Anubodhan, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2026, Pages: 173-187
ISSN: 3049-4184 (Print), 3108-1185 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.65885/anubodhan.v2n1.2026.017

The Buddhist Theory of Causation (Pratītyasamutpāda) : A Critical Analysis

Nishi Kumari[1] and Dr. Jeetendra Yadav[2]

Received: 20 March 2026 / Accepted: 24 March 2026 / Published: 31 March 2026
Journal homepage: https://anubodhan.org

Abstract

In Buddhist philosophy, the problem of causation is inseparable from the explanation of change, suffering, and the possibility of nirvana. From its earliest teachings, Buddhism rejects accounts grounded in a permanent self or enduring substance and instead articulates causation through the doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda, according to which phenomena arise and cease in dependence upon conditions. Although this doctrine occupies a central position in Buddhist thought, its adequacy as a coherent philosophical theory of causation invites critical examination.

This paper therefore examines whether Pratītyasamutpāda can be understood as a coherent philosophical theory of causation and to what extent it remains philosophically defensible.

This study analyses the formulation of dependent origination in early Buddhist texts, its systematic development in Abhidharma philosophy, and its critical reinterpretation in Madhyamaka thought. Particular attention is given to key philosophical problems: the issue of causal continuity in the absence of a permanent self, the question of causal efficacy within a framework of momentariness, and the problem of moral responsibility in a non-self doctrine.

[1]Research scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of lucknow
E-mail: nishigupta3654@gmail.com Orcid id: 0009-0001-8587-2937
[2]Assistant Professor, Mahamaya Govt. Degree college, Mahona, Lucknow, Affiliated with University of Lucknow, Email: jeetenyadava@gmail.com

The paper argues that while Pratītyasamutpāda offers a powerful critique of substance-based theories of causation and presents a fundamentally relational account of conditionality, it encounters unresolved conceptual tensions when interpreted as a complete realist theory of causation. Dependent origination is therefore better understood as a philosophically significant explanatory framework within Buddhist thought rather than as a fully articulated metaphysical theory of causation.

Keywords: Pratītyasamutpāda, Buddhist Causation, Dependent Origination, Madhyamaka Philosophy, Conditionality.

Introduction

Causation has long been regarded as one of the central problems of philosophy, since it concerns the fundamental question of how phenomena arise, change, and cease. In Buddhist philosophy, this problem acquires a distinctive significance because it is directly connected with the explanation of suffering and the possibility of nirvana. Unlike many philosophical systems that account for causation through a permanent self, enduring substances, or a first cause, Buddhism adopts a radically different approach. It sets aside such metaphysical assumptions and explains causation in terms of conditional dependence.[1]

This distinctive understanding is articulated through the doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), according to which all phenomena arise in dependence upon conditions and cease with the cessation of those conditions. The doctrine occupies a central position in Buddhist thought and serves as the conceptual foundation for teachings such as impermanence (anitya), non-self (anātman), and suffering (duḥkha).[2] In this way, dependent origination integrates metaphysical inquiry with ethical and soteriological concerns.

Despite its centrality, Pratītyasamutpāda is often treated primarily as a religious or doctrinal principle, while its philosophical status as a theory of causation remains insufficiently examined. An important question therefore arises: can dependent origination be consistently understood as a coherent philosophical account of causation in the absence of substance, essence, and intrinsic causal power? Addressing this question constitutes the main objective of the present study.

---

[1] David J. Kalupahana, A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1992), 20–35.

[2] Ibid., 36–52; see also Paul Williams, Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 64–72.

The paper undertakes a critical analysis of Pratītyasamutpāda as a Buddhist theory of causation. It examines its formulation in early Buddhist thought, traces its systematic development in Abhidharma traditions, and considers its critical reinterpretation in Madhyamaka philosophy. Particular attention is given to philosophical problems such as causal continuity without a permanent self, the issue of causal efficacy within the doctrine of momentariness, and the problem of moral responsibility within a non-self framework.

Rather than offering a purely descriptive account, this study seeks to evaluate both the strengths and the conceptual limitations of Buddhist causation. It argues that while Pratītyasamutpāda advances a powerful critique of substance-based theories and presents a relational understanding of causal dependence, it encounters unresolved philosophical tensions when interpreted as a complete causal theory.

