

Buddhaghosa and the definition of 'cause' (*paccaya*)

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IN his commentary on the *Paṭṭhāna* of the Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka and also in his *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa has presented us with a definition of a 'cause' (*paccaya*) which seems to be a faithful representation of the Theravāda conception. This definition runs as follows: "Whatever phenomenon which supports another phenomenon for its existence or its arising, is the cause of that."¹ Thus a 'cause' (*paccaya*) is said to have the characteristic of rendering assistance.² Sumaṅgala, who wrote an exegesis on the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* of Anuruddha, gives a similar definition.³

Here the word 'cause' (*paccaya*) has a rather limited connotation. It refers to only those phenomena that support others for their arising or for their continued existence. It does not include factors which are instrumental in bringing about the destruction of other phenomena or those that obstruct the arising or continued existence. The meaning of the word 'cause' need not be necessarily restricted to those that produce or help in the continued existence of another phenomenon. It also includes those that obstruct. For example, while the seed, the rain or moisture, the fertility of the soil, etc., may be considered as causes that help in the production of a sprout, the excessive heat or the activity of the insects, etc., may also be regarded as causes which prevent the production of a sprout. The obstruction may take place in two different ways, namely,

- (a) by the continued existence of a phenomenon which may have earlier helped in the production, and
- (b) by the intrusion of a completely new phenomenon which is generally harmful to the one that is produced.

¹ *Tikapatthāna* (together with the commentary of Buddhaghosa), ed. Mrs. C. F. A. Rhys Davids, (London: Pali Text Society, 1921), vol i, p. 11; *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa ed. Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, (London: Pali Text Society, 1920-1921), p. 533, Yo hi dhammo yassa dhammassa *ṭhitiyā vā uppattiyā vā upakarako hoti, so tassa paccayos*

² *Loc. cit.*, *upakāralakkhaṇo paccayo*.

³ *Abhidhammatthavibhāvini* (or *Abhidhammatthasaṅgahaṭṭikā*), ed. Dehigaspe Pannasara and Palannoruwe Wimaladhamma, (Colombo: Wimaladharmā Hewavitarane, 1933. Vidyodaya Tika Publication, vol. i), p. 137, *upakāraṭṭhena paccayo*.

The first is a negative cause, while the second is a positive one. Of these two kinds of causes, the former seems to have been included in the Theravāda theory of causal correlations (*paccaya*), while the latter was recognised only by the non-Theravāda traditions.

In the *Paṭṭhāna* of the Theravādins twenty four varieties of causal correlations are enumerated⁴ and two of them, *vigata-paccaya* and *natthi-paccaya*, may be explained as negative 'cause' of the type mentioned earlier. They are not positive obstructing causes, but only assist by disappearing (*vi-gacchati*, *vigata*), that is by giving an opportunity (*okāsassa dānena*) for another phenomenon to occur.⁵ For example, the seed cannot continue to exist even after the arising of the sprout ; it has to make room for the sprout. Also, there cannot be two different forms of contact (*phassa*) taking place at the same moment. One has to give way to the other. Therefore, that mental state which ceases by giving an opportunity or the other to come into existence, they called the abeyance condition (*vigata-paccaya*) or the absence condition (*natthi-paccaya*). But nowhere among the twenty four forms of causal correlations do we come across anything equivalent to the positive obstructing cause mentioned above. This may have resulted in the restricted definition of a 'cause' given by the later scholiasts like Buddhaghosa and Sumaṅgala.

But in spite of this traditional definition of the Theravādins, we find a passage in Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dīgha Nikāya* giving a rather unusual definition of a 'cause' (*paccaya*). Herein Buddhaghosa describes the various powers and also the different kinds of knowledge possessed by the Buddha. One of these knowledges consists in the knowledge that ignorance (*avijjā*) is related to dispositions (*saṅkhāra*) in nine different ways, one of them being obstruction (*palibodha*).⁶ This certainly is an idea foreign to the theory of causal correlations enumerated in the *Paṭṭhāna*, and does not carry the stamp of authority from any of the Theravāda texts. Therefore, we may have to look up to another tradition for a similar form of correlation.

In this connection the analysis of causes (*pratyaya*) in the *Abhidharma-samuccaya* of Asaṅga seems to be very significant.⁷ It represents the Yogācāra definition of the four *pratyayas* and served as the basis of all later expositions

⁴ See Nyanatiloka, *A Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, (Colombo : Bauddha Sāhitya Sabha, 1957) ; Kalupahana, D. J., *The Philosophy of Relations in Buddhism* (1), in *University of Ceylon Review*, Peradeniya : University of Ceylon, vol. xx, No. 1 April 1962, pp. 19-54.

⁵ *Tikapāṭṭhāna*, vol. i, p. 21.

⁶ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (Dīghanikāyatthakathā), ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, (London : Pali Text Society, 1886), vol. i, p. 101.

⁷ *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, ed. Pralhad Pradhan, (Santiniketan : Visva Bharati, 1950), pp. 28-29.

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given by the Yogâcâra teachers. Asaṅga refers to various ways in which the “root-cause” (*hetu-pratyaya*) could be recognised and one of them is by way of ‘opposition’ or ‘obstruction’ (*paripantha*).⁸ The example given is that of the acquisition of defiling tendencies (*kleśa*) which leads to the perpetuation of the flow of defilements and the resulting postponement (i.e., temporary obstruction) of the attainment of final emancipation. Here the defilements function as obstructing causes and this function of the ‘cause’ (*pratyaya*) is identical with that referred to by Buddhaghosa in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* as *palibodha*.

Moreover, while discussing the different varieties (*prabheda*) of the “root-cause” (*hetu-pratyaya*), Asaṅga enumerates two causes which he termed “obstructing cause” (*virodhi-kāraṇa*) and “non-obstructing cause” (*avirodhi-kāraṇa*). Of these two, the former compares with the positive obstructing cause enunciated in the *Abhidharma-samuccaya* and the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, while the latter resembles the negative opposing cause emphasised in the *Paṭṭhāna*. The close similarity between the two concepts *palibodha* in Pali and *paripantha* (= *virodhi-kāraṇa*) in Sanskrit cannot fail to strike us. While the negative obstructing cause was recognised by the Theravādins, the positive obstructing cause was not. But Buddhaghosa’s analysis in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* shows to what extent he was influenced by the non-Theravāda traditions in spite of the fact that the monks of Māhāvihāra in Ceylon were keeping a close watch on his interpretation of the Theravāda texts.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, vol. i, p. 2.