



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week one: Introducing dependent arising

The central teaching

This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living in the Kuru country, at the market town of Kammāsaddhamma. Venerable Ānanda approached, greeted him respectfully and sat down at one side. Then Venerable Ānanda said, “How wonderful and marvellous it is, bhante! This dependent arising is profound, and it appears profound, and yet to me it’s as clear as clear can be!”

“Don’t say that, Ānanda!! This dependent arising *is* profound, *and* it appears profound, and it’s because they do not understand or penetrate this *dhamma* that this generation is tangled up like a ball of twine, afflicted as with an inflammation and matted like reeds and grasses, unable to go beyond *samsāra* with its misery, unhappy destinies, and states of woe.”
Mahānidāna Sutta (D15; Great Discourse on Causation)

This conversation between the Buddha and his attendant opens Mahānidāna Sutta. Ānanda was then a *sotāpanna* or stream enterer, one who has had a glimpse of the deathless and has entered the stream of awakening – in other words, a mature practitioner. With this level of realisation, Ānanda felt he knew what dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) was all about. He felt he had grasped it, not just intellectually but in the depths of his meditative and life experience. And it’s true that he could not have attained to stream entry without realising dependent arising to some degree. But the Buddha was quick to point out the limitations of his understanding, emphasising that to *fully* comprehend dependent arising is to become fully awakened – to become a *buddha*.

The word “*buddha*” comes from the root *budh*, “know, wake.” A *buddha* is one who knows, one who is awake; one who knows the nature of things as they are, as they always have been, and as they always will be; one who is awake to what is really happening. The doctrine of dependent arising expresses that to which a *buddha* awakens. As the Buddha said:

Whether *tathāgatas* appear or do not appear, what endures is a stability of nature, a natural order, specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*).

This is what a *tathāgata* awakens to, this is what he realises. After awakening to and realising it he explains, teaches, declares, lays it out, reveals, analyses and clarifies it, saying: “Look!” (S 2.25)

The universe as we experience it reveals a “stability of nature,” a “natural order,” in its activities. Because the universe is orderly, functioning according to discoverable laws, it is possible to be liberated from suffering. Our situation is workable. If events occurred simply by chance or inevitable decree of fate, there

would be nothing we could do to change our lives; we would be helpless victims of circumstances beyond our control. As the Buddha, looking back to his awakening, explained:

Before awakening, when I was a *bodhisatta* and not a fully awakened one, I thought: “Alas, this world has fallen into misery! We are born, age and die. We fall (from one existence) and rise (into another). And yet no escape from this suffering, this ageing and death, has been discovered. Surely an escape from this suffering, this ageing and death, can be discovered!”
...

“Arising!” Vision arose in me regarding *dhammas* previously unheard of; insight, wisdom, knowledge and intuition arose. ...

“Cessation!” Vision arose in me regarding *dhammas* previously unheard of; insight, wisdom, knowledge and intuition arose. (S 2.10)

The Buddha’s vision was one of ceaseless change. Everything we touch is already changing into something else. Phenomena arise and cease, and the only thing that does not change is the fact of change itself. Furthermore, each thing that changes does so because of specific conditions that appear in regular patterns of conditional relationship. The path of practice consists in living in accordance with these natural conditions in such a way that suffering ceases and freedom arises. Means and end, path and result, are two aspects of the same “natural order.” The practice that leads to the cessation of suffering is that of living without interfering with the natural arising and cessation of phenomena; life without interfering with the natural arising and cessation of phenomena is the cessation of suffering.

Dependent arising is therefore central to the Buddha’s teaching. We suffer because we are ignorant of the natural laws that govern our existence, the laws that condition the arising and cessation of phenomena. As we discover these laws we learn to let go of those things which arise and cease, and finally of arising and cessation itself. In this way we ensure the cessation of that which causes us suffering and the arising of that which liberates us. The full understanding of these laws constitutes our final goal, awakening (*bodhi*).