The Philosophical Problem of Causation

The problem of causation has long remained one of the most central and complex issues in philosophical inquiry. At its most basic level, it concerns the relation between cause and effect: how one event gives rise to another, and what it means to say that something "produces" or "conditions" something else. Across different philosophical traditions, discussions of causation are closely connected with broader questions concerning change, continuity, identity, and explanation. Any philosophical account of reality therefore needs to clarify how phenomena arise, interact, and cease.

In many classical philosophical systems, causation is commonly explained through the idea of enduring substances or intrinsic causal powers. Causes are often understood as entities that possess inherent capacities through which effects are produced. For instance, in Aristotelian philosophy causation is analysed through the doctrine of four causes, where substances are considered to have definite causal capacities that bring about particular effects. Similarly, the Nyāya school of Indian philosophy explains causation in terms of a real relation between cause and effect grounded in the inherent nature of substances. By contrast, David Hume famously questioned whether any necessary causal power can actually be perceived, suggesting that causation is known only through the repeated association of events rather than through any directly observable connection. These diverse interpretations indicate that the philosophical problem of causation has been approached in different ways across traditions.

Against this broader background, Buddhist philosophy represents a distinctive departure from substance-based explanations. It rejects the idea of permanent substances and denies the existence of an enduring self. Instead of locating causation in intrinsic powers or fixed essences, Buddhism explains

causal relations in terms of conditional dependence. Phenomena are understood as arising through a complex network of conditions rather than through self-subsisting causes. This shift from substance to relational dependence marks an important transformation in the philosophical understanding of causation.

However, this non-substantialist approach also raises a number of important philosophical questions. If there are no enduring entities, how can causal continuity be maintained? If phenomena are momentary, in what sense can a past event influence a present one? And if personal identity is denied, how can moral responsibility be justified within such a causal framework? These questions show that Buddhist causation cannot simply be understood as a doctrinal claim; it requires careful philosophical examination.

The Buddhist account of causation is therefore inseparable from its broader metaphysical commitments. By rejecting essence and permanence, Buddhism presents a relational and process-oriented view of reality. At the same time, this perspective introduces certain conceptual tensions that invite further critical analysis. Understanding Buddhist causation thus involves not only recognising its originality but also examining how coherent it is as a philosophical explanation of the arising and cessation of phenomena.

It is within this broader philosophical context that the doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda must be examined. Any attempt to interpret dependent origination as a theory of causation must engage with these fundamental issues of continuity, causal efficacy, and agency. The present study approaches Pratītyasamutpāda from this perspective, seeking to clarify both its philosophical strengths and the conceptual difficulties that emerge when it is analysed as a theory of causation**.**

Pratītyasamutpāda in Early Buddhist Thought:

In early Buddhist philosophy, the doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination) is presented as the fundamental explanation of the arising and cessation of phenomena. It expresses the Buddha's insight into the conditional structure of reality and serves as the philosophical foundation of Buddhist metaphysics and ethics. The basic formulation of this doctrine—"when this exists, that arises; when this ceases, that ceases"—articulates a view of causation grounded not in substance or essence, but in relational dependence.

Pratītyasamutpāda appears repeatedly in early Buddhist discourses as the principle through which suffering is explained and its cessation made intelligible. Rather than positing a creator, first cause, or permanent self, early Buddhism interprets existence as a continuous process conditioned by ignorance (avidyā), craving (tṛṣṇā), and attachment. The well-known twelvefold chain of dependent origination illustrates how suffering arises through a

sequence of interrelated conditions and how its cessation becomes possible through the removal of those conditions.

A distinctive feature of early Buddhist causation is its rejection of substantial identity. Phenomena are not understood as self-subsisting entities but as impermanent aggregates arising moment by moment through causal conditions. This view is closely connected with the doctrines of impermanence (anitya) and non-self (anātman). Causation, therefore, is not conceived as the activity of enduring agents but as a dynamic process of conditional becoming.

Within this framework, Pratītyasamutpāda functions both descriptively and practically. Descriptively, it explains the structure of experience; practically, it guides ethical transformation by revealing the conditions that sustain suffering. By understanding dependent origination, one gains insight into how ignorance perpetuates existence and how its cessation leads toward nirvana. Thus, early Buddhism integrates causal explanation with soteriological purpose.

