

# Dependent Origination

## The Buddhist Law of Conditionality

P. A. Payutto

Translated from the Thai by Bruce Evans

<http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/coarise.htm>

---

### Contents

#### Introduction

1. [An Overview of Dependent Origination](#)  
[Types of Dependent Origination found in the texts](#)
  1. [The general principle](#)
  2. [The principle in effect](#)
2. [Interpreting Dependent Origination](#)  
[The essential meaning](#)
3. [Man and Nature](#)
4. [The Standard Format](#)  
[The main factors](#)
  1. [Ignorance and craving-clinging](#)
  2. [Volitional impulses and becoming](#)
  3. [Consciousness to feeling, and birth, aging and death](#)
5. [Other Interpretations](#)  
[Preliminary definition](#)  
[How the links connect](#)  
[Examples](#)  
[An example of Dependent Origination in everyday life](#)
6. [The Nature of Defilements](#)
7. [Dependent Origination in Society](#)
8. [The Middle Teaching](#)
9. [Breaking the Cycle](#)

#### [Appendix](#)

- [A note on interpreting the principle of Dependent Origination](#)
  - [Birth and death in the present moment](#)
  - [Dependent Origination in the Abhidhamma](#)
  - [A problem with the word "nirodha"](#)
-

# Introduction

The teaching of causal interdependence is the most important of Buddhist principles. It describes the law of nature, which exists as the natural course of things. The Buddha was no emissary of heavenly commandments, but the discoverer of this principle of the natural order, and the proclaimer of its truth to the world.

The progression of causes and conditions is the reality which applies to all things, from the natural environment, which is an external, physical condition, to the events of human society, ethical principles, life events and the happiness and suffering which manifest in our own minds. These systems of causal relationship are part of the one natural truth. Our happiness within this natural system depends on having some knowledge of how it works and practicing correctly within it, through addressing problems on the personal, social, and environmental levels. Given that all things are interconnected, and all are affecting each other, success in dealing with the world lies in creating harmony within it.

The sciences which have evolved with human civilization, and which are influencing our lives so profoundly today, are said to be based on reason and rationality. Their storehouse of knowledge has been amassed through interacting with these natural laws of conditionality. But the human search for knowledge in modern scientific fields has three notable features: Firstly, the search for knowledge in these sciences, and the application of that knowledge, is separated into distinct categories. Each branch of science is distinct from the others. Secondly, human beings in this present civilization are of the belief that the law of conditionality applies only to the physical world, not to the mental world, or to abstract values such as ethics. This can be seen even in the study of psychology, which tends to look at the cause and effect process only in relation to physical phenomena. Thirdly, the application of scientific knowledge (of the laws of conditionality) is applied solely to serve self interests. Our relationship with the natural environment, for instance, is centered around trying to derive as much resources from it as we can with little or no regard for the consequences.

Underneath it all, we tend to interpret such concepts as happiness, freedom, rights, liberty, and peace in ways that preserve self interests and encroach on others. Even when controlling other people comes to be seen as a blameworthy act, this aggressive tendency is then turned in other directions, such as the natural environment. Now that we are beginning to realize that it is impossible to really control other people or other things, the only meaning left in life is to preserve self interests and protect territorial rights. Living as we do with this faulty knowledge and these mistaken beliefs, the natural environment is thrown out of skew, society is in turmoil, and human life, both physically and mentally, is disoriented. The world seems to be full of conflict and suffering.

All facets of the natural order -- the physical world and the human world, the world of conditions (dhamma) and the world of actions (kamma), the material world and the mental world -- are connected and interrelated, they cannot be separated. Disorder and aberration in one sector will affect other sectors. If we want to live in peace, we must learn how to live in harmony with all spheres of the natural environment, both the internal and the external, the individual and the social, the physical and the mental, the material and the immaterial.

To create true happiness it is of utmost importance that we not only reflect on the interrelationship of all things in the natural order, but also see ourselves clearly as one system of causal relationships within that natural order, becoming aware first of the internal mental factors, then those in our life experiences, in society, and ultimately in the world around us. This is why, of all the systems of causal relationship based on the law "because there is this, that arises; when this ceases that ceases," the teachings of Buddhism begin with, and stress throughout, the factors involved in the creation of suffering in individual awareness -- "because there is ignorance, there are volitional formations." Once this system of causal relationship is understood on the inner level, we are then in a position to see the connections between these inner factors and the causal relationships in society and the natural environment. This is the approach adopted in this book.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Buddhadhamma Foundation, to Khun Yongyuth Thanapura, who has undertaken the responsibility of having this book translated into English, and also Bruce Evans, who has translated it with heart as well as mind, making a number of adjustments to it in order to turn one chapter of a larger book into a comprehensive whole.

May the good intentions involved in the production of this book serve to play some small part in creating well-being, both individual and social, in the world at large.

P. A. Payutto

# 1

## An Overview of Dependent Origination

The principle of Dependent Origination is one of Buddhism's most important and unique teachings. In numerous passages of the Pali Canon, it was described by the Buddha as a natural law, a fundamental truth which exists independently of the arising of enlightened beings:

"Whether a *Tathagata* appears or not, this condition exists and is a natural fact, a natural law; that is, the principle of conditionality.

"The Tathagata, enlightened to and awakened to that principle, teaches it, shows it, formulates it, declares it, reveals it, makes it known, clarifies it and points it out, saying,

"See here, conditioned by ignorance are volitional impulses.'

"This suchness, monks, this invariability, this irreversibility, that is to say, this law of conditionality, I call the principle of Dependent Origination." [S.II.25]

The following excerpts indicate the importance which the Buddha ascribed to the principle of Dependent Origination:

"Whoever sees Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Origination." [M.I.191]

\* \* \*

"Truly, monks, a noble disciple who is learned and has understood for himself, independent of faith in others, that 'When there is this, then there is that; with the arising of this, that arises ...'

"When a noble disciple thus fully sees the arising and cessation of the world as it is, he is said to be endowed with perfect view, with perfect vision; to have attained the true Dhamma, to possess the initiate's knowledge and skill, to have entered the stream of Dhamma, to be a noble disciple replete with the purifying knowledge, one who is at the very door of the Deathless." [S.II.79]

\* \* \*

"Whichever recluse or Brahmin knows these conditions, knows the cause of these conditions, knows the cessation of these conditions, and knows the way leading to the cessation of these conditions, that recluse or Brahmin is worthy of the name 'a recluse among recluses' and is worthy of the name 'a Brahmin among Brahmins', and of him it can be said, 'He has attained to the goal of the recluse's life and the goal of the Brahmin life due to his own higher wisdom.'" [S.II.15,45,129]

In the following exchange with Venerable Ananda, the Buddha cautions against underestimating the profundity of the principle of Dependent Origination:

"How amazing! Never before has it occurred to me, Lord. This principle of Dependent Origination, although so profound and hard to see, yet appears to me to be so simple!"

"Say not so, Ananda, say not so. This principle of Dependent Origination is a profound teaching, hard to see. It is through not knowing, not understanding and not thoroughly realizing this teaching that beings are confused like a tangled thread, thrown together like bundles of threads, caught as in a net, and cannot escape hell, the nether worlds and the wheel of *samsara*." [S.II.92]

Those who have studied the life of the Buddha may recall his reflections shortly after the Enlightenment, when he had not yet begun to expound the teaching. At that time, the Buddha was reluctant to teach, as is related in the Scriptures:

"Monks, the thought arose in me thus: 'This truth which I have realized is profound, difficult to see, abstruse, calming, subtle, not attainable through mere sophisticated logic.

"'But beings revel in attachment, take pleasure in attachment and delight in attachment. For beings who thus revel, take pleasure and delight in attachment, this is an extremely difficult thing to see: that is, the law of conditionality, the principle of Dependent Origination. Moreover, this also is an extremely difficult thing to see: the calming of all conditioning, the casting off of all clinging, the abandoning of desire, dispassion, cessation, *Nibbana*. If I were to give this teaching and my words were not understood, that would simply make for weariness and difficulty.'" [Vin.I.4; M.I.167]

This passage mentions two teachings, the principle of Dependent Origination and *Nibbana*, stressing both their profundity and also their importance within the Buddha's enlightenment and teaching.

## Types of Dependent Origination found in the texts

The textual references dealing with the principle of Dependent Origination can be divided into two main categories. Firstly, those which describe the general principle, and secondly, those which specify constituent factors linked together in a chain. The former format is often used to precede the latter as a general outline. The latter, more frequently encountered, is mostly expressed on its own. This latter description may be regarded as the practical manifestation of the principle of Dependent Origination, showing as it does how the natural process follows the general principle.

Each of these two main categories can further be divided into two limbs, the first showing the process of origination, the second, the process of cessation. The first limb, showing the process of origination, is called the *samudayavara*. It is the sequence in its forward mode, and corresponds to the second of the Four Noble Truths, the cause of suffering (*dukkha samudaya*). The second limb, showing the process of

cessation, is called the *nirodhavara*. It is the sequence in its reverse mode and corresponds to the third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering (*dukkha nirodha*).

## 1. The general principle

In essence, this general principle corresponds to what is known in Pali as *idappaccayata*, the principle of conditionality.

A. <i>Imasmim sati idam hoti:</i>	When there is this, that is.
<i>Imasuppada idam upajjati:</i>	With the arising of this, that arises.
B. <i>Imasmim asati idam na hoti:</i>	When this is not, neither is that.
<i>Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati:</i>	With the cessation of this, that ceases. [S.II.28,65]

## 2. The principle in effect

A) *Avijja-paccaya sankhara*  
With Ignorance as condition, there are Volitional Impulses.

*Sankhara-paccaya viññanam*  
With Volitional Impulses as condition, Consciousness.

*Viññana-paccaya namarupam*  
With Consciousness as condition, Body and Mind.

*Namarupa-paccaya salayatanaam*  
With Body and Mind as condition, the Six Sense Bases.

*Salayatana-paccaya phasso*  
With the Six Sense Bases as condition, (sense) Contact.

*Phassa-paccaya vedana*  
With Contact as condition, Feeling.

*Vedana-paccaya tanha*  
With Feeling as condition, Craving.

*Tanha-paccaya upadanam*  
With Craving as condition, Clinging.

*Upadana-paccaya bhavo*  
With Clinging as condition, Becoming.

*Bhava-paccaya jati*  
With Becoming as condition, Birth.

*Jati-paccaya jaramaranam*  
With Birth as condition, Aging and Death,

*Soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa sambhavan'ti*  
Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief and Despair.

*Evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti*  
Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.

B) *Avijjaya tveva asesaviraganirodha sankhara-nirodho*  
With the complete abandoning of Ignorance, Volitional Impulses cease.

*Sankhara-nirodha viññana-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Volitional Impulses, Consciousness ceases.

*Viññana-nirodha namarupa-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Consciousness, Body and Mind cease.

*Namarupa-nirodha salayatana-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Body and Mind, the Six Sense Bases cease.

*Salayatana-nirodha phassa-nirodho*  
With the cessation of the Six Sense Bases, Contact ceases.

*Phassa-nirodha vedana-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Contact, Feeling ceases.

*Vedana-nirodha tanha-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Feeling, Craving ceases.

*Tanha-nirodha upadana-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Craving, Clinging ceases.

*Upadana-nirodha bhava-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Clinging, Becoming ceases.

*Bhava-nirodha jati-nirodho*  
With the cessation of Becoming, Birth ceases.

*Jati-nirodha jaramaranam*  
With the cessation of Birth, Aging and Death,

*Soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa nirujjan'ti*  
Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief and Despair cease.

*Evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti*  
Thus is there a cessation to this whole mass of suffering. [Vin.I.1-3; S.II.1,65]

Note that this format treats the principle of Dependent Origination as a process of the arising and cessation of suffering. This is the wording most commonly found in the texts. In some places, it is given as the arising and cessation of the world, using the Pali words *ayam kho bhikkhave lokassa samudayo* -- "Thus, monks, is the arising of the world," and *ayam kho bhikkhave lokassa atthangamo* -- "Thus, monks, is the dissolution of the world" [S.II.73]; or *emamayam loko samudayati* -- "Thus does this world arise," and *emamayam loko nirujjhati* -- "Thus does this world cease" [S.II.78]. Both of these wordings in fact have the same meaning, which will become clear once our terms are defined.

In the Abhidhamma texts and Commentaries the principle of Dependent Origination is also known as *paccayakara*, referring to the interdependent nature of things.

The extended form given above contains twelve factors, interdependently linked in the form of a cycle. It has no beginning or ending. Putting ignorance at the beginning does not imply that it is the First Cause, or Genesis, of all things. Ignorance is put at the beginning for the sake of clarity, by intercepting the cycle and establishing a starting point where it is considered most practical. We are in fact cautioned against assuming ignorance to be a First Cause with the following description of the conditioned arising of ignorance -- *Asava-samudaya avijja-samudayo, asava-nirodha avijja-nirodho* -- ignorance arises with the arising of the outflows, and ceases with their cessation. [M.I.55]

The twelve links of the standard principle of Dependent Origination format are counted from ignorance to aging and death only. As for 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair', these are actually by-products of aging and death for one with outflows (*asava*) and defilement, becoming 'fertilizer' for the further arising of outflows, and consequently ignorance, which turns the cycle once more.

The Buddha did not always describe the Dependent Origination cycle in one fixed form (from beginning to end). The extended format was used in cases where he was explaining the principle in general, but when he was addressing a particular problem, he often applied it in reverse order, thus: aging and death <= birth <= becoming <= clinging <= craving <= feeling <= contact <= six sense bases <= body and mind <= consciousness <= volitional impulses <= ignorance [see S.II.5-11,81]. In other descriptions he may have begun at one of the intermediate factors, depending on the problem in question. For example, he might have started at birth (*jati*) [as in S.II.52], feeling (*vedana*) [as in M.I.266], or at consciousness (*viññana*) [as in S.II.77], following the steps forward up to aging and death (*jaramarana*), or tracing backwards to arrive at ignorance (*avijja*). Or he may have begun with some factor altogether different from the twelve links, which was then worked into the Dependent Origination chain.

Another point worthy of note is that the dependent origination of these links does not have the same meaning as 'to be caused by' as such. The determinants which make a tree grow, for instance, include not just the seed, but also the soil, moisture, fertilizer, air temperature and so on. These are all 'determinants.' Moreover, being a determinant does not necessarily imply any sequential order in time. For instance, in the example of the tree, the various determinants, such as moisture, temperature, soil and so on, must exist together, not sequentially, for the tree to benefit. Moreover, some kinds of determinants are interdependent, each conditioning the existence of the other, as, for example, an egg is a condition for a chicken, while a chicken is a condition for an egg.



# 2

## Interpreting Dependent Origination

The principle of Dependent Origination has been interpreted in a number of ways, which can be broadly summarized as follows:

1. As a demonstration of life- or world-evolution, based on a literal definition of such phrases as *loka-samudaya* (arising of the world) [as in S.II.73].
2. As a demonstration of the arising and cessation of individual life, or individual suffering.

This second division can further be divided into two subcategories:

*2.1* Demonstrating the process over a very long period of time, from lifetime to lifetime. This is the more literal interpretation; it is also the explanation most often found in the commentarial texts, where the subject is expanded on in such minute detail that the newcomer is likely to be confused by the plethora of technical terms.

*2.2* Demonstrating a process which is continually occurring. Although related to *2.1*, this interpretation gives a more profound and practical definition of the terms with emphasis on the present moment, which is considered to be the real objective of the teaching. This kind of interpretation is supported by teachings in numerous Suttas, and in the Abhidhamma Pitaka there are passages which describe the entire Dependent Origination process in one mind moment.[1]

In the first interpretation given above, there are attempts to interpret the principle of Dependent Origination as a world-origin theory, treating ignorance (*avijja*) as the First Cause and tracing evolution through the whole twelve links. This kind of interpretation makes the teaching of Buddhism seem very similar to other religious teachings and philosophies, which postulate an origination principle, such as God. The interpretations differ only in that the latter teachings describe the birth and existence of the world as the workings of some supernatural force, whereas the teachings of Buddhism, as seen in this interpretation, would explain things as simply a form of evolution proceeding according to the natural laws of cause and effect.

However, this interpretation [#1] certainly contradicts the Buddha's teaching, because any teaching or school of thought which shows a world originating from a First Cause is contrary to the principle of

conditionality, or Dependent Origination, which clearly states that all things are interdependent, arising continually through the influences of causes and conditions. Any First Cause, be it a Creator God or anything else, is impossible. Interpreting the Dependent Origination cycle as a description of life- or world-evolution can only be feasible when it presents a picture of the universe functioning according to the natural processes of growth and decline, ceaselessly unfolding at the dictates of cause and effect.

When assessing the plausibility of these interpretations, we must bear in mind the Buddha's objective in teaching Dependent Origination. In his teachings, the Buddha aimed to present only that which could be used to address the problems of life on a practical basis. He did not encourage trying to understand reality through conjecture, debate, or analysis of metaphysical problems, which he saw as impossible. For this reason, any assessment of a teaching as authentically Buddhist should involve an assessment of its value in terms of ethical principles.

A definition of the principle of Dependent Origination as a beginningless and endless process of evolution, although seemingly valid, can still be seen to have limited ethical value. What may be gained from it is:

(1) A broader view of the world, as proceeding according to the flow of causes and effects and bound to the conditions found in the natural process. There is no Creator or Appointer, nor is the world a series of aimless accidents. Objectives cannot be realized through merely wishing, supplicating the gods, or luck, but must be effectuated through self-reliant effort based on an understanding of causes and conditions.

(2) Creating the right causes for desired results can only be done when there is an understanding of those causes and the way they connect with their respective results. This necessitates the presence of an understanding (*pañña*) which is capable of discerning these complexities; life must be dealt with and related to with wisdom.

(3) An understanding of the natural process as subject to the cause and effect continuum can be effective for reducing the delusion which causes clinging to, and identification with, things as self. Such a perspective enables a sounder and more independent relationship with things as they are.

The view of the principle of Dependent Origination as a world-evolution theory, although harmonious with the teachings of the Buddha, is nevertheless somewhat superficial. It lacks a profound, detailed, moment-by-moment analysis of physical and mental components. It is not strong enough or clear enough to unequivocally bring about the three results mentioned above, especially the third. In order to delve deeper into the truth, it is necessary to examine the unfolding of natural events in more detail, on a personal basis, clearly seeing the truth of this process as it actually occurs in our lives, even in very brief instances. With such a clear awareness, the three benefits mentioned above will be more likely to occur. Incidentally, this more immediate interpretation does not preclude the interpretation of the process as evolution on a long-term basis.

Any explanation of the principle of Dependent Origination as a world-evolution theory, whether in a basic or a more subtle sense, will lack depth. The second interpretation, which concerns personal life, and particularly the process of the continuation of personal suffering, is much more profound.

Of the descriptions of the Dependent Origination cycle as a personal process, the interpretation which covers several lifetimes (given in 2.1) is that which is most accepted and expanded on in the Commentaries.[2] There it is treated in minute detail and greatly elaborated on, systematized and illustrated. However, at the same time this systematization tends to be rather rigid, and it tends to mystify

the subject for the newcomer. Here it will be given its own chapter, followed by the partially related interpretation of Dependent Origination as occurring in a matter of mind moments (rendition 2.2).

## The essential meaning

In essence, the principle of Dependent Origination is a description of the process of the arising and cessation of suffering. The word 'suffering' (*dukkha*) is a very important term in Buddhism. It figures in several of its most important teachings, such as the Three Characteristics (*tilakkhana*) and the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*). In order to more clearly understand the principle of Dependent Origination, it is essential to first understand this word *dukkha*, or suffering.

