



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week two: Mahānidāna Sutta

Introduction

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

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

Mahānidāna Sutta, the Great Discourse on Causation, is found in the Dīgha Nikāya, the Collection of Long Discourses. The entire sutta is dedicated to an explanation and analysis of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). There are many different versions of dependent arising found in the suttas, so it is useful to ask ourselves what this one in particular is concerned with; what aspect of dependent arising is being presented here? This sutta is concerned primarily with the relationship between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and name-&-form (*nāmarūpa*), and this relationship may be regarded as the heart of dependent arising.

The Buddha opens by rejecting Ānanda’s optimistic claim of having understood the profundity of dependent arising and says: “This dependent arising **is** profound, **and** it appears profound, and it’s because they do not understand or penetrate this *dhamma* that this generation is tangled up like a ball of twine, afflicted as if with an inflammation and matted like reeds and grasses, unable to go beyond *samsāra* with its misery, unhappy destinies, and states of woe.” So the sutta is concerned in particular with the depth and profundity of dependent arising and its relationship to our entanglement within *samsāra*.

The word translated as “profound” is *gambhīra*, which can also be translated as “deep” and “unfathomable.” The Great Ocean is *gambhīra*, as is a *tathāgata*, a fully awakened one. So it is not surprising that this sutta is so difficult, as it tries to express the unfathomable depths found within dependent arising.

Specific conditionality

“Ānanda, if asked, ‘Is there a specific condition (*idappaccaya*) for ageing-&-death?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions ageing-&-death?’ one should say ‘Birth (*jāti*) conditions ageing-&-death.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for birth?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions birth?’ one should say ‘Becoming (*bhava*) conditions birth.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for becoming?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions becoming?’ one should say ‘Clinging (*upādāna*) conditions becoming.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for clinging?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions clinging?’ one should say ‘Craving (*taṇhā*) conditions clinging.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for craving?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions craving?’ one should say ‘Feeling (*vedanā*) conditions craving.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for feeling?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions feeling?’ one should say ‘Contact (*phassa*) conditions feeling.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for contact?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions contact?’ one should say ‘Name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) conditions contact.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for name-&-form?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions name-&-form?’ one should say ‘Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) conditions name-&-form.’

“If asked, ‘Is there a specific condition for consciousness?’ one should say ‘There is.’ If asked, ‘What conditions consciousness?’ one should say ‘Name-&-form conditions consciousness.’

“In this way, Ānanda, name-&-form conditions consciousness; consciousness conditions name-&-form; name-&-form conditions contact; contact conditions feeling; feeling conditions craving; craving conditions clinging; clinging conditions becoming; becoming conditions birth; and with birth as condition, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to be.

Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.”

Specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) is the fundamental principle underlying dependent arising, and the Buddha begins with a discussion of this principle.

Ānanda, if asked, “Is there a specific condition (*idappaccaya*) for ageing-&-death?” one should say “There is.” If asked, “What conditions ageing-&-death?” one should say “Birth conditions ageing-&-death.”

We begin by identifying a phenomenon – in this case, ageing-&-death, but it could be *any* experienced phenomenon – and ask: What gives rise to this? Later we learn what is required for a phenomenon to be considered a specific condition for something:

“*Birth (jāti) conditions ageing-&-death* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no birth of any kind anywhere ... then, in the complete absence of birth, with the cessation of birth, would ageing-&-death be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause (*hetu*), ground (*nidāna*), origin (*samudaya*) and condition (*paccaya*) for ageing-&-death, namely, birth.”

What is required for *this* to arise? And what would cause *this* to disappear if it too disappeared? When we find such a phenomenon, we have found the specific condition for *this*. Notice how local the enquiry is. What specific aspect of our experience causes this other specific aspect of our experience? We can start anywhere, asking our question of anything, so we are always in a position to begin, because there is always something happening now. Once we begin we are embarked on a journey that naturally unfolds as a sequence of conditional relationships, and which can take us in any number of directions. The journey on which the Buddha takes Ānanda in this discussion follows a set trajectory found in many other suttas, consisting of ageing-&-death, birth, becoming, clinging, craving, feeling, contact, name-&-form and consciousness.

