal of responsibility and karmic causality. Therefore it is neither the individual nor someone else who is the cause of suffering, which led Shakyamuni to teach that the cause of suffering is causation, the teaching of the Middle Path, which doesn't go to either extreme. Mental forms, etc. are produced through being conditioned by ignorance. It's the wheel of the twelve linked chain of interdependent causes. In English, causation, in Sanscrit, *pratitya-samutpada*. In Japanese, which Master Deshimaru used in his commentaries on the Hannya Shingyo, the twelve *innen* or *juniengi*.

The traditional starting point, the origin of transmigration or samsara, is ignorance.

Actually, one is not "in" samsara, our conditioned existence "is" samsara. Existing, and being subject to the causes and conditions which I will describe, is samsara. In this existence, we go through six states: infernal suffering; famished suffering, prey to greed; an animal state, dominated by ignorance and instincts; a human state; the asura state, as these fighting gods or titans representing our spirit of competition to obtain power and positions; the deva state, a state of happiness, bliss, which could lead us to believe we have attained satori, although it's just another conditioned state which is impermanent and a cause of suffering once it stops. We go around in these six states, whether during zazen, during life, or in the infinite cycle of lives and deaths one linked to another depending on karmic law.

Let's begin with ignorance, which Master Deshimaru said meant not knowing oneself profoundly. For Shakyamuni, it means not having understood the Four Noble Truths, the Dharma, and the process which I'm explaining here. Not understanding it leads one to react; these are the samskaras, impulses and calls to action, will and impulses not clarified by wisdom, but conditioned by the productions of ignorance, in other words, greed and hatred.

Our actions will produce painful karma in the present time, and moreover will project us into the dynamics of continuing to exist in samsara.

This conditions consciousness. If we situate ourselves in a cycle of rebirth: in a given life, conscience influenced by karma, produces consciousness of rebirth, the final consciousness before death, which conditions the desire to be reborn and produce energy, a dynamic leading to being reborn with a body and mind. In the Indian tradition, birth is not only conditioned by a sperm and an egg meeting, but also by the conscience of being reborn. Therefore, there are 3 "people" at the moment of birth. The consciousness of rebirth enables conception of a new body and mind, called *namarupa*, which are the five skandhas forming "the individual".

The body is *rupa* or *shiki*, the first skandha. *Nama* is what has to do with the mind: sensations, perceptions, impulses to react or *samskara*, makings of the mind and consciousness. As of this moment a new individual is born. The six domains of senses develop due to the contact with the outside world, dependent on the six sensory organs in order to function: eyes, nose, ears, mouth, touching, and consciousness, considered as a sensory organ. In order for them to function, visual and auditory objects, etc. must be present, as well as conscience linked to these sensory organs. This is the genesis of an individual, starting with the baby in contact with the outside world through their sensory organs and whose consciousness develops. Sensations are produced. There are two types of them, one is cognitive perception or sensations enabling us to recognize objects, without emotions coming into play. Then there are emotional sensations enabling us to determine the quality of objects: good, bad, liking or disliking, or neutral feelings.

Sensations provoke desire. If a sensation is pleasant, we want it to continue or happen again. A glass of wine is good, one more, the whole bottle, money in order to continue! Life is often based on this: tasting a pleasure, then obtaining the object which creates this pleasure, then undertaking all kinds of activities to ensure possessing this object. This is what leads to greed, attachment, etc. Inversely, desire can be wanting to reject something which is unpleasant to us: rejecting, eliminating that which disturbs us. Desire thus provokes attachment and anguish, fear of losing an object of desire, for example, a partner, which provokes anxiety and jealousy. Desire and attachment produce the wish to continue existing in this world to enjoy everything which pleases us. Since life is short, we strongly project ourselves towards a future existence: continuing to be reborn, and becoming once again.

In Buddhism, it is difficult to explain rebirth without the existence of a permanent self which transmigrates. Let's say that it's the energy of this consciousness, which, without being something permanent, is in a process of wanting to become again, creating a new birth, old age and death. This new existence, which is impermanent, is subject to frustration and illness, and comes to old age and death.

Through this idea, we can clearly see that human existence is highly impermanent; that an individual is none other than the combination of five aggregates, *namarupa*, conditioned by ignorance etc. However, at the same time, if one understands this process, he/she can eventually see the possibility of ending it. To end it, the teaching of Buddha indicates two sensitive points to begin with: ignorance and desire, implying hatred.

If we consider the links of this chain, chaining us into a cycle, the best way to get out of it is by breaking one of the links, either by awakening to our ignorance, which is the best way, or, like

the ascetics, by trying to vanquish our desires. However, we can't really be free from desire unless we understand vacuity, and unless we have realized non-duality with all things, and therefore have resolved ignorance. This is where the Buddha dharma works, to help people liberate themselves from their suffering.

