

1

Necessity and Sufficiency in Early Buddhist Conditionality¹

Basic notions in dependent arising
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1 Usefulness of the concepts

1.1 FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS. The ancient records of early Buddhist teachings invariably and simply show how careful reasoning, especially common sense, is used to present various teachings on the universal truths of impermanence and suffering to the more abstruse reality of not-self. As our understanding of these ancient texts deepens, we often enough might sense a hint of subtle hues of the different teachings, or how each of the links of dependent arising works in relation to one another. Yet we are unable to pin it down.

In theoretical study, certain concepts can be useful in helping us to organize and focus our thoughts, so that they can connect to give us a clearer understanding of certain teachings and statements.² This study comprises two main parts. Firstly, we will examine a philosophical discussion on necessity and sufficiency, and secondly, we will apply this to an analysis of the teaching of dependent arising to better understand its working in conceptual and practical terms.

Necessity and sufficiency, being fundamental concepts, cannot be readily specified in other terms. Philosophers and academics are still not fully agreed on their finer points. The main reason for this systemic ambiguity of the two terms, I think, is that their meaning depends on their application. Furthermore, they are merely thinking tools for dealing with conceptual statements. Once such issues are resolved, we need not ponder over them any more, and go on to the next level of mental cultivation, that of dealing with mind directly, that is, meditation.

1.2 PHILOSOPHY, MEMORY AND CONDITIONS. An important enterprise is that of analysing and refining the definitions of significant terms and the concepts they express, so that we might have a better understanding of such intricate problems as those of moral ethics, existence, and truth, “that lay beyond the reach of scientific resolution.”³ If philosophical analysis lacks scientific predictability, it is because we cannot really measure thinking and concepts. They can only be graded by our *intentions*, that is, how we use words or their context.⁴

The sense and truth that we attribute to a statement is significantly influenced by our memory (or lack of it). We might have the best of intentions, but we are often short in memory, so that we forget what has been said or known in the past. Hence, we come to a conclusion convinced of our rightness and rectitude or wrongness and guilt. Or, we could be convinced by a present argument that we accept whatever follows, or feel too embarrassed, or is too entrenched in belief, to extricate ourselves from that wrong view.⁵

Careful philosophers and teachers often remind us of Wittgenstein’s warnings against premature theorizing and over-generalizing.⁶ “[H]is insight that many everyday terms pick out families, should mandate caution over expecting a complete and unambiguous specifications of what constitutes a necessary, or a sufficient, condition.”⁷ [7]

1.3 THE PROBLEM WITH LOGIC. Although logic is a technically exact way of determining truth, it is merely a thinking tool, and its usefulness is in the hands and minds of those who use it and their purposes

¹ I would like to whole-heartedly thank **Sylvester Lam**, a Singapore lawyer, whose enthusiasm and erudition have pointed out some typos here, and also made some very useful suggestions for improving this presentation.

² See **Working with concepts** = SD 40a.11.

³ Andrew Brennan 2003:1, digital ed.

⁴ See **Saññā** = SD 17.4 (2.3) on meaning.

⁵ For a study on the standards of truth, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/1:188-193) = SD 35.4a; also **Unconscious views** = SD 30.9.

⁶ See Wittgenstein 1942, 1953. For an intro, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language-game>.

⁷ Brennan, “Necessary and sufficient conditions,” 2003:2, digital ed. This useful study should be read in full.

behind such a use. It is well to state at the start that logic alone only proves arguments⁸ to be *logical* or not. Whether such arguments, even if logically correct, are *right* or *wrong*, ultimately depends on ethics; whether they are good or bad, ultimately dependent on morality.

The last case—the use of logic in moral situations—is especially relevant in early Buddhism, where the “rightness” or “wrongness,” or better, the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, of actions depends on the intention (*cetanā*) behind the action. In other words, we are here dealing with the logic behind the action (not a statement). This difference is of vital importance: here we are looking at *why* a deed is done, that is, the motivation or reason (that is, the intention), behind the action. When the intention behind the action is good or wholesome, the action is “right” (that is, good or wholesome, too).

