



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

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Week four: Vibhaṅga

Introduction

This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti, at Jeta's forest, Anāthapiṇḍika's park. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus: "Bhikkhus." "Bhante," they replied. The Blessed One said, "I will teach (*desissāmi*) and analyse (*vibhajissāmi*) dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak." "Yes, bhante," the bhikkhus replied.

Arising

The Blessed One said, "What is dependent arising?"

"Delusion (*avijjā*) conditions formations; formations (*saṅkhārā*) condition consciousness; consciousness (*viññāṇa*) conditions name-&-form; name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) conditions the six sense fields; the six sense fields (*salāyatana*) condition contact; contact (*phassa*) conditions feeling; feeling (*vedanā*) conditions craving; craving (*tanhā*) conditions clinging; clinging (*upādāna*) conditions becoming; becoming (*bhava*) conditions birth; birth (*jāti*) conditions ageing-&-death (*jarāmaraṇa*); sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come into being. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering. This is called arising (*samuppāda*).

Ageing-&-death

"What is ageing-&-death (*jarāmaraṇa*)? Whatever is ageing regarding any beings in any classification of beings – old age, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, decline of life, decay of the faculties (*indriyānaṃ paripāko*) – this is called ageing (*jarā*).

"Whatever is passing away regarding any beings in any classification of beings – separation, disappearance, mortality, fulfilment of one's time, breaking up of the aggregates (*khandhānaṃ bhedo*) and laying down the body – this is called death (*maraṇa*). Thus this ageing and this death are together called ageing-&-death.

Birth

"What is birth (*jāti*)? Whatever is birth regarding any beings in any classification of beings – origin, entry, production, appearance of the aggregates (*khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo*) and taking up of the sense spheres (*āyatanānaṃ paṭilābho*) – this is called birth.

Becoming

"What is becoming (*bhava*)? There are these three becomings: sensual becoming (*kāma-bhava*); material becoming (*rūpa-bhava*); immaterial becoming (*arūpa-bhava*) – this is called becoming.

Clinging

“What is clinging (*upādāna*)? There are these four clings: clinging to sense desires (*kāmuṣupādāna*), clinging to views (*diṭṭhupādāna*), clinging to precepts-&-practices (*sīlabbatupādāna*), clinging to belief in self (*attavādupādāna*). This is called clinging.

Craving

“What is craving (*taṇhā*)? There are these six classifications of craving (*taṇhā-kāya*): craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for odours, craving for tastes, craving for tangible objects, craving for phenomena. This is called craving.

Feeling

“What is feeling (*vedanā*)? There are these six classifications of feeling (*vedanā-kāya*): feeling arising from eye contact; feeling arising from ear contact; feeling arising from nose contact; feeling arising from tongue contact; feeling arising from body contact; feeling arising from mind contact. This is called feeling.

Contact

“What is contact (*phassa*)? There are these six classifications of contact (*phassa-kāya*): eye contact; ear contact; nose contact; tongue contact; body contact; and mind contact. This is called contact.

Six sense fields

“What are the six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*)? The eye sense field, ear sense field, nose sense field, tongue sense field, body sense field, and mind sense field. These are called the six sense fields.

Name-&-form

“What is name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*)? Feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*): this is called name (*nāma*). The four great things (*mahābhūta*) and the form derived from the four great things: this is called form (*rūpa*). And so this name and this form are together called name-&-form.

Consciousness

“What is consciousness (*viññāṇa*)? There are these six classifications of consciousness (*viññāṇa-kāya*): eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness. This is called consciousness.

Formations

“What are formations (*saṅkhārā*)? There are these three formations: body formation (*kāya-saṅkhārā*); speech formation (*vacī-saṅkhārā*); mind formation (*citta-saṅkhārā*). These are called formations.

Delusion

“What is delusion (*avijjā*)? That which is confusion (*aññāṇa*) regarding *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. This is called delusion.

Recapitulation

“So delusion conditions formations; formations condition consciousness; etc. (*pe*) Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering. But from the complete fading away and cessation of delusion, formations cease; from the cessation of formations, consciousness ceases; etc. (*pe*) Thus is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.” (S 2.2-4)

The twelvefold formula

“The Blessed One said, ‘What is dependent arising?’” When the Buddha asks and answers this question, he does so with the twelvefold formula, often regarded as the “standard” version of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). This is the version we find portrayed in the Tibetan “wheel of becoming” (*bhava-cakka*), or “wheel of life,” painting. This is also the version that is used by all the Indo-Tibetan traditions to explain the mechanics of rebirth, interpreted as extending over three lives. This week we will examine this version of dependent arising, and in particular questions arising from the issue of causation over time and rebirth.

The question of rebirth poses problems for some western Buddhist practitioners, who simply do not believe in it and find it irrelevant to their concerns in this life. The same scepticism can be found among the emerging middle class in modernising Buddhist cultures such as Thailand. Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, one of the most influential teachers of Theravāda Buddhism in contemporary Thailand, encouraged this scepticism. His demythologising approach to Buddhist teachings had a particular appeal for Westerners and for the Thai urban and intellectual middle class, who are at the cutting edge of Thailand’s transformation from a traditional Buddhist to a modern secular culture.

For Buddhādāsa, dependent arising is the essence of Buddhism, and it forms the subject matter of most of his writings and talks. Yet he is uncompromising in his attacks on the classical interpretation of dependent arising extending over three lives. His central objection to this interpretation is that dependent arising that extends over three lives cannot be practised, and the suggestion that dependent arising extends beyond this life encourages belief in a permanent self who is reborn and moves from life to life. It encourages the wrong view that was held by Bhikkhu Sāti, which we examined last week.

