Dependent Origination and Emptiness

Streams
Of
Dependently
Arising
Processes
Interacting

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Dedication

For those who seek to evolve,
rather than just pursue high quality saṃsāra.

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Abbreviations and Notes

AN – Aṅguttara Nikāya (book.sutta)
Dhp – Dhammapada (verse)
DN – Dīgha Nikāya (sutta.verse)
Iti – Itivuttaka (verse)
MMK – Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā (chapter)
MN – Majjhima Nikāya (sutta.verse)
PED – Pali-English Dictionary from the Pali Text Society
SN – Saṁyutta Nikāya (book.sutta)
Snp – Sutta Nipāta (book.sutta)
Ud – Udāna (book.sutta)
Vsm – Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification by Buddhaghosa, translated by the Ven. Nāṇamoli, BPS 1956 +)

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Footnotes with the symbols * † ‡ ¤ and ± provide additional information that did not fit easily in the main body. Endnotes with a number are references and can usually be ignored unless you wish to delve into the sources.

In order to save typing, all the internet URLs mentioned in this book can be found at http://sodapi.leighb.com/links.htm.

Most of the suttas mentioned can be found at Sutta Central via http://leighb.com/suttacentral.htm.

Preface

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Kurus, where there was a town of the Kurus named Kammasadamma. Then the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him:

"It is wonderful, venerable sir! It is amazing, venerable sir! This dependent origination is so deep and so deep in implications, yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be."

"Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This dependent origination is deep and deep in implications. It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma, Ānanda, that this generation has become like a tangled skein, like a knotted ball of thread, like matted reeds and rushes, and does not pass beyond the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world, saṃsāra." DN 15, SN 12.60

"So, Leigh, I hear you are writing a book on dependent origination. Aren't you in the same boat as Ānanda?"

"Actually, I think Ānanda had a better boat."

"So, in that case, why are you writing a book on dependent origination?"

"Well, there seems to be lots of misinformation and lots of missing information about dependent origination. So I thought I'd share what I've learned so far about the topic, along with some of the implications of dependent origination not found explicitly in the suttas."

Some of what I write here could be accurate. Some of it could completely miss the mark. And what's written here is certainly very incomplete. But it's what I've seen so far by exploring the concepts of dependent origination. All credit to the Buddha for “finding and showing the way,” and to all those who have preserved that Dhamma for us today.

Introduction

> *This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.* MN 26.19

This book is not a complete treatment of the topic of dependent origination. Such a task is actually impossible, even for a fully awakened* one. Dependent origination is “unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.” No amount of words can do it justice – it has to be experienced for oneself.

Nonetheless, there are lots of words that can be said which can serve as “fingers pointing at the moon.” What I’ll attempt to do here is lay out the various traditional understandings of dependent origination, and then the deep, more profound teachings found in the suttas of the Pāli Canon. As well, I'll bring in ideas and insights from later Buddhist literature and also those I've personally encountered while working with dependent origination.

The book is divided into three parts:
Part 1 provides background information that will be needed to understand what follows.
Part 2 discusses the links of dependent origination, examining various interpretations and their implications.
Part 3 dives into the general case of dependently arising phenomena and the deeper implication thereof.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when exploring any of the Buddha's teachings is that he was a phenomenologist, not a metaphysicist. By “phenomenologist” I'm not referring to the philosophy of

Edmund Husserl; rather I am saying that the Buddha was only interested in the phenomena we experience and our responses to those experiences. By saying “not a metaphysicist” I'm pointing out that the Buddha was not interested in explaining the fundamental nature of the world. However, the general principle of dependent origination (which we will get to eventually) does have metaphysical implications, even though they are only a side effect.

Even though the Buddha wasn't teaching metaphysics *per se*, Buddhist Metaphysics certainly exists. But Buddhist Metaphysics is a later invention and will not be of any help in understanding dependent origination.[†]

Eschewing metaphysics is actually a difficult thing to do for most people when they are studying spiritual literature. We all want to know, “What's really going on here?!?” Well, the Buddha didn't answer that sort of question. In fact, he point blank refused to answer the primary metaphysical questions of his time:

> Is the cosmos infinite or not?
> Is the cosmos eternal or not?
> Is the soul the same as the body or not?
> What happens to an awakened one after death?[1]

He very consistently stuck to teaching “dukkha and the end of dukkha”[2] by having people explore the phenomena they experience and their responses to those experiences.[‡] In this regard, consider the Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta (MN 63), which presents a simile about a man struck by a poisoned arrow who would not allow the arrow to be removed until he learned everything about the how and why of being struck by that arrow. That man dies before learning all those details because the arrow was not removed. Metaphysical questions are an equally useless distraction from the actual goal of ending dukkha.

The scholarship supporting this phenomenological approach will emerge as we explore dependent origination from the perspective of the suttas of the Pāli Canon. As we delve into dependent origination, you should keep this non-metaphysical, phenomenological outlook firmly in mind.

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* Throughout this book, I will use “awakened” rather than the perhaps more familiar “enlightened” since “enlightened” is not an accurate translation, having been chosen by the early translators to suggest a connection with the European Enlightenment.

† “With the Buddha ... any treatment of any entity or aspect of reality was suspect for he did not allow any definitive metaphysicizing, generally referred to as views or points of view concerning reality. Yet, despite strong condemnation of metaphysical views, we note that in subsequent Buddhist literature ... there is a vast array of doctrines dealing with empirical phenomenal matters.” Inada, pg 465

‡ “Dukkha” is most often translated as “suffering,” but see the chapter Dukkha is a Bummer for a more comprehensive translation.

1. E.g. DN 9.25-27, SN 44.7&8, AN 10.95

2. E.g. MN 22.38 and SN 22.86

PART 1 – Background

Dependent Origination is the most important teaching that the Buddha uses to explain what *dukkha*[*] arises dependent upon and to provide a strategy for ending dukkha. Dependent Origination is often presented as linked list of dependencies, frequently numbering twelve items. But it is far more than just the twelve item linked list; the implications of the general case of "something arising dependent upon something else" are quite profound and lead to some of the deepest of all the Buddha's teachings.

The next four chapters provide background information needed to begin to understand what the Buddha was teaching with Dependent Origination. These chapters go from more general to more specific.

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* See the next chapter for a detailed discussion of this most important Pāli word

Dukkha is a Bummer

> *Both formerly and now what I teach is dukkha and the end of dukkha.* MN 22.38, SN 22.86

As a starting point for exploring dependent origination, we need to keep in mind the Buddha's own statement about exactly what he was teaching; he said on several occasions that he taught “dukkha and the end of dukkha.”[1] Hopefully, this book will show how an understanding of dependent origination leads to gaining the insights necessary for ending dukkha.

The extremely important Pāli word *dukkha* gets translated using a number of different English words: suffering,
stress, unsatisfactoriness. But none of these words really captures what the Buddha was saying when he used the word dukkha. It does mean “suffering” and “stress” and “unsatisfactoriness” – but it includes all the minor annoyances of life as well. It's basically “getting what one does not want” and “not getting what one does want.” It covers all those little niggling feelings that life is not perfect.

In a number of discourses, the Buddha says:

> *Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha: birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha; union with what is displeasing is dukkha; separation from what is pleasing is dukkha; not to get what one wants is dukkha; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are dukkha.* DN 22, SN 56:11, *etc*.

What if we plug in the usual English words and see what we get? But rather than using that whole long sentence above, let's start with:

> “Having the flu is dukkha.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is dukkha.”

So first “suffering”:

> “Having the flu is suffering.” – yeah, OK.
> “Losing your sunglasses is suffering.” – not really, you wimp.

“Suffering” seems too strong in some cases. So let's try “stress”:

> “Having the flu is stress.” – yeah, but I want to change “stress” to “stressful.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is stress.” – once more “stressful” would work better.

so

> “Having the flu is stressful.” – yeah, OK.
> “Losing your sunglasses is stressful.” – if losing sunglasses is stressful, you need a vacation for sure.

Again, “stress” seems too strong in some cases. And changing “stress” to “stressful” changes a noun to an adjective; we lose something thereby. What about “unsatisfactoriness”:

> “Having the flu is unsatisfactoriness.” – too weak and I want to change “unsatisfactoriness” to “unsatisfactory.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is unsatisfactoriness.” – again “unsatisfactory” would work better.

so

> “Having the flu is unsatisfactory.” – that's a weird way to speak for sure.
> “Losing your sunglasses is unsatisfactory.” – it works, but it's weird – and again we are going from a noun to an adjective.

Maybe instead of using the usual English words, what if we try working from the literal meaning of dukkha – “dirty hole”. The hole originally referred to the axle hole in a cart wheel. In order for the wheel to turn

smoothly, the hole needs greasing. But the grease can also cause dirt and pebbles to collect in the hole, thus giving an unsatisfactory ride. So a dirty hole produces unpleasantness.

Let's try the literal meaning of dukkha:

> “Having the flu is [a] dirty hole.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is [a] dirty hole.”

We need to insert the article “a” since Pāli has no articles. But this is actually much less meaningful than anything above. Is there any English phrase that is close to “dirty hole” and means things are not quite right? How about “bad space”:

> “Having the flu is a bad space.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is a bad space.”

I'd want to fix these up as:

> “Having the flu put me in a bad space.”
> “Losing your sunglasses puts you in a bad space.”

This is a little better, but we've strayed rather far from the simple “Having the flu is dukkha.”

What other English phrases mean something like “put me in a bad space”? How about “bummed me out”. Or even better, the shortened “bummer”:

> “Having the flu is a bummer.”
> “Losing your sunglasses is a bummer.”

Again, we've needed to introduce the article “a”, but this is much more promising. Let's try it in the original quote:

> “Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha: birth is a bummer; aging is a bummer; illness is a bummer; death is a bummer; grief, lamentation, bodily pain, mental pain and despair are

> bummers; having to associate with what is displeasing is a bummer, separation from what is pleasing is a bummer; not getting what one wants, that too is a bummer: In brief the five aggregates subject to clinging are all bummers."

The downsides seem to be only the need for "a" and the need at times to make "bummer" plural. But this better captures the range of dukkha than "suffering" or "stress" or "unsatisfactoriness" and it doesn't generate weird constructs either. It keeps the word as a noun, and a noun with an embedded verb sense since a "bummer" bums you out. Plus, very importantly, it captures the fact that the Buddha wasn't teaching that dukkha "resides" in the object, but in your mind – see for example the sutta on the Two Arrows at SN 36.6.* If aging and death are dukkha, the end of dukkha doesn't imply the end of aging or death; the end of dukkha implies not getting all bummed out when these things occur. This gives a much clearer picture that the end of dukkha doesn't come from changing the external world, but by changing one's reactions to the external world:

> "Bummer! I lost my sunglasses at the beach."
> "Well, it's only sunglasses, don't get all bummed out about it."

Of course, we should check this more carefully by plugging "bummer" into a few more of the Buddha's teachings. How about the Four Noble Truths:

> Dukkha
>
> Bummers happen.
>
> The Origin of Dukkha
>
> Bummers arise dependent on craving.
>
> The Cessation of Dukkha
>
> With the cessation of craving comes the cessation of bummers.
>
> The Path of Practice that Leads to the Cessation of Dukkha
>
> The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of bummers.

That works. Let's try another:

> “I teach only dukkha and the end of dukkha.”
> “I teach only bummers and the end of bummers.”

And from SN 12.15:

> “One has no uncertainty or doubt that, when there is arising, only dukkha is arising; and that when there is passing away, only dukkha is passing away.”
>
> “One has no uncertainty or doubt that, when there is arising, only bummers are arising; and that when there is passing away, only bummers are passing away.”

Not quite as smooth, but it still works. How about a more modern phrase:

> “May you be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.”

which actually is

> “May you be free from dukkha and the causes of dukkha.”

and converts to

> “May you be free from bummers and the causes of bummers.”

Yep, that's what we are after.

Maybe “bummer” is too flippant for such a serious subject. It's doubtful it will make it into the academic world and we're highly unlikely to find translations using “bummer” rather than “suffering” or “stress”. But maybe thinking about dukkha from a hippy slang perspective will help you understand more deeply what exactly the Buddha was teaching.[†]

I will continue to use “dukkha” rather than “bummer” or any other translation of this very important word. Although “bummer” comes closer to capturing what “dukkha” means than any other English word (in my opinion), even “bummer” does not encompass all the subtleties of the

meaning of “dukkha.”

The key thing is that dukkha does not reside “out there;” it resides in your response to the inevitable suffering, stress, and bummers of life. The Buddha's teaching of dependent origination is pointing to a way of experiencing the world such that your responses to the stresses of life don't generate negative mental states.

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* In SN 36.6 – The Sallatha Sutta (The Dart) – the Buddha says:

> *It is as if a man were pierced by a dart and, following the first piercing, he is hit by a second dart. So that person will experience feelings caused by two darts. It is similar with an untaught worldling: when touched by a painful feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, beats his breast, weeps and is distraught. So he experiences two kinds of feeling: a bodily and a mental feeling.*
> ...
> *It is as if a man were pierced by a dart, but was not hit by a second dart following the first one. So this person experiences feelings caused by a single dart only. It is similar with a well-taught noble disciple: when touched by a painful feeling, he will not worry or grieve and lament, he will not beat his breast and weep, nor will he be distraught. He experiences one single feeling, a bodily one.*

Clearly the well-taught noble disciple doesn't get bummed out. Two other suttas that have a similar theme are SN 1.38 and SN 4.13 – both are about physical pain without mental pain (*i.e.* no bummers).

† See Appendix 3 for a further brief discussion of why “suffering” is a poor choice for translating “dukkha.”

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1. MN 22.38 and SN 22.86. See Tricycle Magazine, Winter 2013, “I Teach Only Suffering And The End Of Suffering” by Bhikkhu Bodhi for a detailed discussion of this famous phrase.

The Noble Quest

> "*[T]his generation delights in attachment, takes delight in attachment, rejoices in attachment. It is hard for such a generation to see this important thing, namely, this-that conditionality, dependent origination. And it is hard to see these important things, namely, the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna.*" MN 26.19

Thus have I heard: Two and a half thousand years ago in northern India there lived a young man of the Gotama clan. We don't really know his first name. He's usually referred to as Siddhartha Gotama, but that's clearly a much later tradition.[*] He was apparently the son of the elected leader of the Sakyans – in other words he came from a well-to-do family. At the age of twenty-nine, he left his homeland at the foot of the Himalayas and headed south to the Ganges river valley to seek his spiritual fortune.

The Ganges river valley at that time was crawling with spiritual seekers. The economy in India, which was agriculture-based, had reached a level of sophistication such that it could support people who weren't directly engaged in producing food. This had resulted in a large number of full-time spiritual seekers who gained their livelihood by going on alms rounds. This also led to the rise of standing armies. You win some, you lose some.

Master Gotama headed east and south to the land of the Kalamas. There he studied with a teacher named Alara Kalama. He learned Alara's doctrine and his meditation practice which culminated in what we know as the seventh jhāna,[†] the Realm of No-thingness. In fact, Master Gotama was so skilled at the practices and understood the doctrine of Alara Kalama so well that eventually Alara said to him, "Come, we will lead this order together."

But Master Gotama had left home because he was seeking an end to dukkha. However, all he'd learned was the seventh jhāna – dukkha was still there upon returning to normal consciousness from the Realm of No-thingness. So he left.

He continued on south to the kingdom of Magadha where he sought out another teacher, Uddaka Rāmaputta – Uddaka the son of Rāma. He learned Rāma's doctrine and his practice, which culminated in what we know as the eighth jhāna, the Realm of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception. At that point, Uddaka offered him sole leadership of that group, but once again, Master Gotama had not learned what to do about dukkha, so again he left.

He spent the next several years practicing austerities. He practiced things like holding his breath for as long as he could. What he discovered was that if you hold your breath for a long time over and over again, it generates terrible headaches. He practiced eating one grain of rice a day. From that he discovered that if you eat one grain of rice a day, you get really skinny and weak. In fact, eventually Master Gotama became so weak that he had a tendency to fall over. He realized some six years after he'd left his home that he was in such an emaciated state that he was in no condition to do any sort of spiritual practice. All of his austere striving had not brought him any closer to understanding what to do about dukkha.

He began thinking about what he could do instead of these austerities. He remembered an incident from his childhood when he was sitting under a rose-apple tree and his father was working – plowing, it is usually assumed. While young Master Gotama sat there, he fell into the first jhāna.[±] Reflecting back some quarter century later on that experience of the first jhāna, he thought "why am I afraid of that pleasure? It has nothing to do with sensuality. Could these jhānas be the way to Awakening?" Reflecting even further, he decided these jhānas are the way to Awakening. But being so weak, he realized that in order to resume jhāna practice, he was going to

have to regain his strength, so he began eating solid food.

Now at that time, there were five other ascetics practicing with Master Gotama, and when they saw he was eating solid food they thought he had resorted to a life of luxury and they left in disgust. But Master Gotama had not resorted to a life of luxury, he hadn't given up the spiritual path. He was just seeking something other than the dead ends he had so far explored. The suttas don't say how long it took him to regain his strength; it probably would have taken some months. During that time, he found a good place under a fig tree near the Nerañjarā River to live and practice.

Some of the suttas tell us that one evening, as the sun was setting, he sat down to meditate and entered the jhānas. one, two, three, four.[1] And then – well, the suttas give various accounts of what happened that night. Maybe all of what the various accounts say, happened; maybe only some of them happened. But for sure, when the sun rose the next morning, Master Gotama was a changed person. He was awake. He was the Buddha. It is said that he spent the next seven weeks hanging out in the vicinity of what we now call the Bodhi Tree. He apparently spent the first week just enjoying the bliss of awakening. But eventually he began contemplating whether he could teach what he had discovered to anyone else. At first his mind was disinclined to teach. What he had learned was quite subtle. It went against the stream. It went against the culture of people who were pursuing pleasure and enjoying their acquisitions.

In MN 26.19, we find the Buddha recounting his musing at that time:

> I considered: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, takes delight in attachment, rejoices in attachment. It is hard for such a generation to see this

> important thing, namely, this-that conditionality, dependent origination. And it is hard to see these important things, namely, the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna.’¤

The two sentences about “important things” are very significant if we really want to understand what the Buddha was teaching. This sutta, MN 26, is regarded by many scholars as being likely the most authentic story of the Buddha's awakening that can be found in the Pāli Canon.‡ The first “important thing” mentioned in verse 19 is “*idappaccayatāpaṭiccasamuppādo*” which is a compound consisting of “*idappaccayatā*” and “*paṭiccasamuppāda*”. The first word is defined in the *Pali English Dictionary* (PED)[2] as “having its foundation in this, i. e. causally connected, by way of cause.” More colloquially we can say “this arises because of that.” Or to shorten it further “this-that conditionality.”

“Paṭiccasamuppāda” is the word we translate as “dependent origination” or “dependent arising.” Sometimes you find it translated as “dependent co-origination” or “dependent co-arising” with the internal “*sam*” becoming the “co-.” But some scholars (like Rhys Davids in the PED) imply that the “*sam*” simply converts “*uppāda*” (coming into existence, appearance, birth)[3] into “*samuppāda*” (origin, arising, genesis, coming to be, production)[4] and so the “co-” is not actually in the Pāli. As we'll see as we get deeper into the exploration of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, it is really just splitting hairs and not actually of any real importance whether the “co-” is there or not in English. My main reason for not using the “co-” is that I hear people talking about “co-dependent origination” or “co-dependent arising” which is definitely not something the Buddha ever spoke about. I will use “dependent origination” to refer to the doctrine/teaching and “dependent arising” to refer to the phenomenon/experience itself.

This “important thing” (this-that conditionality, dependent origination) is

the heart of the Buddha's teaching. At MN 28.28, Sāriputta quotes the Buddha as having said, “One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.” Dependent origination is the richest vein to mine in the whole of the teachings. As the Buddha said to Ānanda in the opening of DN 15, it's because of not understanding dependent origination that people have gotten themselves into this tangled ball of woe. This book is an exploration of just what the Buddha meant and was trying to teach using this important concept.

This “important thing” (this-that conditionality, dependent origination) also appears to be the Buddha's best attempt to describe what happened the night of awakening. As we will see in a few chapters, what makes the most sense is found in the suttas Samyutta 12.65 and Udāna 1.1-1.3. It indicates that the discovery of this-that conditionality, dependent origination is what the Buddha discovered that night of his awakening.

There is a second sentence at MN 26.19 on “important things” that are difficult to understand: “namely, the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna.” Our exploration of dependent origination will also be an exploration of these difficult yet important things.

Obviously the Buddha did decide to teach – he thought maybe those who had little dust in their eyes would understand what he had come to understand. And when those five ascetic friends – his first disciples – understood what he was teaching, he knew there were indeed people with little dust in their eyes.

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* Siddhattha (Pāli), Siddhartha (Sanskrit) “he who has gained the goal”

† The jhānas are eight altered states of consciousness, brought on via concentration, and each yielding a deeper state of concentration than the previous. For more, see my book **Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhanas**.

± The first jhāna is described as “filled with rapture and happiness.”

¤ For multiple translations of the important part of MN 26, see http://leighb.com/mn26_19.htm.

‡ E.g. Pande, pg 123ff, regards this sutta as an early composition. Unfortunately MN 26 does not really provide any information as to exactly what the Buddha's practice was that night of awakening.

1. MN 26.14-17 and MN 36.21-37

2. See PED under “Ida & Idaŋ” as well as the entry for “Paccayatā”.

3. PED under “Uppāda”

4. PED under “Samuppāda”

Necessary Conditions

Dukkha arises dependent on craving. SN 56.11

To start getting a handle on dependent origination, it's necessary to understand that dependent origination is not about causes, but about necessary conditions.[*] Understanding the idea of “necessary condition” is extremely important for understanding dependent origination. A necessary condition for the light in your room to be on is that the light switch be on. However, the light switch is not a sufficient condition – you also need the electrical power plant to be producing electricity, and you need all the wires from the power plant to the light in your room to be intact, as well as having a working lightbulb. The light switch being on, the electric plant producing electricity, and the wires being intact are all necessary conditions for the lightbulb to function. Furthermore, none of these are sufficient conditions; nor are any of them the actual cause of the light shining – the light actually shines because of excited electrons inside the lightbulb emitting photons.

The power of discovering necessary conditions comes from the fact that you don't need to understand the cause of something in order to turn it off or to prevent it from arising. All you need is a necessary condition you can manipulate. If something is happening and you want it to stop, find a necessary condition for that something and turn off that necessary condition – the something ceases. If you want to turn off the light in your room, you don't have to blow up the power plant, you don't have to cut the wires to your house, you don't even need to know what causes the light to shine. You can turn off the light just by turning off the light switch – it's an easily manipulable necessary condition for the light. If you want to prevent the light from coming back on, just prevent the light switch from being turned on.

Dependent origination is a teaching about necessary conditions. Remember the Buddha is only teaching dukkha and the end of dukkha. The method he uses to bring dukkha to an end is to identify necessary conditions for the arising of dukkha and then find some necessary condition(s) he can manipulate to turn off the dukkha. This is what the teaching of the Four Noble† Truths is all about:

1. Dukkha is the problem.
2. Dukkha arises dependent on the necessary condition of craving.
3. With the ceasing of the necessary condition of craving, dukkha ceases.
4. There is a path of practice that can be learned in order to cease craving and thereby cease generating dukkha.

The Four Noble Truths are a summary of dependent origination in that they highlight some of the most important dependencies, particularly the one between Craving and Dukkha. My teacher Ayya Khema referred to the Four Noble Truths as “Dependent origination in telegram style.” Today I guess we would say “... in Twitter style.”[1]

The major difficulty with this is that turning off craving is a lot harder than turning off a light switch. This is why, although an understanding of the Four Noble Truths is a great help on the path to freedom, it is not sufficient. A deeper teaching is needed to further help one fully accomplish turning off craving, and that teaching is this teaching of dependent origination. But it “is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.” An intellectual understanding of dependent origination is a good start, but is not sufficient; it must not only be understood, but it also must be experienced.

But in order to experience this dependent origination deeply enough for it

to be transformative, it does need to be understood first. So what do the twelve links of dependent origination really mean? What's the bigger picture here? How should we interpret this? This is what we will look at in the next several chapters.

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* At least when dependent origination is taught well, it is said that each link arises dependent on the previous. Unfortunately it is often said that each link is caused by the previous link. However, this is an important distinction – the Buddha was teaching dependencies, not causes.

This is not to say that an exploration of causes is unwarranted. It's just that the Buddha was not teaching causes when he taught dependent origination. There are other arenas where understanding causes is very important – much of modern science is about exploring causes. And of course, the Buddha did teach causes in other circumstances.

† Although the word “Noble” is a correct literal translation, it doesn't really capture all of what is meant. “Ennobling” would be far more elucidating, since practicing in accord with this understanding will ennoble you. But I will continue to use the more familiar “Noble.”

1. Also see AN 3.61 which makes the same correlation between the 4 Noble Truths and Dependent Origination.

The Key

> *From what is endearing there have arisen quarrels, disputes....*
> Snp 4.11

Frequently when dependent origination is taught, it is discussed in terms of The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. Each link is said to arise dependent upon the previous link:

> Dependent upon **Ignorance**, Saṅkhāra arise,
> dependent upon **Saṅkhāra**, Consciousness arises,
> dependent upon **Consciousness**, Name-and-Form arise,
> dependent upon **Name-and-Form**, 6 Senses arise,
> dependent upon **6 Senses**, Contact arises,
> dependent upon **Contact**, Vedanā arises,
> dependent upon **Vedanā**, Craving arises,
> dependent upon **Craving**, Clinging arises,
> dependent upon **Clinging**, Becoming arises,
> dependent upon **Becoming**, Birth arises,
> dependent upon **Birth**, **Aging-and-Death** arise.

But what this twelve-link model is attempting to teach is certainly not obvious and is difficult to grasp. Caroline Rhys Davids, one of the early Pāli scholars, refers to it as a "mysterious old rune."[1] If you start trying to make sense of the twelve links, it's a difficult proposition. The next to the last thing that happens is you get born? That seems kind of weird. Everyone else points out that you get born first. Here you're getting born just before you die? What's that about? That's not the only strange thing here. Once you begin to get a good understanding of what each link is actually referring to, even more strange things can start cropping up.

Of course, the two Pāli words *Saṅkhāra* and *Vedanā* need to be understood

before anyone can begin to understand the twelve links. Saṅkhāra is literally “making together” and refers, in its most general sense, to anything that is constructed, fabricated, concocted. So all the things of the material world are saṅkhāras, but so are your thoughts, emotions, ideas, intentions and memories. Saṅkhāra gets translated using a large variety of English words in different contexts. But the Buddha was using only a single word in all those contexts. Hence Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s “fabrication” and Santikaro’s “concoction” are the most suitable translations.

Vedanā are your initial mental response to sensory inputs – and there are only three possibilities: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. They are instinctual, automatic responses built into the old brain by evolution for survival purposes. They arise in your consciousness without any conscious intention or direction on your part. There is not really a good English word for translating “vedanā” (although “valence” comes quite close), so I will always leave it untranslated. It definitely never means “emotions” even though it is often translated as “feelings”.