When logic is applied to statements, the truth there is usually limited to *how* an act is done. This is almost a mechanical process without the need for knowing the intention or morality behind the action. Such logic may work well in technical situations (such as computer programming), but is problematic when applied to human thinking and action. As such, it is meaningful to speak of a Buddhist “psychological ethics,”⁹ as in early Buddhism, logic is only useful as a tool when it clarifies how the mind works, why we act, and how such states and actions (“events”) are good or bad.

2 Basic definitions

2.1 BASIC DEFINITIONS AND APPLICATIONS. Anthony Flew, in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*,¹⁰ defines “necessary and sufficient conditions” as follows:

This is a necessary condition for that if and only if that cannot be without this. This is a sufficient condition for that if and only if this is by itself enough to guarantee that...

To say that this is a logically necessary condition of that entails that to affirm *that* and to deny this must be to contradict yourself; being a man is thus a logically necessary condition of being a husband. To say that this is a logically sufficient condition of that entails that to affirm *this* and to deny that must be to contradict yourself: being a husband is thus a logically sufficient condition of being a man. From which it becomes clear that if this is a logically necessary condition for that, then it must be a logically sufficient for this...

...if the sufficient condition is the causally sufficient condition, then it can only be simultaneous with or precedent to its effect, that of which it is the causally sufficient condition.

(1984:242, sv Necessary and sufficient conditions. Emphases added)

A W Sparkes¹¹ defines sufficient condition, necessary condition, and necessary-and-sufficient condition as follows:

- (1) X is **sufficient condition** for y, if any only if (iff) *X and non-Y is an impossibility*; eg, *being a king is sufficient for being male* as is *combustion for the presence of oxygen*. (It is impossible that a king is not a male, or for combustion to occur without oxygen.)

⁸ Here, “argument” means “a piece of discourse consisting of one proposition (the *conclusion*) and one or more other propositions (the *premiss* or *premisses*) which are put forward as reasons for assenting to the conclusion.” (Sparkes 1991: §4.6). Strictly speaking, adds Sparkes, if an arguer is arguing not that some position is true but that some action should be done, he is arguing *not* that some position is true but that some action should be done, he is arguing not to a conclusion, but to a recommendation or prescription. Besides arguments, there are **statements** (or propositions) whose truth or falsehood can (in many cases) be examined, eg, by science (where they are measurable), by epistemology (if they are knowable), or by metaphysics (if they are possible).

⁹ This term was first used by CAF Rhys Davids as the title of her tr of **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**, subtitled “Compendium of states or phenomena,” London, 1900. While Rhy Davids terms applies to the Abhidhamma, we can safely use this same term as reflecting a prevailing attitude of early Buddhist training. See **Dhamma & Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1(1.1).

¹⁰ Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed, NY: St Martin’s Press, 1984.

¹¹ AW Sparkes, *Talking Philosophy: A wordbook*. London: Routledge, 1991.

- (2) X is a **necessary condition** for Y, iff *Y but non-X* is an impossibility; eg, *being male* is necessary for *being a king* as is *presence of oxygen* for *combustion*. (“A king must always be *not a male*”—this is impossible. “There is *combustion* only when there is *no oxygen*”—this is impossible.)
- (3) X is a **necessary-and-sufficient condition** for Y, iff *X but non-Y*, and *Y but non-X*, are both impossibilities;¹² eg *being a male monarch ranking immediately below an emperor* is necessary-and-sufficient for *being a king*, as is *being a rectangular plane figure with four equal sides* for *being a square*.
- (4) **Alternative ways of expressing these conditions**, eg

X is a sufficient condition for Y	if X then Y ¹³ whenever X then Y
X is a necessary condition for Y	unless X, then non-Y if non-X, then non-Y Y, only if X
X is a necessary and sufficient condition for Y	if X then Y, and if non-X then non-Y X if and only if Y X, only if Y