Beyond the particular conditioned events listed here we find a deeper structure revealed by the repetition. In the oral tradition of early Buddhism, repetition indicates emphasis. The repetition reminds us that this is a chant, a performance, not a document. The particular sequence of conditions presented above is repeated in many other suttas. Where we have repetition, then we have something we are meant to remember. And often the pattern or structure of the repetition is more important than the content, that which is being repeated. So the frequent use of an invariable “standard” sequence, such as the one found here, indicates that the sutta is presenting us with a fundamental paradigm, universally applicable.

In this instance we find, firstly, the fundamental pattern of *x-conditions-y*, which we also find throughout the Buddha’s teachings. Secondly, here the Buddha elucidates this pattern by repeatedly asking: *What conditions y? If there were no x, would y be discerned?* By memorising and chanting the sequences elaborating this pattern, the practitioner learns that for any given experienced phenomenon *y*, look for *x*, that which is required for its arising, and without which it would cease. So the practitioner is being trained through memorisation to first identity the experience, and then look for what conditions it. This training is applied when s/he comes to practice meditation, as these are the two fundamental movements of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation.

Birth

“*Birth (jāti) conditions ageing-&-death* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no birth of any kind anywhere – of *devas* into the *deva*-state, of *gandhabbas* into the *gandhabba*-state, of *yakkas* into the *yakka*-state, of demons ... , of human beings ... , of quadrupeds ... , of winged creatures ... , and of reptiles into the reptile-state – if there were no birth of beings of any sort into any state, then, in the complete absence of birth, with the cessation of birth, would ageing-&-death be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause (*hetu*), ground (*nidāna*), origin (*samudaya*) and condition (*paccaya*) for ageing-&-death, namely, birth.

Becoming

“*Becoming (bhava) conditions birth* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no becoming of any kind anywhere – no sense-sphere becoming (*kāma-bhava*), no fine-material becoming (*rūpa-bhava*), and no immaterial becoming

(*arūpa-bhava*) – then, in the complete absence of becoming, with the cessation of becoming, would birth be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for birth, namely, becoming.

Clinging

“*Clinging (upādāna) conditions becoming* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no clinging of any kind anywhere – no clinging to sense pleasures (*kāma-upādāna*), no clinging to views (*diṭṭhi-upādāna*), no clinging to precepts-&-practices (*sīlabbata-upādāna*), and no clinging to a doctrine of self (*attavāda-upādāna*) – then, in the complete absence of clinging, with the cessation of clinging, would becoming be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for becoming, namely, clinging.

Craving

“*Craving (taṇhā) conditions clinging* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no craving of any kind anywhere – no craving for forms, no craving for sounds, no craving for smells, no craving for tastes, no craving for tangibles, and no craving for phenomena – then, in the complete absence of craving, with the cessation of craving, would clinging be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for clinging, namely, craving.

Feeling

“*Feeling (vedanā) conditions craving* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no feeling of any kind anywhere – no feeling born of eye-contact, no feeling born of ear-contact, no feeling born of nose-contact, no feeling born of tongue-contact, no feeling born of body-contact, and no feeling born of mind-contact – then, in the complete absence of feeling, with the cessation of feeling, would craving be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for craving, namely, feeling.

For each of the *nidānas* of ageing-&-death, birth, becoming, clinging and craving we get a definition of the term, and an examination of its conditioned nature – what causes it to arise and cease. The definition of birth here draws our attention, as it is different from another common definition found elsewhere in the suttas. Here, birth is described in such a way as to reveal a *cosmology*, the arising of beings within different worlds – the worlds of *devas*, *gandhabbas*, *yakkas*, demons, human

beings, quadrupeds, winged creatures and reptiles. The sutta is drawing a picture of the universe, a cosmology, but the cosmology is first person. *Devas* are born into the “*deva-state*” (*devattā*), or “*deva-hood*.” They are not born into an objectively existing heaven, empty and waiting for them; rather, when there are *devas*, there is a *deva-state*, which includes an appropriate heaven, and when there is a *deva-state*, there are *devas*. Similarly, humans are not born onto earth, but into humanity – which happens to be located on earth. Reptiles also share this earth, but they live in a different world, a different state. The sutta is referring to a universe which is alive, as experienced by living creatures, not to a universe which is simply an objective place, occasionally inhabited.

