

## BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF REALITY

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The purpose of this article is to present, in a succinct way, the principal elements of the Buddhist conception of reality, not at its beginning, as it appears only in the earliest texts, nor in the course of its historical evolution, showing its different stages, but in the form this conception assumed when it had been fixed once for all several centuries after the *Parinirvāṇa* of Buddha.

### *Infinitude of saṃsāra*

Beginninglessness (*anāditva*) is one of the most important principles in Indian philosophy, Hindu as well as Buddhist. It asserts the lack of beginning for a series of entities, processes, phenomena, etc.<sup>1</sup> This conception of Indian philosophy contrasts in a very remarkable way with the more generalized conception in Western philosophy, always anxious to find for every thing a First Cause, a First Motor, a First Principle, that marks a beginning, beyond which it is impossible to go further.

The word *saṃsāra*, which originally means the reincarnations' series, designates also in a broader sense the *empirical reality*, in which human destiny fulfils itself, and which is opposed to the *Absolute: saṃsāra / Brahman, saṃsāra / nirvāṇa*.

Buddhism (as well as Hinduism) maintains that the empirical reality, with its worlds, universes, men, gods, etc., the processes that take place in it and the laws that govern it, has had no temporal beginning, is eternal *a parte ante*. The beginninglessness of *saṃsāra* is affirmed in many texts:

*Samyutta Nikāya* II (*Tiṅkaṭṭhasutta, Paṭhavīsutta, Assusutta, Khīrasutta*), pp. 178-181, where in the beginning of the first four *suttas* Buddha declares:

*anamataḅḅoyamaḅ bhikkhave saṃsāro / pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjānīvaraṇāmaḅ sattānaḅ taṅhāsaḅmyojanānaḅ sandhāvataḅ saṃsārataḅ.*

“The *saṃsāra*, O *Bhikkhus*, is without limit. A first extreme [of the series] of the beings cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving, that are running on [in the *saṃsāra*], that are transmigrating, is not known”.

Cf. III, pp. 149 and 151, V, pp. 226 and 441; *Kathāvatthu*, p. 29; *Dīvyāvadana* p. 122, lines 18-20.

*Anamataggo* is commented by Buddhaghosa in the following way: *Sāratthappakāsinī*, Vol. II, p. 156:

*anamataḅḅo ti, anu amataggo, vassa-sataḅ vassa-sahassaḅ ñāḅena anugantvā pi amataggo aviditaggo, nāssa sakkā ito vā etto vā aggamaḅ jānitum: aparicchinna-pubbāparakoṭiko ti attho.*

“Whose beginning is unthinkable – going back from here, by means of the mind, even one hundred years or one thousand years, its beginning is unthinkable, its beginning is unknown, it is not possible to find its beginning: the meaning is that the extremes that precede and that follow are limitless”.

*Laṅkāvatārasūtra* II, verse 151: *anādigatisaḅsāre*. “In the *saṃsāra* whose course exists from eternity”.

<sup>1</sup> F. Tola and C. Dragonetti [1980], pp. 1-20.

*Mahāvastu* II, p. 288, verse 45: *anavarāgrasmiṃ saṃsāre*. “In the *saṃsāra* without beginning and end”. Cf. III, p. 26, verse 4, p. 300, verse 2, p. 375, verse 3.

Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* II, verse 28: *anādimati saṃsāre*. “In the beginningless *saṃsāra*”.

Śāntideva, *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, p. 94, lines 30-31: *anavarāgre jātisaṃsāre*. “In the course of rebirths that has no beginning and end”.

Prajñākaramati *ad Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX, verse 118: *anavarāgrasya saṃsārasya pūrvakoṭir na prajñāyate*. “A first limit of the beginningless and endless *saṃsāra* is not known”. Cf. verses 12 and 32 *anādisaṃsāra*<sup>o</sup>; 33 and 84: *anavarāgrasaṃsāra*<sup>o</sup>; 124: *anavarāgro hi jātisaṃsārah*.

Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* III, verse 19, p. 434: *ity anādibhavacakrakam*. “Thus the wheel of existences has no beginning”. Cf. *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, p. 434, line 21: *sarvasattvā tridhā ye ca anādibhavacakrake*. “And all the beings that in three ways are in the wheel of existences which has no beginning.”

Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakāśāstra* XI, verse 1:

*pūrva prajñāyate koṭir nety uvāca mahāmuniḥ /  
saṃsaro 'navarāgro hi nāsyādir nāpi paścīnam //*

“The Great Muni has said that a first extreme is not known,  
for *saṃsāra* is without beginning and end - it has neither beginning nor end”.

Cf. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā ad locum*. Let us remark that the doubtful word *anavarāgra* is understood by Nāgārjuna as “having neither beginning nor end”.

Buddhaghosa, *Aṭṭhasālinī*, p. 10, paragraph 25: *ayaṃ saṃsārasāgaro nāma anamataggo*. “The ocean of *saṃsāra* is indeed without limit”;

*Ibidem*, p. 177, paragraph 471; p. 191, paragraph 515; p. 192, paragraph 519; and p. 285, paragraph 34: *anamatagge saṃsāravatṭe*. “In the round of the *saṃsāra* without limit”.

#### *Infinitude of the space*

To the eternity that Buddhism attributes to the empirical reality corresponds the infinity of space (*ākāśānañca*). The empirical reality extends in an unlimited way in the ten directions of the space.

The stanza I, 64 of *Buddhavamsa* affirms that four things are beyond any measure: the number of beings, the space (*ākāśa / ākāsa*), the number of universes or world systems and the knowledge of a Buddha: *cattāro te asaṅkheyyā, koṭi yesāṃ na nāyati (var. nāyati) / sattakāyo ca ākāso, cakkāvāḷā canantakā / buddhaññaṃ appameyyaṃ, na sakkā ete vijānitum*.

Buddhaghosa, *Aṭṭhasālinī*, p. 131, paragraph 321, affirms in a similar way: ... *cattāri hi anantāni – ākāso ananto, cakkāvāḷāni anantāni, sattanikāyo (var. sattakāyo), buddhaññaṃ anantaṃ*. “Four things are infinite: space is infinite, worlds are infinite, beings are infinite, knowledge of a Buddha is infinite”.

*Milindapañho*, p. 388, lines 3-4 (PTS ed.), expresses: *puna ca paraṃ mahārāja ākāso ananto appamāṇo aparimeyyo*. “And again, O great king, space is infinite, endless, immeasurable”.

The affirmation of the infinitude of space is frequently found in the Pāli texts in relation to the stages of meditation (*jhāna*) and the levels of liberation (*vimokha*) reached through it, as for instance *Dīgha Nikāya* I (*Paṭṭhapādasutta*), p. 183:

*Puna ca param ... bhikkhus sabbaso rūpasaññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭighasaññānaṃ atthagamā nānattasaññānaṃ amanasikārā 'ananto ākaso ti' ākāsañcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

“And again ... the *Bhikkhu*, by passing completely beyond the consciousnesses of form, by the disappearance of consciousnesses of resistance, by paying no attention to the consciousnesses of diversity, lives having attained the domain of the infinity of space with his mind centered in the idea: ‘The space is infinite.’”

*Dīgha Nikāya* II (*Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*), p. 112, after giving the text just quoted, adds: *ayaṃ catuttho vimokho*. “This is the fourth liberation”.

The expression “*ananto ākaso*” [“space is infinite”] is commented by *Vibhaṅga*, and Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*.

*Vibhaṅga*, p. 262:

[*ananto ākaso ti – tatha katamo ākaso?*] *Yo ākaso ākāsatam<sup>2</sup> aghaṃ aghagataṃ vivaro vivaragataṃ asamphuṭṭhaṃ (var. asamputaṃ) catūhi mahābhūtehi - ayaṃ vuccati 'ākaso' / tasmim ākāse cittaṃ thapeti saṅghapeti anantaṃ pharati / tena vuccati 'ananto ākaso' ti.*

“That which is space and realm of space, sky and realm of sky, vacuity and realm of vacuity, untouched by (var. not filled with) the Four Great Elements - that is called ‘space’. In that space he [= the *Bhikkhu*] fixes, establishes his mind, pervades the infinite. Hence it is said: ‘Infinite space’.”

*Visuddhimagga*, p. 275, paragraph 23:

*ananto ākaso ti ettha, nāssa uppādanto vā vayo vā paññayati ti ananto; ākaso ti kasiṇuggahāṭṭimākāso vuccati. manasikāravasenāpi c'ettha anantatā vedītabbā. Ten'eva Vibhaṅge vuttaṃ: 'tasmin etc.'*”

“Here in ‘Infinite [lit. extreme-less, border-less, limit-less] space’ - ‘infinite’ means: because for it neither an arising-extreme nor a final-ceasing-extreme is known. ‘Space’ is called a space where a meditation-device can [or: is to] be removed. And here infinitude is also to be known by means of attention. For this reason in the *Vibhaṅga* is said: ‘In that space etc.’”

A passage of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Chapter XI, p. 240, lines 12-13, describes in an impressive way the profoundness of the universe:

*asti ... adhistāyāṃ diśy asaṃkhyeyāni lokadhātukoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇy atikramya ratnaviśuddhā nāma lokadhātuḥ.*

“There is, in the nadir, beyond incalculable hundreds of thousands of ten millions of hundred thousands millions of universes, a universe called *Ratnaviśuddha*”.

And the great/infinite number of worlds that inhabit the space, to which we shall refer afterwards,

<sup>2</sup> On *°gata* as “realm”, cf. *Pāli Tipiṭakam Concordance* and *Critical Pāli Dictionary* sub “*aghagata*”, and *Aṭṭhasālīnī*, p. 326, line 1.

requires an unlimited space, in which these worlds can be located.

### *Infinite number of worlds*

This unlimited space, as it is already seen through the preceding quotations, is occupied by millions of millions of worlds, disseminated in all the regions. Many texts refer to the infinite number of worlds that fill the space:

(The smaller) *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha*, p. 93, lines 1-2:

*asti śāriputra paścime digbhāga ito buddhakṣetraṃ koṭisatasahasraṃ buddhakṣetrāṇāṃ atikramya  
sukhāvātī nāma lokadhātuḥ.*

“O Śāriputra, there is in the Western region of space, from hence beyond one thousand of ten thousands of Buddha-Worlds, a Buddha-World, *Sukhāvātī* by name”.

*Mahāvastu* I, p. 124, verses 13-14:

*buddhakṣetrasahasrāṇi anekāni atahparam /  
buddhakṣetrasahasrāṇāṃ koṭi na prajñāyate 'parā // 13 //*

“There are from hence numerous thousands of Buddha-Worlds; the other end of the thousands of Buddha-Worlds is not known [13].

