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Dependent Origination, Protecting Life & Middle Path

Shih Chao-hwei, Professor/Director, Center for Applied Ethics, Hsuan Chuang University

Abstract

This paper introduces three cores of Buddhist Ethics: Dependent Origination, Protecting Life and the Middle Path.

"Dependent Origination" is generally known as "causes and conditions", is the core and most fundamental principle. It is also the unique Buddhist ideology that distinguishes Buddhism from other religions in the world. All phenomena in the universe, be it human, events, matters or scenes (these are collectively called Dharma in Buddhism), are not free from the law of "combination of causes and conditions".

"Protecting Life" is a moral principle that develops naturally from the Law of Dependent Origination. It is based on three major principles: "putting oneself in others' shoes", "interdependency", and "equality of all dharma nature" of the dependent originated phenomena. "putting oneself in others' shoes" is the moral ground for protecting life. This is named as the Golden Rule Theorem in ethical study. The ability of "putting oneself in others' shoes" is the moral entity that develops in accordance to the principle of "interdependency" and "equality of all dharma nature" of the dependent originated phenomena.

"the Middle Path" is: "to make a relatively best choice without selfish thought among the causes and conditions that we see, hear, sense and know." When we say causes and conditions that we "see, hear, sense and know", we have hinted that there are limitations in our sense organs and understandings. The doer must understand that these causes and conditions that we "see, hear, sense and know" do not encompass all causes and conditions. Thus, when we make a decision, we do not dare to boast that all our selections are the "absolute truth". We can only humbly acknowledge that this is the "relatively best choice" that we can make at the moment.

In addition, the practice of "putting oneself in others' shoes" and the ability of seeing the insight of dependent origination and selflessness – which develops under the study of the Law of Dependent Origination – can assist us to put self-benefit aside but to think for the benefit of the sentient beings and make a "non-selfish" selection/choice.

The three major principles of "protecting life", such as "putting oneself in others' shoes", not only help us to relate better to others' feelings when meeting/communicating with others, but they can also develop according to the Law of Dependent Origination and become ethical judgments and practical conducts that are in accordance to the Middle Path.

Key Words: Sattva (being, creature), pratīya-samutpāda (dependent origination), protecting life, madhyamā-pratipad (the middle path), putting oneself in others' shoes, interdependency, equality of all dharma nature.

1. Definition and Connotation of Dependent Origination

"Dependent Origination" (s. pratīya-samutpāda; p. paṭicca-samuppāda), or what is generally known as "causes and conditions" (s. nidāna), is the most important key word amongst the Buddhist teachings that is vast in system and abundant in contents. It is the core and most fundamental principle. It is also the unique Buddhist ideology that distinct Buddhism from other religions in the world. Śākyamuni Buddha realised the truth, and attained Enlightenment by observing and contemplating the human life with profound wisdom, proving the reality of this law¹.

The definition of "Dependent Origination" is as follows:

"Without veering towards the two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma by the middle (the Middle Path).

When this exists, that comes to be;

With the arising of this, that arises.

That is,

With ignorance as a condition, volitional formations (come to be)

With volitional formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be...

with birth as a condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair come to be.

Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be;

With the cessation of this, that ceases.

That is,

With the cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations;

with the cessation of birth, then aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair cease.

Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering."

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All phenomena in the universe, be it human, events, matters or scenes (these are collectively called Dharma (p. Dhamma) in Buddhism), are not free from the law of "combination of causes and conditions". Such a law is not a creation of the Buddha. However, it is a teaching that the Buddha had realised himself without the guidance of a teacher. It is a teaching that the Buddha realised through his profound insight and great wisdom, which he then went on to teach. Thus, it is said:

"Whether the Buddha was born in this world or not, this law (dharma) has always existed, hence, dharma abide, dharma realm."²

The above sentence implies that whether the Buddha was born in this world or not, all dharma (phenomena) rise and fall according to this law. It is always as such. Thus it is called Dharma Abide. This law applies everywhere in the universe. Hence, it is named Dharma Realm.

There may not be great differences between the words "causes" and "conditions", seeing as they both refer to "reasons". However, in differentiating them, we define "cause" to refer to the main cause that forms a dharma; and "conditions" as the secondary causes surrounding the main cause. The accomplishment or destruction of all human matters and phenomena are subject to causes and conditions. Thus, the teaching of Dependent Origination does not only point out the truth of the arising of all phenomena, it also spelled out the truth of the cessation of all phenomena. In other words, everything that is dependently originated arises and ceases according to causes and conditions, thus, phenomena in nature that are everlasting and unchanging cannot be found. As everything exists according to causes and conditions, there is no self-nature that is independent. Neither can there be self-mastery.

At this point, we would like to emphasise that the law: "when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; when this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases", is the common law of all phenomena. There is no exception to living things, non-living things, animals or plants. However, non-living things do not have the sign of life, and although plants live, they do not have consciousness or emotional love as the animals do (thus, they are called the sentient beings (s. sattva)). They have high sensitivity to their feelings of suffering and happiness. Thus, the core concern of Buddhism is targeted on the sentient beings among the living things. The reason for Buddha's searching for the truth, practicing the path, realising the truth and preaching the dharma is to find an ultimate solution to the problems of birth, old age, sickness, death, worry, sorrow, distress and pain in life.

2. From "Positive" Rule to the Norm of "Obligation"

In the book *The Study of Buddhist Ethics* that I have written, based on the rule of experience, I drew up a summary of the basic principle of dependent origination. From this basic principle, I have established the philosophy of "protecting life". In short, "protecting life" is a moral principle that develops naturally from the Law of Dependent Origination. Extending from this, all norms of morality do not deviate from the aspiration of "protecting life".