So the Buddha asks, “with the cessation of birth, would ageing-&death *be discerned?*” The answer is no, and he replies, “This is the cause ... for ageing-&death, namely, birth.” In other words, the *discernment* (*paññāyati*) of ageing-&death is functionally equivalent to the *existence* of ageing-&death – and so on for the other *nidānas*. The verb used here is *paññāyati*, “to be known,” “to be perceived,” “to be discerned.” This sutta is not about how independently existing beings appear in otherwise empty independently existing worlds; it is about the appearance (to someone) of beings and their worlds. We have a shift from a third person discourse (the world and its beings “out there,” existing independently), to a first person discourse (the world and its beings *appear* – to someone).

In brief, the structure we are dealing with is this: *Without x, would y be discerned? No! Therefore, x conditions y.* In other words, *y* and the discernment-of-*y* are the same; its discernment *is* its existence. As we saw last week, this means that we are dealing here with *dhammas*; not “things” but “our-experience-of-things.” And all *dhammas* (phenomena) are *paṭiccasamuppanna dhammas* (dependently arisen phenomena) – except, of course, for *nibbāna*.

Following this sequence of specific conditions uncovers a series of particular conditioned events, that culminates here in the mutual interdependence of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and name-&form (*nāmarūpa*). But before then, we take a side trip.

From feeling to conflict

“Thus, Ānanda, feeling (*vedanā*) conditions craving (*taṇhā*); craving conditions seeking (*pariyesanā*); seeking conditions getting (*lābha*); getting conditions decision-making (*vinicchaya*); decision-making conditions desire-&passion (*chandha-rāga*); desire-&passion conditions attachment (*ajjhosaṇa*); attachment conditions possessiveness (*parigaha*); possessiveness conditions stinginess (*macchariya*); stinginess conditions guarding (*ārakkha*); and because of guarding, various evil unwholesome phenomena (*pāpakā akusalā dhammā*) arise – taking up clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, insulting speech, slander, and falsehoods.

“Because of guarding, various evil unwholesome phenomena arise – taking up clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, insulting speech, slander, and falsehoods should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no guarding of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of guarding, with the cessation of guarding, would those various evil unwholesome phenomena arise?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for those various evil unwholesome phenomena, namely, guarding.

“*Stinginess conditions guarding* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no stinginess of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of stinginess, with the cessation of stinginess, would guarding be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for guarding, namely, stinginess.

“*Possessiveness conditions stinginess* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no possessiveness of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of possessiveness, with the cessation of possessiveness, would stinginess be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for stinginess, namely, possessiveness.

“*Attachment conditions possessiveness* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no attachment of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of attachment, with the cessation of attachment, would possessiveness be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for possessiveness, namely, attachment.

“*Desire-&passion conditions attachment* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no desire-&passion of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of desire-&passion, with the cessation of desire-&passion, would attachment be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for attachment, namely, desire-&passion.

“*Decision-making conditions desire-&passion* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no decision-making of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of decision-making, with the cessation of decision-making, would desire-&passion be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for desire-&passion, namely, decision-making.

“*Getting conditions decision-making* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no getting of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of getting, with the cessation of getting, would decision-making be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for decision-making, namely, getting.

“*Seeking conditions getting* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no seeking of any kind anywhere, then, in the complete absence of seeking, with the cessation of seeking, would getting be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for getting, namely, seeking.

“*Craving conditions seeking* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no craving of any kind anywhere – that is, no craving for sense pleasures, no craving for existence, and no craving for nonexistence – then, in the complete absence of craving, with the cessation of craving, would seeking be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for seeking, namely, craving.

“Thus, Ānanda, these two *dhammas*, being a duality, converge into one through feeling.”

In this section the Buddha continues his discussion of specific conditionality, tracing a sequence of specific conditions generating dependently arisen phenomena, but he branches out into a new direction. Beginning with feeling (*vedanā*), which is part of the first sequence, he traces a series of specific conditions culminating in “various evil unwholesome phenomena,” “taking up clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, insulting speech, slander, and falsehoods.”