Rather than jumping right in with the twelve links, which is the most complex recension and most likely the latest development in the doctrine of dependent origination, I'm going to start at the beginning. But wait, where is the beginning? The Buddha’s discourses were preserved as an oral tradition for approximately three and half centuries after his death. Eventually they were written down in Sri Lanka in the first-century BCE. It’s possible for current scholars to look at the Pāli that’s used and be able to tell what is early Pāli and what is later Pāli. You have no trouble telling the difference between eighteenth-century English and twenty-first-century English, right? This is what the scholars are doing, as well as looking at the complexity of the doctrines presented, and possible timelines for any biographical information. In doing so, they pretty much agree that a collection known as Book 4 of the Sutta Nipāta[2] contains some of the earliest material. The Sutta Nipāta itself is a collection of 71 suttas in the

Khuddaka Nikāya – the volume of Miscellaneous Discourses.

The 11th discourse in Book 4 of the Sutta Nipāta is entitled *Kalaha-vivāda Sutta* which we can translate as “The Discourse on Quarrels & Disputes.”[3] It appears to be the earliest teaching on dependent origination that we have preserved in the Pāli Canon. The sutta is a series of questions and answers. The initial question is:

> From where do **quarrels and disputes** arise?

The Answer:

> From what is **endearing** there have arisen quarrels, disputes....

In other words, quarrels and disputes arise dependent upon what is felt to be endearing. People don't argue seriously about what is trivial and of little concern to them – it's those things that we are firmly engaged with that are at the basis of quarrels and disputes. But this only leads to another question:

> Where is the origin of finding things **endearing**?

The Answer:

> Things which are endearing in the world have **desire** as their origin....

The things that we find endearing, that we are firmly engaged with, are those things which are desirable. But why do we find some things desirable and other things not so desirable?

> What is the source of **desire** in the world?

The Answer:

> Desire arises in dependence upon what is called “**pleasant**” (and) “**unpleasant**”....

The things that we find desirable are the things that produce pleasant

feelings; and those things we find undesirable are ones that produce unpleasant feelings. The pleasant and unpleasant can be physical experiences, but most often they are mental experiences. But where do these experiences of pleasant and unpleasant come from?

> Where do the **pleasant** and the **unpleasant** have their origin?

The Answer:

> The pleasant and the unpleasant have their source in **sense-contact**....

We only judge something as pleasant or unpleasant if we experience it through our senses. Remember, for the Buddha, the mind is taught as the sixth sense, so thinking, remembering, feeling may all be mental, but they are also counted as sense-contact.

> Where does **sense-contact** have its origin in the world?

The Answer:

> Sense-contacts are dependent upon **name-and-form**....

“Name-and-Form” is the literal translation of *Nāmarūpa*. It's often translated in the context of dependent origination as “Mind-and-Body” or “Mentality-Materiality”. But perhaps a better translation which can bring out more of what the Buddha was actually teaching would be “Concept and Manifestation.”[4] “Concept” would be your idea of what you are experiencing; “Manifestation” would correspond to your actual sensory input. In other suttas,[5] the Buddha explains sense-contact as the coming together of three things: a sense object, a sense organ, and sense consciousness. The object and organ would be part of form/materiality (at least for the five external senses) and sense consciousness would be the most basic mental processing of the sensory input, the basic knowing.

There's more to this Quarrels & Disputes sutta, but what we have discussed

so far gives us a new chart of dependent origination that immediately makes a lot more sense, and is easier to understand, than the twelve-link chart at the top of this chapter:

> **Quarrels & Disputes** arise dependent upon
> **Endearing** which arises dependent upon
> **Desirable** which arises dependent upon
> **Pleasant & Unpleasant** which arise dependent upon
> **Sense-contact** which arises dependent upon
> **Name-and-Form**.

What we now have is the following: Dependent upon Name-and-Form (especially if we think of them as Mind-and-Body) Sense-contacts occur. These Sense-contacts are sometimes Pleasant and sometimes Unpleasant. We have a strong tendency to Desire the Pleasant and Desire the absence of the Unpleasant. If we obtain our Desire, we find that Endearing. Then we get engaged in Quarrels & Disputes if what we find Endearing is threatened.

This is very reminiscent of the Second Noble Truth – Dukkha arises dependent upon Craving, though here we find a synonym for Craving: Desire. We now have a bigger picture of the larger mechanism of the Craving/Desire → Dukkha linkage. This is certainly much easier to get our heads around than the “mysterious old rune” of the twelve link version of dependent origination.

But you might be thinking “Well, this doesn't really look all that much like the twelve link dependent origination list at the start of this chapter.” Indeed – Sense-contact and Name-and-Form are in both lists, but that's all that obviously matches. So let's rewrite the list from the beginning of the chapter, but in the reverse order:

Aging-and-Death arise dependent upon
Birth arises dependent upon
Becoming arises dependent upon
Clinging arises dependent upon
Craving arises dependent upon
Vedanā arises dependent upon
Sense-contact arises dependent upon
6 Senses arise dependent upon
Name-and-Form arise dependent upon
Consciousness arises dependent upon
Saṅkhāra arise dependent upon
Ignorance.

The first item in the list, Aging-and-Death, is often actually given as "birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair."[6] This is a list of Dukkha – just like Quarrels & Disputes are Dukkha. Thus we can actually change the first item in both of these lists to be Dukkha in order for both to be more encompassing. At least we can if we can show that the dependencies still apply. For the twelve link list, obviously one needs to be born if one is going to experience dukkha. For the Snp 4.11 list we have the Second Noble Truth: Dukkha arises dependent on craving. But wait, the Snp 4.11 list doesn't contain Craving. But it does contain Desire – and craving and desire are sometimes used interchangeably in the suttas.[7] While we are noticing similarities, we can also notice that we Cling to that which we find Endearing. Plus Vedanā is almost identical to Pleasant & Unpleasant – we desire and crave the pleasant, and we desire and crave for the absence of the unpleasant.

We can create the following table if we line up these correspondences (a-d-u = arises dependent upon):

Dukkha a-d-u	Dukkha a-d-u
Birth a-d-u	
Becoming a-d-u	
Clinging a-d-u	Endearing a-d-u
Craving a-d-u	Desirable a-d-u
Vedanā a-d-u	Pleasant & Unpleasant a-d-u
Sense-contact a-d-u	Sense-contact a-d-u
6 Senses a-d-u	
Name-and-Form a-d-u	Name-and-Form
Consciousness a-d-u	
Saṅkhāra a-d-u	
Ignorance	

So there is a subset of the twelve link list that closely matches the Snp 4.11 list. But how come many of the the words are different? And how did all those other six links get there? To answer these two questions, we should look at a paper by Joanna Jurewicz entitled *Playing with Fire: The pratītyasamutpāda from the perspective of Vedic thought*.[8] Although I disagree with many of her assumptions about what the Buddha meant or was trying to do, the paper gives an excellent overview of the Vedic understanding of creation. This understanding as presented by Jurewicz exactly matches the twelve link model – since her thesis is to make this match happen. But it's quite possible that the Buddha, or later disciples, took the words from Snp 4.11 and made adjustments to those words so they matched the subset of words from the Vedic understanding of creation – only the words, not the Vedic teaching. Then over time the other words from the Vedic understanding of creation crept in. Of course, this is just speculation – all we really know is that dependent origination evolved from the righthand list above into the elaborated lefthand list above. We know for sure that the lists representing dependent origination are many and varied in the suttas. See Appendix 1 for a chart of some of the various recensions of the lists of dependent origination found in the suttas.

There is more to this sutta than the things I have presented here. If you want to explore this sutta further, I've collected multiple translations plus the Pāli and placed them in a table, side by side, so you can dive in more deeply: http://leighb.com/snp4_11.htm.

If you do study this sutta in more detail, one thing to notice is that the questions are just too good. For example, the full first question is “Where do quarrels and disputes originate and the sorrow, the grief, the selfishness, the pride, arrogance and slander that go with them? Where do these originate, come tell me?” The origins of all of these bits of dukkha have a single, clear, compact answer. This is not likely a record of an actual conversation. When a question is asked, the answer is a concise, contained teaching that answers all the different aspects of the question. Whoever is asking the questions, seems to always ask them in such a way so there is simple, compact answer. I’m guessing the Buddha composed this sutta as a result of the intuitive understanding that he attained the night of his awakening, as an attempt to describe what’s going on and where he got it from.

As was said above, there is more to Snp 4.11 after Name-and-Form. We will address this near the end of the book, after we have more background in the depths of what the Buddha was really teaching.

The key take-aways from this chapter are that dependent origination isn’t about cause. Dependent origination is about necessary conditions. And this sequence:

> **Dukkha** arises dependent upon
> **Endearing** which arises dependent upon
> **Desirable** which arises dependent upon
> **Pleasant & Unpleasant** which arise dependent upon

> **Sense-contact** which arises dependent upon
> **Name-and-Form**.

or equivalently:

> **Dukkha** arises dependent upon
> **Clinging** arises dependent upon
> **Craving** arises dependent upon
> **Vedanā** arise dependent upon
> **Sense-contact** arises dependent upon
> **Name-and-Form** arise dependent upon

provides a roadmap of how to escape Dukkha: Name-and-Form is a given and because of that we are going to have Sense-contacts. These Sense-contacts will inevitably generate Vedanā, since Sense-contacts are a sufficient condition for Vedanā. Then, if we are not careful, we will fall into Craving and Clinging (or equivalently Desire and Endearment), and that's a setup for Dukkha. It's the care needed upon the arising of Vedanā that the Buddha teaches as the second Establishment of Mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas.[9]

This breaking the chain of dependent origination between Vedanā and Craving is also a key point. The links prior to and including Vedanā are not under our control – dependent on Name-and-Form, Sense-contacts arise, and these inevitably generate Vedanā. But if we can get our mindfulness in there with the Vedanā experience, we can stop right there before we get lost in any Craving or Clinging. The strategy for each Sense-contact is to enjoy the pleasant, deal with the unpleasant as necessary, and don't get caught in Craving or Clinging.

This is why the links of dependent origination are so important – they provide the basic roadmap for overcoming Dukkha. But these links, whether there are 2 or 6 or 12 or even more, are part of multiple teachings

of dependent origination found in Buddhism. We will look at some of the more elaborate teachings and interpretations in the next few chapters.

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1. Pande, pg 406 quoting from Buddhist Psychological Ethics XXIV, by C.A.F. Rhys Davids

2. The “Atthakavagga” or “Book of Eights”. For an excellent translation and commentary, see **The Buddha before Buddhism** by Gil Fronsdal, Jaico Publishing House, 2017, ISBN 9789386867292.

3. For multiple complete translations, see http://leighb.com/snp4_11.htm.

4. See Bucknell, 1999, pp 322-326.

5. E.g. MN 18 – The Honeyball Sutta
https://suttacentral.net/mn18/en/sujato

6. E.g. SN 12.1 and many other places in Saṃyutta 12

7. E.g. MN 109

8. *Playing with Fire: The pratītyasamutpāda from the perspective of Vedic thought*, by Joanna Jurewicz, Journal of the Pali Text Society 26 (2000) pp. 77 – 103, Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies, Vol. I, P. Williams, 2005. This work can often be found on the internet in PDF form via searching.

9. DN 22.11 and MN 10.32

PART 2 – The Links

The next six chapters are on the links of dependent origination. Often people think dependent origination is synonymous with these links. These links are indeed very important, but as we'll see in PART 3, there's more to dependent origination than just the links. Nevertheless, it is important to have an understanding of these links, since this is the format in which dependent origination is most frequently encountered. This section will survey the various interpretations of the links and their implications.

It is essential that you keep in mind that these links are not about causes; rather they are about necessary conditions. If you start trying to figure out how some link causes the next one, you will miss the actual teaching because that is not what is being taught. Dependent origination is about dependencies – it's right there in the name; it is not about causes. Keep the basic meaning of *idappaccayatā* in mind: this arises dependent on that; if that doesn't happen, this doesn't arise.

Why Do We Die?

I am of the nature to die; I cannot avoid death. AN 5.57

Why do we die? I don't mean heart disease, or cancer, or stepping in front of a bus. I mean – How come you gotta die? If you were making it up, would you make it up that you'd have to die? I mean think about it. You get born. That's pretty traumatic. Then you gotta do the diaper thing. That's not any fun. Finally, you do start to have fun – and they ship you off to school. You do 12, 16, 24 years. You get outta school and they put you to work. You work for forty years and finally, finally you can have some fun. And you die.

Are we not doing something we should be doing? What if we hung a lot of crystals in the windows? And then.... No, the New Agers already did that and they're still dying. Maybe we're doing something we shouldn't be doing. Do you realize that over 90 percent of the people that ever ate food are now dead? So maybe if we.... No, that's not gonna work either.

One thing's for sure. If you get born, you die. If you don't get born, you don't die. It would appear that birth is a necessary condition for death. Of course that only raises the question: Why do we get born? I don't mean the gleam in your father's eye. I mean why bother being born, if you are just going to wind up dead?

Being born is a popular thing to do. Everybody I know did it. In the spring it's really popular – birds do it, bees do it, birth is happening all over the place. There seems to be this urge in nature to become, to get born. And then eventually everything born winds up dead.

This urge to become, where does it come from? From an evolutionary

perspective, becoming is a successful response of individual organisms in preserving their genes. If that preserving response doesn't happen, that genetic line comes to an end, and a species will die out. So what does “preserving” really mean? It's making something that exists continue to exist. If we take preserving out of the context of a specific species's preserving response, we can generalize it. If we examine “preserving” from a conscious control perspective, we find that preserving means clinging to whatever has been obtained. Thus, becoming is dependent on clinging. And becoming leads to birth, which leads to death – and even other sorts of dukkha before death.

So clinging, what about this clinging? What do you cling to? Think about the things you cling to in your life. You'll notice that the things you cling to are the things you really want. Once you get the things you really want, you want to hang onto them; that’s where the clinging comes from. If you don’t really want it, you’re not going to cling to it. If someone gives you a fruitcake for Christmas and you don't like fruitcake, are you going to cling to it? You don’t really want it; you certainly weren't desiring fruitcake. Then along comes someone else and they say, “Oh wow, I love fruitcake!” “You want the fruitcake? Here, have the fruitcake!” You’re not clinging, you’ll give it away really easily. But if it’s something you really want, then you’re going to cling to it. This really wanting, this craving leads to clinging, and clinging leads to becoming and birth and death.

Where does craving come from? What do you crave? Ice cream? Why do you crave the ice cream? Do you crave chocolate ice cream because it’s got a brown color? No, you’re not craving it because of that. Do you crave it because you pay money for it? No, it's the other way around – you’re paying money for it because you crave it. You crave it because it produces a pleasant experience, right?

This pleasant experience goes by the name of *vedanā* in Pāli. As I said

earlier, “vedanā” could be translated by “valence” but that's not really a well known English word. Vedanā is your initial, automatic categorization of a sensory input as either “pleasant,” “unpleasant,” or “neither pleasant nor unpleasant.” Since we don't really have a good English word corresponding to “vedanā,” I'm going to continue to use the Pāli word and leave it untranslated.
When a pleasant vedanā is produced by the taste of the ice cream, it’s like, oh good, I’ll have another bite, and another bite, oh, I think I’ll have seconds. The craving for ice cream arises due to pleasant vedanā.

Sometimes, however, we crave for the absence of something if the vedanā it’s producing is unpleasant. You know that person sitting next to you in the meditation hall, who is breathing all loud and funny. That’s producing an unpleasant vedanā – no, not the sound vedanā – it’s your mind responding unpleasantly to that sound, and you’re craving for him to shut up. When he finally does shut up, you’re like “please stay like that.” You’re clinging to the quiet. The vedanā, if it’s pleasant, leads to craving-for and to keeping; if it's not good, it leads to craving to not have and to keep away. That keeping or keeping away is clinging – which leads to becoming, birth and death.

So the vedanā that leads to this craving, where does that vedanā come from? For example, when you are in the grocery store, there’s no vedanā being experienced that is causing the craving for the ice cream. Well, maybe there’s the memory of the pleasant tasting ice cream, and although that produces a pleasant mental vedanā, that's not the actual vedanā that generates the craving. If the vedanā of the memory was good enough, you wouldn't have to actually buy the ice cream. That craving inducing vedanā is not happening when the ice cream is in your basket; it’s not happening when it’s sitting on the table; it’s not happening when it’s in the bowl; it’s not even happening when it’s on the spoon. The real vedanā happens when the ice cream hits the tongue – contact. Contact is then followed by vedanā. And that vedanā, if you’re not careful, will lead to craving, clinging,

becoming, birth, old age, sickness, death, pain, sorrow, grief, lamentation, and all the rest of the dukkha.

These contacts that trigger vedanā, where do contacts come from? Well, you left your senses engaged with the environment. You've got five external senses, and you've got the mind which is the sixth-sense. The five are receiving input from the environment and you're going to experience sense-contacts whether you want them or not. You're sitting in meditation and then somebody outside starts making noise. You didn't want that sense-contact, and you can't turn it off. You can close your eyes, so you can sort of turn off that sense-contact, but you can't really close your ears. Or you're walking along and suddenly there's a horrible smell, you can pinch your nose, but that smell already triggered unpleasant vedanā – that's how you know the smell is unpleasant. You put something in your mouth, you expect it to taste one way, but it tastes another way and you can't go, "Oh, I think I'll have it taste differently." Your senses are engaged and functioning, and they are going to be receiving these sense-contacts. And your mind – well, you've probably noticed it's rather difficult to turn it off, it just seems to want to be thinking all the time. Your mind is going to be experiencing sixth-sense contacts continuously, and these sixth-sense contacts – thoughts, emotions, memories – they too generate vedanā. So these senses are engaged with the environment and they're getting contacts, the contacts are producing vedanā; the vedanā, if you are not careful, lead to craving, clinging, becoming, birth, death.

What about these senses? They're just part of being alive. They're part of having a mind and a body.[*] A mind and body without any senses would be senseless because you'd be dead pretty quickly. Being senseless just doesn't work, you need the senses so that you can navigate your environment and obtain the things that are necessary to sustain your mind and body. This is how you determine it's too hot, it's too cold; you're hungry, you're thirsty; don't walk into that tree. And those senses are

getting sense-contacts which produce vedanā, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, death.

What about this mind-and-body? Well, they're dependent on you being conscious. If you have a mind-and-body and you're not conscious and it stays that way, it's a pretty serious condition – you're in a coma and you'll wind up dead. You have to come back to consciousness fairly regularly. It's okay for a few hours every night, in fact it seems to be a requirement, but consciousness has to be happening on a very regular basis. Mind-and-body are dependent on consciousness and the senses are dependent upon there being a mind-and-body for them to be embedded in. And contact, of course, is dependent upon there being senses that have those contacts. Vedanā arise when contacts take place. And if you're not careful, you'll get caught up in craving, clinging, becoming, birth, death.

What about consciousness? Consciousness[†] appears to arise as a result of the interaction of mind and body. If there's a body, but no mind, there's no consciousness. We call that being dead, right? If you have a mind but no body – well, we don't have a lot of experience with that; we really don't encounter disembodied minds very often, if at all. So really, when you get right down to it, mind and body have to interact, which produces consciousness, which is necessary for mind and body to continue to interact successfully. These are interdependent. The mind-and-body and the consciousness are leaning on each other like two sheaves of wheat, you pull away either one of them and the other falls over as well. Having a conscious mind and body means that you've got senses that are receiving contacts and thus producing vedanā, and if you're not careful there's going to be craving, clinging, becoming, birth, old age, sickness, death, pain, sorrow, grief, lamentation, and all the rest of the dukkha.

These are the links of dependent origination, paṭiccasamuppāda. What follows in DN 15 after the Buddha says, "Do not say so, Ānanda – by not

penetrating dependent origination is how people fall into all the dukkha they're experiencing" is a teaching on dependent origination much like what is presented above, in the so-called reverse order starting with aging-and-death and looking at what aging-and-death is dependent upon. Aging-and-death are dependent upon birth. Then what is birth dependent upon? Becoming. And then continuing by working "backwards" through the links.

In the Samyutta Nikāya (the Connected Discourses or Thematic Discourses), there are books on 56 different topics including book 12 entitled "The Connected Discourses on Origin." In that book there are 93 suttas on dependent origination. In sutta 65 of book 12, the Buddha says before his awakening he was pondering:

> "Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisatta, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: 'Alas, this world has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this dukkha headed by aging-and-death. When will an escape be discerned from this dukkha headed by aging-and-death?'
>
> "'When what exists does aging-and-death come to be? By what is aging-and-death conditioned?' Then through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: 'When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.'[1]"

Remember the Buddha's original question, the reason he left home, was "what can we do about dukkha?" So he wonders, "why do we die?" – or more accurately, "what does death depend on?" Death depends on birth. And he works backwards in time through the ten items discussed above, discovering necessary conditions for each of them. The links of dependent origination are best studied in this "reverse order" where one can much

more easily see that this teaching is not so much about causation, but rather is about identifying necessary conditions. Each item is linked to a previous necessary condition for its arising.

Furthermore, in Samyutta 12.65, the Buddha says, “I have discovered this path to awakening.” As near as we can tell from the various sutta descriptions of the Buddha's awakening,[2] this discovery of dependent origination was the key to his awakening.

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* “Nāmarūpa” which is literally “name-and-form,” but often in the context of the links of dependent origination is translated as “mind-and-body” or “mentality and materiality.” This lack of consistency of the basic interpretation of “nāmarūpa” is present in the suttas themselves – see for example DN 15 vs Snp 4.11 (which we discussed in the chapter The Key). Some of the reasons for the label “mysterious old rune” are two and half millennia old.

† “Consciousness” is a translation of the Pāli word *viññāṇa*, which literally means “divided knowing.” It maybe best understood as “that which knows.” “Consciousness” in Buddhist philosophy is not the same thing as either what the word would mean to a doctor (i.e. global level of awareness) or to a Western philosopher of mind (where the word means roughly “experiencing,” – peripheral vision, for example, is always conscious, even though one doesn’t have any kind of metacognitive awareness of it). “Viññāṇa” is not a “well defined” term in the suttas – it's used slightly differently in multiple contexts. In fact, MN 112 uses the word in four different ways in a single sutta.

1. SN 12.65

2. SN 12.65, Ud 1.1, Ud 1.2, Ud 1.3

The Wheel

> *And what is the noble method that a stream enterer[*] has clearly seen and thoroughly penetrated with wisdom? Here, the noble disciple attends closely and carefully to dependent origination itself.* SN 12.41

In the previous chapter, we discussed dependent origination as having ten links. Often, however, you find dependent origination discussed as having twelve links, with two more added at the beginning of what was discussed in the previous chapter. These additional links are ignorance and *saṅkhāra*s.

Continuing our exploration of dependent origination in the reverse order, we left off in the previous chapter saying that consciousness arises dependent on mind-and-body and that mind-and-body are dependent on consciousness. In the teachings that have twelve links, we find that consciousness arises dependent on saṅkhāras. Is this a contradiction? We previously said consciousness arises dependent on mind-and-body and here we're saying it arises dependent on saṅkhāras. But actually there's no contradiction – this just means that the arising of consciousness has multiple necessary conditions, one of which is mind-and-body and another is that consciousness needs a saṅkhāra to be conscious of. Many things have multiple necessary conditions – the light in your room has the electric plant producing electricity, the wires being intact, the light switch being on, and a functioning lightbulb all as necessary conditions.

As mentioned earlier, the Pāli word *saṅkhāra* gets translated in a number of ways depending on the context. We find “formations” used in a general sense along with “compounded things.” In the teachings on the five aggregates (*khaṇḍha*s) we find it translated as “intentions” or as “mental activity.” In the context of dependent origination we sometimes find it

translated as “karmic formations.” It is “one of the most difficult terms”[1] to translate in all of Buddhism – and also one of the most important to understand.

Despite all these multiple context-driven translations of saṅkhāra, the Buddha used a single word in all of those contexts. Better translations are “concoctions” or “fabrications.” Both of these words fit in all of the above contexts and also have the sense of “not quite true” which I think is an important aspect of saṅkhāra. It literally means “making together” so it refers to anything that is constructed.[†]

Returning to “consciousness arises dependent on saṅkhāras,” this means that consciousness arises dependent on an object of consciousness – a saṅkhāra. There is no such thing as “objectless consciousness” in the suttas; consciousness always has an object, it arises dependent on an object, usually a saṅkhāra. (The one exception is consciousness of Nibbāna – because Nibbāna is not a saṅkhāra, it's a dhamma, but still an object of consciousness.)

The last link in the reverse order of dependant origination is that saṅkhāras arise dependent on ignorance. Out of ignorance we concoct the things of the world. We are going to need a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of this “most difficult term” *saṅkhāra* to see exactly what is meant by this. I'm going to defer discussing this last necessary-condition link until we have quite a bit more background to work with. It will be addressed in the chapter Nibbāna – as Described In Udāna 8.

———————o———————

The most famous teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination is probably the Tibetan wheel of life. This is a big circle that’s being held by Yama (Lord of Death).

Yama is a rather fearsome creature; you can see his fangs coming over the top of the circle in the twelve o'clock position. Then at ten and two, you see his claws. Down at four and eight he’s got his feet grasping the wheel and

his tail is swishing back and forth at six o'clock.

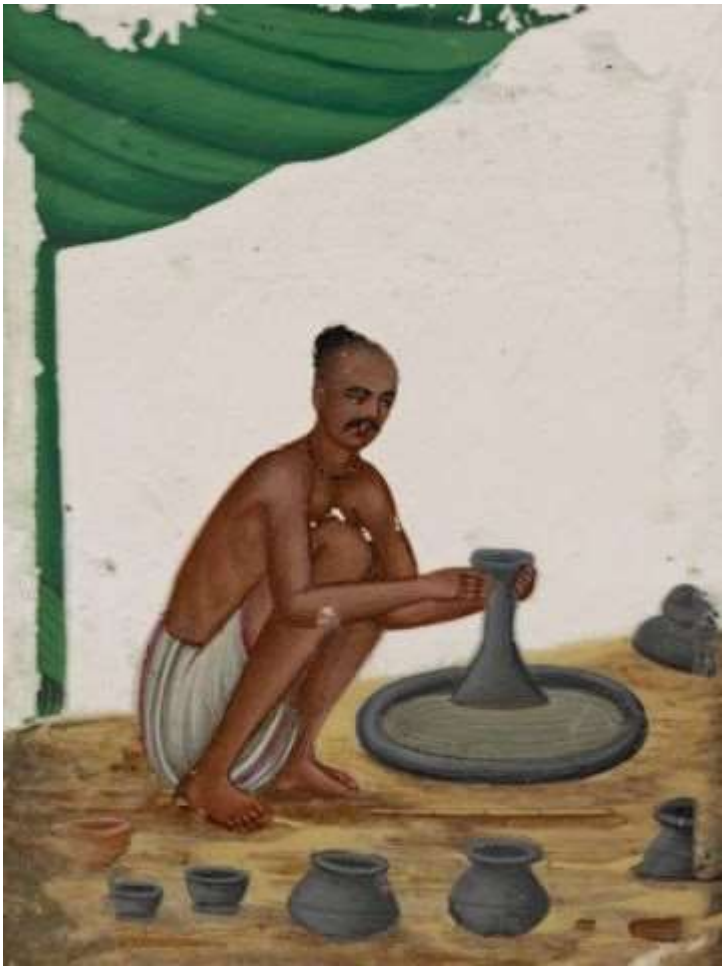
On the circle are a number of concentric rings. In the center, the bullseye position, there are a rooster, a snake and a pig, each biting the tail of the other. The rooster is greed, the snake is hatred, and the pig is delusion. The next concentric ring depicts various beings coming out of states of woe and coming up to nice states and then descending again to states of woe: the wheel of *saṃsāra*.