We may say that they are two main points in the Buddhism. One is the Law of Dependent Origination. Secondly is the concept of "protecting life".

The Law of Dependent Origination is a precise description of the Law of Cause and Effect. It is the main principle of Buddhism. Based on this theory, Buddhism explains the rising and falling of the world. This theory also encompasses the fair/righteous rules of suffering for one's own deeds and common karmic results due to common deeds.

The concept of "protecting life" is the ultimate spirit among all norms of ethics in Buddhism. It encompasses the passive rule of not harming others (Principle of Non-maleficence) to the positive rule of loving and being kind to everyone (Principle of Beneficence). These principles set their foundations on "the notion of self-discipline (Principle of Autonomy) - mind is the guide". In other words, by emphasising the basic principle that all lives possess the volition of free will, the teaching of dependent origination develops a philosophy of "protecting life".

A question of concern is that the Law of Dependent Origination explains the reason for the rising, falling, formation and destruction of all phenomena, this is only a general rule induced from the level of Positive Ethics. However, the study of ethics is a study of the Obligation level. Thus, how could the teaching of dependent origination, based on a Positive topic/theme, deduce a systematic theory of Obligation?

3. Protecting Life: An Inevitable Development of the Law of Dependent Origination

When a Buddhist disciple takes refuge in the Triple Gem (make vows to be a Buddhist), although they may not formally take the Five Precepts, such as the precept of no killing, as their basic norm of conduct, they do make a vow that:

"from now on, until the end of their life, they will protect life"³.

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This shows the Buddha's emphasis on "protecting life". As mentioned earlier, according to the Law of Cause and Effect that is in accordance to the Law of Dependent Origination, either one is searching for personal happiness for the present or future, and the understanding of "wholesome acts reap wholesome rewards, and evil deeds reap evil retribution" as wholesome teachings are what everyone should uphold.

The Buddha draws this wholesome teaching more specifically into two virtuous acts: To uphold the duty of morality – to uphold the Five Precepts. To go beyond one's basic duty and share the resources that one has with others – to practice giving.

Practising giving and upholding precepts are two virtuous acts that can help us to fulfill the aim of benefiting oneself, so that one can be relieved from suffering and gain happiness. More importantly, it can also achieve the effect of benefiting others, so that sentient beings can be freed from suffering and gain happiness.

In other words, altruism in Buddhism can be achieved directly using the Law of Dependent Origination. Below are the three principles of "altruism in Buddhism – protecting life" in accordance to the Law of Dependent Origination.

3.1 To Put Oneself in Others' Shoes

From the Agama sutras of early Buddhism to the Mahayana sutras, it is explained that "putting oneself in others' shoes" is the morale ground for protecting life. As mentioned in the Samyutta-nikāya ("55 Sotāpattisamyutta"):

"I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die; I desire happiness and am averse to suffering. Since I am one who wishes to live...and am averse to suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to take the life of another – of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desires happiness and is averse to suffering – that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from the destruction of life, exhorts others to abstain from the destruction of life, and speaks in praise of abstinence from the destruction of life....Again, if someone were to take from me what I have not given, that is, to commit theft, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to take from another what he has not given, that is, to commit theft, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to

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me is displeasing and disagreeable to the others too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from taking what is not given, exhorts others to abstain from taking what is not given, and speaks in praise of abstinence from taking what is not given....Again, if someone were to commit adultery with my wife, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to commit adultery with the wives of another, then that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the others too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from sexual misconduct, exhorts others to abstain from sexual misconduct, and speaks in praise of abstinence from sexual misconduct....Again,...if someone were to damage my welfare with false speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to damage the welfare of another with false speech, then that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from false speech, exhorts others to abstain from false speech, and speaks in praise of abstinence from false speech....Again,...if someone were to divide me from my friends by divisive speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to divide another from his friends by divisive speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either...Again,...if someone were to address me with harsh speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to address another with harsh speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either...Again,...if someone were to address me with frivolous speech and idle chatter, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to address another with frivolous speech and idle chatter, then that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from idle chatter, exhorts others to abstain from idle chatter, and speaks in praise of abstinence from idle chatter. ...The noble disciples possess these seven good qualities and these four true states of confidence (true confidence in the Buddha, ...in the dharma, ...in the sangha. He possesses the virtues dear to the nobles ones, unbroken...leading to concentration.)....if he wishes, he could by himself declare of himself: I am one finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my destination."⁴

In "Dandavaggo" of the Dhammapada, it is also said that:

"All tremble before the rod, all fear death; putting oneself in the place of another, one should

neither strike nor cause to strike.⁵

All tremble before the rod, to all life is dear; putting oneself in the place of another, one should neither strike nor cause to strike.”²⁵

This is the practice of “putting oneself in others’ shoes”. That is to share the feeling of other sentient beings in accordance to our own feelings. Hence, respect the sentient beings’ nature of loving their lives and fearing death, wishing for happiness and avoiding suffering.

A person who can always put oneself in another’s position will be self-initiated in upholding the seven noble precepts of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. (Generally, the last four items are collectively termed as “no lying”, hence, forming the Five Precepts.) Anyone who can develop true confidence in the precepts equips oneself with the supreme practice to be reborn in the heaven or human realm. With this as the foundation, if one can further develop true confidence in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, with these four virtues, one can enter into the noble stream and attain the first fruition (s. srota-apanna). One will at the maximum, be reborn to and from the heaven and human realms seven times, before one realises ultimate liberation and attains arahathood.