The term 'dukkha' in the Buddha's teaching is used in a much broader sense than is its English equivalent, 'suffering'. It is therefore necessary to discard the narrow meaning of the word as it occurs in the English language and reconsider it in the light of the very broad meaning of the Buddha's words, which divide suffering into three types [D.III.216; S.IV.259; S.V.56]. Together with their commentarial explanations [Vism.499; Vbh.A.93], they are:

**1. *Dukkha-dukkhata*:** the suffering which is a feeling. This includes both physical and mental suffering -- aches, pains, sadness and so on -- much as is usually understood by the English word 'suffering'. This corresponds to the Pali word '*dukkhavedana*' ('the feeling of suffering' which ordinarily arises whenever a disagreeable sensation is experienced).

**2. *Viparinama-dukkhata*:** the suffering which is inherent in change; the suffering concealed within the inconstancy of happiness. This is the suffering which is caused by the changes within, and the cessation of, happiness. This can be observed on a hot day when you have been working outside: you may not notice the heat if you are accustomed to it, but once you go into an air-conditioned room, the resulting pleasant feeling may cause an unpleasant reaction to take place when you go back outside -- the heat feels unbearable. The original neutral feeling of heat turns into an uncomfortable one because of the pleasantness of the air-conditioned coolness. The pleasantness of the air-conditioning causes the subsequent feeling of heat to seem unpleasant. It's almost as if the suffering is dormant, only to reveal itself when the pleasant feeling fades. The more intense the pleasant feeling is, the more intensely does it change into suffering, and the suffering seems to expand in proportion to the intensity of the pleasant feeling. If the pleasant feeling had not arisen, the suffering dependent on it would likewise not have arisen. If pleasant feeling is accompanied by an awareness of its fickle nature, fear, worry and anxiety tend to shadow it. When the pleasant feeling in time passes away, it is followed by the longing, "I used to have such happiness, now it is gone."

**3. *Sankhara dukkhata*:** the suffering which is inherent within all *sankhara*, all things which arise from determinants; specifically, the five *khandhas*. This refers to the subjection of all conditioned things to the contrary forces of birth and dissolution, how they are not perfect within themselves but exist only as part of the cause and effect continuum. As such, they are likely to cause suffering (that is, the feeling of suffering, or *dukkha-dukkhata*) whenever there is inflexible craving and clinging to them through ignorance (*avijja-tanha-upadana*).

The most important kind of suffering is the third kind, which describes the nature inherent to all conditions, both physical and mental. *Sankhara-dukkhata* as a natural attribute assumes a psychological

significance when it is recognized that conditions are incapable of producing any perfect contentment, and as such will cause suffering for anybody who tries to cling to them.

The principle of Dependent Origination shows the interdependence and interrelation of all things in the form of a continuum. As a continuum, it can be analyzed from a number of different perspectives:

All things are interrelated and interdependent; all things exist in relation to each other; all things exist dependent on determinants; all things have no enduring existence, not even for a moment; all things have no intrinsic entity; all things are without First Cause, or Genesis.

To put it another way, the fact that all things appear in their diverse forms of growth and decline shows their true nature to be one of a continuum or process. Being a continuum shows them to be compounded of numerous determinants. The form of a continuum arises because the various determinants are interrelated. The continuum moves and changes form because the various factors concerned cannot endure, even for a moment. Things cannot endure, even for a moment, because they have no intrinsic entity. Because they have no intrinsic entity they are entirely dependent on determinants. Because the determinants are interrelated and interdependent, they maintain the form of a continuum, and being so interrelated and interdependent indicates that they have no First Cause.

To render it in a negative form: if things had any intrinsic entity they would have to possess some stability; if they could be stable, even for a moment, they could not be truly interrelated; if they were not interrelated they could not be formed into a continuum; if there were no continuum of cause and effect, the workings of nature would be impossible; and if there were some real intrinsic self within that continuum there could be no true interdependent cause and effect process. The continuum of cause and effect which enables all things to exist as they do can only operate because such things are transient, ephemeral, constantly arising and ceasing and having no intrinsic entity of their own.

The property of being transient, ephemeral, arising and ceasing, is called *aniccata*. The property of being subject to birth and dissolution, of inherently involving stress and conflict, and of being intrinsically imperfect, is called *dukkhata*. The quality of voidness of any real self is called *anattata*. The principle of Dependent Origination illustrates these three properties in all things and shows the interrelatedness and inter-reaction of all things to produce the diverse events in nature.

The functioning of the principle of Dependent Origination applies to all things, both physical and mental, and expresses itself through a number of natural laws. These are:

- ***Dhammaniyama***: the natural law of cause and effect;
- ***Utuniyama***: the natural law pertaining to physical objects (physical laws);
- ***Bijaniyama***: the natural law pertaining to living things and heredity (biological laws);
- ***Cittaniyama***: the natural law governing the workings of the mind (psychological or psychic laws);
- ***Kammaniyama***: the law of kamma, which is of particular importance in determining human well-being and is directly related to behavior from an ethical perspective.

It is worth noting that kamma, as with all other cause and effect relationships, can only function because things are transient (*anicca*) and are void of intrinsic entity (*anatta*). If things were permanent and had intrinsic being in themselves none of the natural laws, including the law of kamma, could operate. Moreover, these laws support the truth that there is no First Cause, or Genesis.

Things have no intrinsic entity because they arise dependent on causes and are interrelated. A simple illustration: What we know as a 'bed' comes from the collection of numerous components to assume a known form. A 'bed' other than these components does not exist. When all the components are dismantled, no 'bed' remains. All that is left is the concept of 'bed.' Even that concept is without independent existence, but must relate to other concepts, such as 'sleeping,' a plane surface, a base, an empty space and so on.

Concepts are formed in the mind through the association of relationships. For most people, once a set of relationships is formed into a concept, the habit of clinging to things through craving (*tanha*) and clinging (*upadana*) attaches to those concepts as fixed entities. Such clinging isolates the concept from its relationship with other things, and stains perceptions with notions of 'me' and 'mine,' leading to identification with them and thus preventing any true understanding.

Things have no root cause or first arising. Tracing back along the stream of causes ad infinitum, no root cause can be found for anything. Yet there is a tendency for people to try to find some kind of original cause; this kind of thinking conflicts with the way of nature and causes perceptions which are at variance with the truth. It is a form of self-deception, caused by the human habit of stopping any inquiry into causes at the immediate one and going no further. Thus the usual understanding of cause and effect, believing in an original cause for things, is inaccurate and contrary to the laws of nature. Considering how things are, it is necessary to search further back by asking, "What is the cause of that so-called Original Cause?" and so on. None can be found. The question should rather be asked, "Why should things have a root cause anyway?"

Another kind of reasoning which contradicts nature and is related to the idea of a root cause is the belief that in the beginning there was nothing. This kind of idea arises from attachment to the concept of self (*atta*), which in turn is derived from attachment to concepts. From there, the deduction is that previously this did not exist, but then it became extant. This kind of false reasoning is the human habit of 'clinging to concepts,' or 'not knowing the truth of concepts,' which in turn is not knowing things as they are. This causes the attempt to find something eternal, a First Cause, Mover of All Things, or Creator, which in turn gives rise to a number of contradictions, such as: "How can that which is eternal create that which is non-eternal?" In fact, within the dynamic stream of cause and effect there is no need for a position either supporting or denying any static existence at all, whether 'in the beginning' or right now, except within the realm of spoken concepts. We should rather encourage fresh consideration with the question "Why must existence be preceded by nonexistence?"

The common belief that all things have a Creator is another idea which contradicts reality. Such a belief is a result of deductive thinking, based on the observation of man's ability to create things and produce artifacts of various kinds, such as the arts and so on. The deduction follows that therefore all things in the world must have a creator. In this case, we are deceived when we isolate the concept 'building' or 'creating' from the normal cause and effect continuum, thus taking a falsehood as our basic premise. In fact, 'building' is only one phase of the Dependent Origination process. That we are capable of creating anything at all is through becoming determinants in the process of relationship which produces the desired result. We differ from the purely physical factors concerned only in that in our case there are some mental factors, involving intention, also present. Even so, those factors remain part of a totality of factors and must also proceed according to the cause and effect process. For instance, when we wish to build a

skyscraper, we must become part of the stream of determinants, manipulating other determinants in the process to completion. If the thought of creation was capable of bringing things into existence independent of the cause and effect process, then we could create skyscrapers anywhere simply by thinking them into existence, which is impossible. Thus, the word 'creation' has no meaning beyond a description of part of a process. Moreover, when things proceed smoothly along the cause and effect process, the question of a creator is no longer relevant at any point along the way.

In any case, searching for the facts regarding the question of a First Cause, a Creator God, and such, have little value in the Buddhist view, because they are not essential to a meaningful life. And even though reflecting on these matters can provide a wider world view as mentioned above, such reflection can still be passed over, as the value of the teaching of Dependent Origination in terms of life fulfillment already covers the benefits desired. We should therefore direct our attention more toward that.

***Footnotes:***

1. Abhidhammahajaniya of the Paccyakara-vibhanga: Vbh.138ff. [[Back to text](#)]
2. See Visuddhimagga, Vism.517-586; Vbh.A.130-213 (approx.) (pp. 199-213 (approx.) describe the one-mind-moment process).

# 3

## Man and Nature

All of life is made up of the five *khandhas* (groups): *rupa* or material form; *vedana*, feeling; *sañña*, perception; *sankhara*, volitional impulses; and *viññana*, consciousness. There is no owner or director of the *khandhas*, either within them or outside of them. In any examination of life, the five *khandhas* are a comprehensive enough base from which to work. The five *khandhas* proceed in conformity with the principle of Dependent Origination, existing within the continuum of interrelated and interdependent determinants.

In this context, the five *khandhas*, or life, are subject to the Three Characteristics: they are in a condition of *aniccata* -- impermanent and unstable; *anattata* -- containing no intrinsic self; and *dukkhata* - - constantly oppressed by arising and cessation, and primed to cause suffering whenever there is association through ignorance. The five *khandhas*, proceeding thus with constant change and free of any abiding entity, are subject only to the natural continuum of interrelated determinants. But for most of us, resistance to the flow results from mistakenly clinging to one or another feature of the continuum as being the self, and wanting this 'self' to proceed in some desired way. When things don't conform with desires, the resulting stress causes frustration and subsequently more intense clinging. The vague awareness of the inevitability of change to that cherished self, or the suspicion that it may not in fact exist, causes this clinging and desire to become even more desperate, and fear and anxiety take root deeply in the mind.

These states of mind are *avijja* -- ignorance of the truth, seeing things as self; *tanha* -- wanting this imagined self to attain various things or states; and *upadana* -- clinging and attachment to these mistaken ideas and all that they imply. These defilements are embedded in the mind, from where they direct our behavior, shape personality and influence the fortunes of our lives, both overtly and covertly. In general, they are the cause of suffering for all unenlightened beings.

In essence, we are here dealing with the discord between two processes:

**1. The natural process of life**, proceeding subject to the fixed, natural law of the Three Characteristics. These are expressed through birth (*jati*), aging (*jara*) and death (*marana*), both in their basic and in their profound senses.

**2. The contrived process of craving and clinging**, based on ignorance of that true nature of life, which causes the mistaken perception of and attachment to a self -- 'creating a self with which to clog up the flow of nature.' This is a life bound by ignorance, lived with clinging, in bondage, in contradiction with the law of Nature, and lived with fear and suffering.

Life, from an ethical point of view, can be said to comprise two kinds of self. Any particular life continuum, proceeding along its natural conditioned course, although bare of any enduring essence, can still be identified as one continuum distinct from others. This is called the 'conventional self,' and this convention can be skillfully used in relation to moral conduct.

Then there is the 'contrived' self, fabricated by ignorance and held fast by craving and clinging. The conventional self is no cause for problem when it is clearly understood as such. The 'contrived' self, however, concealed within the conventional self, is the self of clinging, which must suffer the vicissitudes of the former self, and thus produces suffering. In other words, it is a process on two levels: on one level is the conventional self, on the other level is the deluded attachment to the conventional self as an absolute reality. If deluded attachment is changed into knowledge and understanding, the problem is solved.

A way of life founded on clinging to the notion of self implants fear and anxiety deeply into the psyche, from where they control behavior and enslave the unsuspecting worldling. A life view based on attachment to the self-concept has many harmful repercussions, such as:

- clinging to selfish desires (*kamupadana*), the endless search for their gratification, and the avaricious grasping of desire objects;
- unyielding adherence to and identification with views (*ditthupadana*), evaluating them as self or belonging to self. It is like building a wall to block out the truth, or even running away from it altogether. This kind of clinging produces a lack of fluidity in reasoning powers and leads to arrogance and bigotry;
- adherence to superstitious beliefs and practices (*silabbatupadana*). Perceiving only a mystical or tenuous relationship in such practices, one can never be truly sure of them, but fear and concern for the contrived self produce a desperate attempt to grasp at anything as a source of security, no matter how mystical or obscure it may be;
- the notion of an independent self (*attavadupadana*), to be held onto, supported and protected from damage or destruction. Suffering then arises as a result of the troubles placed on this oppressed 'self of clinging.'

In this context, stress and suffering not only arise within the individual, but also radiate outwards to society. Thus the condition of clinging (*upadana*) can be singled out as the main source of all man-made troubles occurring in society.

The cycle of Dependent Origination shows the origin of this stressful, self-centered life, and its inevitable result in suffering. With the breaking of the cycle, the stressful life is completely transformed, resulting in a life that is lived with wisdom, in harmony with nature, and liberated from clinging to self.

To live with wisdom means to live with clear awareness of the way things are and to know how to benefit from nature; to benefit from nature means to live in harmony with nature; to live in harmony with nature is to live freely; to live freely is to be free of the power of craving and clinging; to live without clinging means to live with wisdom, to know and relate to things through an understanding of the process of cause and effect.



According to the Buddha's teaching, there is nothing which exists beyond or separate from nature, either as a mystical power controlling events from without, or in any other way related to or involved in the proceedings of nature. Whatever is associated with nature cannot be separate from nature, but must be a component of it. All events in nature proceed at the direction of the interrelationship of natural phenomena. There are no accidents, nor is there any creative force independent of causes. Seemingly astounding and miraculous events are entirely causally arisen, but because the causes are sometimes obscured from our knowledge, those events may appear to be miraculous. However, any sense of perplexity or wonder soon disappears once the cause of such events is understood. The word 'supernatural' is simply a contrivance of language referring to that which exceeds our current understanding, but in fact there is nothing that is truly 'supernatural.'

The same applies to our relationship with nature. The manner of speech which describes human beings as separate from nature, or as controlling nature, is simply a contrivance of language. Human beings are part of nature, not separate from it. To say that we control nature simply means that we become determinants within the cause and effect process. The human element contains mental factors, comprising intention, which are involved in the process of act and result together known as 'creation.' However, mankind is not capable of creating anything out of thin air, independently of the natural causes. Our so-called control of nature arises from our ability to recognize the factors required to produce a particular result, and knowing how to manipulate them.

There are two stages to this process. The first is knowledge, which leads to the second stage, becoming a catalyst for the other factors. Of these two stages, it is knowledge that is crucial. Through this knowing, man is able to utilize and take part in the cause and effect process. Only by interacting with and influencing things with wisdom can man be said to be 'controlling nature.' In this case, man's knowledge, abilities and actions become additional factors within the natural process.

This principle applies to both physical and mental phenomena. The statement, 'to benefit from nature is also to live in harmony with nature' is based on the reality of the interdependent nature of both physical and mental phenomena. We could equally say 'controlling the mental aspects of nature' or 'controlling the mind' and these would also be valid. Wisdom in regard to both physical and mental phenomena is essential in order to really benefit from nature.

A life of wisdom can be looked at from two perspectives: inwardly, it is characterized by serenity, cheerfulness, awareness and freedom. Experiencing an agreeable sensation, the mind is not intoxicated or deluded by it. When deprived of comforts, the mind is firm, unshaken and untroubled. Happiness and suffering are no longer invested into external objects.

The outer level is characterized by fluency, efficiency, flexibility and freedom from cumbersome complexes and delusions.

Here is a teaching from the Buddha which illustrates the differences between the life lived with clinging and the life of wisdom:

"The unlearned, unenlightened being (*puthujjana*), monks, experiences pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings and neutral feelings. The learned, noble disciple also experiences pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings and neutral feelings. In this case, monks, what is the distinction, the contrast, the disparity between the learned, noble disciple and the unlearned, unenlightened being?"

"When an unlearned, unenlightened being, monks, encounters unpleasant feeling, he grieves, laments, wails, beats his chest and is distraught and distracted therein: he experiences two kinds of feeling, namely, in the body and in the mind.

"It is as if an archer, having fired one arrow into a certain man, were then to fire a second arrow. That man would experience pain from both arrows. Such is the unlearned, unenlightened being. He experiences two kinds of pain, bodily and mental.

"Moreover, in experiencing an unpleasant feeling he feels displeasure. Displeased over that unpleasant feeling, latent tendencies to aversion (*patighanusaya*) contingent on that unpleasant feeling are accumulated. Confronted with unpleasant feeling he seeks delight in sense pleasures. Why so? Because the unlearned, unenlightened being knows of no other way out of unpleasant feeling than to seek the distraction of sense pleasures. Delighting thus in sense pleasures, latent tendencies to lust (*raganusaya*) contingent on those pleasant feelings are accumulated. He does not know the origin, the cessation, the attraction, the liability and the release from those feelings as they really are. Not knowing these things as they really are, latent tendencies to delusion (*avijjanusaya*) contingent on neutral feelings are accumulated. Experiencing pleasant feeling he is bound to it, experiencing unpleasant feeling he is bound to that, and experiencing neutral feeling he is bound to that. Monks, thus is the unlearned, unenlightened being bound to birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. He is, I say, bound by suffering.

"As for the learned, noble disciple, monks, experiencing unpleasant feeling he neither grieves, laments, wails nor beats his chest. He is not distressed. He experiences pain only in the body, not in the mind.

"Just as if an archer, having shot one arrow into a certain man, were then to shoot a second arrow, but miss the mark: in this case that man would experience pain only on account of the first arrow. Such is the learned, noble disciple. He experiences pain in the body, but not in the mind.

"Moreover, he experiences no displeasure on account of that unpleasant feeling. Not being displeased over that unpleasant feeling, latent tendencies to aversion contingent on that unpleasant feeling are not accumulated. Experiencing that unpleasant feeling he does not seek distraction in sense pleasures. Why not? Because the learned, noble disciple knows of a way out of unpleasant feelings other than distraction in sense pleasures. Not seeking distraction in sense pleasures, latent tendencies to lust contingent on pleasant feelings are not accumulated. He knows the origin, the cessation, the attraction, the liability and the release from feelings as they really are. Knowing these things as they really are, latent tendencies to delusion contingent on neutral feelings are not accumulated. Experiencing pleasant feeling he is not bound to it, experiencing unpleasant feeling he is not bound to that, experiencing neutral feeling he is not bound to that. Monks, thus is the noble, learned disciple, liberated from birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. He is, I say, liberated from suffering.

"This, monks, is the distinction, the contrast, the disparity between the learned, noble disciple and the unlearned, unenlightened being." [S.IV.207-210]

# 4

## The Standard Format

The standard form for presenting the principle of Dependent Origination is quite complex, more a matter for the specialist than for the casual reader. It requires an extensive foundation in Buddhism and a comprehensive vocabulary of Pali terms to thoroughly understand it. There are also scriptures devoted exclusively to the subject.<sup>[3]</sup> Here I will briefly summarize the basic factors.

### The main factors <sup>[4]</sup>

The main factors have already been covered in the Overview, so here they will be mentioned in brief only, given first in the Pali language, and followed by definitions of the Pali terms in English:

*Avijja => sankhara => viññana => namarupa => salayatana => phassa => vedana => tanha => upadana => bhava => jati => jaramarana ... soka parideva dukkha domanassa upayasa => The cause of suffering (dukkha samudaya).*

The division on cessation proceeds according to the same headings.

Because the principle of Dependent Origination revolves in the form of a cycle, beginningless and endless, it would be more accurately represented as in Figure 1 below.