*buddhakṣetrāṇāṃ śūnyānāṃ koṭi na prajñāyate 'ntarā /  
lokadhātusahasrāṇāṃ koṭi na prajñāyate 'ntarā // 14 //*

“Another end of the empty Buddha-Worlds is not known; another end of the thousands of universes is not known [14]”.

*Ta chih tu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*), p. 133 b, lines 3-13:

【經】南方度如恒河沙等諸佛

世界。其土最在邊。世界名離一切憂。佛號無憂德。菩薩名離憂。西方度如恒河沙等諸佛世界。其世界最在邊。世界名滅惡。佛號寶山。菩薩名儀意。北方度如恒河沙等諸佛世界。其世界最在邊。世界名勝。佛號勝王。菩薩名得勝。下方度如恒河沙等諸佛世界。其世界最在邊。世界名善。佛號善德。菩薩名華上。上方度如恒河沙等諸佛世界。其世界最在邊世界名喜。佛號喜德。菩薩名得喜。如是一切皆如東方。

*English translation of Lamotte's French translation, Vol. I, pp. 594-595: “Sūtra: In the South region (dakṣiṇasyāṃ dīśi), beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges (gaṅgānadīvālukopamān lokadhātūn atikramya) and at the extreme limit of these universes (tebhyo yaḥ sarvāvasānikah), is situated the universe called Li yi ts'ie yeou (Sarvaśokāpagata); its Buddha is called Wou yeou tō (Aśokaśrī) and its*

bodhisattva Li yeou (*Vigataśoka*). – In the Western region (*paścimāyāṃ diśi*), beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and at the extreme limit of these universes, is situated the universe called Mie ngo (*Upasāntā*); its Buddha is called Pao chan (*Ratnārcis*) and its bodhisattva Yi yi (*Cāritramati*). – In the Northern region (*uttarasyāṃ diśi*), beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and at the extreme limit of these universes, is situated the universe called Cheng (*Jayā*); its Buddha is called Cheng wang (*Jayendra*) and its bodhisattva Tö cheng (*Jayadatta*). – In the Nadir region (*adhastād diśi*), beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and at the extreme limit of these universes, is situated the universe called Houa (*Padmā*); its Buddha is called Houa tö (*Padmaśrī*) and its bodhisattva Houa chang (*Padmottara*). – In the Zenith region (*upariṣṭād diśi*), beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and at the extreme limit of these universes is situated the universe called Hi (*Nandā*); its Buddha is called Hi tö (*Nandaśrī*) and its bodhisattva Tö hi (*Nandadatta*)”.

*Ibidem*, p. 113 c, lines 15-16:

【經】光明出過東方如恒河沙等世界。乃至十方亦復如是。

*English translation of Lamotte's French translation*, Vol. I, p. 447: “*Sūtra*: The rays rushed through the East region and its universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, and it was the same in the ten regions”.

*Ibidem*, p. 125 c, lines 24-27:

譬如大雨連注。滂滂無間不可知數。諸世界亦如是。我見東方無量世界。有成有住有壞。其數甚多不可分別。如是乃至十方。

*English translation of Lamotte's French translation*, Vol. I, p. 542: “It is said in the *Tsa a han king* (*Samyuktāgamasūtra*): ‘When it rains at plenty, the drops of rain water (*bindu*), are so compactly that one cannot count them. It happens the same with the universes (*lokadhātu*). I see in the East region (*pūrvasyāṃ diśi*) countless universes being born, subsisting or perishing. Their number is very great and defies any calculation. It happens the same in the ten regions’.”

*Ti tsang pu sa pên yüan ching* (*Kṣitigarbha-praṇidhānasūtra?*), p. 777 c, line 9:

爾時十方無量世界

“... from countless universes in the ten directions of space”.

In Chapter VII of the *Lotus Sūtra* several references to the infinite number of worlds are found. So in p. 163, lines 6-7, the number of universes in each region of the space is mentioned in a general way:

*daśasu dikṣv ekaikasyāṃ diśi pañcāśalokadhātukoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇi ṣaḍvikāraṃ prakampitāny abhūvan.*

“In the ten regions of the space, in each one of them, the fifty hundreds of thousands of ten millions of hundred thousand millions of worlds trembled in six ways”.

And in the following pages (p. 167, lines 10-11; p. 171, lines 4-5; p. 174, lines 6-7 and 8) the same expression is used in order to indicate in an individual form the infinite number of universes in each region of the space. In page 157, lines 1-2, the infinite number of the worlds is also pointed out:

*tad kiṃ manyadhve bhikṣavaḥ śakyaṃ teṣāṃ lokadhātūnām anto vā paryanto vā gaṇanayādhigantum / ta āhuḥ / no hīdaṃ bhagavan no hīdaṃ sugata.*

“What do you think, O *Bhikṣus*, is it possible to arrive through calculation to the end, to the limit of world systems? They said: ‘No, Lord; no, *Sugata*’.”

Cf. p. 6, line 7; p. 8, line 6; p. 9, stanza 4; p. 14, stanza 44; p. 15, stanza 49; p. 16, stanzas 53-55, etc., where references to the infinite number of worlds and/or universes or world systems are found.

In these characteristics of the empirical reality, proper of Buddhism, is revealed an eagerness for infinitude, a will of not remaining confined to narrow spatio-temporal limits - eagerness and will that are certainly proper of the Indian Culture in which Buddhism sinks its roots.

#### ***Infinite number of beings***

The countless universes in the unlimited space are peopled by an infinite number of beings (*sattakāyo ananto*). This is an ancient doctrine that is referred to in *Buddhavaṃsa* I, 64, and Buddhaghosa's *Aṭṭhasālinī*, p. 131, already quoted.

We can add the following texts in which this doctrine also appears:

***Ta chih tu lun*** (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*), p. 94 b, lines 4-11:

復次眾生如大海無初無中無後。有明智算師。於無量歲計算不能盡竟。如佛語無盡意菩薩。譬如十方一切世界乃至虛空邊際。合為一水。令無數無量眾生。共持一髮取一滯而去。更有無央數眾生。如前共持一髮取一滯而去。如是令彼大水悉盡無餘。眾生故不盡。以是眾生等。無邊無量不可數不可思議。

*English translation of Lamotte's French translation, Vol. I, p. 310: “Lastly, beings (sattva), as the great ocean (mahāsamudra), are without beginning, without middle and without end (apūrvamadhyacarama). An intelligent master in calculation (gaṇanācārya) who would count them during innumerable years would not reach their end. Thus the Buddha has said to the Bodhisattva Wou tsin yi (Akṣayamati): ‘If all the universes (lokadhātu) of the ten regions up to the end of space (ākāśa) formed a sole mass of water, and inexpressible and incalculable beings came, each one with a hair, to take out a single drop of water, there would remain an incalculable number of beings. If, taking out thus, each one, a single drop with a hair, they were able to drain this great mass of water, even thus, the number of beings would not be exhausted. It is because of this that the number of beings is unlimited (ananta), immense (apramāṇa), incalculable (asamkhyeya) and inconceivable (acintya)”.*

*Ibidem*, p. 93 b, line 29 - c, line 1:

復次眾生無量苦亦無量。

*English translation of Lamotte's French translation, Vol. I, p. 304: “Beings (sattva) are innumerable”.*

*Ibidem*, p. 125 c, lines 27-28:

是十方世界中。無量眾生有三種身苦老病死。



English translation of Lamotte's French translation, Vol. I, pp. 542-543: "In these universes of the ten regions, innumerable beings [*sattva*] suffer the three-fold physical pain [*kāyaduḥkha*]..."

The doctrine of the limitlessness of the number of beings is mentioned in relation to the infinite number of beings that are brought to *nirvāṇa* by each of the Buddhas that appear in the worlds:

Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* ad III, 3 c-d, p. 388:

*traidhātukānām anto nāsti / yāvad ākāśam tāvanto dhātavaḥ / ata eva ca nāsty  
apūrvasattvapradurbhāvaḥ / pratibuddhotpādaṃ cāsaṃkhyeya-sattvaparinirvāṇe pināsti sattvānām  
parikṣayaḥ, ākāśavat.*

"There is not a limit for the three worlds [*kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, *arūpyadhātu*]. As is the space so many are the worlds. And therefore, there is not coming into existence for beings that have not existed before and, although the *parinirvāṇa* of innumerable beings is produced on the occasion of the appearance of each Buddha, there is not coming to an end for beings, as [there is not for] space".

*Shou chang lun* (*Hasta-daṇḍa-sāstra*), attributed to Śākyakīrti (?) and translated by I-Tsing, a treatise that refutes the heretical belief in the existence of an *apūrvasattva*, quotes in its beginning (p. 505 b, lines 10-12) the mentioned passage of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*.

*Ti tsang pu sa pên yüan ching* (*Kṣitigarbha-praṇidhāna-sūtra?*), p. 778 a, lines 13-19, refers to the infinite number of beings that attend the Great Assembly, where Śākyamuni is going to preach:

爾時釋迦牟尼佛告文殊師利法王子菩薩摩訶薩。汝觀是一切諸佛菩薩。及天龍鬼神。此世界他世界此國土他國土。如是今來集會到忉利天者。汝知數不。文殊師利白佛言。世尊若以我神力千劫測度不能得知。佛告文殊師利。吾以佛眼觀故猶不盡數。

◦  
"At that time Śākyamuni Buddha told the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Mañjuśrī, son of the *Dharma* King: 'As you look at all these Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods, nāgas, pretas, spirits from this world and from the other worlds, from this region and from the other regions, who have come and are now assembled in the *Trayastrimśā* heaven, do you know their number or not?' Mañjuśrī said to the Buddha: 'O *Bhagavant*, even if with my extraordinary power, for a thousand *kalpas*, I were to calculate [their number], I would be unable to know it.' The Buddha told Mañjuśrī: 'As I look at them with my Buddha eye, yet their number cannot be exhausted'."

