

The Problem of Psychological Causation and the Use of Terms for 'Chance' in the Early Buddhist Texts

by

D. J. KALUPAHANA

*Department of Pali and Buddhist Civilization, University of Ceylon,
Peradeniya*

THE belief in 'chance' or 'fortuitous occurrence' was criticized and rejected by most of the major schools of thought in India. The result seems to be that there never was a school of any significance which tried to justify this belief, although its opposite, namely, the belief in determinism, causal or otherwise, came to be advocated by one or the other of the important schools. In fact, in the philosophical atmosphere it was not a powerful force which the other schools of thought had to reckon with. Yet, every school, when presenting its own conception of reality, referred to the theory of 'chance' as well as other theories with which it was not in agreement only to reject them.

One of the earliest references to the concept of 'chance' is to be found in the *Śvetâśvatara Upaniṣad*. Here the term used to denote this concept is *yadṛcchā*.¹ The question was raised as to whether one could consider factors such as time (*kāla*), inherent nature (*svabhāva*), fate (*niyati*), chance (*yadṛcchā*) elements (*bhūtāni*) or the person (*puruṣa*), taken individually or in combination, as the cause of our pleasure and pain.² While commenting on this passage, Śaṅkara defines *yadṛcchā* as "happening without any reason or cause" (*ākasmiki prāptih*).³ It is opposed to the concept of *svabhāva* which implies determinism, especially as used by the Materialists in the *Sarvadarśana-saṃgraha*.⁴

The *Śvetâśvatara Upaniṣad* represents a stratum of thought slightly earlier than, or contemporary with, early Buddhism.⁵ But in spite of the currency gained by the term *yadṛcchā* to denote 'chance' during the time of the *Upaniṣads*, we find the term being completely ignored by the early Buddhist texts. Instead of the term *yadṛcchā* the Buddhists have employed a new term, i.e.,

1. *Svetâśvatara Upaniṣad*, 1.2, (in *The Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1953, p. 709.
2. *ibid.*, *Kālah svabhāvo niyatir yadṛcchā bhūtāni yonih puruṣa iti cintyā. samyoga eṣam na tvātma-bhāvād ātmāpy aniṣaḥ sukha-duḥkha-hetoḥ.*
3. Commentary on the *Svetâśvatara Upaniṣad*, in *Bibliotheca Indica*, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, vol. vii, p. 276.
4. ed. V. S. Abhyankar, The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1924, p. 13.
5. Jayatilleke, K. N., *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1963, p. 482.

THE PROBLEM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSATION

adhiccasamuppāda, to denote 'chance'.⁶ The question as to why the Buddhists avoided the use of the term *yadṛcchā* and coined a new term *adhiccasamuppāda* seems to have some bearing on the problem of psychological causation.

Analysing the Sanskrit term *yadṛcchā* we find that it is derived from the two words *yad* and *ṛcchā*. *Ṛcchā* is again derived from \sqrt{rch} which means "to meet with, fall on, incur, fall into, attain, attack, insult".⁷ When prefixed with *yad*, it may mean "whatever way it falls on or happens", that is, "chance happening". The Prakrit form of *yadṛcchā* would be *yadicchā*, and this latter could be derived either from \sqrt{rch} or from $\sqrt{iṣ}$. "to wish". But the tendency has always been to consider *yadicchā* as being derived from $\sqrt{iṣ}$.⁸ Therefore, it always meant "as one wishes; according to one's liking". In this sense the two words *yenicchaka* and *yadicchaka* are used complementarily in the early Buddhist texts.⁹ Here they do not mean 'chance'. It is only in the commentaries that we find the term *yadicchā* used in the sense of 'chance' or 'without any cause' (*kenaci kāraṇena vinā*)¹⁰ and this was especially because it was used here to define the term *adhiccasamuppāda*.¹¹ This may be an echo of the original meaning of the term *yadṛcchā*. Thus the Prakrit form of the term *yadṛcchā* conveyed two different shades of meaning, namely,

- (1) "as one wishes; according to one's liking", (*i.e.*, in the early *sutta* literature), and
- (2) "chance occurrence", (*i.e.*, in the later commentaries).