That we *can* have a new sequence of specific conditions inserted here shows us that more than one sequence is possible; and in fact there are many versions of dependent arising scattered throughout the Nikāyas.¹ This in turn shows us that any given formula we are presented with is simply an individual instance of an underlying paradigm that does not exhaust the possibilities. All these formulas are expressions of the fundamental paradigm of specific conditionality, which can be summarised as *x-conditions-y*. But each formula expresses *x-conditions-y* in different ways and different circumstances. So dependent arising can be applied in any situation, and to apply it we simply ask of any experienced event, “What conditions *this*?” The answer will lead us to another experienced event, of which the same question can be asked; and so on. This will naturally result in a sequence that can be expressed in a new formula of dependent arising.

The above sequence uses dependent arising to demonstrate the Buddha’s approach to ethics, showing us how dependent arising is to be *lived*. Dependent arising provides both an abstract principle (a metaphysics) and its practical application in

¹ In Nidāna Saṃyutta alone (the main collection of texts on dependent arising) I have counted 71 discrete versions.

life (an ethics), for without application the abstract principle is futile. We have already seen how dependent arising is applied to cosmology, in terms of birth into different “states.” Dependent arising also provides the underlying paradigm for psychology, in terms of its analysis of mental factors such as consciousness and those included in name-&-form, which we will examine closely below. The same logic is applied to ethics, cosmology and psychology; it is all of a piece, all part of the same pattern. These applications are all based on a first person perspective: “this” is the-appearance-of-this, our-discernment-of-this, our-experience-of-this. Further, we have a concern with process rather than identity, an understanding that this experience arises and ceases in dependence upon conditions and so is not an independently existing “thing” but an event within a dynamic process, arising and ceasing now.

Contact

“*Contact conditions feeling* should be understood in this way: If there were absolutely and utterly no contact of any kind anywhere – that is, no eye-contact, no ear-contact, no nose-contact, no tongue-contact, no body-contact, and no mind-contact – then, in the complete absence of contact, with the cessation of contact, would feeling be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for feeling, namely, contact.

“*Name-&-form conditions contact* should be understood in this way: If those qualities (*ākāra*), traits (*līṅga*), signs (*nimitta*), and indicators (*uddesa*) through which there is a description of the mental body (*nāma-kāya*) were all absent, would designation-contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*) be discerned in the physical body (*rūpa-kāya*)?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of the physical body (*rūpa-kāya*) were all absent, would impingement-contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*) be discerned in the mental body (*nāma-kāya*)?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of the mental body and the physical body were all absent, would either designation-contact or impingement-contact be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) were all absent, would contact be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for contact, namely, name-&-form.”

Here we approach the heart of the teaching. This discussion of the relationship between contact (*phassa* or *samphassa*) and name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) throws open

the whole nature of this dependently arisen world. The emphasis is on causation, so when speaking of the experienced world we are concerned with *how* the world is created, and how it disappears. Let us begin by examining what is meant by contact, or stimulus (*phassa*).

Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact (*phassa*). Dependent on ear and sounds ... nose and scents ... tongue and flavours ... body and tangibles ... Dependent on mind and phenomena, mind consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. (M 1.111-12; etc.)

Contact or stimulus is the presence-together of sense object, sense organ and the appropriate sense consciousness. To see requires a functioning eye, a visible form, and eye consciousness, all coming together as contact. Contact refers to the immediacy of experience, but in such a way as to point out the complexity of even the most basic experience, because all experience entails an event that combines at least three discrete but interrelated phenomena: a sense sensitivity, or receptor; a sense object; and the presence of the sense object. Another common definition for contact found in the suttas is:

What is contact (*phassa*)? There are these six classifications of contact (*phassa-kāya*): eye contact; ear contact; nose contact; tongue contact; body contact; and mind contact. This is called “contact.” (D 2.62; S 2.3; etc.)

This passage doesn't so much define contact as delineate its location. Contact always arises in association with one or more of the six sense fields. We find contact wherever the sense fields are active, because contact, or stimulus, is the cognised impact of the sense object on its corresponding sense organ. For there to be contact, there must be those phenomena which are in contact: the six sense fields, the “everything” of the Sabba Sutta. Indeed, we could say that contact *is* the experienced world of the senses. However, contact can be abstracted from its context, analysed as a discrete phenomenon: the interaction of sense organ and sense object, and the knowing or cognising of this interaction.