The same concern is echoed by other voices within contemporary Theravāda. Ñāṇavīra Thera was an English bhikkhu who lived in Sri Lanka until his death in 1965. He made radical and uncompromising attacks on Theravāda orthodoxy, again with the three life interpretation of dependent arising at the centre of his sights. His objection is essentially the same as that of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa: dependent arising spread over three lives cannot be seen or realised now. Strongly influenced by existentialism, Ñāṇavīra argued that *dhamma* is concerned with the problem of one’s own existence in *this* life, and this problem can only be resolved in the present, not in some imagined future life.

This week we will first examine the *nidānas* as they are presented in our text, and then focus on the problem of rebirth. Our text is called Vibhaṅga, “Analysis,” and is the second sutta in Nidāna Saṃyutta, the Connected Discourses on Causation. The first sutta is Desanā, “Teaching.” So at the beginning of Nidāna Saṃyutta we are presented with “teaching” followed by “analysis,” and this is echoed in the Buddha’s opening words in this discourse: “I will teach (*desissāmi*) and analyse

(*vibhajissāmi*) dependent arising.” Analysis (*vibhaṅga*) divides things up into their individual parts; and this division makes possible a new synthesis, a recognition of the dynamic patterns that connects each individual event with every other experienced event. Ultimately, it is the relationships between events that are real, not the “things” that we normally take for granted.

Delusion

What is delusion (*avijjā*)? That which is confusion (*aññāṇa*) regarding *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. (S 2.4)

Often translated “ignorance,” *avijjā* includes both ignorance, a simple not knowing what is happening, and delusion, a positive state of misinformation regarding what is happening, and it is this that seems implied by the Pāli word *aññāṇa*. It’s not simply that we don’t know what is going on. It’s that we both don’t know, *and* are convinced that we do.

Delusion is confusion regarding the nature of the human condition as we experience it in this moment, which in the Buddha’s terms implies confusion regarding the four noble truths. The first noble truth asserts the truth of *dukkha*. Usually translated as “suffering” or “pain,” *dukkha* is a technical term which points to the fact that no experience is perfect; all experience is imperfect, and therefore unsatisfactory. *Dukkha* ranges from the extremely gross to the extremely subtle. Extreme physical pain is *dukkha*; the knowledge lurking at the back of the mind during the most blissful experience that this too will end is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is most accurately translated as “unsatisfactoriness,” but here I will follow the usual convention and use “suffering.”

Suffering is a dependently arisen phenomenon (*paṭiccasamuppanna dhamma*); it arises and ceases through a cause. The second truth explains that suffering arises dependent upon the arising of craving (*taṇhā*), and the third truth explains that suffering ceases dependent upon the cessation of craving. The second and third truths are about conditional relationship, and constitute a summary of dependent arising. Last week we saw this relationship expanded in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta in a section that explains how *saṃsāra* arises and ceases in the present:

On knowing a phenomenon (*dhamma*) with the mind, he is passionate for it if it is pleasing; he is upset with it if it is displeasing. ... Engaged as he is in favouring and opposing, whatever feeling he feels ... he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains holding on to it. As he does so, delight arises in him. Now delight in feeling is clinging. Becoming is conditioned by his clinging; becoming conditions birth; birth conditions ageing-&death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to be. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.

“Passion” (*rāga*) and “delight” (*nandi*) indicate craving, as we see below; craving conditions clinging; clinging conditions becoming; becoming conditions birth; and birth conditions suffering. So we can see how dependent arising can be expressed in many formulas, and to say that delusion is confusion regarding the four noble truths is another way of saying that it is confusion regarding dependent arising. The four noble truths are themselves another version of dependent arising.

Delusion conditions formations

Sanṅkhāras arise dependent on delusion. *Sanṅkhāra*, a key technical term in Buddhist teaching, is derived from the verb *karoti* (“to build, make, produce, act, perform, do”) and the prefix *saṃ* (“with,” “together”). The verb *saṅkharoti* means “to put together;” “to construct;” “to form.” *Sanṅkhāras* are all those things that are put together, constructed, compounded, formed; and they are all those things which in turn put together, construct, compound and form other things.

For example, in one discourse the Buddha describes his life as King Mahāsudassana in a previous existence, and the power and wealth he enjoyed as Mahāsudassana. The Buddha describes all Mahāsudassana’s possessions – towns, people, cattle, clothing, jewels, and so on – as *saṅkhāras*. He concludes:

In this way, all of these *saṅkhāras* of the past have vanished, have changed. So impermanent are *saṅkhāras*, so unfixed and unconsoling, that one is sure to be disenchanted with all *saṅkhāras*, sure to have one’s passion fade, sure to be liberated.
(S 3.146)

These possessions are impermanent and so ultimately futile. They are impermanent because they are constructed or formed out of parts, so they must ultimately break up, fall apart. Further, they in turn construct or form other *saṅkhāras*. The owner of all these possessions was King Mahāsudassana, and it was these royal possessions which made him into King Mahāsudassana. Mahāsudassana’s sense of himself, his identity (*attabhāva*), comes from his position as king, which in turn is produced by his immense wealth of goods, slaves and soldiers. Once these disappear, so too does Mahāsudassana.

The Buddha is saying that “I” do not exist independently, and I realise this when I see that my sense of identity depends upon supports that are themselves impermanent. If what I depend upon is impermanent, then I must be impermanent. Mahāsudassana realised his identity depended upon his possessions, and with the cessation of these possessions the thought “I am King Mahāsudassana” ceased. The possessions, therefore, are *saṅkhāras*, because they create or form something other than themselves.