In the above explanation, Sparkes says that he has discussed necessary (etc) conditions in terms of *states of affairs*. They can be discussed also in terms of the truth-values of propositions: the truth of p is a necessary condition for the truth of q, iff (if $\neg p$ then $\neg q$). (Sparkes 1991:93 f)

2.2 EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS. John Hospers, in his classic textbook, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*,¹⁴ contains a helpful discussion on these topics, which is here summarized:

(1) **Necessary condition.** When we say that X is a necessary condition for the occurrence of Y,¹⁵ we sometimes mean (or should mean) simply the empirical fact that *in the absence of X, Y never occurs*.

Thus, in the absence of oxygen, we never have a fire. The presence of oxygen, however, is not a *logical* necessity for fire to occur. Indeed, it is conceivable that something quite different from oxygen, say the presence of an elephant, would be a necessary for fire. Only by experience can we know what the conditions are, the absence of which is followed by the substance of the event.

“Oxygen is necessary for fire”¹⁶ is thus a simple empirical statement, testable in experience. If oxygen (X) is necessary to fire (Y), we can also say that if there is fire, there is oxygen present. Thus, we can say that when X is a necessary condition for Y:

If not X, then not Y “if there is no oxygen, there is no fire,”

or, what is the same thing,

If Y, then X “if there is fire, there is oxygen.”

But we cannot say either of these:

¹² In other words, in the foll examples, it is impossible that (X) a male monarch who ranks below an emperor is not a (Y) king; and it is impossible that (X) \rightarrow an equilateral four-sided plane figure is not (Y) a square.

¹³ In any such proposition as “if x, then y,” or “if p, then q,” the clause headed by “if” is called the protatis (“tension-creating”) and the consequent clause headed by the “then” is the apodosis (“tension-removing”).

¹⁴ John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953, 2nd ed 1967:279-307 (ch 15 What is a cause?), esp 291-293.

¹⁵ Hospers uses the symbols C and E, which I have changed to X and Y for consistency.

¹⁶ Or, more technically, we could say, “An *oxidant* is necessary for combustion.” It should be understood here that this proposition is “under normal circumstances.”

If X, then Y	× “if there is oxygen, there is fire,”
If not Y, then not X	× “if there is no fire, there is no oxygen.”

(2) **Sufficient condition.** X is said to be sufficient for the occurrence of Y if, invariably, whenever X occurs, Y occurs. “If it rains on the street, the street is wet.”¹⁷ The occurrence of rain is *enough* for the street’s being wet. To say that X is sufficient for Y is to say:

If X, then Y	“if it rains on the street, then it is wet,”
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or what is the same thing,

If not Y, then not X	“if the street is not wet, then it has not rained.”
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This, however, is *not necessary*: the street might be wet even if it had not rained at all. For example, a water sprinkler had just passed. Hence, we cannot say either of these:

If not X, then not Y	× “if it does not rain on the street, it is not wet,”
If Y, then X	× “if it the street is wet, it has rained on it.”

Thus, necessary condition and sufficient condition are the reverse of each other.

3 Problems of the standard theory¹⁸

3.1 TRUTH-FUNCTIONS AND SYMMETRY IN THE STANDARD THEORY. Andrew Brennan, in his paper on “Necessary and sufficient conditions,” introduces the term “the standard theory,”¹⁹ stating that it “makes use of the fact in classical logic, the truth-function ‘ $p \supset q$ ’ (‘if p, q’) is false only when p is true and q is false. According to the standard theory, when “ $p \supset q$ ” is true, then the truth of the consequent “q” is *necessary* for the truth of the antecedent “p,” and the truth of the antecedent is, in turn, *sufficient* for the truth of the consequent.

We can therefore see an important symmetry (or balanced relevance) between the two kinds of conditions: Q is a necessary condition for P is the same as P being a sufficient condition for Q (and vice versa). So it appears that any truth-functional conditional sentence states both a sufficient and a necessary one.