However, while early texts clearly emphasize conditionality, they do not offer a fully systematic philosophical account of causation. The doctrine remains largely experiential and pragmatic in orientation. This open-endedness later invites further analytical development in Abhidharma philosophy and critical reinterpretation in Madhyamaka thought, both of which attempt to clarify—and, in different ways, problematize—the causal implications of dependent origination.

In early Buddhist teaching, Pratītyasamutpāda is concretely expressed through the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, which traces the causal emergence of suffering from avidya to jaramaran. This causal series provides a systematic explanation of the Second Noble Truth by showing how ignorance and craving condition existence and perpetuate suffering. Unlike the Eightfold Path, which belongs to the Fourth Noble Truth and outlines the way to cessation, the twelvefold formulation of dependent origination functions specifically as a philosophical account of causal arising. [3]

Pratītyasamutpāda as a Theory of Causation:

The doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda occupies a central place in Buddhist thought and is often understood as the Buddhist explanation of causation. In philosophical discussions, it is interpreted as an attempt to explain how phenomena arise through conditions rather than through permanent substances or intrinsic causal powers.

[3] See Saṃyutta Nikāya, Nidāna-saṃyutta (Connected Discourses on Causation), especially SN 12.1–12.65; also Mahānidāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 15), where dependent origination is presented as the Buddha's explanation of the arising and cessation of suffering.

The doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda can be understood as the Buddhist attempt to formulate a distinctive theory of causation grounded in conditionality rather than substance. Unlike classical causal theories that presuppose enduring entities or intrinsic causal powers, Buddhism explains causation through a network of interdependent conditions. The doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda is often expressed in the well-known formula "***asmin sati idam bhavati; asya nirodhāt idam nirudhyate,"*** meaning "when this exists, that arises; with the cessation of this, that ceases."[4] This statement shows that in Buddhist thought phenomena arise not independently but in dependence upon certain conditions, and when those conditions cease, the corresponding effects also come to an end.

The idea of dependent origination is also closely related to the Buddhist explanation of suffering, especially the Second Noble Truth, which speaks about the origin of suffering in craving (tṛṣṇā) and ignorance (avidyā). From this perspective, suffering is not seen as something produced by a permanent self or an external force, but as the result of a series of conditions. The teaching of dependent origination helps explain how these conditions give rise to suffering and how the process continues within conditioned existence. In this way, the twelvefold chain of dependent origination presents a causal account of how suffering arises and is sustained.

Philosophically, this represents a radical departure from substance-based metaphysics. Causes are not conceived as autonomous agents producing effects through inherent power; rather, effects arise through the convergence of multiple conditions. Causation, therefore, is not linear or mechanistic but contextual and processual. This conditional model avoids both the notion of a first cause and the reification of entities, presenting reality as a continuous flow of dependent events.

A distinctive feature of Buddhist causation is its rejection of svabhāva (inherent existence). Phenomena are understood as empty of intrinsic nature and are defined entirely by their relations. This non-essentialist approach implies that causal relations themselves lack independent reality and exist only within the web of conditions. Such a view challenges realist accounts of causation that assume stable entities and fixed causal powers. Instead, Buddhism proposes a dynamic ontology in which causation operates through mutual dependence rather than through substantial transmission.[5]

---

[4] See Saṃyutta Nikāya, Nidāna-saṃyutta (SN 12), discussion on dependent origination.
See also Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

[5] See Nāgārjuna's analysis of causation in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, especially Chapter 1, where inherent causal production is rejected; also David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, for an interpretation of dependent origination as a non-substantialist causal theory.

This relational model also reshapes the understanding of continuity. Since Buddhism denies a permanent self or enduring substance, continuity must be explained without identity. The causal sequence is maintained through conditional succession rather than through persistence of an underlying entity. While this allows Buddhism to account for change without metaphysical permanence, it raises important philosophical questions regarding causal efficacy: if causes perish momentarily, in what sense do they produce effects? This problem becomes especially pronounced in later Abhidharma interpretations, which attempt to reconcile momentariness with causal continuity.