The next ring is usually the biggest one, the one where the artist has the most fun, and it depicts the six realms of existence. The lowest section is the hell realms. They are depicted in ways that Dante would be proud of – all sorts of gruesome stuff: people boiled in oil, chewed by monsters, walking through forests where all the leaves are swords, the whole nine yards. Above hell is the realm of the hungry ghosts. These are beings that in their previous incarnation were very greedy and now they have been reborn in a realm where they have giant bellies and little tiny necks – and they can never get enough.

Among the lower realms is also the realm of the warring gods, the Asuras. These are beings that are fighting all the time. (It appears that they own a five sided building just south of Washington, DC.) Above that there's the animal realm, the only realm that we know directly besides our human one. The artist has fun painting deer and rabbits and birds and all the other animals. Then there’s the human realm, our realm, and the artist paints people doing various things: farming, weaving, eating, sleeping – all the various ways we occupy ourselves in this realm. Finally, at the top are the various god realms. These are the 26 heavenly realms, and the devas there are all depicted in the usual ways we expect heavenly beings to be living: eating banquets of ambrosia, sitting on clouds playing lutes (rather than harps), enjoying themselves.

But the most important ring is the outermost ring. In that ring the twelve links of dependent origination are depicted. Up at the top, in the one o'clock position, is ignorance, *avijjā*, depicted as an old blind person trying to make their way through the forest, finding it difficult to know where to go, what to do.

Dependent on ignorance are *saṅkhāra*s. These concoctions, or fabrications, are things that are manufactured, created. They are made, but they also have a hint of not quite true – like: “he came home last night really late and he concocted some story about a flat tire.” These saṅkhāras are not quite really the deepest truth of what’s going on because they’re dependent on ignorance. The saṅkhāras are depicted at two o'clock as a potter sitting at a wheel making pots.



Some of the pots are very beautiful, some are misshapen, some are broken. So too are our creations. "*Saṅkhāra*s" in the context of dependent origination is often translated as "karmic formations," and it does include our karmic intentions, some of which are good and some of which are broken and messed up. But *saṅkhāra*s in dependent origination are really more than just "karmic intentions" – this word is referring to all the things of creation and is specifically implying that all these manufactured things are not quite the whole story since they arise out of ignorance.

Dependent upon saṅkhāras is consciousness – *viññāṇa*. Our consciousness is dependent upon there being an object of consciousness and these objects are concoctions, fabrications, created things. These objects can be mental states or stories we are telling ourselves, or they can be physical things – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures – all of which are part of creation. Consciousness is depicted at three o'clock as a monkey swinging through the trees grabbing first one limb and then the next. You might have encountered this monkey mind at some point in the recent past.

At four o'clock there’s mind-and-body – *nāmarūpa*. This is depicted as two people in a boat. One is standing up and poling the boat along, one is lying prone and is just along for the ride.

One of them is mind, one of them is body; which is which? This is actually an important insight to gain, it's the first of the sixteen insight knowledges:[2] the delineation of mind and body. It is essential to understand what is mind and what is body, how they interact, and most importantly which one is in charge. This is a topic to contemplate – get yourself concentrated and then investigate your mind and investigate your body. See how they interact and figure out who’s in charge. Who’s deciding which way the boat goes? The answer is left as an exercise for the reader.

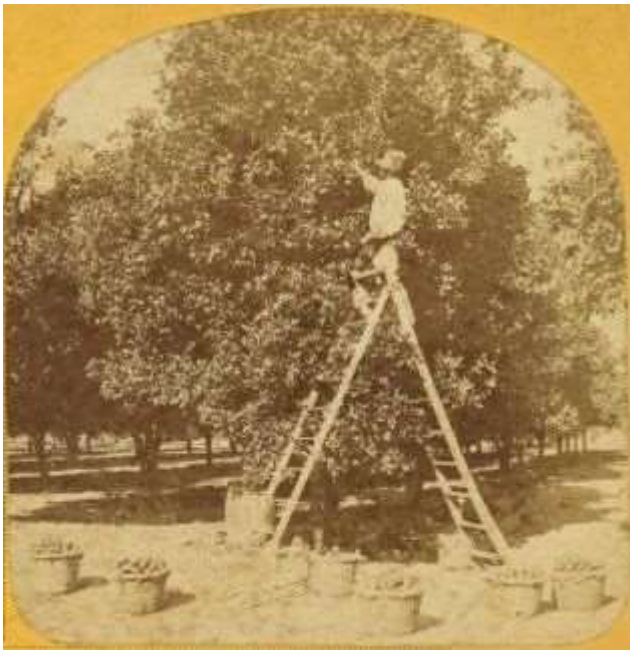
Dependent on mind-and-body are the six senses – *salāyatanā*. This is depicted at five o'clock as a house with five windows and a door: the five external senses and the door representing the mind.

Dependent on the senses, contact arises – *phassa*. Contact is a depicted at six o'clock as a couple embracing.

Dependent upon contact is *vedanā*. Vedanā is depicted at seven o'clock as a man having arrows shot into his eyes. Unpleasant vedanā.

Dependent upon vedanā is craving – *taṇhā*. Craving is shown at eight o'clock as an enormously overweight person sitting at a table that’s laden with lots of food.

Dependent upon craving is clinging – *upādāna*. Clinging is depicted at nine o'clock as someone picking fruit and putting it into baskets that are so full that the new fruit simply rolls off onto the ground.



Dependent upon clinging is becoming – *bhāva* – and that’s depicted as a pregnant woman at ten o'clock.

Dependent upon becoming is birth – *jāti* – and that’s a mother with an infant at eleven o'clock.

And then dependent upon birth is death – *maraṇa* – and that’s depicted as a corpse at twelve o'clock.

Now we've come full circle. What exactly is going on here? Does ignorance arise dependent upon death as the circle continues? What do all the items and links actually mean? Why does birth come as the 11th item – birth usually comes first? And the connections between craving, clinging, and becoming don't seem at all clear. And what's this deal about the things of creation arising due to ignorance – weren't a lot of the things of creation here before anyone shows up to be ignorant? Is there a big picture?

It's certainly not obvious what's going on. After all, Caroline Rhys Davids did call dependent origination a “mysterious old rune.” What we'll do in the

next few chapters is take a look at the more common interpretations of the links of dependent origination.

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* A “stream enterer” is one who has attained the first of the 4 stages of awakening.

† In the teaching of the 5 khaṇḍhas *saṅkhāra* refers to thoughts, emotions, memories & intentions – all the mental activities other than *vedanā*, *saññā* and *viññāṇa*.

1. PED under “Saṅkhārā”

2. For a listing of the sixteen insight knowledges, see http://leighb.com/7sop16ik.htm. For a more detailed look at them see **The Seven Stages of Purification and the Insight Knowledges** by Matara Sri Ñanarama Mahathera.

Three Lives?

> *One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.* MN 28.28

There are actually a number of interpretations of dependent origination, and the one presented in the Visuddhimagga in Chapter 17 is probably the most well known. This is the so-called Three-Lives Model of dependent origination. These twelve links are said to cover three lifetimes. The first lifetime is your previous life, and consists of ignorance and saṅkhāras (which are interpreted as "karmic formations"). So in your previous life out of ignorance you acted in certain ways and these actions (*karma*) have results which give rise to this current life. This life consists of consciousness, mind-and-body, six senses, contacts, vedanā, cravings and clingings. Then your next life consists of becoming, birth and death. This traditional interpretation is standard Theravādan orthodoxy and has its roots in either the Paṭisambhidāmagga or perhaps even earlier in the Abhidhamma.[1]

Basically the Three-Lives Model says that in your previous life, you were ignorant and thereby generated karmic formations – your ignorant actions. This has led to your rebirth in this life with a karmically generated consciousness and mind-and-body. Your mind-and-body have six senses which experience sense-contacts generating vedanā, and because you are not fully awakened, you wind up craving and clinging. The clinging in particular is clinging to being alive, so when you die this time, that clinging will result in you coming again (becoming) to birth and eventually another death.

This interpretation is quite satisfying for those who have an "immortality project." By "immortality project" I'm referring to the widespread tendency

of people to seek some way that, when their body dies, they won't really cease to exist. The most common manifestations of immortality projects involve rebirth in either heaven or hell, or reincarnation in either this realm of our current lives or another realm. It implies the Buddha taught that you won't cease to exist, at least, not until you become fully awakened. Its most profound implication is that if you can quit craving, then there won't be any more clinging – including not clinging to life so strongly that the force of becoming results in your future birth and inevitable death. This is a way to escape *saṃsāra* – the cycle of birth and death – and thereby escape all future dukkha.

But there are some serious problems with the Three-Lives Model.

(1) The Buddha has said at MN 28.28, "One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination." The Dhamma is also said to be *sandiṭṭhika* (visible here and now) and *akālika* (without involving time). How on earth could one see three lifetimes here and now? Either the Dhamma is not equivalent to dependent origination, or two of the factors of the Dhamma which are chanted every day in every monastic setting (*sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*) are wrong – or the Three-Lives Model is wrong.

(2) The Three-Lives Model, in its deeper implications, teaches that this life's consciousness, mind-and-body, senses, contacts, and the vedanā experienced in this life are all the result of the karma from your previous life. Such a teaching should be examined in light of SN 36.21:

> "Some vedanā, Sīvaka, arise here originating from bile disorders ... originating from phlegm disorders … originating from wind disorders … originating from an imbalance [of the three] … produced by change of climate ... produced by careless behavior … caused by assault … produced as the result of kamma: that some

> vedanā arise here produced as the result of [each of the eight causes] one can know for oneself, and that is considered to be true in the world. Now when those ascetics and brahmins hold such a doctrine and view as this, 'Whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, all that is caused by what was done in the past,' they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore I say that this is wrong on the part of those ascetics and brahmins."

In other words, not all vedanā arise from karma – only a subset of vedanā arise from karma; other vedanā arise from the other seven conditions. Also in SN 12.25, we find someone asking if vedanā are created by oneself, by others, by both oneself and others, or do vedanā arise fortuitously. The answer is that "pleasure and pain are dependently arisen. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact." If the Three-Lives Model is correct, then either all vedanā arise from karma (contradicting SN 36.21) or there are vedanā that are not dependently originated (contradicting SN 12.25).[2]

(3) The Three-Lives Model logically doesn't make any sense. Frequently the Buddha says that with the ceasing of ignorance, there is the ceasing of the saṅkhāras. And with the ceasing of saṅkhāras, there is the ceasing of consciousness, and so on up to, with the ceasing of birth, there is the ceasing of aging-and-death and all the other dukkha. So uprooting ignorance leads to the end of dukkha. But the ignorance that you need to uproot is in your previous life. How are you going to uproot the ignorance of your previous life when you can't even remember your previous life, let alone go back and change anything? There seems to be a serious problem here. I find it highly unlikely the Buddha would make such a stupid logical error.

The usual move to avoid the above problem is to say all three lives are

taking place simultaneously:

> This life is the “previous life” for your “next life,” hence ignorance and saṅkhāras are currently present.
> This life is the “next life” for your “previous life,” hence becoming and birth were present and death will be present.

But this makes an even greater mess. Uprooting ignorance in this life would mean that craving and clinging would not occur in your next life and finally dukkha would not arise in the life after your next life because that life would not actually arise. But the Buddha is clearly teaching a method for ending dukkha in this life! The Third Noble Truth is very clear that “the cessation of dukkha is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of craving.”[3] Dukkha ends here and now with the ending of the necessary condition of craving. It does not end only after death and especially not after two more deaths.

(4) The teaching on Transcendental Dependent Origination winds up contradicting many of the Buddha's teachings if multiple lifetimes are involved in interpreting it. We will revisit this particular contraindication for a Three Lives interpretation after a thorough exploration of Transcendental Dependent Origination in a following chapter on Transcendental Dependent Origination.

(5) The Buddha does not ever seem to have intended such a multiple lifetime interpretation. There just are not any suttas that clearly lead to a three lives interpretation.[*] However DN 15, which we have quoted from earlier,[†] does possibly imply a two lives interpretation. But DN 15 is a curious sutta. It comes from the land of the Kurus – which modern scholars have identified being the area around what is currently Delhi in India. Yet that is a very long way from all the other places where the Buddha is said to have delivered his discourses. In fact the distance from Sāvatthī, one of the western most places the Buddha gave other discourses, to Delhi is further

than from Sāvatthī to the eastern most places where the Buddha taught. And there are no places between Sāvatthī and Delhi where the Buddha is said to have taught or even passed through. Other features of DN 15 and the other suttas from the Land of the Kurus seem to imply they are later compositions.‡ DN 15 is curious also in that there are only nine items given for dependent origination – starting with Aging-and-Death and working back to Consciousness but leaving out the Six Senses. It would appear to be an early list of items with a later explanation added to them.

Given all of these problems with the Three-Lives Model and the fact that there really doesn't seem to be any support for that interpretation among the thousands of suttas, the Three-Lives Model does not seem to be what dependent origination is all about. Sorry, there is no support for any immortality projects here.

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* This may be the most controversial statement I make in this whole book. I'm sure there will be many who disagree with me about this. Ven. Payutto (2011), in his Appendix 1, indicates that approximately one third of the teachings on dependent origination in the suttas refer to the three lives interpretation. I have a great deal of respect for Ven. Payutto's skill as a scholar, but I stand by my statement.

† See the Preface, The Noble Quest, and Why Do We Die?

‡ DN 15 and the two Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas (DN22 and MN 10) are composites. See also **A History Of Mindfulness** by Bhikkhu Sujato.

1. Nanavira, 1960, p 15

2. There are more problems with consciousness, mind-and-body, senses, contacts, and vedanā being the result of karma (actions) from a previous life

– Nanavira, 1960, p 16.

3. DN 22, verse 21; MN 141, verse 31; SN 45.8; AN 5.28

Moment to Moment

The Dhamma is visible here-&-now. MN 7

If not three lives, then what are the links of dependent origination all about? The other common interpretation of the links is the Moment-to-Moment interpretation. This interpretation says that all of the links, not just the Contact → Vedanā → Craving → Clinging → Dukkha links, but all of them are happening moment to moment; in other words, occurring with every sense-contact.

This approach is best exemplified in the interpretation put forth by Ajahn Buddhadasa, and it may be the most helpful one. Here's an example of what's meant by moment-to-moment dependent origination: let's say you've never had a mango. You've heard about mangos, and one day you go to the grocery store, and in the produce section there's a sign that says "Mangos." You're like "Oh, I've heard about mangos, they're supposed to be good." There's this funny looking fruit and you think, "I'll buy a mango." So you buy a mango and you take it home. You figure out you've got to peel it; and of course, you make a big mess because that's what happens the first time you attack a mango. Then you cut off a piece, and now you've got a piece of mango in your sticky fingers. You are conscious, you've got a mind and body, you've got working senses. The mango hits the tongue – contact, vedanā, pleasant vedanā, craving; "I'll have another bite" and another bite. "This is good; I'm going to get me some more mangos. In fact my friends Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice, they've never had a mango. I'm going to turn them on to mangos." You have just given birth to the mango bringer. You go see your friends and you turn them on to mangos and they're like "Great, this is wonderful, thank you!" And the next time you go see your friends you bring a mango, and they're like "Great, thank you for the mango." And the next time you bring a mango, they're

like “Oh, another mango.” And the next time you bring a mango, they’re like “What’s with all the mangos?” Oh, dear! death of the mango bringer.

What’s happening is that based on your sensory input and your cravings and clingings, you’re creating a sense of self. It’s not your physical birth that’s happening with every sense-contact; it’s the birth of the self. When you crave, there’s a sense of the craver. When you cling, there’s an even stronger sense of the clinger – me, I own it, mine. At first, at the craving stage, it’s “I want it”. At the clinging stage, it's “I've got it and I’m going to keep it.” And this results in “*bhava*,” which I've been translating as “becoming,” and which could also mean “being and having.” Now you have this thing you're craving. You have become the one who owns it, and you just gave birth to yourself as this owner. But because your sense of self is rather fragile – notice how we're always seeking self validation – it keeps dying on you and you’ve got to think it or emote it up again.

Examining the twelve links of dependent origination from a moment-to-moment perspective is probably the deepest and most important way to look at them. This spinning of the wheel of dependent origination leads to old age, sickness, death, pain, sorrow, grief, lamentation, and all the rest of the dukkha. The Buddha’s teaching is about the end of dukkha, and there are two ways to work on this. One is when there’s a sense-contact, and it produces vedanā – Stop! don’t go any further. Don’t go into the craving. There’s not much you can do before that. You’re conscious, you have a mind and body, your senses are engaged with the environment. You’re inevitably going to get contacts, and the contacts are going to produce the vedanā which are not under your control. The vedanā are happening in the old brain, the so-called reptilian structure, and that's not under your control. It’s only after the vedanā that you have some opportunity to control what happens next.

Thankfully, the craving isn’t inevitable. Some of these links are inevitable.

In other words, if you get born, it's inevitable you're going to die. But if you get a pleasant vedanā, it's not inevitable that you're going to fall into craving. What comes after vedanā is perception – the naming or conceptualizing of that sense-contact – and that's not even mentioned in the twelve links of dependent origination. After perception, mental activity arises – saṅkhāra again, the thinking and emoting about the sense-contact that produced this vedanā. Some of the thinking and emoting is no problem. It's only when it gets into the "I gotta have it, I gotta keep it" that the craving and clinging set in. Or "I gotta get rid of it, I gotta keep it away." That's where it gets to be a problem.

This is why the second establishment of mindfulness is to pay attention to your vedanā.[1] This is so that when you experience a pleasant vedanā, you know it, and you're right there in that gap after the vedanā and before the onset of craving – and you can actually deal with the experience wisely. You can enjoy the pleasant vedanā, and just leave it at enjoying the pleasant vedanā. You can experience the unpleasant vedanā, and act if necessary based on the unpleasant vedanā without falling into craving and clinging. This is the strategy on a sense-contact by sense-contact basis. It's a lot of work because we get a lot of sense-contacts. However you need to be in there every time checking because the craving is liable to come up; and when it comes up, it's a setup for dukkha. We don't really seem to be able to pull this off all the time. Sometimes, yes, good, diminish your dukkha, you experience the sense-contact with its vedanā, enjoy it, let it go. But sometimes, you get lost and fall into craving and clinging.

But a long term strategy is to go back to the very beginning of the list of the twelve links, and uproot the ignorance. Because without the ignorance, there are not the saṅkhāras, and without the saṅkhāras there's no consciousness, mind-and-body, *etc*. That sounds a bit like annihilation, but really what it's saying is that without the ignorance this whole tendency to wind up in craving and clinging just isn't there. The key thing is to uproot

that sense of self that is the craver and the clinger, to gain the unshakable deep understanding, based on experience, that this feeling of self is simply an illusion. You want to penetrate that illusion to such an extent that you don't conceive of a self. Similarly, when you go to the beach and look out and see a ship sail over the horizon, you know it didn't fall off the edge of the world. That sensory input does not lead to conceiving any "the edge of the world" as part of the experience. Can you get to the same place about all of the stuff that normally generates the sense of "I", the sense of me, the most important creature in the universe? This is the uprooting of ignorance, and when that's done, then the whole edifice of self/craver/clinger falls apart. Furthermore, it's taken care of forever.

When contemplating that uprooting ignorance yields no saṅkhāras, no consciousness, *etc*., it is important to remember that the twelve links are not a description of a single thing. They are a collection of necessary conditions – which are important to recall and understand. We in the West want to make the twelve links into a linear explanation of one thing. But remember, dependent origination didn't start out with twelve links – it started with a much simpler six-link version that shows how we get caught up in dukkha. As more links were added, the unitary description of the origination of dukkha became embedded in a non-unitary collection of links that lack the cohesion of the earlier, coherent set of links. But this larger collection does have the advantage of showing that with the ending of ignorance, all the tendencies we had that can lead to dukkha no longer arise because all of them have been cut off at the root.

The insight path, which we are working on, is a path that helps us get in at the stage of the vedanā and experience it without getting caught in the craving; that's the short-term solution. The long-term solution is to get enough insight so that we permanently penetrate the delusion of self and uproot that ignorance.

The teaching of dependent origination is laid out in a linear fashion. Because it was preserved in an oral tradition, it comes out one word after another, so it appears as though the teaching itself is linear. But I would suggest that the teachings of the Buddha are actually holographic. Looking at them only linearly misses some of the depth, and in particular, the teaching of dependent origination is multi-dimensional. If we look at, for example, consciousness, we find it showing up in multiple places. Consciousness is mentioned as the third of the twelve links: ignorance, saṅkhāra, consciousness. But it actually requires consciousness to have a sense-contact – remember sense-contact is the coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and consciousness. So consciousness is there in the sense-contact. Consciousness is there in the craving and the clinging. Consciousness is there at birth, whether it's the birth of the sense of self or the birth of the physical being. Thus consciousness is happening in multiple places even though it's only mentioned once.

The same thing happens with saṅkhāra – created things, compounded things, concoctions. It's mentioned in step two, but your mind and body are also concoctions as well, they are created things, they are saṅkhāras. Your senses are saṅkhāras. Your cravings and clingings are mental activities, saṅkhāras. Saṅkhāra is also occurring multiple times in the operation of the links as well.

The links of dependent origination are presented linearly, but it does help to see dependent origination in a more holographic way. One way I like to think of it is similar to a telescope. If you have three parts to the telescope, you can squish it down and it gets small; or you can extend it out. When you've got the twelve links, you've extended out the telescope; but you can also squish it down. On the inside you have those first two links: out of ignorance we concoct the world – for example consider a wooden table – you look at it, and you know it's a table. Actually, you are ignoring the fact that this used to be trees, and somebody cut down the trees, and somebody

made it into nice pieces of wood. Then somebody assembled it into this table. But eventually this table is going to be worn out. It'll be just firewood. Then it will be burned, and it will become carbon dioxide which some trees will breathe in. So when you concoct a table, you are ignoring it's full history – and the fact that it is changing all the time. It's changing slowly, but you are ignoring that too, as well as its full history. Anytime you concoct something, you're missing some of the bigger picture. That's the inside part of the telescope of dependent origination.

The middle part is the consciousness, mind-and-body, the senses, the sense-contacts, the vedanā, the craving, the clinging – that's what goes on when we're concocting the world out of ignorance, the middle part of the telescope. Then the outside part is the becoming, birth, and death. So there was this urge to become, we got born and eventually we're going to die. But inside of this, between the becoming, the birth, and the death, there is this life full of sense-contacts, cravings and clingings. And inside of that there is concocting the world out of ignorance. When you look at dependent origination telescoped in this way, you have three different perspectives on this one life, not three lifetimes.

So far, we've only scratched the surface of dependent origination. There are many teachings on dependent origination and in the next few chapters we'll look at some more of them. Hopefully this chapter has given you a sense of the basics of the twelve links of dependent origination, from the perspective of moment-to-moment experience.

If you want to dig deeper into this moment-to-moment interpretation, I highly recommend Ajahn Buddhadasa's book **Under the Bodhi Tree: Buddha's Original Vision of Dependent Co-arising**. It is by far the finest book on this topic available today. It's a wonderful and very readable collection of Ajahn Buddhadasa's Dhamma talks on dependent origination. Consider this chapter only as a teaser for Ajahn Buddhadasa's far deeper

and more profound exposition of dependent origination. Read that book and you will have a far better understanding of the moment-to-moment interpretation of dependent origination than this brief overview can possibly give you.

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1. E.g. DN 22.11 and MN 10.32

Transcendental Dependent Origination

Dukkha is the supporting condition for confidence. SN 12.23*

The sutta on Transcendental Dependent Origination is one of the more interesting ways that dependent origination is used to teach more than just the moment to moment activity we experience with our sense-contacts. This is the Upanisa Sutta found at Samyutta 12.23.[1]

This sutta presents the links in the so-called reverse order, which is usually the best way to study the links of dependent origination. However for this sutta, initially I'm going to present the links in the so-called forward order. The sutta can be divided into two parts – the mundane part and the transcendental part.

The mundane part is the usual twelve links starting with Ignorance as a necessary condition for Saṅkhārā ... up through Birth as a necessary condition for Dukkha. This mundane part explains how we get ourselves into the messes of Dukkha that we experience – just like we have been discussing in the previous chapters.

Then the sutta says that Dukkha is a necessary condition for the arising of *Saddha*. Saddha is often translated as “faith” but I think a better translation is “confidence.” This confidence is not self confidence, rather it's confidence in a proposed method for overcoming Dukkha. What this link is teaching us is that once we acknowledge the seeming all-pervasiveness of dukkha, we begin searching for a solution to this problem.† There are manifold paths promising relief from dukkha, most of which don't work. However, when we do find a promising path, we try it out and if it seems like it just might work, we gain confidence in that path.

From that Confidence as a necessary condition, *Pāmojja* arises. Pāmojja is usually translated as “worldly joy.” This joy arises because the path that one now has confidence in is starting to work. In particular, the Buddha frequently teaches that Pāmojja arises during meditation when one overcomes the five hindrances of sensual desire, ill will & hatred, sloth & torpor, restless & remorse, and doubt.[2]

Having generated this Worldly Joy, one can now generate *Pīti*. Pīti gets variously translated as “rapture” or “euphoria” or “ecstasy” or “delight.” My favorite translation is “glee.” Pīti is primarily a physical sensation that sweeps you powerfully into an altered state. But Pīti is not solely physical; as the suttas say, “on account of the presence of Pīti there is mental exhilaration.”[3]

When the Pīti calms down, *Passaddhi* – tranquility – arises. Then because of that tranquility, *Sukha* – joy, happiness – arises. Upon letting go of the pleasure of the Sukha, *Samādhi* – deep concentration – manifests. These five – Pāmojja, Pīti, Passaddhi, Sukha, and Samādhi – are the mind's movement into and through the four jhānas, the purpose of which is to generate the deep concentration that turbo-charges one's insight practice.[4]

Arising dependent on a mind that is “thus concentrated, pure and bright, unblemished, free from defects, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability”[5] is *Yathābhūtañāṇadassana* – knowing and seeing things as they are. These are the insights into the nature of reality that begin the process of freeing one from dukkha.