As the saying quoted from the Agama sutra mentioned earlier, by upholding the seven noble precepts (the Five Basic Precepts), which are wholesome acts of altruism, although its results help one to gain the reward of happiness in the realm of human or heaven, the initial motive of upholding the precepts should not come from the consideration of self-benefit (egoism). It should be a shared feeling and sympathy that arises by putting oneself in others’ shoes. If we can always put ourselves in others positions in all our actions, even if our ambition to attain worldly happiness for ourselves has not changed, we may develop great motivation in benefiting others during the process of putting ourselves in others’ position and sharing the feelings of others. Hence, gradually develop the moral habits of altruism.

If we can uphold pure precepts as such, and further cultivate pure faith in the Triple Gem, then, when we enter the stream of the noble ones and attain enlightenment and liberation, we will suddenly realise “self” is in fact an illusion and absurd.

The practice of “putting oneself in others’ shoes” is similar to the “intuitive wholesome ability” mentioned in Confucianism. This is named as the Golden Rule Theorem in ethical study. Using Immanuel Kant’s Golden Rule Theorem, the contemporary scholar of ethical study, Gensler further did some delicate authentication and minor amendment. These modifications are

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to eliminate the absurdness that arises due to the implication of some abusive and wild languages in the Golden Rule Theorem.⁶ Hence, he set two precise definitions for the Golden Rule Theorem:

Under the same circumstances and environments, treat others in the same way that you like to be treated.

If "I did something to someone, however, under the same circumstances and conditions, I do not wish this thing to happen to me", then, this person does not have a standard behaviour in treating oneself and others. This is against the Golden Rule Theorem. (Gensler, 1999, 147-173)

This coincides with the core of Confucianism. It is said that "what I do not want, do not give it to others"; "what I do not like others to impose on me, I should not impose this on others." This is exactly the same theorem mentioned above.

Thus, it is not only Buddha, Confucious, and the western philosopher Immanuel Kant, who uphold the Golden Rule Theorem. Other religions such as Hinduism, Christian religions, Islam, Taoism, the Persian religion and many thinkers in the world do uphold this theorem too. Many have also regarded this principle of "putting oneself in others' shoes" as the core of moral thinking. Hence, Gensler says: "the Golden Rule Theorem has almost become a global rule. It is a norm that is common to all people at any era." He also said: "the Golden Rule Theorem that is deeply rooted among cultures in the world, is suitable to be used as a guideline in solving conflicts among various cultures if they do arise." (Genslear, 1999, 160)

Christianity and Kant have not included animals as part of the opponents covered in their Golden Rule Theorem. Christianity bases their reasoning on the "God nature". Kant bases his reasons on "Rationality". Animals are not equipped with "God Nature" and "Rationality", thus are not being taken by human beings into a consistent morality consideration.

However, Buddhism clearly regards animals as one of the opponents when practicing the teachings of "putting oneself in others' shoes". The reason being animals also have the same emotion and feeling of sufferings as human beings. They do not like to be killed and they have the sentiments of joy, anger, sorrow and happiness. As such, the practice of "putting oneself in others' shoes" cannot exclude sharing the feelings of animals. Thus, we should use the "ability to feel/sense" as a yardstick in judging the opponents encompassed by the Golden Rule Theorem. Our care and share of feelings should not be limited to human beings alone. It must be expanded to all sentient beings (including animals).

In this aspect of ethical judgment, the view points of the Animal Liberation philosopher Peter Singer and the Ethical study scholar Gensler are more consistent to Buddhism's point of

views. (Peter Singer, 1996, 2; Gensler, 1999, 163-164).

Of the two virtuous acts of protecting life mentioned above, upholding precepts and giving, the former is passively not to harm others. The latter is actively giving happiness to others. The former is still within the scope of fulfilling one's duty. The latter is a virtuous act that surpasses the level of duty. These two actions arise from the practice of "putting oneself in others' shoes", to have sympathy to others' circumstances and share the feelings of others. Thus, one passively controls oneself, to restrain oneself from acting inappropriately and bringing sufferings to others. On the positive side, one shares one's resources with others. One gives wealth, material, energy, speeches that can help to change others' environment, so that others can be relieved from suffering and attain happiness. From the practice of giving and upholding precepts of an ordinary person, to the Bodhisattvas' minds and actions of the noble ones – "to have great loving kindness unconditionally", and "to see all sentient beings as one united body and to have compassion to all", these practices are founded on the teaching of "putting oneself in others' shoes".

From this stand point, we can see that "self-love" is initially a strong care to "personal circumstances". It seems like a knife that has cut off the communication bridge between one and others. In fact it is not so. It is more like a double sided knife that on the one hand it can fall into the trap of ego-centricism and be caught in delusion, creating karma and reaping sufferings. On the other hand, based on "care for oneself", it can also develop into an opposite direction. By putting oneself in others' shoes, one sharing the feelings on how others also care for themselves (self-regarding), are they able to start practicing altruism. This also proves that the Buddha's teaching of the Law of Dependent Origination, regardless of whether from the psychological or ethical aspects, from positive or obligated levels, sets a bridge that guides one to practice from egoism to altruism.

3.2 The Interrelationship among the Dependent Originated Phenomena

"Putting oneself in others' shoes" or the "wholesome intuitive ability" is a moral sentiment that develops from experience. It surpasses the barrier of religion and culture. It becomes the Golden Rule – the core of moral thinking. However, if we investigate further, what is the origin of such a moral sentiment? Does it depend on subjective conditions or is it merely an objective emotion? Does it come from the external revelation of the heaven, or is it an intuitive awareness that comes from within? Is it a truth that is clear by itself without relying on any proof, or does it need more fundamental truth to prove its validity? On this point, there are great differences among the view points of the various philosophers.

According to the Law of Dependent Origination, "wholesome intuitive ability" is a product of the harmonisation of the subjective and objective entities. It does not come from the external factor such as the revelation of the heaven. It can be proved by the more fundamental truth of Dependent Origination. In short, "wholesome intuitive ability" is the moral entity that develops in accordance to the principle of "interdependency" and "equality of all dharma nature" of the dependent originated phenomena. Hence, a sense of common feeling of sympathy toward other sentient beings - the objective entities, naturally develops.