The Buddha says, “name-&-form conditions contact.” What is “name-&-form” (*nāma-rūpa*)? Name-&-form is the coherent and structured world within which we live and which we take for granted as “real,” but which is organised and mapped from the chaotic mass of sense data that strikes us through the six senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Remember the Sabba Sutta taught that all there is, or all we can hope to experience – which in a first person discourse amounts to the same thing – comes to us through the six senses. Name (*nāma*) is the organising activity that shapes the sense data into a meaningful sense of a self-within-a-world.

Feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), choice (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*): this is called “name” (*nāma*). (S 2.3)

Feeling (*vedanā*) is the hedonic aspect of experience, our automatic classification of all experienced objects as being either pleasant (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*), or, if the object is too faint or remote from our interest, neither-painful-nor-pleasant (*adukkha-m-asukha*). Perception (*saññā*) is the recognition of a given sense object as constituting an understandable percept. Choice (*cetanā*) is intention or volition, the decision that arises from the perceived significance of the object. Contact (*phassa*) is immediate experience, the knowing of the impact of sense object with sense organ.

Attention (*manasikāra*) is the mind's selection of a specific sense object and its focusing upon it.

Name (*nāma*) is characterised by intentionality. Our states of mind – beliefs, desires, intentions, perceptions and so on – are all *about* something in the world; they are directed at objects and situations. If we believe, we believe *something*; if we desire, we desire *something*; and so on. In terms of meditation practice, intentionality reminds us that knowing always has an object: when there is knowing, there is always *some thing* which is known, the reference or object of knowing. Knowing is always knowing-of. So *nāma* has the characteristic of being directed toward an object; or we could say that *nāma* is the process of the mind reaching out to an object.

The word *nāma* is of course cognate with the English word “name,” because *nāma* *names* the objects of experience, by reaching out and assessing them. The constituents of *nāma* are *activities* which shape the appearance of the phenomenon and our response to it. Feeling and perception are both concerned with interpreting experience. Choice and attention direct our perceptions and actions in specific directions in order to create a purposeful and therefore meaningful world. Contact is the presence-together of a sense sensitivity, its corresponding sense object and their corresponding consciousness.

If name (*nāma*) is the organising activity that shapes sense data into a self-within-a-world, then form or body (*rūpa*) is what is shaped.

Why do you say “body” (*rūpa*)? One is afflicted (*ruppati*), therefore one calls it “body.” What is one afflicted by? One is afflicted by cold, heat, hunger, and thirst; one is afflicted by contact (*samphassa*) with snakes, wind, heat, mosquitos and gadflies. One is afflicted, therefore one calls it “body.” (S 3.86)

Rūpa can be translated either as “form” or as “body,” depending on context.² This definition is based on a word play with the verb *ruppati*, “to be afflicted,” “to be affected.” The Buddha sees physical experience as essentially painful (*dukkha*), but the point here is that “body” or “form” is an experience – the body is our-experience-of-the-body – and this experience is essentially receptive in nature. The body receives the impact of sense data; it is struck by incoming data, and the moment of impact is contact or stimulus (*phassa* or *samphassa*), the event which is immediate experience.

Name-&-form become part of experience through contact or stimulus. The immediacy of experience itself is contact, and all experience arrives with a feeling tone – painful or pleasant or neither-painful-nor-pleasant – already built into it. We are already moved by experience. And so, contact conditions feeling, while name-&-form conditions contact.

“Name-&-form conditions contact should be understood in this way: If those qualities (*ākāra*), traits (*lingā*), signs (*nimitta*), and indicators (*uddesa*) through which there is a

² *Rūpa* translated as “form” refers to what is seen, visual sense data either coming through the eyes or through the mind, as when we “see” in our imagination or dreams.

description of the mental body (*nāma-kāya*) were all absent, would designation-contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*) be discerned in the physical body (*rūpa-kāya*)?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of the physical body (*rūpa-kāya*) were all absent, would impingement-contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*) be discerned in the mental body (*nāma-kāya*)?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

Contact is divided into designation-contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*) and impingement-contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*). Designation contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*) is a movement from the mental to the physical, and impingement contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*) is a movement from the physical to the mental.