When the insights are deep enough, when one knows and sees what's actually happening, this can lead to *Nibbidā*. The best translation of nibbidā is “disenchantment.” We are currently under the spell that we will find relief from dukkha via the things of this world. But when we can see deeply enough the way things really are, we become dis-enchanted; the spell is

broken.

Being disenchanted, we can become *Virāga*. Virāga is an interesting word. It has two parts: vi- and rāga. “Rāga” means “color, hue; coloring.” But it has broader meanings than just visual; you might be familiar with the Indian musical form raga. A raga colors one's mind, generates a mood.[6] And “vi-” is a prefix with a multitude of meanings – in this case it would be “not.” The usual translation of Virāga is “dispassion;” but this dispassion doesn't mean a flat affect. It means one's mind is not colored by the things of the world that one has become disenchanted with and which have been seen to no longer be an exit from Dukkha.

Dependent on dispassion, *Vimutti* arises – release/deliverance/emancipation. Finally with emancipation, *Āsavakkhaye ñāṇa* is gained – the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsava*s. The āsavas are the intoxicants – we are intoxicated with sense pleasures, we are intoxicated with becoming, and we are intoxicated by ignorance. The overcoming of these intoxicants is the goal of practice; and with emancipation, one knows one has done what needed to be done, one has become an *arahant*.

Now we can build the following chart of Transcendental Dependent Origination – in the reverse order:

> Knowledge of destruction of the āsavas (āsavakkhaye ñāṇa) arises dependent upon
> Emancipation (vimutti) arises dependent upon
> Dispassion (virāga) arises dependent upon
> Disenchantment (nibbida) arises dependent upon
> Knowledge and vision of things as they are (yathābhūtañāṇadassana) arises dependent upon
> Concentration (samādhi) arises dependent upon

Happiness (sukha) arises dependent upon
Tranquility (passaddhi) arises dependent upon
Rapture (pīti) arises dependent upon
Worldly Joy (pāmojja) arises dependent upon
Confidence (saddha) arises dependent upon
Dukkha arises dependent upon the other eleven mundane links, which follow in the usual order
...
Ignorance

This is the outline of the path of practice that the Buddha frequently spoke of,[7] and this path of practice clearly has nothing to do with multiple lifetimes. We are, in this very life, to undertake this path of practice which leads to emancipation and the knowledge that you are emancipated. In the three-lifetimes model, the Dukkha step, *i.e.* the Aging-and-Death step, is supposed to be in your next lifetime, yet the Buddha clearly teaches we are to practice in this way in this lifetime.

The transcendental part of this sutta has nothing to do with the onset of dukkha – in fact it's the exact opposite. The usual twelve links are the example *par excellence* of dependent origination, but they are only the common, elaborate example. The general principle of dependent origination, of which this is an example, is actually more important than the usual mundane twelve links. More on this general principle as we get deeper.

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* Don't worry – I will explain exactly what this statement means in just a few paragraphs.

† The Buddha discusses this searching in another sutta: AN 6.63: “And what is the result of dukkha? Here, someone overcome by dukkha, with a

mind obsessed by it, sorrows, languishes, and laments; they weep beating their breast and become confused. Or else, overcome by dukkha, with a mind obsessed by it, they embark upon a search outside, saying: 'Who knows one or two words for putting an end to this dukkha?' Dukkha, I say, results either in confusion or in a search. This is called the result of dukkha."

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi has a far more detailed examination of this sutta which can be found at "Transcendental Dependent Arising: A Translation and Exposition of the Upanisa Sutta", by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 1 December 2013, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel277.html.

2. For a detailed look at these hindrances, see *Abandoning the Five Hindrances* at http://rc.leighb.com/more/Abandoning_the_Five_Hindrances.htm.

3. DN 1.3.23

4. For a detailed examination of these five mind states and how they are synonymous with the four jhānas, see the chapter "The Jhāna Summary" in my book **Right Concentration**, pages 127-131.

5. DN 2.83

6. Anālayo, 2009, pg 29ff

7. E.g. DN 9.30, MN 22.20, MN 26.15-16,19, MN 63.8-10, MN 64.9&15, MN 72.14, MN 83.21, MN 118.42, and many other places as well.

The Honeyball Sutta

> *Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of these three is contact. With contact as condition there is vedanā. What one feels, that one conceptualizes. What one conceptualizes, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates.* MN 18.16

There is an important set of dependently arising links that overlaps with some of the usual twelve links, but provides additional insights that are different from those of the twelve links. This set is found in the Middle Length Discourses at sutta MN 18, “The Honeyball Sutta.”

The sutta opens with a lay person (rudely) interrupting the Buddha's solitary meditation to ask what he teaches, what his doctrine is. The answer is a bit cryptic: “I teach in a way such that one does not quarrel with anyone; in a way that concepts no more underlie one who lives detached from sensual pleasures, without bewilderment, free from worry and craving.” The questioner is not pleased and leaves.

Later that evening, the Buddha tells his monks what had transpired. A monk asks how does the Buddha teach in that way, and how is it that concepts no longer underlie the Buddha. And again, the Buddha's reply is cryptic: “As for the source through which concepts and mental proliferation beset one: if nothing is found to desire or cling to, this is the end of the underlying tendencies to unwholesome states, the end of quarrels and disputes, here these evil states cease without remainder.”*

Rather than unpacking this statement at this time, let's look at the dependent arisings:

evil, unwholesome states such as quarrels and disputes
arise dependent upon
desire and clinging
arise dependent upon
concepts and mental proliferation

This is somewhat similar to what we found in the “The Discourse on Quarrels & Disputes” discussed in the chapter The Key. Quarrels and disputes arise dependent on desire and clinging which is similar to what we found earlier. But desire and clinging in “The Honeyball Sutta” are not said to be dependent on pleasant/unpleasant and then contact and name-and-form. Here desire and clinging arise dependent upon concepts and mental proliferation.

But what exactly does this mean? Well, after saying this, the Buddha retired to his dwelling. The monks were puzzled; “Who can we ask to explain the details of this?” They decided to go to the venerable Mahā Kaccāna and ask him to explain it. He says they should have asked the Buddha himself to explain it, but he will do what he can.

Mahā Kaccāna says he understands the detailed meaning as follows: for each of the six senses, he says, “Dependent on the [sense organ] and [sense objects], [sense]-consciousness arises. The meeting of these three is contact (*phasso*). With contact as condition there is *vedanā*. What one feels (*vedeti* – verb form of *vedanā*), one conceptualizes (*sañjānāti* – verb form of *saññā*). What one conceptualizes, one thinks (*vitakketi* – verb from of *vitakka*) about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates (*papañcasaññāsaṅkhā*).”

Maybe still a bit cryptic. But let's build the dependent arisings table:

dependent upon sense organ & sense object, sense-consciousness

arises

dependent upon sense organ, sense object & sense-consciousness, contact arises

dependent upon contact, vedanā arises

dependent upon vedanā, conceptualization arises

dependent upon conceptualization, thinking arises

dependent upon thinking, mental proliferation arises

The six sense organs are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The six sense objects are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, and mind-objects (*dhamma*s). Sense-consciousness is the basic interface between the physical (sense object & sense organ) and the mental (knowing the sensory input). Consciousness could be defined as "that which knows." For example, as you read this sentence you are not aware of the touch sensations in your left foot – until I mention them. Then you become aware of them – conscious of them; that's touch consciousness. It's the same with what is in your peripheral vision – you only became aware of those sights when I mention them. All along there was touch on your left foot and the objects in your peripheral vision were present – but you were not conscious of them until the corresponding sense consciousness kicked in.

Contact is the coming together of sense organ, sense object, and sense-consciousness – it takes all three. This is not mentioned in the usual twelve links of dependent origination, but thankfully it is taught in this sutta. We have discussed vedanā in detail in the chapter The Key. *Saññā* arises dependent on vedanā and is an extremely important word. *Saññā* is usually translated as "perception;" however, perhaps a more accurate translation would be "conceptualization." When there is a sensory input, we conceptualize that input which then provides us with the name/identification of that input. As we get deeper into this book, *saññā* will crop up again.

So now we have the basics of sensory input. There is an object and an organ; these come together with sense-consciousness to generate contact. Contact is invariably followed by vedanā. Then we conceptualize that input. The conceptualizing step does not always occur. If you are well concentrated (in meditation or on a task) there might be a sound, but you don't bother to conceptualize what it is. But for most sensory input, we do conceptualize what that input is. Then we think about it; thinking involves stringing together concepts.

One of the more important teachings in early Buddhism is the teaching on the five aggregates (*khandhas*). They are *rūpa* (materiality), *vedanā* (valence), *saññā* (conceptualization), *saṅkhāra* (fabrication), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness). Here in Mahā Kaccāna's explanation, we find these five aggregates: sense-objects and sense-organs are materiality; these come together with consciousness to generate contact which is invariably followed by vedanā; the sensory input is conceptualized, and the concepts are fabricated to make thoughts. Remember from the chapter The Key, saṅkhāra is literally "making together" – what we are making together is our concepts. We call this "thinking." It is important to remember that in Pāli there is no distinction made between thoughts and emotions – both are included in "thinking."

This understanding of the mechanism of sensory processing is very useful information. We can make a chart of it as follows:

object+organ+consciousness=contact → vedanā → *saññā* (conceptualization) → *saṅkhāra* (as thinking/emoting)

This insight into understanding how we interface with the world of our sensory input is very helpful in exploring many aspects of the Buddha's teachings, as well as our own direct experience.

It is important to realize that this is not a one shot deal. The thinking is input to the sixth sense – the mind. And just like any other input, a thought has a vedanā. A thought may also beget a concept (saññā). And that concept may be "made together" with other concepts to generate more thinking – which again is input to the sixth sense....

There are two important take-aways from understanding this. First is that the initial external five-sense vedanā may be missed/overwhelmed by the vedanā generated by the subsequent mental reaction. Very often the pleasant or unpleasant aspect of an experience is due to our mental reaction to the experience rather than to the vedanā of the initial external sensory input. The implications of this are huge.

Remember back in the Introduction, we saw that the Buddha only taught "dukkha and the end of dukkha."[1] We also know the Buddha had a bad back in his later years.[2] So clearly his awakening didn't bring the end of physical dukkha. What he's offering with the end of dukkha is the end of dukkha reactions. This is spelled out very clearly in SN 36.6 – "The Sallatha Sutta (The Dart)," which was mentioned in a footnote to the chapter Dukkha is a Bummer. To summarize that sutta: an unawakened person experiences a physical pain and adds more dukkha to the experience by getting upset about it. An awakened person experiences a physical pain and does not add to the physical dukkha by having any mental dukkha reaction. What the Buddha is teaching as "the end of dukkha" is not a world of rainbows and unicorns, but the end of dukkha reactions to all our experiences in this world right here, right now; the end of generating downstream mental dukkha vedanā reactions.

The second important take-away from understanding that the sensory input chain continues on in the mental realm is the delineation of the mechanism for the origination of *papañca* – mental proliferation. Any sensory input generates vedanā and probably conceptualization and thinking. The

thinking also generates vedanā and probably more conceptualization and more thinking. That subsequent thinking is colored by those vedanā and concepts, and if there is no mindfulness there, this can easily spiral out of control. The key teaching from Mahā Kaccāna's explanation in the Honeyball Sutta is that, unless we are careful, the thinking gets out of hand and spirals into *papañca*. Papañca is one of the best words in Pāli. Papañca refers to the tendency of the mind to think a thought, and then the next thought, and the next thought, and the next thought. It can be truly amazing what comes up. Maybe you noticed this the last time you meditated. This tendency is to just go on and on and on, and the whole universe shows up in your mind. And it's all just stuff we're thinking up.

Now we can understand what the Buddha originally said to the monks: don't let your sensory input trigger papañca – papañca can lead to delight, welcoming, and holding. If you don't get entangled in this way, then the underlying tendencies to unwholesome states are not there; this is the end of quarrels and disputes and other unwholesome actions.

We can combine the Buddha's teaching and Mahā Kaccāna's explanation to build a master table of dependent arising for this sutta:

> dependent upon sense organ & sense object, sense-consciousness arises
> dependent upon sense organ, sense object & sense-consciousness, contact arises
> dependent upon contact, vedanā arises
> dependent upon vedanā, saññā arises
> dependent upon saññā, thinking arises
> dependent upon thinking, mental proliferation arises
> dependent upon mental proliferation, *delight, welcoming, and holding* arise
> dependent upon *delight, welcoming, and holding*, underlying

unwholesome tendencies are strengthened
dependent upon underlying unwholesome tendencies, *quarrels, disputes, and other evil unwholesome states* arise

Mahā Kaccāna says that it is possible to stop the evil unwholesome states from arising at any point in this chain. Well, yes, sometimes it is necessary to not look, *etc*. Hopefully you are discriminating as to what you look at, listen to in the media. But we cannot shut off our senses completely – we need them to navigate our environment. So there are going to be some contacts, which will invariably generate vedanā. Unless we are well concentrated (and we cannot be that concentrated most of the time), these sensory inputs are going to generate concepts. This is the point where we need to be most mindful of intervening – we need to not be fooled by our conceptualizing and thinking. We need to not run off into papañca. Once again, we can see the importance of the Second Establishment of Mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas – mindfulness of vedanā.[3] With mindfulness established at the onset of vedanā, we have a chance to not get lost in thinking that spirals out of control. Subsequent to the vedanā, a concept usually arises; but because we are right there with our mindfulness, we don't spiral out of control into papañca and "delight, welcoming, and holding," *i.e.* craving and clinging.

We will revisit this multiple times in this book. The key is to not be fooled by your conceptualizing; and remember that just because you think it, does not make it so.

The Honeyball Sutta uses the general principle of dependent origination to create another list of links. These new links also show how we can fall into evil unwholesome states – *i.e.* dukkha. The sutta also shows that if we can break this chain at any point, we won't fall into the dukkha states. These links are generated using the general principle of dependent origination rather than the twelve links. This general principle is what we will

investigate further in the next chapters.†

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* The full quote is “Bhikkhu, as to the source through which perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man: if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance; this is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malicious words, and false speech; here these evil unwholesome states cease without remainder.”

Ñaṇamoli, Bhikkhu. **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**: New Translation (Teachings of the Buddha) (Kindle Locations 3477-3482). Wisdom Publications. Kindle Edition.

† This sutta gets its name from Ānanda saying to the Buddha at the end of it: “Venerable sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honeyball, wherever he would taste it he would find a sweet delectable flavour; so too, venerable sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, wherever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind.”

Ñaṇamoli, Bhikkhu. **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**: New Translation (Teachings of the Buddha) (Kindle Locations 3547-3550). Wisdom Publications. Kindle Edition.

1. E.g. MN 22.38 and SN 22.86

2. See e.g. MN 53.5, SN 48.41, SN 35.243, AN 9.4, AN 10.67, AN 10.68, and DN 16.2.25

3. DN 22.11 and MN 10.32

PART 3 – Deeper Implications

In the previous two chapters we have examined two linked lists of dependent arisings that use the general principle of dependent origination – that things arise dependent on other things – to create lists that somewhat overlap with, yet are different from, the standard twelve links. There are many more suttas where this general principle is used to create different lists – examples include *The Sutta on Mindfulness of Breathing* at MN 118 and *Pairs* at AN 10.61. But exploring these many other dependent arising lists is a study for some other time. The remaining chapters of this book delve into the deeper aspects of the teachings of dependent origination. These teachings are far more profound than just the links discussed in PART 2. The implications of a more general look at dependently arising phenomena lead to some of the most important aspects of the Buddha's Dhamma.

The General Case

> *[T]his Dhamma is visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise for themselves.* MN 38.25

Far too often, when dependent origination is taught, the twelve links are taken as being the full teaching. But as Ñāṇavīra Thera says,

> *Paticcasamuppāda* is, in fact, a structural principle, ... and not one or another specific chain of *saṅkhārā* [concoctions]. It is thus an over-simplification to regard any one given formulation in any particular terms as *paticcasamuppāda*. Every such formulation *exemplifies* the principle; none states it.[1]

If the twelve links are just an example, rather than the "structural principle," what is this structural principle, and how can it be stated? Thankfully, it does occur in multiple places throughout the suttas. For example, in Majjhima Nikāya 79.7, the Buddha says. "I will teach you Dhamma: If this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises; if this is not, that does not come to be; from the stopping of this, that is stopped." This is what idappaccayatā is pointing to: this-that conditionality.[*] Or as we have been discussing it: necessary conditionality.

If the range of the twelve links is about the arising of dukkha, then what is the range of this-that conditionality? Since it is the general principle, it should have a greater range, yes? We know that vedanā are dependently originated – they arise dependent on contact. From both Majjhima Nikāya 18 and Majjhima Nikāya 109.9, we can see that both conceptualizations (*saññā*), and mental activities (*saṅkhārā*) also arise dependent on contact. We also know that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is dependently originated – it arises dependent both on name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*) as taught in the ten

links, and on saṅkhārā, as taught in the twelve links. In Majjhima Nikāya 38.8 we also learn that consciousness arises dependent on sensory contact. These four (vedanā, saññā, saṅkhārā, viññāṇa) dependently originated aggregates (*khandha*) are all that we experience mentally. So our entire mental world is dependently originated.

What about the material world – form (*rūpa*)? Are all the things of the material world dependently originated? Modern science certainly thinks so – it traces the entire physical world back to the Big Bang. It seems that everything arises dependent on other things; nothing stands alone. The range of this-that conditionality is universal. Also see MN 28.28 which explicitly states that all five aggregates are dependently arisen. When the aggregates are taught as an establishment of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas,[2] recognizing the arising and passing of each of the aggregates is part of the initial practice: we are to see each of the aggregates and their arising and their passing. True, the word "dependent" is not part of those instructions, but anyone doing that practice will quickly discover each of the aggregates arises dependently, certainly not spontaneously.

This observation that everything arises dependent on other things is about as close to metaphysics as we find in early Buddhism. But the purpose of this exploration is not to understand the fundamental nature of reality, rather to understand that craving and clinging are futile undertakings. This futility is due to the fact that because everything depends on other things, nothing is a stable, reliable source of satisfaction. Understanding this breaks the spell, your mind is no longer colored by seeking the unattainable, and freedom dawns.

The universality of idappaccayatāpaṭiccasamuppādo – of this-that conditionality, dependent origination – has massive implications. This is what we will be examining in the next several chapters.

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* Bhikkhu Bodhi translates “idappaccayatā” as “specific conditionality.” I prefer “this-that conditionality” because it is a bit more definitive. Using “this-that conditionality” also avoids saying that specific conditionality is the general principle of dependent origination, which might be confusing since specific and general have opposite meanings.

1. Nanavira Thera, **Clearing the Path**, p 29, §18

2. DN 22.14 and MN 10.38

Sāti, the Son of a Fisherman

> *For in many ways the Blessed One has stated consciousness to be dependently arisen.* MN 38.3

We'll now take a look at Majjhima Nikāya 38, which will not only present the general principle of dependent origination, but also hopefully will answer some unaddressed questions about consciousness and rebirth. This sutta is entitled "The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving."

"*Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Now on that occasion a pernicious view had arisen in a bhikkhu named Sāti, the son of a fisherman: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that roams and wanders through the rounds of rebirths, not another.'*" Sāti is thinking his consciousness is his self, and when he dies his consciousness moves on to another incarnation. This is plain old reincarnation as you find in many traditions. You die, the real essence of you, your consciousness in this case, goes on and finds a new incarnation.

"*Several bhikkhus, having heard about this, went to the bhikkhu Sāti and asked him, 'Friend, is it true that such a view has arisen in you?'*"

"'*Exactly so, friends. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that roams and wanders through the rounds of rebirths, not another.*'"

"*Those bhikkhus, desiring to detach him from that pernicious view, questioned and cross-questioned him: 'Friend Sāti, do not say so. Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One. The Blessed One would not speak thus. For in many discourses the*

Blessed One has stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness.'" As we've seen already, in dependent origination consciousness is dependent on name-and-form if we are looking at the ten links *i.e.*, name-and-form are dependent on consciousness and consciousness is dependent on name-and-form. Or if we are looking at the twelve links, consciousness is dependent upon saṅkhāras *i.e.*, concoctions, fabrications, created things. In other words, consciousness has multiple necessary conditions for its manifestation.

"*Yet although questioned and cross-questioned by those bhikkhus in this way, Sāti stubbornly adhered to that pernicious view and continued to insist upon it.*"

"*Since these bhikkhus were unable to detach him from that pernicious view, they went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, they sat down at one side and told him all that had occurred, adding: 'Venerable sir, since we could not detach the bhikkhu Sāti from that pernicious view, we have reported the matter to you.'*"

"*Then the Blessed One addressed a certain bhikkhu: 'Come, bhikkhu, tell Sāti in my name that the Teacher calls.' – 'Yes, venerable sir,' he replied. He went to the bhikkhu Sāti and told him: 'The Teacher calls you, friend Sāti.' – 'Yes friend', he replied, and he went to the Blessed One and after paying homage to him, he sat down at one side. The Blessed One then asked him. 'Sāti, is it true that you hold the following view: As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is the same consciousness that roams and wanders through the rounds of rebirth, not another.' 'Exactly so, venerable sir, this is how I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One.' 'What is consciousness, Sāti?' 'Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions.'*"

So for Sāti, consciousness is that little being sitting behind your eyeballs, looking out, and it's got levers that make your mouth open and close so you can speak. That little being is also the one who has the experience when you see a sunset or touch a hot stove; and it's the one that goes on to the next incarnation because it gets the results of karma. This is not an uncommon view.[¤] Here Sāti thinks consciousness 'experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions' – *i.e.* consciousness wanders through the rounds of rebirth receiving the results of karma.

"'*Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit, for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time.*'"

If you are a disciple of the Buddha, you had better keep an open mind. Holding fixed views and opinions is just going to get you in trouble.[*]

"*Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus, 'Bhikkhus, what do you think? Has this bhikkhu Sāti kindled even a spark of wisdom in this Dhamma and Discipline?'*"

"'*How could he, venerable sir, no venerable sir.*'"

"*When this was said the bhikkhu Sāti sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum and without response. Then knowing this the Blessed One told him: 'Misguided man, you will be recognized by your own pernicious view. I shall question the bhikkhus on this matter.*'"

The Buddha was certainly correct – we now know poor ole Sāti twenty-five hundred years later because of his pernicious view.

"*Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, do you understand the Dhamma taught by me as this bhikkhu Sāti does?'*"

"'*No, venerable sir, for in many discourses the Blessed One has stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness.*'"

"'*Good, bhikkhus, good. It is good that you understand the Dhamma taught by me in this way, because that's what I have taught. But this bhikkhu Sāti misrepresents us by his wrong grasp, and injures himself and stores up much demerit; for this will lead to his harm and suffering for a long time.*'"

"'*Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned to be eye-consciousness; when it arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when dependent on nose and odors, nose-consciousness; dependent upon tongue and taste, tongue-consciousness; dependent upon body and tangibles, body-consciousness; dependent upon mind and mind-objects, mind consciousness.*'"

Consciousness, whether you name it (or reckon it) as "eye consciousness" or "mind consciousness," is named based on its dependency on whichever of the six senses generates it. For example, your dreams are mind consciousness even though you are seeing them and even though there is activity in your visual cortex. The mind is what generates the dreams, not the eye, because the eye is not involved. But when you are looking at the material world, the eye is involved; then it's eye consciousness. Notice that how we reckon, or name, or categorize consciousness is just how we speak

of our experience; it's not a hard, fast scientific/metaphysical explanation – it's just how we speak of our experience. But it does point directly at another necessary condition for the arising of consciousness – sensory input.

"'*Just as the fire is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns – when fire burns dependent on logs, it's a log fire; when it burns dependent on sticks, it's a stick fire; when it burns dependent on grass, it's a grass fire; when it burns dependent on cowdung, it's a cowdung fire; when it burns dependent on chaff, it's a chaff fire; when it burns dependent on trash, it's a trash fire – so too, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises.*'"

Fire itself is not different; whether it's burning on logs or trash, it's still fire – oxygen uniting with fuel in the presence of heat. But we reckon it differently based on the condition upon which it depends. We may respond to fire differently in various cases. If it's a log fire and you need those logs, you'll put the fire out. But you may just let a trash fire burn. Consciousness is like fire; in all the cases there's a commonality. But we reckon consciousness, or give it a name, based on the sense that's involved. Just as a fire doesn't arise without fuel, so too consciousness doesn't arise without sensory input.

Now we have a third necessary condition for the arising of consciousness – it requires sensory input, as well as an object – saṅkhāra – and a mind-and-body that supports it and is bound up with it.[1] (See Appendix 4 for a further discussion on these three necessary conditions for consciousness.) Remember, of course, that the mind is considered the sixth sense, so being conscious of your thoughts requires your mind to think them.

Then the Buddha asks some questions about the general principle of dependent origination. He begins by basically asking, "'*Do you understand*

when something has arisen?' 'Yes, venerable sir.' 'Can you see its origination occurs with something else as nutriment' – as the cause or condition? '*Yes, venerable sir.' 'Do you see with the cessation of that nutriment what has come to be is subject to cessation?' 'Yes, venerable sir.'"*

So things arise because of causes and supporting conditions, they stick around because of supporting conditions, and when the supporting conditions are gone, they cease. The Buddha continues asking quite a bit more about the general principle – checking up if the monks really understand, and they do.

"'*Bhikkhus, purified and bright as this view is, if you adhere to it, cherish it, treasure it, and treat it as a possession, would you then understand the Dhamma that has been taught as similar to a raft being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.' 'No, venerable sir.'"*

The famous simile of the raft occurs at Majjhima Nikāya 22.13-14: you're on the dangerous, near shore of a river. If you can get to the other side, you'll be safe – but it's too big of a river to swim, there's no bridge, and there's no ferryman. So you gather materials, bind them together into a raft, and then using your arms and legs make your way across to the far shore, the safe shore. When you get to the far shore, do you pick up the raft and walk around with it on your head? No, you let it go. The raft is for getting to the far side, but in order to safely get onto the far shore at the end, you have to let go of the raft. So if you are getting attached to any teaching, you're making it into a fixed view. Then it's not a skillful means for getting you to the far shore – in fact, there's the danger of converting the teaching into metaphysics and missing the point entirely. In the present case, the Buddha is teaching about what we call this-that conditionality – idappaccayatā. This arose because that occurred; if that doesn't occur, this doesn't arise. The Buddha says this is important and you have to understand

it; but don't cling to it. That would be carrying the raft around on your head.

"'*Bhikkhus, purified and bright as this view is, if you do not adhere to it, cherish it, treasure it, treat it as a possession, would you then understand the Dhamma that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping?' 'Yes, venerable sir.'*"
The Buddha is not doing metaphysics, he's just providing ways of investigating the world that can be helpful for coming to the end of dukkha.