Furthermore, Buddhist causation is inseparable from ethical considerations. The doctrine of dependent origination explains not only physical or psychological processes but also moral causality, particularly through the concept of karma. Actions are understood to generate consequences through conditional relations rather than through a continuing agent. This raises a further philosophical difficulty: how moral responsibility can be sustained within a framework that denies enduring personal identity. Buddhist thinkers respond by appealing to causal continuity of mental processes, yet this solution remains philosophically contested.

From a critical perspective, Pratītyasamutpāda succeeds in offering a powerful alternative to substance-based theories of causation by replacing essence with relation and permanence with process. At the same time, its rejection of intrinsic causal power introduces conceptual tensions. While the doctrine provides a coherent account of conditional arising, it struggles to articulate a fully explicit account of causal efficacy. Consequently, dependent origination functions more convincingly as a contextual and explanatory framework than as a complete realist theory of causation.

The Twelvefold Chain as the Causal Structure of Pratītyasamutpāda:

Pratītyasamutpāda is philosophically articulated in early Buddhism through the twelvefold chain of dependent origination (dvādaśa-nidāna), which provides a systematic account of the causal genesis of suffering and conditioned existence. This twelvefold sequence does not merely represent a temporal succession of events; rather, it expresses a structural model of causation grounded in conditional dependence.

The twelve links are traditionally enumerated as follows: ignorance (avidyā), volitional formations (saṃskāra), consciousness (vijñāna), name-and-form (nāma-rūpa), the six sense bases (ṣaḍāyatana), contact (sparśa), feeling (vedanā), craving (tṛṣṇā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), and old age and death (jarā-maraṇa). Together, these links explain how

ignorance conditions mental formations, how consciousness becomes embodied, and how craving and attachment perpetuate the cycle of suffering.[6]

Philosophically, this chain functions as an explicit causal account of the Second Noble Truth, demonstrating that suffering arises not from a permanent self or external agent but from an interdependent sequence of psychological and existential conditions. Each factor exists only in relation to others, and none possesses independent causal power. Causation here is therefore relational and distributive rather than substantial or linear.

Importantly, this model also implies reversibility: with the cessation of ignorance, the entire chain collapses. Thus, dependent origination explains the arising of suffering (samudaya) and also indicates the possibility of its cessation when the causal chain is reversed. In this sense, the doctrine indirectly relates to the Third Noble Truth (nirodha), which affirms the cessation of suffering through the removal of its conditions. In this sense, the twelvefold formulation integrates metaphysical explanation with soteriological purpose. Unlike the Eightfold Path, which belongs to the Fourth Noble Truth and prescribes practical discipline, the twelvefold chain offers a philosophical analysis of causal conditioning itself.

Modern Buddhist scholarship has interpreted Pratītyasamutpāda as the central causal theory of Buddhism, emphasizing its non-substantialist and conditional character. Kalupahana, in particular, argues that dependent origination replaces substance-based causation with a dynamic network of conditions, thereby presenting a distinctive Buddhist model of causal explanation.[7]

From a critical standpoint, while this causal model successfully avoids essentialism and creator-based explanations, it raises deeper metaphysical questions. If all links are conditionally produced and momentary, the precise nature of causal transmission remains unclear. The doctrine explains that suffering arises dependently, but it leaves unresolved how momentary conditions exert causal efficacy across successive moments. This difficulty becomes a central concern in later Abhidharma analysis.

Abhidharma Analysis of Causation

[6] Saṃyutta Nikāya, Nidāna-saṃyutta (SN 12.1–12.65); see also Mahānidāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 15), where dependent origination is presented as the Buddha's explanation of the arising and cessation of suffering.

[7] David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), where Pratītyasamutpāda is explicitly interpreted as Buddhism's non-substantialist theory of causation.

The Abhidharma tradition represents the most systematic philosophical development of Buddhist causation. While early Buddhist texts present Pratītyasamutpāda largely in experiential and pragmatic terms, Abhidharma seeks to analyse reality by reducing experience to its most basic constituents (dharmas). In this context, dependent origination is no longer treated merely as a general principle of conditionality but is reformulated into a detailed causal framework.