The *Lotus Sūtra* has several references to the infinite number of beings (in relation to the number of beings that attended the Assembly of the Buddha in Rājagṛha):

p. 15, verse 48: *ahaṃ vimāś ca bahuprāṇakotyā iha sthitāḥ*. "I and these numerous ten millions of beings standing here.";

p. 24, verse 68: *tahi śrāvakānām gaṇanā na vidyate te cāpramāṇāḥ sugatasya śrāvakāḥ*. "There is not calculation for the disciples assembled there, the Sugata's disciples are numberless";

p. 26, verse 85: *bhikṣū bahū tatha pi ca bhikṣuṇīyo ... analpakās te yatha gaṅgavālikā*. "Many monks and also nuns ... numerous as the sand of the Ganges...";

p. 10, verse 13: *bodhisattvā yatha gaṅgavālikā*. “Bodhisattvas [numerous] as the sand of the Ganges”;

p. 20, line 12: *viṃśatibodhisattvakoṭyaḥ*. “Twenty times ten millions of Bodhisattvas”;

p. 24, verse 70: *bahubodhisattvā yatha gaṅgavālikāḥ*. “Many Bodhisattvas [numerous] as the sand of the Ganges.”;

p. 2, line 10 - p. 3, lines 2-3: *aśītyā ca bodhisattvasahasraiḥ ... bahuprāṇikoṭīnayaśatasahasrasamātarakaiḥ*. “With eighty thousand of Bodhisattvas ... saviors of many hundred thousand of ten millions of hundred thousand millions of beings”;

p. 49, verse 73: *ekasmi yāne paripācayanti acintiyā prāṇisahasrakotyāḥ*. “In One Vehicle they lead to full ripeness inconceivable thousands of ten millions of beings”;

p. 26, verse 82: *āśvāsayitvā ... prāṇakoṭyo bahavo acintiyāmaḥ ... bhāviṣyatha buddha mamāntareṇa*. “Conforting ... many inconceivable ten millions of beings: ... you will be Buddhas after me”.

### **Infinite number of the Buddhas**

As beings, the Buddhas are also numberless. Their function is to save beings and to lead them to Enlightenment. The idea of the infinite number of the Buddhas had a modest origin. From the very beginning of Buddhism, the texts mention the existence of several Buddhas of the past. Their number is at first a small one, but it gradually increases and reaches very big proportions: 6 (**Vinaya** III, *Suttavibhaṅga*, Part I, p. 7; **Dīgha Nikāya** II, *Mahāpadānasutta*, III, *Ātānāṭiyasuttanta*, p. 195-196; 27 (**Buddhavaṃsa**); 55 (**Lalitavistara**, Chapter I, p. 5); 75000, 76000 and 77000 (*A p'i ta mo ta p'i p'o cha lun = [Abhidharma] Mahāvibhāṣā[śāstra]?*, p. 892 c, lines 4-15). Cf. **Hōbōgirin** III, sub “*Butsu*”, pp. 194-197.

In several Mahāyāna texts the number of the Buddhas becomes almost infinite and they are located in the past, the present and the future and in all the extension of space:

**Karuṇāpuṇḍarikasūtra** II, p. 41:

*atha te bodhisattvā evam āhuḥ / “asmābhir badhanta bhagavan gaṅgānadīvālikāsamesu atīteṣu buddheṣu bhagavatsu triṣṭhatsu dhriyatsu yāpayatsu iyaṃ dhāraṇī śrutā ca pratilabdā ca” / apara evam āhuḥ, “asmābhir dvigaṅgānadīvālikāsamānām”, apare “tribhiḥ”, apare “caturbhiḥ”, apare “pañcabhiḥ”, apare “ṣaḍbhiḥ”, apare “saptabhiḥ”, apare “ṣṭabhiḥ” / apare evam āhuḥ, ... navasu ...*

“Then those Bodhisattvas said thus: ‘O Lord *Bhagavant*, this *dhāraṇī* has been heard and grasped by us when Buddhas *Bhagavants* of the past, so numerous as the sands of a river Ganges, stayed, lived, existed’. Others said thus: ‘... so numerous as the sands of two rivers Ganges’. Others: ‘... of three ...’. Others: ‘... of four ...’. Others: ‘... of five ...’. Others: ‘... of six ...’. Others: ‘... of seven ...’. Others: ‘... of eight ...’. Others said thus: ‘... of nine ...’.”

**Daśabhūmikasūtra**, p. 4, lines 6-7: *daśabuddhakṣetrakoṭīparamāṇurajahsamās tathāgatā mukhāny upadarśayāṃ āsuḥ*. “... *Tathāgatas* so numerous as the powder of the atoms of ten times ten millions of Buddha-Worlds showed their faces”.

**Mahāvastu** I, pp. 124-126:

*atīkrāntānām buddhānām pūrvā koṭī na prajñāyate / praṇidhantāna bodhāya ... /16/ avaivartikadharmānām ... / abhiṣekabhūmiḥprāptānām ... /17/ tuṣiteṣu vasantānām ... / tuṣitebhyaś cyavantānām ... /18/ mātu kuṅṣau śayantānām ... / sthitānām matuḥ kuṅṣau ... /19/ jāyamānānām vīraṇām ... / jātānām lokanāthānām ... /20/ anikeṣu grhyamānānām ... / pādāni vikramantānām ... /21/ mahāhāsam*



*hasantānāṃ ... / diśaṃ vilokayantānāṃ ... /22/ anīkena dhāriyantānāṃ ... / upanīyamānānāṃ gandharvaiḥ ... /23/ purebhyo niṣkramantānāṃ ... / bodhimūlam upentānāṃ ... /24/ prāpnuvantānāṃ tathāgatajñānāṃ ... / dharmacakrapravartantānāṃ ... /25/ satvakoṭi vinentānāṃ ... / siṃhanādaṃ nadantānāṃ ... /26/ āyuhśaṃskāraṃ utsrjāntānāṃ ... / nirvāyantānāṃ vīrāṇāṃ ... /27/ nirvṛtānāṃ śayantānāṃ ... / dhyāpiyantānāṃ vīrāṇāṃ pūrvā koṭi na prajñāyate /28/.*

“The first extreme of past Buddhas is not known ... neither of those who assume the vow to win Enlightenment ... (16) ... neither of those who are not liable to turning back ... neither of those who attained the consecration stage ... (17) ... neither of those who live among the Tuṣita Gods ... neither of those who fall from the Tuṣita Gods ... (18) ... neither of those who lie in their mother's womb ... neither of those who stand in their mother's womb ... (19) ... neither of the Heroes who are being born ... neither of those Saviours of the world who have been born ... (20) ... neither of those who are taken on their mother's hip ... neither of those who take the (seven) steps ... (21) ... neither of those who laugh a loud laugh ... neither of those who contemplate the regions of the space ... (22) ... neither of those who are carried on the hip (of their mothers) ... neither of those who are attended by the Gandharvas ... (23) ... neither of those who depart from their homes ... neither of those who approach the Bodhi-tree ... (24) ... neither of those who attain the knowledge of a *Tathāgata* ... neither of those who set rolling the Wheel of *Dharma* ... (25) ... neither of those who convert ten millions of beings ... neither of those who roar the Lion's Roar ... (26) ... neither of those who abandon the conditionings of life ... neither of those Heroes who are extinguished ... (27) ... neither of those who lie extinguished ... neither is known the first extreme of those Heroes who are cremated (28)”.

*Ibidem* I, p. 46: *aprameyās tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksaṃbuddhāḥ pūjītā...* “Countless *Tathāgatas* Arhants, Perfectly Enlightened have been honoured [by me = Śākyamuni]”.

In *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* are found numerous references to the countless Buddhas of the past, the present and the future. We mention some of them:

p. 52, verse 98: *anāgatā pi bahubuddhakoṭyo acintiyā yeṣu pramāṇu nasti.* “The inconceivable many ten millions of future Buddhas who have no measure”;

p. 49, verse 71:

*ye cāpy abhūvan purimās tathāgatāḥ parinirvṛtā buddhasahasraneke / atītam adhvānam asaṃkhyakalpe teṣāṃ pramāṇaṃ na kadāci vidyate //.*

“There is not in any way a measure  
for those who in the past in countless *kalpas*  
have been the many thousands of Buddhas,  
the former *Tathāgatas* completely extinguished”.

p. 22, lines 1-2: *paścād bahūni buddhakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇi dṛṣṭāni satkṛtāni ca.* “Afterwards many hundred thousand of ten millions of hundred thousand millions of Buddhas were seen and worshipped [by them: the eight sons of Candrasūryapradīpa]”;

p. 29, lines 3-5: *bahubuddhakoṭīnayutaśatasahasraparyupāsītāvino ... tathāgatā ... bahubuddhakoṭīnayutaśatasahasracīṇacaritāvino.* “*Tathāgatas* who have worshipped many hundred thousand millions of Buddhas, who have fulfilled their Career under many hundred thousand of ten millions of hundred thousand millions of Buddhas”.

For other cases of references to infinite number of Buddhas in the *Lotus Sūtra* see *Index to the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* sub “*bahu-buddha*” etc., pp. 712-714.

### Dynamic conception

We can say that Buddhism has a dynamic conception of reality. This manifests itself in the peculiar doctrine of the *dharmas*.<sup>3</sup>

The *dharmas* are the elements, the constituent factors of all that exists. All that is “material”, as human body, is constituted by material *dharmas*. The mental phenomena as perceptions, sensations, volitions, acts of consciousness are nothing but *dharmas*. And man is only a psycho-physical aggregate of material *dharmas* and of mental *dharmas*. Reality, in its integrity, is likewise nothing else than *dharmas* - isolated or accumulated.

*Dharmas* are unsubstantial (*anātman*), because (using the Western terminology) they do not exist *in se et per se*, or (using the Buddhist terminology) they do not exist *svabhāvena*, i.e. they do not possess an own being; they are dependent, produced by causes and conditions. And, besides that, since the first period of Buddhist thought, *dharmas* were conceived as impermanent (*anitya*). But in the Hīnayāna several sects added to the *dharmas* the attribute of instantaneity. Among these sects are the Sarvāstivādins, the Vātsīputrīyas, the Mahīśāsakas and the Kāśyapīyas and the sects derived from these, according to Vasumitra (*I pu tsung lun lun*, pp. 16 c, line 2; 16 c, lines 15-16; 17 a, lines 13-14, and 17 b, line 1 = Bareau [1954], pp. 255, 257, 262 and 265, and Masuda [1925], pp. 50, 54, 62 and 65). Buddhaghosa in his commentary (pp. 195-196) to *Kathāvatthu* (XXII, p. 620), informs that the Pubbaseliya and the Aparaseliya sects, both derived from the Mahāsaṅghikas, affirmed the instantaneity of *dharmas*. Vasubandhu, who exposes the Abhidharmic point of view of the Sarvāstivādins-Vaibhāṣikas, emphatically says (*Abhidharmakośa* IV, 2 d, pp. 568-569) that “what is conditioned is momentary” (*saṃskṛtaṃ kṣaṇikaṃ*, and *bhāṣya ad locum: ko 'yaṃ kṣaṇo nāma? ātmalābho 'nantaravināśī, so 'syastīti kṣaṇikah*). Yaśomitra *ad Abhidharmakośa* II, 46 b, p. 262, line 26, refers to the Vaibhāṣikas with the term *kṣaṇikavādin*. On the contrary the Theravādins, according to the quoted text of the *Kathāvatthu*, did not accept the momentariness of the *dharmas*, and this explains why they remained attached to the realistic conception of the world.