What follows in this sutta, starting at MN 38.17 is a "catechism," a series of questions and answers, on the twelve links of dependent origination. The scholar Govind C. Pande thinks this is a later insertion,[2] and I'm inclined to agree with him – it's such a drastic change of tone from what has preceded it. It's one of the most tedious sections in the whole of the Pāli Suttas. The twelve links are given in forward arising order, and then questions are asked about these links in the reverse arising order, and then there is a recapitulation of the arising order. Then the twelve links are given in forward ceasing order, and then questions are asked about these links in the reverse ceasing order, and then there is a recapitulation of the ceasing order. And none of this covers any new territory that we have not already discussed about dependent origination.

Finally at MN 38.23, we get to the heart of the matter. "'*Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing in this way [that is, in terms of dependent origination] would you run back to the past thus: 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, venerable sir.' 'Knowing and seeing in this way would you run forward to the future thus: 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, venerable sir.' 'Knowing and seeing in this way, would you now be inwardly perplexed about the present thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?' 'No, venerable sir.'"

If you can truly see the world and yourself in terms of the general principle of dependent origination, these sorts of questions do not arise.[3] For example, we say that a fire goes out. But unless you understand the nature of fire, you might be tempted to ask, "When a fire goes out, which way does it go? North? South? East? West? Up? Down?"[4] Of course, the question makes no sense – when we say that a fire goes out, we are not presenting a scientific fact – it's just a figure of speech. It's just the same with all those questions above about how was I in past, will be in the future, am right now. This seemingly solid self that we think we have is just a convenient way of speaking – it represents neither a scientific fact nor a useful way of viewing reality if you wish to escape dukkha.

The Buddha is saying you should look at everything in terms of dependently originated phenomena. Don't get stuck conceiving of some solid entity called me, my soul, my essence, my self. You can't find it. If you look for it in any of the aggregates, you're not going to find it in any of them.[5] If you look for it in a combination of the aggregates, you can't find it there either.[6] The Buddha didn't say there was no self. What he said is that everywhere you look, that's not self. In fact, once the wanderer Vacchagotta came to the Buddha and asked, "Venerable sir, tell me once and for all, is there a self?" The Buddha didn't say anything. "Venerable sir, once and for all, is there no self?" The Buddha didn't say anything. Vacchagotta leaves. After he was gone, Ānanda asked the Buddha why he didn't answer Vacchagotta. He replied, "If I had said there was a self, Vacchagotta would have fallen into the mistake of eternalism, thinking he had a soul that was going to exist forever. If I had said there was no self, he would have fallen into the mistake of annihilationism[†] – that he would be

utterly destroyed at death. Better not to say anything so he doesn't get more confused than he is already."[7] Which was good, because Vacchagotta kept coming back and asking more questions, and eventually he asked to become a monk, and eventually after asking still more questions, he became fully awakened.[8]

Remember in the previous chapter we found that everything is dependently originated? This would obviously include you. The Buddha is not saying that there's no self. What he's saying is that everywhere you look you can't find a self. If you look closely, all that you do find are dependently originated phenomena. Everything is dependent upon other things. There's no essence to anything.

I once heard a talk by Joseph Goldstein who pointed out that actually it's much more accurate to think of yourself, not as a noun, but as a verb. I thought Joseph's point was quite interesting, really right on. Furthermore, you're not just a single process, you're a collection of processes. You're a circulatory process, a digestive process, a respiratory process, and more. It's all in motion, it's all moving, it's all changing all the time.

I started contemplating this, and I realized there actually aren't any nouns at all; it's just some verbs move kind of slow. Interestingly, the Navajo language, spoken by the indigenous Navajo people of the American southwest, is a "verb-heavy" language – it has a great preponderance of verbs but relatively few nouns[9] – which seems a more accurate way of conceptualizing the world we encounter. That wooden table we mentioned earlier is not a noun. It's trees doing their thing – well, some carpenter's thing as well, but it's in motion. It's not changing fast, but it, like everything else, is changing. You can't find a single thing in all of creation that's not changing. Everything arises because of causes and conditions, and they stick around while there are supporting conditions. When the supporting conditions cease, they cease. This is what the Buddha is saying. Look at

yourself that way also: you are a dependently originated collection of processes. When you truly get this, those questions about how was I in past, will be in the future, am right now, just do not occur.

For everything in creation, there are multiple streams of processes that interact to give rise to that bit of creation. And of course, all those streams are also the results of still other processes interacting. When we look carefully, all we find are Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting – SODAPI. At the intersection of these interacting streams, whether you call that intersection “tree” or “cow” or “me,” that intersection is also a process that generates more dependently arising processes. When that intersection is a person, we call any newly generated processes “karma.” It's as though we are a valve – the input is all the SODAPI making us who we are, and the output is our thoughts, speech and actions – more SODAPI.[10]

We share some of these streams. For example, this book is written in English. Some of the processes generating this book in English are the activities of the British who came to North America, ran off the Dutch, ran off the French, ran off the Spanish, and suppressed the Natives. So English is spoken in northern North America where I live. These processes are all part of those of us reading this book. Even if your native language is not English, because the British went on to create a world spanning empire, English has become the international language.

However, some of these streams are very individual – streams like your genetic makeup and your birth order in your family of origin. Some streams you share with many others, some were shared long ago, others recently – your education, your friends, what books you've read, where you've traveled, *etc*. The number of SODAPI at the intersection you call “me” are incalculable. But if you can get a feel for this as it applies to yourself, as well as to everything else in creation, then maybe those questions about

how was I in the past, will be in the future, am right now, won't occur.

From **Hegoland** by Carlo Rovelli:

> The best description of reality that we have found is in terms of events that weave a web of interactions. “Entities” are nothing other than ephemeral nodes in this web. Their properties are not determined until the moment of these interactions; they exist only in relation to something else. Everything is what it is only with respect to something else.
>
> Every vision is partial. There is no way of seeing reality that is not dependent on a perspective--no point of view that is absolute or universal.
>
> And yet, points of view communicate. Knowledge is in dialogue with itself and with reality. In the dialogue, those points of view modify, enrich, converge – and our understanding of reality deepens.
>
> The actor of this process is not a subject distinct from phenomenal reality, outside it, nor any transcendent point of view; it is a portion of that reality itself.[11]

Returning to the sutta about Sāti. the Buddha asks “‘*Bhikkhus, are you saying this just because I'm your teacher?’ ‘No, venerable sir.’ ‘Do you speak this way of what you have known and seen and understood for yourselves?’ ‘Yes, venerable sir.’ 'Good, bhikkhus, it is good that you have known and seen and understood this for yourselves.'*”

This is a very important point. You make progress on the spiritual path based on what you have known and seen and understood for yourself, that is, based on what you have experienced and understood for yourself.

Remember, after his awakening, the Buddha was reluctant to teach: “This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.” Ayya Khema said an insight was an understood experience. SODAPI is a concept that hopefully can be useful as you deeply examine reality so that you can understand what you are experiencing. But it's not metaphysics either.

“‘*Good, bhikkhus. You have been guided by me with this Dhamma, which is visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, leading onward, to be experienced by the wise for themselves.*’” This Dhamma teaches about the dependently originated nature of the universe, a universe without solid entities, the universe of just verbs, of just actions and interactions and their results. This is the Dhamma.

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This sutta appears to be a composite of two different discourses. The first one, which is discussed above, is about the destruction of craving for becoming (*bhavataṇhā*). A test to see if you have any *bhavataṇhā* would be to imagine that you are suddenly presented with irrefutable evidence that there is no life after death. If you have any sort of negative reaction, you still have work to do – you still have *bhavataṇhā*. If you have a positive reaction to such sudden news, then you have the opposite – *vibhavatanha*, the craving to not become, and you still have work to do. The destruction of both of these types of craving arises from “knowing and seeing in this way [that is, in terms of dependent origination]” and your reaction to such news would be equanimous.

Following what we have already discussed in this sutta, there is a short passage that serves as a bridge to the second discourse of this sutta. The bridge itself seems to be a later addition, since it contradicts what has come

before. The second discourse does contain bits of dependent origination, but nothing significantly new from what we have already covered. It discusses the destruction of craving for sense pleasures (*kāmataṇhā*) and recommends to practice the Gradual Training,‡ which it details, especially to practice the jhānas. Then you have a far more wholesome and far less problematic source of pleasure.

The above two paragraphs are a short summary of the three types of craving that the Buddha discusses in multiple discourses.[12]

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¤ E.g. at MN 109.14 there is a bhikkhu, stubborn and obtuse, who wanted to know what self gets the results of the actions done by the not self.

* K.R. Norman (1994), p. 92 writes: Sāti ... so misunderstood the Buddha's teaching that he thought it was “consciousness” (viññāṇa) which continued in saṃsāra. This would appear to be a recollection by Sāti of a teaching similar to that found in the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad that vijñana continues: “This great being, endless, unlimited, consisting of nothing but intelligence”. This view was refuted by the Buddha, who pointed out that he had frequently taught that “Without a cause there is no origination of consciousness.”

† Annihilationism assumes there is an actual “self” that is destroyed at death.

‡ The Gradual Training is used as the foundation for my book **Right Concentration**; more details can be found there.

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1. DN 2.83 (DN 2.86 in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation)

2. Pande, 1974, pp 150-151.

3. This exact same teaching also appears in the last two paragraphs of SN 12.20. See also MN 2.7ff where this teaching also appears, along with more discussion about why it is important and useful.

4. This simile is suggested by MN 72 where the Buddha is having a conversation with the wanderer Vacchagotta.

5. SN 22.59

6. SN 22.85

7. SN 44.10

8. Vacchagotta becomes a monk in MN 72 and becomes an arahant in MN 73.

9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navajo_grammar

10. Thanks to Deric Morris for this idea of looking at us as valves (personal conversation).

11. Rovelli, 2021, pp 199-2021

12. E.g. DN 22.19, MN 141.21, SN 22.22

Without Concepts of Existence or Non-Existence

> *This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends on a duality – upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence.*
> -- SN 12.15

In the previous chapter, we looked at dependent origination as the Buddha's counterpoint to what Sāti, the son of the fisherman thought, which was that consciousness migrates from incarnation to incarnation. The counterpoint is that we are to see the world as dependently arising processes, as opposed to the world including some sort of "me" that just keeps on going. In this chapter, we will explore a short sutta that elaborates on this. The discourse is the Kaccānagotta Sutta[*] and is found in the Samyutta Nikāya's twelfth book, which is on dependent origination, and this is the fifteenth sutta.

"Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was living at Savatthi. There the Venerable Kaccānagotta approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side and said to him, "Venerable Sir, it is said, 'Right View, Right View.' In what way, Venerable Sir, is there Right View?"

The first thing to notice is that this is "the Venerable Kaccānagotta." This is not "a certain Bhikkhu;" rather it is somebody who probably is fairly experienced on the path. So what we're going to get is not a beginner's teaching – this is an advanced teaching, so buckle up. It's not easy to understand what the Buddha is pointing to here, but it's so essential that we need to take a look at it .

The Venerable Kaccānagotta wants to know, what is Right View? “This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends on a duality – upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence.” Literally it says “upon the notion of it is and the notion of it is not.” We do this all the time. Do leprechauns exist? Or do they not exist? Does Planet 9 exist or not exist? Do cookies currently exist in the cookie jar or not exist there? We want to put everything in one or the other of these two buckets.

“But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is, with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is, with correct wisdom, there's no notion of existence in regard to the world.”

As things come into being, we're not thinking they're not existing, that they're annihilated; and when things cease, we're not thinking they last forever, they're eternal. If you really see what's going on, if you really pay attention to arising and passing, you begin to realize that the two buckets of existence and non-existence may not be the most useful way of categorizing the things of the world.

For each of the practices given in the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas,[1] after the basic practice is taught, you are then also to do that practice internally, externally, and both, and then in its arising form and in its passing form, and both arising and passing form. As mentioned in the chapter The General Case, with the five aggregates as a mindfulness practice, we find the arising and passing practice given when the practice is initially presented: to see each of the aggregates and their arising and their passing. It's important to pay attention to the arising and passing of the world – this world that is totally in flux. This deep recognition of *anicca* (inconstancy, impermanence) is what helps us not to fall into either of these extremes of existence or non-existence.

“The world in general, Kaccāyana, grasps after systems and is imprisoned by dogmas. But one with Right View does not go along with that system-grasping, that mental obstinacy and dogmatic bias, does not grasp at it. One with Right View does not take a stand about 'my self'” – my soul, my *attā*.[†]

The idea is that Right View is not locking in to any sort of viewpoint and defending it. In particular, the Buddha says, don't take a stand about “my self.” Remember, the “self” is essentially the soul, the essence of me that's going to be eternally happy – some day. The Buddha says, don't take a stand about that. He's not saying there is a self; he's not saying there isn't a self. We had the story of Vacchagotta in the previous chapter asking, “Does the Self exist?” or “Does the Self not exist?” The Buddha would not give him a categorical answer, in fact he did not give an answer at all.

We don't want to be shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence. “One with Right View does not become engaged, clinging, adhere, and does not take a stand about 'my self,' One has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing. One's knowledge about this is independent of others; it is in this way, Kaccayana, that there is Right View.”

“One has no perplexity that what is arising is only dukkha arising; what is ceasing is only dukkha ceasing.” At first this may seem quite strange. That chocolate cake that arose certainly wasn't dukkha – it was delicious. But its ceasing is dukkha if you want more and there isn't any. That headache that arose was certainly dukkha. But it's ceasing is the opposite of dukkha. So how are we supposed to understand this?

There are two ways to work with it. First, you can realize that anytime you think of a thing arising, you are putting that thing into the “exists” bucket. Anytime you experience a thing ceasing, you are putting it into the “not-exists” bucket. But these buckets are not so useful for experiencing the

deeper truths that can lead to the end of dukkha. Rather than the duality of existence and non-existence of things, which is dukkha laden, we should be examining our experience from a non-dual perspective, from an ever flowing processes perspective rather than one of existing or non-existing entities. This is the orthodox Mahāyāna understanding of this passage. This is the view from the anattā (not-self, emptiness) perspective.

A second way to try to understand this is to broaden the definition of dukkha even further than “bummer” – all the way to “not a source of lasting satisfaction.” Then we have the following: “one has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is not a source of lasting satisfaction, what ceases is not a source of lasting satisfaction.” This fits well with the chocolate cake and headache examples above: when the cake arose, it was not a source of lasting satisfaction; when it ceased, that cake was definitely experienced as not a source of lasting satisfaction. When the headache arose, it certainly was not a source of lasting satisfaction; when it ceased, the headache still wasn't a source of lasting satisfaction – it might come back. When the absence of the headache arose, that was not a source of lasting satisfaction – all things change and a new headache could arise, which would bring the ceasing of the absence of a headache – definitely not a source of lasting satisfaction. This is the view from the anicca-dukkha (impermanence-bummer) perspective.

“'All exists,' Kaccayana; this is one extreme. 'All does not exist.' This is the second extreme.” The Buddha is known for finding the middle way between two extremes. He spoke about the middle way between a pair of extremes in the traditional “First Sermon”[2] – the middle way between asceticism and sensual indulgence. Now, here is another pair of extremes: all exists, or all does not exist.

“Without veering toward either of these extremes, a Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle:” Dependent Origination. Now the sutta doesn't

actually say “Dependent Origination.” What follows in the sutta is just the twelve links of dependent origination given in their forward arising order, that is, with ignorance as condition, saṅkhāras arise, with saṅkhāras as condition, consciousness arises, *etc*., all the way up to, with birth as condition aging-and-death arise. That's followed by the twelve links in their forward ceasing order; when ignorance ceases, saṅkhāras cease, when saṅkhāras cease, consciousness ceases, *etc.*, all the way up to aging-and-death and all the other dukkha ceasing. I suspect this is a corruption in the sutta.[‡] The links don't make sense here; the links exemplify a specific case which is simply not addressed in this sutta. This sutta addresses a far more general case. I postulate that what the Buddha actually said was “All exists, Kaccayana, this is one extreme. All does not exist; this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, a Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: this-that conditionality, dependent origination” – *i.e.* idappaccayatāpaṭiccasamuppādo. Then, in later generations, when they were preserving this and all the other suttas by chanting them, they decided, “Oh, dependent origination; we'd better stick the details in here; it will make the chant sound a lot better” – sort of a chorus. And they slapped the twelve links in, so this is what we get today. It just makes a lot more sense to say the middle way is to look at experience in terms of this-that conditionality, dependent origination; whereas the twelve links here don't really make any sense.

When the Buddha is saying, “one does not take a stand about 'my self,'” there is no entity anywhere to be found. It's sort of like, you go to the beach, and you look out and you can see the edge of the world, six miles out. If a ship gets too close to the edge of the world, it falls off the edge of the world. Right? That's terrible; all those people die. It happens far too often. If you go to the beach, you've probably seen it happen at least once or twice. You are trapped in an illusion! Let's say they come along, they take you to Florida, they stick you in a SpaceX capsule, they blast you into orbit, you look down, you see it's a sphere, they explain gravity to you. You

go back to the beach; you look out; it looks just like it did before, but you no longer conceive of the edge of the world. You no longer get engaged in discussions about “when you fall off the edge of the world, does it hurt immediately? Or does it hurt only when you hit the bottom? Or do just keep falling and eventually starve to death?” Those questions no longer make any sense; you understand the illusion. This is what the Buddha is saying about the self. Don't get caught in discussions about the self – does the self exist, does the self not exist. That's as silly as trying to decide if it hurts or not when you fall off the edge of the world. Rather than being trapped in the illusion of self, look at the world in terms of dependently arising processes. That's all that's happening.

This is very much like the previous chapter, but perhaps from a little different perspective. Basically, the teaching here is the importance of looking at the world not as entities, not as things, but as processes, as verbs. These processes are interacting, and are causes and effects which become causes for more effects that keep rolling on – this whole mass of dependently arising phenomena. But don't throw any of the processes into an exist or not-exist bucket either.

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* For multiple translations on a single page, see http://leighb.com/sn12_15.htm

† self, ego, personality, soul

‡ Pande agrees that this is likely a corruption, pg 201: “The formula as such, therefore, must be regarded in the case of these suttas [SN 12.15, 17-18, 24-26, 46-48] as a later substitution for part of the more fluid original continuation. Mrs. Rhys Davids advocates this conclusion in the case of SN 12.18 and the arguments are generalizable to the other suttas [including our SN 12.15] of the class which are greatly similar in problem and answer.”

Furthermore, the Chinese version of this sutta, Samyutta Āgama 301, says, “That is called avoiding the two extremes, and teaching the middle way, namely: Because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises” and then the āgama goes on to give the twelve links in both arising and ceasing orders as is found in the Pāli version.

1. DN 22 and MN 10

2. SN 56.11

The Middle Way – Introduction to Emptiness

It is inappropriate to say: "movement and what-is-moving are the same."

It is inappropriate to say: "movement and what-is-moving are different."

-- MMK, Chapter 2

The Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15), which we discussed in the previous chapter, is an extremely important sutta – not only because of the depth of the teaching given there, but also because of what develops from it. The teaching there is so profound that we could say it influenced a fair amount of the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness, thanks to the teachings of a man named Nāgārjuna.

Nāgārjuna was born into a Brahmin family around 100 CE, in southern India. By the time he was 20, he was well-known for his scholarly Brahminical learning. However, he began studying the works of the Buddha, the early suttas. Supposedly, in three months, he had mastered them, but they still left unanswered questions. At that point he encountered an old monk who followed the newly emerging Mahāyāna tradition.

Nāgārjuna was so impressed by the Mahāyāna vision that he traveled throughout India, seeking other Mahāyāna texts. He was very skilled in debate, and eventually defeated all comers, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist. He declared at one point, "I have no master." He founded an order and rules for his monks to live by.

The biography above is gleaned from the less fantastical parts of the multiple legends about Nāgārjuna; however, there isn't a lot we reliably

know about him. But he is the author of a text of profound significance: the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (MMK), or *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. This is a rather remarkable set of teachings. There are twenty-seven short chapters, made of verses, and they attempt to elucidate emptiness. The only one of the early suttas Nāgārjuna references in this master work is the Kaccānagotta Sutta, discussed in the previous chapter. Nāgārjuna clearly was influenced by that sutta and expands the teaching there into what I would call the most important Buddhist text composed after the Buddha's death.

If you read *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, you get a sense that Nāgārjuna had great respect for the Buddha and his teachings. He's basically trying to take Buddhist understanding back toward the teachings that are found in the suttas, via an emphasis on emptiness. It is very important to understand that "emptiness" does not mean "non-existence." It means that things are empty of inherent existence, that is they don't have an essence – they don't exist "from their own side."

Towards the end of *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Nāgārjuna equates emptiness and dependent origination. Things are empty because they are dependently originated. "Things" here refers to every thing – both material and mental – all phenomena. There are no stand alone entities or concepts – all arise dependent on other things – just as we saw in the chapter The General Case.

One way Nāgārjuna does this is by looking closely at some of the words and concepts we commonly use, trying to better understand just what we mean by them. In doing so, he points out that each concept we deal with is dependent on other concepts – hence each of the concepts is empty. The following are excerpts from three of Nāgārjuna's chapters.

We will start by looking at "Movement" (MMK 2). The key relationship to

notice here is the one between “movement” and “that which is moved” – each of which is a concept that is dependent on the other one; they both are empty. What Nāgārjuna is doing here is refuting the concept of there being some essence, called “movement,” in moving things.

> There is no movement in what has ceased moving;
> There is also no movement in what has not moved.
> Movement is unknowable apart
> From what-is-moving and what is not moving.

All that is moving and all that is not moving constitutes all possible things that have moved or could move. We will not find any essence called “movement” anywhere apart from these two possible cases.

> How can movement exist [as an essence]
> Within whatever is moving?
> When whatever is moving stops,
> It is impossible for it to have any movement.

It is very important to keep in mind that if something has an essence, then that essence is unchanging. This is a very key point for understanding Nāgārjuna's teachings.

> To claim that there is movement within [something in] motion
> Implies that there could be no movement
> Within [something in] motion,
> Because it is asserted there is movement within motion.

Yes, this is tricky! What Nāgārjuna is saying here is that if there is an essence called “movement” within whatever is moving, then movement and whatever is moving are two different things. If indeed they are different, then it should be possible to have one without the other. He now goes on to

point out the weirdness that results from postulating a movement essence:

> If there were [an essence called] movement within motion,
> It would follow that movement would be twofold:
> That by which one becomes someone in motion
> And [that by which one] is actually moving.
>
> If movement were twofold,
> Then the thing that is moving also would be twofold,
> Because movement is impossible
> Without something moving.
>
> If there were nothing moving,
> Movement would be impossible.
> If there were no movement,
> How could something moving be existent?

If movement is an essence in things that move, then that essence cannot be in the things that are not moving. But we know that some non-moving things do start to move. So how can they, if they don't have that movement essence already – assuming there is such a thing as “movement essence?”

> When a mover does not move,
> A non-mover cannot move;
> What third thing other than a mover
> And a non-mover could possibly move?
>
> When a mover is impossible without movement,
> Then how is it possible to say: “a mover moves”?

It is unnecessarily redundant to say “a mover moves.” Saying this leads to the following:

To claim that a mover moves
Implies that there could be a mover
Who does not move,
Because it is asserted that a mover moves.

If a mover moves,
It would follow that movement would be twofold:
That which reveals the mover
And that which moves, once one becomes a mover.

If a beginning of movement does not exist in what-is-moving,
[if] a beginning of movement also does not exist in what has not [yet] moved,
[and if] there does not exist a beginning [of movement] within motion,

where does a beginning of movement happen?

Before a beginning of movement,
There is not any motion or anything which has moved
Wherein movement could begin.
How can movement exist in what has not begun to move?

It is inappropriate to say: “movement and what-is-moving are the same.”
It is inappropriate to say: “movement and what-is-moving are different.”

If whatever is moving is a mover,
It would follow that
The act and the actor would be the same too.

If moving and a mover were conceived as different,
There could be moving without a mover
And a mover without moving.

If things are not established as the same
And not established as different,
How can they be established at all?

That very movement by which a mover is made evident
Does not [enable a mover to] move.
Because there is no [mover] before any movement,
Who would be going where?

“It is inappropriate to say: 'movement and what-is-moving are the same.' It is inappropriate to say: 'movement and what-is-moving are different.'” Movement and what-is-moving are not the same thing. And yet, you can't have one without the other; they're dependently related. We need to pay attention to our notions and concepts and see how one thing is dependent on another. You can't have a movement unless there's something moving, but you can't have something moving unless there's movement. So which came first? How did it get started? There is not any fixed entity there, is there? This begins to point us in the right direction.

Let’s look at another analysis of a common experience: “Seeing” (MMK 3). The key relationship to notice here is the one between “seeing” and “seer” – each of which is a concept that is dependent on the other one; they both are empty.

Seeing does not see itself.
How can what does not see itself
See anything else?

Nāgārjuna points out that your eyes can't see themselves. It's also worth noting that your ears can't hear your ears. You can't smell your nose. Your tongue can't taste itself. You might think, “Ah, but I can touch my body!” But you actually have to touch one part of your body with another part of your body in order to experience it. And although you can think about your thoughts, the thinking about is different from the thought being thought about.

> When not seeing the slightest thing,
> There is no act of seeing.
> How can it [then] be reasonable to say: “seeing sees”?

This is the same redundancy as saying “a mover moves” – neither of these can be an essence and these are not two different things.

> Seeing does not see;
> Non-seeing does not see.
> It should be understood that seeing explains the seer too.

“Seeing explains the seer.” These are just concepts; they appear to be separate, but on closer inspection there's this interdependent relationship. Neither “seeing” nor “seer” are self existing – the two are not actually separate after all. You can't have seers who aren't seeing; you can't have seeing being done by a non-seer. Nāgārjuna goes on to generalize this visual argument to all six senses.

Next we have Nāgārjuna verses on “Aggregates” (MMK 4). This is different from the two above – they were about an activity and the one doing/experiencing the activity. This is about an entity and its reason(s) for being – which could be thought of as its constituent parts. However, once again there is a very similar dependency, leading again to both the entity and its parts being empty.

Apart from the constituents of form,
Form is not perceived.
Apart from “form”,
The constituents of form also do not appear.

“Form” is a translation of “rūpa” which we have already discussed. Form is only manifest as an object (or as multiple objects). “Constituent” is translation of “*kāraṇa*” which means “constituent, reason, cause.” There could be multiple ways to discuss the *kāraṇa* of an object, but a useful one to think about is that an object is assembled from it constituent parts – for example, your body is made of various parts, your car is assembled from its parts. So an object is not found that doesn't consist of its parts; parts of an object are not part of an object that doesn't exist.

If there were form apart from the constituents of form,
It would follow that form is without constituents;
There is no object at all that is without constituents.

There is no material object that is does not consist of constituent parts.

If a constituent of form existed apart from form,
It would exist as a cause without fruit;
Causes without fruit do not exist.

A part of your car separate from your car is not actually a part of your car.

If form [inherently] existed,
A cause of form would be untenable;
If form did not exist,
A cause of form would be untenable.