But why were the early Buddhists reluctant to use the Prakrit equivalent of *yadṛcchā* to denote 'chance'? A careful examination of this problem would show that it has some connection with the Buddhist theory of psychological causation. For the early Buddhist the term *yadicchā* always conveyed the meaning of "as one wishes; according to one's liking", and to use the term to denote 'chance' would be to recognize the fact that one's wishes or likes and dislikes are "chance occurrences" or "non-causal" in character. This philosophical position was not acceptable to them, for they believed that causal determinism applies not only in the field of physical phenomena, but also in the sphere of psychological life.

Discussing the problem of causation in early Buddhism, Dr. K. N. Jayatilleke maintains that "it is only a probability and not a necessity when psychological factors are involved".¹² The question whether the law of causality applies

-
6. *Dīgha Nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, Pali Text Society (P.T.S.), London, 1890-1911, vol. i, p. 28; vol. iii, pp. 33, 138; *Samyutta Nikāya*, ed. M. Léon Feer, P.T.S., 1884-1904, vol. ii, pp. 22-23; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, P.T.S., 1885-1900, vol. iii, p. 440; *Udāna*, ed. P. Steinthal, P.T.S., 1948, p. 69. The term used in most of these instances is the past participial form, *adhiccasamuppanna*.
 7. *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary*, ed. A. A. MacDonell, Oxford University Press, London, 1954 reprint, p. 56.
 8. *Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, P.T.S., London, 1951, reprint, pp. 117-8.
 9. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, vol. iii, p. 28; *Dhammapada*, ed. S. Sumaṅgala, P.T.S., London, 1914, verse 326.
 10. *Paramatthadīpanī Udānatthakathā*, ed. F. L. Woodward, P.T.S., London, 1926, p. 345.
 11. Or more properly *adhiccasamuppanna Udāna*, p. 69.
 12. *Op. cit.*, pp. 453-4.

in the same strict sense to human actions as to other phenomena, is said to be the crux of the problem of freedom of will.¹³

In the main, two different views have been expressed by philosophers regarding this problem. First is the affirmative opinion, commonly called the doctrine of necessity, which asserts that human volitions and actions are necessary and inevitable. Second is the negative opinion, according to which human will is not determined, like other phenomena, by antecedents, but *determines itself*; that our volitions are not, properly speaking, the effects of causes, or at least have no causes which they uniformly and implicitly obey.¹⁴ Dr. Jayatilleke's view regarding the nature of the Buddhist theory seems to compare with the latter opinion, for he tries to distinguish two types of causation, one in the physical world where it takes the form of necessity, and the other in psychological life where it is only "a probability and not a necessity". In support of this interpretation Dr. Jayatilleke has quoted two statements from the Pali Nikāyas. They are as follows: '

- (1) "A person who knows and sees things as they are, need not make an effort of will (saying) 'I shall become disinterested'; it is in the nature of things that a person who knows and sees becomes disinterested".¹⁵
- (2) "If a person, being ardent, gains knowledge and insight, is pleased and satisfied with his knowledge and insight and because of it praises himself and looks down on others, saying: 'It is I who dwell knowing and seeing, but these other monks dwell not knowing, not seeing'. Because of this knowledge and insight he is exultant and indolent, and falls into sloth".¹⁶

Statement (1) implies that causal uniformity (*dhammatā*) reigns supreme in the sphere of psychological life. Here it is said that a person who gains knowledge and insight becomes disinterested naturally and, therefore, is able to attain the higher stages of spiritual development. Statement (2) implies that a person who has gained knowledge and insight, would not be able to make any progress on the path to spiritual perfection. Comparing these two statements, Dr. Jayatilleke has come to the conclusion that according to early Buddhism causality is only a probability when psychological factors are involved. But a careful examination would show that these two statements explain two different causal situations. Statement (2) seems to represent an enlarged causal situation than that described in statement (1). Here we find a reference to a disposition which is not given in statement (1). This disposition, namely, the inclination to be satisfied with one's knowledge and insight, has interrupted

13. Edwards, P. and Pap, A., *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., New York, Ninth Printing, December, 1963, p. 341.