Suppose that **Nālāgiri** is an elephant, then he has a trunk. Being an elephant is a *sufficient* condition for his having a trunk, and having a trunk is a *necessary* condition for his being an elephant.

We can also use “only if” to identify a necessary condition, for example, we can say that **Bakkula** was swallowed by a fish, only if he was swallowed by a water-creature. For, if it is not a water creature, it is not a fish. The standard theory here would say that “if p, q” and “p and only if q” are the same ways of expressing the truth-functional “ $p \supset q$.” All this applies especially to logical, conceptual and definitional conditions.

Brennan then gives a few examples of problematic applications of the standard-theory truth function. Suppose that it is *both raining and sunny*. This is sufficient condition for “It is raining” to be true. That it is raining is, contrariwise, a necessary condition for it being true that it is both raining and sunny.

Even in conceptual and definitional cases, the standard theory, says Brennan, has some problematic results. Take, for example, any two true sentences A and B, the conditional “If A, then B” is true. For example, provided that it is true that the sun is made of gas, and it is also true that elephants have four

¹⁷ Hospers has “If rain is falling on the street, the street is wet.”

¹⁸ Andrew Brennan (2003) discusses various problems with the “standard theory” of logic, centering around the truth function “ $p \supset q$ ” (if p, then q). His key ideas relevant to our purposes have been summarized in this section and developed where necessary to reflect applications to Buddhist ideas and action.

¹⁹ See Blumberg 1976:133 f; Hintikka & Bachman 1991:328 for example of this approach.

legs, then the truth-functional conditional, “If elephants have four legs, then the sun is made of gas,” is also true! However, the sun’s gaseous nature would not normally be regarded a necessary condition for elephants having four legs.

Yet, according to the standard theory, any *truth* will be a necessary condition for the truth of every statement whatsoever, and any *falsehood* will be a sufficient condition for the truth of any statement! However, such odd results would not arise if we accept that *premises be relevant to the conclusion drawn from them*, and that antecedents of true conditionals are likewise relevant to the consequent.

3.2 PROBLEMATIC CONDITIONALS. According to Brennan, a number of linguists and philosophers have long been skeptical of the truth-functional analysis of the conditional. Suppose we see a symmetry between necessary and sufficient conditions, and also that “if p, q” sentences can always be paraphrased by “p only if q.” However, neither these claims is reflected in what our natural understanding of necessary and sufficient, or the function of “if” in English. Let us consider the following examples.

(1) If I opened the door, I used a key. (Brennan 2003:2)

The house door, the only way in, is locked. To get into the house in a normal, non-violent way, we must use a key to open the door. A *necessary* condition for opening the door, then, is to use a key. Hence, (1) is true. This is quite straightforward.

(2) If you touch me, I’ll scream. (McCawley 1993:317)

In the case of (1), using the key is necessary for opening the door, but no similar move would work for (2). According to (2), read naturally, my screaming is *not* necessary for your touching me. According to McCawley, “[t]he *if*-clause must be temporally/causally/epistemologically prior even if it is modified by *only*, contrary to the usual claim of introductory logic texts that ‘If A, B’ and ‘A only if B’ and ‘equivalent’” (1993:317). Simply, the first part (the antecedent) is related to the later part (the consequent) by way of time, cause-and-effect or how we know about it: it does not make sense to say: “You’ll touch me only if I scream”!

In other words, the “if” clause here, in a standard English statement, gives the condition—in terms of time, cause or knowing—for the truth of the “then”-clause. A similar asymmetry occurs in (1). In terms of time and cause-and-effect, to open the door I must use the key first; but it would be wrong to say that using the key depended, in time or cause, on opening the door! For a clearer understanding on how the antecedent conditions the consequent, let us look at this pair of conditional sentences (based on Sanford 1989: 175 f):

(3) If Lee Ann learns to play, I’ll give her a flute.

(4) Lee Ann learns to play only if I give her a flute.