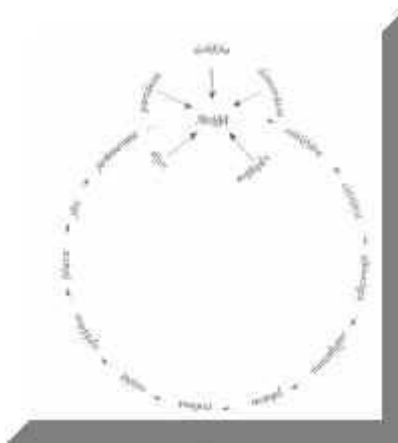


Fig. 1 [View larger online](#)

1. **Avijja = Unknowing**, or ignorance of dukkha, its cause, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation (the Four Noble Truths); and, according to the Abhidhamma, not knowing what went before (the past), what comes after (the future), what came both before and after (the past and the future), and the principle of Dependent Origination.

2. **Sankhara = Volitional Impulses**: bodily formations, or intentional actions; verbal formations, or intentional speech; mental formations, or thoughts[5]; and, according to the Abhidhamma: meritorious formations, or good kamma (*puññabhisankhara*), non-meritorious formations, or bad kamma (*apuññabhisankhara*), and fixed or unmoving formations, or special meritorious kamma (*aneñjabhisankhara*).

3. **Viññana = Consciousness** through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind (including the re-linking consciousness, *patisandhi viññana*). (The six consciousnesses.)

4. **Namarupa = Body and Mind**: *nama* (name or mind): feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention, or, according to the Abhidhamma: the *khandhas* of feeling, perception and volitional impulses; and *rupa* (body or materiality): the four elements, earth, water, wind and fire and all forms dependent on them.

5. **Salayatana = The six sense bases**: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

6. **Phassa = Impingement or contact**: eye contact, ear contact, nose contact, tongue contact, body contact and mind contact.[6]

7. **Vedana = Feelings** (of pleasure, pain and indifference) arising from impingement on eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.[7]

8. **Tanha = Craving** for sights; craving for sounds; craving for odors; craving for tastes; craving for bodily sensations; craving for mind objects: the six cravings.[8]

9. **Upadana = Clinging** to sense objects (*kamupadana*), that is, sights, sounds, odors, tastes and bodily sensations; clinging to views (*ditthupadana*); clinging to rules and practices (*silabbatupadana*); clinging to the concept of self (*attavadupadana*).

10. **Bhava = Becoming**, the conditions which lead to birth; also realms of existence: the sense realm (*kamabhava*); the realm of form (*rupabhava*); the realm of formlessness (*arupabhava*).

An alternative definition: *Kammabhava*, the realm of action, or actions which condition rebirth: meritorious actions (*puññabhisankhara*); demeritorious actions (*apuññabhisankhara*); imperturbable actions (*aneñjabhisankhara*); and *Upapattibhava*, the realms of rebirth: the sense realm; the realm of form; the formless realm; the realm of perception; the realm of non-perception; the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.

11. **Jati = Birth**, the arising of the khandhas and the sense bases, birth; the appearance or arising of things[9] (this latter interpretation used in explaining the Dependent Origination cycle in one mind moment).

**12. Jaramarana = Aging and death:** *jara*: the aging process, the fading of the faculties; and *marana*: the breaking up of the khandhas, the dissolution of the life principle, death; alternatively, the dissipation and dissolution of phenomena.[\[10\]](#)

Here are some examples of these general headings:

(*Asava*) => **Avijja** -- Ignorance: Believing that this very self will be reborn in various states due to particular actions; that after death there is nothing; that life is a random process in which good and evil actions bear no fruit; that simply by adhering to a certain religion one will automatically be 'saved'; that material wealth will provide true happiness ... From there ...

=> **Sankhara** -- Volitional Impulses: Thinking and intending in accordance with those beliefs; considering and planning actions (*kamma*) in accordance with those intentions, some good, some bad and some neutral. From there ...

=> **Viññana** -- Consciousness: the perception and awareness of sensations, which will be related to particular intentions. Mind or consciousness is fashioned into specific qualities by intention. At death, the momentum of volitional impulses, propelled by the law of *kamma*, induces the so-fashioned re-linking consciousness (*patisandhi viññana*) to take a sphere of birth and level of existence appropriate to it. This is rebirth. From there ...

=> **Namarupa** -- Body and mind: The process of rebirth proceeds to create a life form primed to generate more *kamma*. As a result there are the *rupa*, *vedana*, *sañña*, and *sankhara khandhas* in their entirety, complete with the distinct qualities and defects endowed on them by the fashioning influence of conditions, or *kamma*, and constrained by the limitations of that particular sphere of existence (*bhava*), be it human, animal, divine, etc. ...

=> **Salayatana** -- The six sense bases: A sentient being must have the means to communicate with its environment in order to function and develop within it. Thus, supported by body and mind, and in conformity with *kammic* momentum, the organism proceeds to develop the six sense bases, the sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. From there ...

=> **Phassa** -- Contact: The process of awareness now operates through the contact or impingement of three factors. They are: the internal sense doors (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), external sense objects (sights, sounds, odors, tastes, bodily sensations and mind objects) and consciousness (eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, tactile-consciousness and mind-consciousness). Depending on this contact, there occurs ...

=> **Vedana** -- Feeling: The feelings, or the 'appreciation' of the qualities of sense contacts, be they of comfort (*sukhavedana* -- pleasant feeling), discomfort or pain (*dukkhavedana* -- unpleasant feeling) or indifference or equanimity (*adukkhamasukha-vedana* -- neutral feeling; or *upekkhavedana* -- equanimous feeling). In conformity with the nature of unenlightened beings, the process does not stop there, but goes on to ...

=> **Tanha** -- Craving: Comfortable feelings tend to produce liking and enjoyment, desire for and seeking after more of the same; for stressful feelings or discomfort there is displeasure, a desire to destroy or get rid of them. Neutral feeling in this context is considered to be a subtle form of pleasant feeling because it does not disturb the mind and invokes a certain amount of complacency. From here ...

=> **Upadana** -- Clinging: As desire intensifies, it becomes a holding onto or clinging to the object in question. As long as an object is yet unattained there is craving; as soon as the object is attained it is held fast by clinging. This refers not only to sense objects (*kamupadana*), but to ideas and views (*ditthupadana*), modes of practice or techniques (*silabbatupadana*) and the feeling of self (*attavadupadana*). On account of this clinging there follows ...

=> **Bhava** -- Becoming: Intention and deliberate action to produce and control things in accordance with the directives of clinging, leading to the further rotation of the whole process of behavior (*kammabhava*), being good kamma, bad kamma or neutral kamma, depending on the qualities of the craving and clinging which condition them. For example, one who desires to go to heaven will do those things which he or she believes will lead to rebirth in heaven, thus laying the groundwork for the five khandhas to appear in the realm (*bhava*) appropriate to those actions (*kamma*) (*upapattibhava*). With the process of creating kamma thus in full swing, one link gives rise to the next, which is ...

=> **Jati** -- Birth: Beginning with the re-linking consciousness, which is endowed with features contingent on its kammic momentum and connecting to a state appropriate to it, the five khandhas arise in a new life continuum, comprising name and form, the six sense bases, contact and feeling. When there is birth, what inevitably follows is ...

=> **Jaramarana** -- Aging and death: the decay and dissolution of that life continuum. For the unenlightened being these things are constantly threatening life in either overt or covert ways. Therefore, in the life of the unenlightened being, old age and death inevitably bring with them ...

=> **Soka** -- sorrow; **parideva** -- lamentation; **dukkha** -- pain; **domanassa** -- grief; and **upayasa** -- despair, which all in all can be summed up as simply 'suffering.' Thus we have in the final words of the principle of Dependent Origination formula: "Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering."

However, as the principle of Dependent Origination functions as a cycle, it does not stop there. The last factor becomes a crucial link in the further continuation of the cycle. Specifically, sorrow, lamentation and so on are all manifestations of the outflows. These outflows are four in number, namely: the concern with the gratification of the desires of the five senses (*kamasava*); attachment to views and beliefs, for example that the body is the self or belonging to self (*ditthasava*); desire for various states of being and the aspiration to attain and maintain them (*bhavasava*); and ignorance of the way things are (*avijjasava*).

Aging and death have an inflammatory effect on the outflows: in relation to *kamasava* they cause feelings of separation from the loved and cherished; in relation to *ditthasava*, aging and death confront the innate belief in self and attachment to the body; in relation to *bhavasava*, they mean separation from cherished states of being; in relation to *avijjasava*, lack of understanding on the fundamental level, (such as not understanding the nature of life, aging and death and how they should be related to), aging and death cause the unenlightened being to experience fear, melancholy, despair and superstitious grasping. These outflows are therefore the determinants for sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair to arise as soon as aging and death appear.

Sorrow and suffering affect the mind in negative ways. Whenever suffering arises, the mind becomes confused and muddled. The arising of sorrow is thus commensurate with the arising of ignorance, as is written in the *Visuddhi Magga*:

'Sorrow, pain, grief and despair are inseparable from ignorance, and lamentation is the norm for the deluded being. For that reason, when sorrow is fully manifest, so also is ignorance fully manifest.'  
[Vism.576]

\* \* \*

'As for ignorance, know that it arises with the arising of sorrow ...' [Vism.577]

\* \* \*

'Ignorance is present as long as sorrow is present.' [Vism.529]

\* \* \*

'With the arising of the outflows, ignorance is arisen.' [M.I.54]

Thus it can be said that for the unenlightened being, aging and death, together with their retinue -- sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair -- are factors for producing more ignorance, thus turning the cycle once more.

The cycle of Dependent Origination is also known as the Wheel of Becoming (*bhavacakka*), or Wheel of Samsara. This model covers three lifetimes -- ignorance and volitional impulses are in one lifetime, consciousness to becoming are in a second lifetime, while birth and aging and death (with sorrow, lamentation and so on) occur in a third. Taking the middle life-span as the present one, we can divide the three life periods, with the entire twelve links of the Dependent Origination cycle, into three time periods, thus:

1. Past life -- Ignorance, volitional impulses:
2. Present life -- Consciousness, body and mind, sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming:
3. Future life -- Birth, aging and death (sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair).

Among these three periods, the middle period, the present, is our base. From this perspective, we see the relationship of the past section as purely a causal one, that is, results in the present are derived from causes in the past (past cause => present result), whereas the future section specifically shows results, that is extending from causes in the present to results in the future (present cause => future result). Thus the middle section, the present, contains both causal and resultant conditions. We can now represent the whole cycle in four sections:

1. Past cause = Ignorance, volitional impulses:
2. Present result = Consciousness, body and mind, sense bases, contact, feeling.

3. Present cause = Craving, clinging, becoming:

4. Future result = Birth, aging and death (sorrow, lamentation, etc.).

Some of the links in this chain are related in meaning, and they can be grouped as follows:

## 1. Ignorance and craving-clinging

From the description of ignorance (*avijja*), it appears that craving (*tanha*) and clinging (*upadana*) are involved, especially the clinging to self, which is present throughout. Not knowing the truth of life, and mistakenly believing in a self, leads to craving on behalf of that self, together with its various forms of clinging. In the words 'With the arising of outflows there is the arising of ignorance,' *kamasava* (the outflow of sensual desire), *bhavasava* (the outflow of desire for being) and *ditthasava* (the outflow of attachment to views) are all types of craving and clinging. Thus, when speaking of ignorance, the meaning invariably includes craving and clinging.

The same applies to any descriptions of craving and clinging -- ignorance is always connected to them. The deluded assumption of conditions to be real entities is the determinant for any wanting and clinging that arise. The more craving and clinging there are, the more is discernment cast aside and mindfulness and rational behavior impaired. Thus, when speaking of craving and clinging, ignorance is automatically implied.

In this light, ignorance as a past cause, and craving and clinging as present causes, mean much the same thing. But ignorance is classed as a past determinant, while craving and clinging are classed as present determinants, to show each of those factors in its prominent relationship with the other factors in the Wheel of Becoming.

## 2. Volitional impulses and becoming

Volitional impulses (*sankhara*) appear in the past life segment while becoming (*bhava*) occurs in the present life segment, but each plays a decisive role in the realm, or *bhava*, life is to appear in, and so they have similar meanings, differing only in their emphasis. *Sankhara* refers specifically to the factor of intention (*cetana*), which is the predominant factor in the creation of kamma. *Bhava* has a broader meaning, incorporating both *kammabhava* and *upapattibhava*. *Kammabhava*, like *sankhara*, has intention as its principal motivating force, but it differs from *sankhara* in that it covers the entire process of the generation of action. *Upapattibhava* refers to the five khandhas arising as a result of *kammabhava*.

## 3. Consciousness to feeling, and birth, aging and death

The segment of the cycle from consciousness to feeling is the present life, described point by point in order to illustrate the cause and effect relationship of the factors involved. Birth, together with aging and



death, are 'future results.' The cycle at this point tells us that causes in the present must generate future results, in this case aging and death. This is a repetition, in condensed form, of the consciousness to feeling segment of the cycle, emphasizing the arising and cessation of suffering. Aging and death also act as connecting points for a new cycle. It can be said, however, that the segments from consciousness to feeling, and from birth to aging and death, are virtually synonymous.

Bearing this in mind, the four stages of cause and effect can be divided thus:

1. Five past causes: Ignorance, volitional impulses, craving, clinging, becoming.
2. Five present results: Consciousness, body and mind, sense bases, contact, feeling (= birth, aging and death).
3. Five present causes: Ignorance, volitional impulses, craving, clinging, becoming.
4. Five future results: Consciousness, body and mind, sense bases, contact, feeling (= birth, aging and death).

Because of the relationship between the twelve links of the Dependent Origination cycle, they can be divided into three groups, called the *vatta*[\[11\]](#), or cycles.

1. Ignorance-craving-clinging (*avijja-tanha-upadana*) -- These are *kilesa* (defilements), the instigating forces for the various kinds of deluded thought and action. This section is accordingly called the *kilesavatta*.

2. Volitional impulses (*sankhara*, and rebirth conditioning actions (*[kamma-] bhava*) -- These are *kamma*, the process of action based on *kilesa* which conditions life. This segment is called the *kammavatta*.

3. Consciousness, body and mind, six sense bases, contact, feeling (*viññana, namarupa, salayatana, phassa, vedana*) -- These are *vipaka*, the events of life resulting from the effects of *kamma*. These then become food for *kilesa*, which then become the causes for the creation of more *kamma*. This segment is thus called the *vipakavatta*.

These three *vatta* are continuously propelling each other around in the cycle of life. Diagrammatically, they can be represented as in Figure 2.

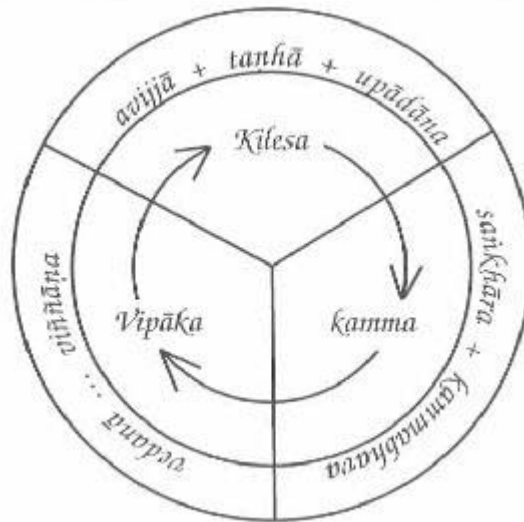


Fig. 2

Because defilements (*kilesa*) are the prime motivators of life conditions, they are positioned at the starting point of the cycle. Thus we can distinguish two starting points, or activating agents, in the wheel of life:

1. Ignorance is the agent from the past which influences the present up until feeling.
2. Craving is the agent in the present time, extending the cycle from feeling up until the future, aging and death.

The reason that ignorance appears in the former section while craving appears in the latter is because ignorance follows on from sorrow, lamentation, and so on, while craving follows on from feeling. Ignorance and craving are the predominant defilements in each respective case.

This model of the Dependent Origination cycle makes the following distinction in the ways rebirth takes place, depending on whether it is ignorance or craving (for being) that is the deciding factor:

- Ignorance is the main cause of birth into woeful states, because the mind enveloped in ignorance is unable to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, useful and harmful. As a result there is no standard for behavior, actions are random and bad kamma is more likely to result than good kamma.
- Craving for being (*bhavatanha*) is more likely to lead to birth in pleasant states. When it is the motivating force, there is an aspiration for a better station in life. As for future existences, the desire might be for rebirth in a heavenly or divine state. Where the present existence is concerned, the aspiration may be for wealth, fame, or reputation. Actions follow on from these initial aspirations. If the aspiration is for rebirth in a divine state, it may involve the development of refined meditation states; if the aspiration is for rebirth in a heavenly realm, then there may be maintenance of moral precepts and performance of generous actions; if the aspiration is for wealth, there may follow the industriousness required to that end; if the aspiration is for a good reputation, then there will be the performance of good works and so on. All of these actions must

be based on a certain amount of self discipline, heedfulness and diligence. As a result, good actions are more likely to arise than with a life lived under the sole control of ignorance.

Although ignorance and craving for being have been placed at starting points in the cycle, they are not the prime movers of it. This is borne out by the Buddha's words:

"No beginning can be found, monks, to ignorance, thus : 'Before this point there was no ignorance, but then it arose.' In this case, it can only be said, 'Dependent on this, ignorance arises.'" [12]

There are identical words for *bhavatanha*. [13]

That ignorance and craving are major determinants and arise together in the process of Dependent Origination is borne out by the following quotation:

"Monks, this body, so arising in its entirety, whether to a fool or a wise man, enshrouded in ignorance and bound by craving, together with external physical and mental properties (*namarupa*), make two things. Dependent on these two things is impingement on the six sense bases. The fool or wise man, receiving impingement through one or other of those sense bases, experiences pleasure or pain." [S.II.23]

In conjunction with the above explanations, the following schematic representations may be useful:



Fig. 3 [View larger online](#)

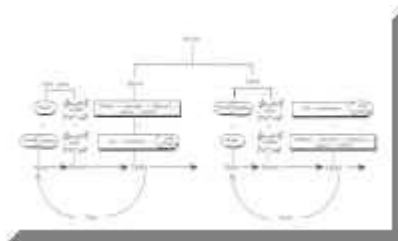


Fig. 4 [View larger online](#)

**Footnotes:**

3. See Paccayakara-vibhanga, Vbh.135ff.; Vism.517-586; Vbh.A.130-213; Abhidhammattha-sangaha, Chapter 8. [[Back to text](#)]
4. For a reference to the descriptions given below, see S.II.2-4; Vbh.135; for commentary, see Vism.517-586; Vbh.A.130-213. [[Back to text](#)]
5. *Pubbanta-aparanta-pubbantaparanta*: the past, the future, both the past and the future. [[Back to text](#)]
6. *Phassa* is the contact between sense organ, sense object and consciousness. [[Back to text](#)]
7. *Vedana* can also be classified as three kinds: pleasant, unpleasant and neither pleasant nor unpleasant; or as five kinds: pleasant bodily feeling, unpleasant bodily feeling, pleasant mental feeling, unpleasant mental feeling, and neutral or indifferent feeling. [[Back to text](#)]
8. Craving can also be classified as of three kinds: sensual craving, craving for being and craving for annihilation. When these three are multiplied by the number of sense doors, six, there are eighteen; when again multiplied by two (internal and external) there are thirty-six; when this is again multiplied by three (past, present and future) the result is a total of 108 kinds of craving: A.II.212. [[Back to text](#)]
9. Vbh.145,159,191. This latter interpretation is used to explain the Dependent Origination cycle in one mind moment. [[Back to text](#)]
10. Ditto. [[Back to text](#)]
11. The three *vatta* are from the Commentaries. They explain the principle of Dependent Origination in a very simplified form: when there is *kilesa*, such as a desire to obtain something, it is followed by *kamma*, action to obtain it, and *vipaka*, the pleasant feeling that results on obtaining it or the unpleasant feeling that results from not obtaining it. These pleasant and unpleasant feelings cause the arising of more *kilesa*, more desire and aversion, which in turn generate more actions, *kamma*, leading to a different kind of *vipaka*, and so on. [[Back to text](#)]
12. A.V.113; Vism.525; according to this Sutta, ignorance is nurtured by the five hindrances. [[Back to text](#)]
13. A.V.116; Vism.525; craving for being is said to be nurtured by ignorance. [[Back to text](#)]

# 5

## Other Interpretations

The description of Dependent Origination given in the previous chapter is that most often found in the scriptures and commentaries. It seeks to explain Dependent Origination in terms of the *samsaravatta*, the round of rebirth, showing the connections between three lifetimes -- the past, the present and the future.