This thesis of the momentariness of the *dharmas* will prevail in the Mahāyāna and it will give rise to its idealistic conception of reality, as we shall see. On the momentariness of the *dharmas* in Mahāyāna see for instance the following texts where the concept of *momentariness* is fully developed, and arguments for its demonstration are given: Asaṅga, *Mahāyāna-sūtralaṅkāra* XVIII, 82-91; Śāntarakṣita, *Tattvasaṅgraha* (*Sthirabhāvaparīkṣā*) 350-475, and Kamalaśīla *ad locum*; Dharmakīrti, *Hetubindu*, pp. 42-67, and the *īkās* of Vinītadeva and Arcaṭa; Dharmottara, *Kṣaṇabhaṅgasiddhi*; Jñānaśrīmitra, *Kṣaṇabhaṅgādhyāya*; Ratnakīrti, *Kṣaṇabhaṅgasiddhiḥ-anvayātmikā*, *Kṣaṇabhaṅgasiddhiḥ-vyatīrekātmikā* and *Sthirasiddhi-dūṣaṇa*; Ratnākaraśānti, *Antarvyāptisamarthana*. Jitāri wrote a treatise whose title is *Kṣaṇajabhaṅga*, see G. Bühnemann [1985], p. 11.

The *dharmas*, as soon as they appear, disappear, and are replaced by other *dharmas* of the same species as long as the causes that provoked the appearance of the replaced *dharma* continue to exist. Thus reality is an accumulation of series of *dharmas*, in a process of vertiginous constant *replacement*.<sup>4</sup> The result is that, as D.N. Shastri [1976] says, p. 189, “the reality, according to the Buddhist, is not static; it is dynamic. It is not being; it is becoming”.

The dynamic nature manifest itself not only in the elements, the *dharmas*, that constitute the foundations of reality, but also in reality itself, taken as a whole, since it is in a beginningless process of cyclic alternance of creations and destructions. This conception<sup>5</sup> is formulated in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II (*Kappasutta*), p. 142, where it is said that in each “cosmic period” (*kappa* = *kalpa*) there are four “incalculable” periods (*asaṅkheyyāni*): 1. the period of *saṃvaṭṭa*, complete destruction, dissolution (“in-volving” cycle); 2. the period during which the state reached by the complete destruction remains (*saṃvaṭṭatṭhāyin*); 3. the period of *vivaṭṭa*

<sup>3</sup> On the Buddhist theory of *dharmas* see M. and W. Geiger [1920]; Th. Stcherbatsky [1923]; H. von Glasenapp [1938]; F. Tola and C. Dragonetti [1977], with bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D.J. Kalupahana [1975]; S. Mookerjee [1935]; N.J. Shah [1967].

<sup>5</sup> Cf. González Reimann, L. [1988], Chapter 8.

(creation, “de-volving” cycle), and 4. the period during which the state reached by the creation remains (*vivaṭṭaṭṭhāyin*). Each of these periods lasts an incalculable number of years.

This cosmological theory is referred to in numerous texts as for instance:

***Dīgha Nikāya*** III (*Aggaññasuttanta*), p. 84:

*hoti kho so Vāseṭṭha samayo yaṃ kadāci karahaci dīghassa addhuno accayena ayaṃ loko saṃvaṭṭati ...  
hoti kho so Vāseṭṭha samayo yaṃ kadāci karahaci dīghassa addhuno accayena ayaṃ loko vivaṭṭati.*

“There is a time, O Vāseṭṭha, when at some moment or other, at the end of a long period, this universe is destroyed ... There is a time, O Vāseṭṭha, when at some moment or other, at the end of a long period, this universe is created”.

Cf. *ibidem* (*Brahmajālasutta*) I, p. 17; *Vinaya* III, p. 4; *Itivuttaka*, p. 99.

Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, p. 356, paragraph 66:

*Pubbenivāsaṃ anussaranto pi ca kappānussarako bhikkhu etesu kappesu aneke pi saṃvaṭṭakappe aneke  
pi vivaṭṭakappe aneke pi saṃvaṭṭavivaṭṭakappe anussarati.*

“Remembering his former state of existence, the monk, who remembers the cosmic cycles, remembers in those cosmic cycles numerous cycles of destruction, numerous cycles of creation, numerous cycles of destruction and creation”.

***Ta chih tu lun*** (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*), p. 125 c, lines 25-27:

我見東方無量世界。有成有住有壞。其數甚多不可分別。如是乃至十方。

(*English translation of Lamotte's French translation*, Vol. I, p. 542: “I see in the East region (*pūrvasyāṃ diśi*) innumerable universes coming forth, subsisting, or perishing. Their number is very great and defies any calculation. It is the same in all the ten regions”.

#### ***The laws that regulate our world***

The empirical reality as conceived by Buddhism, unlimited in space, without beginning in time, with its immense number of worlds, peopled by numberless beings, in which countless Buddhas preach the salvific Dharma, in a constant process of change, is not a chaotic universe. The empirical reality is submitted to laws, principles, norms, which regulate its existence and behaviour, which determine what necessarily must happen and *vice versa* what necessarily cannot happen in given circumstances, that is to say, when determined causes and conditions occur or do not occur. Thanks to these laws the universe appears as an organized system, as a *cosmos*.

We may consider that this Buddhist conception of a regulated universe is rooted in the ancient Vedic conception of a Cosmic Order (*ṛta*) that is either a product of the norms imposed by the Gods or an autonomous self-imposed principle.

#### ***The causal law and its universality***

All that exists is for Buddhism under the sway of the law of causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda* / *prat*

*ītyasamutpāda*), condensed in the well-known formula, *asmin sati, idaṃ bhavati*: “Given this, occurs that”.<sup>6</sup> Nothing occurs in the domain of existence owing to hazard, casually. Everything is the product of the conjunction of a multiplicity of causes. Nothing comes into existence, remains in it or goes out from it without the intervention of one or several causes. All is dependent, *pratītyasamutpanna*. This conception had a remarkable development in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* and it reaches its extreme expression in the Mādhyamika theory of Voidness (*śūnyatā*), absence of an own being (*svabhāvaśūnyatā*).<sup>7</sup> This law of causality is the great law of the universe.

The universality of the causality law is revealed by the fact that it is the foundation of one of the *tilakkhaṇa / trilakṣaṇa*, the three universal characteristics of reality: all is *anattan / anātman* i.e. unsubstantial, lacking an own being, lacking an existence *in se et per se*. The principle *sabbe dhammā anattā* or *sabbaṃ anattā* (all dharmas lack substantiality) is found in many Pāli texts as for instance: *Dhammapada*, verse 279; *Samyutta Nikāya* III (*Channasutta*), p. 133, IV (*Aniccādisuttanavaka*), p. 28 (*sabbaṃ anattā*), p. 401; *Majjhima Nikāya* I (*Cūlasaccakasutta*), p. 228; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I (*Uppādāsutta*), p. 286; *Theragāthā*, verse 678; *Paṭisambhidāmagga* I, p. 37, p. 53; *Mahā-Niddesa*, p. 94, p. 271; *Kathāvatthu*, p. 65, p. 531; *Vibhaṅga*, p. 70 (without *sabbe*).

And all is unsubstantial because of being dependent, *pratītyasamutpanna*, as expressed in the following texts:

Nāgārjuna, *Acīntyastava* 3:

*pratyayebhyaḥ samutpannam anutpannam tvayoditam /  
svabhāvena na taj jātam iti śūnyam prakāśitam.*

“What has arisen from conditions  
has been said by you to be un-arisen;  
that is not born with an own being,  
therefore it has been proclaimed to be void”.

*Ibidem* 40 a-b:

*yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatā saiva te matā.*

“What is Origination in Dependence,  
that indeed has been considered by you to be Voidness”. [I.e. dependence = unsubstantiality.]

Nāgārjuna, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikārikā* 19 a-b (Tibetan translation):

*de dan de brten gaṅ ḥbyuṅ de /  
raṅ gi dños por skyes ma yin //*

“What arises depending on this or that [cause]  
- that is not produced as a thing with an own being”.

Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* ad I, 1, p. 9, line 5, and *Subhāṣita-saṃgraha* [28], p. 395, line 19, quote the (Sanskrit) text of *kārikā* 19 of the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*:

*tat tat prāpya yad utpannam notpannam tat svabhāvataḥ.*

<sup>6</sup> Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* III, stanza 18 a, p. 432.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. Dragonetti [1987].

“What is produced depending on this or that, that is not produced by itself”.

Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* quotes four times *ad* XIII, 2, p. 239, (indicating the source), *ad* XXIV, 7, p. 491, *ad* 14, p. 500, and *ad* 18, p. 504, the following stanza:

*yaḥ pratīyair jāyati sa hyajāto no tasya utpādu sabhāvato 'sti /  
yaḥ pratīyādhīnu sa śūnya ukto yaḥ śūnyatām jānati so' pramattaḥ.*

“What is born out of conditions, that is not born indeed,  
it has not an arising with being [variant: with own being];  
what is dependent on conditions, that is called ‘void’.  
Who knows Voidness, he is not negligent”.

[We quote *ad* XIII, 2. The other quotations have *svabhāvato* instead of *sabhāvato*].

Prajñākaramati, *Pañjikā* *ad* IX, 2, p. 172 (with variant *sabhāvato* in *pāda* b) and *Subhāṣita- saṃgraha* [28] pp. 395-396 (with *utpāda evāsya bhavet svabhāvāt* in *pāda* b) quote this stanza (with the indicated variants and without mentioning the source). Candrakīrti points out that this stanza comes from the *Anavatap-tahradāpasamkramaṇasūtra*. The stanza is found in the Chinese translation of this *sūtra* included in *Taishō*, Vol. XV, No. 635, p. 497 b, 3-4 and in the Tibetan translation included for instance in *Sde-dge* edition, *Tōhoku* No. 156 and *Peking* edition, *Catalogue* No. 823. In both translations the *sūtra* bears different names.