While (3) refers to the condition for my giving Lee-ann a flute (say, by borrowing or hiring one), (4) gives a necessary condition (possibly more) for Lee-ann to play the flute. The two statements do not say the same thing, even though the standard theory logic textbooks take “if p, q” and “p only if q” as being synonymous. In fact, if we take both (3) and (4) together (as being equivalent), poor Lee-ann would be caught in a double-bind with no chance of ever getting a flute from me!²⁰

3.3 TRUTH-STATEMENTS AND STATES OF AFFAIRS. Before we go on, it is useful to differentiate between *truth-statements* and *states of affairs* (or events), and how they are related. Let us examine these two statements (based on Wertheimer 1968:363 f):

²⁰ See Brennan 2003:4 (digital ed).

- (5) That it will rain tomorrow is a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth, today, of the forecast “There will be rain tomorrow.”
- (6) The truth, today, of the forecast, “It will rain tomorrow,” is a necessary and sufficient condition for rain falling tomorrow. ×

David Sanford argues that while (5) is sensible (or valid), (6) “has things backward” (Sanford 1989: 176 f). However, we need to be cautious here, warns Brennan, as, rephrasing Sanford, the statement about the rain, if true, is true because of the occurrence of rain. It does not rain because of the truth of the statement” (id). The occurrence of rain explains the truth of the statement, and not the other way around (2003: 5).

Of course, adds **Brennan**, “people sometimes do undertake actions just to ensure that what they had said turn out to be true; so there will be cases where the truth of the statement explains the occurrence of an event” (2003:5). A well known example of this is postdiction or *vaticinium ex eventu*, “prediction after the event,” a common practice in prophetic traditions, especially in theistic religions.²¹ But this is unlikely to be case here.

Hence, it is important that an argument must be both *valid* and *true*. *Propositions* are true or false; *reasoning* or argument is valid or invalid. The propositions in a valid argument may all be false, and the statements in an invalid argument may all be true. To know the truth, then, that a conclusion is true,

(1) we need to know that the premises are true, and

(2) the argument must be valid, that is, that the conclusion follows logically from the premises.²²

Take this example from McCawley:²³

(7) If John wins the race, we will celebrate.

(8) We are not celebrating because John has not won the race.

As Brennan points out, John’s winning the race is a sufficient condition, and his winning the race is the reason why we will be celebrating. However, our celebration is unlikely to be the reason why he wins the race, as we have got the sequence of events wrong, mistaking the effect to be the cause. However, we can rightly make this *inference* (conclusion): that we do not celebrate is a ground for inferring that John has not won the race.

3.4 THREE BASIC RELATIONS OF CONDITIONALS. **Brennan** identifies at least three different relations that work with conditionals, each of which may bear upon issues of necessity and sufficiency. The first is **the implication relation** symbolized by the hook operator, “ \supset ,” or some relevant implication operator. Such an operator captures some inferential relation,²⁴ some examples of which we have seen above.

First, there is the implication symbol, the hook operator \supset or some related symbol. It represents some inferential relations we have already noted (such as 3) “which can be thought of as holding paradigmatically between bearers of truth values, but can be loosely thought of in terms of states of affairs.” (Brennan 2003:6).

²¹ See eg **Devadaha S** (M 101) @ SD 18.4(4.2); **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b(3.4.4.2); also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaticinium_ex_eventu.

²² See **John Hospers** 1967:129. On the difference btw *validity* and *truth* in a argument, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65) @ SD 35.4a(3.1.2).

²³ Both Kai von Fintel 1997:3 (cites as 1993:566) & Brennan 2003:6 (no citation) qu this example, but I cannot locate it in McCawley 1993.

²⁴ On inference & deduction, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65) @ SD 35.4a comy (3a(6)). On Buddhist logic & inference, see **Language & discourse** = SD 26.11 (4.2, 7.3, 8, 9).

There are two more relations often related to necessary and sufficient conditions. Let us examine this statement to identify them:

(9) If Sun Tan was there, it was a good party.