Designation contact describes immediate experience from the perspective of the knowing. It involves conceptual and volitional activity reaching out into and impacting upon the phenomenal world. The mind designates or names the raw data of experience, organising it into a coherent world. The visual data of moving patterns of colour and light and shade are designated “People sitting in the Buddhist Library;” the aural data of vibrations striking the ear are designated “Passing traffic.” This designation is the work of the mental-body (*nāma-kāya*), based on the information passed on to it from all the senses – the material body (*rūpa-kāya*).

Impingement contact describes immediate experience from the perspective of the known. It involves the experienced impact of sense data from the phenomenal world. Sense data from the phenomenal world strikes the psycho-physical body and provides the mind (*nāma-kāya*) with a site (*rūpa-kāya*) on which to construct the experience of a coherent world. Visual and aural data strike their respective sense faculties, located at precise sites within the body, and these data are constructed into the experience of, for example, participating in this class at the Buddhist Library.

So contact is a two way street, and always involves both mind and body. Designation contact could not be known within a material body (*rupa-kāya*) without the presence of the mental body (*nāma-kāya*) to reach out to the sense object; impingement contact could not be known within a mental body without the presence of a material body which can register material sense data.

These two movements illustrate a fundamental aspect of the Buddha’s model of the experienced world. We are always in the midst of some given situation – *this* situation right here and now. The givenness of this situation is inescapable. Whether we like it or not, we are here and now and have no choice to be other than here and now. The givenness of this situation manifests as impingement contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*), the reception of sense data. However, while we find ourselves inescapably in this given situation here and now, we are free to respond to this situation in any number of ways. This situation here and now is workable. How we work with this situation manifests, in part, as designation contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*), the active reaching out to and construction of a meaningful world. There is a basic oscillation in experience between receptive and

active, between what is given and what we can do about what is given, and this oscillation is part of the essential dynamic of dependent arising.

“If those qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) were all absent, would contact be discerned?”

Why does the Buddha not simply ask, “If there was no name-&-form would contact be discerned?” Why does he say that it is “the qualities, traits, signs, and indicators through which there is a description of name-&-form” that condition contact? Again we see the importance of *concept* in our understanding of the world. This reminds us of the “linguistic turn” in contemporary philosophy, cultural studies, poststructuralism, and so on. It reminds us that interpretation is built into experience; that an experienced world is an already *interpreted* world. This theme will be expanded upon further into the sutta.

Consciousness conditions name-&-form

“Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) conditions name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) should be understood in this way: If consciousness were not to descend into the mother’s womb, would name-&-form take shape in the womb?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If, after descending into the womb, consciousness were to depart, would name-&-form be generated into this present state of being?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-&-form grow up, develop, and reach maturity?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for name-&-form, namely, consciousness.”

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is *the knowing of the object* in its purest, most elemental sense. In general terms we can say that our experienced world is divided into a duality of knowing and what is known. For example, if I stub my toe I “know,” or am conscious of, the sensation of pain. The knowing of the pain is consciousness; the pain itself is the object of consciousness.

Speaking more precisely, we experience an undiluted moment of consciousness in the very first moment when our toe impacts upon a hard object. For a single moment there is an elemental knowing; then suddenly I know a situation *already interpreted*: pain, anger directed at the object that I struck, irritation at myself for being so careless, and so on. There is a shift from the simplicity of pure awareness to a complex situation where I live in an organised and coherent – although painful – world in which “I” have stubbed “my toe” on “that” – which should *not* have been there! This complex world has been organised and interpreted by name-&-form. The painful quality of the experience is feeling (*vedanā*). The percepts of “me” and “my toe” are perception (*saññā*). The decisions to jump about and curse are choice (*cetanā*). The immediacy of the experience is contact (*phassa*). And my focus on both

the pain and on my aversion to it is attention (*manasikāra*). Consciousness has conditioned name-&-form.