Several Mahāyāna texts explicitly assert that *everything* is dependent on causes, i.e. is *pratīyasamupanna*, as for instance:

#### *Lalitavistara,*

p. 117, line 1: *hetu pratīya bhava śūnya ... dharmā*. “The *dharmas* being dependent on a cause, are void of [real] existence”.

p. 340, lines 3-4: *pratīya jātā dharmā ime*. “These *dharmas* are born in dependence”.

p. 375, line 11: *pratīyasamudāgataṃ jagac chūnyam*. “The world arisen in dependence is void”.

p. 419, line 9: *hetuṃ pratīya imi sambhuta sarvadharmā*. “All these *dharmas* are born depending on a cause”.

#### *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka,*

p. 191, line 12: *pratīya sarve imi bhāva utthitāḥ*. “All these beings have arisen in dependence”.

#### Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakāśāstra*

XXIV, 19 a-b: *apratīyasamutpanno dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate /*. “There is not a *dharma* arisen not in dependence”.

#### Āryadeva, *Catuḥśataka*

IX, 2: *apratīyāstitā nāsti kadā cit kasya cit kva cit*. “An existence not in dependence does not exist at any time for anything at any place”. This verse is quoted by Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* *ad* XX, 9 and XXIV, 19.

The same Candrakīrti quotes, *ibidem*, a saying of the *Bhagavant*:

*sahetu sapratīyaya dharmā jānati /*

*ahetu apratyaya nāsti dharmatā //*

“The [wise] knows that *dharmas* are with causes, with conditions; the nature of the *dharmas* is not without causes, without conditions”.

The expression of the same idea is found in Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

VI, 25 c-d: *sarvaṃ tatpratīyabalāt svatantraṃ tu na vidyate*. “Because of causality nothing is self-dependent”, which is commented by Prajñākaramati *ad locum*: *idaṃpratīyayatāmātrasamupasthitasvabhāvaṃ sarvaṃ idam / na tu svātantryapravṛttaṃ kiṃcid api vidyate*. “All this has a nature which has been produced only by causality. Nothing exists self-dependently arisen”.

and VI, 31 a-b: *evaṃ paravaśaṃ sarvaṃ*. “Thus all is dependent on another”.

### ***Importance of the causal law***

The *paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda* has ever been a fundamental theory of Buddhism, since its origin, along all its history, either when it designated the chain of twelve *dharmas* that produce suffering or when it came to designate universal contingency as the supreme law of reality. The importance possessed by the causal law is indicative of its universality. This importance manifests itself in many facts.

The *paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda*, as the chain of twelve members, constitutes a development of the Second and Third Noble Truths, which explains how suffering arises and how it is suppressed. And, as the universal contingency, it is the basis of the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra philosophies.

The *paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda* is considered by Buddha to be his *dhamma*, as expressed in the *Majjhima Nikāya* I, *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta*, pp. 190-191:

*Vuttaṃ kho pan 'etaṃ Bhagavatā: Yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passatīti.*

“That has been said by the Bhagavant: ‘Whoever sees Dependent Origination sees the *Dhamma* [Doctrine], whoever sees the *Dhamma* sees the Dependent Origination’.”

The *Śālistamba Sūtra* in its beginning affirms in a similar way:

*yo bhikṣava pratīyasamutpādaṃ paśyati / sa dharmāṃ paśyati / yo dharmāṃ paśyati sa buddhaṃ paśyati / ity uktvā Bhagavān tūśṇīṃ babhūva.*

“He who sees the Dependent origination [*pratīyasamutpāda*], sees the Doctrine [*dharmā*], he who sees the Doctrine sees the Buddha.”

According to the *Āryapratīyasamutpādanāmamahāyānasūtra*, p. 71 *infra*:

*rten ciñ ḥbrel bar ḥbyuñ ba ḥdi ni de bzin gśegs pa rnamṣ kyi chos kyi sku yin te / sus rten ciñ ḥbrel bar ḥbyuñ ba mthoñ ba des de bzin gśegs pa mthoñ ño.*

“This Dependent Origination is the *Dharmakāya* of the *Tathāgatas*, whoever sees the Dependent Origination sees the *Tathāgata*”.

The *paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda* is also considered by Buddha to be the *ariyo ñāyo*, the Noble (Buddhist) method, as *Samyutta Nikāya* V, *Paṭhamabhayaverūpasantasutta*, pp. 388-389). Cf. *ibidem*



II (*Pañcaverabhayasutta*), p. 70:

*katamo cassa ariyo ñāyo paññāya sudiṭṭho hoti suppaṭividdho? idha, gahapati, ariyasāvako paṭiccasamuppādaññeva sādhuḥkaṃ yoniso manasi karoti - iti imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassuppāda idaṃ uppajjati; iti imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati; yadida avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā ... ayam assa ariyo ñāyo paññāya sudiṭṭho suppaṭividdho.*

“And what is the Noble [Buddhist] method which he [= Buddha's disciple] has well seen and well penetrated by insight? In this world, O householder, the Noble [Buddha's] disciple well and thoroughly reflects on the Dependent Origination: *this being, that is; by the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that is not, by the cessation of this, that ceases*; thus, conditioned by ignorance, the *saṅkhāras* [arise] ... this is the Noble [Buddhist] method, which he has well seen and well penetrated by insight”.

Many texts express that the discovery by Buddha of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* / *pratītyasamutpāda* took place during the middle watch or the last watch of the night in which he attained the *bodhi* (Enlightenment). That indicates the importance this doctrine possesses as being discovered in the most significant moment of Buddha's life. See the texts quoted by Lamotte [1977], pp. 282-283: *Taishō* 187, p. 595 b 6 - 595 c 24; *Mahāvastu* II, p. 285, lines 7-18; *Lalitavistara*, pp. 346, line 1 - 348, line 15; *Taishō* 189, p. 642 a 20 - 642 b 10; *Taishō* 190, pp. 794 c 12 - 795 b 19; *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa XIV, verses 49-86; *Nidānakathā*, p. 75, lines 25-26.

Buddha himself praises the *paṭiccasamuppāda* / *pratītyasamutpāda* as being profound (*gambhīra*) and as looking profound and remarks that, through not understanding this doctrine, through not penetrating it, people are in a confused state of mind, as in *Dīgha Nikāya* II, *Mahānidānasuttanta*, p. 55:

*Gambhīro cāyaṃ Ānanda paṭiccasamuppādo gambhīrāvabhāso ca. Etassa Ānanda dhammassa ananubodhā appaṭivedhā evaṃ ayaṃ pajā tantākulakajātā gulāguṇhikajātā muñjababbajabhūtā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ saṃsāraṃ nātivattati.*

“This Dependent origination is profound, O Ānanda, and it looks profound. It is because of not understanding it, because of not comprehending, that people, having become like tangled skein, a matted ball of thread, a bunch of *munja* and coarse grass, is unable to overcome woe, miserable existence, destruction, transmigration”.

Cf. *Samyutta Nikāya* II, (*Nidānasutta*), p. 92. Buddhaghosa in his commentaries of both passages (*Sumaṅgala-vilāsini* II, pp. 485-486, and *Sārattha-pakāsinī* II, p. 87) explains that the profoundness of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is like the ocean at the foot of Mount Sineru: *Ekaṃ gambhīraṃ gambhīr 'āvabhāsaṃ hoti, Sineru-pādaka-mahāsamudde udakaṃ viya.*

And it is a very well-known fact that the *paṭiccasamuppāda* / *pratītyasamutpāda* theory is mentioned, developed, explained, commented in a brief or large form in numerous Buddhist texts. Even there are *suttas*, *sūtras*, *śāstras* dedicated to that theory. And many times Buddha is extolled as the discoverer of this theory. Ancient Brahmin authors have referred to this Buddhist theory in order to discuss and criticize it, and many modern scholars have dealt with it pointing out its paramount importance in Buddhist philosophy.

### *Universal interdependence*

The strictest causality which governs empirical reality in its entirety implies, as a corollary, the interdependence of all that exists, since every thing is produced as an effect by the conjunction of a multiplicity of things that act as causes; and consequently each of these things that act as causes is on its own turn produced as an effect by the conjunction of a multiplicity of other things that also act as causes, and so on in a beginningless backwards process. The necessity of a plurality of causes and/or conditions for the forthcoming

of anything is stated in many texts as for instance:

Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* I, 7, pp. 25-26:

*rūpaskandhaḥ vedanāskandhaḥ, saṃjñāskandhaḥ saṃskāraskandhaḥ, vijñānaskandhaś ceti,ete saṃskṛtā dharmāḥ /sametya = sambhūya pratyayaiḥ kṛtā iti saṃskṛtāḥ / na hyekapratyayajanitaṃ kiñcid astīti.*

“The form-aggregate, the sensation-aggregate, the perception-aggregate, the *saṃskāra*-aggregate and the consciousness-aggregate are the *saṃskṛta* [conditioned] *dharmas*. They are conditioned, because they are produced by conditions coming together [*sametya*] i.e. being joined [*sambhūya*], because there is nothing produced by [only] one condition”.

Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, p. 461, paragraphs 105-106:

*Etth 'āha: Kiṃ panāyam ekā va avijjā saṅkhārānaṃ paccayo, udāhu aññe pi paccayā santī ti? Ki pan 'ettha? Yadi tāva ekā va, ekakāraṇavādo āpajjati; atha aññe pi santi, avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā ti ekakāraṇaniddeso n'upapajjati ti. Na n'upapajjati. Kasmā? Yasmā*

*Ekaṃ na ekato idha nānekam anekato pi no ekaṃ phalam atthi...*

*Ekato hi kāraṇato na idha kiñci ekaṃ phalam atthi, na anekam, nāpi anekehi kāraṇehi ekaṃ, anekehi pana kāraṇehi anekam eva hoti. Tathā hi anekehi utu-pathavī-bīja-salilasāṅkhātehi kāraṇehi anekam eva rūpagandharasādikaṃ aṅkurasāṅkhātaṃ phalaṃ uppajjamānaṃ dissati.*

“Here [some one] says: Is ignorance alone the condition of the *saṅkhāras* [= the karmic residues], or are there other conditions? What does this mean? If [ignorance] alone, then the theory of a single cause occurs, if there are other causes, then the teaching of one single cause as expressed in ‘the *saṅkhāra* are conditioned by ignorance’ has no place. No, it has no place [really]. Why? Because:

In the world from one neither one nor many,  
and only one effect is not [produced] from many...

For in the world from a single cause no single effect whatsoever is [produced] nor many; through many causes a single [effect] is not [produced] either; through many causes many [effects] are indeed [produced]. Thus through many causes named ‘climate, earth, seed, water’ etc., many effects as form, smell, taste and so on named ‘shoot’ are seen to arise”.