If some object had inherent existence – an essence – then it would not be composed of parts; if it had parts, it could be disassembled and no longer have any existence, and hence never had an essence. And then, of course, there are no constituents of something that never existed.

> It is untenable to say, “the fruit is like the cause.”
> It is also untenable to say, “the fruit is unlike the cause.”

Your car is not the same as its parts; yet your car is not independent of its parts. The same applies to your body.

> Feeling and conceptualization,
> Mental activities and consciousness,
> And all things are comparable
> In every aspect, at every stage with form.

The same discussion above can be applied to each of the five aggregates.

Think about your body. It has a bunch of parts, but it seems to be a bit more than just a bunch of pieces. If you remove a piece from your body, then it’s not part of you (or your body) any more. You go get a haircut, and afterward you look down on the floor. “Oh no, part of me is on the floor!” Do you ever have that reaction? No? You walk in, it was part of you. You walk out, it’s not part of you. How did it become not part of you?

Think about your red Corvette (I assume you have a red Corvette). If you remove one of the wheels, is it still a red Corvette? What if you remove all 4 wheels? Remove the steering wheel? The seats? Is it still a red Corvette? What if you pull the engine? Drop the transmission? Remove the driveshaft and differential? What if you disconnected everything that can be disconnected? Is that pile of parts still a red Corvette? If not, where did it go? At exactly what point did all those parts stop being a red Corvette and

become just a bunch of parts? “Red Corvette” is just a handy designation for that pile of parts assembled in a specific way, but there is no intrinsic red Corvette. Your body is just like that! The only way your body differs from the red Corvette is that your body's parts are far less easily replaced.*

You can sense a cool breeze when one blows on you; but no, that’s not you. What’s going on here? Where are we drawing the lines? How are we creating these individual things out of this whole, ever-flowing process? How do we get caught in the mistake of “thingifying” the world, when it’s just a bunch of interacting, interdependent processes?

In the next chapter we will apply a similar analysis to the concept of Self. After all, this is the concept that gets us into the most trouble, what with its craving and clinging.

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The translations in this chapter are based on a literal English translation of Nāgārjuna by Stephen Batchelor that I adapted with his permission into what is hopefully a more readable form than the very terse, enigmatic literal Nāgārjuna.

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* The idea of disassembling a vehicle to illustrate emptiness was originally taught by the nun Vajirā in SN 5.10 with reference to a chariot.

The Middle Way – Emptiness of Self

You are not the same as or different from
Conditions on which you depend;
You are neither severed from
Nor forever fused with them.
-- MMK, Chapter 18

Where emptiness gets really interesting is when Nāgārjuna analyzes the concept of the "Self" (MMK 18).

If the aggregates were me,
Then I would arise and pass away like them.
If I was something else,
Why would the aggregates say anything about me?

Suppose you start looking for your self. Are you your body? Well, you change out most of your cells within seven years. Does that mean you're somebody different every seven years? You certainly don't look like you looked when you were ten years old, but there does seem to be some sort of continuity. Perhaps you're your mind. Maybe you're the consciousness; you're the part that knows it's me. But that keeps changing as well, and it disappears every night when you're in deep dreamless sleep. Yet, if you are something other than these, then your body and the mind wouldn't say anything about you.

There is no "mine"
When there is no me.
To pacify me and mine,
grasping at me and at mine must cease.

If you're conceiving of a self, then you're also conceiving of a self in terms of what it possesses. If you're conceiving of possessions, you're making a self that possesses these possessions, the clinger, the craver, the owner.

> If I don't conceive of a self,
> I would not think of me and mine –
> Me and mine arise only
> With reference to a self."

This is the Buddha's strategy, to make a "breakthrough in consciousness" so that you're no longer conceiving of a self. Then there's nobody there to think of me and mine.

> When I cease thinking
> "What is inside is me,
> What is outside is mine – "
> Clinging ceases, liberation dawns.

How many times do we do that? Inside it's me, outside it's mine. Without self-reference, the tendency to crave and cling, to do unwholesome acts, selfish acts – is automatically dropped. There is no more basis for these things. Actions with self at the center often leads to doing the same things over and over again – yet those repeated actions don't bring lasting happiness. But we continue to do them with the hope that if we do it just one more time, it will bring that happiness. Stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. But that's how we too often live our lives, it seems – grasping after me and mine.

> *Papañca* generates thoughts
> That lead to compulsive acts –
> *Papañca* is stopped by emptiness.

Remember from The Honeyball Sutta chapter, papañca refers to mental proliferation, that tendency of the mind to think a thought, and then the next thought, and the next thought, and the next thought. This tendency is to just go on and on and on, and a whole universe shows up in your mind. And it's all just stuff we're thinking up.

Papañca spawns thoughts that lead to compulsive acts. Once upon a time, a woman asked her husband to go to the market and get some potatoes. “Yes, dear.” As he gets up to leave for the market, she says, “And be sure and get a good price.” “Yes dear.” He's walking to the market and he's thinking, “Well, I've got to get a good price for the potatoes, but I've also got to get good potatoes. She won't like it if I come home with no-good potatoes. You can get bad potatoes for a good price; and you can get good potatoes for a bad price; but getting good potatoes for a good price, that's difficult. It means you've got to be really careful, because those potato sellers, they'll put some bad potatoes at the bottom; you think you're getting good potatoes and you get home and there's a bunch of bad potatoes and you paid too much for them. Sometimes there's a rotten potato in there. I hate those rotten potatoes; they stink.” At that point, he arrives at the market and screams at the potato seller, “You can keep your rotten potatoes!” and walks off. This is papañca: a whole universe is created that's nothing but thought. We do this all the time. Emptiness stops papañca. This is how the realization of emptiness can bring us freedom.

> Buddhas teach about 'self'
> And also teach about 'not self'
> And also teach 'neither self nor not-self.'

On the conventional level, there's a self. When the Buddha is teaching Brahmā Vihāra practices,* for example in DN 13, MN 52, AN 3.65, he's talking in terms of selves. Sometimes though, the Buddha needs to point

out there's not really a self to be found – like in the “Discourse on Not-Self” at SN 22.59. Other times he says there's nothing which is either a self or not, which is what we were seeing in the Kaccānagotta Sutta in the chapter Without Concepts of Existence or Non-Existence.[1]

> “When things dissolve,
> There's nothing left to say.
> The unborn and unceasing
> Are already free.”

This is pointing at Nibbāna, which is “Nirvana” in Sanskrit.

> “When things dissolve,
> There's nothing left to say.”

When things, saṅkhāras – concoctions, fabrications – dissolve, when you stop concocting, there's nothing left to say. When you stop making fabrications out of this effervescent flow of dependently arising processes and phenomena, there's nothing left to say. We have arrived at an understanding beyond words.

> “The unborn and unceasing
> Are already free.”

If you're not thingifying the world, there are no things being born and there are no things that are going to cease. It's already free, all of it. You've just got to quit concocting all these individual entities, conceiving of them existing – or not existing, especially this entity of me.

> “Buddha said: 'it is real,'
> And 'it is unreal,'
> And 'it is both real and unreal,'

> And 'it is neither one nor the other.'"

Depending on the situation and to whom the Buddha was speaking, he adjusted what he had to say. Remember he wasn't doing metaphysics, he was just trying to get people to practice.

> It is all at peace,
> Not conceptualizable by mental conceptualizing,
> Incommunicable,
> Inconceivable,
> Indivisible.

It's all at peace. The universe is unfolding in a lawful manner – which we call the law of cause and effect. You're attempting to papañca-ize it, think about it, decide how it all works, find the beginning of the universe, be able to explain everything, decide whether the soul is the same as the body or something else, or… on and on and on. But it just can't be done. It's already all at peace. None of your thinking is going to get you to the place where it's all at peace. What is actually happening is "Incommunicable," in the sense that you can't really describe in conventional terms what's going on at the ultimate level. We can use the conventional terms to point at what's going on at the ultimate level, but don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon. Don't get caught up in your concepts and think that your concepts are reality. They're just useful to help you see what's going on at a deeper level.

"Inconceivable." If you want to fully know exactly what's going on, you have to be able to conceive of the whole universe, but your brain ain't big enough. It can only take in bits and pieces, which is why we chop the universe up into pieces – called concepts – so we can manipulate it. To have a brain big enough to take in everything going on in the universe, well, you are going to need a brain the size of the whole universe. That's

going to be rather difficult. You cannot conceptualize the ultimate – because all concepts are conventional.

“Indivisible.” Any piece of the universe that you pick up is not a separate thing. John Muir stated this brilliantly: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”[2] It's all very much interconnected/interrelated.[†] There are no separate entities anywhere in the entire universe. We concoct separate entities; we thingify our experience, because that's the only way we can manage to deal with it. But it's all just SODAPI, and all those streams are entangled enough so it's impossible to divide up the universe into separate entities and have an accurate picture of what's actually happening. I said earlier that it's all verbs, but truth be told, there is only one verb: “Unfolding.” We could say “the universe is unfolding” but actually “the universe is” is superfluous; there's just Unfolding.

> “You are not the same as or different from
> Conditions on which you depend;
> You are neither severed from
> Nor forever fused with them –
> This is the deathless teaching
> Of buddhas who care for the world.”

This is really the heart of the matter. You are not the same as, or different from, all the dependently arising streams of processes that interact in making you, you. You're not the same as them, and yet, you're not different from them. You're not severed from them either; all the things that have gone on in your life that make you who you are – you can't just dump them; they're part of who you are. But you're not them. Nor are you forever fused with them – you're not stuck at that, and you're more than that.

Think of the lettuce of that last salad you ate. You are not severed from it,

in that the nourishment it provided is a part of you. Also you are not severed from the farm worker who picked that lettuce, nor from the truck drivers and grocery workers who made it available for you. Nor are you forever fused with that lettuce; it's gone and digested, it's made you who you are right now – at least to some small extent. But you will continue to change and grow; there is no static thing anywhere in the universe.

All these dependently arising processes are coming together to make the you that you experience, but you're not those dependently arising phenomena, yet you're not separate from them either. You are the point where they all coalesce at this moment in time. When you can step outside the confines of existence and non-existence, all this is much easier to experience and understand.

The above verse, more than anything else I encountered, was the basis for SODAPI. The more I reflected on this verse, the more I could see all those streams interacting and intersecting at the point I call “me.” This is the way to the deathless – there is nobody here to die. Stop identifying with this intersection point of all these streams that we are neither severed from nor forever fused with.

> “When buddhas don't appear
> And their followers are gone,
> The wisdom of awakening
> Bursts forth by itself.”

This is pointing to the fact that the truth is out there. If the Buddha is not around to give you the instructions, and even if his followers aren't around to give you instructions, it is possible to figure it out yourself; you've just got to pay careful enough attention. I have to admit though – I'd have never figured this out without the Buddha's help! I'm glad he left some instructions around.

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The verses in this chapter that are enclosed in quotes are from **Verses from the Center**, by Stephen Batchelor. It's a poetic translation of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. It's not literally accurate, but it does capture the essence of what Nāgārjuna is trying to say. If you really want to study Nāgārjuna, as a start, I would suggest you get a copy of Batchelor's book and read it a dozen times. Batchelor really does a brilliant job of making Nāgārjuna's teaching accessible. The verses not in quotes are again my adaptations from Stephen Batchelor's literal English translation of the MMK, done with his permission.

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* Loving-kindness (Mettā), Compassion (Karuṇā), Appreciative Joy (Muditā) and Equanimity (Upekkhā)

† "Interconnected" would imply that everything is connected to everything else. "Interrelated" means that everything is connected to enough other things so that all the connections yield chains of connections from any one thing to all other things. Given these definitions, "interrelated" more closely matches the way the world is constructed.

1. Tsongkhapa in his *Ocean of Reasoning*, which is a commentary on the MMK, makes the same point at section 325.

2. John Muir, **My First Summer in the Sierra**, https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/my_first_summer_in_the_sierra/

The Middle Way – Emptiness and Dependent Origination

Dependent origination is emptiness
Which, dependently configured,
Is the middle way.
Everything is dependently originated;
Everything is empty.
-- MMK, Chapter 24

The next chapter we will examine is MMK 24. In some translations it is entitled “The Four Noble Truths” and in others “Awakening.” It starts with an imaginary opponent, a complainer, lashing into Nāgārjuna for corrupting the Dharma. “By saying that everything is empty, you're saying there are no Noble Truths, that nobody can ever become awakened.” The opponent is thinking that emptiness means that nothing exists. He misunderstands emptiness; he's thinking of it as nihilism. This sometimes happens when people are trying to understand what the Buddha is talking about. For example, some people think that when a fully awakened one dies, they don't come back; they get annihilated. Right? No. This is not what the Buddha said, but that's what some seem to believe.[1] This opponent is saying, “You're corrupting the Dharma, your emptiness is nihilism.” Nāgārjuna's response:

“We say that this understanding of yours
Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
As a consequence you are harmed by it.

> The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
> Is based on two truths:
> A truth of worldly convention
> And an ultimate truth."

This is one of the early elucidations of the doctrine of the two truths. You find hints of the two truths in the suttas,[2] but it's not spelled out like it's spelled out in "The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way." Nāgārjuna says there are two truths – conventional truths of the world, which in the original Sanskrit actually means something like "truths that don't fully reveal," or "truths that leave something hidden." Then there are the truths which are ultimate. We usually say "relative" and "absolute" or "conventional" and "ultimate." But, remember, the first of these are truths that don't give you the full explanation; that's what the conventional world is. It's true, these are my eyeglasses; they're not yours, right? But that doesn't really explain what's going on at the deepest level.

> "Those who do not understand
> The distinction drawn between these two truths
> Do not understand
> The Buddha's profound truth."

It's actually necessary to understand that there are these two perspectives, and to understand how the perspectives differ.

> "Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
> The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught."

We need fingers to point at the moon – okay maybe not the moon, but the Andromeda Galaxy. Almost none of us are sharp enough to look up into the night sky and pick out the Andromeda Galaxy without a little help or some earlier teaching. So we need teachings that have to be presented in the

relative world, using relative words and ideas and concepts. But hopefully these become just fingers that point to the sublime truth.

> “Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
> Liberation is not achieved.”

The freedom from dukkha, the breakthrough to awakening, occurs when you're looking at the world from the perspective of the ultimate. The perspective of the relative just has too much hidden to enable you to make that breakthrough.

Sometimes people want to make the ultimate truths supplant the conventional truths. But this is not possible; remember these are truths seen from different perspectives, which doesn't necessarily mean one set of truths is true and the other set is false. Consider a bowl, an ordinary soup bowl. Is it concave or convex? Come on, which is it? These are opposites, how could it be both? Well, it depends on your perspective. If you want to put soup in that bowl, you better take the concave perspective. If you want to use that bowl to elevate a candle, you need the convex perspective. Both concave and convex apply to the bowl, even though they are opposites.

It's the same with the conventional and the ultimate truths. Sometimes, you need the conventional perspective, such as when crossing the street. You can't look down that street, see a bus coming, and say “It's empty,” step in front of it, and not get run over. Conventional truths do have their uses – I put on my shoes when I leave the meditation hall, not yours – it just makes things go better. But because the truths seen from the conventional perspective don't fully reveal what's going on, we at times must look from the ultimate perspective. The truths seen from that perspective are the ones that lead us to liberation.

> “By a misperception of emptiness

A person of little intelligence is destroyed."

Like the guy at the beginning of this chapter who was complaining about nihilism.

"Like a snake incorrectly seized
Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

For that reason—that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult to understand and to learn—
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it."

Only a few have little dust in their eyes. You, Mr. Complainer, you've got lots of dust in your eyes.

"You have presented fallacious refutations
That are not relevant to emptiness.
Your confusion about emptiness
Does not belong to me.

Those for whom emptiness is possible,
For them everything is possible.
Those for whom emptiness is not possible,
For them everything is not possible."

What Nāgārjuna is saying here is that emptiness – the fact that everything is dependently originated – makes things possible. Things have their causes and conditions; they can actually change. If there were no emptiness, if everything had an essence – click, it's frozen into that essence and it's always that way. Nothing would ever change. You better hope you were in a good mood when that happened!

"When you foist on us
All of your errors
You are like a man who has mounted his horse
And has forgotten that very horse."

This is a reference to a man who had two dozen horses. He goes out one morning and mounts one of his horses, and he goes around counting his horses, "One, two, three, four…twenty-two, twenty-three – Twenty-three! Oh, no, someone's stolen one of my horses!" He forgets to count the horse he's riding.

"If you perceive the existence of all things
In terms of their essence,
Then this perception of all things
Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.

Effects and causes
And agent and action
And conditions and arising and ceasing
And effects will be rendered impossible."

Things have to be like that – to have an essence means to have some aspect that has always been there. But if something arises from causes and conditions, that means it can't have an essence – because if it had an essence, then it would be there before it arose, which makes no sense at all. And because it doesn't have an essence, it will cease.

Then comes what most scholars consider to be the heart of the whole *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*:

"Whatever is dependently co-arisen

That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way."

Nāgārjuna is not only equating dependent origination with emptiness, but furthermore pointing out that emptiness is also empty. It's just a concept we're using to try to understand what's going on. Don't make an ultimate out of emptiness. In Jay Garfield's commentary to the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, he says that Nāgārjuna is basically climbing up higher and higher; and as he gets to each level, he kicks away the ladder. He climbs up to the next level, and he kicks away the ladder. And he gets up to the highest level, and he kicks away that ladder as well.[3] It's all empty.

Stephen Batchelor translates the verse above slightly differently:

"Dependent origination is emptiness
Which, dependently configured,
Is the middle way.
Everything is dependently originated;
Everything is empty."

When you hear teachings on emptiness, what you are hearing is teachings on dependent origination. The universe is just these streams of causes and conditions coming to fruition, and we are part of the continuation of these streams of causes and conditions as our actions come to fruition as well. The whole of the universe is nothing but SODAPI – Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting.

We have now arrived at the key point – the intersection, the simultaneity, the identity, of dependent origination and emptiness.

"Something that is not dependently arisen,

> Such a thing does not exist.
> Therefore a nonempty thing
> Does not exist."

Or restating this more simply:

> "Everything is dependently originated;
> Everything is empty."

There's a good bit more to this chapter addressing all of the Complainer's objections in detail, but we'll skip most of the rest of this chapter. The chapter concludes with the following:

> To see dependent origination is to see
> dukkha, its origins, cessation, and the path.

As I mentioned in the chapter on Necessary Conditions, the Four Noble Truths are a summary of some of the key points of dependent origination. If you're seeing dependent origination, you're able to see the Four Noble Truths.

There's one last point in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* that we really want to address. The chapter after "The Four Noble Truths/Awakening" is entitled "Nirvana" (MMK 25). "Nirvana" is Sanskrit and is the same as "Nibbāna" in Pāli. The bulk of this chapter is demonstrating that Nirvana/Nibbāna is also empty – it too is dependently originated. This is actually quite important – Nibbāna is said in the suttas to be unchanging.[*] Also Nirvana cannot have ontological existence either – if it did and was unchanging, you would never get to partake of it because it wouldn't change to let you in. So Nirvana/Nibbāna is a realization – and what is realized is unchanging. So what is it that is realized?

Towards the end of this chapter on Nirvana, Nāgārjuna says:

> Saṃsāra is no different from nirvana,
> Nirvana no different from saṃsāra.
> Saṃsāra's limits are nirvana's:
> There is not even the slightest difference between them.

Basically he is saying, "This – this world right here – is Nibbāna," **if** you can see it with the eyes of a Buddha. "This same world is saṃsāra" **if** you see it with eyes of craving and clinging. So how do we see the world from the nirvana perspective? What exactly are we looking for? We will address this in the next 3 chapters as we look at what several suttas say about Nibbāna.

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Most of the translations in this chapter are from **The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way**, by Jay Garfield. After you have worked with Batchelor's **Verses From the Center** and read it multiple times, then if you want to look in depth at exactly what Nāgārjuna was saying, you should work with Garfield's book which has a very helpful commentary as well as an excellent, more literal translation. The last two of the verses above (the ones without quotes) are my own translations.

Of course, all this is just my own understanding. You're going to need to explore this material and make it your own. This is hopefully only whetting your appetite to look at the world in terms of these Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting. Can you see that's what's going on? When you get caught in an unpleasant mind state for example, can you look back and see, "Oh, this is what the sensory input was that triggered it, and that sensory input was triggered by ..., and that was triggered by ...," and can you start seeing the SODAPI coming at you. This can take you in the

direction of freedom. Hopefully, this can help you realize that dependent origination is a very rich vein to mine, a very good place to investigate.

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* “All saṅkhāra are *anicca*, all saṅkhāra are *dukkha*, all dhammā are *anattā*,” – from Dhammapada Verses 277, 278 and 279. So what's the difference between “all saṅkhārā” (all created things) and “all dhammā (all phenomena)?” – Nibbāna, according to Ven. Walpola Rahula Thera. See his book **What the Buddha Taught**, page 57. Nibbāna is not anicca and not dukkha, *i.e.* Nibbāna is unchanging and never a bummer. But also it is without a 'self' or essence.

1. E.g. SN 22.85

2. E.g. DN 9.53, SN 1.25

3. **The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way**, translated by Jay L. Garfield, pp 304-307

Nibbāna – as Described In Udāna 8

> *There is without birth, without beings, without made things, without fabricated things.* Ud 8.3

What is this Nibbāna/Nirvana that we spoke of in the previous chapter, what does it look like? In this and the next two chapters, we will look at several suttas that give hints as to what this is – and how to approach it.

The first several suttas come from the Udāna. The Udāna is a collection in the Khuddaka Nikāya, the same volume in which you find the Sutta Nipāta. "Udāna" means "exclamation" or "inspired utterance," and all these suttas have a prose part. Then at the end of each prose part the Buddha utters an exclamation which is always in verse form. At times, scholars indicate that some of the verses were probably composed earlier than the prose parts. For some of the suttas, the prose is a very nice lead-in to the verses; for some of the suttas, there seems to be very little relationship between the prose and the verses. Sometimes the verses are very, very good even though the lead-in had nothing to do with them. For the suttas from the Udāna we'll discuss in this and the next chapter, the lead-in prose and the verses do fit quite well together.

First is Udāna 8.1. "Thus I have heard. Once the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. On that occasion the Blessed One was instructing, rousing, inspiring and gladdening the bhikkhus with a Dhamma talk connected with Nibbāna. Those bhikkhus being receptive and attentive and concentrating the whole mind were intent on listening to Dhamma."

"Then on realizing its significance, the Blessed One uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance: 'There is, bhikkhus, that base* where there

is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base of infinite space, no base of infinite consciousness; no base of no-thingness, no base of perception nor non-perception; neither this world nor another world, nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no decreasing, no increasing; not fixed, not moveable, it has no support. Just this is the end of dukkha.'"

The first thing here is: no earth, water, fire, air – no four elements. Then, no four higher jhānas: infinite space, infinite consciousness, no-thingness, neither perception or non-perception. So no rūpa and no arūpa, *i.e.* no materiality, no immateriality. Neither this world nor another world, nor both. It's not this world, it's not someplace else, and it's not both this world and someplace else. Neither sun nor moon. "'Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no decreasing, no increasing; not fixed, not moveable, it has no support. Just this is the end of dukkha.'" It seems to be without opposites. It's an experience of – to use the word we use in modern times – non-duality. Thus the Buddha is describing Nibbāna as non-dual. What does that mean? Well, that's the whole sutta, so keep this non-duality in mind and we'll continue to explore.

In the same collection, at Ud 8.2, again the Buddha is at Savatthi giving a Dhamma talk on Nibbāna. The prose is exactly the same as the previous sutta, and then the Buddha gives this inspired utterance:

> "The uninclined is hard to see
> The truth is not easy to see
> Craving is penetrated by one who knows
> For one who sees there is no thing, nothing."[1]

That's John D. Ireland's translation. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has:

> "It's hard to see the unaffected,

For the truth is not easily seen,
Craving is pierced
In one who knows;
For one who sees,
There is nothing."[2]

The key point is that there is no thing. But remember this is not the base of no-thingness, *i.e.*, this is not the same as the seventh jhāna. This is something quite different, and it's very hard to see: it's hard to see the unaffected or the uninclined. It's hard to rest your mind in this non-dual state.

So far this hasn't really led to a lot of understanding of what Nibbāna is. The problem we encounter in the sutta descriptions of Nibbāna is that they are all rather cryptic. This is due to trying to describe the indescribable; mostly all the Buddha can do is hint at what Nibbāna is not.

Udāna 8.3 is probably the most famous description of Nibbāna found in the suttas. Again, the Buddha is at Savatthi, giving a Dhamma talk on Nibbāna, the monks are listening, all the same as before, and then the Buddha gives this inspired utterance:

> "There is, bhikkhus, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned. If, bhikkhus, there were no not-born, not-brought-to-being, not-made, not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned. But since there is a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned."[3]

You might have heard of Nibbāna referred to as "the unconditioned." Both words are wrong in such a translation: both "the" and "unconditioned". Pāli doesn't have any articles, there's no "a", "an", or "the". Another translation

only says there is “an unborn, unmade, unbecome, unfabricated,” there's still that “an” at the front of it.[4] This “a,” “an” or “the” creates a tendency for us to think of it as a thing. This leads to people thinking of “the unconditioned” or “an unconditioned,” as having ontological existence – that is, it’s a real thing.

The tooth fairy doesn’t have ontological existence – it’s just a concept. Your body does have ontological existence – it's not just a concept. Some people would like to make Nibbāna an ontological thing, something that truly exists. We even find some contemporary people basically talking about Nibbāna as another heaven. It’s not one of the thirty-one realms of existence described in some of the later suttas,[5] but it’s said to be out there; and furthermore when one become fully awakened, one can enter into it. The thought often expressed seems to be that when one dies as an arahant, one gets to go live there forever. Thus, Nibbāna has been converted into something very much like the Christian idea of heaven. This is not what the suttas are saying at all. But this mistake seems to arise due to inaccurate translations; the mistake results from “the unconditioned.”

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, there’s a very serious problem with giving Nibbāna ontological existence. Nibbāna doesn’t change. If Nibbāna is a thing or a place, and it doesn’t change, and it doesn’t include you right now, you’re on the outside forever, 'cause it ain’t going to change to let you in. You better hope Nibbāna doesn’t have ontological existence, because unless you’re fully awakened right now, unless you’re fully within Nibbāna right now, you’re stuck on the outside. Making it seem to have ontological existence by adding the “the” is a source of much confusion and immortality project creating.

“Unconditioned” is the common translation of the word “asaṅkhata.” But “unconditioned” makes it seem like Nibbāna is not dependently originated. However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, Nāgārjuna makes an

excellent case that Nibbāna is also empty. This matches Dhammapada Verse 279 which says "all dhammā (which includes Nibbāna) are "anattā," literally "not self." Since "dhammā" includes all phenomena, whether alive or not, "anattā" more generally would mean "coreless" or "without an essence" or "empty" – thus "dependently originated." So "unconditioned" is exactly the opposite of what "asaṅkhata" means with respect to Nibbāna. More on this point follows.