Those who do not agree with this interpretation, or who would prefer something more immediate, can find alternatives not only in the Abhidhamma Pitaka, where the principle of Dependent Origination is shown occurring in its entirety in one mind moment, but can also interpret the very same words of the Buddha used to support the standard model in a different light, giving a very different picture of the principle of Dependent Origination, one which is supported by teachings and scriptural references from other sources.

The arguments used to support such an interpretation are many. For instance, the immediacy of the end of suffering and the sorrowless life of the *Arahant* are states which can arise in this present life. It is not necessary to die before realizing the cessation of birth, aging and death, and thus sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Those things can be overcome in this very lifetime. The whole of the Dependent Origination cycle, both in the arising of suffering and in its cessation, is concerned with this present life. If the cycle can be clearly understood as it operates in the present, it follows that the past and the future will also be clearly understood, because they are all part of the one cycle.

For reference, consider these words of the Buddha:

"Udayi, whosoever can recall the khandhas he has previously occupied in great number, of such a person would it be fitting to question me about past lives, or I could so question him; that person could satisfy me with an answer thereof, or I him. Whosoever sees the passing away of beings and their subsequent arisings, of such a person would it be fitting to ask me about future lives, or I could so question him; that person could satisfy me with an answer thereof, and I him.

"Enough, Udayi, of former times and future times. I will teach you the essence of the Dhamma: When there is this, there is that. With the arising of this, that arises. When there is not this, that cannot be; when this ceases, so does that." [M.II.31]

\* \* \*

The householder, Gandhabhaga, having sat down at a respectful distance, addressed the Blessed One thus, "May the Blessed One teach me the origin and the cessation of suffering."

The Blessed One replied, "Householder, if I were to teach you the origin and the cessation of suffering by referring to the past thus, 'In the past there was this,' doubt and perplexity would arise in you thereof. If I were to teach you the origin and the cessation of suffering by referring to the future thus, 'In the future there will be this,' doubt and perplexity would arise in you thereof. Householder, I, here and now, shall teach you, here and now, the origin and the cessation of suffering." [S.IV.327]

\* \* \*

"Sivaka, some feelings arise on account of irregularities in the bile ... some on account of irregularities in the phlegm ... some on account of wind ... some on account of the confluence of numerous factors ... some on account of changes in the weather ... some on account of irregular exercise ... some on account of external dangers ... some on account of kamma results. That feelings arise dependent on these different causes is something you can see for yourself and that people everywhere acknowledge. On this account, any recluse or holy man who claims that 'All feelings that arise, be they pleasant or unpleasant, are entirely the result of previous kamma,' can be rightly said to have spoken in excess of what is obvious to people everywhere, and I say that such views are wrong." [S.IV.230]

\* \* \*

"Monks, when there is intentional, fixed and steady deliberation on any theme, that theme becomes an object for sustaining consciousness. Where there is an object, consciousness has an abiding. When consciousness is so firmly established and developed, birth in a new sphere (*bhava*) ensues. When there is arising into a new sphere of existence, birth, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair follow. Thus is there the arising of this whole mass of suffering." [S.II.65]

Although this interpretation of the principle of Dependent Origination must be understood in its own right, we nevertheless do not discard the pattern established by the standard model. Therefore, before going into its meaning, we should first reiterate the standard model, adapting the definitions in keeping with this interpretation.

## Preliminary Definition

**1. Ignorance** -- ignorance of the truth, or things as they are; being deluded by nominal realities; the ignorance behind beliefs; lack of wisdom; failure to understand cause and effect.

**2. Volitional Impulses** -- mental activities, willful intent, intention and decision, and their generation of actions; the organization of the thinking process in accordance with accumulated habits, abilities, preferences, and beliefs; the conditioning of the mind and the thinking process.

**3. Consciousness** -- the awareness of sensations, namely: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and cognizing; the basic climate of the mind from moment to moment.

**4. Body and mind** (the animated organism) -- the presence of corporeality and mentality within awareness; the state of coordination between the body and the mind to function in line with the stream of consciousness; the bodily and mental changes as a result of mental states.

**5. The six sense bases** -- the functioning of the sense bases.

**6. Contact** -- the point of contact between awareness and the outside world.

**7. Feeling** -- of pleasure, pain or indifference.

**8. Craving** -- the desire to seek pleasurable sense objects and to escape the unpleasant. Craving is of three kinds: wanting to have and enjoy, wanting to be, and wanting to destroy or be rid of.

**9. Clinging** -- attachment and grasping to either pleasant or unpleasant feelings, to the conditions of life which precipitate such feelings, and the evaluation of and attitudes toward those things in terms of their potential to satisfy desires.

**10. Becoming** -- the entire process of behavior generated to serve craving and clinging (*kammabhava* -- the active process); also the conditions of life resulting from such forces (*upapattibhava* --the passive process).[\[14\]](#)

**11. Birth** -- clear recognition of emergence in a state of existence; identification with states of life or modes of conduct, and the resulting sense of one who enjoys, occupies or experiences them.

**12. Aging and death** -- the awareness of separation, or deprivation of the self from a state of existence or identity; the feeling or threat of annihilation or separation from such states of being; from there, the resulting experience of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (even in their most subtle forms).

## How the links connect

**1 => 2. Ignorance as a determinant for volitional impulses:** With no knowledge or awareness of the truth, no clear understanding or wise reflection on experiences, the result is confused thinking based on conjecture and imagination, and conditioned by beliefs, fears and accumulated character traits. These consequently condition any decisions to act, speak or think.

**2 => 3. Volitional impulses as determinants for consciousness:** With intention, consciousness is conditioned accordingly. We have a tendency (or are conditioned) to see, hear and cognize what our background intentions influence us to. Moreover, the context within which we see, hear or cognize will also be conditioned by those intentions. Intention will lead the consciousness to repeatedly recollect and proliferate about certain events. It will also condition the basic state of mind, or consciousness, to assume either fine and good or base and evil qualities; consciousness is conditioned in conformity with good or evil intentions.

**3 => 4. Consciousness as a determinant for body and mind:** Cognition, sight, hearing and so on, entail physical properties (*rupadhamma*) and mental properties (*namadhamma*) that we know and see. In addition, when consciousness operates, the relevant physical and mental properties (these being the 'cohorts' of consciousness -- the *khandhas* of form, feeling, perception and volitional impulses), must also

function accordingly and in coordination with the nature of that consciousness. For instance, when consciousness is fashioned by anger, perceptions arising as a result will be correspondingly negative. The body will take on features in conformity with the hostile intention, such as aggressive facial expressions, tensing of the muscles, and high blood pressure. Feelings will be unpleasant. When consciousness takes on any particular feature repeatedly and habitually, the subsequent mental and physical properties will become the corresponding bodily and mental traits of bearing and character.

**4 => 5. Body and mind as determinants for the six sense bases:** When body and mind function the relevant sense bases will be activated to meet their demand (in seeking relevant information or in enjoying sensations). Those sense doors will function in accordance with the bodily and mental states conditioning them.

**5 => 6. The six sense bases as determinants for contact:** With the functioning of the various sense doors, contact (*phassa*), the impingement on them, or full awareness of sensations, arises, dependent on the sense door functioning at the time.

**6 => 7. Contact as a determinant for feeling:** Together with the awareness of sensations there must also be feelings of one kind or another: if not pleasant or unpleasant, then neutral.

**7 => 8. Feeling as a determinant for craving:** With the experience of pleasant sensations there follows liking and attachment. This is sense craving (*kamattanha*). Sometimes desire is for a position from which it will be possible to control and indulge in those pleasant feelings. This is craving for being or for states of being (*bhavattanha*). Experiences which produce feelings of discomfort or suffering usually cause thoughts of aversion and the desire to be rid of the source of those feelings. This is craving for non-being (*vibhavattanha*). Within neutral feelings, such as indifference or dullness, there is a subtle attachment, so that indifference is regarded as a subtle form of pleasant feeling, liable to evolve into desire for more overt forms of pleasure at any time.

**8 => 9. Craving as a determinant for clinging:** As desire becomes stronger it develops into clinging, a kind of mental preoccupation, creating an attitude toward and evaluation of the object of desire (with *vibhavattanha*, a negative evaluation will be formed). A fixed position is adopted towards things: if there is attraction it precipitates a binding effect, an identification with the object of attraction. Whatever is connected with that object seems to be good. When there is repulsion, the object of that repulsion seems to affront the self. Any adopted position towards these things tends to reinforce clinging, which will be directed toward, and in turn reinforce the value of:

- Sense objects (*kama*)
- Ideas and beliefs (*ditthi*)
- Systems, models, practices and so on (*silavatta*)
- The belief in a self (*attavada*) to either attain or be thwarted from its desires.

**9 => 10. Clinging as a determinant for becoming:** Clinging conditions *bhava*, life states, both on the level of behavior (*kammabhava*), and as regards character and the physical and mental properties (*upapattibhava*). These could, for example, be the pattern of behavior (*kammabhava*) and character traits (*upapattibhava*) of one who aspires to be rich, or who desires power, fame, beauty, or who hates society, and so on.

**10 => 11. Becoming as a determinant for birth:** Given a life state to be occupied and possessed, a being arises to fill it as enjoyer or experiencer. This is the distinct feeling of occupation or possession of that life



state. There is a perception of one who acts and one who reaps the fruits of actions, one who succeeds and one who fails, one who gains and one who loses.

**11 => 12. Birth as a determinant for aging and death:** Birth into a life state necessarily entails the experiences of prosperity and decline within it. These include the imminent degeneration of that state, the experiences of adversity and ruin within it, and the separation from and destruction of it. There is a constant threat of danger, and a constant need to protect and maintain the self. The inevitability of decline and dissolution, together with the constant anxiety and effort to protect that state from them, combine to cause sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, or suffering.

## Examples

**1 => 2. Ignorance ... volitional impulses:** Not knowing the truth, the mind proliferates and imagines accordingly, like a man who, believing in ghosts (ignorance), is frightened (volitional impulse) by the light reflected from the eyes of an animal at night; or like a person speculating about something held in another's closed fist; or like a person who believes that celestial beings can create anything they wish, and devises ceremonies or mystic phrases to supplicate them; or like one who, unaware of the true nature of conditioned things as unstable and subject to determinants, sees them as attractive and desirable, and aspires to obtain and control them. As long as any trace of ignorance is still present, volitional impulses or proliferation will be produced.

**2 => 3. Volitional impulses ... consciousness:** With *cetana*, intention, along with mental coloration, consciousness, as seeing, hearing and so on, is conditioned accordingly. Without intention or interest, consciousness may not arise, even in a situation where it is possible for it to do so. For example, when we are reading an absorbing book, our attention does not wander, but acknowledges only the matter being read into consciousness. Even a loud sound or bites from mosquitoes may go unnoticed. When we are intent on searching for a particular object, we may not notice other objects.

One and the same object looked at in different circumstances, with different intentions, may be seen differently, depending on the context of the intention. For example, a vacant plot of land to a child may appear as a great playground; to a man intending to build a house it may seem like a prospective retirement home; to a farmer, different features again will seem important, while to an industrialist, still different features will be prominent.

If we look at the same object at different times, in the context of different thoughts, different features will appear prominent. When thinking wholesome thoughts, the mind is influenced by those thoughts, and interprets the object of awareness in their context. Thinking in a harsh and injurious way, the mind takes note of, turns toward and interprets the meaning of its associated objects of awareness in the light of those destructive thoughts. For example, amidst a collection of objects placed together might be a knife and some flowers. A flower lover might notice only the flowers and none of the other objects placed nearby. The more intense the interest and attraction to those flowers, the more intense will be the awareness of them to the exclusion of everything else. Another person in need of a weapon might notice only the knife. In the case of a number of people seeing the same knife, for one there might be the perception of a weapon, while for another there might be the perception of a kitchen utensil, while yet another might see it as a piece of scrap metal, all depending on the background and intention of the observer.

**3 => 4. Consciousness ... body and mind:** Consciousness and body and mind are interdependent, as Venerable Sariputta said:

"Like two sheaves of reeds standing, supporting each other, with body and mind as condition there is consciousness; with consciousness as condition, body and mind. If we remove the first of those sheaves of reeds, the other falls down. If we remove the other sheaf, the first will tumble. In the same way, with the cessation of body and mind, consciousness ceases; with the cessation of consciousness, body and mind cease." [S.II.114]

In this context, with the arising of consciousness, body and mind will arise, and must arise. As volitional impulses condition consciousness, they also condition body and mind, but because body and mind depend on consciousness for their existence, being properties of consciousness, it is thus said: "volitional impulses condition consciousness, and consciousness conditions body and mind." Thus, we could analyze the way consciousness conditions body and mind in the following way:

1. When the mind is said to cognize any particular sensation, such as in seeing or hearing, in fact it is simply the cognition of body and mind (specifically, the *khandhas* of form, feeling, perception and volitional impulses). All that exists on an experiential level is what is cognized by consciousness from moment to moment, the physical and mental properties apparent to the senses. When there is cognition there are relative mental and physical properties that are experienced. The existence of a rose, for example, is the cognition by the visual or cognitive sense at that time. Apart from this, there is no 'rose' as such, other than as a concept in the mind. The 'rose' is not independent of the feelings, perceptions and concepts occurring at that time. Thus, when there is consciousness, body and mind will simultaneously and independently be there.

2. Body and mind, especially mental qualities, dependent on any instant of consciousness will assume qualities harmonious with that consciousness. Whenever mental activities, or volitional impulses, are wholesome, the consciousness resultant on them will be subsequently cheerful and clear, and bodily gestures will be buoyant. When volitional impulses are unwholesome they lead to the cognition of sensations from a harsh and harmful perspective. The mental state will be negative, and bodily gestures and behavior will be influenced accordingly. In this state, the constituent factors, both mental and physical, are in a state of readiness to act in conformity with the volitional impulses that condition consciousness. When there is a feeling of love and affection (volitional impulse) there arises the cognition of pleasing sensations (consciousness), the mind (*nama*) is cheerful and bright, as are facial features (*rupa*). With anger there is the cognition of unpleasant sensations, the mind is depressed and facial features are sullen and aggressive.

On the sports field, the footballer focuses his attention and interest on the game being played. His awareness arises and ceases with an intensity proportional to the strength of his interest in the game. All the necessary components of body and mind are primed to function and perform their duties as directed. The interrelationship in this case refers to and includes the successive arising and ceasing of body and mind (or physical and mental properties). The active properties of body and mind converge to form the overall state of being as it is directed by consciousness and volitional impulses (note the similarity to *bhava*).

All the events taking place at this stage are important steps in the generation of kamma and its results. The cycle, or *vatta*, has completed one small revolution (ignorance is defilement, or *kilesa*; volitional impulses are kamma; consciousness and body and mind are kamma-results, or *vipaka*) and is preparing to begin a new cycle. This is a significant stage in the building of habits and character-traits.

**4 => 5. Body and mind ... six sense bases:** Body and mind must function through awareness of the outside world, which, together with previously acquired experience, is in turn used to serve the intention or volitional impulses. Thus the components of body and mind which serve as transmitters and receivers of sensations (the sense bases) are in a state of alertness to function in conformity with their determinants. For instance, in the case of the football player on the field, the sense organs responsible for receiving the sensations directly concerned with the sport being played, such as eye and ear, will be primed to receive those sensations. At the same time, those senses not immediately concerned, such as taste or smell, will be dormant, or in a state of suspended activity.

**5 => 6. The six sense bases ... contact:** Awareness arises through the sense bases, based on the coordination of three factors: internal sense bases (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind), external sense objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily feelings and mental impressions), and consciousness (through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). Awareness arises in conformity with each particular sense base.

**6 => 7. Contact ... feeling:** Wherever there is contact there must be the experience of one of the three kinds of feelings: comfort or happiness (*sukhavedana*), discomfort or pain (*dukkhavedana*), or indifference, neither happiness nor pain (*upekkha* or *adukkham-asukhavedana*).

The third link to the seventh, that is, from consciousness to feeling, is known as the *vipaka*, or kamma-resultant, section of the Dependent Origination cycle. Links 5, 6 and 7, in particular, are neither wholesome nor unwholesome in themselves, but can be catalysts for the arising of wholesome and unwholesome thoughts and actions.

**7 => 8. Feeling ... craving:** When pleasant feeling is experienced, desire usually follows. With unpleasant feeling, the reaction is one of stress, a desire to have the unpleasant object removed or annihilated. There is also a desire to seek distraction in pleasant feeling. Neutral feelings, or indifference, induce a condition of dullness or complacency. Both are subtle and deluding forms of pleasant feeling which the mind tends to attach to. They can also act as catalysts for the generation of desire for further pleasant feeling.

Craving can be divided into three distinct kinds, thus:

1. *Kamatanha* -- Craving for desirable sense objects.

2. *Bhavatanha* -- 'Craving for being,' craving for particular life situations; on a deeper level, this includes the life instinct and the desire to maintain a particular condition or identity.

3. *Vibhavatanha* -- 'Craving for non-being,' the craving to escape from or be free of disliked objects or situations; this kind of craving usually expresses itself in feelings such as despair, depression, self-hatred and self-pity.[15]

Craving thus appears in three main forms: as craving for sense objects, craving for life situations, and craving to be free of unpleasant situations. This last form of craving is particularly noticeable when desires are thwarted or opposed, and expresses itself in resentment, anger and aggression.

**8 => 9. Craving ... clinging:** Objects of desire become objects of attachment, the more intense the desire, the more intense the attachment. Craving develops into specific attitudes and values. With unpleasant feeling, clinging manifests as an obsessive aversion to the object of that feeling and an obsessive desire to seek escape from it. In this way, there is clinging to objects of the senses, to the life situations which can

provide them, to identities, opinions, theories, and methods for procuring them and to the concept or image of a self to enjoy or suffer from those situations.

**9 => 10. Clinging ... becoming:** Clinging naturally affects life situations in one way or another, and its effects occur on two levels. Firstly, clinging ties the self to, or causes it to identify with, particular life situations which are believed to either fulfill desires or provide the means to escape from things not desired. If there are desired situations, there will naturally be situations not desired. Such grasped-at life situations are called *upapattibhava*.

Attachment to any life situation will produce thoughts or intentions to either become or avoid it. These thoughts will include the machinations to invent ways and means of effectuating those desires. All of this thinking and activity is molded by the direction and mode of clinging. That is, they operate under the influence of accumulated attitudes, beliefs, understandings, values and likes or dislikes. Some simple illustrations:

- Desire for rebirth in a heavenly realm will cause clinging to teachings, belief systems or practices which are believed to effectuate such a rebirth, and behavior will be conditioned accordingly.
- Desire for fame will produce clinging to those values and the relevant behavior assumed to be required to attain fame, and to the self which is going to attain it. Behavior which results is conditioned by that clinging.
- Desire to acquire possessions belonging to another will condition the thought processes accordingly. Clinging habitualizes the thought pattern, which may eventually, for one lacking circumspection and moral conscience, lead to theft. The original aim of becoming an owner becomes the actuality of being a thief. In this way, through seeking to attain objects of desire, people will either create unskillful actions and develop bad habits, or create skillful actions and develop virtue, depending on the nature of their beliefs and understanding.

The specific *pattern of behavior* resulting from the influence of clinging, including the nature of events so conditioned, is called *kammabhava* (actions conditioning rebirth). The *life situations* resulting from such modes of behavior, be they desired or not, are called *upapattibhava* (states of rebirth).