A similar process takes place in regard to the effects. Each of the things that are produced as an effect, acting as a cause, in conjunction with a multiplicity of other things that also act as causes, produces other things as effects, and so on in an endless forwards process.

We may consider that this idea is on the basis of the explanation given in *Milindapañho*, *Lakkhaṇapañho* II, pp. 52-54 (Vaddekar ed.). Nāgasena expresses that *avijjā*, ignorance, is the root of the three times, that from it come forth the other members of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and that for the whole time a “first end”, i.e. a beginning is not known. At the request of the king, Nāgasena gives three illustrations that imply that *paṭiccasamuppāda* incessantly revolves, as a wheel, that this movement has neither beginning nor end, and that in this dynamic process effects behave as causes of other effects. The first illustration concerns the *bīja-aṅkura-phala* mechanism: from the seed, the shoot, from the shoot, the fruit, from the fruit again the *bīja*, and so on. The second illustration is that of the hen and the egg, which give rise one another. The third illustration makes manifest the circular conception of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (p. 53, lines 15-17):

*Thero paṭhaviyā cakkam likhivā Milindaṃ rājānaṃ etad 'voca - Atthi mahārāja imassa cakkassa anto 'ti. Natthi bhante 'ti.*

“The Thera drew a circle on the ground and said to King Milinda: Is there any end to this circle? No, Sir, there is not”.

In reference to this last illustration Nāgasena introduces another “circles” mentioned by Buddha (p. 53, lines 17-21):

*Evam eva kho mahārāja imāni cakkāni vuttāni bhagavatā - cakkhuṃ ca paṭicca rūpaṃ ca paṭicca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanapaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā kammaṃ. Kammato puna cakkhuṃ jāyati 'ti. Evam etissā santatiyā atthi anto 'ti. Natthi bhante 'ti.*

“Such are, O Great King, these circles spoken of by the Bhagavant: depending on the eye and depending on the form arises the consciousness-of-the-eye [= sight], the union of the three is contact, depending on contact arises sensation, depending on sensation arises thirst [= desire], depending on thirst arises attachment, depending on attachment arises *kamma* [= *karman*], and from *kamma* eye again arises. Is there any end to this series? No, Sir, there is not. The same reasoning is applied to the other organs of sense, including mind [*manas*]”.

The *Prañīyasamutpādayakārikā*, wrongly attributed to Nāgārjuna,<sup>8</sup> states the circular nature of the causal law, its eternal revolving movement (expressed by the metaphor of the never stopping wheel) and the effects becoming causes:

*ṭṛbhyo bhavati dvandvaṃ dvandvāt prabhavanti sapta saptabhyaḥ / traya udभवanti bhūyas tad eva [tu] bhramati bhavacakram.*

“From the three [ignorance, desire, attachment: *avidyā*, *trṣṇā* and *upādāna* = *kleśa*;] arise the two [formations and existence: *saṃskāras* and *bhava* = *karma*;], from the two come forth the seven [consciousness, name and form, six-fold base, contact, feeling, birth, old age, death: *vijñāna*, *nāmarūpa*, *ṣaḍāyatana*, *sparśa*, *vedanā*, *jāti*, *jarāmaṇa* = *duḥkha*] and from the seven again arise the three: this wheel of existence revolves”.

The *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu *ad* III, 19, p. 435, has:

*etena prakāreṇa kleśakarmahetukaṃ janma taddhetukāni punaḥ kleśakarmāṇi tebhyaḥ punar janmety anāḍibhavacakrakaṃ veditavyam.*

“In this way birth is caused by impurity and action; impurity and action are caused at their turn by that [birth]; and again birth is [produced] from them [= impurity and action] - thus the beginningless wheel of existence is to be known”.

And finally, we find in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* XVII, p. 498, paragraph 298:

*Tivaṭṭam anavaṭṭhitam bhamatī ti [cf. p. 496, paragraph 288] ettha pana, saṅkhāra-bhavā kammavaṭṭam, avijjā-taṇhupādānāni kilesavaṭṭam, viññāna-nāmarūpa-saḍāyatana-phassa-vedanā vipākavaṭṭan ti imehi tīhi vaṭṭehi tivaṭṭam idaṃ bhavacakkaṃ, yāva kilesavaṭṭam na upacchijjati, tāva anupacchinnapaccayattā anavaṭṭhitam, punappunaṃ parivattanato bhamati yevā ti veditabbaṃ.*

“With its three rounds [it] revolves without stopping - here the *saṅkhāras* and *bhava* [formations and being] are the round of *kamma*; *avijjā*, *taṇhā* and *upādāna* [ignorance, craving and clinging] are the round of *kilesa* [defilements]; *viññāna*, *nāmarūpa*, *saḍāyatana*, *phassa*, *vedanā* [consciousness, name and form, six-fold base, contact, feeling] are the round of result, *vipāka* [*kamma*-result] - this wheel of existence,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. Dragonetti [1978] and [1986].

consisting of three rounds, because of having these three [mentioned] rounds, not stopping due to a causality which is not cut off, revolves with an incessantly turning, so long as the round of *kilesa* [defilement] is not cut off - so it must be known”.

The result of this interdependence of causes and effects that pervades the whole reality is a “net” that relates among themselves all the existing things - momentary, evanescent, interconnected by causal relations, acting all of them at the same time as effect and cause. The universal interdependence is another great law of existence. And it is based on it that Buddhism constructs an ethics of solidarity among all beings, humans, animals, plants, the non-conscious nature and things.

### *Other laws*

The law of causality manifests itself in other laws that regulate the physical order, the moral order, and the course of the salvific action.

As an example of law referent to the physical order, the Buddhist texts mention the inevitable destruction of all that arises, which affects the human body and every kind of life in nature, being time the factor that allows the functioning of this law.

This law is expressed in the well known formula: *yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ, sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ ti*: “Whatsoever arises is subject to destruction”. Cf. *Udāna* V, 3, p. 49, lines 15-16; *Mahāvagga* p. 11 *in fine*; *Dīgha Nikāya* I (*Ambaṭṭhasutta*) p. 110, lines 12-13; *Samyutta Nikāya* IV (*Paṭhamagilānasutta*), pp. 47, 107; *Majjhima Nikāya* III (*Cūḷarāhulovādasutta*), p. 280, lines 10-11.

An example of law referent to the moral order is the law of *karman* / *kamma* or moral retribution of actions. Every action, good or bad, gives rise to merits or demerits and demands necessarily reward or punishment in this life or in other future existences. The whole destiny of beings depends on their *karman* i.e. on the moral quality of the actions that they have accomplished in their previous existences.

*Majjhima Nikāya* III (*Cūḷakammavibhaṅgasutta*), pp. 202-203, clearly expresses this doctrine:

*Ko nu kho, bho Gotama, hetu ko paccayo yena manussānaṃ yeva sataṃ manussabhūtānaṃ dissati h  
inappanītatā? Dissanti hi, bho Gotama, manussā appāyukā, dissanti dīghāyukā; dissanti bavhābādā,  
dissanti appābādā; dissanti dubbhaṇṇā, dissanti vaṇṇavanto; dissanti appesakkhā, dissanti mahesakkhā;  
dissanti appabhogā, dissanti mahābhogā; dissanti nīcākulīnā, dissanti uccākulīnā; dissanti duppaññā,  
dissanti paññavanto. Ko nu kho, bho Gotama, hetu ko paccayo yena manussānaṃ yeva sataṃ  
manussabhūtānaṃ dissati hīnappanītatā ti? Kammaṃ satta vibhajati yadidaṃ hīnappanītatāyāti.*

“ ‘Now, dear Gotama, what is the cause, what is the reason, that lowness and excellence are seen among human beings, while they are born as humans? For, dear Gotama, human beings of short life-span are seen, of long life-span are seen, of many illnesses are seen, of few illnesses are seen, of ugly complexion are seen, of beautiful complexion are seen, of little power are seen, of great power are seen, of little wealth are seen, of great wealth are seen, of low-class family are seen, of high-class family are seen, of weak intelligence are seen, intelligent [ones] are seen. Now, dear Gotama, what is the cause, what is the reason, that lowness and excellence are seen among human beings, while they are born as humans?’

‘O young man, beings are owners of their *karman*, are heirs of their *karman*; they have as matrix their *karman*, they have as kinsman their *karman*, they have as protector their *karman*. *Karman* divides beings - by lowness and excellence.’”

Cf. *Milindapañho*, p. 65 (PTS ed.). Cf. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II (*Mallikādevīsutta*), pp. 202-205: the *karman* explains why some women are beautiful, rich etc. and others are not; *Ta chi tu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*), p. 119 b, line 11 - c, line 4: the *karman* is the cause whereby some persons do not see a Buddha but get to eat and to drink, while others see a Buddha but do not obtain food and drink.

In the *Majjhima Nikāya* I (*Kukkuravatikasutta*), pp. 387-392, the Buddha describes the four kinds of actions that can be accomplished by men indicating the consequences of each of these kinds of actions. He concludes each one of his four expositions with the following words, which concentrate the essential import of the doctrine of *karman*:

*bhūtā bhūtassa upapatti hoti, yaṃ karoti tena upapajjati...Evaṃ p'ahaṃ... kammadāyādā sattā ti vadāmi.*

“Rebirth of a being is from what has come to be; according to what he does, so is he reborn ... So I say: beings are heirs of their *karman*”.

The greatest example of the application of the law of *karman* is given by Śākyamuni himself who, after an infinite number of rebirths in which He accumulated limitless merits, attained the condition of Buddha.

The destiny of beings, in all its aspects, as is seen by the quoted text of *Majjhima Nikāya* III, depends on their deeds, on their *karman*. But the incidence of the *karman* of any individual is not limited to him; together with the *karman* of other individuals it possesses a collective force that determines the destiny of the universe: its destruction, its new creation, the special features it is to possess in its new stage of existence, the events which will occur in it, etc.