Venerable Yin Shun sees these two principles of the Law of Dependent Origination – interdependency and equality of all dharma nature, as the "foundation for loving kindness and compassion"⁷.

In addition, although human beings are seen as distinct individuals, among the individual bodies, they are definitely not "non-conductor". Generally, we rely on languages and expression to convey messages. However, for people who are very close and loving to each other, the communication can sometimes happen just within the air. For example, when a son is met with an accident outside and dies, the mother at home who does not know about the accident, may cry at home without reason at that same time as when the accident happens. This is what we mean by "the hearts are linked" or the "interaction of the heart wave".

In the world that we are living in, why do we sometimes find people who feel very guilty when they accidentally kill an animal? On the other hand, there are people who use knives to kill thousands of people without feeling a sign of shame? Since all human beings possess wholesome intuitive ability, why is there such a vast difference in the response from each individual? Now, this distinct difference of moral awareness among individuals can be further explained using the Law of Dependent Origination. The more one reduces the "consciousness of self-centeredness", the path of communication becomes more smooth. Thus, a mother who loves her child and forgets about herself can feel the suffering and happiness of the child just like her own. One who forgets about oneself when reading novels or watching movies, and blends oneself into the state of the role player, will also fall into a state where one can't help dropping tears in accordance to the protagonist's sadness. This is the reason for the differences in moral awareness among individuals, although everyone is equipped with the ability of "putting oneself in others' shoes".

However, why are the distinct individuals not non-conducting to each other? The reason being: from the perspective of the Law of Dependent Origination, any phenomenon that exists

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(including sentient beings), cannot be isolated and exist independently. All require the corporation of causes and conditions in order to succeed. Thus, an entity that arises due to causes and conditions itself is in a complex interdependency network with other entities that also arise due to causes and conditions. Under this premise, how can lives that are mutually supported and rely on causes and conditions, not have some pathways that are hidden, subtle and free flowing? Thus, the respect to other lives is not only based on pure subjective likes or dislikes or emotional factors. Behind the common feeling and sympathy between the subjective and objective entities, there are in fact principles as mentioned above.

Furthermore, it is only in realising the state of 'selflessness' through penetrating the Law of Dependent Origination, that we can further improve our 'loving kindness to all sentient beings' that develops from "putting oneself in others' shoes" to the life wisdom of "dharma nature loving kindness" and "unconditional great loving kindness".

In addition, with the loving kindness to sentient beings that arise through the understanding of the dharma nature of dependent origination (dharma nature loving kindness), and not to rely on anything as the centre of "self" and develop the network of "mine", we will be able to develop great loving kindness to all sentient beings unconditionally (great loving kindness without conditions).

3.3 The Equanimity of the Dharma-Nature of Dependent Origination

Secondly, as all sentient beings are relatively stable existences that are formed by various causes and conditions, when causes and conditions change, the superiority, inferiority, good or bad state of the existence will change accordingly. The class and nation consciousness or gender discrimination arise due to the attachment to class, nation and gender as real. Hence, a permanent view arises. This is also a kind of self-view that is caused by self-pride (the psychology of looking down on others). All phenomena are dependent originated and empty in nature, that is, selfless. Thus, behind all these distinctive phenomena, an existence that is everlasting, permanent, independent, self-existing and real cannot be found (that is, it is empty in nature, it is selfless). In other words, all phenomena are dependent originated and have no self-nature. Phenomena that function under this law rise and fall, there are only phenomena that are relatively stable in state. There is no real distinctive existence that is everlasting. This teaching of the equanimity of dharma nature is the fundamental principle of Buddhism in advocating equality among all sentient beings.

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When we use this principle that the dharma nature is equal and same to contemplate the various forms of the dependent originated phenomena, we will understand that their relationship is not only interrelated and interdependent, but will develop a common feeling and sympathy towards others sentient beings, and realise that there is no difference between ourselves and others.

The common feelings towards others that arise due to our understanding of the interdependent and interrelationship among all sentient beings, is only an understanding that by-passes the fence of "I" and "you". Now that we understand the equanimity of dharma nature, there is no difference between "I" and "you", even the true "fence between I and you" cannot be found.

Thus, the Mahayana teaches equality among all sentient beings. Not only is it so among all sentient beings, it is also equal among all sentient beings and the buddhas. This is because, "due to causes and conditions that the world comes together", hence, sentient beings exist. Similarly, "due to causes and conditions that the world ceases", hence, buddhas are founded. All sentient beings have the potential to attain Buddhahood – the Buddha nature. These are all in deep experience/insight gained from the contemplation and realisation of the equanimity of dharma nature.

Hence, the thought of "seeing all sentient beings just like our own self and having compassion to all" is not necessary for one to put oneself in others' shoes in order to imagine the feelings of others and make rational judgment. The thought of relieving sentient beings from sufferings and bringing happiness to all arises due to the profound realisation that all sentient beings are equal in their nature, they are just like one body. At this stage, "protecting life" is not only simply a feeling, a thought of benefiting others. It has become an enhancement of sentiment and love. "Protecting life" is not only a virtuous act, it has become a moral awareness and rational thought. It has become a duty that a human being who has enhanced one's sentiments and selfish-love should fulfill. Thus, not only should we passively not harm or abuse sentient beings (including animals), but also on the active side, we should develop behaviours that surpasses this basic duty and have benevolence to sentient beings. Hence, in doing so we transform our life from an ordinary person to the noble state.