This stage of the Dependent Origination cycle is pivotal in the creation of kamma and its results, and on a long term basis plays a crucial role in the development of habit and character traits.

**10 => 11. Becoming ... birth:** At this point there arises the distinct feeling of a self, an identification with a certain situation or condition, either desired or undesired. In Dhamma language we might say that a being has arisen within that state (*bhava*), resulting in the feeling of one who is a thief, an owner, a success, a failure, a nobody and so on. In the case of the ordinary person, birth, or the arising of the sense of self, can be most easily observed in times of discord, when clinging tends to arise in very extreme ways. In arguments, even intellectual debates, if defilements are used instead of wisdom, a distinct sense of self will arise in the form of such thoughts as 'I am superior,' 'I am the boss,' 'he is my subordinate,' 'he is inferior,' 'this is my view,' 'my view is being contested,' 'my authority is being questioned' and so on. These are all instances where the identity is being discredited or threatened. Birth is therefore most obvious at times of *jaramarana*, decay and death.

**11=> 12. Birth ... aging and death:** Given a self which occupies or assumes a certain position, it follows that this self will sooner or later be deprived of or separated from that position. The self is threatened by

alienation, frustration, misfortune, conflict and failure. Although it seeks to maintain its position indefinitely, all that arises must inevitably experience decay and dissolution. Even before dissolution sets in, the self is surrounded by the threat of impending doom. This intensifies clinging to life situations. Fear of death arises from the awareness of danger. The fear of death and dissolution is embedded deeply within the mind and is always influencing human behavior, causing neuroses, insecurity, the intense and desperate struggle for desired life situations, and despair in the face of suffering and loss. Thus for the ordinary person, the fear of death haunts all happiness.

In this context, when the self appears in any undesired life situation, is deprived of a desired situation, or is threatened with the possibility thereof, it is left with disappointment and frustration, or, in the Pali language, *soka* (sorrow), *parideva* (lamentation), *dukkha* (pain), *domanassa* (grief) and *upayasa* (despair). Surrounded by all this suffering, the result is distraction and confusion, which are functions of ignorance. Most efforts to relieve suffering are thus directed by ignorance, and so the cycle continues.

A simple example: For the average person living in a competitive world, success does not stop at merely the social phenomenon of success, with all its trappings, but includes clinging to the identity of being a successful person, which is a 'becoming,' or life state (*bhava*). Occasionally the feeling of self will manifest as thoughts of "I am a success," which in effect means "I have been born (*jati*) as a successful person." However, such success, in its fullest sense, is dependent on external conditions, such as fame, praise, attainment of special privileges, admiration and recognition. Birth as a "success," or "being successful," depends not only on recognition and admiration from others, but the presence of a loser, someone to succeed over. As soon as a successful being is born, he or she is threatened with fading, obscurity and loss. In this situation, all the feelings of depression, worry and disappointment which have not been properly dealt with by mindfulness and clear comprehension will become accumulated in the subconscious, and they will exert an influence on subsequent behavior in accordance with the Dependent Origination cycle.

Whenever there is the arising of the self-concept, there is an occupation of space; when there is occupation of space, there must be a boundary or limitation; when there is limitation, there must be separation; when there is separation there must be the dualism of 'self' and 'not self.' The self will grow and extend outwards through the desire to attain, to act and to impress others. However, it is not possible for self to grow indefinitely according to its desires. The expanding self will inevitably meet with obstruction in some form or other, and desires will be thwarted, if not externally then from within. If one has any sensitivity to the esteem of others, opposition will arise in the form of one's own sense of conscience. If there is no suppression of these desires and they are allowed to express themselves fully, opposition will appear from external sources. Even if it were possible to indulge every desire to the full, such activity is weakening. It only serves to increase the power of craving itself, together with its attendant feeling of lack. Not only does it increase dependence on externals, but it increases internal conflict. When desires are unfulfilled, tension, conflict and despair are the natural result.

## **An example of Dependent Origination in everyday life**

Let us take a simple example of how the principle of Dependent Origination operates in everyday life. Suppose there are two school chums, named 'John' and 'Ian.' Whenever they meet at school they smile and say "Hello" to each other. One day John sees Ian, and approaches him with a friendly greeting ready, only to be answered with silence and a sour expression. John is peeved by this, and stops talking to Ian. In this case, the chain of reactions might proceed in the following way:

**1. Ignorance (*avijja*):** John is ignorant of the true reason for Ian's grim face and sullenness. He fails to reflect on the matter wisely and to ascertain the real reasons for Ian's behavior, which may have nothing at all to do with his feelings for John.

**2. Volitional Impulses (*sankhara*):** As a result, John proceeds to think and formulate theories in his mind, conditioned by his temperament, and these give rise to doubt, anger, and resentment, once again dependent on his particular temperament.

**3. Consciousness (*viññana*):** Under the influence of these defilements, John broods. He takes note of and interprets Ian's behavior and actions in accordance with those previous impressions; the more he thinks about it, the surer he gets; Ian's every gesture seems offensive.

**4. Body and mind (*namarupa*):** John's feelings, thoughts, moods, facial expressions and gestures, that is, the body and mind together, begin to take on the overall features of an angry or offended person, primed to function in accordance with that consciousness.

**5. Sense bases (*salayatana*):** John's sense organs are primed to receive information that is related to and conditioned by the body-mind organism's state of anger or hurt.

**6. Contact (*phassa*):** The impingement on the sense organs will be of the activities or attributes of Ian which seem particularly relative to the case, such as frowning expressions, unfriendly gestures, and so on.

**7. Feeling (*vedana*):** Feelings, conditioned by sense contact, are of the unpleasant kind.

**8. Craving (*tanha*):** *Vibhavatanha*, craving for non-being, arises, the dislike or aversion for that offensive image, the desire for it to go away or to be destroyed.

**9. Clinging (*upadana*):** Clinging and obsessive thinking in relation to Ian's behavior follows. Ian's behavior is interpreted as a direct challenge; he is seen as a disputant, and the whole situation demands some kind of remedial action.

**10. Becoming (*bhava*):** John's subsequent behavior falls under the influence of clinging and his actions become those of an antagonist.

**11. Birth (*jati*):** As the feeling of enmity becomes more distinct, it is assumed as an identity. The distinction between 'me' and 'him' becomes more distinct, and there is a self which is obliged to somehow respond to the situation.

**12. Aging and death (*jaramarana*):** This 'self,' or condition of enmity, exists and flourishes dependent on certain conditions, such as the desire to appear tough, to preserve honor and pride, and to be the victor, which all have their respective opposites, such as feelings of worthlessness, inferiority, and failure. As soon as that self arises, it is confronted with the absence of any guarantee of victory. Even if he does attain the victory he desires, there is no guarantee that John will be able to preserve his supremacy for any length of time. He may not, in fact, be the 'tough victor' he wants to be, but rather the loser, the weakling, the one who loses face. These possibilities of suffering play with John's moods and produce stress, insecurity, and worry. They in turn feed ignorance, thus beginning a new round of the cycle. Such negative states are like festering wounds which have not been treated, and so continue to release their 'poisoning' effect on John's consciousness, influencing all of his behavior, and causing problems both for

himself and for others. In John's case, he may feel unhappy for the whole of that day, speaking gruffly to whoever he comes into contact with, and so increasing the likelihood of more unpleasant incidents.

In this case, if John were to practice correctly he would be advised to start off on the right foot. Seeing his friend's sullenness, he could use his intelligence (*yoniso-manasikara*: considering in accordance with causes and conditions) and reflect that Ian may have some problem on his mind -- he may have been scolded by his mother, he may be in need of money, or he may simply be depressed. If John reflected in this way no incident would arise, his mind would be untroubled, and he might even be moved toward compassionate action and understanding.

Once the negative chain of events has been set in motion, however, it can still be cut off with mindfulness at any point. For instance, if it had continued on up to sense contact, where Ian's actions were perceived in a negative way, John could still set up mindfulness right there: instead of falling under the power of craving for non-being, he could instead consider the facts of the situation and thereby gain a fresh understanding of Ian's behavior. He could then reflect wisely in regard to both his own and his friend's actions, so that his mind would no longer be weighed down by negative emotional reactions, but instead respond in a clearer and more positive way. Such reflection, in addition to causing no problems for himself, could also serve to encourage the arising of compassion.

Before leaving this example, it might be useful to reiterate some salient points:

- In real life, the complete cycles or chains of events, such as that mentioned in this example, take place very rapidly. A student finding out that he has failed an exam, someone receiving bad news, such as the death of a loved one, or a man who sees his wife with a lover, for example, may all feel intense sorrow or shock, even going weak at the knees, screaming or fainting. The more intense the attachment and clinging, the more intense the reaction will be.
- It should be stressed once again that the inter-determination within this chain of events does not necessarily have to be in sequential order, just as chalk, a blackboard, and writing are all indispensable determinants for the white letters on a blackboard's surface, but do not have to appear in sequential order.
- The teaching of Dependent Origination attempts to clarify the workings of nature, to analyze the unfolding of events as they actually occur, so that the causes can be more easily identified and corrected. As for the details of how that correction can be effectuated, they are not the concern of the teaching of Dependent Origination, but are rather the domain of *magga* (the Path), or the Middle Way.

In any case, the examples given here are very simplified and may seem somewhat superficial. They are not sufficiently detailed to convey the full subtlety of the principle of Dependent Origination, especially such sections as ignorance as a determinant for volitional impulses, and sorrow, lamentation and despair conditioning the further turning of the cycle. Looking at our example, it may appear that the cycle only arises occasionally, that ignorance is a sporadic phenomena, and that the ordinary person may spend large periods of his or her life without the arising of ignorance at all. In fact, for the unenlightened being, ignorance of varying degrees is behind every thought, action and word. The most basic level of this ignorance is simply the perception that there is a self which is thinking, speaking and acting. If this is not borne in mind, the true relevance of the teaching to everyday life may be overlooked. For this reason some of the more profound aspects of this chain of events will now be examined in more detail.

**Footnotes:**

**14.** The term *upapattibhava* comes from the Abhidhamma. In the later Suttas, the term is *patisandhipunnabhava* (see Nd2 569). [[Back to text](#)]

**15.** Scholars are divided over interpretations of *bhavatanha* and *vibhavatanha*. Two or three groups of definitions of the term are given in the Tipitaka and Commentaries (Vbh.365; Vism.567) Some scholars compare *bhavatanha* with Freud's life instinct or life wish, and *vibhavatanha* to the death instinct or death wish. (See M. O'c. Walshe, *Buddhism for Today*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1962, pp. 37-40.) There is a particularly lucid definition in the Itivuttaka (It.43-44). [[Back to text](#)]



# 6

## The Nature of Defilements

For the unenlightened being, experiences and situations are normally interpreted and evaluated through the following biases or influences:

1. The concern around desires for the five kinds of sense objects (*kama* -- sights, sounds, smells, tastes and bodily sensations).
2. The concern around the existence and preservation of the self, its identities and desired situations (*bhava*).
3. Views, beliefs, and ways of thinking (*ditthi*).
4. Delusion or ignorance (*avijja*): not clearly knowing the meaning of things as they are, which leads to the perception of self.

The third and fourth conditions, in particular, are obviously related: without wisdom or understanding, it follows that behavior will be guided by habitual and misguided views and beliefs. These two conditions cover very broad areas of influence, including political, social and religious ideals and practices based on temperament, habit, training, and social conditioning. They are related to the first and second biases and exert an influence over them, thus controlling all personal feelings and behavior. They condition everything, from likes and dislikes to means and methods chosen to gratify desires. Ignorance and views are concealed deeply within consciousness and are quietly and continually exerting their influence.

According to common perception, we are in control of our actions and are able to pursue desires of our own free will. Closer observation will tell us that this is an illusion. If we were to ask ourselves, "What do we really want? Why do we want such things? Why do we act the way we do?" we would find nothing which is really our own. We would find instead inherited behavior patterns, learned from schooling, religious upbringing, social conditioning and the like. Individual actions are simply chosen from within the bounds of these criteria, and although there may be some adaptations made, these will again be at the direction of other influences. Any choices or decisions made are part of a stream of conditions, and these are themselves influenced by other factors. What people feel to be their self is none other than the sum total of these influences or biases. These conditions, in addition to having no self of their own, are powerful forces over which most people have little or no control, so that there is really very little chance for true independence.

The four qualities mentioned above are called in Pali *asava*.<sup>[16]</sup> Translated literally, *asava* means 'that which floods,' or 'that which pickles or festers,' because these things 'pickle' or 'poison' the mind. They also 'flood' the mind whenever it experiences a sensation, and so we will call them 'outflows.' No matter what

may be experienced, be it through any of the sense doors or conceived in the mind itself, these outflows insinuate themselves into and spread their influence over it. Sensations or thoughts, instead of being functions of the pure mind, become instead products of the outflows, in turn polluting subsequent mental states and causing, as a result, suffering.

The first outflow is called *kamasava*, the second, *bhavasava*, the third *ditthasava*, and the fourth *avijjasava*. These outflows lie behind the behavior of all unenlightened beings. They create the delusion of self-view, which is ignorance at its most basic level. In this sense they control and direct thinking and behavior. This is the very first level of the Dependent Origination cycle: ignorance is conditioned by the outflows. From there the cycle continues -- with ignorance as determinant, volitional impulses arise accordingly.

While, under the influence of delusion, most people believe that they themselves are performing actions, the irony is that they are not their own masters at all -- their behavior is totally controlled by intentions which are lacking in reflexive awareness. Essentially, ignorance is blindness to the Three Characteristics as they are shown in the principle of Dependent Origination, especially the third one, not-self (*anatta*). More specifically, ignorance is not clearly knowing that the conditions usually taken to be an individual or self, 'me' or 'you,' are simply a stream of physical and mental phenomena, constantly arising and ceasing, related and connected by the cause and effect process. This stream is in a state of constant flux. We could say that a 'person' is simply the overall result of the feelings, thoughts, desires, habits, biases, views, knowledge, beliefs and so on, at any particular point in time, that are either inherited from social and environmental factors, such as through learning, or formed from personal, internal factors, all constantly changing. Not clearly knowing this, there is clinging to one or another of these conditions as self or belonging to self. To cling to conditions in this way is in effect to be deceived and controlled by them.

This is "ignorance as a determinant for volitional impulses" on a more profound level than given previously. As for the remaining headings, from here up until *vedana*, feeling, there should be no difficulty understanding them from the explanations already given. Therefore we will pass on from there to another important section, "craving (*tanha*) as a determinant for clinging, (*upadana*)," another of the sections dealing with *kilesa*, or defilement.

The three kinds of craving already mentioned are all expressions of the one craving, and all are commonly experienced in everyday life, but they can only be seen when the workings of the mind are carefully analyzed. At the root of all ignorance is ignorance of things as a natural process of interrelated causes and effects, which gives rise to the perception of a self. This leads to a very important and fundamental desire, the desire to be, the desire to survive, to protect and preserve the illusion of self. Wanting to be is related to wanting to have -- desire is not simply for existence, but existence in order to consume those objects which will produce pleasant feelings. Thus it can be said that desire for existence depends on the desire to have, and desire to have intensifies the desire to exist.

As craving intensifies, a number of situations may result: if the desired object is not obtained at the desired time, the *bhava*, or state of existence, at that time becomes intolerable. Life will seem difficult, and this leads to a desire to annihilate the undesirable situation. At the same time, desire to acquire will once again arise, based on fear of no longer being able to experience pleasant feeling, and from there desire to be once more. A second possibility might be not obtaining the desired object at all; a third, obtaining it, but in insufficient quantity; while a fourth might be obtaining it, but then desiring something else. The process may take various forms, but the basic pattern is one of ever-increasing craving.

When the workings of the mind are examined closely, human beings seem to be embroiled in a constant search for a state that is more fulfilling than what they have. Unenlightened beings are constantly being repelled from the present moment -- each moment of present time is a state of stress, an unendurable situation. The desire to extinguish this situation, to free the self from the present and find a state which is more fulfilling, is constantly arising. Wanting to get, wanting to be and wanting to not be are constantly occurring in the daily life of unenlightened beings (on a level that few are aware of). Personal life thus becomes a constant struggle to escape the present state of being to search for some future fulfillment.

Tracing back along the process, we find that these desires originate from the fundamental ignorance of things as they really are -- in short, ignorance of the principle of conditionality and Dependent Origination. This ignorance gives rise to the basic misconception of self in one form or another: either seeing things as separate entities, fixed and enduring, (*sassataditthi*) or as being completely and utterly annihilated (*ucchedaditthi*). All unenlightened beings have these two basic wrong views at the root of their consciousness, and these give rise to the three kinds of desire. The desire for existence (*bhavatanha*) springs from the distorted perception of things as separate and enduring entities (and thus desirable and worth attaining). Alternatively, there is the misconception that these separate entities are destructible (and as such are not worth having and must be escaped from), which is the basis for the desire for annihilation (*vibhavatanha*).

These two basic wrong views prepare the way for craving. If there was understanding of the stream of events as a process of interrelated causes and effects, the perception of a separate entity which endures or is destroyed would be baseless. All craving is naturally based on these two basic views.

Fear of loss of pleasant feeling leads to the frantic search for more, and the perception of a separate entity leads to the struggle to procure for that entity and to preserve it. On a coarser level, craving expresses itself as the struggle to seek out objects of desire, life situations which provide such objects, boredom with those objects already obtained, and the despair with, or inability to endure, the lack of new objects of desire. The picture that emerges is of people unable to be at peace with themselves, constantly craving objects of desire and experiencing melancholy, loneliness, alienation and distress in the struggle to escape from unendurable boredom. When desires are thwarted there is disappointment and despair.

For most people happiness and suffering depend entirely on external conditions. Free time becomes a bane, both individually and socially, a cause for boredom, misery and loneliness. This basic dissatisfaction increases in proportion to the amount of desire and the intensity of the search for sensual gratification. In fact, looking from a more introspective viewpoint, we find that the most important cause for social problems, such as drug addiction and juvenile delinquency, is the inability of people to be at peace with the present moment and their subsequent struggles to escape it.

In the event of having studied and trained in a religious teaching, and developed right views, craving can be turned in a good direction, aimed at realizing more long-term goals, which entails the performance of good works and, ultimately, the use of craving to abandon craving.

The defilement (*kilesa*) which follows on from craving is clinging, of which there are four kinds:

**1. Kamupadana: Clinging to sensuality.** Desire and effort to seek out sense objects are naturally followed by clinging and attachment. When an object of desire is obtained, the wish to gratify that desire even more and the fear of losing the object of such gratification will produce clinging. In the event of disappointment and loss, attachment is based on yearning. Clinging becomes even stronger and generates further action in the quest for fulfillment because desire-objects provide no lasting satisfaction. Because

nothing can ever really belong to the self, the mind is constantly trying to reaffirm the sense of ownership. The thinking of unenlightened beings is thus constantly clinging to and obsessed with one object of desire or another. It is very difficult for such a mind to be free and unattached.

**2. *Ditthupadana*: Clinging to views.** Desire to be or not to be produces bias and attachment to views, theories or philosophical systems, and in turn methods, ideas, creeds and teachings. When views are clung to they become identified with as part of one's self. Thus, when confronted with a theory or view which contradicts one's own, it is taken as a personal threat. The self must fight to defend its position, which in turn gives rise to all kinds of conflicts. The process tends to bind the mind into tight corners where the functioning of wisdom is impaired. Such thoughts and views do not provide knowledge, but rather obstruct it.

**3. *Silabbatupadana*: Clinging to mere rules and rituals.** The desire to be and the fear of dissolution, together with attachment to views, in turn lead to blind adherence to those practices and methods, such as magic and occultism, which are believed to effectuate the desired result. The desire for self-preservation and self-expression manifest outwardly as blind attachment to modes of behavior, traditions, methods, creeds and institutions. There is no understanding of their true value or meaning. This in effect means that the creation of these methodologies and practices leads to stricture and confusion, making it difficult to effect any self-improvement or to derive any true benefit from them.