Soon after the Buddha’s awakening there were two young men, Upatissa and Kolita, who were students of the *samaṇa* (contemplative) Saṅjaya, the sceptic. These two friends vowed to each other that whoever awakened first would immediately inform the other. One day, Upatissa saw one of the Buddha’s students, Venerable Assaji, going on alms round in Rājagaha. He was so impressed by the appearance of this monk that he approached him and asked for the teaching. Assaji protested that he was a new student and understood little of the Buddha’s doctrine. What he did understand he summed up in the following verse:

Of those *dhammas* produced by a cause,
The *Tathāgata* has taught their arising
And also their cessation.
This is the teaching of the great *samaṇa*. (Vin 1.40)

Upatissa immediately attained stream entry (*sotāpatti*), the first stage of awakening, also known as the vision of dharma (*dhamma-cakkhu*). He hastened to his friend and repeated the verse. Kolita also attained stream entry. The two men became the Buddha’s students, bringing with them the other students of Saṅjaya.

They became the Buddha's chief disciples, and were known as Sāriputta, foremost in wisdom, and Mahā-Moggallāna, foremost in powers.

This story illustrates the liberating power contained within the teaching of dependent arising. *Dhammas* are arising and ceasing in dependence upon causes; seeing and understanding this has the power to transform our life, here and now.

Idappaccayatā

We saw above that “the stability of nature, the natural order” is expressed as “specific conditionality.” In Pāli, this is the compound term *idappaccayatā*, made up of *ida*, *paccaya* and *tā*. *Paccaya* is derived from the verb *pacceṭi* (*paṭi* + *√i*; “come back to,” fig. “fall back on,” “find one’s hold in”). Literally meaning “support,” its applied meaning is “reason, cause, ground, condition.” The other parts of the compound are: *ida*, which means “this;” and the abstract suffix *-tā*.

Ida-(p)paccaya-tā (“this-conditioned-ness”) asserts that any given experience or phenomenon (*ida* – this) is supported or conditioned (*paccaya*) by something other than itself. Any given phenomenon is contingent, coming into existence because of phenomena other than itself, and going out of existence because of phenomena other than itself. Further, what supports the arising or cessation of any particular phenomenon is specific; precisely *this* conditions precisely *that*. The regularity of the causal connections between phenomena means they can be clearly defined and accurately mapped. So *idappaccayatā* is translated as “specific conditionality.”

This general principle is expressed in a brief verse which appears throughout the Nikāyas:

*Imasmim sati idaṃ hoti; imass’ uppādā idaṃ uppajjati.
Imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.* (S 2.28)

When this is, that is; because this arises, that arises.

When this is not, that is not; because this ceases, that ceases.

Looking at the first line, we can see that it opens with the locative absolute (*imasmim sati*), which does not convey causality, but structural or logical coincidence. “When this is, that is” does not say this *causes* that; it says this *accompanies* that. To say that when there is *x* there is *y* and when there is no *x* there is no *y* is to assert both *x* and *y* are experienced, in the present, as contingent. Their “reality” or “substance” depends on that of entities other than themselves, entities whose reality or substance in turn depends on entities other than themselves. Contingency asserts the reality of things to be their lack of independent or separate reality; their substance to be their lack of independent or separate substance.

The conclusion of the line is unambiguously causal; *because* this arises (*imass’ uppādā*), that arises (*idaṃ uppajjati*). To say because *x* arises, *y* arises, and because *x* ceases, *y* ceases, is to assert causality, which implies a directing influence of *x* over *y*. However, the causation of *entities* is not being asserted, because the notion of independent and separate entities has already been denied in the first part of the verse, since whatever is radically contingent cannot exist independently. It cannot

be a “thing,” in our normal sense of the word. Causation occurs, but no entities are caused.

Idappaccayatā expresses the nature of a phenomenon in terms of its relationships with other phenomena. It does not deal with the essence of a phenomenon, but with its movement, its activity; or rather, it sees the essence of any given thing to be its behaviour. We are what we do; identity is activity. *Idappaccayatā* describes a dynamic model of reality, a model of things as processes. The pattern of this process, the behaviour of phenomena, is expressed in our next term.