In summary, it is with Buddhism's Law of Dependent Origination that leads to the view of "protecting life". From the interrelationship of the dependent originated phenomena and the equanimity nature of dependent origination, we can find the theoretical support to have sympathy and compassion to those who are weak and lonely. From the profound insights of "selflessness"

and "equanimity", the pure state of morality, where "altruism," that is not mixed with the deluded thought of "egoism", is attainable.

4. The Denotation and Connotation of Middle Path

Under the endless movement of causes and conditions, human beings do possess "relative freedom of choice". While living among others, groups or even animals, plants and non-living things, human beings always need to make some ethical judgment, so as to decide one "wishes to be so, and not to be thus". Now, the question lies on what is the guideline for one to make the decision that one "wants to be so, and not to be thus"? How can human beings use their "relative freedom" skilfully and try their best to make the most appropriate and correct decision for the choices in front of them? Thus, the Buddha taught the Middle Path (s. madhyamā-pratipad) as the main guiding principle for ethical practices.

Middle Path has always been misunderstood as having an ambiguous stand point or abandoning of choice making. In fact, "path" means way. Middle Path is a way that leads us to the realisation of the truth of "middle". It is certainly not a "giving up of choice". In fact, as the choice of path is precise and clear, there is no room for ambiguity.

In short, the word "middle" encompasses two goals. Firstly, we must maintain 'righteousness' in our subjective attitude and not be bias. Secondly, with regards to objective issue or matters, we must investigate the "centre" (the fundamental core) of the questions thoroughly. With this attitude that is righteous and diligent, we can take into consideration causes and conditions from various perspectives without prejudice. With this non-bias information, we can investigate in depth and make rational deductions to thoroughly understand the truth of the question. Hence, find a rational way of solving the problem. This is termed as the Middle Path.

"Not to be bias and lop-sided" is the gist in making an ethical judgment. Not only does it rely on a righteous personality and a mind that can always share the feelings of others, it also needs the knowledge and understanding of many of the related causes and conditions. Thus, the Theory of the Middle Path is not sided to either the Theory of Mind-only or Materialism. It is the Law of Dependent Origination that talks about the interrelationship between mind and material, and the dependency of mind and objects.

Having made this ethical judgment that is "non-bias and non-lop-sided", we transform our judgment into actions. It becomes the Middle Path. This is a non-bias path of communicating with others that we as an individual or a group should adopt while living in an environment in this era

of time. While communicating with others, we should have a "non-bias and non-lop-sided" way of treating others. If we narrow the scope, even for the individual defilements that we have, we should also have a non-lop-sided way of confronting them. However, please do not think that this non-lop-sidedness must be the middle point of a line as in geometry. One who is lazy in making choices and only hope for a "standard answer" will not be able to develop a mind and wisdom that is sharp and alert, and realise Middle Path in life.

For example, the Buddha says that to "not indulge in suffering and happiness" is the Middle Path. This is the saying of a wise man from his experience. From his personal experience in practice, the Buddha thoroughly understands that we should not attach to worldly happiness or the bliss of meditation, nor to the various forms of ascetic practice that are non-beneficial to the liberation of our life. Thus, in terms of self-discipline, the Buddha advised his disciples to uphold the Middle Path so that not indulging in suffering and happiness is the essence of their life.

How can we practice not indulging in suffering and happiness appropriately? The key is not to stereotypically find a fixed point. This is because this fixed point can vary and be adjusted according to an individual's spiritual foundation, role and environment. One who is sumptuous in habit needs some tougher training. Those who are very strict on themselves need some enjoyment as the buffer. Under the same principle of "not to indulge in suffering and happiness", the living standard of the lay people may still be above the average line. However, for the sangha members, it is more appropriate to have the living standard that is below the average life. Furthermore, in environments that are generally poor or generally rich, the individual's living standard of "no suffering or happiness" will also be different. A big house situated in an area of poverty will be too striking and inapt. However, if it is situated among the high-rise buildings at the centre of the city, the affluence of the house will be diluted.

Following from what we mentioned above, we may give the Middle Path a more precise definition. That is: "to make a relatively best choice without selfish thought among the causes and conditions that we see, hear, sense and know."

When we say causes and conditions that we "see, hear, sense and know", we have hinted that there are limitations in our sense organs and understandings. The doer must understand that these causes and conditions that we "see, hear, sense and know" do not encompass all causes and conditions. Thus, when we make a decision, we do not dare to boast that all our selections are the "absolute truth". We can only humbly acknowledge that this is the "relatively best choice" that we can make at the moment.

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For example, when humankind first invented nuclear power, they thought that it is a way of producing energy that has zero pollution, superior application and low in cost. Hence, many countries start to establish nuclear power plants. At that time, people thought that this is the right public policy. However, this was followed by the many unexpected incidents, such as the fusion of the nuclear reactor in Russia and the leakages of nuclear radiation, which brought sever disasters and extensive calamities to the people. After these bitter lessons, human beings must admit that the decision of using nuclear power is a wrong choice.

Clearly, due to the limitations of our understanding, what we see as the "best" at present may turn out to be a "bad" choice as time goes on. Therefore, a person who understands the teaching of the Middle Path would only maintain a modest attitude towards one's choice. With a modest attitude, even if we cannot guarantee that our choice is absolutely right, it helps reduce our attachment to our views and to stop committing mistakes repeatedly.

In addition, the practice of "putting oneself in others' shoes" and the ability of seeing the insight of dependent origination and selflessness – which develops under the study of the Law of Dependent Origination – can assist us to put self-benefit aside but to think for the benefit of the sentient beings and make a "non-selfish" selection/choice.