A central feature of Abhidharma metaphysics is the doctrine of momentariness (kṣaṇikavāda), according to which all phenomena arise and perish instantaneously. Reality is understood not as a collection of enduring substances but as a succession of momentary events. Causal continuity is therefore explained through sequential conditioning rather than through the persistence of entities. Each momentary dharma arises in dependence upon prior conditions and immediately ceases, giving rise to subsequent phenomena.

To explain this process, Abhidharma philosophers developed an elaborate theory of causal conditions (pratyaya). Instead of a single cause producing an effect, causation is analysed through multiple interrelated conditions, such as immediate condition, supporting condition, object condition, and dominant condition. This multi-conditional model reflects the Buddhist rejection of linear causation and emphasizes the complex interdependence of phenomena. Such analytical precision is most clearly expressed in scholastic works like the Abhidharmakośa, where causation is systematized through technical categories.[8]

Philosophically, Abhidharma attempts to reconcile dependent origination with momentariness by proposing that causal efficacy operates through immediately preceding conditions. However, this solution introduces a serious conceptual difficulty: if causes cease the very moment they arise, in what sense can they genuinely produce effects? In later Buddhist philosophical discussions, this difficulty was addressed through the concept of arthakriyākāritva (causal efficacy). According to this view, the reality of a phenomenon is determined by its capacity to perform a function or produce an effect. A dharma is regarded as real precisely because it is capable of generating a specific result within a network of conditions. In this way, causal efficacy becomes the criterion of existence, allowing Buddhist philosophers to explain how even momentary phenomena can function as causes.

The causal relation appears to risk collapsing into mere temporal succession. Although Abhidharma provides technical explanations to preserve causal

[8] Abhidharmakośa by Vasubandhu, especially the sections on causal conditions (pratyaya) and momentariness, where Abhidharma attempts to systematize dependent origination through analytical categories.

continuity, these accounts implicitly introduce a form of causal realism that sits uneasily with the Buddhist denial of inherent existence.

Modern scholars have critically examined this tension and argued that Abhidharma's analytical realism complicates the original relational spirit of dependent origination. Kalupahana, in particular, observes that while Abhidharma succeeds in systematizing Buddhist causation, it also generates philosophical problems concerning causal efficacy and ontological commitment.[9]

From a critical perspective, Abhidharma represents both an advancement and a complication of Buddhist causal theory. It sharpens the conceptual structure of Pratītyasamutpāda, yet simultaneously introduces new metaphysical difficulties regarding continuity, efficacy, and realism. These unresolved issues provide the philosophical background against which Madhyamaka thought later undertakes its radical critique of causation and inherent existence.

The Madhyamaka Critique of Causation

Madhyamaka philosophy represents a radical internal critique of Buddhist causal theory, directed primarily against the subtle realism implicit in Abhidharma analysis. While Abhidharma attempts to preserve causal continuity through momentary dharmas and technical causal conditions, Madhyamaka questions the very possibility of inherent causal production. This critique is most systematically developed by Nāgārjuna, whose philosophical project aims to expose the conceptual limitations of all substantialist accounts of causation.

In the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Nāgārjuna argues that phenomena cannot arise from themselves, from others, from both, or without cause. This fourfold negation (catuṣkoṭi) undermines every metaphysical model of causal origination. If causes possessed inherent existence, they would either produce effects eternally or not at all. Conversely, if effects were inherently real, they would not depend on causes. Nāgārjuna therefore concludes that causal relations cannot be grounded in intrinsic nature (svabhāva), but exist only conventionally within dependent relations.[10]

[9] David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1975), for a critical philosophical evaluation of Abhidharma causation and its conceptual limitations.

[10] Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Chapter 1, where Nāgārjuna rejects inherent causal production through the fourfold negation. See also Jay L. Garfield (trans.), The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

This critique transforms the understanding of Pratītyasamutpāda itself. Rather than functioning as a realist account of causal production, dependent origination is reinterpreted as the very expression of emptiness (śūnyatā). To say that things arise dependently is to say that they lack inherent existence. Causation, in this view, is not an ultimate metaphysical relation but a conventional description of interdependent processes. Madhyamaka thus dissolves causal realism by showing that both causes and effects are empty of intrinsic being.