Paṭiccasamuppāda

Paṭiccasamuppāda is a compound term made up of *paṭicca* and *samuppāda*. *Paṭicca* is the gerund of the verb *pacceṭi*, discussed above, and means “grounded on,” “on account of,” “conditioned by.” *Samuppāda* is a compound word from the prefix *saṃ* (together) and the verb *uppajjati* (arise). *Samuppāda* therefore means “arising together,” or “co-arising.” *Paṭiccasamuppāda* has been translated in a number of ways, among them “dependent arising,” “dependent co-arising,” “interdependent arising,” “dependent origination,” “conditioned genesis,” and “conditioned co-production.”

A glance at the translations shows basic agreement except for the use of the prefix *saṃ*. Is *paṭiccasamuppāda* dependent arising, dependent co-arising or interdependent arising? Does it refer to production or co-production? Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the great fifth century commentator who defined Theravāda orthodoxy, casts light on this question in a playful linguistic analysis found early in the *Paññābhūminidessa* (*Exposition of the ground of wisdom*) of his *Visuddhimagga*.

This totality of dhammas (*dharmasamūha*) resulting from conditionality (*pacceyatā*) which is *paṭiccasamuppāda* is a term which is regarded in two ways. Befalling (*paṭiyamāna*) it leads to welfare and happiness, and therefore the wise regard it as worthy to fall back on (*pacceṭum*); so it is *paṭicca*. And arising, it arises rightly (*sammā*) and together (*saha*), not one after another and not causelessly; so it is *samuppāda*. Thus it is *paṭicca* and *samuppāda*, so it is *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

Further, it arises together (*saha uppajjati*), so it is co-arising (*samuppāda*); it is dependent upon (*paṭicca*) a combination of conditions, not rejecting any. Therefore *paṭicca* and *samuppāda* is *paṭiccasamuppāda*. ...

This totality of causes ... is called *paṭicca*, taking it as “united with its opposite” (*paṭimukhaṃ ito gato*) by the mutuality of its combined factors, in that none are missing and they accomplish a common result. It is called *samuppāda* in that it gives rise to *dharmas* together, such that each gives rise to the other and they are inseparable in their behaviour. Therefore *paṭicca* and *samuppāda* is *paṭiccasamuppāda*. (Vism: 443)

Buddhaghosa is emphasising that, in lived experience, cause and effect manifest as a totality of causes leading to a totality of results, not as a single cause leading to a single result. Causation over time refers to *totalities*, not individual entities; and each totality is made up of phenomena that arise and cease in dependence upon other phenomena. That which is *paṭicca* (dependent) is a combination of factors; that which is *samuppāda* (co-arising) is a combination of results. From this we can see that *saṃ* applies to both parts of the compound, and expresses the conditional relationships *between* causes and causes, effects and effects, causes and effects, and

effects and causes; and the conditional relationships *within* causes, and within effects. Therefore *paṭiccasamuppāda* could be translated as “inter-dependent arising,” except that, as we shall see, interdependency is one particular conditional relationship among others. It could be translated as “dependent co-arising,” except that sometimes it is convenient to focus on a single strand of causation. So here I shall translate *paṭiccasamuppāda* simply as “dependent arising,” while keeping in mind the depth of its meaning.

Paṭiccasamuppanna dhammā

Dhammas arise and cease because of conditions, and so are dependently arisen *dhammas* (*paṭiccasamuppanna dhammā*), or, more simply, the dependently arisen. But what is a *dhamma*? Remember that the Buddha was primarily a meditator, and his teaching is an expression of his meditative experience. What we call Buddhist philosophy or psychology is more like phenomenology. The Buddha’s teaching is a first person discourse, unlike, for example, science, which is a third person discourse. Science studies the objective world and assumes a radical division between the subjective and objective aspects of experience, investing “reality” into the objective. In our culture, to call a given view “subjective” is to regard it as at best suspect, very probably false. When we say we are being “objective,” we are saying our view should be taken seriously; it is probably true. Subjective and objective in everyday discourse are almost synonymous with false and true.