For example, we know clearly the great danger behind nuclear power policy and the difficulties in disposing nuclear waste. However, there are still people who have chosen the nuclear power strategy. This is because they live outside the dangerous boundary of nuclear disaster. The area where the nuclear waste is buried is also far away from where one lives and works. Since one does not need to confront with the risk of the side effect of nuclear power or nuclear disaster, at the same time, one can enjoy the facilities in life brought by the nuclear power, why not agree to it? This is a choice that has gone astray from Middle Path. This is because the decision maker does not have a righteous attitude that is "non-selfish". He/she could not put himself/herself in the position of those residents who live in the area that suffered from the side effect of nuclear power plant. They could not respect their feeling and have consideration to their suffering.

As such, politicians and businessmen may also always try to make some decision which is "relatively the best according to the causes and conditions that they see, hear, sense or know". However, this is not the Middle Path. They are only trying to gain "the greatest benefit for oneself". A slight difference in the beginning can lead to great differences at the end. The difference lies in whether one is selfish or non-selfish, has the concept of self or non-self.

5. The Counteracting Implications of the Middle Path

The reason why I highlight "making a relative best selection without selfishness" is to tackle the two extremes of "insufficiency" and "overdoing".

a. Counteracting Insufficiency – The Common Illness of Being Weak and Sitting on the Fence

Many Buddhist disciples when confronting great dispute, not only do not dare to make their choice, but when abandoning their vote, they still try to rationalise their weakness and attitude of "sitting on the fence" by using "impartiality" or "aloofness" as camouflage. As such, when many kind-hearted people raise arms and call for help in many topics of justice and righteousness, bravely participating in the issue, these Buddhists will absent themselves in order to protect themselves (to play safe).

This hypocritical attitude is very commonly seen in Chinese societies. As long as there are a few evil persons in the village, they can do whatever they like and everyone is frightened of them. Superficially, the villagers are the innocent victims. However, if we investigate further, we will realise that this is a structure of partnership in crime. The minority can bully the villagers; but there must be a conforming majority who has a blind spot in their moral values.

An example of this is when people are over-lenient and over-tolerant of the evils, or just care for themselves and have an indifferent attitude when others are being victimised. The reason why the evils can have the public under their control and rely on their privilege is because:

They accumulate more accomplices and share the benefits, or they may ally with their enemy to defeat another common enemy.

They let the vast majority of third parties maintain a neutral attitude, so that they can realise their plan of attacking each and everyone individually.

Under these circumstances, to be an accomplice and share the benefit is of course a bad choice. Even if we try to remain neutral and avoid making a choice, this is still a kind of selection. At the same time, it is also a bad choice.

There is no doubt that "to be neutral" is also one of the choices, and this choice may not necessary be in accordance to the Middle Path. This is because when facing the evil deeds and the sufferings they lead to, to maintain neutral may only satisfy our self- benefit (or the benefit of our organisation). We are only sitting and watching the deepening of the evil and the intensification of the suffering.

For example, we know very clearly that the nuclear power policy creates great danger of

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harming lives. However, during the election, when the pro-nuclear power and con-nuclear power candidates for prime minister (or various ministers and representatives) pursued us to vote for them, most people will still chose a "neutral" position, so that they do not offend any party. If the majority of the people uphold this attitude in election time, then the candidates will have no fear in supporting the nuclear power policy. They are not worried that if they pro the nuclear power policy they will lose in the election. This attitude of being "neutral", even if it is the same as the middle point in geometry, is definitely not equivalent to the Middle Path.

Due to one's righteous personality, the ability of sharing the feeling of others by putting oneself in others' shoes, and the objective understanding of the pros and cons of nuclear power policy, one who practices the Middle Path will vote for, and encourage others to vote for, the candidate who opposes the nuclear power policy. Even if by doing so one may offend people who supported the policy, and even bear the risk that once the pro-nuclear policy party wins, one may have to confront their revenge, it does not worry him/her. At this time, his action and behaviour is in accordance to the Middle Path.

Thus, to a person who practices the Middle Path, not only is he/she able to make a decision that is in accordance to the Middle Path, he/ she may sometimes go beyond the middle line in order to rectify some mistakes. Thus, when making a choice, there is the possibility that one may slant leftward or rightward from the middle.

In an environment where everyone inclines to the left, maybe only a choice that is "rightward from the middle" is in accordance to the Middle Path. On the other hand, in an environment where everyone inclines to the right, maybe only a choice that is "leftward from the middle" is in accordance to the Middle Path. At this time, a Middle Path practitioner will have to choose to "retreat oneself, even though thousands and millions of people are moving forward". This is not against aloofness; on the contrary, this is the real detachment and aloofness that surpasses the consideration of self-benefit and the benefit of one's group or sect.

b. Counteracting "Overdoing" – Eliminating the Common Illness of Discrimination and Hollow Thought

Due to the limitation of our six sense organs, the causes and conditions that we can "see, hear, sense and know" do not necessary encompass all causes and conditions. Although we should not give up making choices, we should not be too proud and boost that our choice must be the "absolute truth". We can only humbly admit that, up to the present, this is the relatively best choice. If we can uphold this attitude in treating people who have different views to us in either the area of politics or religion, we will have more mutual respect and communication

among each other. In turn, this would reduce a lot of disputes and sources of disaster that is irreconcilable. This attitude of "overdoing" is less commonly seen among the Buddhists. It is easier for followers who believe in "only one truth" to behave as such.

However, it is easy for Buddhists to commit the other type of "overdoing" and to give up everything and fall into the trap of nihilism. Some Buddhists tend to use terms from the sutras or quotes of the great masters – such as "no attachment", "not discriminating/thinking of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness", "to practice is not difficult, problem arises when one discerns" etc. – as excuses for them "not to make choice". Even if this is not because of their weak and sitting-on-fence mentality, it implies that they do not have right insight on dependent origination. One's mind is confused. One is fastidious and demanding but inept.