The initial "a" in "asaṅkhata" means "not" or "without," and "saṅkhata" is the past participle of the verb form associated with "saṅkhāra." Remember that a saṅkhāra is something that's created or made or fabricated or concocted. Better translations of asaṅkhata, rather than "unconditioned," would be Thanissaro Bhikkhu's "unfabricated" and Santikaro's "unconcocted." These are really good, because who's the concocter/fabricator? We are; we're busy concocting the things of the world. We're concocting some chunks of wood, all stuck together, as a table; and when we concoct a table, we miss seeing the trees and the sunlight and the rain and the minerals in the earth, and the birds that lived in the trees, and the insects that were eaten by the birds, and the woodsmen that cut down the trees, and somebody who milled it into the form of the table. But it may come to pass that you need to concoct it as something other than a table – what if you desperately need some fire wood? You could concoct it as a source of firewood rather than a table. If there's a flood it might become a raft. We definitely have this tendency to conceive of things in a certain way, and we fixate on them as though they are and were always like that.

Asaṅkhata – unconcocted, unfabricated – would be not doing that, not fixating on concepts. Literally this Pāli description of Nibbāna would translate as "without birth" (ajāta), "without beings" (abhūta), "without made things" (akata), and "without formed things" (asaṅkhata)[6] – as opposed to our usual way of experiencing the world, with birth, beings,

made things, and formed things. Does this remind you of the non-duality we found in the verses of Ud 8.1 just above?

When you look at the universe you find everything is dependent on other things – nothing exists independently. Earlier we saw that there really aren't any nouns – it's all verbs. It's just that some verbs are moving kind of slow. Even further, it's not actually a bunch of different verbs; there is really only "unfolding." Can you step out of concocting things and experience the bigger picture? If so, you begin to get a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he is talking about Nibbāna. It's getting beyond fixating on things. Furthermore, stepping beyond saṅkhāra we have overcome the ignorance of ignoring the much bigger picture of the vastly interrelated world. It's out of ignorance (avijjā) that we concoct all the seemingly separate bits and pieces of reality. This more clearly explains the first pair of links of the twelve link model – saṅkhāras arise dependent on ignorance.

If you remember back to the chapter The Noble Quest, there were two "important things" that needed to be understood. The first one is this-that conditionality, dependent origination. The second important thing at MN 26.19, which is also difficult to understand, is "namely, the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna."

Now we can understand "stilling of all fabrications" as asaṅkhata – unconcocted, unfabricated – not fixating on concepts. The "relinquishing of all acquisitions" is not clinging. "The destruction of craving" is the end of craving. These lead to dispassion – not having our minds colored by being lost in our concepts. They lead to cessation – of dukkha; to nibbāna – liberation. Notice that, although the first "important thing" – this-that conditionality, dependent origination – does have metaphysical implications as a side effect, this second "important thing" is all about

upgrading your behavior due to the insights gained from a deep understanding of the first “important thing.”

So how do we get there? There’s another sutta in the Udāna that gives us an actual practice to do. We will examine the fairly famous Bāhiya Sutta in the next chapter.

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* The word “base” is a translation of *āyatana*, which we encountered earlier as *salāyatanā* referring to the Six Senses in the twelve link model of dependent origination. *Āyatana* refers to both sense organs and sense objects – but there is no single English word that covers both of these meanings. Sometimes *āyatanāni* is translated as “sense bases” to try to capture both meanings. Here “base/*āyatana*” would be like a sound or a smell, which are sense objects – but here, the sense objects are one of the four elements or one of the four immaterial states.

1. **Nibbāna Sutta: Parinibbana (2)**, translated from the Pāli by John D. Ireland, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.02.irel.html

2. **Nibbāna Sutta: Unbinding (2)**, translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.02.than.html

3. **Nibbāna Sutta: PariNibbāna (3)**, translated from the Pāli by John D. Ireland, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.03.irel.html

4. **Nibbāna Sutta: Unbinding (3)**, translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.03.than.html

5. For more information see the Introduction to Walshe's translation of the **Dīgha Nikāya**, pp 37-46.

6. Norman, 1994, pg 38

Nibbāna – as Described in the Bāhiya Sutta

> *You should train yourself thus: in seeing, there will merely be seeing; in hearing there will merely be hearing; in sensing there will merely be sensing; in cognizing there will merely be cognizing.* Ud 1.10

The Bāhiya Sutta occurs in the first book of the Udāna and it's the 10th sutta in that book, Udāna 1.10.

"*Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was living in Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Now at that time Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was living at Supparaka by the seashore. He was honored as a holy man and had no trouble obtaining alms food, robes, lodgings, and medicine when he was ill.*"

The question arises: why was this holy man wearing bark cloth? The commentaries tell that he was a ship-wrecked sailor who washed up naked at Supparaka, which would be near today's Mumbai. They say he found some bark to cover his nakedness, and when people saw this, they thought he was a holy man and started giving him food, lodgings, *etc*.[1] But the commentaries were written many centuries after this story takes place and in a different culture – and the authors actually had no idea what happened. Most likely, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was a devotee of the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad, one of the earliest of the Upanishads. The Upanishads are Vedic teachings that originated a century, or maybe more, before the Buddha. The Vedas themselves are quite ancient, but the later literature in that tradition were these Upanishads. And the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad, one of the earliest ones, makes a big deal about trees.[2] So Bāhiya is dressed like a tree because of his devotion to the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad.

"*Then one day, the thought arose in Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, 'Am I an arahant, or am I at least on the way to arahantship?' Then a deva, who was a relative of Bāhiya's in a former life, overheard this thought of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth. This deva came to Bāhiya and said: 'Bāhiya, you are not an arahant, and furthermore you do not practice a path that could lead to arahantship.'*"

"*Then Bāhiya said to that deva: 'Well, who in this world is an arahant or knows a path to arahantship?' And that deva replied: 'In a far country, in the kingdom of Kosala, near the town of Savatthi, there is the Buddha, the perfectly awakened one. He is an arahant and he teaches a path to arahantship.'*"

"*Then Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth set his lodging in order, and immediately departed for Savatthi. He stopped for only one night at each place along the way."* In other words he went directly there; he'd go as far as he could in the day, he would sleep for the night, get up the next day and keep going – he didn't take any rest days.[3] He had *saṃvega* – spiritual urgency. Eventually, he arrived at Savatthi, and went to Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

"*When he arrived there, he saw a number of monks doing walking meditation. He went up to those monks and inquired: 'Venerable sirs, where is the Buddha, where is the Blessed One, the fully awakened one, the arahant?' Those monks said to Bāhiya: 'The Blessed One has gone into town on alms round.' Straight away Bāhiya left Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park and headed into Savatthi to find the Buddha.*"

It wasn't long before he encountered the Buddha. He recognized him by his clear, bright countenance and perhaps by the large number of monks following along behind as he went on alms round. Bāhiya immediately rushed forward and threw himself at the Buddha's feet and said: "*Teach me*

Dhamma, O Blessed One! Teach me Dhamma that it might be for my benefit for a long time."

"*The Buddha replied: 'It is an unsuitable time, Bāhiya, we have entered among the houses for almsfood.'*" At that time, if someone got their food by going on alms round there was a limited time window in which they were able to obtain alms food. People didn't have alms food available all day. They would do their cooking in the morning, with some extra cooked for any recluse or beggar that came by. Then when all that was gone and they had eaten their own meal, that was the end of the alms food. If you approached someone who got their food by going on alms round and requested a teaching, then if they stopped and gave you a teaching, they might not eat that day. So Bāhiya is told it's not an appropriate time.

"*Bāhiya replied: 'Teach me Dhamma, O Blessed One, teach me Dhamma! It is uncertain how long I will live. It is uncertain how long the Blessed One will live. Teach me Dhamma so it will be for my benefit for a long time.'*"

"*And again the Buddha replied: 'It is an unsuitable time, Bāhiya, we have entered among the houses for almsfood.'*"

"*And a third time Bāhiya said: 'Teach me Dhamma, O Blessed One, teach me Dhamma! It is uncertain how long I will live; it is uncertain how long the Blessed One will live. Teach me Dhamma, O Blessed One so that it will be for my benefit for a long time.'*" Sometimes if you ask a Buddha three times really nicely, he might grant your wish.

"'*Herein, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: in seeing, there will merely be seeing; in hearing, there will merely be hearing; in sensing, there will merely be sensing; in cognizing, there will merely be cognizing.*[*] *In this way you should train yourself, Bāhiya. When, Bāhiya, for you in seeing there is merely seeing, in hearing there is merely hearing, in sensing there*

is merely sensing, and in cognizing there is merely cognizing, then Bāhiya, you will not be with that. When, Bāhiya, you are not with that, then Bāhiya, you will not be in that. When, Bāhiya, you are not in that, then Bāhiya, you will be neither here, nor beyond, nor between the two. Just this is the end of dukkha.'"

"*Through this brief Dhamma teaching by the Blessed One the mind of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was immediately freed from the āsavas (the intoxicants).*[†] *Then the Blessed One, having instructed Bāhiya with this brief instruction, went away.*"

Why did the Buddha give this particular teaching to Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth? And why did it have such a profound effect? The Bark-cloth clothing marked Bāhiya as a serious follower of the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad. So the Buddha could tell that Bāhiya would be familiar with this Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad teaching:

> "The unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the uncognized cognizer... There is no other seer but he, no other hearer, no other thinker, no other cognizer. This is thy self, the inner controller, the immortal...."[4]

And that he would also be familiar with:

> "... that imperishable is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the ununderstood understander. Other than it there is naught that sees. Other than it there is naught that hears. Other than it there is naught that thinks. Other than it there is naught that understands...."[5]

The Buddha, as he often does, takes something his questioner is familiar with and gives it a subtle but profound twist: there's no Ātman, there's just seeing, just hearing, *etc*. The Buddha knows Bāhiya's practice, and he knows Bāhiya has been looking at his seeing trying to find the unseen seer;

listening to his hearing for the unheard hearer, *etc*. So he says to him: “No, in seeing let there just be seeing; in hearing just hearing; in sensing just sensing; in cognizing just cognizing.” When you can do that, when there’s just seeing, not seeing an object, just seeing, then there’s no you in that, there’s no you in this, there’s no you in between – meaning there’s no subject-object duality. Just this is the end of dukkha.

“*Not long after the Blessed One’s departure, a cow with a young calf attacked Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth and killed him.*” This seems to have been a common hazard at that time. Today it would be as if someone went to their weekly meditation group, and on the way home a drunk driver ran a red light and killed them. Only they didn’t have drunk drivers back then; they had cows with calves – and there were no fences, just like today in India. You can imagine Bāhiya is walking along and in seeing, he's just seeing – there’s a cow over on the left, there’s a calf on the left, there’s another cow over on the right, the assumption of course is that calf on the left goes with that cow on the left. Bāhiya walks between that calf on the left and that cow on the right – which is the real mama and oops, he’s done in.

I say this is a common hazard because Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was not the only person mentioned as being killed by a cow with a calf. There was the former king of Taxila, who renounced his kingship and traveled to Rājagaha to become a Buddhist monk. He actually encountered the Buddha one night in a potter’s shed, and the Buddha gave him a discourse during which he attained the third level of awakening. But before he could reach final arahantship, he was killed by a cow with calf.[6] There’s also the story of Suppabuddha the leper, who saw a large gathering of people. Thinking it may be a free distribution of food, he went to the gathering; but no, it was just someone giving a talk, but Suppabuddha sat down to listen anyhow. It was the Buddha, and he gave a Dhamma talk – and Suppabuddha the leper attained the first level of awakening. But he too was killed by a cow with

calf.[7] One of the Vinaya stories talks about the public executioner in King Pasenadi's kingdom of Kosala with its capital at Savatthi. This executioner was also killed by a cow with calf.

The commentaries, bless their little hearts, say it was all the same cow – despite the fact that these took place in widely separated areas. Supposedly, in a previous life these four guys had hired a courtesan, had their way with her, and then killed her. Now she had come back as a cow and killed them.[8] Be careful when studying the Commentaries. A cow with calf just was a hazard at that time, and poor Bāhiya got caught in the hazard.

"*When the Blessed One, having walked for alms food in Savatthi was returning from alms round with a number of bhikkhus, on departing from the town, he saw that Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth had died. Seeing this he said to the bhikkhus, 'Bhikkhus, take Bāhiya's body, put it on a litter, carry it away, burn it and make a stupa for it. Your companion in the holy life has died.' 'Very well, Venerable Sir,' those bhikkhus replied to the Blessed One, and they did so. When they were done, they went to the Blessed One, prostrated themselves, sat down to one side and told him what they'd done, adding 'What is his destiny? What is his future birth?'*"

"'*Bhikkhus, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth was a wise man. He practiced according to the Dhamma and did not trouble me by disputing about Dhamma. Bhikkhus, Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth has attained final Nibbāna.' Then on realizing its significance, the Blessed One uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance:*

> *'Where neither water, nor earth, nor fire, nor air gain a foothold*
> *There gleam no stars, no sun sheds light*
> *There shines no moon, yet there no darkness reigns.*
>
> *When a sage, a brahman, has come to know this*

For themself through their own wisdom,
Then they are freed from form and formless,
Freed from pleasure, freed from pain.'"

As in Ud 8.1, we are going beyond the four elements – where water, earth, fire, and air gain no foothold. We are going beyond rūpa, going beyond projecting concepts of solid, liquid, gas, and energy onto the material world, going beyond light and dark, going beyond form and formless, one is freed from form, freed from formless. And also freed from pleasure, freed from pain. Just this is the end of dukkha.

Once again the Buddha is talking about what we now call non-duality. This non-duality initially is in respect to materiality – not concocting or fabricating in our minds tables and chairs and trees and cows and calves and everything else that is material. Then also not concocting light and dark, not even concocting pleasure and pain. Just this is the end of dukkha.

We are now beginning to get a sense that Nibbāna is a way of experiencing the world differently from the way we usually experience it. In this sutta, the Buddha gives a method that can enable us to begin to have these experiences. In seeing let there just be seeing, in hearing just hearing, in sensing just sensing, in cognizing just cognizing. If you can do that, if you can actually step into the non-dual state, if you can get beyond subject and object, then there is no you in that, no you in this, no you in between. There's nothing to grab hold of, there's no craving because there's no craver and nothing to be craved. Just this is the end of dukkha.

This Bāhiya practice is actually quite an important practice and is particularly good to do when going for a walk. Can you just walk along and just see seeing, and just hear hearing? In the sensing of the road or trail, there's just sensing. When it's going really well, it doesn't feel like you're walking along the road; when it's going really well, your sense of vision is

sort of bouncing a bit with each step, and the road is passing away underneath your vision, and that's all that is happening. There are sounds, but you don't identify them as a bird or anything else. You're not seeing that as a tree; there are just colored shapes in your visual field. There are just sounds, and there are physical sensations; and the whole thing is changing as you walk along. Now, step back a bit further to where there are not even colored shapes, not even sounds – just seeing and just hearing. It is possible to step out of the concocting, the fabricating that we are usually doing – our normal busting up the world into a whole bunch of bits and pieces. It's also possible to stop finding the best piece and saying it's me, and the second best piece is mine. When you can stop doing that, you stop doing the craving and clinging, and there's no more dukkha.

For more on this non-ordinary way of sensing the world, there's another sutta on this same point which we will examine in the next chapter.

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* The Pāli literally says "in seen, there will merely be seen; in heard, there will merely be heard; in sensed, there will merely be sensed; in cognized, there will merely be cognized." I have replaced the past participles with gerunds to make the instructions clearer in English. Unfortunately, you frequently find this translated "in the seen," *etc*. but as mentioned above, there are no articles in Pāli, so "the" is again, not only inaccurate, but also hides the actual meaning.

† As mentioned earlier, the āsavas are the intoxicants – we are intoxicated with sense pleasures, we are intoxicated with becoming, and we are intoxicated by ignorance.

1. **Dictionary of Pali Names** under "Bāhiya Dārucīriya" http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/b/baahiya.htm

2. Personal communication from John Peacock.

3. Sometimes this is mistranslated that he went all the way from Supparaka to Savatthi in the space of one day and night. No supernormal powers are needed – he just stopped for one night at each place along the way.

4. Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad 3.7.23

5. Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad 3.8.11

6. MN 140

7. Ud 5.3

8. **Dictionary of Pali Names** under “Suppabuddha” http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/s/suppabuddha.htm

Nibbāna – as Described in DN 11

Where consciousness is signless, limitless, and all-illuminating.
DN 11.85

The Kevaddha Sutta in the Long Discourses, the Dīgha Nikāya, is another sutta, like MN 38, that appears to have been created by joining two different discourses together. Both of the discourses that make up DN 11 were given to the layman Kevaddha, who lived in the city of Nalanda. Nalanda is just north of Rājagaha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha. The Buddha's chief disciple, Sāriputta, was a native of Nalanda. Nalanda was later the site of a famous Buddhist university which was destroyed in the Muslim invasion of the late twelfth-century CE.

"At this time Kevaddha came to the Buddha, saluted him, sat down at one side and said: 'Venerable Sir, this Nalanda is a prosperous place. It is full of rich people, much grain, lots of wealth. You should send some of your monks into town to perform miracles. If you do that, the people of Nalanda will be very impressed and they'll give you food, clothing, lodgings, and medicine if needed.'"

"The Buddha replied, 'Kevaddha, this is not how we teach the Dhamma. There are really only three miracles. There is the miracle of the supernormal powers.'" This refers to being one and becoming many, being many and becoming one, appearing and disappearing, walking on water, diving through the earth, passing through walls and ramparts unimpeded, flying cross-legged through the air – all the usual stuff. "'There are these supernormal powers, but as everyone knows there is the Gandhāra charm that allows anyone to do this. If the monks were to go into Nalanda and perform these sort of miracles, the people of Nalanda would say: 'Oh, they've got a Gandhāra charm.' No one would be particularly impressed.'"

“’There’s also a second miracle, and that’s knowing the minds of others. But if the monks were to go into town and perform mind reading, everyone knows that there’s the Manika charm. If you possess the Manika charm, then you can know the minds of others and people will just say: ‘Ah, they’ve got a Manika charm' and no one would be particularly impressed.’”

“’There is only one miracle that is actually impressive: the miracle of instruction. And what is the miracle of instruction? A Tathāgata arises in this world, a fully awakened Buddha who teaches the Dhamma which is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. Someone hears the Dhamma, gains confidence, goes forth, practices the precepts, guards the senses, is mindful of their activities, is content with little, abandons the hindrances, practices the jhānas, gains insight into the nature of reality, overcomes the āsavas, and becomes completely awakened. This is the miracle of instruction.’”

The series above (actually given in far more detail in the sutta) is the Gradual Training, which occurs in various forms in thirty different suttas.[1] It appears to be the curriculum of practice for the monks and nuns in the Buddha's monastic sangha. The Gradual Training is another example of the general principle of dependent origination,[*] with each item arising and becoming perfected dependent on the previous items.

This is the end of the first discourse in this sutta, which then continues with a quite different story. “’Once in this order, Kevaddha, there was a monk who wanted to know where the four elements – earth, water, fire, and air – cease without remainder. So he attained to such a great level of concentration that he was able to go to the lowest of the heavens, the Devas of the Four Great Kings. He went up to the devas there and said: ‘Excuse me good sirs, can you please tell me where the four elements cease without

remainder?' Those devas said to that monk: 'We don't know, but you should ask the Four Great Kings, they'll probably know.' So that monk increased his concentration and was able to reappear in the presence of the Four Great Kings. He went up to those Four Great Kings and said, 'Excuse me good sirs, can you tell me where the four elements cease without remainder?' And they said to him, 'We don't know. But if you ask the devas in the realm above this one, maybe they will know.'"

"So that monk increased his concentration and went up to the next realm. There he approached those devas…." You might guess how this story unfolds. Up and up he went through the heavens, at each level asking, "Where do the four elements cease without remainder?" And at each level, the devas replied, "We don't know, ask the guys upstairs." Up he went through the heavens, one after another until finally he reached the Retinue of Brahmā.

"He approaches those devas and asks, 'Excuse me good sirs, can you please tell me where the four elements cease without remainder?' And those devas said to him, 'We don't know. But you should ask Brahmā. He knows everything.' The monk asks, 'Where can I find this Brahmā?' 'Oh, no one knows where to find Brahmā.' 'Well, how can I ask him?' 'Sometimes, he shows up and then you can ask him.' 'Well, how will I know when he shows up?' 'Oh you'll know. There will be a bright light, and a sound like thunder, and lots of sweet smelling incense, and Brahmā will appear and announce himself.'"

"So that monk went over to a corner and sat down to meditate. It wasn't too long until there was a bright light, and a sound like thunder, and lots of sweet smelling incense, and Brahmā appeared and announced in a loud voice: 'I am Brahmā, Creator of the Universe, Lord of All. I know everything, I see everything.' That monk went up to him and said, 'Excuse me, sir. Can you tell me where the four elements cease without remainder?'

Brahmā replied, ‘I am Brahmā, Creator of the Universe, Lord of All. I know everything, I see everything.’“

“’I didn’t ask you who you were, you already told me that. Can you tell me where the four elements cease without remainder?’ ‘I am Brahmā, Creator of the Universe, Lord of All. I know everything, I see everything.’ ‘Look, you already told me that. Stop repeating yourself and just tell me where the four elements cease without remainder!’”

“Then Brahmā took that monk by the arm and led him aside and said, ‘These guys think I know everything. I don’t know where the four elements cease without remainder. But by the looks of you, you are a Buddhist monk. Why don’t you go ask the Buddha?’”

“So as quickly as a strong man could extend his arm or draw it back, that monk disappeared from the Brahmā realm and reappeared on earth. He went to the Blessed One, saluted him, sat down at one side, and said: ‘Venerable sir, where do the four elements cease without remainder?’ The Buddha replied, ‘You’ve been wandering around as far as the Brahmā realm asking this question. And now not finding it, you come back to me. But, monk, you should not ask your question in that way – where do the four elements cease without remainder? Instead, this is how the question should be put:

> Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find?
> Where do long and short, small and great, beautiful and ugly -
> Where do name-and-form completely come to an end?

And the answer is:

> Where consciousness is signless, limitless, and all-illuminating.

> That's where earth, water, fire and air no footing find.
> There both long and short, small and great, beautiful and ugly,
> there name-and-form all come to an end.
>
> With the cessation of consciousness, all this comes to an end."[†]

This is a bit cryptic. The wrong question is "Where do the four elements cease without remainder?" The right question is "Where do the four elements no footing find?" This harkens back to the verses after the Bāhiya sutta, where the Buddha says where the four elements no footing find, there dark and light don't occur. Here, he expands the teaching to say it's where consciousness is signless, limitless, and all-illuminating.

When you see a table, you're seeing the signs of a table. It's got a flat top and legs holding it up off the ground. That's how you know it's a table. You pick up the cues, the signs. So what does it mean that consciousness is signless? How about a consciousness that is, well, in seeing is just seeing, in hearing is just hearing, in sensing is just sensing, in cognizing is just cognizing? How about a consciousness that is not fabricating, not concocting a table, not giving birth to a table, not making this a table? It's a way of experiencing the world without fixating in any way on the objects or characteristics of any object being sensed – or on the one doing the sensing. It's looking at the world from a non-dual perspective.

Nibbāna is not a thing. It doesn't have ontological existence. It's a realization. It's a realization that there is nothing but streams of dependently originated processes interacting, without even making a thing out of the streams. If you concoct "stream," you still have not quite gotten all the way to the point. Every thing is not a thing, it's just dependent on other things which aren't things. It's a little hard to talk about. You can see why the Buddha says it's not this and it's not that.

It’s consciousness that is signless. But it's not just your ordinary open awareness – which is also a form of consciousness that is signless. Indeed open awareness/Bāhiya practice is certainly helpful in gaining this realization. But the realization of Nibbāna does seem to require a breakthrough to a much deeper understanding – an understanding that is so profound that it permanently changes the way you experience the world. The best totally inadequate simile I can offer is to ask you to remember what it was like when you found out there was no Santa Claus (apologies to those of you who never believed in Santa Claus – it is an inadequate simile). I remember I saw the world differently. There was fear – fear I wouldn't be getting any more of those really premium Christmas presents. But there was also a different way of seeing the world and of relating to the big guy in the red suit. The world wasn't any different, but I was. The breakthrough experience of Nibbāna is a realization so profound it permanently changes you and your relationship to the world. And a very important component of what is experienced is signless consciousness.’”[‡]

When consciousness is signless, it’s also limitless. There can’t be any limits because a limit would be a sign. You’re not concocting the end of this consciousness, it really is all-encompassing, and it’s all-illuminating. When viewing from this viewpoint, when realizing in this way, nothing is hidden. Everything is experienced to be dependent on other things. Nothing stands alone. And nothing is a thing, it’s all verbs, it’s all processes, but they aren’t individual processes. One gets this huge, giant picture of, I guess you could say, unfolding.

Not “the unfolding,” because that makes it a noun, a thing – there’s just unfolding. Can you experience the world like that? Can you experience the inconstant, unsatisfactory, empty nature of phenomena, without resorting to dualities or even signs? Then your consciousness is signless, limitless, and all-illuminating. That’s where earth, water, fire and air no footing find. There long and short, small and great, beautiful and ugly; there name-and-

form all come to an end.

The last line is really puzzling. “With the cessation of consciousness, all this comes to an end.” Does that mean you have to become unconscious? The usual explanation is that, at a path moment – a momentary experience of Nibbāna – there’s a cessation experience where everything stops, then it starts up again, only it’s really different on the other side. That turns out not to be what’s being talked about here, because the idea of “path moments” is from the later commentaries and this is a sutta.

The word *viññāṇa* which we translate as “consciousness” literally means “divided knowing.” When divided knowing comes to an end, all these dualities come to an end. When we stop chopping up the holistic unfolding into bits and pieces, then all this comes to an end. As Ud 8.1 says, “Just this is the end of dukkha.”

This required holistic experience is expressed so very eloquently by Kitaro Nishida in his work **The Nothingness Beyond God**:

> Pure experience is the beginning of Zen. It is awareness stripped of all thought, all conceptualization, all categorization, and all distinctions between subject-as-having-an-experience and experience-as-having-been-had-by-a-subject. It is prior to all judgment. Pure experience is without all distinction; it is pure no-thingness, pure no-this-or-that. It is empty of any and all distinctions. It is absolutely no-thing at all. Yet its emptiness and nothingness is a chock-a-block fullness, for it is all experience-to-come. It is rose, child, river, anger, death, pain, rocks, and cicada sounds. We carve these discrete events and entities out of a richer-yet-non-distinct manifold of pure experience.

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* The Gradual Training is not strictly about necessary conditions since some of the later items can arise without having the exact previous item. The Gradual Training items could be said to be “extremely helpful supporting conditions” in the cases where they are not exactly necessary conditions.

† For multiple translations of this important passage, see http://leighb.com/dn11_85.htm.