It is possible that Sun Tan is an exuberant ice-breaker, the live-wire of the party. His attendance, then, is a good indicator that it will be a fun party. So we might say that the party is good because of Sun Tan's presence. On the other hand, we could rightly surmise, too, that it is the goodness of the party that explains Sun Tan's presence. Sun Tan senses that it would be a good gathering, and so he attends it.²⁵

3.5 FUNCTIONS OF AN "IF" CLAUSE. An easy way to understand the difference between these two possible explanations is seeing them as *the reason why and they reason for* thinking so. But first let us examine an important aspect of conditionality. A conditional case is often recognized by an attending "if" clause. Such an "if" clause may do any of these three things, as already described:

- (a) to *introduce* a premise from which a consequent follows (the way hook operator works) [3.4];
- (b) to state a reason *why* the consequent follows in a particular case;
- (c) to state a reason *for* the consequent of a particular case.

These functions of the "if" clause are the more common ones, but there are others.

It is not always easy to distinguish these different functions of the "if" clause. The concept of *explanation* is not helpful here. For, we can explain something by giving a reason *for* thinking it is so, or by giving a reason *why* it is so. [3.6]

3.6 REASON WHY AND REASON FOR. Looking at proposition (1) again: that I opened the door as a *reason for* thinking that I used a key, not a reason why. In (3), that Lee Ann learns to play the flute is *the reason why* I will buy her a flute, and that I buy her a flute is a reason for thinking that, but not a reason why, she has learned to play the flute. And in (7), that we celebrate is a *reason for* thinking that John has won the race, but not the reason why.

Sparkes gives an example of how "because" is wrongly used, which helps us understand the difference between the two. When Edmund Hillary was asked why he climbed Mount Everest, his famous reply was, "Because it's there." How was he using the word "because"? Let us say that he was proposing the presence of Everest as the reason for having climbed it:

(10) Everest was there. Therefore, I climbed it. ×

Hillary is not really giving a *reason for believing* that he climbed Everest. He is only **giving a reason for** his action, that it was the appropriate or excusable thing to do.²⁶

Even where there is a correlation between reasons *why* and reasons *for*, we cannot safely generalize such a correlation. We might, for example say that if A is a sufficient reason why B occurs, then the occurrence of B will sometimes—not always—be a *reason for* thinking that A has occurred. Furthermore, if A is a sufficient reason for thinking that B *has* occurred, then B will sometimes—not always—be a *reason why* A has occurred.

For example, that I used a key was not just a reason *for* thinking that I had opened the door, but also one of the reasons *why* I was able to open the door. There is no easy way for generalizing on the relationship between reasons *why* and reasons *for*. However, one thing we can say is that we can **explain** something by citing a reason for thinking it is the case, or by citing a reason why it is the case.²⁷

3.7 LIMITS OF ANALYSIS BY WAY OF NECESSITY AND SUFFICIENCY. The specifying of necessary and sufficient conditions have traditionally been a part of a philosopher's business of analysing terms, concepts, situations and events. As **Brennan** notes,

²⁵ Cases like this were first introduced by Wilson 1979. See Brennan 2003:7.

²⁶ Sparkes 1991: §4.7(ii).

²⁷ See Brennan 2003:7.

Philosophical investigations of knowledge, truth, consciousness, memory, justice, altruism and a host of other matters do not aim at stating explanatory relations, but rather at identifying and developing conceptual ones.²⁸ Philosophical analyses do not generally give conditions that provide reasons why or reasons for thinking that. Nor do dictionary definitions.

That Nellie is an elephant is not a (or the) reason why she is an animal, any more than that a figure is a square is a reason why it has four sides. Rather, elephants are one kind of animal, and squares are one kind of four-sided figures.

To specify the *necessary* conditions for the truth of the sentence “that figure is a square” is to specify a number of conditions including “that figure has four sides,” “that figure is on a plane,” and “that figure is closed.” Conversely, the truth that “that figure is a square” is a *sufficient* condition for the truth of “that figure is closed.”