All of this is in a relative dimension. This is how it operates in the world of phenomena. Another approach is conceivable; for example, a neuro-physiological scientific approach, which explains how a human being comes about. It is remarkable to think that five centuries BC, the attempt to understand this was born, a law explaining this becoming. Not a myth or a belief, but actually a law which could be broken down and function as causality. The vision of Shakyamuni, who conceived and taught this, was a very modern vision of our own functioning.

This vision was then adopted by Nagarjuna for example, and by all the great Mahayana Masters, to signify that all which exists, as sentient beings, beings in samsara, are the result of causes and conditions and don't exist on their own. None of them have their own substance. It is another way of demonstrating the error of believing in a substantial and permanent ego, in itself. There is just a flow of causes and conditions linked together. The Middle Path which Nagarjuna speaks vastly about, was already expressed by Buddha. At the end of the sermon at Acela, he said: this teaching signifies that an individual is neither eternal, nor destined to be destroyed; he/she is just a flow like the river.

As for Nagarjuna, he lived during the second or third century AD, seven or eight centuries after Buddha Shakyamuni. He was a monk and also a great thinker, who, along with other Mahayana thinkers, considered that the liberating powers of the teachings of Shakyamuni could be in great danger due to theoretical elaborations of Abhidharma thinkers. For centuries, these thinkers tried to systemize the Buddha's teachings, his intuitions and lessons. In spite of the fundamental teachings about vacuity, they were trying to prove that at the base of the reality which we encounter, there are elements possessing their own nature in themselves. The thinkers of Abhidharma named them: the dharmas, types of constitutive bricks for the edifice of existence. Even if they agreed to admit that these dharmas were not permanent, they still attributed a permanent nature to them. For example, fire possesses its own nature of burning, its svabhava. Or water, whose nature is being wet, and enables humidifying etc. They counted seventy four dharmas. Through this description, they came to deny interdependence and vacuity and to reconstruct entities possessing their own nature. A whole bunch of theoretical wild imaginings were born which, according to Nagarjuna, seriously threatened the possibility to liberate oneself and to awaken oneself through following the teachings of the Buddha.

Nagarjuna wrote a poem, the *Madhyamika-karika*, translated in English as the "Middle Stanzas" or "Middle Poems". I don't want to go into detail about the twenty seven chapters of the Stanzas, in which Nagarjuna approaches all of the great themes of Buddha dharma: ego, time, walking, nirvana, etc.

This is the beginning, the stanzas dedicated to Buddha Shakyamuni. These stanzas are like a thunder bolt. He says: "Without anything which ceases or arises, without anything which is destroyed or eternal, without unity or diversity, without coming or going, such is causation." The deep truth is that nothing ceases, nothing is ever produced, there is just a series of causes and conditions, so none of the links in the chain have their own substance, they are caused (come about) by the preceding one, but the preceding one is also influenced by the one which

follows. For example, ignorance conditions the tendency to react, but these tendencies develop ignorance, and it's the same for each of the links.

Nagarjuna adds: "It's causation of words and things. It's blessed appeasement. The one who taught this to us, The Perfect Awakening, is the best instructor, to whom I bow." For Nagarjuna, this is the heart of the Buddha Dharma, which he will strive to detail and develop throughout the following stanzas. But in order to understand things this way, one must acknowledge what he has developed in chapter 25 about the Four Noble Truths. In this chapter he replies to the theorists of Abhidharma, in a supposed dialogue. Instead of developing a thesis, he deconstructs and dismantles their theories. Even causation ends up by being completely dismantled.

In chapter 1 he says: "Since in this domain everything is conditioned and nothing exists in itself, nothing can condition anything. It makes no sense to speak of conditions." It is sometimes said that this is like a sophism, that it's paradoxical. But what Nagarjuna is attacking must be understood: he's not attacking the phenomenal life in which we live, but the ideas that we make of life, ideas which develop ignorance and keep us from realizing awakening.

In chapter 25, he makes his adversaries speak and has them say to him: "With your theory, and especially the affirmation of universal vacuity, the Four Noble Truths no longer exist." That's what was developed in the Hannya Shingyo: in *ku*, there are neither five aggregates, nor the Four Noble Truths, nor suffering nor ceasing of suffering, nor extinction, no nirvana, all concepts are denied. So his adversaries would say to him: "You are a nihilist, you deny the Buddha dharma, you are someone dangerous."

He replies: "No, you're the ones who don't understand the meaning of vacuity. In order to understand vacuity, in the way I'm using it, you should consider that there are two truths. **A conventional truth, which everyone in daily life agrees with, and an ultimate truth, which is discovered under the surface.**"

Since all dharmas are conditioned, insubstantial, this thought about *ku*, evoked in the Hannya Shingyo, is only pertinent from a profound point of view. As an example, from the point of view of how we see things in zazen. This does not prevent the reality of *ku* coexisting with *shiki*, phenomenon. And Nagarjuna, like the Hannya Shingyo, does not deny the existence of phenomena. He just refuses their solidity, their substance, and sees them as an interdependent flow.

