

Non-Violence through the Lens of the Buddhist Theory of Dependent Origination: A Philosophical Enquiry

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Abstract: *This article attempts to explore the principle of non-violence (ahimsā) in the lenses of Buddhist theory of Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda). Whereas non-violence is generally considered to be associated with ethical sanction and empathetic conduct, doctrine of dependent origination expresses the philosophical and epistemological concept of reality as interpersonal and interdependent. The theory of dependent origination actually conveys the notion that nothing happens in isolation in strict contradiction to the idea of independent existence as preached by Nyaya and Vedanta Schools. This paper tries to demonstrate that in Buddhist thought non-violence is not just an ethical principle rather a normal outcome of the realisation of interdependence. This work explains how our understanding of interdependent existence may help to eliminate the underlying causes of violence. This study concludes that practising non-violence is immensely important not only in micro context but also at broader level to ensure peaceful living of mankind in this globe.*

Keywords: Non-Violence, Dependent Origination, Buddhist Philosophy, Five Precepts

1. Introduction

The Sanskrit word *ahimsā* has many different interpretations. Ahimsa, commonly referred to as non-harming or non-violence, occupies a central role in Indian Philosophical traditions. It was probably first clearly articulated as a religious ideal by Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, the great Jain teacher. Though it is primarily associated with Jain school it occupies a major place in Buddhist philosophy. It should be mentioned in this context that in Buddhist philosophy *ahimsā* is neither a doctrine (because the nature of reality can be understood without this concept), nor a theory (because the concept of *ahimsā* does not help in explaining things and beings in their own way), but an ethical principle which guides the life and living of individuals (Chinchore, 2005). Buddha talked about five precepts (Pancha Sila) as the guiding principle for living a disciplined life. Ahimsā is rooted within these ethical rules and principles and connected with the some of the eightfold paths needed to be practised for the end of human sufferings.

In Buddhist view, non-violence is inseparably linked with karma, the intentional action of a person. Thus, non-violence is perceived by the intent behind an action rather than the action itself. Since, *cetanā* (the conscious intent) is the determining factor of any action, it is the purity of one's intention rather than avoidance of harm which decides the fruits of karma. Thus, non-violence in Buddhist philosophy is decided not on the basis of the act itself but on the underlying mental state in which this act has been performed. Harm created inadvertently may not be a major issue in practising ahimsa according to Buddhist moral discourse. That is why accidental harm (e.g. striding on an insect unwillingly) is perceived differently in Buddhism than in Jain school (In Jainism inadvertent or unintentional harm is considered as violence). Without *cetanā*, the seeds of karma are not planted

in the same manner. Thus, the Buddhist interpretation of *ahimsā* (non-violence) is inextricably linked with the idea that no events have independent existence, which the theory of dependent origination suggests.

The theory of dependent origination (**Pratītyasamutpāda**) conveys the idea that no event occurs independently; every occurrence is being governed by other factors (Payutto, 1994, Bucknell, 1999). It deals with the phenomenon, or perpetual changes, caused by karma, the intentional action of a person, all of which come from direct causes (*hetu*) and indirect causes (*pratyaya*). This theory thus imparts the notion that everything exists because of something else and if the cause vanishes the results does not follow (Aitken, 2024). A common analogy for this interdependence is of three sticks standing straight and tilting against each other; if one is taken away, the others fall. The doctrine thus states that nothing happens in isolation which actually contradicts the notion of independent existence as preached by other Indian philosophical schools like Nyaya or Vedanta.

Actually, the doctrine of dependent origination talks about a middle way (Wayman, 1971) It does not support the idea that everything exists forever and nothing exists at all. Lord Buddha himself described this theory as dharma. According to him one who realises the idea of dependent origination realises the dharma and one who realises the dharma realises the concept of dependent origination (Anlayo, 2018, Paudel, 2020). All the Buddha's other teachings may be seen as founded on the teaching of Dependent Origination. Buddhist concept of four noble truths, the doctrine of karma, the doctrine of impermanence, the doctrine of no-self is based on the fundamental idea of dependent origination. Because of this immense importance of the doctrine of dependent origination many scholars define it as the crown jewel of Buddhist philosophy (Bhattacharya, 1982).

This article tries to investigate how the concept of non-violence arises from the understanding of dependent origination and argues that ahimsa is not based upon any divine command rather on practical perception of interdependent existence. Analysing the concept of *ahimsā* in the context of the theory of dependent origination may seem to be one of the novel attempts in this field with significant practical applications for addressing contemporary social challenges.