The inferential relations in this case are modeled—albeit inadequately, as noted earlier—by an operator like hook. [sic] (Brennan 2003:8; reparagraphed)

As such, we should remember that although a statement might be logically correct, they need not be naturally true. For example, “If Sun Tan was there, it was a good party,” but Sun Tan was not there, so it was a bad party. This statement need not be true, as Sun Tan could have been sick, and was unable to attend, and the party went on very well without him.

Even the inferential use of “if” is not always reflective of necessary and sufficient conditions. There are various kinds of conditionals and various kinds of conditions. In such analyses, we must ensure that the premises and conclusions are not only *logically correct*, but that they must also be true.

4 Causes and conditions

4.1 LIMITATIONS OF A “CAUSE.” Following the basic definitions of necessity and sufficiency earlier [2-3], it is clearly *not* plausible to define “cause” as a necessary condition. Indeed, there are a great number of necessary conditions that we would *not* call causes. For example,²⁹ if someone asks, “Why are you attending sutta study class?” and you reply, “Well, I was born, you know,” your answer would not be considered satisfactory. Yet being born is a necessary condition for your being here or anywhere else at this moment.

However, if you were asked for *the cause* of a given event, it will not do to answer that there is a given universe. Or, if you were asked who or what caused or created the universe, it will not do to answer that it is God. You could very well have said that it is a giant turtle. In other words, just because you say the word God, and no matter how well you define the word—just as you can define a unicorn—does not mean that it exists or that it is true. You cannot, in itself, define something into existence. But let us return to our discussion on cause and causality.

4.2 CONDITIONALITY. A cause, then, is not the same as a necessary condition. A necessary condition, however, does have something to do with causality insofar as we often speak of a necessary condition as a “causal factor” (not as *the* cause). For example, before something can burn, under normal circumstances, there must be oxygen: oxygen is necessary for combustion. It can be said to be a causal factor in combustion, but it is certainly not *the* cause of fire. A better term here, instead of the term “cause,” would be *condition*. There are a *number* of conditions, not just one, for combustion.

What and how many conditions then are sufficient for combustion? Under normal circumstances, we can say that

- (1) there must be combustible material;
- (2) there must be the required temperature for combustion; and
- (3) there must be oxygen (“air”) (or an oxidant).

²⁸ For a detailed account of conceptual analysis, see F Jackson 1988.

²⁹ This section is based on Hospers 1967:292 f.

When all these conditions are present, the combustible substance burns. These conditions are together *sufficient* for combustion. We must note that each of the conditions alone is necessary but that not one of them alone is sufficient. A combination of necessary conditions brings about the event.

The example of combustion is, of course, unusually simple: only three necessary conditions are sufficient for combustion. But for a car to work properly, the necessary conditions are far more numerous. It must have an engine, the wheels must be properly attached, there must be fuel in the tank, and numerous other parts that must be connected together and work in a certain way (and not to mention that the driver must know how to drive) and so on.

The list of necessary conditions, as such, would run into many thousands. But even this example of the car is very simple compared to how *the living external world* functions. Yet, even this is simpler compared to *the human realm*: what are the conditions that have to come together, for example, for a person to enjoy this discussion? The possibility is staggering. Even if we could list many of the conditions, we probably do *not* yet have a single sufficient condition. In general, concludes **Hospers**, it is easier to list necessary conditions (conditions in the absence of which the event never occurs) than sufficient conditions (conditions in the presence of which the event always occurs). (1967:292-305)