Philosophically, this position exposes the tension within Abhidharma causation. While Abhidharma treats dharmas as momentary yet ontologically discrete realities, Madhyamaka argues that such an approach reintroduces subtle essentialism. Nāgārjuna's critique suggests that Abhidharma's attempt to secure causal efficacy through dharma-realism ultimately contradicts the non-essentialist spirit of early Buddhist teaching.[11]

At the same time, Madhyamaka does not deny empirical causation. It distinguishes between conventional truth (saṃvṛti-satya) and ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya), allowing causal explanations to function pragmatically while denying their ultimate ontological grounding. Causation operates within lived experience, but it cannot be metaphysically absolutized. In this way, Madhyamaka preserves the practical utility of Pratītyasamutpāda while rejecting its interpretation as a realist causal theory.

From a critical standpoint, Madhyamaka completes the Buddhist rejection of substance-based causation by extending non-essentialism to causal relations themselves. However, this radical deconstruction also raises philosophical concerns. If causation is merely conventional, questions arise regarding explanatory adequacy and moral agency. While Madhyamaka successfully dismantles metaphysical realism, it leaves unresolved how causal efficacy can be meaningfully articulated within a framework of universal emptiness.[12]

Critical Philosophical Evaluation

The preceding analysis indicates that the Buddhist understanding of causation does not remain static but undergoes a significant conceptual transformation across early Buddhist thought, Abhidharma systematization, and Madhyamaka critique. Although all three traditions appeal to Pratītyasamutpāda as their common foundation, they differ radically in their ontological commitments and in their interpretation of causal relations.

---

[11] See Abhidharmakośa by Vasubandhu, for Abhidharma causal realism; contrasted with Nāgārjuna's critique of svabhāva.

[12] David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, for discussion of Madhyamaka's rejection of causal realism and its philosophical implications.

In early Buddhism, dependent origination functions primarily as a phenomenological and soteriological principle. It explains the arising of suffering and points toward its cessation without positing enduring substances or intrinsic causal powers. Causation is presented in relational and conditional terms, thereby avoiding metaphysical essentialism. However, this early formulation remains philosophically underdetermined. While it establishes conditional arising, it does not explicitly account for causal efficacy—that is, how effects are generated in the absence of persisting entities or inherent causal capacities.

Abhidharma philosophy attempts to resolve this indeterminacy by introducing a technical ontology of momentary dharmas and a complex theory of causal conditions (pratyaya). Through kṣaṇikavāda, Abhidharma seeks to preserve causal continuity by locating efficacy in immediately preceding moments. Yet this analytical move generates a serious metaphysical tension. By treating dharmas as ontologically discrete units, Abhidharma implicitly reintroduces a form of causal realism that conflicts with the Buddhist rejection of svabhāva. Moreover, if causes cease instantaneously, their capacity to produce effects becomes conceptually obscure, threatening to collapse causation into mere temporal succession rather than genuine productive relation.[13]

This difficulty becomes the central target of Madhyamaka philosophy, most rigorously articulated by Nāgārjuna in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Nāgārjuna's critique of intrinsic origination undermines all metaphysical models of causal production by denying inherent nature (svabhāva) to both cause and effect. Causation is thereby relocated from the level of ultimate ontology to that of conventional truth. Dependent origination is reinterpreted as synonymous with emptiness (śūnyatā), marking a decisive shift from causal realism to radical relationality.[14]

Philosophically, Madhyamaka succeeds in safeguarding Buddhism's non-essentialist orientation by dissolving the ontological status of causal relations themselves. Yet this success comes at a theoretical cost. If causation is only conventionally valid, its explanatory force becomes fragile. The grounding of moral agency, karmic continuity, and practical responsibility remains epistemically unclear within a framework that denies any ultimate causal structure. Madhyamaka thus resolves Abhidharma's ontological realism but leaves causation metaphysically attenuated.

[13] Abhidharmakośa by Vasubandhu, especially the analysis of pratyaya and momentariness.