2. Ahimsa in the Lenses of Dependent Origination

2.1 Dependent Origination: A Conceptual Underpinning.

The theory of dependent origination teaches that all events, including physical objects, mental states, and experiences, are the result of a chain of interdependent causes and conditions. These causes and conditions give rise to each other in an intricate network, with no perpetual essence. Therefore, nothing exists in isolation or as a separate, independent entity. In early Buddhist tradition, dependent origination basically explains that sufferings arise through the twelvefold links starting with avidya (ignorance) and ends in death. The chain looks as avidya→ Samskara→ Vijnana→ Namarupa→ ṣaḍāyatana→ sparśa→ vedanā→ trishna→ upādanā→ bhava→ jati→ jarāmarana. This link describes that sufferings is caused not due to any isolated incidence but because of a chain of interrelated events. Among these links ignorance(avidya), lack of realisation of four noble truths and the true nature of reality, is the root cause of all sufferings (Harvey, 1995).

Later Buddhist Philosopher such as Nagarjuna relates the idea of dependent origination with the concept of emptiness(*śūnyatā*). According to him since all events are the outcome of certain cause and conditions, they don't have any inherent, independent existence. He argues that what is dependently originated is empty of inherent existence (Nagarjuna, 1970). By realising that everything is empty of inherent existence but works through cause and effect one can understand the true nature of reality. This interpretation of dependent origination has profound ethical implications. This view thus suggests that intentional harm (violence) is not interaction between two isolated substances but an event within a web of interbeing.

2.2. Dependent Origination and Roots of Violence.

People get involved into violence because they make a distinction between self and other. Since we believe in the idea of a permanent, unchanging self, we target each other either for self-defence or for aggression. But the Buddhist concept of dependent origination presupposes that there is no permanent self. That self is nothing but a contingent aggregation of physical and mental processes undermines the motive of protecting self and hence the root cause of violence.

From the twelvefold link it is evident that lust for objects (Trishna) and attachment (upādanā) lead to sufferings. These mental conditions like cravings, fear, aggressions may fuel violence. When people feel that these mental states are not independent rather dependent upon feelings and contact, they

can try to avoid themselves from doing these activities that ultimately lead to sufferings. Thus, the realisation of the concept of dependent origination may prevent the practice of violence.

2.3 Dependent Origination and the Practice of Ahimsā.

Five precepts (Pancha Sila) constitute the ethical guiding principle for maintaining a disciplined and healthy life in Buddhist Philosophy. These precepts talk about abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and avoiding intoxicants. Though these guidelines are voluntary but are necessary for living with honesty, empathy, truthfulness, purity and self-control. These precepts are connected with eightfold path preached by Lord Buddha for the cessation of human sufferings. Among these paths right action which tells that acts of the people should be guided by nonviolence, friendship and compassion, right speech which talks about abstaining from lying and right livelihood which speaks about living a life based on truth and non-violence form the ethical guidelines of living. Thus, non-violence is rooted in the ethical guidelines of Buddhist teaching.

It has been mentioned earlier that intentional action which harm others are considered as violence in Buddhist Philosophy. Now, the knowledge of dependent origination which is considered as realisation of 'Dharma' (Chalmers, 1988), prevents people from practising violent activities. People guided by five precepts realise that actions are interdependent and harming others is equivalent to harming oneself in an interpersonal field. According to the law of karma, *himsā*, (intentional harm) yields conditions for future sufferings. Philosophically, there is nothing about independent isolated action; it resonates across interconnected networks which the theory of dependent origination states.

In Buddhist philosophy, cessation of sufferings is one of the greatest objectives of mankind. And sufferings occur due to some cause and conditions. Realisation of this interconnection between sufferings and causes of sufferings help people to act with compassion, honesty and purity and induce not to be aggressive on others intentionally. As long as people understands this interrelated chain of events they will refrain from doing harm and even thinking about harm of others. Thus, the realisation of the essence of dependent origination helps people to lead the right kind of life, a life based on truth and non-violence, as envisaged in Buddhist ethical teachings.

3. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion illustrates that in Buddhist Philosophy, *ahimsā*(non-violence) is considered as a guiding principle in life and living of the human beings. There are pain and sufferings in human life. People who understand that everything is connected in an interrelated chain of actions, can try to avoid sufferings in their life if they guide their activities accordingly. Those who realise that nothing happens in isolation that is who realise dependent origination can easily avoid aggression. The belief in the doctrine of dependent origination shapes the mental and physical actions of individuals. It has been mentioned earlier that *cetanā* (the

conscious intent) is the determining factor of any action. The belief in the interdependence of events, develop that consciousness within individuals which debar them from doing and even thinking about harming others. Because people know that doing intentional harm of others is tantamount to harming himself. As long as people realise this causality, they try to lead a life in accordance with compassion, friendship, purity and try to maintain self-control. When people reorient their physical and mental actions in accordance with these ethical guidelines violence disappears.

Realisation of the doctrine of dependent origination which ultimately lead people to live with compassion and friendship may have immense importance in the contemporary world. Along with astounding scientific and technological progress leading to increasing material prosperity, the ethical norms of life are increasingly relegated to a subsidiary position. Racial and ethnic conflicts are increasing day by day. Global political affairs are being shaped by aggression and annexation. Amid such turmoil, the Buddhist teachings that encourage compassion and non-violence may guide humanity towards a more peaceful world.

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