We should know that, "non attachment", "not thinking of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness", "the path of practice is easy, problem arises when one discerns" are stages for one who has transformed from an "ordinary" to a "noble person". This is the stage after one has already become very skilful in practicing firmness in their wholesomeness.

For ordinary persons like us, due to our self-centredness, we normally trap ourselves in defilements. It is even difficult for us to be firm in doing good deeds, not to say "not to think of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness". Thus, the guiding principle in practicing the Middle Path is to remind ourselves that even if we wish to transform ourselves from the ordinary state to the noble state, we should not try to skip steps in our practice and look for short cuts, or to brag arrogantly for the mere purpose of showing off ourselves. We must contemplate seriously the essence of dependent origination, and practice the Noble Eightfold Path step by step in our daily life.

6. The Personality/Moral Character Factor of the Doer/Actor

The three major principles of "protecting life", such as "putting oneself in others' shoes", not only help us to relate better to others' feelings when meeting/communicating with others, but they can also develop according to the Law of Dependent Origination and become ethical judgments and practical conducts that are in accordance to the Middle Path.

With regards to these specific ethical conducts, we either justify its legitimacy by analysing whether it is in accordance to the principle of morality (such as the deontologist), or we justify its correctness according to its substantial benefits (such as the teleological theory).

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On the other hand, the wholesome and unwholesome ethical conduct does not only affect the result of the action itself, nor only the opponent whom the action is imposed on. At the same time, it also affects the doer's personality and future. In the case of the former, it forms one's habitual moral values and unique personal characteristics (this is called "niṣyanda-phala", that is, the like effects that arise from like causes). With the latter, it also leads to future retributions of happiness and suffering (this is called "vipākha-phala", that is, the causes that mature or produce effects in another life; or heterogeneous effects produced by heterogeneous causes).

According to the Law of Dependent Origination, in both the aspects of personal character and future life, the former needs more attention. This is because once a wholesome or unwholesome ethical behaviour develops into habit, it not only forms one's personal character. This personal character will also influence our behaviour and lead to the endless appearance of similar behaviours. This will then lead to endless corresponding retributions.

In other words, personal characters that are formed by wholesome or unwholesome behaviour become habitual behaviour. Its influential power can last very long. The consequence that it brings is more astonishing than the effect of a one-off wholesome or unwholesome action.

The "niṣyanda-phala" is named as such due to its uniform and continuous effect. On the other hand, "vipākha-phala" is named as such because of the difference in time and category when the effect occurs. There are changes from the time of cause to when the effect takes place. For example, if a stingy and greedy person does not correct one's character of stinginess and greediness, not only will one's stinginess and greediness continue, one will regularly express greedy behaviour when circumstances arise. As such, one's stingy and greedy habit is being strengthened again. This is the principle whereby "similar causes" produce "niṣyanda-phala".

When a stingy and greedy person produces a greedy action under a circumstance, and when this karmic effect matures, he or she will reap the effect of poverty and shortage. As the time when action was done and the time the effect was reaped is different, and greediness and poverty are of different categories (reaping result of different categories). It is obvious that between karma and effect, changes have occurred during the process. Hence, it is named as "vipākha-phala".

The worldly people always fear the "vipākha" retributions lead by their evil karma. This is because when they come, they are pressing and intolerable. However, suffering from the retribution of evil karma will end when the karmic effect ends. The evil personality or character that accumulates from evil deeds is the "niṣyanda-phala". Its influence is endless. It requires

strong effort to rectify it, so that its strength can be weakened.

From the interrelationship of the wholesome and unwholesome personal characters, behaviours and the retributions of suffering and happiness, we can see that it is with important reason that contemporary virtue ethics place great emphasis on personal characters. Besides rules or the interest in benefit, more emphasis should be place on the cultivation of individuals' personal characters, proclivity and virtue conducts/acts. All these will naturally influence one's intention when engaging in virtue conducts/acts.⁸

Virtue Ethics set the cultivation of a person's moral character as the priority. This theory feels that if one is equipped with a good personal character, one will use it to engage in good behaviour. They cannot agree to the Kant, deontologist's view that although one's behaviour is in accordance to one's duty, however, if one does not do it with the mind of fulfilling one's duty, this action does not possess the value of morality. This view devalues wholesome actions that do not require a lot of effort, but which have developed from good moral habits, while praising wholesome action that is done after a great struggle and effort. On the other hand, Virtue Ethics will certainly not agree with the teleologists, who base their ethical judgment completely on the benefits of the end result, while disregarding the wholesome and unwholesomeness of the intention.

However, how does virtuous conduct/act arise? Is it inborn or acquired? According to Aristotle's point of view, virtue is the disposition of ethical behaviour that has developed into habits. If we investigate the origin of virtue conduct/act according to Buddhism's Law of Dependent Origination and Middle Path, Buddhism's theory also suggests that virtue conduct/act is acquired from learning and cultivation. It is not a mysterious endowment. If this is so, personal character cannot be separated from behaviour and become an independent identity. It is a natural presentation expressed from behaviour that has developed into habits.

On the other hand, our personal character also influences our behaviour. Specifically, the contents of virtues include "wholesome mind attributes,"⁹ such as faith, no greed, no hatred, no ignorance, sense of shame and guilt, diligence, etc. Among these, we should pay special attention to shame and guilt because they are the elements that develop our virtues.

"What is sense of shame? With self effort and the effort of the dharma, one develops the nature of respecting the virtuous and wholesome, overcomes shamelessness and stops evil deeds. What is sense of guilt? With worldly effort, reject violence and evil, overcome no guilt and stop evil deeds."¹⁰ The above definition highlights two messages: The development of virtues should come from one's self motivation of respecting oneself and

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respecting the truth. However, this does not exclude the influence of external effort (worldly effort), such as education, custom, discussion, law, etc.