Sanṅkhāras are dependently arisen phenomena, and in its broadest sense the word “*saṅkhāra*” does not refer to any particular thing or entity, but to the fact that the thing – any thing – is constructed, put together, formed, and in turn constructs, puts together, forms. *Sanṅkhāras* are formative processes rather than things; the relationships between things rather than the things themselves.

Experience is endlessly changing: things turn into other things, which means things form other things. But when we speak of experience, we are not so much speaking of “things,” but our-experience-of-things, or experienced events. These experienced events are *dharmas*, and they refer to our relationship *with* things as much as they do to the things themselves. Similarly, the term *saṅkhāras* draws attention to the relationships *between* things, the fact that things form other things, and these other things (the formed – *saṅkhata*) are therefore dependent on them (the forming – *saṅkhārā*).

Formations condition consciousness; Consciousness conditions name-&-form

Formations form consciousness, so consciousness is dependent on something other than itself for its existence. As the Buddha explains in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta, “consciousness is dependently arisen, since without a condition consciousness does not come into being.” But what is consciousness?

In our text, consciousness is defined in terms of its location: “There are these six classifications of consciousness (*viññāṇa-kāya*): eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness.” In Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta, when the Buddha wants to emphasise the conditionality of consciousness he also locates consciousness within the sense fields: “Consciousness is reckoned (*saṅkhā*) by the particular condition (*paccaya*) dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; ... when consciousness arises dependent on mind and phenomena (*dhammas*), it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.” However, there is another common definition of consciousness which defines it in terms of its activity:

Why does one say “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*)? It knows (*vijānāti*), therefore one says consciousness (*viññāṇa*). (S 3.87)

Consciousness is the knowing of an object. There is no consciousness without an object. Consciousness is always consciousness *of something*. When we are aware, we are aware of something; when we know, we know something. So consciousness arises dependent upon something else, its object; and in turn, the object of consciousness arises dependent upon consciousness, for without consciousness the object could not be discerned. Consciousness is the presence of the phenomenon, the object of consciousness. Hence its mutually dependent relationship with name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*), or the sentient body along with its world, which constitutes what is present. The phenomenon and its presence together compose experience. Consciousness, having arisen dependent upon formations, in turn gives rise to name-&-form, the sentient body along with its world. We have examined the mutually dependent relationship between consciousness and name-&-form in Mahānidāna Sutta in terms of the feedback loop of consciousness conditioning name-&-form, and name-&-form conditioning consciousness.

Consciousness has *depth*, in terms of both emergence and time. Because of its depth, it is capable of development. Undeveloped consciousness, consciousness which arises dependent upon delusion, is intimately bound up with suffering because we identify with it. For ordinary untrained people, consciousness is not just the presence or knowing of the phenomenon, but, as with Bhikkhu Sāti, is identified with as the one who knows, the one to whom something is present. Consciousness which arises dependent on delusion is regarded as self (Pāli: *attan*; Sanskrit: *ātman*). For the ordinary untrained person, “This is present” means “This is present to me;” “I am conscious of this.” And identification with consciousness is always accompanied by a sense of possession: “This is mine;” “I am this;” “This is my self.”

The arising of this view is the arising of name-&-form dependent on delusion. I construct my self by developing a sense of separate identity, which includes both the bundle of mental and emotional processes we call the ego and a sense of

identification with the ego – the conviction that “*I am my ego.*” As an independent entity I am necessarily concerned with *my* life, *my* career, *my* security, *my* relationships. The process of forming or constructing a self is formation (*saṅkhāra*), and it in turn confirms and develops my sense of identity, of ownership of experience: “Delusion conditions formations; formations conditions consciousness.” As consciousness is owned, so too are the objects of consciousness, mental and physical phenomena, the sentient body along with its world: “Consciousness conditions name-&-form.”

Name-&-form conditions six sense fields; Six sense fields conditions contact

“What are the six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*)? The eye sense field, ear sense field, nose sense field, tongue sense field, body sense field, and mind sense field. These are called the six sense fields.

The six sense fields (*saḷ-āyatana*) are here inserted between name-&-form and contact, while in Mahānidāna Sutta they are not mentioned. Name-&-form implies the sense fields; or we could say that the six sense fields provide another way of expressing the processes of perception contained within name-&-form. Tracing a trajectory of specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*), lines of *x-conditions-y*, we may include the six sense fields between name-&-form or not, depending on what aspects of the process of perception we are talking about, from which perspective we are viewing it.

Āyatana is derived from *ā* + *yam*, “to stretch or spread out.” It indicates the extent, reach or sphere of the senses. The six sense fields are the six functioning sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) and their appropriate objects (forms, sounds, scents, tastes, tangible things and phenomena). A functioning sense organ, one capable of responding to sense stimuli, requires the presence of an object of sense, a source of stimulus; and in turn, an object of sense is not present without a functioning sense organ, an appropriate sensitivity. Experience arises from the relationship between sense organ and sense object. The convergence or impact of functioning sense organ, its appropriate sense object and its presence to consciousness is contact or stimulus (*phassa*). Hence, the six sense fields condition contact.

What is contact (*phassa*)? There are these six classifications of contact: eye contact, ear contact; nose contact; tongue contact; body contact; and mind contact. This is called “contact.”

Contact is the immediacy of experience, the communication between the psycho-physical person or sentient body and the inner and outer world. As such, it cannot occur without functioning sense organs, their objects of recognition, and the appropriate consciousness.