On the subject of *silabbatupadana*, the late Venerable Buddhadasa, one of the most influential Buddhist thinkers in contemporary Thailand, has given an explanation which may be of interest here:

Practicing moral restraint, or any other form of Dhamma practice, without knowing its aim or reflecting on its meaning, but simply believing that such practices are auspicious and automatically productive of benefit, leads to strict adherence to precepts according to beliefs, customs or examples handed down from previous generations. Rather than penetrating to the real reasons for these practices, people simply cling fast to them through tradition. This is a kind of clinging (*upadana*) which is very difficult to redress, unlike the second kind of clinging, attachment to views, or wrong thoughts and ideas. This kind of clinging fixes on to the actual forms of practice, its external applications.<sup>[17]</sup>

**4. *Attavadupadana*: Clinging to the ego-idea.** The feeling of a true self is delusion on its most basic level. There are other factors which enhance this feeling, such as language and communications, which produce an attachment to concepts and a tendency to see the stream of causal phenomena as fixed entities. This feeling develops into clinging when craving becomes involved. Implicit in craving is the clinging to a self in order to obtain the object of desire. Both craving to be and craving to cease are dependent on the perception of self. Fear of disintegration intensifies the desire for being and the struggle to survive, and thus the sense of self.

Craving is dependent on a powerful and independent self of some form or other. Sometimes it seems that things can be controlled, and this supports the illusion of self, but in fact such control is only partial and temporary. The so-called self is merely one factor among countless other factors within the cause and effect stream. It is beyond any person's power to completely direct or control objects of clinging. The feeling of ownership or control over things may at times seem to be well-founded, but it can never be totally or completely real, with the result that clinging and the struggle to reaffirm the sense of self are intensified.

Clinging to the self makes it difficult to organize things in conformity with the true cause and effect process. When action is not in accordance with cause and effect, and conditions do not behave in

accordance with desires, the self is frustrated and confronted with impotency and loss. Clinging to self is the most fundamental kind of clinging, and is the foundation for all the other kinds.

With the experience of pleasant feeling, craving follows. This leads to *kamupadana*, clinging to desired sense objects. *Ditthupadana*, clinging to views, is present in the form of clinging to the idea that a particular object is good, that only by obtaining it will there be happiness, and that only the methods and teachings which encourage the search for and procurement of this object are correct. *Silabbatupadana* manifests as clinging to the methods and techniques which are considered necessary for the attainment of the objective. *Attavadupadana* appears as clinging to the self which is to own the object.

In short, clinging causes confusion. The thinking of unenlightened beings does not flow smoothly as it should in accordance with reason but is instead irrational, distorted and convoluted. Suffering arises from adherence to the idea of self or ownership. If things were really the self or owned by the self, then they could be controlled at will. But instead they follow causes and conditions. Not being in the power of desire, they become contrary: the self is opposed and thwarted by them. Whenever the clung-to object is attacked, the self is also attacked. The extent of the clinging, that is the influence of the 'self' in our actions, and the extent of disturbance experienced by this self, are all proportional. The result is not only suffering, but a life that is lived and operated under the power of craving and clinging, rather than with wisdom and intelligence.[18]

From clinging, the process continues up to becoming, (*bhava*), birth, (*jati*), aging and death (*jaramarana*), and from there to sorrow, lamentation, and so on, as has already been explained. Any attempt to find a way out of this predicament is conditioned by habitual thought patterns, and dictated by biases, preferences, and views. Without awareness of the true state of things, the cycle begins once again at ignorance and continues on as before.

Although ignorance can be seen as the root cause and creator of all other forms of defilements, in terms of their actual expression through behavior, craving plays the more dominant role. This is why in the Four Noble Truths it is said that craving is the cause of suffering.

Under the blind and confused influence of ignorance and craving, bad kamma is more likely to exceed good kamma. But as ignorance is tempered by skillful beliefs and right thinking, and craving directed and trained by noble aims, good kamma is more likely to exceed bad kamma, and will lead to beneficial results. If craving is wisely directed it becomes a valuable tool in the ultimate destruction of ignorance and defilements. The former way is that of unwholesomeness, unskillful behavior and evil, while the latter is the way to goodness, skill and purity. Both good people and bad people have their own kinds of suffering, but only the path of goodness is capable of leading to the cessation of suffering, to liberation and freedom.

"Sister, a monk in this Teaching and Discipline hears that such and such a monk has realized the deliverance of mind through wisdom, which is void of outflows. He then considers to himself, 'When will I also be able to realize that deliverance of mind through wisdom?' Later, that monk himself, relying on craving, abandons craving. It was on account of this that I said, 'This body is born of craving. Relying on craving, one should abandon craving.'" [A.II.145]

Given a choice between different kinds of craving, the good kind is the preferable incentive for action. However, the transcendence of both good and evil desires, the path of wisdom, is the ideal path to purity, freedom and perfect happiness.

**Footnotes:**

**16.** *Asava*: three outflows -- *kamasava*, *bhavasava*, *avijjasava* -- are given in D.II.81; S.IV.256; etc. Four outflows -- *kamasava*, *bhavasava*, *ditthasava* and *avijjasava* -- are given in the *Abhidhamma*, see Vbh.373. In M.A.I.56 it is said that *ditthasava*, the outflow of views, can be included within *bhavasava*, the outflow of becoming, because the desire for being and attachment to *jhana* states are linked with either the eternalist or annihilationist views. For a general explanation, see Nd2.274; D.A.III.989 (approx); Vin.Tika (Thai edition) 1/476 (unpublished in Romanized Pali). [\[Back to text\]](#)

**17.** Phra Ariyanandamuni, *Luk Phra Buddhasasana* (Suvijahn, 1956), p. 60. [\[Back to text\]](#)

**18.** The four bases of clinging occur in D.III.230; Vbh.375 and elsewhere. *Attavadupadana*, clinging to [the notion of] self, is essentially clinging to one or another of the five *khandhas*, as is said in the Tipitaka, "The unenlightened being perceives that form (body) is self, or that self has form, or that form is within self, or that self is within form. He perceives that feeling ... perception ... volitional impulses ... consciousness is the self, or that self has consciousness, or that consciousness is within the self or that self is within consciousness." [\[Back to text\]](#)

# 7

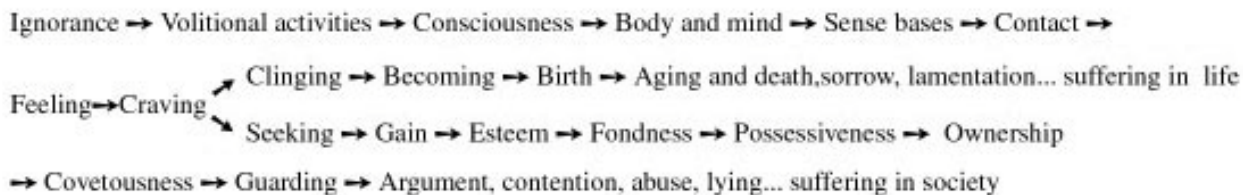
## Dependent Origination in Society

The longest Sutta dealing with Dependent Origination in the Pali Canon is the Mahanidana Sutta [D.II.55-71]. There the Buddha explains the principle of conditionality both on an individual basis, as it occurs within the mind, and also in a social context, as it occurs in human relationships. So far we have dealt exclusively with the principle of Dependent Origination as it occurs in individual human consciousness. Before passing on from this subject it would therefore seem appropriate to mention briefly how Dependent Origination works on the social scale.

The Dependent Origination cycle describes the arising of social ills along the same lines as the arising of personal suffering, but from craving onwards it diverges in to a description of external events:

"In this way, Ananda, conditioned by feeling is craving, conditioned by craving is seeking, conditioned by seeking is gain, conditioned by gain is valuation, conditioned by valuation is fondness, conditioned by fondness is possessiveness, conditioned by possessiveness is ownership, conditioned by ownership is avarice, conditioned by avarice is guarding,[\*] conditioned by guarding and resulting from guarding are the taking up of the stick, the knife, contention, dispute, arguments, abuse, slander, and lying. Evil and unskillful actions of many kinds thus appear in profusion."[\[19\]](#)

Below is a comparison of the way the principle of Dependent Origination works on the personal and the community levels.



To study the above chain of events more clearly, let us look at some of the examples described by the Buddha elsewhere, such as the cycle of *nanatta* (variation), which can be briefly summarized thus:

*Dhatunanatta* (variations within the elements) => *phassananatta* (variations of impingement) => *vedanananatta* (variations of feeling) => *saññananatta* (variations of perception) => *sankappananatta* (variations of thought) => *chandananatta* (variations of desire) => *parilahananatta* (variations of agitation) => *pariyesanatta* (variations of seeking) => *labhananatta* (variations of gain).[20]

The first section, from *dhatu* to *sañña*, can be simply rephrased thus: because of the manifold proliferation of elements, there arises the manifold proliferation of perceptions. In another place in the Pali the following sequence of events is described:

*Dhatunanatta* (variations of the elements) => *saññananatta* (variations of perception) => *sankappananatta* (variations of thought) => *phassananatta* (variations of impingement) => *vedanananatta* (variations of feeling) => *chandananatta* (variations of desire) => *parilahananatta* (variations of agitation) => *pariyesanatta* (variations of seeking) => *labhananatta* (variations of gain). [S.II.140-149]

This sequence illustrates a process connecting individual mind experience with external events, showing how the origin of social problems and suffering lies within human defilements. The sequence is very basic, showing only an outline of the unfolding of events. More detailed explanations, emphasizing more specific situations, appear in other Suttas, such as the *Aggañña* [D.III.80-98], the *Cakkavatti* [D.III.58-79] and the *Vasettha* [Sn.594-656] Suttas. These Suttas are the working models of the principle of Dependent Origination on the social level. They explain the development of events in human society, such as the arising of class structures, as the result of the interaction between people and the environment around them. In other words, these phenomena are a result of an interaction between three levels: human beings, human society and the whole of the natural environment.

The feelings that we experience depend on sense impingement, which, in addition to existing internal factors such as perception, depends on social and environmental factors. Dependent on feeling, craving arises, resulting in the variations of human behavior towards both other people and the world around them, within the restrictions specified by social or natural circumstances. Results of those actions further affect all other factors. Human beings are not the only determinants in social or environmental development, and the natural environment is not the only determinant in conditioning human beings or society. Rather they all constitute an interdependent process of relationship.

One section of the *Aggañña* Sutta illustrates the sequence of social evolution according to cause and effect thus:

People become lazy and begin to hoard rice (previously rice was plentiful and there was no need to hoard it) and this becomes the preferred practice => people begin to hoard private supplies => unscrupulous people steal other's shares to enlarge their own => censure, lying, punishment, and contention result => responsible people, seeing the need for authority, appoint a king => some of the people, being disillusioned with society, decide to do away with evil actions and cultivate meditation practice. Some of these live close to the city and study and write scriptures; they become the Brahmins. Those who remain with their families continue to earn their living by various professions; they becoming the artisans. The remaining people, being vulgar and inept, become the plebeians. From among these four groups a smaller group breaks off, renouncing tradition and household life and taking to the 'homeless life.' These become the *samanas*.

The aim of this Sutta is to explain the arising of the various classes as a matter of natural development based on related causes, not as commandments from an almighty God. All people are equally capable of



good and evil behavior, and all receive results according to the natural law; it follows that all beings are equally capable of attaining enlightenment if they practice the Dhamma correctly.

The Cakkavatti Sutta shows the arising of crime and social ills according to the following cause and effect sequence:

(The ruler) does not share wealth among the poor => poverty abounds => theft abounds => the use of weapons abounds => killing and maiming abound => lying abounds => slander ... sexual infidelity ... abusive and frivolous speech ... greed and hatred ... wrong view => lust for what is wrong, greed, wrong teachings, disrespect for parents, elders and religious persons, disrespect for position abound => longevity and appearance degenerate.

It is interesting to note that in modern times, attempts to resolve social problems are rarely attuned to their real causes. They seek to provide stopgap solutions, such as establishing counseling for drug addicts and delinquents, but they do not delve deeply into the social conditions which affect the emergence of such problems in the first place, such as consumerism and mass media. In this respect, the Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination on the social scale offers an invaluable precedent for intelligent and truly effective social analysis and reform.

**Footnotes:**

[\*] The Pali words here are: *pariyesana*, *labha*, *vinicchaya*, *chandaraga*, *ajjhosana*, *pariggaha*, *macchhariya* and *arakkha* respectively. [[Back to text](#)]

**19.** D.II.58; these nine conditions occur elsewhere under the title of the nine conditions rooted in craving (*tanhamulakadhamma*), such as in D.III.289; A.IV.400; Vbh.390. [[Back to text](#)]

**20.** D.III.289; Ps.I.187; the word "elements" (*dhatu*) here refers to the eighteen elements: six internal sense bases (sense organs), six external sense bases (sense objects) and six consciousnesses. [[Back to text](#)]

# 8

## The Middle Teaching

To understand the principle of Dependent Origination is said to be Right View (*sammaditthi*). This Right View is a very balanced kind of view, one which does not tend to extremes. Thus the principle of Dependent Origination is a law which teaches the truth in a median and unbiased way, known as the Middle Teaching. The 'median-ness' of this truth is more clearly understood when it is compared with other teachings. In order to show how the principle of Dependent Origination differs from these extreme views, I will now present some of them, arranged in pairs, using the Buddha's words as explanation and keeping further commentary to a minimum.

### First Pair:

1. *Atthikavada*: The school which upholds that all things really exist (extreme realism).
2. *Natthikavada*: The school which upholds that all things do not exist (nihilism).

"Venerable Sir, it is said 'Right View, Right View.' To what extent is view said to be right?"

"Herein, Venerable Kaccana, this world generally tends towards two extreme views -- *atthita* (being) and *natthita* (not being). Seeing the cause of the world as it is, with right understanding, there is no 'not being' therein. Seeing the cessation of this world as it is with right understanding, there is no 'being' therein. The world clings to systems and is bound by dogmas, but the noble disciple does not search for, delight in or attach to systems, dogmas or the conceit 'I am.' He doubts not that it is only suffering that arises, and only suffering that ceases. When that noble disciple clearly perceives this independently of others, this is called Right View.

"Kaccana! To say 'all things exist' is one extreme. To say 'all things do not exist' is another. The Tathagata proclaims a teaching that is balanced, avoiding these extremes, thus, 'With ignorance as condition there are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... with the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases ...'" [S.II.16-17, 76; S.III.134]

\* \* \*

A Brahmin approached the Buddha and asked, "Venerable Gotama, do all things exist?"

The Buddha replied, "The view that all things exist is one extreme materialistic view."

*Question:* Then all things do not exist?

*Answer:* The view that all things do not exist is the second materialistic view.

*Question:* Are all things, then, one?

*Answer:* The view that all things are one is the third materialistic view.

*Question:* Are all things, then, a plurality?

*Answer:* The view that all things are a plurality is the fourth materialistic view.

"Brahmin! The Tathagata proclaims a teaching that is balanced, avoiding these extremes, thus, 'With ignorance as condition there are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... with the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases ...'" [S.II.77]

### **Second Pair:**

1. *Sassatavada:* The school of eternalism

2. *Ucchedavada:* The school of annihilationism

### **Third Pair:**

1. *Attakaravada* or *Sayankaravada:* The school which upholds the view that happiness and suffering are entirely self-determined (kammic autogenesisism)

2. *Parakaravada:* The school which upholds the view that happiness and suffering are entirely caused by external factors (kammic heterogenesisism).

These second and third pairs are very important to the fundamental teaching of Buddhism. If studied and clearly understood they can help prevent a lot of misunderstandings about the law of kamma.

*Question:* Is suffering caused by the self?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Is suffering then caused by external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Is suffering then caused both by oneself and external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Is suffering then caused neither by oneself nor external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* In that case, is there no such thing as suffering?

*Answer:* It is not that there is no such thing as suffering. Suffering does exist.

*Question:* In that case, is it that Venerable Gotama does not see or know suffering?

*Answer:* It is not that I do not see or know suffering. I do indeed know and see suffering.

*Question:* May the Blessed One please tell me then, please instruct me, about suffering.

*Answer:* To say 'suffering is caused by the self,' is the same as saying 'he who acts receives the results (suffering).' This tends to the eternalist view (*sassataditthi*). Saying 'suffering is caused by other agents,' as a person who experiences sharp and painful feelings would feel, is just like saying, 'one person acts, another suffers.' This tends to the annihilationist view (*ucchedaditthi*). The Tathagata, avoiding those two extremes, proclaims a teaching that is balanced, thus, 'With ignorance as condition there are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... with the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases ...'  
[S.II.19]

\* \* \*

*Question:* Are happiness and suffering caused by the self?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Are happiness and suffering caused by external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Are happiness and suffering caused by both the self and external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* Are then happiness and suffering caused by neither the self nor external factors?

*Answer:* Do not put it that way.

*Question:* In that case, then, do happiness and suffering not exist?

*Answer:* It is not that happiness and suffering do not exist. Happiness and suffering do exist.

*Question:* In that case, does the Venerable Gotama neither know nor see happiness and suffering?

*Answer:* It is not that I neither see nor know them. I do indeed both see and know happiness and suffering.

*Question:* May the Blessed one please inform me, please instruct me, about happiness and suffering.

*Answer:* Understanding from the outset that feeling and self are one and the same thing, there is the clung-to notion that happiness and suffering are self-caused. I do not teach thus. Understanding that feeling is one thing, self is another, there is the clung-to notion that happiness and suffering are caused by external factors. I do not teach thus. The Tathagata, avoiding those two extremes, proclaims a teaching that is balanced, thus, 'With ignorance as condition there are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... with the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases ...' [S.II.22]

\* \* \*

"Ananda, I say that happiness and suffering are dependently arisen. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact (*phassa*).

"Dependent on body and volition in relation to the body, internal happiness and suffering can arise. Dependent on speech and speech-volition, internal happiness and suffering can arise. Dependent on mind and mind-volition, internal happiness and suffering can arise.

"With this very ignorance as condition, bodily actions which are a cause for internal happiness and suffering are created. Dependent on other people (at the instigation of another person or external force), bodily actions, a cause for internal happiness and suffering, are created. With awareness, volitional bodily activities, the cause of internal happiness and suffering, are created. Without awareness, volitional bodily activities, the cause of internal happiness and suffering, are created ... volitional speech is created ... volitional thoughts are created ... instigated by another ... with awareness ... without awareness. In all these cases, ignorance is present."[\[21\]](#)

#### **Fourth Pair:**

**1. *Karakavedakadi-ekattavada:*** The belief that the doer and the experiencer of the fruit of actions are one and the same (the monistic view of subject-object unity).

**2. *Karakavedakadi-nanattavada:*** The belief that the doer and the experiencer of the fruit of actions are separate things (the dualistic view of subject-object distinction).

*Question:* Are the doer and the receiver one and the same thing?

*Answer:* Saying that the doer and receiver are one and the same thing is one extreme.

*Question:* Are, then, the doer one thing, the receiver another?

*Answer:* To say the doer is one thing, the receiver of results another, is another extreme. The Tathagata, avoiding these two extremes, proclaims a teaching that is balanced, thus, 'With ignorance as condition there are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... with the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases ...' [S.II.75]

\* \* \*

*Question:* Revered Gotama, what are aging and death? To whom do they belong?

*Answer:* You have asked the question improperly. To say either, 'What are aging and death, to whom do they belong,' or 'aging and death are one thing, the experiencer another,' is to say the same thing, the statements differ only in the letter. When there is the view, 'life and the body are one and the same thing,' there can be no Higher Life (*brahmacariya*). When there is the view, 'life and the body are two different things,' there can be no Higher Life. The Tathagata, avoiding these two extremes, proclaims a teaching that is balanced, thus, 'With birth as condition are aging and death.'

*Question:* Revered Sir, birth ... becoming ... clinging ... craving ... feeling ... contact ... the sense bases ... body and mind ... consciousness ... volitional impulses ... What are they? To whom do they belong?