The Buddha was concerned primarily with the nature of human experience. He recognised the distinction between subjective (*ajjhatta*) and objective (*bāhira*), but did not equate subjective with false and objective with true. The inner world of subjective experience and the outer world of objective experience are equally real, insofar as both of them are simply manifestations of experience. The Buddha’s perspective on the world is indicated by *Sabba Sutta* (*Discourse on everything*):

I will teach you everything (*sabbam*) ... And what is everything? The eye and forms; ear and sounds; nose and scents; tongue and tastes; body and tangible things; mind and phenomena.

Whoever would say, “Rejecting this everything, I declare another everything,” the basis for that would be mere words, and if asked could not sustain it. Furthermore, one would become distressed.

Why? Because it is beyond experience. (S 4.15)

“Everything” is the totality of our experience. Anything beyond experience is unknowable. Anything said about what is unknowable can be based only on speculation and logic – “mere words.” The field of the known, of the experienced, is the field of the six senses (which includes the mental sense of everything thought, felt, seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched in the mind, imagination and memory). The range of the six senses is the known universe, and therefore it *is*, for us, the universe.

In other words, the world is not an independently existing entity out there which, within our limits, we perceive and relate to; the world *is* our-experience-of-the-world. This does not mean that the world is merely subjective, for sense perception depends upon an (objective) object of sense. Nor is the world merely objective, for

objects out there are beyond our experience and knowledge except for our (subjective) perception of them.

So the concept of *dhammas* does not refer to “things” which are out there or in here, but to our experience of things. A *dhamma* is a thing-as-experienced, or the experience-of-a-thing. Note that the experience-of-a-thing has two essential aspects: the experiencing and the thing experienced. Remove either and the *dhamma* does not manifest.

This subtle shift in perception is vital for understanding the Buddha’s teaching. He is concerned with the nature of human experience, not with a scientific, objective description of the world. Hence his response to a question posed by a *deva* who asked:

“Bhante, is it possible for us, by means of movement, to know, see, and arrive at the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age or die, does not fall (from one existence) and rise (into another)?”

“I declare, friend, I would not, by means of movement, know, see, or arrive at an end of the world where one is not born, does not age or die, does not fall (from one existence) and rise (into another).

“Moreover, I declare that within this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and mind, is the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the practice leading to the cessation of the world.” (A 2.47-48)

Here a question which assumes the existence of an objectively existing and material “end of the world” receives an answer which turns the perception of the questioner around to the nature of his own experience, and the practice which illuminates that experience.

When examined with insight, the self and the world resolve into a series of experiences. These experiences arise because of conditions and cease because of conditions, not randomly but according to regular and discernible patterns of cause and effect. What at first seem to be solid and independently existing “things” turn out to be radically contingent, dependently arisen phenomena (*paṭīccasamuppanna dhammas*).

Indeed, they are *dhammas* *because* they arise and cease dependently. A fundamental characteristic of “things out there” in our conventional sense of “things” is that they *are* regardless of our experience of them. A scientist has no direct experience of an atom, but he knows it is there. I have no direct experience of Moscow, but I know it is there. The validity or existence of a “thing” is not affected by whether or not I have any direct experience of it. The Buddha gives the example (D 2.328) of a blind man who denies the existence of the sun and moon because he cannot see them. He is wrong, because they do objectively exist.

A *dhamma*, in contrast, refers to our experience-of-a-thing; it arises and ceases dependently, because it is dependent on experience. Experience, in turn, is dependent on a functional sense organ (e.g., an eye), a corresponding sense object (visible form) and the appropriate sense consciousness (eye consciousness), all coming together as contact or stimulus. The absence of any one of these factors means the *dhamma* (the experience-of-seeing-this) does not arise. The *dhamma* is

dependent on the conjunction of these factors; or, the *dhamma* is the conjunction of these factors.