Contact conditions feeling

Our text defines feeling (*vedanā*) in terms of its location: “feeling arising from eye contact ... feeling arising from mind contact.” But the Buddha also defines feeling in terms of its activity.

Why do you say “feeling” (*vedanā*)? It feels (*vediyati*), therefore it is called “feeling.” What does it feel? It feels what is pleasant (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*) and neither-painful-nor-painful (*adukkha-m-asukha*). It feels, therefore it is called “feeling.” (S 3.86-87)

Vedanā is the hedonic or affective aspect of all experience. We could see it as the flavour of experience. The mind is deeply programmed to automatically classify all experience as being either pleasant (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*), or neither-painful-nor-painful (*adukkha-(m)-asukha*), or neutral. This sense of the pleasantness or painfulness of experience is not the experienced event itself, but something added to it. Sounds are physical experience; but two people may experience the same sounds (a rock concert, for example) differently, one as pleasant, the other as painful. The qualities of pleasantness or painfulness are not inherent in the sounds themselves, but in our response *to* the sounds. We find feeling in what stimulates this response. And remember that “feeling” here does not mean emotion, although all emotion contains an element of *vedanā* or feeling. The natural result of feeling is grasping after the pleasant, resisting the painful, and either ignoring the neither-painful-nor-painful, or doubt or confusion regarding it.

**Feeling conditions craving;
Craving conditions clinging;
Clinging conditions becoming**

Where there is experience, there is a sense of pleasure and pain, and therefore an automatic tendency to turn toward and cultivate what gives pleasure, and turn away from and avoid what gives pain. This is craving (*taṇhā*), the restless desire for something else to happen, defined in the Buddha’s first discourse, Dhammacakkavattana Sutta (Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma):

Craving (*taṇhā*) leads to further becoming (*pono-bhavika*), is bound up with passion (*rāga*) and delight (*nandi*), and finds its delight now here, now there. That is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. (Vin 1:10)

Craving is the restless desire for something else to happen. It is not just wanting, but wanting that “leads to further becoming,” like the wanting that drives the characters in a soap opera. Each desire leads to a problem, which generates a new desire to solve that problem. Satisfying that new desire leads to another problem – and so on, *forever*. No matter how often we satisfy our wanting, we always want something more, something extra to add to this situation right now, because this situation right now is never completely satisfactory.

“Delight” (*nandi*) is the satisfaction that comes from fulfilling desire. It’s the payoff, why we pursue the desire in the first place. But delight always has an element of agitation, even panic, which conditions the further arising of the desire. “That was nice – I’ll do it again!” So it implies a degree of obsession, even addiction, in the heart. “Passion” (*rāga*) literally means “colour.” It indicates the colouring of the mind, like when we “see red,” and implies obsession, the inability to see beyond something and so to let it go. More than just having a good time, craving (*taṇhā*) involves a state of emotional investment and obsession that is characterised by an inability to let go of the search for a good, or bad, time. Passion and delight are like the satisfaction the alcoholic finds in his beer, or the insomniac in the thinking that keeps her awake. So passion and delight are associated with lack of freedom, and with endless becoming in new forms – *saṃsāra*.

“Finding delight now here, now there” refers to the *restlessness* implied in the endless search for satisfaction – like the restlessness of the characters in a soap opera. Without their restless search, the story would end. This restlessness fuels the endless developments in the soap opera’s plot – *samsāra*. When we watch our minds we find our thoughts restlessly moving from story to story, sometimes replaying old tapes over and over again. This is “finding delight now here, now there.”

We cultivate our craving, and when cultivated it develops into clinging (*upādāna*) and becoming (*bhava*). Craving is part of a continuous process of psychological development. My desires give me my fundamental direction in life, and from desire I construct a life and an identity. This is the maturing of a journey beginning with craving and proceeding through clinging. Its end result is an identity defined by its desires for specific types of sense (including mental) satisfaction. As the Buddha says, “What one desires gives rise to its appropriate identity (*attabhāva*), whether favourable or unfavourable.” (A 3.411)

Upādāna (clinging) is one of a number of terms from the same root which contain a complex of related meanings. *Upādāna* can mean “taking up,” or “that which is placed under, support.” In terms of its first meaning, *upādāna* means “clinging.” One takes up, clings to and develops simple wants which are rooted in pleasurable and painful feelings. Sense experiences and personality processes are taken up, collected and developed, and in this way a sense of identity is formed. One “becomes” someone; clinging (*upādāna*) conditions becoming (*bhava*). This is an aspect of the depth of consciousness, which develops by way of clinging into the presence *to me* of experience, the owner of experience, the one who experiences.

In terms of its second meaning, *upādāna* can mean “fuel,” that which supports a fire. We saw how this works in terms of the four nutriments (*āhāra*) in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta. The Buddha likened the self-in-process to a great fire (*aggi-khandha*), fuelled by its experiences and the wanting and aversion conditioned by them:

For example, if one was to light a great fire of ten, twenty, thirty or forty cartloads of wood, and was, from time to time, to throw into it dry grass, dry cow-dung and dry sticks; such a great fire, fed and supplied with fuel (*upādāna*), would burn for a long time. (S 2.85)

A fire is dependently arisen; it arises dependent on fuel (*upādāna*), and is inseparable from its fuel. Its nature and identity is dependent on the nature of the fuel; so we call it a bush-fire, house-fire, coal-fire, and so on. Dependent upon the fuel (*upādāna*), the fire comes into existence (*bhava*). Like a fire, the self is a pattern of dynamic processes which maintains a shape while its substance constantly changes. The type of identity arising from clinging depends on the type of clinging cultivated.