*Answer:* You have asked the question wrongly. ... (same as for aging and death) ... Because of the complete abandoning of ignorance, whatsoever views there be that are confused, vague, and contradictory, such as 'What are aging and death, to whom do they belong?', 'Aging and death are one thing, the experiencer another,' 'The life principle and the body are one thing,' 'The life principle and the body are separate.' are done away with, finished with, abandoned and unable to arise again. [S.II.61]

\* \* \*

*Question:* Who is it who receives contact?

*Answer:* You have put the question wrongly. I do not say 'receives contact.' If I were to say 'receives contact,' you could, in that case, rightly put to me the question 'Who is it who receives contact?' But I do not say that. To ask 'on what condition does contact rest?' would be to ask the question rightly. And the correct answer would be, 'With the sense bases as condition, there is contact. With contact as condition, feeling.'

*Question:* Who is it who experiences feeling? Who is it who desires? Who is it who clings?

*Answer:* You have put the question wrongly ... To ask 'On what condition does feeling rest? What is it that conditions desire? What is it that conditions clinging?' would be asking the question in the right way. In that case, the correct answer would be, 'With contact as condition there is feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging.' [S.II.13]

\* \* \*

"Monks, this body does not belong to you, nor does it belong to another. You should see it as old kamma, something conditioned and concocted by volitional impulses, a base of feeling.

"In regard to this, monks, the learned, noble disciple wisely considers the dependent arising of all things, thus, 'When there is this, this comes to be. With the cessation of this, this ceases. That is, with ignorance as condition are volitional impulses; with volitional impulses as condition, consciousness ... With the complete abandoning of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases.'" [S.II.64]

The teaching of Dependent Origination demonstrates the truth of all things in nature as having the characteristics of transience, stress and not self, [\*] and as faring according to cause and effect. There is no need for questions about the existence or non-existence of things, whether they are eternal or whether they are annihilated and so on, as such questions do not pertain to what is truly useful. However, without clear understanding of Dependent Origination, the Three Characteristics, especially not-self, will also be misunderstood. Quite often the teaching of not-self is taken to mean nothingness, which conforms with the nihilist (*natthika*) view, a particularly pernicious form of wrong understanding.

In addition to helping to avoid such views, a clear understanding of the principle of Dependent Origination will prevent the arising of views about a Genesis or First Cause, such as mentioned in the beginning of this book. Some of the Buddha's words in this connection:

"Monks, for a noble disciple who sees the dependent arising of things in conformity with the principle of Dependent Origination, it is impossible to fall into such extreme views as, 'What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what in the past did I become thus?'; or such views as, 'In the future, will I be? In the future what will I be? In the future how will I be? In the future what will I become?'; or, 'Am I? What am I? How am I? Where did this being arise from, and where will it go?' -- none of these doubts can arise for him. Why? Because that noble disciple has seen the dependent arising of things in accordance with the principle of Dependent Origination, clearly, as it is, with perfect wisdom." [S.II.26]

In this context, one who sees the principle of Dependent Origination will no longer be inclined to speculate about the questions of metaphysics. This is why the Buddha remained silent on such issues. He called such questions *abyakatapañha* -- questions better left unanswered. On seeing the principle of Dependent Origination, and understanding how all things flow along the cause and effect continuum, such questions become meaningless. Here we may consider some of the reasons why the Buddha would not answer such questions:

"Revered Gotama, what is the reason that, while recluses of other sects, being questioned thus:

1. Is the world eternal?
2. Is the world not eternal?
3. Is the world finite?
4. Is the world infinite?
5. Are the life principle and the body one thing?
6. Are the life principle and the body separate?
7. Do beings exist after death?
8. Do beings not exist after death?
9. Do beings both exist and not exist after death?
10. Do beings neither exist nor not exist after death? ...

... give such answers as 'The world is eternal,' or 'the world is not eternal,' ... 'Beings neither exist nor do not exist after death,' but the Revered Gotama, being so questioned, does not answer thus?"

"Herein, Vaccha, these recluses of other sects believe either that the body is the self, or that the self has a body, or that the self is in the body, or that the body is in the self, or that the self lies in the body; or that feeling ... perception ... volitional impulses ... consciousness is the self, or that the self is consciousness, that consciousness lies in the self or that the self lies within consciousness. It is for this reason that those recluses, being so questioned, answer in such ways.

"But the Tathagata, Arahant, Fully Self-Enlightened Buddha, does not apprehend the body to be the self or the self to be the body, or that the body lies in the self, or the self within the body ... that consciousness is the self, or that consciousness lies within the self, or the self within consciousness. For this reason, the Tathagata, Arahant, Fully Self-Enlightened Buddha, being so questioned, does not make such statements as 'the world is eternal' or 'the world is not eternal'."[\[22\]](#)

There are a number of other theories or schools of thought which have a special relationship to the concept of kamma, and which also clash with the principle of Dependent Origination, but those points are covered in another work, so I will not go into them here.

### **Footnotes:**

**21.** S.II.39; for further study, see D.I.53; S.I.134; D.III.137. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[\*] The Three Characteristics: *aniccam*, *dukkham*, and *anatta*. [\[Back to text\]](#)

**22.** S.IV.395; the reasons that the Buddha refused to answer questions dealing with metaphysics are many. Most importantly, such questions are based on wrong assumptions, such as the concept of self. They do not correlate with reality. As the Buddha would say, "You have asked the question wrongly." Another reason for his silence is that the truths these questions seek are not accessible to logical thinking and cannot be answered in words. Like trying to look at a picture with one's ears, such indulgences are a waste of time. Another reason is that, since such questions are inaccessible to rational thinking, debating them would yield no practical results. The Buddha's main interest was in giving teachings that would yield results on a practical basis, so he swept aside the questions of metaphysics and instead guided his questioners to more practical concerns. If the question was one which could be answered by personal experience, the Buddha, rather than prolonging the conjecture or debate, would show how the questioner could realize it for himself. Lastly, the Buddha was born at a time when metaphysical questions generated intense interest, and teachers and philosophers were debating them heatedly all over the country. Whenever people approached religious teachers or philosophers they would tend to ask these questions. The questions had become so much of an obsession that people had gotten out of touch with practical reality; that is why the Buddha would remain silent on them. His silence was not only a check on metaphysical discussions, but also a powerful jolt to the listener to take heed of what it was the Buddha did have to teach. For references to these reasons for not answering, see M.I.426, 484; S.II.222-3; S.IV.375; A.IV.68; A.V.193. [\[Back to text\]](#)



# 9

## Breaking the Cycle

The teaching of Dependent Origination is part of what is known as the Middle Teaching (*majjhena-dhammadesana*). It is taught as an impersonal, natural truth, a description of the nature of things as they are, avoiding the extreme theories or biased views that human beings are wont to fall into as a result of their distorted perceptions of the world and their attachments and desires within it. The cycle of Dependent Origination which describes the problem of human suffering comes in two limbs: the first limb, called the *samudayavara* (origination mode), is a description of the arising of suffering, corresponding with the second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering; the second limb, called the *nirodhavara* (cessation mode), is a description of the cessation of suffering, corresponding with the third Noble Truth.

In essence, then, the Middle Teaching[23] describes two processes:

**1. *Samudaya*:** the origination mode of the Dependent Origination cycle: ignorance => volitional impulses ... becoming => birth => aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair = the arising of suffering.

**2. *Nirodha*:** the cessation mode of the Dependent Origination cycle: cessation of ignorance => cessation of volitional impulses => cessation of consciousness ... cessation of aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair = the cessation of suffering

The reason we must deal with the cause of suffering (*samudaya*) is because we are confronted with a problem (*dukkha*), the solution of which demands a search for its causes. When the cause of suffering is understood, we recognize that the solution of the problem consists in the eradication of those causes. Thus the process of cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) is described. In the Middle Teaching, the cessation of suffering includes not only the process for bringing about the cessation of suffering, but also the state of cessation itself, which is *Nibbana*.

A discussion of the subjects of suffering, the cause of suffering, the process of the cessation of suffering and the state of suffering's cessation would seem to be a comprehensive description of the Buddha's teachings, but in fact it is not. This is because the Middle Teaching describes only natural phenomena, functioning according to natural causes and conditions. It is not geared to practical application. This is why the process of the cessation of suffering, or *nirodha*, which is included within the Middle Teaching, is simply a description of impersonal phenomena and their interrelated functioning to produce the cessation of suffering. It does not address the details of practical application in any way. It states simply that in the attainment of the goal, the cessation of suffering, the factors must proceed in this way, but it does not state what we must do in order to make this process take place. The Middle Teaching is simply a description of natural processes within the natural order. Studying the mechanics of the process of cessation may lead to an understanding of the basic principles involved, but we still lack practical guidance. What methods are there for realizing this solving of problems which we have now studied? This is the point at which the natural processes must be connected to practical application.

It is imperative that practical application be in conformity and harmony with the natural process -- it must work in accordance with the natural process in order to produce results. The principle at work here is, first, to know and understand the natural processes, and then to practice in accordance with a humanly devised method based on that knowledge and understanding. In other words, as far as the natural processes are concerned, our only duty is to know them, while in relation to the practice, our responsibility is to formulate techniques that conform with that understanding, and thereby graduate from mere knowledge of the natural processes to practical application.

Practice, techniques and methods of practice in this context are known by the specialized term of *patipada* -- the methods of practice, the way of life or life-style which leads to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha laid down methods of practice which are in harmony with the natural process, or the Middle Teaching, and called this practice the Middle Way (*majjhima patipada*), consisting of techniques which are balanced, in conformity with the natural processes, and perfectly attuned to bringing about the cessation of suffering. The Way avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self torment which lead to stagnation or digression from the true goal.

The Middle Way is known in short as *magga*, the Way. Because this Way has eight factors or components, and transforms the one who successfully travels it into a noble one (*ariya*), it is also known as the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha stated that this Way, this Middle Path, was a time-honored way upon which many had previously traveled and attained the goal. The Buddha was merely the discoverer and proclaimer of this ancient way. His duty was simply to point it out to others.[S.II.106]

The Way is a technique for realizing the objective, which is the cessation of suffering, in conformity with the natural processes. It works within causes and conditions, guiding them to interact and produce the desired result. When we talk about the Way, we are no longer talking about an impersonal process of suffering's cessation, but a humanly devised technique, the Eightfold Path. In other words, we have transcended the level of bare knowledge and are entering into the field of practical application.

In order to understand this transference from a natural process to a formulated technique, we may refer to the following schematic representation:

**Nirodha:** ignorance ceases => volitional impulses cease => consciousness ceases => body and mind cease => sense bases cease => contact ceases => feeling ceases => craving ceases => clinging ceases => becoming ceases => birth ceases => aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain grief and despair cease => the cessation of suffering

**Magga:** Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration => cessation of suffering

We can summarize the connection between the natural process of the cessation of suffering and the human techniques for implementing it, known as the Way, as follows:

- Cessation is a natural process, as opposed to the Way, which is a humanly formulated technique for bringing about a result in accordance with that natural process.

The Way arises from the use of knowledge of the natural processes of cessation to formulate a method of practice. It is essential to know and understand this natural process to some extent, and this is why the Way begins with Right View.

- Cessation is a natural process subject only to the relationship between causes and conditions. When we talk about the cessation of suffering, we really mean the cessation of the causes and conditions which support the existence of suffering. Thus the process of the cessation of suffering is in clear and absolute terms -- the removal of problems, the absence of problems, or the state which is diametrically opposed to problems, in which problems do not arise.

The Way proposes techniques of practice which can be adapted to time and place. It can be explained in many levels, from simple to difficult. The eight factors of the Way can be further divided into many sub-factors, making the path of practice very complex. The Way is a technique which gradually leads to the state of no problems, slower or faster, and more or less effective, in accordance with the level of practice used.

- Cessation illustrates the cessation of suffering in terms of impersonal causes and conditions, and the utter removal of those conditions. As such it does not concern itself with questions of good and evil.

The Way is a graduated system of practice of human invention, relying on the gradual accumulation of goodness in order to overcome the power of evil conditions which obstruct or hold back the attainment of the goal. For this reason the Way puts emphasis, especially in the earlier stages, on the abandoning of evil and the cultivation of the good.

- Cessation is a principle; the Way is a technique, a method and a tool.

Cessation can be compared to the principles for extinguishing fire, or the natural conditions which cause fire to go out, which may be summarized as: lack of fuel, lack of oxygen, or loss of temperature.

The Way can be compared to the practical techniques for putting out fire, which must operate in accordance with the natural principles. These will concern ways of depriving the fire of fuel, depriving it of oxygen or bringing the temperature down. When these three simple principles are transferred to practical application, they become major concerns: techniques must be devised and devices invented for the purpose. For instance, the kinds of materials and tools to be used must be considered in terms of whether it is an electrical, oil, gas or ordinary fire, and the techniques best suited to each case must be adopted. People may have to be specially trained for the purpose of extinguishing fires.

To use another analogy, cessation can be compared to the principles for curing an illness, which describe the cure by removing the cause, such as by destroying the bacteria which caused it, removing the poison or foreign matter from the body, or by addressing the malfunction or degeneration in the organs of the body. The Way can be compared to the techniques and methods for curing the illness. Compared to these, the principles of curing illness appear minuscule. The techniques for curing them are enormous, beginning with the observation of the illness' symptoms, the diagnosis, the application of medicines, the techniques of surgery, for nursing the patient, and for physiotherapy; the invention and production of surgical instruments; the building of hospitals and nursing homes; the hospital administration system, and the training of doctors and nurses -- to name a few -- which altogether present a vast and complex picture.

Although the Middle Way is said to have eight factors, these factors are simply the basics, and they can all be further divided into many other factors and classified into numerous different systems and levels in accordance with different objectives, situations, and temperaments. Thus, there are copious and highly detailed teachings dealing with the Way, which require a great amount of study. The Middle Way is a vast subject, needing an explanation in its own right. Its study may be divided into two main sections: firstly,

dealing with the factors of the Path, which is the basic system, and another section defining and analyzing those factors into various forms for use in specialized circumstances. Here I will deal only with a fundamental description of the factors of the Path.

Before beginning to describe the Path itself, let us look at some ways of illustrating the step up from a natural state to practical application, or from a natural process to a human technique.

In the texts, these two kinds of practice are described:

1. ***Miccha-patipada***, wrong practice or the wrong way, being the way leading to suffering
2. ***Samma-patipada***, right practice, or the right way, being the way which leads to the cessation of suffering.

In some places the origination mode of the Dependent Origination cycle is said to be *miccha-patipada*, and the cessation mode is said to be *samma-patipada*, represented like this:

***Miccha-patipada***: ignorance => volitional impulses => consciousness => body and mind => sense bases => contact => feeling => craving => clinging => becoming => birth => aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain grief and despair => suffering.

***Samma-patipada***: cessation of ignorance => cessation of volitional impulses => cessation of consciousness => cessation of body and mind => cessation of sense bases => cessation of contact => cessation of feeling => cessation of craving => cessation of clinging => cessation of becoming => cessation of birth => cessation of aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair => cessation of suffering.[S.II.4]

In another place, however, the Buddha explained the practices which are directly opposed to the Eightfold Path as *miccha-patipada*, and the Eightfold Path itself as *samma-patipada*, thus:

***Miccha-patipada***: Wrong view, wrong thought, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration

***Samma-patipada***: Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.[S.V.18]

The cycle of Dependent Origination is a description of a natural process, not a path of practice. However, the first set of right and wrong practices described above describes practice in terms of the cycle of Dependent Origination. Is there a contradiction here? It may be answered that the Dependent Origination cycle illustrated here (and it is only illustrated as a form of practice in this one Sutta) seeks to describe practical application. The Commentators to this Sutta ask the question: ignorance may be a condition for good actions, or merit (*puññabhisankhara*), or it may serve to generate the state of highly stable concentration (*aneñjabhisankhara*); why then is it said to be wrong practice? Answering their question, the Commentators state that when people are motivated by a desire to be or to get something, no matter what they may do -- whether they develop the five higher knowledges (*abhiñña*) or the eight attainments (*samapatti*) -- it is all wrong practice. On the other hand, those who are motivated by an aspiration for Nibbana, who are aiming for relinquishment, or the liberated mind, rather than attaining or obtaining something, will always have right practice, even when doing such minor actions as making offerings.[See S.A.II.14]

However, my intention in presenting these two kinds of right and wrong practice for comparison is simply to incorporate them into an examination of the progression from the natural process of cessation to the humanly devised technique known as the Path, as has been explained above. Note that apart from describing the process and practical path to goodness, those which are harmful or wrong are also described.

There is another way in which the Buddha described the cycle of Dependent Origination in its cessation mode which differs from those explained above. The beginning half describes the arising of suffering in accordance with the normal Dependent Origination cycle in forward or origination mode, all the way up to the arising of suffering, but from there, instead of presenting the cycle of Dependent Origination in the regular sequence, it describes a progression of skillful conditions which condition each other in another sequence that culminates in liberation. This is a wholly new sequence of conditions which does not refer to the cessation of conditions in the origination mode at all. This sequence is a very important example of how the Path factors may be applied to a practical, real-life system. In other words, it is a sequence which may arise for one who successfully treads the Path and attains to the goal. This process of liberation is mentioned in several places in the texts, differing somewhat from place to place. I would like to present each of them, as follows:

Ignorance => volitional impulses => consciousness => body and mind => sense bases => contact => feeling => craving => clinging => becoming => birth => **suffering** => faith => gladness => rapture => calmness => happiness => concentration => knowledge and insight of things as they are => disenchantment => dispassion => liberation => destruction of the outflows.[S.II.31]

Note that the progression begins with ignorance and proceeds to suffering, which is the origination mode of Dependent Origination, or the arising of suffering, but then, having reached suffering, instead of the sequence beginning again at ignorance as is usual, it continues with faith, which proceeds to take the flow from ignorance into another direction, a skillful one, leading ultimately to knowledge of the destruction of the outflows, no longer returning to ignorance at all. Note that when suffering is taken as the middle factor, the number of factors preceding it and succeeding it is the same.

For one who understands the nature of ignorance, the progression above will not seem strange: if we divide it into two sections, we find that one is the sequence from ignorance to suffering, while the other is the sequence from faith to knowledge of the destruction of the outflows (enlightenment). In the latter sequence, faith takes the place of ignorance. Faith here refers to a modified or diluted form of ignorance. At this stage, ignorance is no longer the totally blind kind, but is imbued with a grain of understanding, which prods the mind to proceed in a good direction, eventually leading to knowledge of things as they are and liberation.

Simply speaking, this means that once suffering has arisen, in accordance with the normal channels, one searches for a way out. In cases where one has a chance to hear the true teachings, or one develops an understanding of moral rationale, this leads to gladness and rapture, which then encourage one to strive for the development of progressively higher good qualities.

In fact, this latter sequence corresponds with the cessation mode of the standard Dependent Origination format (with the cessation of ignorance is the cessation of volitional impulses, etc.), but here a more detailed picture is given, seeking to illustrate how the sequence of the arising of suffering connects with the sequence of the cessation of suffering.