What is consciousness in its elemental form, considered apart from name-&-form? Consciousness is the *presence* of the phenomenon, of what is present. That first moment, when I knew *something* had happened but did not recognise what, is consciousness, a moment of pure presence. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is knowing, and since we cannot have knowing without something that is known, consciousness is a *knowing-of*. Perception (*saññā*) is also a knowing, but it is recognition, a *knowing-as*. Perception recognises “my toe hurts.” And perception does not arise alone, but as part of name (*nāma*); and name does not arise alone, but always linked to form (*rūpa*); and name-&-form does not arise alone, but always linked to consciousness. So in that first moment of perception – “That’s my toe!” – we are presented with a complete and coherent world within which we *already* live and with which we are *already* engaged – consciousness conditions name-&-form.

“If consciousness were not to descend into the mother’s womb, would name-&-form take shape in the womb?” ... “If, after descending into the womb, consciousness were to depart, would name-&-form be generated into this present state of being?” ... “If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-&-form grow up, develop, and reach maturity?”

The inter-relationship between consciousness and name-&-form occurs now, in the immediacy of this already interpreted world; it is *synchronic*. But it also occurs through time, moving from yesterday through today to tomorrow; it is *diachronic*. When the Buddha speaks about movement or development through time, he speaks in terms of consciousness as a stream – the *viññāṇa-sota*. Here he is speaking of the moment of conception followed by the growth and development of a human being, which is a linear process over time, and which implies the process of rebirth. Again we are reminded of the cosmological slant of this sutta. The Buddha selects three instants within this process of the development of identity over time and asks: If consciousness was cut off at this point, would the process continue? He is showing us a cross-section of the process of human development, intersecting the diachronic with the synchronic.

When can consciousness cease, and cause name-&-form to cease? At any time; at *this* time. At this time, we have the arising of consciousness together with name-&-form, which is a person-within-a-world; at this time, we have the cessation of consciousness together with name-&-form, which is a person-within-a-world; then, at this time we have the re-arising of consciousness together with name-&-form, which is a person-within-a-world. So a person within a world is a stream of consciousness together with name-&-form, a complex process of experience and interpretation which arises now, in *this* moment; and ceases now, in *this* moment; and then arises now, in *this* moment; and so on.

Name-&-form conditions consciousness

“Name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*) conditions consciousness (*viññāṇa*) should be understood in this way: If consciousness were not established (*patittha*) in name-&-form, would the arising and coming to be of birth, ageing-&-death in the future be discerned?”

“Certainly not, bhante.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, ground, origin, and condition for consciousness, namely, name-&-form.

“To this extent, Ānanda, we can be born, age, and die, fall (from one existence) and rise (into another); to this extent there is a pathway for designation (*adbhivacana-patha*), a pathway for language (*nirutti-patha*), a pathway for concept (*paññatti-patha*), a sphere for wisdom (*paññā-avacara*); to this extent the round turns as far as can be discerned in this state (*itthattam paññāpanāya*), that is, (when there is) name-&-form together with consciousness.

The relationship between consciousness and name-&-form is that between knowing and the known, and so is one of interdependence or mutuality. Where there is something known, there is the knowing of it; when there is a knowing, there is something known. This relationship can be explored in a number of ways, and here the Buddha introduces the notion of the establishment (*patitthatā*) of consciousness.

Without something to know, there cannot be knowing; without a phenomenon being present, there cannot be the presence of a phenomenon. Consciousness is the knowing-of something, the presence-of what is present. One way of expressing this is to say that consciousness needs a base, somewhere to ground. It needs to be located, “established” somewhere, on something. Only then can consciousness be discerned, for the base or foundation of consciousness provides the “of” when we say consciousness is a knowing-of. Only in relationship to this “of,” the foundation of consciousness, can consciousness itself, the knowing itself, be discerned. This foundation, the “of” of knowing-of, is name-&-form. Therefore, name-&-form conditions consciousness.

The above analysis is psychological, but the sutta examines the establishment of consciousness from the perspective of cosmology. Previously the Buddha said, “If consciousness were not to descend into the mother’s womb, would name-&-form take shape in the womb?” This is a description of the moment of rebirth. The stream of consciousness (*viññāna-sota*) flows from past to future, arising and ceasing with incredible rapidity. Each time it arises, name-&-form arise with it; and this moment of consciousness together with name-&-form already contains a person within her world, a complete functioning universe; or rather, it already *is* a complete functioning universe. This process of person and world formation is going on now, in this life, streaming from past to future; and it goes on between lives, linking the rebirths of beings. And the process is exactly the same, whether the time frame is between the beginning and end of this moment, this day, or this life.