What is clinging (*upādāna*)? There are these four classifications of clinging: clinging to sense desires (*kāma-upādāna*), clinging to views (*diṭṭhi-upādāna*), clinging to precepts-&-practices (*sīla-[b]bata-upādāna*), and clinging to belief in a self (*atta-vāda-upādāna*). This is called clinging.

Clinging to sense desires, I can become a person addicted to certain pleasures or physical habits. Clinging to views, I can become dogmatic and intolerant, obsessed with the correctness of my chosen ideology. Clinging to precepts-&-practices, I can

become fixated on specific moral codes and spiritual practices, complacently convinced that merely by reproducing a certain practice or “technique” my liberation will be assured.

For the Buddha, however, the fundamental form of clinging is *atta-vāda*, the belief in oneself as a separate entity; belief in independently existing things, rather than dependently arisen phenomena. The becoming that is conditioned by clinging blossoms into the birth of a supposedly separate, independent self, formed by craving and clinging. This self suffers because of the open-ended nature of the desires that created her. No matter how much she satisfies her desires she will not be finally contented, because the creation of new desires goes on apace – because she *is* her desires. Further, her sense of separation creates its own anxiety. Faced with the other, she must defend himself and her possessions from a threatening world; having borders, she must defend her borders.

Becoming conditions birth Birth conditons ageing-&-death

What is birth (*jāti*)? Whatever is birth regarding any beings in any classification of beings – origin, entry, production, appearance of the aggregates (*khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo*) and taking up of sense spheres (*āyatanānaṃ paṭilābho*) – this is called birth.

What is ageing-&-death (*jarāmaṇa*)? Whatever is ageing regarding any beings in any classification of beings – old age, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, decline of life (*āyuno saṃbhāni*), decay of the faculties (*indriyānaṃ paripāko*) – this is called ageing (*jarā*).

Whatever is passing away regarding any beings in any classification of beings – separation, disappearance, mortality, fulfilment of one’s time, breaking up of the aggregates (*khandhānaṃ bhedo*) and laying down the body – this is called death (*maṇa*). Thus this ageing and this death are together called ageing-&-death.

These definitions use language in two ways, leading to two levels of meaning, conventional (*lokasammutiyā*) and ultimate (*paramattha*). So in the definition of birth, “origin, entry, production” can refer to the birth of a being within a world at the beginning of a life; while “appearance of the aggregates and taking up of the sense spheres” to the birth of any given phenomenon in this present moment. Similarly, “separation, disappearance, mortality, fulfilment of one’s time” can refer to the death of a being in the world at the end of a life; while “breaking up of the aggregates” to the death of any given phenomenon in this present moment. “Old age, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, decline of life” can refer to the ageing of a being in the world over many years; and “decay of the faculties” to the decay of any given phenomenon in this present moment. The same text can shift from conventional to ultimate and back again, depending on the viewpoint, the perspective, being taken, and this perspective will determine the meaning of the event being spoken of. Neither perspective denies or negates the other. Both are true; both work. In the following text, for example, the Buddha speaks of birth in the ultimate sense:

Here an ordinary untrained person ... regards body as self, self as possessed by body, body in self, self in body. He regards feeling ... perception ... formations ... consciousness as self, self as possessed by consciousness, consciousness in self, self in consciousness.

This is how he regards it: it occurs to him, “I am.” When it occurs to him “I am,” then there is the appearance of the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. There is mind, there are phenomena, there is the sphere of delusion.

To the untrained ordinary person touched by experience born of deluded contact comes “I am;” “I am this;” “They will be;” “They will not be;” ...

But in the case of the trained cultivated student, delusion is abandoned, knowledge arises. Because of the fading of delusion and the arising of knowledge, for him there is no “I am;” there is no “I am not;” ... (S 3.46-47)

The ordinary untrained person identifies with the five aggregates and therefore fabricates an “I” which really does not exist. The “I” is clung to, protected and further developed. This fabrication comes from “experience born of deluded contact,” which is contact as part of a stream of causation beginning with delusion. Hence the five senses “appear” when we think “I am;” they “appear” when they appear *to someone*. In the same way, “birth” is the appearance of the aggregates as *my* aggregates; “death” is the breaking up of the aggregates as *my* aggregates. Birth, therefore, refers both to physical birth and to the birth of the I concept. “Becoming” is the sense “I am;” “birth” is the sense “I am *this*.” And where there is birth there is ageing and death, which are painful.

Rebirth and consciousness

Does dependant arising extend beyond this life? Can it be used to explain rebirth? When we looked at Mahānidāna Sutta in week two we saw how at the centre of this discourse is the interdependent relationship of consciousness together with name-&-form, and how this shows the universe arising and ceasing now, in this present moment. But we also saw how the relationship between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) is also used to explain conception, birth, and the maturity of the person through life. Similarly, last week we saw in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta how consciousness is one of the four nutriments (*āhāra*), and that these are “for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be and for the entry of those seeking birth.” So dependent arising does deal with beings who are born, mature over time, and die, and then seek birth again.

The Buddha believed in and taught rebirth, which he had directly verified by means of his own perception. The memory of his own rebirths was the first of the three *vedas* (knowledges) that made up his awakening (M 1.247-48). The problem of rebirth is bound up with that of causation over time, and particularly in the sense of personal continuity over time. This in turn is bound up with the problem of identity, the identity of the beings who endure over time, beings who experience the results of their actions and who are reborn from life to life. And these questions of causation over time, personal continuity and identity are all bound up with the nature of consciousness, and in particular the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*), which provides the “unbroken stream” providing the link between one life and another (D 3.105), and between one moment and another.