In the Nettipakarana[24], the following passage attributed to the Buddha is said to be a description of the cessation mode of the Dependent Origination cycle:

"Ananda, in this way, skillful moral conduct has absence of remorse as its objective, absence of remorse has gladness as its objective, gladness has rapture as its objective, rapture has calmness as its objective, calmness has happiness as its objective, happiness has concentration as its objective, concentration has knowledge and insight into things as they are as its objective, knowledge and insight into things as they are has disenchantment as its objective, disenchantment has dispassion as its objective, dispassion has knowledge of liberation as its objective. It is thus that skillful moral conduct brings about the fulfillment of these respective factors for the attainment of arahantship." [25]

According to this passage, the sequence goes like this:

Skillful moral conduct => absence of remorse => gladness => rapture => calmness => happiness => concentration => knowledge and insight into the way things are => disenchantment => dispassion => knowledge of liberation

It can be seen that this sequence is the same as that mentioned previously, except that it mentions only the section dealing with the cessation of suffering, and excludes the section dealing with the arising of suffering. Let us look once more at the previous sequence:

Ignorance => volitional impulses => consciousness => body and mind => sense bases => contact => feeling => craving => clinging => becoming => birth => suffering => faith => gladness => rapture => calmness => happiness => concentration => knowledge and insight into things as they are => disenchantment => dispassion => liberation => destruction of the outflows

Although both these sequences are the same, they are not identically worded. One sequence begins with faith, the other begins with skillful moral conduct and continues with absence of remorse. From there they are the same. In fact the only difference is in the wording and in terms of emphasis. The first sequence illustrates the situation in which faith plays a prominent role. However, in this kind of faith, the mind has full confidence in rationality, is inspired by goodness, and assured of virtue. This mental state will also be affected by behavior. Faith being so supported by skillful and good behavior, it is followed by gladness, as in the other sequence, which begins with skillful moral conduct and absence of remorse. This sequence gives prominence to moral practice. In this situation, a foundation of confidence in rationality and a predilection for goodness are essential in order to maintain good moral conduct. With morality and absence of remorse, self-assurance arises in the quality of one's behavior, which is a characteristic of faith. This gives the mind confidence and clarity, and becomes a condition for the arising of gladness, just as in the previous sequence.

One of these sequences finishes up with 'liberation and destruction of the outflows,' while the other finishes up with 'knowledge of liberation.' They are both the same, except that the latter sequence includes liberation and the destruction of the outflows under the one heading of 'knowledge of liberation.'

Another illustration of the process of liberation proceeds like this:

Intelligent reflection (*yoniso-manasikara*) => gladness => rapture => calmness => happiness => concentration => knowledge and insight into things as they are => disenchantment => dispassion => liberation. [D.III.288]

This sequence differs only in that it begins with intelligent reflection, or knowing how to think and reason for oneself, instead of faith, which relies on outside influences for instruction. When one thinks properly and in accordance with reality, one sees the way things really are, and the result is gladness. From there, the factors of the progression are the same as in the previous sequences.

These sequences show more clearly the path of practice in relation to the cycle of Dependent Origination. Even so, they are only a rough outline of practical techniques. There are still many points that need to be clarified, such as what needs to be done to initiate the arising of such a sequence. That is a concern of the Path, the fourth of the Noble Truths, or the Middle Way, which deals with the Buddhist ethical system, moral practice based on knowledge of the natural processes. However, that is a vast subject which must be dealt with in a later book.

[ Faith  
Moral Conduct  
Investigation ]

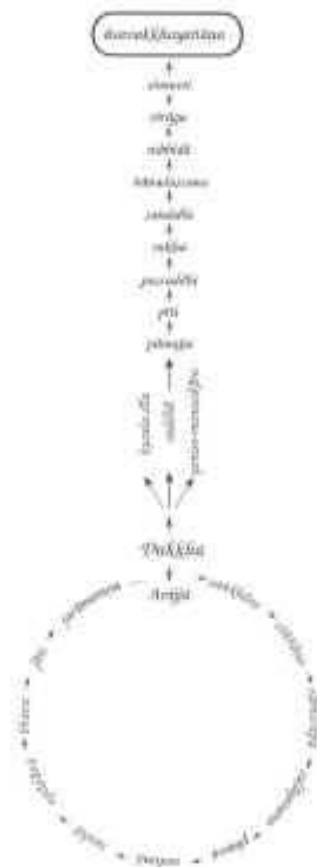


Fig.5 [View larger online](#)

### Footnotes:

23. The phrase *majjhena dhammadesana*, or Middle Teaching, comes from the Pali sentence "*majjhena dhammam deseti*," which occurs frequently throughout the Nidanavagga of the Samyutta Nikaya, from S.II.17 to S.II.77. [[Back to text](#)]

24. Ñanamoli, *The Guide*, Pali Text Society, 1962, p.97. [[Back to text](#)]

25. A.V.311. In A.V.1, the same passage occurs, except that it puts *nibbida* and *viraga* together as one. cf A.III.19. [[Back to text](#)]

# Appendix

## A note on interpreting the principle of Dependent Origination

It has been mentioned that in the commentary to the Abhidhamma Pitaka (*Sammohavinodani*), the principle of Dependent Origination is shown occurring entirely within the space of one mind moment. This point needs to be reiterated because modern study of the teaching (at least in traditional scholastic circles) interprets it completely on a lifetime-to-lifetime basis. Accordingly, when there are attempts to interpret the Dependent Origination cycle as a process occurring in everyday life, those who adhere to the traditional interpretations are wont to dismiss them as baseless and in contradiction to the scriptures. For mutual comfort and ease of mind, therefore, I have included this reference to show that such an interpretation is not without scriptural basis.

Indeed, it is worth noting that what evidence there is for this interpretation is possibly only a shadow from the past which has become well-nigh forgotten, and which is still in existence only because the Tipitaka stands as an irrefutable reference.

The commentarial description of the cycle of Dependent Origination as a lifetime-to-lifetime process, which is generally taken to be the authority, comes from the *Visuddhimagga*, written by Acariya Buddhaghosa around the fifth century AD. However, there is another commentary which deals with the principle of Dependent Origination and that is the *Sammohavinodani* mentioned above. The explanation here is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the principle of Dependent Origination on a lifetime-to-lifetime basis, as in the *Visuddhimagga*, and the second explaining it as an event occurring within one mind moment.

The *Sammohavinodani* is also the work of Acariya Buddhaghosa, and is believed to have been written after the *Visuddhimagga*. The difference between the two is that whereas the *Visuddhimagga* was authored by Acariya Buddhaghosa himself, the *Sammohavinodani* is a commentary by him on the Abhidhamma Pitaka. In his introduction to the *Sammohavinodani*, Buddhaghosa writes, "I will glean this work from the ancient commentaries." [Vibh.A.1 (approx.)] Even in the *Visuddhimagga*, when it comes to the section dealing with the principle of Dependent Origination, he reveals, "An explanation of Dependent Origination is extremely difficult," and "Now I would like to expound on the *paccayakara* (principle of



conditionality), even though I haven't a foot to stand on, like a man stepping into a flowing river with no stepping stone. However, the Dependent Origination is rich with teachings, not to mention the commentaries handed down from the ancient teachers in an unbroken line. Relying on these two sources, I will now expound the principle of Dependent Origination." [Vism.522; identical to Vibh.A.130 (approx.)]

The explanation of the principle of Dependent of Origination given in the *Visuddhimagga*, unlike the *Sammohavinodani*, contains only an explanation of the principle on a lifetime-to-lifetime basis. This explanation is almost identical to that given in the *Sammohavinodani*. This being the case, it may be asked, "Why is there no explanation of the principle of Dependent Origination in one mind moment given in the *Visuddhimagga*?" It may be that even in the time of Buddhaghosa scholastic circles generally described the principle of Dependent Origination on a lifetime-to lifetime basis. It may also be that the author felt more comfortable with this interpretation because, difficult as it was, as he noted in his introduction, still there existed the commentaries of the teachers handed down till that time. The one-mind-moment interpretation, on the other hand, was not only very difficult, but had also disappeared from scholastic circles. This can be surmised from the *Sammohavinodani* itself, where the description of this interpretation is extremely brief. That any explanation of it occurs at all may be simply due to the fact that it is mentioned in the Tipitaka and as such demanded an explanation. The author was able to make use of the traces of commentary still remaining to formulate his own commentary.

Now let us consider the explanation given in the *Sammohavinodani* itself. The *Sammohavinodani* is a commentary to the *Vibhanga*, which is the second volume of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. The section of the *Vibhanga* which describes the principle of Dependent Origination is called the *Paccayakara Vibhanga*. It is divided into two sections: the first is called *Suttantabhajaniya* (definition according to the Suttas), the second, the *Abhidhammabhajaniya* (definition according to the Abhidhamma). The *Sammohavinodani*, the commentary to this volume, is likewise divided into two sections. It describes the difference between the two sections thus:

"The Fonder expounded the *paccayakara* in terms of numerous moments of consciousness in the *Suttantabhajaniya*, but as the *paccayakara* is not limited to numerous minds, but can occur even in one mind moment, he now seeks to explain the *paccayakara* as it occurs in one mind moment, and this is the *Abhidhammabhajaniya*." [Vibh.A.199 (approx.)] And elsewhere: "In the *Suttantabhajaniya* the *paccayakara* is divided into different lifetimes. In the *Abhidhammabhajaniya* it is expounded in one mind moment." [Vibh.A.200 (approx.)] In regard to the principle of cause and effect as it functions in one mind moment in everyday life, it is said, "...birth, (aging and death) for example, here refer to birth (aging and death) of *arupa* (immaterial) things, not to the decaying of the teeth, the graying of the hair, the wrinkling of the skin, dying, the action of leaving existence." [Vibh.A.208 (approx.)]

One final point deserves a mention: In the *Vibhanga* of the Tipitaka, the section which describes the lifetime-to-lifetime interpretation occupies only five pages of material. The section which describes the principle of Dependent Origination in one mind moment contains seventy-two pages. [26] But in the *Sammohavinodani*, Buddhaghosa's commentary, it is the reverse. Namely, the section dealing with the lifetime-to-lifetime interpretation is long, containing 92 pages, whereas the section dealing with the one-mind-moment interpretation contains only 19 pages. [27] Why the commentary on the one-mind-moment version of Dependent Origination is so short is possibly because the author did not have much to say about it. Or perhaps he thought it had already been explained sufficiently in the Tipitaka, there being no need for further commentary. Whatever the case, we can affirm that the interpretation of Dependent Origination in everyday life is one that existed from the very beginning and is founded on the Tipitaka, but only traces of it remain in the Commentaries.

## Birth and death in the present moment

Those who would like to see a reference to the cycle of rebirth in the present moment, in the present life, might like to refer to the Sutta presented below:

""The deep-grained attachment to the feeling of self does not arise for one who is endowed with these four conditions (*pañña*, wisdom; *sacca*, integrity; *caga*, generosity; and *upasama*, calm.). With no perception of self clouding one's consciousness one is said to be a *muni*, a peaceful one." On what account did I say this? Perceptions such as 'I am,' 'I am not,' 'I will be,' 'I will not be,' 'I will have form,' 'I will not have form,' 'I will have no form,' 'I will have perception,' 'I will not have perception,' 'I will neither have nor not have perception,' monks, are an affliction, an ulcer, a dart. By transcending these perceptions one is a *muni*, a peaceful one.

"Monks, the *muni* is not born, does not age, does not die; he is not confused, nor does he yearn. There are no longer any causes for birth in him. Not being born, how can he age? Not aging, how can he die? Not dying, how can he be confused? Not being confused, how can he be desirous? "The deep-grained attachment to the feeling of self does not arise for one who is endowed with these four conditions. With no perception of self clouding one's consciousness, one is a *muni*, a peaceful one" -- It was on this account that this statement was made."[\[28\]](#)

## Dependent Origination in the Abhidhamma

In the Abhidhamma many different models of Dependent Origination are presented, sorted according to the various kinds of skillful, unskillful and neutral mental states involved in producing them. These are further analyzed according to the levels of mental state involved, be they of the sensual realm (*kamavacara*), the realm of form (*rupavacara*) the formless realm (*arupavacara*) or the transcendent realm (*lokuttara*). This is because the Abhidhamma studies the mind on the level of "thought moments," and thus analyses Dependent Origination according to the kind of specific mental state involved. The factors occurring within these models will vary according to the kind of mind-state.

For example, in some skillful mind states, the model might begin at *sankhara*, volitional impulses, ignorance not being present, or it may even start with one of the roots of skillfulness (non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion) instead of ignorance. Especially noteworthy is the fact that craving will only occur in the models based on unskillful mental states. In some instances, craving is replaced by *pasada*, inspiration, or is excluded altogether. Ignorance and craving are suppressed at these times -- they do to appear in their standard forms but in other forms, if not excluded altogether. Moreover, in the Abhidhamma Pitaka the various factors are presented as components of a whole or as reversing actions (such as "ignorance conditions volitional impulses, volitional impulses condition ignorance; volitional impulses condition consciousness, consciousness conditions volitional impulses;" etc.) Here I will present only the more important descriptions:

### A. 12 unskillful mental states (*akusala citta*):

Ignorance	conditions	volitional impulse
volitional impulse	conditions	consciousness
consciousness	conditions	mentality ( <i>nama</i> )

mentality	conditions	sixth sense base <a>[a]</a>
sixth sense base	conditions	contact
contact	conditions	feeling
feeling	conditions	craving
(or) feeling	conditions	aversion <b>[b]</b>
(or) feeling	conditions	doubt
(or) feeling	conditions	restlessness
(or) craving	conditions	clinging
(or) craving	conditions	conviction <b>[c]</b>
(or) aversion	conditions	conviction
(or) restlessness	conditions	conviction
(or) clinging	conditions	becoming
(or) conviction	conditions	becoming
(or) doubt	conditions	becoming
or) becoming	conditions	birth
(or) birth	conditions	aging and death

= the arising of the whole mass of suffering

**B. Skillful mental states (only those occurring in the realms of sensuality, form and formlessness):**

ignorance	conditions	volitional impulse
(or) skillful root <b>[d]</b>	conditions	volitional impulse
volitional impulse	conditions	consciousness
consciousness	conditions	mentality
mentality	conditions	sixth sense base
sixth sense base	conditions	contact
contact	conditions	feeling
feeling	conditions	inspiration <b>[e]</b>
inspiration	conditions	conviction
conviction	conditions	becoming
becoming	conditions	birth
birth	conditions	aging and death

= the arising of the whole mass of suffering

**C. *Vipaka* (resultant) and *kiriya* (functional) mental states (only those occurring in the sensual, form and formless realms):**

(skillful root	conditions	volitional impulse)
volitional impulse	conditions	consciousness
consciousness	conditions	mentality

mentality	conditions	sixth sense base
sixth sense base	conditions	contact
contact	conditions	feeling
feeling	conditions	becoming
(or) feeling	conditions	conviction
conviction	conditions	becoming
(or) feeling	conditions	inspiration
inspiration	conditions	conviction
conviction	conditions	becoming
becoming	conditions	birth
birth	conditions	aging and death

= the arising of the whole mass of suffering

**D. Transcendent mental states (skillful and resultant):**

**Skillful**

ignorance	conditions	volitional impulse
(or) skillful root	conditions	volitional impulse

**Resultant**

(skillful root	conditions	volitional impulse)
volitional impulse	conditions	consciousness
consciousness	conditions	mentality
mentality	conditions	sixth sense base
sixth sense base	conditions	contact
contact	conditions	feeling
feeling	conditions	inspiration
inspiration	conditions	conviction
conviction	conditions	becoming
becoming	conditions	birth
birth	conditions	aging and death

= the arising of all these *dhammas*

Note that the transcendent skillful mental state may begin at ignorance or a skillful root, but the resultant transcendent mind state begins at a skillful root or, if not, then at a volitional impulse. In addition, the final phrase "and thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering" becomes "and thus is the arising of all these *dhammas*."

## A problem with the word "nirodha"

The word *nirodha* has been translated as "cessation" for so long that it has become standard practice, and any deviation from it leads to queries. Even in this book I have opted for this standard translation for sake of convenience and to avoid confusing it for other Pali terms (apart from lack of a better word). In fact, however, this rendering of the word "nirodha" as "ceased" can in many instances be a mis-rendering of the text.

Generally speaking, the word "cease" means to do away with something which has already arisen, or the stopping of something which has already begun. However, *nirodha* in the teaching of Dependent Origination (as also in *dukkhanirodha*, the third of the Four Noble Truths) means the non-arising, or non-existence, of something because the cause of its arising is done away with. For example, the phrase "when *avijja* is *nirodha*, *sankhara* are also *nirodha*," which is usually taken to mean "with the cessation of ignorance, volitional impulses cease," in fact means "when there is no ignorance, or no arising of ignorance, or when there is no longer any problem with ignorance, there are no volitional impulses, volitional impulses do not arise, or there is no longer any problem with volitional impulses." It does not mean that ignorance already arisen must be done away with before the volitional impulses which have already arisen will also be done away with.

Where *nirodha* should be rendered as cessation is when it is used in reference to the natural way of things, or the nature of compounded things. In this sense it is a synonym for the words *bhanga*, breaking up, *anicca*, transient, *khaya*, cessation or *vaya*, decay. For example, in the Pali it is given: *imam kho bhikkhave tisso vedana anicca sankhata paticcasamuppanna khayadhamma vayadhamma viragadhamma nirodhadhamma*: "Monks, these three kinds of feeling are naturally impermanent, compounded, dependently arisen, transient, subject to decay, dissolution, fading and cessation." [S.IV.214] (All of the factors occurring in the Dependent Origination cycle have the same nature.) In this instance, the meaning is "all conditioned things (*sankhara*), having arisen, must inevitably decay and fade according to supporting factors." There is no need to try to stop them, they cease of themselves. Here the intention is to describe a natural condition which, in terms of practice, simply means "that which arises can be done away with."

As for *nirodha* in the third Noble Truth (or the Dependent Origination cycle in cessation mode), although it also describes a natural process, its emphasis is on practical considerations. It is translated in two ways in the *Visuddhimagga*. One way traces the etymology to "ni" (without) + "rodha" (prison, confine, obstacle, wall, impediment), thus rendering the meaning as "without impediment," "free of confinement." This is explained as "free of impediments, that is, the confinement of *samsara*." Another definition traces the origin to *anuppada*, meaning "not arising", and goes on to say "*nirodha* here does not mean *bhanga*, breaking up and dissolution."

Therefore, translating *nirodha* as "cessation", although not entirely wrong, is nevertheless not entirely accurate. On the other hand, there is no other word which comes so close to the essential meaning as "cessation." However, we should understand what is meant by the term. In this context, the Dependent Origination cycle in its cessation mode might be better rendered as "being free of ignorance, there is freedom from volitional impulses ..." or "when ignorance is gone, volitional impulses are gone ..." or "when ignorance ceases to give fruit, volitional impulses cease to give fruit ..." or "when ignorance is no longer a problem, volitional impulses are no longer a problem."

Even in the forward mode, there are some problems with definitions. The meaning of many of the Pali terms are too broad to be translated into any single English words. For instance, *avijja paccaya sankhara*

also means "When ignorance is like this, volitional impulses are like this; volitional impulses being this way, consciousness is like this; consciousness being this way, body and mind are like this; ..."

**Footnotes:**

- a. *Chatthayatana*: the sixth sense base, which is *mano*, mind. [[Back to text](#)]
- b. *Patigha*: aversion. [[Back to text](#)]
- c. *Adhimokkha*: conviction. [[Back to text](#)]
- d. *Kusalamula*: roots of skill; i.e., non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. [[Back to text](#)]
- e. *Pasada*: inspiration, faith. [[Back to text](#)]
- 26. *Suttantabhajaniya Vbh.*135-138; *Abhidhammabhajaniya Vbh.*138-191. [[Back to text](#)]
- 27. *Suttantabhajaniya Vbh.A.*130-198 (approx.); *Abhidhammabhajaniya Vbh.A.* 199-213 (approx.). [[Back to text](#)]
- 28. *M.III.*246; see also *M.III.*225; *S.III.*228; *S.IV.*14; (old age = degeneration or loss); *Thag.*247. [[Back to text](#)]

A. = *Anguttara Nikaya*

D. = *Digha Nikaya*

D.A. = *Digha Nikaya Atthakatha*

It. = *Itivuttaka*

J. = *Jataka*

M. = *Majjhima Nikaya*

M.A. = *Majjhima Nikaya Atthakatha*

Nd1 = *Maha Niddesa*

Nd2 = *Cula Niddesa*

S. = *Samyutta Nikaya*

Thag. = *Theragata*

Vbh. = *Vibhanga*

Vbh.A. = *Vibhanga Atthakatha*

Vin. = *Vinaya Pitaka*

Vism. = *Visuddhimagga*