The thing-in-itself, or the thing out there, however, is not dependent on my seeing it. It is its in-dependence which makes it a thing; it is its dependence, embracing both subjective and objective, which makes it a *dhamma*. So the most appropriate translation for “*dhamma*” in the context of *paṭiccasamuppāda* is “phenomenon,” a term which indicates that all we know, all we experience, is what is present to consciousness; there is no “thing-in-itself” beyond the range of consciousness.

The middle way

Dependent arising expresses the “middle way” between the extremes of existence and non-existence, as the Buddha explains in Kaccānagotta Sutta:

This world, Kaccāna, is normally reliant on the duality of existence (*atthitā*) and non-existence (*natthitā*). But for one who sees, realistically and with perfect wisdom, the arising of the world, there is no “non-existence” regarding the world. And for one who sees, realistically and with perfect wisdom, the cessation of the world, there is no “existence” regarding the world. ...

One has no doubt or confusion that what arises is only *dukkha* arising, what ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing. (S 2.17)

Dependent arising is the middle way between “existence” and “non-existence.” What do these two terms mean? “Existence” and “non-existence” refer to our normal, everyday notion of reality, where we take our experience of ourself and our world at face value. If we say something “exists,” we mean it is really there; it is solid, substantial, independent of us, and so worth hanging on to, worth defining oneself by. This solidity entails permanence, which for the Buddha does not mean lasting forever and ever, but lasting unchanged over time.

So, for example, I can see that much of my experience of life is insubstantial, even dream-like, but I remain convinced that “I” am real, because “I” am the one who sticks around long enough to experience this insubstantiality; all this dream-like experience is about *me*. It may not be real, but it gives *me* reality. But there is a shadow side of existence, because although I strive to convince myself of my own solidity and permanence, I know one day I will die, will cease to exist – and this knowledge fills me with dread. But from the Buddha’s perspective, the deepest terror is not the fear of death some time in the future, but the fear that I right now I am not real, that there is not and never has been any foundation to support my own separate existence. This dread is *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

Existence always entails non-existence, and both depend on our sense of our own reality, our futile attempts to ground the experience of our lives and our world. In denying “existence” and “non-existence,” the Buddha is denying the reality that we construct to solidify our sense of ourselves and our world, which enables us to hold things together and which papers over our dread of an abyss we are desperate to avoid. He is denying the existence of solid “things,” *and* of the abyss which we think is the only alternative to the solidity of things, for each of these depends upon the other, and is unthinkable without the other. Instead, he is asserting the radical contingency of everything that exists, and of existence itself.

There are no enduring “things,” only enduring patterns of conditional relationships. There is only dependent arising and the dependently arisen. To see this requires that we face our dread, our *dukkha*, and when we do so we discover that there is no-one who exists, and so no-one who ceases to exist, only the radical contingency of ceaselessly changing experience and the pain of clinging to it in our futile attempts to solidify this flow into a solid self surrounded by a reliable world. “What arises is only *dukkha* arising, what ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing.”

Summary

Dependent arising, the middle way between the extremes of existence and non-existence, involves three aspects:

- *Idappaccayatā* (specific conditionality): the general principle that any given phenomenon is contingent. Each phenomenon is dependent upon something else and arises and ceases dependently upon that something else. All things depend on each other for their existence.
- *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent arising): the pattern of arising and cessation. What is central here is the behaviour of phenomena rather than their identity; the conditional relationships between phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves. Together, specific conditionality and dependent arising comprise the enduring state of ourselves and our experienced world, the stability of nature, the natural order.
- *Paṭiccasamuppanna dhammas* (the dependently arisen): what arises and ceases. There are no “things,” only our-experience-of-things, which are events in infinite and endless process. These events are phenomena, appearances, and all phenomena are contingent, radically dependent upon other phenomena. And as the Buddha is primarily concerned with suffering and the cessation of suffering, his focus is on those phenomena that are associated with “the middle way which leads to serenity, direct knowledge, full awakening and *nibbāna*,” (Vin 1.10) and so he provides a detailed analysis of those phenomena that serve to bind or liberate us.