Who is reborn?

Remember Bhikkhu Sāti’s wrong view, which was based on his determination to find something which is reborn. Not surprisingly, he chose consciousness as the

candidate: “As I understand the *dhamma* taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness (*viññāṇa*) that runs (*sandhāvati*) and wanders (*saṃsarati*), not another.” In a text dealing with the four nutriment, Venerable Moliya-Phagguna makes the same kind of mistake. The four nutriment, “for the maintenance of beings that already have come to be and for the entry of those seeking birth,” are physical food, contact, mental volition and consciousness. Moliya-Phagguna asks, “Bhante, who consumes consciousness as nutriment?”

“The question is not relevant,” the Blessed One said. “I do not say ‘One consumes;’ should I say ‘One consumes,’ the question ‘Who consumes?’ would be relevant. But I do not say so. Not saying so, one could ask me: ‘What does consciousness nourish?’ this is a relevant question. The relevant answer is: ‘Consciousness as nutriment is the condition for further becoming and birth in the future. When that comes to be, there are the six sense fields. The six sense fields are dependent on contact.’”

“Who contacts?”

“The question is not relevant ... contact is dependent on the six sense fields; feeling is dependent on contact.”

“Who feels?”

“The question is not relevant ... feeling is dependent on contact; craving is dependent on feeling.” ... (S 2.13)

The Buddha is extremely careful with language. The questions “Who consumes?;” “Who contacts?;” “Who feels?” all assume the existence of someone, and whatever answer he gives will leave that assumption unchallenged. So there are certain questions that are better not asked, for they will not lead to useful answers. In place of “Who does *x*?,” the Buddha asks “What conditions *x*? What does *x* condition?” He speaks in terms of conditional process, not identity, and he will speak about rebirth in terms of conditional process. There is “further becoming and birth in the future;” there is no-one who endures from past to future. Conditional relationships can and do extend through time.

Time and consciousness

The issue of time is central to an understanding of the path of practice, as well as rebirth. The path implies time: *now* I am deluded, and *later* I want to awaken. It is interesting that some western commentators who are sceptical about rebirth are also sceptical about the real possibility of awakening (*bodhi*), and this is not surprising when we reflect on our own experience. When, for example, I am caught in an emotional trap I am familiar with from long experience, I am shocked by how deeply I am caught in my habitual reactions, and I realise I can never complete this path in just one lifetime. I need more time, and if that time is not available, awakening is not available.

We have seen in the texts we have studied that causation over time involves consciousness (*viññāṇa*). We have mentioned that consciousness has *depth*, in terms of both emergence and time. In terms of time, we are always in some situation which is located *now*. We experience this situation now as changing, and the experience of change entails time. In this situation now, we are already moving from past to future. This situation now is dynamic, and its dynamism is linked to

change; and the knowing of change is the stream of consciousness. The tradition sees consciousness and time as inextricably linked, as shown in this verse from Atthasālinī, the commentary to Dhammasaṅgaṇī:

*Samaye niddisi cittaṃ
cittena samayaṃ muni*

By means of time the Sage described mind
And by means of mind described time.

Samaya means “time” in the sense of “occasion.” Each sutta begins with the phrase *evaṃ me suttaṃ* (“This is how I heard it”), followed by the phrase *ekaṃ samayaṃ*, “At one time,” or “On one occasion.” Whatever happens, happens “at one time.” That which knows what is happening is mind (*citta*) or consciousness (*viññāṇa*), and consciousness is both limited and described by time. We have seen how consciousness always has an object, and its object is name-&-form, the self within its world. Name-&-form is an infinitely complex collection of dependently arisen phenomena, all those phenomena that together make up myself, in this world, now. Consciousness is *limited* by time insofar as it lasts only as long as the particular combination of dependently arisen phenomena that make up its object; and it is *described* by time in terms of the time within which this particular combination of dependently arisen phenomena exists.

At this time, for example, I am speaking to you. “You” consist of a certain number of people scattered about this room in a certain pattern. This experienced situation – “I speaking to you, now” – is made up of innumerable *dhammas*. How long does this experienced situation last? Until one of these *dhammas* changes, whereupon it becomes another situation – this one. For example, as soon as one person moves, then this particular situation, made up of this particular combination of events, has ceased. As soon as my attention shifts from one aspect of this situation to another, then this particular situation, made up of this particular combination of events, has ceased. Because every experienced event is complex, situations are constantly changing. How long does one unit of consciousness last? It lasts as long as the entire collection of dependently arisen phenomena associated with name-&-form lasts unchanged. How do we describe this consciousness together with name-&-form? We describe it as an occasion, as time. The boundaries of consciousness are conditioned by the complexity of the dependently arisen *dhammas* that make up name-&-form, the self within its world, as any change in any phenomenon changes the nature of the consciousness that knows it.

We are always in this situation now, but this situation now has already changed from what it was in the past, and is already changing into what it will be in the future. This situation now is discerned and described in terms of consciousness together with name-&-form, arising and ceasing in mutual dependence. We experience consciousness as a stream (*viññāṇa-sota*), streaming from the past through the present and into the future. Consciousness has *depth*; depth in time. It is open to both past and future, and can be described and analysed in terms of time. We directly experience change by means of the stream of consciousness, and from this infer the concept “time.”