The essence of virtue must be respecting the virtuous and wholesome, and disdaining and rejecting violence and evil. It is not only a state of the inner mind. This is because when it is being expressed as specific behaviour, it can encourage one to refrain from evil actions.

Our personal characters affect our behaviour. At the same time, our behaviours influence our personal characters. Personal characters and behaviours are mutually related. Hence, we need to include both rules and benefits of behaviour into considerations. Thus, besides emphasising on personal characters, Buddhism also spells out specifically the norms of conduct (such as the Five Precepts) that can lead to the development of wholesome personal characters. It also analyses objectively the benefits that one and others can gain by following these norms, so that everyone will try one's best to follow the norms.

Although rules and benefits are not necessarily making a choice between either this or that. The ethical study of the Law of Dependent Origination encompasses the Virtue Ethics that emphasises moral characters, the Deontological Theory that emphasis on rules and regulations, and the Teleological Theory that emphasis on benefits. All can be mutually supplemented and it is not necessary to reject each other.

The right or wrong of an ethical behaviour can be analysed and justified. However, we can only analyse and justify the wholesome or unwholesomeness of a moral character. Wholesome and unwholesome cannot correspond directly to right and wrong. An ethical choice that is made out of wholesome intention, due to some unclear causes and conditions, may be proved as "wrong". (For example, giving help to a beggar who, unexpectedly, uses the money begged to buy drugs.)

On the other hand, action that initiate from unwholesome intention may, due to greater consideration for self-benefits, lead to a "right" choice. (For example, in order to maintain one's power and self-benefits, a politician needs to ensure that the society is not in chaos. Hence, he/she will try his/her best to maintain the public security and reduce the poverty gap.

Coming back to our discussion, although a person who has wholesome character may not ensure that their selection/choice will be right, it can reduce a lot of wrong choices that are made due to lop-sided behaviour that develop from unwholesome intention and improper moral conducts.

In summary, the Theory of Middle Path of Dependent Origination does not neglect the

personal character factor of the doer, while placing emphasis on the right and wrong of the behaviour and the happiness and suffering of the result. The ethical judgment of the Middle Path Theory does not only look at whether the intention of the doer is wholesome or unwholesome (which is what the Virtue Ethics does). It also incorporates considerations on whether the behaviour is in accordance to the rule of morality (which is what the Deontological Theory does), and the wholesome and unwholesomeness of the result (which is what the Teleological Theory does).

Nonetheless, although other causes and conditions can be beyond the control of the doer, personal intention is where the doer can master the best. And behind the intention, it is always the individuals' habitual moral values. Thus, the Law of Dependent Origination places greatest emphasis on an individual's personal character. It even places "virtue" and "merits" side by side, which has become the classical Theory of Consistency/Equality in Virtue and Merits.

Annotation

1. For detail please refer to *Samyuktāgama*, Scroll 10 (T2, p67a); *Majjhāgama*, scroll 24, "Sutra of Great Cause" (T1, pp578b-582a). Also, the Pali Canon: *Mahānidāna Suttanta*, *Dīghā-nikāya II*, pp. 55-57; *Mahāpadana Suttanta*, *Dīghā-nikāya II*, pp. 31-35. In these suttas, the Buddha talks about the Law of Dependent Origination.
2. *Samyuktāgama*, scroll 12 (T2, p. 84b)
3. As in the *Samyuktāgama Sutra*, Chapter 37 (T2, p. 273b).
4. *Samyuktāgama Sutra*, Chapter 37 (T2, p. 273b-c); *Samyutta-nikāya* 55; The Theravada Canon (Chinese version) Chapter 16c, p. 236).
5. 1991. *Dhammapada*. Tainan: Miao Xin Temple. p. 30.
6. The absurdness that arises due to 'the implications of some words in the Golden Rule Theorem' are, for example:
 - i. to a patient: if you want the doctor to take away your appendix, then you should take away the doctor's appendix too.
 - ii. To a person who has been mistreated and wishes to be mistreated: if you want X to mistreat you, then mistreat X. Thus, Genesler specifically inserts 'under same circumstances' into the Golden Rule Theorem, so as to avoid the absurdness that arise from seeking for consistency under the words mentioned above. (1999. Genesler. Pp. 151-156).
7. Refer to Venerable Yin Shun. "Loving Kindness and Compassion is the Core of Buddhism" *The Three Essential in Practising the Buddha's Teachings*. pp. 120-123.

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8. For the definition, contents and representative sayings of the Ethical Studies of Virtue Conducts, please refer to Lin, Huo Wang. *Ethical Studies*. pp. 153-169.
 9. With regards to the quantities and contents of the 'wholesome mind attributes', scripture from different sects vary in their records. For example, the Consciousness-only Sect divides the 'wholesome mind attributes' into eleven categories. They are: faith, shame, guilt, no greed, no hatred, no ignorance, diligence, ease, no lax, letting go, and no harm. For their definitions and contents, please refer to the *Vijnaptimatratasiddhi Sastra (Treatise on the Accomplishment of Consciousness-only*, scroll 6, T31, pp. 29b – 31b.
 10. The definitions from varies sastras are similar. This quotation comes from the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi Śāstra*, scroll 6, T31, p. 29c.

通訊資料

釋昭慧 教授/主任

玄奘大學 倫理應用中心/宗教學研究所

地址：新竹市玄奘路 48 號

電話：886-3-5302255

Correspondence

Shih Chao-hwei, Professor/Director,

Center for Applied Ethics/Department of Religious Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, TAIWAN

Address : No.48, Hsuan-chuang Road, Hsinchu City 300, TAIWAN

Tel : 886-3-5302255