‡ Please remember this paragraph was written by someone who still has much work to do on the spiritual path! This is simply the best I can do from my unenlightened perspective.

1. For more details on the items in the Gradual Training series and which items occur in which suttas, see http://leighb.com/gtchart.htm.

Emptiness, Mindfulness, Selflessness

> *View the world as empty, ever mindful, uproot the view of self, thus you may be one who overcomes death.* Snp 5.15

Of course, the Buddha taught much more than just dependent origination. The most widely known of his teachings, at least in the twenty-first-century West, is Mindfulness. What he taught on mindfulness is far deeper than is generally discussed in today's secular mindfulness movement. Thankfully, there are a number of excellent modern books on what the Buddha taught as mindfulness practice.[1] There is also a short, little known sutta that seems to capture the relationship/partnership of dependent origination and mindfulness. It's again from the Sutta Nipāta, this time from book 5 – another collection of early suttas. This is Snp 5.15[2] – *Mogharāja-māṇava-pucchā*, that is, "Mogharāja's Question." The word "empty" in this sutta does not have exactly the same meaning for the Buddha as it has for Nāgārjuna. It would be closer to "empty of a self and what belongs to a self" or "empty of (concocted) things."

We can glean the first of these understandings from SN 35.85 – "The World is Empty." There, Ānanda says to the Buddha, "It is said, Venerable Sir, that the world is empty. In what way is it said that the world is empty?"

"The world is empty of a self and of what belongs to a self; thus it is said, 'the world is empty.' And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-consciousness is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-contact is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Whatever vedanā arises with eye-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant—that too is empty of

self and of what belongs to self." The same is then repeated for the ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and textures, and mind and mental objects. Notice that this sutta states "Forms are empty," anticipating the later "The Heart Sutra" by many years.

The second understanding as "empty of (concocted) things" can be gleaned from MN 121 – "The Smaller Sutta on Emptiness." There Ānanda wants to know what the Buddha means when he says "These days I often practice the meditation on emptiness."

The Buddha replies by providing instructions for a gradual descent to a mind state empty of concoctions. By way of example, he points out that the meditation hall is empty of the disturbances of village life. The forest is empty of the disturbances of the meditation hall. By not attending to the perception of forest, one can focus on singleness based on the perception of earth and then there are no disturbances of forest. By not attending to the perception of earth, one focuses, in turn, on singleness based on each of the four immaterial states,[*] dropping one and moving on to the even more subtle next one. One regards each of these meditation states as empty of whatever is not there, and for whatever remains, one understands, "There is this." Finally, not attending to the perception of any quality of any of the previous objects, one attends to the singleness based on the signless concentration of mind – which would be resting in the Bāhiya practice without distraction. "Then there is only the non-emptiness connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body and conditioned by life. This is one's genuine, undistorted, pure descent into emptiness, supreme and unsurpassed." If one can deeply realize that even the signless concentration of mind is concocted and mentally fashioned, and drop that, one becomes liberated. (There is far more to this profound sutta than in this very brief summary!)

Both of these sutta understandings ("empty of a self and what belongs to a

self" and "empty of (concocted) things") fit the Buddha's answer to Mogharāja, as does Nāgārjuna's "empty of essence" and "dependently originated." But all of these will arise from viewing the world from a SODAPI perspective. Whatever understanding you plug in for "empty," we have three of the keystones of the Dhamma: Emptiness, Mindfulness, Selflessness.

> Mogharāja: How should one view the world so that one is not seen by the King of Death?
>
> The Buddha: View the world as empty, ever mindful, uproot the view of self, thus you may be one who overcomes death. So viewing the world, one is not seen by the King of Death.

Viewing the world as empty and uprooting the view of self is what we have been discussing in this book, so hopefully nothing further needs to be said here about these. But the "ever mindful" phrase packs considerably more power than is usually found in the twenty-first-century secular mindfulness teachings.

Modern neuroscience has identified the Default Mode Network (DMN) that is activated in our brains when we are not focusing on an external task. It is a large-scale brain network that ties together several areas of the brain that seem to be active when we are generating a sense of self. The Wikipedia article on the DMN says:

> It is best known for being active when a person is not focused on the outside world and the brain is at wakeful rest, such as during daydreaming and mind-wandering. ... Other times that the DMN is active include when the individual is thinking about others, thinking about themselves, remembering the past, and planning for the future.[3]

If the above description of the DMN sounds like the opposite of

mindfulness and more like *papañca*, you begin to get a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he says to be "ever mindful" – rather than our usual way of being lost in *papañca*. Basically, in addition to viewing the world as empty (which would include not being fooled by your conceptualizing), we need a new default, one superior to the DMN. And that would be being "ever mindful." When there is no task at hand that needs your full attention (which of course also requires mindfulness), then just be fully mindful of your current sensory input – continuously mindful of the here and now – rather than wandering off into *papañca*. This combination of emptiness and being ever mindful is our method for not getting fooled by our conceptualizing and for engaging with the world as it is actually manifesting.

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* The four immaterial states are the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of no-thingness, and the base of perception nor non-perception. See the chapter on "The Immaterial Jhānas" in **Right Concentration** for details.

1. Highly recommended books on mindfulness include:

> **Satipatthana** – The Direct Path to Realization, by Bhikkhu Analayo, Windhorse Books, 2003, ISBN: 1899579540
>
> **Satipatthana Meditation** – A Practice Guide, by Bhikkhu Analayo, Windhorse Books, 2018, ISBN: 978-1911407102
>
> **Mindfulness – A Practical Guide To Awakening**, by Joseph Goldstein, Sounds True, 2013, ISBN: 978-1-62203-063-7

2. In some translations the reference is given as Snp 5.15 and in others as Snp 5.16 – it depends on whether the translator considers the introduction to Snp5 as just the introduction or as Snp5.1.

3. From the article “Default mode network” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Default_mode_network.

Don't Be Fooled By Your Conceptualizing

> *Conceptualization is indeed the source of* papañca *(obsessive proliferation).* Snp 4.11 [487]

Back in the chapter The Key, I mentioned there's more after Name-and-Form in Snp 4.11 – "The Discourse on Quarrels & Disputes." Let's look at that now that we have gained some deeper understanding from the material we studied in the previous chapters.

In Snp 4.11, after Sense-contacts are said to be dependent on Name-and-Form, the following question arises:

> In what state must one be for Form to vanish, and what will make pleasure and pain disappear?

This is different from what's gone before in that sutta. All the other questions were of the style: "What does X depend on?" But here the question is not "What do Name-and-Form depend on?" but "How does Form disappear?" The answer is a bit cryptic:

> Neither perceiving ordinary perceptions,
> nor misperceiving perceptions,
> nor unable to perceive,
> nor having perception destroyed –
> maintaining oneself in this way,
> forms do not occur
> because obsessive proliferations have perception as origin.[1]

This is the key verse of the sutta, but it is a little unclear exactly how we should translate/understand it. *Saññā* is usually translated as "perception;" however, perhaps a more accurate translation would be

“conceptualization.” When there is a sensory input, we conceptualize that input which then provides us with the name/identification of that input. Unfortunately, we believe those concepts to be real – to be a totally accurate reflection of the underlying reality – and this is what gets us into trouble. Here the Buddha is not saying we should operate without concepts, or that all concepts are false – he's indicating that we need to not be fooled by our conceptualizing. Thus, translating this verse again we have:

> One's conceptualization of concepts is not the ordinary kind,
> nor is one's conceptualization of concepts abnormal;
> one is not without conceptualization,
> nor is one's conceptualization of that which has ended –
> to such a one form disappears.
> Conceptualization is indeed the source of *papañca* (obsessive proliferation).[2]

This is pointing to the same disappearance of Form as in “Where neither water, nor earth, nor fire, nor air gain a foothold” found in DN 11, Ud 1.10 and also in Ud 8.1 – because Form is defined in the suttas as these four elements. So for Form to disappear, our perception/our conceptualization must become non-ordinary – exactly what the instructions to Bāhiya provide. The insights into our conceptualizing that are gained from Bāhiya's practice check our tendency towards obsessive proliferation which can lead to Craving and Clinging, and those two are a setup for Dukkha.

It's important to remember that “Dependent Origination,” “Emptiness,” and “SODAPI” are all empty and are just concepts. None of them is ultimate; none of them is metaphysics, even if they do have metaphysical implications as side effects. They are just useful concepts intended to help us escape from our ordinary way of conceiving the world.

In particular, SODAPI – Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes

Interacting – is not any final word. Once you have grokked SODAPI, it's then necessary to step back even further and realize that the Processes are only concepts, and also that the Streams are just concepts. Each time we conceive of a process, we are beginning to lose sight of all the other processes in that stream. Each time we conceive of a stream, we are beginning to lose sight of all the other streams that particular stream is entangled with. It's not that all the processes are connected to all the other processes, nor that all the streams are connected to all the other streams – it's that all of these are interconnected to so many other streams and processes that the full picture leaves us with only indivisible unfolding. It's like a net – each node of the net is not directly connected to every other node, but each node is connected to enough other nodes such that all the nodes form a unitary object – the net. But indivisible unfolding is also not like a net in that a net is a static thing and indivisible unfolding is totally dynamic.

From **Pointing Out the Great Way** by Dan Brown:

> It is incorrect to say that phenomena come forth either as discrete temporal events or as an emergent mass. Both positions are extreme. The events are neither one or many. In an ultimate sense these conceptualizations are empty. Yet in a relative sense it may seem both as if many single mind moments occur and as if there is one entire interconnected network of very subtle propensities.[3]

As Nāgārjuna said:

> “It is all at ease,
> Not conceptualizable by mental conceptualizing,
> Incommunicable,
> Inconceivable,
> Indivisible.”

There is no ultimate concept possible – the indivisible universe is incommunicable and inconceivable. But

> "Without intuiting the sublime,
> You cannot experience freedom."

It is necessary to intuit the ultimate. This is exactly what Dependent Origination, Emptiness, and SODAPI are all pointing at. They are concepts that attempt to point us towards the incommunicable, inconceivable, indivisible ultimate reality. Once we do intuit the ultimate deeply enough we can become disenchanted with things of the conventional world; they are experienced as just concepts – necessary concepts for navigating conventional reality, but they no longer color our minds such that our mental proliferation leads to craving and clinging. Furthermore, we can begin to act more in harmony with the ultimate nature of reality.

This does not mean we are living without concepts – "one is not without conceptualization." It just means we are not being fooled by our concepts. In particular, it means we don't lose sight of the indivisible nature of reality. At the conventional level this means striving to live in harmony with all the things of the conventional world – because they, and you, are all vastly interrelated. So how does one do that?

The second item of the Buddha's Eightfold Path[*] is Right Intention, which the Buddha defines as "intentions of renunciation, intentions of non-ill-will, intentions of harmlessness."[4] Or we could say, "Letting go, Love, and Compassion." We can let go because we have deeply experienced there is nothing that can be hung onto – it's all in flux. And we can act with love and compassion because we have deeply experienced the interrelated, indivisible nature of reality. These three are natural responses to experiencing deeply the dynamic, holistic nature of the world. All three arise because we are no longer trapped into believing our conceptualizing

will yield the full picture of the world. In particular, the concepts of “me” and “mine” are seen as just concepts, and the less driven we are by these two concepts, the more freedom we find.

From Albert Einstein:

> A human being is part of a whole, called by us the “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.[5]

And from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

> All I'm saying is simply this: that all mankind is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be – this is the interrelated structure of reality.[6]

Letting go, Love and Compassion are the natural response to experiencing deeply the all pervasive, interrelated, dependently arising nature of our world. Don't be fooled by your conceptualizing.

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* Right View is the first item of the Buddha's Eightfold Path – which was explained in the Kaccānagotta Sutta as experiencing the world beyond concepts of existence and non-existence. Also, one with Right View “does not go along with system-grasping, mental obstinacy and dogmatic bias, does not grasp at it. One does not take a stand about 'my self'” – my soul,

my atta.

1. Translated by Santikaro based on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's translation in **Paṭiccasamuppāda From the Buddha's Own Lips** (in Thai).

2. For much more on this verse, see the footnotes at http://leighb.com/snp4_11.htm

3. Brown, 2006, pg 419

4. DN 22.21, MN 141.25, SN 45:8

5. From a note to Robert S. Marcus, 12 Feb., 1950, on the occasion of his son passing away due to polio.

6. "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," March, 1968

Afterword

> *One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.* MN 28.28

This book is an attempt to show what the deepest understanding of Right View is, and how to work with it: start examining the world in light of the ideas presented here. It's all just SODAPI –just Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting. Plus the streams are vastly interrelated. Viewing the world from this perspective and acting in harmony with what you find is a very important part of the path of practice. Just don't get fooled by your conceptualizing while doing this, or doing anything else either.

But this book only contains a description, just fingers pointing at the sublime. The ultimate nature of the universe has to be experienced for yourself – it is "unattainable by mere reasoning, it is subtle, to be experienced by the wise." For this information to be anything more than an intellectual grab-bag, you have to practice. You have to do this investigation for yourself. You have to examine reality with an indistractable mind from this perspective until you experience the full implications of this-that-conditionality, dependent origination, for yourself.

This book is also incomplete. Only a fully realized person could fully understand dependent origination – and then, of course, could not fully describe it, since the ultimate is indescribable. But there is more that can be described – certainly more that can be described than is described in this book. I'm sure that if I attempted to write down all the nuances and depths that even I have encountered, this would be a never ending task – the more I look closely, the more I find to explore. But hopefully what's here is sufficient to give you both a starting point and inspiration to do your own

exploration of dependent origination.

Had I written this book a decade earlier, it would have been quite different. Nothing stays the same, everything in the universe is in flux – especially unenlightened human ideas and understandings. But what is presented here is based on my current understanding of the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination. This two and a half thousand year old tradition's teachings are both practical and timely even today. Perhaps by the time you have this book in hand, my understanding will have deepened – maybe if I'm diligent, it will have deepened enough that I see this as just a waypoint along the path. Maybe this book will serve as a useful waypoint on your path.

May your journey on the spiritual path be of great fruit and great benefit to you and to all beings!

The Real After Word

Recognize the interrelatedness of all of us and act accordingly.

Appendix 1

Various Recensions of Dependent Origination Found in the Suttas

In the table below, various teachings and suttas are listed along with the sequences of the dependent origination links found in each sutta. This is not an exhaustive list, only a sample. Rather than spell out the names of all the links, the table below will be used to create a numerical key:

1. Ignorance
2. Saṅkhāra
3. Consciousness
4. Name-and-Form
5. 6 Senses
6. Contact
7. Vedanā
8. Craving
9. Clinging
10. Becoming
11. Birth
12. Aging-and-Death

So 1-12 means all twelve links in forward order and 12-6,4-3-4 means reverse order Aging-and-Death to Contact, then (leaving out the 6 Senses), Name-and-Form – Consciousness – Name-and-Form. If there are links other than the twelve, they will be spelled out.

4 Noble Truths	12 & 8
DN 14	12-4-3-4

DN 15	12-6,4-3-4
DN 21	perceptions & papañca, thinking, desire, dear-&-not-dear, envy & stinginess, rivalry & hostility
MN 9	The Wholesome (and the Unwholesome). Non-Greed, Non-Hatred, Non-delusion. Nutriment. The Four Noble Truths. 12-1. Āsavas
MN 18	6(includes objects + 5 + 3)-7-Sañña-3
MN 28	Aggregates - 8-9,12
MN 38	3 arises in dependence on 6. Nutriment-9-1. 1-12. 12-1. 1-12. 12-1. 5-12.
MN 115	1-12
MN 146	discusses various other dependently arisen phenomena, including the 7 Factors of Awakening

All the suttas in SN Book 12 are on dependent origination; only a select subset is included below:

SN 12.1	1-12
SN 12.2	1-12. 12-1
SN 12.10	12-2
SN 12.11	Nutriment-8-1
SN 12.12	Nutriment-6-12
SN 12.15,17,18	1-12 (probably late insertion)1
SN 12.16	12-1
SN 12.19	1-8,12
SN 12.20	12-1, 12-1
SN 12.23	Transcendental Dependent Origination-12-1

SN 12.24	6-12, 12-1
SN 12.25	6-7, 1-2,7
SN 12.31	(general case)
SN 12.39	3-12
SN 12.41	1-12
SN 12.43	sense & object, 3,6-8,12. sense & object, 3,6-12
SN 12.44,45	sense & object, 3,6-12
SN 12.46,47,48	1-12 (probably late insertion)1
SN 12.52-56,60	gratification-8-12
SN 12.57,58	gratification-4-12
SN 12.59	gratification-3-12
SN 12.62	1-12. 6-7
SN 12.64	7-3-4-2-10-11-12
SN 12.65	12-4-3-4. 12-2
SN 12.66	12-Acquisitions-7-pleasant
SN 12.67	12-4-3-4. 4-3-4-12
AN 3.61	11-4-5-6-7. 1-12
Ud 1.1	1-12
Ud 1.2	1-12
Ud 1.3	1-12,1-12
Snp 3.12	12, acquisition, 1,2,3,6,7,8,10,12, disturbance,nutriment,perturbed,dependent,form/formless,self

Snp 4.11	Quarrels & Disputes-Endearing-Desirable-Pleasant & Unpleasant-6-4

Use can use the following link to quickly access most of the suttas above: http://leighb.com/suttacentral.htm

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1. Pande agrees that this is likely a corruption, pg 201: “The formula as such, therefore, must be regarded in the case of these suttas [SN 12.15, 17-18, 24-26, 46-48] as a later substitution for part of the more fluid original continuation. Mrs. Rhys Davids advocates this conclusion in the case of SN 12.18 and the arguments are generalizable to the other suttas of the class which are greatly similar in problem and answer.”

Appendix 2

Sutta References

The following is not a complete list of all the suttas mentioned in this book, but it should point you toward the more important ones if you wish to further study this and related topics. The ones in **bold** are the suttas that are extensively discussed. The links are to Sutta Central or Access To Insight.

Dīgha Nikāya

DN 11, (**DN 11.85**), DN 15, DN 22

Majjhima Nikāya

MN 10, MN 18, MN 22, MN 26, (**MN26.19**) MN 28, MN 36, **MN 38**, MN 63, MN 109

Saṃyutta Nikāya

SN 12.15, **SN 12.23**, SN 12.60, **SN 12.65**, SN 22.59, SN 22.85, SN 22.86, SN 36.6, SN 36.21, SN 44.10, SN 56:11

Aṅguttara Nikāya

AN 3.61

Udāna

Ud 1.1, Ud 1.2, Ud 1.3, **Ud 1.10, Ud 8.1, Ud 8.2, Ud 8.3**

Sutta Nipāta

Snp 4.11, Snp 5.15

Dhammapada

Verses 277, 278 and 279

Appendix 3

Why “Suffering” Is a Poor Choice for Translating “Dukkha"

Someone asked the following question:

> Translating dukkha to mean bummers makes it more user friendly and better captures dukkha's range. I agree, but I don't understand why it is so important to make such a big deal about dukkha including life's minor annoyances. It's my perceived major crises that I need Buddhism for. Don't we all think we can handle the minor annoyances just fine? Maybe this point is troublesome for me because most of my dukkha comes from (my perception of) big things; maybe yours (and most people's) comes from smaller annoyances. Or, maybe your point is that we don't realize how much suffering is or can be generated by the little annoyances.

My main point is that “suffering” leaves too much out that “dukkha” actually includes. This is important because we are either running towards things we think will give us pleasure, or running away from things that we think will give us displeasure = dukkha. All this running away is not primarily generated by what we would term “suffering", but it's still controlling our lives – often unconsciously, especially if it's a long way from suffering – yet it's still dukkha.

In later Buddhism, three unwholesome personality/temperament types are discussed: The Greedy type, the Aversive type, and the Deluded type.[1] In brief, the Greedy type primarily seeks to find pleasant experiences, the Aversive type primarily seeks to avoid unpleasant experiences, and the Deluded type is unsure exactly what to do. Of course, we all have all three tendencies, but one may predominate. And obviously both greed and aversion are rooted in delusion. But this typology may be helpful in

understanding our own actions and the actions of others.*

Now consider these three types in relation to dukkha. For the aversive types, all that aversion is dukkha; both the object of the aversion is dukkha and the aversion itself is dukkha. Dukkha, and fear of dukkha, run their lives to a large extent – even though it may mostly not be labeled "suffering." Because we all have all three of these tendencies, greedy and deluded types also get caught in aversion – dukkha; again it may not feel like suffering, but it's still dukkha. And the deluded types – all that confusion they deal with is dukkha, even though it might not be classified as suffering.

So "suffering" as a translation of "dukkha" leaves out so much of what the Buddha was pointing to when he used the word "dukkha." "Bummer" has its limitations as well – the death of a loved one is indeed suffering, not just a bummer – but "bummer" does have a broader range, I think, than "suffering. And "bummer" definitely does a better job of putting the responsibility back on you, unlike the word "suffering."

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* For more on the three types, see **The Three Buddhist Personality Types: Which One Are You?** at https://zenpsychiatry.com/the-three-buddhist-personality-types-which-one-are-you/

1. Vsm III.74, pp 96ff

Appendix 4

The Three Necessary Conditions for Consciousness

Consciousness is said to arise dependent on three things:

1. nāmarūpa – Name-and-Form (or Mind-and-Body)
2. saṅkhārā – an object for consciousness
3. āyatana – sense object and sense organ coming together, *i.e.* sensory input

Consciousness's dependency on nāmarūpa has already been discussed at length in the chapter Why Do We Die?

Yes, it does seem as though saṅkhārā and sense object are the same thing. But saṅkhārā is the "object of consciousness" in that there is no such thing as objectless consciousness in early Buddhism. But objects are limitless and we are only conscious of some of them – *i.e*. those that we sense.

Remember, the Buddha is not doing consistent metaphysics. He is pointing to dependencies and sometimes he focuses on the object – saṅkhārā. And sometimes he focuses on sensory input – āyatana, which includes both the sense object and the sense organ. It's sort of like the sense object is "out there" and the saṅkhārā is "in here within my consciousness". I see a tree – the tree (sense object) is out there; I become conscious of the tree and start processing the colored shapes into what I conceptualize (saññā) as "tree" and then have thoughts and emotions and memories (saṅkhārā) about it.

Of course, if we really want to get technical, a saṅkhārā in the broadest sense is anything that is created/made/manufactured. So all sense objects and all sense organs are actually saṅkhārās. But for pedagogical purposes, sometimes it's more useful to talk about consciousness arising dependent on

saṅkhārā, and at other times, such as in MN 38, Sāti, the Son of a Fisherman, it's more useful to talk in terms of sense objects and sense organs.

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May any merit from this project be to the benefit and liberation of all beings everywhere!

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Glossary

akālika – without involving time

anicca – inconstancy, ever-changing, impermanent

anattā – literally “not-self"; coreless, empty

arahant – a fully awakened one, a fully liberated one

āsava – intoxicant; also translated as outflow, influx, effluent, canker, taint

āsavakkhaye ñāṇa – the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*

attā – self, ego, personality, in Buddhism a mere conventional expression, and not a designation for anything really existing, often synonymous with soul

avijjā – ignorance

āyatana – sphere of perception or sense in general

āyatanāni – plural of āyatana – often referring to the 6 senses (*salāyatanā*)

bhāva – becoming

bhavataṇhā – craving for becoming

brahma-vihāra – one of four meditation practices of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity

bhikkhu – a Buddhist monk

deva – heavenly being

dhammā – phenomena

Dhamma – the teaching of the Buddha and also “the way things truly are”

dukkha – bummer, unsatisfactoriness, stress, suffering

idappaccayatā – this-that conditionality; literally “having its foundation in this”

idappaccayatāpaṭiccasamuppādo – this-that conditionality, dependent origination

jāti – birth

jhāna – literally “meditation"; one of four (later eight) states of concentration

kamma (Pāli) / *karma* (Sanskrit) – action, deed, doing

kāmataṇhā – sensual craving

kāraṇa – (Sanskrit) constituent, reason, cause

khandha – one of the five aggregates: *rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhārā* & *viññāṇa*

maraṇa – death

mettā – loving-kindness, unconditional love

nāmarūpa – name-and-form, sometimes translated as “mind-and-body” or “mentality-and-materiality,” especially in the context of dependent origination

nibbāna (Pāli) / *nirvana* (Sanskrit) – literally “not burning,” *i.e.*, not burning with the fires of greed, hate, or delusion; the goal of the holy life, the realization that brings an end to *dukkha*

nibbidā – disenchantment

pāmojja – gladness, worldly joy

paññā – wisdom

papañca – mental proliferation

passaddhi – tranquility

paṭiccasamuppāda – dependent origination

phassa – contact, sense-contact

pīti – glee, rapture

rūpa – materiality, body

salāyatanā – the six sense organs and the six sense objects (see also *āyatana*)

saṃsāra – worldly existence, the indefinitely repeating cycles of birth, dukkha, and death

saddhā – usually translated as “faith” but perhaps more accurately as “confidence” or “trust”

samādhi – indistractability, concentration

samuppāda – origin, arising, genesis, coming to be, production

saṃvega – spiritual urgency

sandiṭṭhika – visible here and now

saṅkhāra – concoction, fabrication

saññā – perception, conceptualization, naming, identifying

sati – mindfulness, remembering to be here now

sukha – happiness/joy

sukha & *dukkha* – pleasure and pain

sutta – discourse, teaching

Suttas – the second division of the Pāli Canon, consisting of discourses given by the Buddha or his closest disciples

taṇhā – craving (literally “thirst”)

Tathāgata – one arrived at suchness, a fully awakened one

udāna – exclamation, inspired utterance

upādāna – clinging, also fuel

uppāda – coming into existence, appearance, birth

upekkhā – equanimity (literally “gaze upon”)

vedanā – initial automatic mental response to sensory inputs as pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant; valence, feeling (but not emotion!)

vicāra – examining

vimutti – release, deliverance, emancipation, liberation

vipassanā – insight, an understood experience

virāga – dispassion, literally “not-colored”

viññāṇa – consciousness; occasionally it means “mind;” literally “divided knowing”

yathābhūtañāṇadassana – knowing and seeing things as they are, knowing and seeing what's actually happening

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About the Author

Leigh Brasington was born and raised in Mississippi. In 1971, he graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis with a B.A. in mathematics, with honors, Phi Beta Kappa. He then began a more than 35 year career of "playing with computers for money." After he moved to San Francisco in 1974, he began taking extended time to travel: 3 years around the world in '79-'81, a year traveling in Australia and Asia in '88, 6 months around the world in '98, plus numerous shorter trips overseas as well.

He began meditating in 1985 and eventually became the senior North American student of Ven. Ayya Khema. She authorized him to teach and he began leading residential retreats in 1997. He has taught jhānas, dependent origination, and insight practices in over one hundred and forty residential retreats.

Near the end of 2008, he retired from software engineering and over the next three years, he spent twenty months in retreat at the Insight Meditation Society's Forest Refuge. This was a wonderful time of deepening his understanding of dependent origination.

He is the author of the book **Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhanas**.

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