Consciousness has depth, insofar as it is open to past and future. While we can easily see how one experienced event leads immediately to another experienced

event, and so how one occasion of consciousness leads immediately to another occasion of consciousness, we must also keep in mind that the depth of consciousness is not exhausted by immediate succession. Events arise that are conditioned by events in the distant past. They arise into the present when they are mature, and when current circumstances (consciousness together with name-&-form) are suitable.

Action and its fruit

Here we get into questions of action (*kamma*) and its result. A common term in Pāli for result is *phala*, literally “fruit.” The Buddha uses the image of seeds maturing into fruit as a metaphor for the “ripening” of actions. A seed of a particular type gives rise to a fruit of a corresponding type. An apple seed ripens into an apple, not an orange; an orange seed ripens into an orange, not an apple. In the same way, wholesome actions ripen into wholesome results; unwholesome actions ripen into unwholesome results.

The seed-fruit metaphor also serves to bring in the time dimension. A seed does not produce its fruit immediately, but over time – perhaps a very long time. In the same way, a dependently arisen phenomenon might arise into consciousness a long time after its initial conditioning event. There may be a long trajectory of specific conditionality between the initial event and the result. While we can track this trajectory as a linear series of events immediately succeeding each other over time – as a diachronic process – there is another dimension to this.

In one discourse the Buddha explains how seeds must be healthy, well planted in good soil, and watered in order to bear fruit (S 3.54). If the seeds are damaged, or the soil is inadequate, or the seeds are not properly planted, or water is lacking, then the seeds will not “undergo increase, growth and full development.” When these conditions come together, then the seeds mature into their fruit. In this metaphor we can see (diachronic) causation over time – the duration required for seeds to mature into fruit-yielding trees – and the (synchronic) combination of particular conditions at this time, now. The seeds mature slowly “underground” and unnoticed; but this process is helped or hindered at any time in the growth process – at this time, now – by the collection of conditions of earth, water and sun. At any moment – at this moment – there is a collection of inherently unstable conditions that make up the single complex event which is the condition of this garden now. The maturing of the fruit requires *both* favourable conditions now, *and* a process of growth and development over time. In the same way, the maturing of consciousness requires *both* favourable conditions now, *and* a process of growth and development over time.

Identity over time

Causation over time raises the question of identity. This is the problem faced by Bhikkhu Sāti, who was convinced of rebirth – the reality of life-after-life – and was looking for an answer to the problem of identity, and therefore of moral responsibility. Who is responsible for my actions? If I do unwholesome deeds today, and they give a result tomorrow, who is on the receiving end? If it’s “me,” then “I” must survive unchanged over time; “I” must be permanent. If it’s not me, then it must be something that survives – “this same consciousness.”

As I practise, I am assaulted by memories of the past that create a strong emotional response now – perhaps shame, remorse, regret, anger, and so on. Before I began to practise I took this situation for granted. After all, “I” underwent these past experiences, so it is not surprising that “I,” today, am affected by them. But after practising *vipassanā* meditation for many years, I *know* that I am not the same person who did that or had that done to me all those years ago. I *know* only this present moment is real, and that the only reality these memories have is their arising, now, in the present. But then, why do they continue to have this impact? And it is the impact of these old habitual emotions that convince me, despite all I know and understand to the contrary, that I *am* permanent, after all. That I have a permanent identity.

Dependent arising must deal with this situation. It can only deal with it if it can handle the question of causation – and identity – over time, and this, in classical Buddhism, means rebirth. For the only difference between the movement from one moment to the next and the movement from one life to the next, from the perspective of classical Buddhism, is depth – the depth of the stream of consciousness expressed in terms of time. For us there is a difference. We can easily accept the first, but not the second. Because of our cultural conditioning we are convinced that the process of cause and effect moment by moment can be blocked by death. But this conviction is just cultural conditioning. For the Buddha and his students it is obvious that movement from one life to another is the same process as movement from one moment to another.

So we return to the question of moral responsibility, and its link with dependent arising and with identity. If “I” don’t receive the result of good and bad actions, who does? Let’s begin with what we have, the present. Right now, I am undergoing the results of choices I made in the past. I am who I am now because of choices made in the past. But who made these choices? If “I” could go back in time to the place where a choice was made that I now regret, would “I” make it? No, of course not, because today I am not the person who would do something so stupid. But then, who did? Whoever that was, it’s not “me.” But there is a continuous stream of conditioning between me now and him then, and at this point in the stream – *here, now* – suffering is happening, and being identified with as “This is mine;” “I am this;” “This is my self.” In the same way, who will inherit the results of my choices, now? Not me, surely; but whoever it is will be directly downstream of the river of conditioning within which this choice now is being made. And at that point, in the future, suffering will be happening, and being identified with as “This is mine;” “I am this;” “This is my self.”

But when we step back, and look at all of this from the perspective of dependent arising, we can see that asking “Who?” is asking the wrong question and guaranteeing the wrong answer, as we saw in the example of Moliya Phaggunā. Dependent arising changes the very nature of the enquiry. As we saw last week, dependent arising provides both method and language for practice. Method: for any given experienced phenomenon *y*, look for *x*, that which is required for its arising, and without which it would cease. Language: Do not speak in terms of identity (Who experiences *y*?), but of dependent arising (What conditions *y*?). When we *practise* in accordance with dependent arising, then the questions of identity we looked at above dissolve. In Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta the Buddha asks his students:

“Knowing (*jānantā*) and seeing (*passantā*) in this way, would you run back to the past: ‘Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? How were we in the past? Having been what, what did we become in the past?’” “No, bhante.”

“Knowing and seeing in this way, would you run forward to the future: ‘Shall we be in the future? Shall we not be in the future? What shall we be in the future? How shall we be in the future? Having been what, what shall we become in the future?’” “No, bhante.”