[14] Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Chapter 1. See also Jay L. Garfield (trans.), The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Modern interpreters have drawn attention to this unresolved tension. David J. Kalupahana characterizes Pratītyasamutpāda as a non-substantialist model of causation grounded in conditional relations rather than metaphysical entities, while also acknowledging that later scholastic developments complicate this insight through technical realism and conceptual ambiguity.[15]

From a critical philosophical standpoint, Buddhist causation offers a profound challenge to substance-based metaphysics by replacing essence with process and autonomy with relationality. Nevertheless, when evaluated as a comprehensive causal theory, dependent origination remains theoretically incomplete. It effectively deconstructs essentialist causation but does not fully reconstruct a coherent account of causal efficacy without intrinsic causal power. Pratītyasamutpāda therefore functions more persuasively as a metaphysically deflationary and soteriologically oriented explanatory framework than as a fully articulated realist theory of causation.

Conclusion

The present study has explored the doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda as the Buddhist understanding of causation by examining its formulation in early Buddhist teachings, its analytical elaboration in Abhidharma philosophy, and its critical reinterpretation in Madhyamaka thought. The central concern of this inquiry has been whether dependent origination can genuinely be regarded as a coherent philosophical account of causation in the absence of substance, essence, or intrinsic causal power.

The discussion suggests that in early Buddhism dependent origination functions primarily as a relational explanation of experience. Causation is understood in terms of conditional dependence rather than through enduring substances or metaphysical agents. Within this framework, the doctrine explains how suffering arises and how its cessation becomes possible. Yet, although this formulation successfully avoids essentialist metaphysics, it does not fully clarify how causal efficacy operates when no persisting entities are assumed.

Abhidharma philosophy attempts to address this difficulty by offering a more systematic analysis of causation through the doctrines of momentary dharmas and multiple causal conditions. By means of the theory of momentariness (kṣaṇikavāda), it seeks to preserve causal continuity through a succession of conditioned moments. However, this analytical approach also generates new philosophical tensions. The treatment of dharmas as discrete

[15] David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1975).

ontological units appears to introduce a subtle form of causal realism that sits uneasily with the Buddhist rejection of inherent existence. Moreover, if causes perish the moment they arise, the precise manner in which they produce effects remains philosophically problematic.

Madhyamaka philosophy confronts these tensions by questioning the very idea of intrinsic causal production. Nāgārjuna's critique of svabhāva in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā demonstrates that neither causes nor effects possess inherent nature and that causal relations themselves cannot be grounded in ultimate reality. Dependent origination is thus reinterpreted in terms of emptiness (śūnyatā), where causation is understood not as metaphysical production but as a conventional description of interdependent processes. While this interpretation preserves the non-essentialist orientation of Buddhist thought, it also raises questions about the explanatory grounding of causal efficacy and moral responsibility.

In view of these considerations, it may be suggested that Pratītyasamutpāda should not be regarded as a fully articulated realist theory of causation. Rather, its philosophical significance lies in offering a profound critique of substance-based metaphysics and in presenting reality as a network of interdependent relations. Dependent origination therefore functions less as a final metaphysical model of causation and more as a reflective framework that connects metaphysical insight with ethical and soteriological concerns. Its enduring importance lies in redirecting philosophical reflection away from fixed essences and toward the relational and conditioned character of existence.

Refrences

- Kalupahana, D. J. (1975). Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Nāgārjuna. (1995). Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: The fundamental wisdom of the middle way (J. L. Garfield, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Vasubandhu. (1988–1990). Abhidharmakośa (Vols. 1–4; L. M. Pruden, Trans.). Asian Humanities Press.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi (Trans.). (2000). Saṃyutta Nikāya: The connected discourses of the Buddha. Wisdom Publications.
- Walshe, M. (Trans.). (1995). Dīgha Nikāya: The long discourses of the Buddha. Wisdom Publications.
- Mark Siderits. (2007). Buddhism as Philosophy (2nd ed.). Ashgate.
- T. R. V. Murti. (1955). The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. George Allen & Unwin.
- Peter Harvey. (2013). An Introduction to Buddhism (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Pres

- Richard Gombrich. (2009). What the Buddha Thought. Equinox.
- Edward Conze. (1967). Buddhist Thought in India. University of Michigan Press.
- Paul Williams. (2009). Mahayana Buddhism The Doctrinal Foundations, (2nd ed). London: Routledge.
- Thomas, E. J. (1933). The history of Buddhist thought. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- L. Garfield (trans.), The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Copyright © 2026 Author(s). Published by Siri Research Foundation. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).