So here the Buddha is speaking of “the arising and coming to be of birth, ageing-&-death *in the future*.” He is using dependent arising to explain causation over time, both in terms of our future in this life – tomorrow is on the way – and in terms of rebirth – the next life is on the way.

To this extent, Ānanda, we can be born, age, and die, fall (from one existence) and rise (into another); to this extent there is a pathway for designation (*adbhivacana-patha*), a pathway for language (*nirutti-patha*), a pathway for concept (*paññatti-patha*), a sphere for wisdom (*paññā-avacara*); to this extent the round turns as far as can be discerned in this state (*itthattam paññāpanāya*), that is, (when there is) name-&-form together with consciousness.

The question of rebirth brings us back to the Buddha's words about how "it's because they do not understand or penetrate this *dhamma* (dependent arising) that this generation is tangled up like a ball of twine, afflicted as with an inflammation and matted like reeds and grasses, unable to go beyond *samsāra* with its misery, unhappy destinies, and states of woe." The noun "*samsāra*" is derived from the verb *samsārati*, "to wander on," or "to wander together." This movement through time and experience is contained within "name-&-form together with consciousness." And again, notice the importance of "designation," "concept" and "language." The Buddha's teaching is a first person discourse, which means it is concerned with the nature of experience, and for experience to be meaningful, or even to be recognised *as* experience, it must be interpreted. Experience must be read. For there to be birth and death, there must be worlds into which beings are born and from which they die, and a world (*loka*) is not just a random series of sense impressions, but a meaningful and coherent whole.

In brief, "name-&-form together with consciousness" refers to the arising of this entire meaningful world, along with the person who experiences it, now; and to the cessation of this entire meaningful world, along with the person who experiences it, now; and the movement through time of this entire meaningful world, along with the person who experiences it. And it does so in a way that can be discerned by the practitioner through insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, and shows that fundamentally, there is no world and no person, only dependent arising and the dependently arisen.

Following sections

Our sutta does not end at this point. The Buddha goes on to teach on explanations of self, considerations of self, the seven stations of consciousness and the eight liberations. But tonight we have no time to listen.

Briefly, these sections go on to apply this understanding of dependent arising found in the first part of the sutta to the problem of liberation from *samsāra*, which was raised in the introduction. The Buddha has just shown how self is constructed – by dependent arising, and in particular through consciousness together with name-&-form – and in the section on *explanations of self* and *considerations of self* he shows how we behave when we don't realise this. When I don't see myself as a temporary arrangement of conditional relationships, I see myself as an independently existing self. And so I have a need to explain (*paññāpeti*) or consider (*samanupassati*) the self, because the self *is* an interpretation – and a bad one at that – of consciousness together with name-&-form.

The seven stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-(t)thiti*) again link cosmology with psychology, showing how when consciousness is "stationed" or based on a particular configuration of name-&-form, a corresponding world is created. These worlds include the human, the divine, and those of the immaterial absorptions (*arūpa jhānas*). The inclusion of the absorptions illustrates the Buddha's first person perspective. The absorptions (*jhānas*) are subjective states cultivated by deep concentration; but they are also objective worlds where beings live, and a meditator who cultivates these states can enter these worlds and interact with these beings. This makes no sense to us, because we see "meditative states" as aspects of psychology, and "other worlds" as aspects of cosmology. But it makes perfect sense to the Buddha, who knows nothing of our categories of psychology and cosmology and their mutually exclusive nature, but who knows *dhamma*, which embraces both

these categories and more. And *dhamma* is first person, where a world is our-experience-of-a-world. Change our experience, and we find ourselves living in a different world.

Finally, the Buddha discusses the eight liberations (*vimokha*). These, along with the contemplation of the seven stations of consciousness, show the path to the full liberation of the mind. And this full liberation comes from a full understanding of dependent arising.

Conclusion

This is what the Blessed One said. Venerable Ānanda was satisfied and rejoiced in the Blessed One's words.

Ānanda's satisfaction and rejoicing shows his agreement with the teaching given. We too rejoice in the Blessed One's words when we attempt to understand and apply this teaching of dependent arising and the dependently arisen to our own lives.