This doctrine is several times referred to in Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, Book III, while describing the *bhājanaloka*, the world where beings are to exist:

*ad III, 45 c-d , p. 506: trisāhasramahāsāhasralokadhātor evaṃ sanniveśam icchanti, yad utākāśapraṭi ṣṭham adhaṣṭād vāyumaṇḍalāṃ abhinirvṛttaṃ sarvasattvānāṃ karmādhīpatyena.*

“They maintain that the disposition of the universe consisting of three thousand great thousand world-systems is thus: below is the circle of wind placed on the space, come into being by the sovereign power of the *karman* of all beings”;

*ad III, 46 a-b, p. 506: tasmīn vāyumaṇḍale sattvānāṃ karmābhīr meghāḥ sambhūyākṣamātrābhīr dhārābhīr abhivarṣanti.*

“By the [power of the] *karmans* of beings clouds, coming together, pour their rain by means of drops of the measure of an *akṣa*<sup>9</sup>”;

*ibidem: katham tā āpo na tiryag visravanti? sattvānāṃ karmādhīpatyena.*

“Why these waters [= those that form the circle of waters] do not flow away sideways? [They do not] owing to the power of the *karman* of beings”;

*ibidem, p. 507: tās ca punar āpaḥ sattvānāṃ karmaṇāmbhūtasambhūtair vāyubhir āvarttyamānā upariṣṭāt kāñcanībhavanti.*

“And then these waters agitated by winds produced by the force of the *karman* of beings become gold in the upper part”;

*ad III, 50 a, p. 509: evaṃ ca punaḥ sambhūtāḥ suvarṇādayaḥ karmaṇāmbhūtasambhūtair vāyubhiḥ samāh ṛtya rāśīkriyante. ta eṭe parvatās ca bhavanti dvīpās ca.*

<sup>9</sup> *Akṣamātra* in the original: “of the measure of one *karśa*, 16 *māśas*, one *tolā*”; “of the size of the axle”; “of the size of the *akṣa* fruit”; “of the measure of *akṣa* (104 *angulas* in length)”, according to *An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sanskrit*.



“And then the gold, etc., produced in this way are gathered and heaped by the winds, put in motion by the force of *karman*, and they become the mountains and the continents”;

*ad III, 59 a-b, p. 516: katham idānīm ceṣṭante? sattvānām karmabhir vivarttanīvāyuvat.*

“How then they [= the *narakapālas*] move? [They move] by the *karmans* of beings, like the winds of creation”;

*ad III, 60 ante a, p. 518: athemau candrārkaḥ kasmin pratiṣṭhitau? vāyau. vāyavo 'ntarikṣe sarvasattvasādhāraṇakarmādhipatyanirvṛtā āvartavat sumeruṃ parivartante.*

“On what the moon and the sun are established? On the wind. The winds produced by the sovereign power of the collective *karman* turn round the Sumeru like a whirlpool”;

*ad III, 60 b, p. 518: sūryavimānasyādhasṭād bahiḥ sphaṭikamaṇḍalaṃ taijasam abhinirvṛtaṃ tāpanaṃ prakāśanaṃ ca. candravimānasyādhasṭād āpyaṃ sītalaṃ bhāsvaraṃ ca. prāṇinām karmabhir dṛṣṭīṣar īraphalapus-pāsasyausadhīnām anugrahārtham, upaghātakārtham ca yathāsambhavaṃ.*

“Under and outside the mansion of the sun a crystal circle of fire is produced, burning and illuminating, under the mansion of the moon one of water, cold and brilliant. By [the force of] the *karmans* of beings they [= both circles] are, according to circumstances, for conferring benefits to the eye, the body, fruits, flowers, grains, herbs and for damaging [them]”.

*ad IV, 85 a-b, p. 711: prāṇātipātenāyāsevitena bāhyā bhāvā alpaujaso bhavanti. adattādānenāsanirajobahulāḥ, kāmamithyācāreṇa rajo 'vakīrṇāḥ, mṛṣāvādena durgandhāḥ, paisūnyenotkūlanikūlāḥ, pārūsyenōsarajāgalā pratikruṣṭāḥ pāpabhūmayāḥ, sambhinnaḥ pralāpe viṣ amartupariṇāmāḥ, abhidhyayā śuṣkaphalāḥ, vyāpādena kaṭukaphalāḥ, mithyādrṣṭyā alpaphalā aphalā vā. idam eṣāṃ adhipatiphalaṃ.*

“Owing to murder intensely carried on [by men] the external things [= according to commentary: plants and earth etc.] become of little vitality. Owing to theft, they are attended with [rains of] stones and dust; owing to sexual misconduct they are covered with dust; owing to lying they have bad smell; owing to calumny they are going up and down; owing to hard words, they are impregnated with salt and arid, they are poor, bad soils; when there is idle talk, change of seasons is irregular; owing to covetousness [soils] produce dry fruits; owing to malice they produce pungent fruits; owing to wrong views they produce few fruits or no fruit at all. This is the effect of the sovereign power of these bad deeds [*karman*]”;

*ad III, 90 a-b, p. 540: tataḥ śūnye bhājane ita eva sāmantaḥ sattvānām tadākṣepake karmaṇi parikṣiṇe sapta sūryāḥ prādurbhūya krameṇa yāvat pṛthivīm sumeruṃ ca niḥśesa dahanti.*

“Then, once the *bhājanaloka* is void owing to the extinction of the *karman* of the beings who dwell in it, [i.e. the *karman*] that [previously had] produced that [= the *bhājanaloka*], seven suns, gradually appearing, burn all up to the earth and the Sumeru”;

*ad III, 90 c-d, p. 541: tathā hi saṃvṛto loka ākāśamātrāvaśeṣaś ciraṃ kalaṃ tiṣṭhati yāvat punar api sattvānām karmādhipatyena bhājanānām pūrvanimittābhūtā ākāśe mandamandā vāyavaḥ syandante.*

“Thus the world, which has disappeared in this way, during a long time remains being only space until again, through the sovereign power of the *karman* of beings, soft winds spread in the space, as previous signs of *bhājanalokas* [that will appear in the future]”.



Likewise the *Li shih a p'i t'an lun* (*Lokaprajñāptyabhidharmaśāstra*), p. 223 c, lines 1-9, a text belonging to the Sarvāstivāda literature<sup>10</sup> states that, when the universe is again created, it is by the force of the accumulated *karman* of all beings that God Brahmā and his *vimāna* (palace) appear as the maturation (*vipāka*) of the fruit (*phala*) of that *karman*. It also asserts that the *karman* produced in previous births is the only sovereign cause (*adhipati*) in the creation of a new world.

The quoted texts of the *Abhidharmakośa* refer to the *real* creation, existence and destruction of the universe by the force of *karman*, and the text of the Chinese *Lokaprajñāptyabhidharmaśāstra* adopts a similar position in relation to the creation of Brahmā and his *vimāna*, owing to the realist philosophical position of the Hīnayāna to which they belong.

The texts that follow belong to a very different context: Mahāyāna Buddhism, and specially the Yogācāra system of philosophy. Although they consider that the world is only a mental creation, nevertheless they still affirm that the creation, existence and destruction of that mental creation is due to *karman*. Furthermore, the idea that *karman* is the cause of universe gives them the possibility to explain why all beings create in their minds, all of them, the idea, the representation, the mental creation of *one* and the *same* universe, avoiding in this way the extreme position of solipsism. All beings mentally create one and the same universe, because their *karman* have had the same “maturation” (*tulyakarmavipāka*) or because there are “common” seeds that produce the same “fruit”.

Hiuan-tsang, *Ch'eng wei shih lun* (*Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiśāstra*), p. 10 c, lines 13-18:

謂異熟識由共相種成熟力故變似色等器世間相。即外大種及所造色。雖諸有情所變各別。而相相似處所無異。如眾燈明各遍似一。誰異熟識變為此相。有義一切。所以者何。如契經說。一切有情業增上力共所起故。

“The *vipākavijñāna* [“maturation”/consciousness, i.e. produced by the maturation of the *karman*], because of the “maturation” of common *bījas* [“seeds”], is transformed adopting the appearance of the world [*bhājanaloka*] constituted by matter, etc. i.e. the exterior great elements [*mahābhūta*] and the matter formed by them [*bhautika*]; [and,] although it, once transformed, in all sentient beings, once transformed, is [in each one of them] apart, different, nevertheless the external aspect is identical [for all beings]: the world is not different [for each one of them], as the light of the lamps is [each one] apart, [but] that of all seems to be one. Which maturation/consciousness is transformed as that external aspect [of a world]? The answer is: all the maturation/consciousness. Why? The *sūtra* says: ‘because it has arisen by the sovereign force of the *karman* of all sentient beings as common [for all].’”

Vasubandhu, *Vimśatikā* ad III c-d, explains the fact that all the infernal beings see the *same* infernal world because they are *tulyakarmavipākāvasthāḥ*, i.e. “because the condition of the maturation of their *karman* is identical”, and ad IV c-d: *samānasvakarmavipākādhipatyāt*. “owing to the identical maturation of their *karman*”.

Many laws regulate the course of the salvific action. Let us mention among them the law constituted by the *Four Noble Truths*, according to which human condition is necessarily submitted to suffering, suffering has as its cause attachment, and suffering can be suppressed destroying its cause through a special method: the *Eightfold Noble Path*, which Buddhism offers. If one follows the Noble Path, one attains Liberation from suffering, *Nirvāṇa*. From the numerous texts that refer to the *Noble Truths* and the *Noble Path* we mention only *Mahāvagga*, (*Dhammacakkappavattana*), p. 10; *Samyutta Nikāya* V (*Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*),

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Takakusu [1905], pp. 142-143; and L. de la Vallée Poussin [1971], I, pp. XXXVII-XLI. This text is quoted in the text of Hiuan-tsang that follows.

### *Characteristics of these laws*

These laws have not been imposed by a Creator since Buddhism does not accept the existence of a God, Creator and Governor of the Universe.<sup>11</sup> It is the Buddhist atheism which is inserted in the atheistic tradition in India. This tradition is very strong and is shared by a series of non-Buddhist philosophical and religious systems, fully accepted by Hindu orthodoxy, as the Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṃkhya and the most ancient form of the Yoga.

These laws have not been created by Buddha either. They have not been revealed to Him by any superior power or even by any human teacher. They are not a construction of His mind, He has not invented them.

These laws, as the empirical reality that they regulate, exist from a beginningless eternity valid by themselves, always the same, inalterable, necessary, acting with an ineludible force, not being possible for anything to escape the rigor of their dominion.