14. *ibid.*

15. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, vol. v, p. 313, *Yathābhūtaṃ bhikkhave jānato passato na cetanāya karaṇīyaṃ 'nibbindāmi'ti. Dhammatā esā bhikkhave yaṃ yathābhūtaṃ jānaṃ passaṃ nibbindati.*

16. *Majjhima Nikāya*, ed., V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, P.T.S., 1948-51, vol. i, p. 195, *So . . . appamatto samāno nānadassanena āvādheti. So tena nānadassanena attamano hoti paripunnasāṅkaṃpo. So tena nānadassanena attān'ukkaṃseti paraṃ vambheti: aham asmi jānaṃ passaṃ viharāmi ime paṇ'aññe bhikkhū ajānaṃ apassaṃ viharantīti. So tena nānadassanena majjati pamajjati pamādam āpajjati, appamatto samāno dukkhaṃ viharati.*

THE PROBLEM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSATION

the natural causal process and has led to a result which is quite different from what it would otherwise have been. Therefore, the two statements could be treated as being similar only if we are to ignore the causal status of this disposition.¹⁷ Similar patterns of causal statements are to be found in the early Buddhist texts, not only describing the causality of psychological life but also physical phenomena. For example, we come across the statement in the early Buddhist texts describing the causality of plant life. It is said that a seed, when sown in a field, germinates and grows having obtained other requisite conditions such as the fertility of the soil (*paṭhavirasa*) and moisture (*sineha*).¹⁸ But in another place, the same causal situation is enlarged when it is said that the seed would not sprout forth if it is broken or damaged, if it is not fresh, if it is destroyed by wind and heat and if it is not possessed of essence.¹⁹ It is evident that this latter description would not invalidate the truth of the statement which maintains that a seed germinates and grows given the necessary requisites such as fertility of soil and moisture. It is this identical pattern that we see in the statements quoted by Dr. Jayatilleke. If, therefore, depending on these two statements we are to maintain that causality is only a probability when psychological factors are involved, the same kind of probability or indeterminacy may be said to exist in physical causation. But if we are to grant causal status to our dispositions or volitions as well, then, as Russell has pointed out, we would not be faced with the perennial problem or reconciling causality with freedom of will.²⁰

The reluctance on the part of the early Buddhists to use the Prakrit term *yadicchā* which, unlike the term *yadṛcchā*, means "according to one's wishes" was therefore prompted by a recognition of the fact that mental phenomena are not 'uncaused'. If they used the term *yadicchā* to mean 'chance' or 'fortuitous origination', then they would be indirectly assuming that mental phenomena are not causally conditioned, or that our will *determines itself*;²¹ that our volitions are not the effects of causes, or at least have no causes which they uniformly and implicitly obey.

-
17. Cp. Russell, B., *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Mentor Books, New York, The New American Library, 1960, p. 182.
 18. *Samyutta Nikāya*, vol. i, p. 134.
 19. *ibid.*, vol. iii, p. 54; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, vol. i, pp. 135-6; vol. iii, p. 404.
 20. Russell, *op. cit.* In a recent paper, Geoffrey Madell has made an attempt to show that the concept of action belongs to a sphere of discourse not quite different from that in which the notion of causal explanation finds its place. See article, 'Action and Causal Explanation', in *Mind*, vol. lxxvi, n. 30, January 1967, pp. 34-48.
 21. The Chinese translators seem to have understood the term *yadṛcchā* in this sense when they rendered it as *tzu jan*, cp. *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, Ed. B. Nanjio, The Otani University Press, Kyoto, 1956, reprint, p. 96 and *Ta-ch'eng-ju-leng-chia-ching*, fasc. 3, (*Taishō Shinshū Daizokyo*, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, The Taishō Issai-kyo Kanko Kwai, Tokyo, 1924, vol. xvi, p. 602 a.

This seems to be the *raison d'être* of avoiding the use of the term *yadicchā* and employing a new term *adhiccasamuppāda*. The term *adhicca* is generally explained as a gerund derived from \sqrt{dhr} 'to bear' with the negative prefix *a*.²² But taking into account the fact that it is a purely Buddhistic term and considering it along with the more popular term *paṭiccasamuppāda*, (which is derived from *prati*- \sqrt{i} -*t*-*ya* + *samutpāda*), it seems more appropriate to explain the term *adhiccasamuppāda* as derived from the \sqrt{i} 'to go' with the prefix *adhi*. If so, *adhiccasamuppāda* would mean "arising on top of one another", *i.e.*, without any causal connection or correlation. Since the term *adhica-samuppāda* did not have the same implications as did the Prakrit form of the term *yadrcchā*, the early Buddhists seem to have preferred the former to the latter.

22. *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 28.

23. Cp. *A Critical Pali Dictionary*, vol. I, ed. V. Trenckner, Dines Anderson, Helmer Smith and Hans Hendriksen, The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen, 1924-48, p. 131.