Nagarjuna reverses the criticism of his adversaries which tell him he's destroying the Buddha Dharma, and answers them: "You are the ones who destroy the Buddha Dharma. Because if you don't accept vacuity, the twelve *innen*, causation (for him it was exactly the same thing: vacuity signifying that all which exists is conditioned, without substance, "empty of" substance) well then, you believe that beings and things exist by themselves, in a substantial way. For example, you believe that suffering exists by itself, that it has no cause."

This is the beginning of the Acela sutra, suffering would not be caused by anything. If it weren't caused by anything, it would be indestructible. So then there would never be any way to liberate oneself from it. The same goes for ego, for everything. No spiritual progress could be hoped for in a world of substance, no liberation could be hoped for in a world without vacuity, a world where everything would be frozen, like frozen into substance.

This is a little like what Kodo Sawaki called "the ego world", which he compared to a world below 0°, where water is frozen, where everything is frozen in ice. In that world, nothing can be transformed, we are completely rigid there, stuck. I am voluntarily going from the notion of absolute, essential truth, to the concrete experience of being coagulated, but it's the same phenomena. Suffering which exists by itself, the ego which exists by itself, which is not conditioned, can neither cease, nor be transformed, therefore eliminating any chance of realizing liberation.

This is what Nagarjuna said. It was not just to gratuitously destroy others' concepts and to affirm other ones. He isn't affirming anything. He's just trying to eliminate all of his adversaries' intellectual illusions which cause the Dharma to lose its liberating force. He's just preaching returning to the source. Like when Buddha with his bowl answered the ascetic who was running after him to ask him about the origins of suffering. In just a few words and in a few minutes, he gave him the basic ideas about causation and the possibility of becoming liberated from it.

I would like to end by bringing up something else. In these Stanzas, Nagarjuna says: "Causation of words and things, blessed appeasement." He speaks about words and things. Actually, he's attacking words more than things. Nagarjuna never denied the existence of the body, the nose, phenomena. What he denied were false ideas that one has. Those who were passionate about Madhyamika, had the impression that Nagarjuna discovered something fantastic, as if he were a revolutionary. Actually, he just rediscovered what Buddha had said in very simple terms: when this is, that is.

I would now like to speak about the longest sutra in the *Majjima nikaya*, the first one called the *Mula-paryaya sutra*. In my opinion, the title has been wrongly translated by the "Original Cause", because in Buddha's view of reality, there is no original cause. **Believing in an original cause is a mistake when it comes to Buddha's teachings.** It could be translated as "the root of all illusions", as long as the root itself is seen itself as something conditioned, and not as an origin. This sermon was given in front of five hundred Brahmans who had just converted to Buddhism. As scholars, they were very proud of their knowledge and had the impression that they had understood the Buddha Dharma in a way that the Buddha considered as being too intellectual, understood through words.

In this sermon, he describes three types of people. The ordinary human being, who is in delusion, non-instructed in dharma, and who, perceiving the earth, names the earth, and starts thinking about the earth. From that point, he identifies himself with the earth, and eventually thinks that this earth is his, and enjoys the earth. In other words, beginning with a perception, the earth, and naming it, he creates a notion which becomes the starting point for the whole process of desire and attachment. Why does the ordinary human being do this? Because of his ignorance, says Buddha. Then he lists all of the elements of reality, like a litany. He thinks of water as being water, identifies himself with water, desires water, wants to have it, etc. Water, fire, all the elements, all categories of beings, concepts, unity, multiplicity, the totality, all mental fabrication, everything which the human mind conceives becomes an object of attachment, of identification, and of desire. And finally, he gets to nirvana. And it's exactly the same process again. This individual who wanders in delusion uses the same concept for nirvana, becomes attached to it, wants it, wants it to belong to him. Why? Because of his ignorance. Thus we didn't [have to] wait for Mahayana Buddhism to denounce the attachment to nirvana.

Shakyamuni denounced it from the start, as being an attachment linked to ignorance, which obviously hindered true liberation.

The second category of individuals deals with people who force themselves not to think like this. In Zen, we speak about people who practice in a progressive way. Here we could think about the jokes made about Jinshu, who wanted to clean the mirror to remove the impurities of his illusions, believing in the reality of these illusions and forcing himself not to be attached to them. Such a person reels through all the aspects of reality, including nirvana, forcing himself not to be attached to them. Why? Because of his ignorance.

The third person is the awakened one, the *arhat* (in the sutra). This awakened one doesn't think, he doesn't force himself not to think, he doesn't think in terms of earth, water, air, fire and nirvana. In other words, he doesn't create mental constructions, *samskara* which lead to desiring, reacting etc. Why? Because he is liberated from greed, hatred and ignorance. Especially ignorance. He has understood the mechanism of all of his mental fabrication, so he doesn't need to force himself not to think in these terms ; simply put, he doesn't think this way.

It is what, in turn, Zen masters have led their disciples to realize, by developing another way of thinking, *hishiryō* in Zen, thinking beyond conceptual thought, beyond attachment to mental concepts, beyond all attempts to box reality into any type of system whatsoever, including this system, which is still relative, a way of explaining, because it is also conditioned.