These ideas are expressed in the following texts:

*Samyuktāgama* (*Nidānasamyukta*, *Bhikṣusūtra*), pp. 164-165:

*kin nu bhagavatā pratīyasamutpādaḥ kṛta aho svid anyaiḥ. Na bhikṣo mayā pratīyasamutpādaḥ kṛto nāpi anyaiḥ. api tūtpādād vā tathāgatānām anutpādād vā sthitā eveyaṃ dharmatā dharmasthitaye dhātuh. taṃ tathāgataḥ svayam abhijñāyābhisambuddhyākhyāti prajñāpayati prasthāpayati vibhajati vīvaraty uttānīkaroti deśayati samprakāśayati. yadutāsmiṃ satīdaṃ bhavaty asyotpādād idam utpadyate. yadutāvīdyāpratyayāḥ saṃskārā yāvāt samudayo nirodhas ca bhavati.*

“The Dependent Origination has been made by the *Bhagavant* or by others? O *Bhikṣu*, the Dependent Origination has not been made by me [the Buddha] or by others. Whether *Tathāgatas* arise or do not arise, stable is that essence of the *dharmas* [= *pratīyasamutpāda*], the foundation for the stability of the *dharmas*. The *Tathāgata* having known and comprehended it [= *pratīyasamutpāda*] perfectly by Himself, declares, makes known, establishes, analyzes, reveals, proclaims, teaches, manifests it: *given this, occurs that; from the arising of this, that arises*, namely the *saṃskāras* exist having as condition ignorance up to [such] is the origin and destruction [of suffering]”.

The Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (*Ta chih tu lun*), p. 298 a, lines 19-20, after quoting the *Bhikṣusūtra*, remarks that the “*law of the arising and destruction, whether the Buddhas exist or not, is eternal*”.

The *Śālistambasūtra*, p. 72 (de la Vallée Poussin ed.), enumerates the characteristics of these laws in relation to *pratīyasamutpāda* or Dependent Origination:

*ya imaṃ pratīyasamutpādaṃ satatasamitam [ajīvaṃ] nirjīvaṃ yathāvad aviparītam ajātam abhūtam akṛtam asaṃskṛtam apratigham anālambanam śivam abhayam anāhāryam avyayam avyupaśamasvabhāvaṃ paśyati, sa dharmam paśyati; yas tv evaṃ [dharmam] satatasamitam [ajīva] nirjīvaṃ ity ādi pūrvavat, yāvad avyupaśamasvabhāvaṃ dharmam paśyati so 'nuttaradharmasārīram buddham paśyati.*

“He who sees this Dependent Origination as eternal, [without life], lacking life, truly without alteration, not born, non become, not made, not compounded, unobstructed, baseless, calm, fearless, ineliminable, imperishable, whose nature is non-cessation, he sees the Dharma; and he who sees the Dharma in the same

<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. von Glasenapp [1954].

way, as eternal, [without life,] lacking life, and *so on as before up to*: whose nature is non-cessation, he sees the Buddha whose body is constituted by unsurpassable *dharmas*.”

In *Samyutta Nikāya* II (*Paccayasutta*), p. 25, after exposing the *paṭiccasamuppāda* theory, Buddha declares:

*uppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ, tīṭhā va sā dhātu dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā idappaccayatā. taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti. abhisambujjhitvā abhisamētvā ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānkaroti.*

“Whether *Tathāgatas* arise or do not arise, stable is this principle [= *paṭiccasamuppāda*], the stability of the law, the necessity of the law, the causality. The *Tathāgata* perfectly comprehends and understands it [the Dependent Origination]; having perfectly understood and known it, He declares, teaches, makes known, establishes, reveals, analyzes, proclaims it”<sup>12</sup>.

The texts already quoted refer to the *pratīyasamutpāda* whose characteristics they describe. But it can be thought that these characteristics are also to be attributed to other laws. There is not a reason why not, and besides that there is a text in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I (*Yodhājīvavagga, Uppādāsutta*), p. 286, which applies the formula found in *Samyutta Nikāya* II (*Paccayasutta*), p. 25, just quoted, to other laws of reality - those of the impermanence (*anicca*) and the painful nature (*dukkha*) of all compounded things and that of the lack of an own being of all *dharmas*:

*uppādā vā, ... tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ tīṭhā va sā dhātudhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā. sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ...*

“... Whether *Tathāgatas* arise or do not arise, stable is this principle [= *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*], the stability of the law, the necessity of the law: all aggregates are impermanent ...”

as in *Samyutta Nikāya* II, p. 25. The same is said in regard to *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā* and *sabbe dhammā anattā*.

#### ***Buddha as a discoverer and expositor of these laws***

From the texts just quoted it is evident that Buddha has not created these laws, has not invented them, they are not a construction of His mind. Moreover they have not been revealed to Him by another being. In several texts He proudly affirms that He has had no master: *na me ācariyo atthi*. Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* I (*Ariyapariyesanasutta*), p. 171, *Kathāvatthu*, p. 289; *Mahāvagga*, p. 8; *Milindapañha*, p. 235 (PTS ed.); *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Part I, p. 132.

These laws are there, they have been always there, and Buddha, after an intense and painful intellectual effort, in the memorable moment of his Enlightenment, discovers the existence of these laws, their nature and their functioning. And He has full consciousness of his character of mere discoverer of a reality that transcends him and to which He has opened his mind and his receptivity in order to allow it to penetrate into him. And it will be the exposition of these laws what constitutes his Teaching, his Dharma. His Teaching, his Dharma, is thus only the exposition, manifestation, explanation, elucidation, revelation and transmission by him of these laws.

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<sup>12</sup> This formula has been reproduced by numerous texts as Yaśomitra's commentary to *Abhidharmakośa ad III*, stanza 28 a-b, p. 452; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I (*Uppādāsutta*), p. 286; *Kathāvatthu* VI, 2, p. 321, and commentary *ad locum*, pp. 89-90; *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, pp. 143-144 and 218 (Nanjio ed.); Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā ad I*, stanza 1, p. 40; Prajñākaramati, *Pañjikā ad IX*, stanza 150. Cf. *Lotus Sūtra* II, stanza 103. It was even quoted by Brahmanic authors as Kumārila, *Tantravārtika, ad I*, 3, 11, and Vācaspati Mīśra, *Bhāmatī ad II*, 2, 19, p. 526.

We can say that in the beginning of Buddhist doctrine there was an intellectual act of knowledge, painfully conquered. From the first moment the importance of knowledge and of human effort has constituted an essential characteristic of Buddhism.

#### ***Realistic conception of Buddhism in its first stages: real existence***

In its first periods, from the VIth century before the Common Era up to the beginning of C.E., Buddhism maintains an open realistic position. The world is real, it exists independently of man, who grasps it with his sense-organs and who thinks it with his mind. But in the world in its totality, submitted to the causal law, in which every thing is an effect, product of the conjunction of a multiplicity of causes and determining conditions, there is nothing substantial, nothing which exists *in se et per se* or nothing that exists *svabhāvena*, i.e. that has an own being that belongs to itself and that depends on itself. Corollaries of the fundamental non-substantialist conception of Buddhism are, on one side, the non-existence of God - already mentioned - and the non-existence of the soul in man.

#### ***Transformation of the early Buddhist conception of reality***

But, in the beginning of the Common Era, and because of the evolution of the ancient conceptions, the existence of the external world and likewise the capacity of our sense-organs and of our reason to grasp its nature began to be doubted. Two great philosophical schools are then constituted: the Mādhyamika School and the Yogācāra School, which will mark new trends to the principal manifestations of Buddhist philosophy.

#### ***The Mādhyamika School: conditioned existence***<sup>13</sup>

The Mādhyamika School, founded by the great Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, brings to its utmost development the conception of causality and the conception of unsubstantiality grounded in it, both inherited from the past, and elaborates its central theory of Voidness. The every-day experience reveals to us a reality constituted by beings and things which present themselves before us as existent *in se et per se*, as compact, continuous and unitarian.

The Mādhyamika School studies the reality we perceive and reaches a conclusion, regarding that reality, completely different from that of our ordinary experience. The empirical reality is constituted only by beings and things absolutely contingent. In it every thing is conditioned, relative, dependent. Furthermore everything is constituted by parts. No totalitary entity exists; there are only conglomerates of parts, of elements, of constituent factors. The rope we perceive does not exist *in se et per se* as a rope, it is only an aggregate of threads, and these at their turn do not exist *in se et per se*, they are only an aggregate of filaments, and so on; and this analytic-abolitive process does not stop in something substantial, provided with a being, with an existence which is proper to it.

Conditionality, relativity, dependence, the fact of being composed, contingency, the absence of an own being or *Voidness* (the proper term used by the School) constitute the true nature, the true way of being of the empirical reality, and the form under which it appears before us is only a *non-reality*, an *illusion*.

#### ***The Yogācāra School: mental existence***<sup>14</sup>

If the Mādhyamika School of the great Nāgārjuna puts special emphasis in *Voidness*, the universal contingency, the absolute relativity of everything, the Yogācāra School affirms with the same force *the sole*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. C.Dragonetti [1987] and F.Tola and C.Dragonetti [1994].

<sup>14</sup> Cf. F.Tola and C.Dragonetti [1983], [1989] and [1990].

*existence of mind*, of consciousness; for this school the only thing that exists is ideas, representations, mental creations, to which nothing real corresponds. Let us remember that for Buddhism, from the very beginning, mind or consciousness is only a series of states of consciousnesses, of acts of knowledge. These cognitive acts constitute the mind; there is not an entity outside and different from them, permanent and autonomous which “has” these acts of consciousness, which is what “experiments” them as their inalterable witness or seer. The idealistic school maintains that thesis, but adds (contrarily to what Buddhism thought in its beginning) that to the succession of representations, which constitutes mind, does not correspond any real correlate.

The empirical reality in which we exist has in this way the same ontological *status* as *dreams* or *illusions created by magic*. Nothing distinguishes the vision of the reality in which we move from oniric visions or from the fantasmagory created by the magician or from the hallucinations to which suggestion gives rise. The naïve realism embraced by Buddhism in its first stages or in the Hīnayāna period, has left the place to an extreme idealistic view, where beings and objects disappear as real entities and where only entities of mental nature remain.

If for the School of Nāgārjuna the empirical reality becomes the *Great Void*, for the Yogācāra School reality is only a *Great Illusion*, created by the mind submerged in error.

### **Conclusion**

The prodigious Universe imagined by the ancient Buddhist thinkers, infinite in time, unlimited in space, peopled by an inconceivable number of world systems, with their incalculable millions of millions of beings, and with their incalculable millions of millions of Buddhas, guiding the infinite beings to their Liberation, in a permanent transformation, regulated by laws of universal validity, has become a product of human mind, a dream of that shadow that is man, who depending only on his own effort and counting only with the help of the Teaching of the Master, looks for the Path that leads to Enlightenment - the foremost degree of intelligence, knowledge and consciousness - and will allow him to reach that realm of peace and silence, the beatitude of extinction, the supreme *Nirvāṇa*.

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