The question of identity over time cannot be answered, for the question itself is part of the problem. Our very search for a solution of this problem is part of the problem, for our attempted solution (“Who?”) presupposes the problem – the self, who is and who owns experience. Dependent arising leaps clear of both the problem and its solution.

Returning to our problem: I am suddenly caught in an emotional trap I am familiar with from long experience, and am easily convinced that it was always like this and will always be like this, because *I* have always been like this and will always be like this. Caught in habitual patterns of reaction, I identify with them precisely because they are habits. They solidify my sense of self, the one who endures throughout time, who was there in the past and will be here for the future. Sometimes I think of my self enduring without change – “I will always be like this.” Sometimes I think of my self changing over time – “One day, things will be better.” But always the self remains something projected from the past, through the present, to the future. This is the one who experiences now the result of past actions; and who will experience later the result of present actions.

Dependent arising denies the self to begin with, cutting the ground out from under this entire situation. We have often referred to the fact that the Buddha’s teaching is a first person discourse. It is always about the nature of experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject. The experiencing subject is always located – here and now. From this perspective I see that here-&-now something has arisen conditioned from the distant past. Here-&-now it arises and ceases, and here-&-now I must respond to it. This response is volitional action (*kamma*) or choice (*cetanā*). I assume self, because I am caught in habitual patterns of reaction; but when I look, I can see that these habits are patterns of conditional relationships, arising and ceasing now. And these responses have already formed a stream of conditioning that will give rise to a result in the future. Past is real; future is real; but always “I” am located here and now, and only here and now. “I” anywhen else is projection.

Dependent arising over three lives

Both Buddhists and Hindus believe in life-after-life, and for the Hindus, believing as they do in an eternal *ātman*, explaining how this takes place is relatively straightforward. The *ātman* moves from life to life just as, for Bhikkhu Sāti, consciousness moves from life to life. Over centuries of debate with Hindu scholars Buddhists were faced with the very difficult task of explaining how there is rebirth but no-one being born. They used the twelfold formula of dependent arising and

spoke in terms of the formula extending over three lives, as the following table¹ shows:

¹ Taken from *The great discourse on causation: the Mahanidana Sutta and its commentaries*. Translated by bhikkhu Bodhi. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984, p 5.

PAST	Cause	(1) Delusion; and (2) formations	are what happened in the past to bring about this present situation. They are past causes with present effects.
PRESENT	Result	(3) Consciousness; (4) name-&-form; (5) six sense fields; (6) contact; and (7) feeling	are what is given in this present situation, the result of the delusion and formations of the past.
	Cause	(8) Craving; (9) clinging; and (10) becoming	are presently occurring actions which are forming results for the future, which are
FUTURE	Result	(11) birth; and (12) ageing-&-death,	the results in the future of present craving, clinging and becoming.

Why three lives? Why not two, or four? The purpose of the three life interpretation is to explain cause and effect over time. When we consider time, we are necessarily faced with three times: past, present, and future. The pattern of causation as described by dependent arising is the same whether the unit of time be a moment, a day, a human life span, or whatever. The Buddha uses terms like “birth” and “death” in different ways, depending on context. If we cling to the notion of a single human life span the we will assume an entity who exists from physical birth to physical death, but such an enduring entity is explicitly denied by dependent arising. Birth and death are taking place with extraordinary rapidity every moment. “Three lifetimes” really means three consecutive periods of time, regardless of the unit employed.

These three lifetimes – or rather, three times – are always experienced from the perspective of the present. We are always located in the present, and from this time we look back into the past and forward into the future. This is possible because of the depth of consciousness, its open-ended boundaries that extend forward and backward into time.

In terms of the twelfefold formula, we are *always* situated at this moment (life two), where there is consciousness, name-&-form, six sense fields, contact, feeling, craving, clinging and becoming. For these phenomena (3 – 10) to exist now, there must have been delusion and formations (1 – 2) in the past; and since these phenomena (3 – 10) exist now, there will be birth, ageing and death (11 – 12) in the future. Structurally, the same is true for lives one and three. From the perspective of life one, present delusion and formations must give rise to all the other *nidānas* in the future; from the perspective of life three, present craving, clinging and becoming must be based on all the other *nidānas* in the past. For the

three life interpretation to work, all twelve *nidānas* must be functioning as a structural whole.

While dependent arising does not deny causation over time, its fundamental concern is with the structure of the experienced present. However, one aspect of the experienced present is its flow from past to future. Dependent arising can, therefore, be used to explain causation over time in terms of the experience of continuity without the need to posit someone who continues. To the degree that dependent arising can explain continuity from one moment to the next, it can explain continuity from one lifetime to the next, or one universe to the next. From the viewpoint of dependent arising, there is no structural distinction between these units of time.

Further, this entire elaborate structure of causation over three times can be seen within the binary of (active) cause and (passive) result. We are always acting purposefully, creating a situation. This purposeful action is karma (Pāli, *kamma*), volitional action, and is made up of delusion, formations, craving, clinging and becoming. This action creates a result, a given situation, which is made up of consciousness, name-&-form, six sense fields, contact, feeling, birth and ageing-&-death. This given situation is *this* situation right here and now; and it will be our situation tomorrow, when we will experience it as *this* situation right here and now. But this given situation must be actively created for it to exist, now, and we are actively creating it now, just as we did in the past. And so we can see, in the unfolding of our lives, how we create our life from moment to moment, and how we experience our life as given from moment to moment. Both are true, and to deny one is to fail to see the totality of our life's dynamic.