5 Necessity and sufficiency in the dependent arising formulae

5.1 SUFFICIENCY OF THE LINKS OF THE DEPENDENT ARISING.

5.1.1 Specific conditionality. **Brahmavaṃso**, in his article, “*Paṭicca-samuppāda*: Dependent origination” (2003b), shows how specific conditionality (*idap,paccayatā*) relates to what in Western logic are called “necessary condition” and “sufficient condition.” **A sufficient condition** is a cause that must always produce the effect—this is *enough* for that, if and only if, this is by itself enough to guarantee that. That is to say, “this is a sufficient condition, if and only if, this is by itself enough to guarantee that.”³⁰ For example, a fire is a sufficient condition for heat. A fire *must* cause heat (under normal circumstances).³¹ The sufficient condition is expressed by the first half of *idap,paccayatā*:

imasmim sati idam hoti | imass'uppādā idam uppajjati
when this is, that is; | with the arising of this, that arises. (S 12.21/2:28)

A necessary condition is a cause without which there would be no effect—that is, without A, B cannot arise. For example, fuel is necessary for a fire. That is to say, “this is a necessary condition for that, if and only if, that cannot be without this.”³² The necessary condition is expressed by the second half of *idap,paccayatā*:

imasmim asati idam na hoti | imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati
when this is not, that is not; | with the ending of this, that ends.³³ (S 12.21/2:28)

In order to demonstrate the difference between these two types of causes I will use the example just given. Fuel is a necessary condition for fire, because with the ceasing of fuel, the

³⁰ Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed, NY: St Martin's Press, 1984:242.

³¹ Meaning that the fire is not an illusion, but produced in a *natural* manner, say, with wood, etc.

³² Anthony Flew, id. One of the closest hints in Buddhism towards the notion of “necessary condition” is found in the Abhidhamma notion of *upanissaya* (“decisive support condition”), used in three cases: (1) where a mental object (*ārammaṇa*) causes conditions states apprehending it to arise, ie, an “object decisive support” (*ārammaṇūpanissaya*); (2) where a preceding state immediately causes the next by way of proximity (*anantara*), ie, “proximity decisive support” (*anantarūpanissaya*); and (3) where past physical or mental states lead to the arising of present conditioned states (such as prior lust may be natural cause in motivating the breaking of a precept), ie, “natural decisive support” (*pakatūpanissaya*). See Abhs:BRS 315 f. On the connection of this term with *upanisā*, see **Upanisā S** (S 12.23/2:29-32) = SD 6.12.

³³ “With the ending of this, that ends” or better “with the non-arising of this, that does not arise.”

fire ceases. But fuel is not a sufficient condition for fire, because fuel doesn't always produce fire—some fuel remains unlit. Fire is a sufficient condition for heat, because fire must cause heat, because without fire there can still be heat—heat can be generated from other sources.

So a necessary condition is a cause without which there would be no effect, and it is expressed by the second half of *Idappaccayatā*. A sufficient condition is a cause that must produce the effect, and it is expressed by the first half of *Idappaccayatā*. Together they make up Buddhist causality. (Brahmavaṃso 2003b:62 f)³⁴

5.1.2 The two cycles of dependent arising. Dependent arising comprises two cycles: the “normal” cycle or *dependent arising* of suffering, and the “reverse” dependent arising, better known as *dependent ending* of suffering (or simply, “dependent ending”). The “normal” sequence of dependent arising is known in Pali as *anuloma*, literally “following the hair,” that is, keeping to the nature of things. The “reverse” sequence is known as *paṭiloma*, “against the hair,” or against the grain, that is, against the flow of the world. Technically, we can speak of dependent arising as the *worldly* cycle, and dependent ending as the *supermundane* or liberation cycle.

The fullest statement or “standard version” of the dependent arising formula (the X-*paccayā*-Y pattern) or “if x, then y” conditionality, has *twelve factors in eleven propositions*. Similarly, the full or standard version of dependent ending has the same twelve links but the eleven propositions work in the opposite direction. This twin-cycle formula is found in such discourses as **the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Desanā Sutta** (S 12.1) and **the Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta** (S 12.15).³⁵ The normal (*anuloma*) cycle, showing the arising of suffering, is first stated, followed by the reverse (*paṭiloma*) cycle, showing the ending of suffering. In both cycles, the same terms are used, but in opposing sequences, as follows:

(A) DEPENDENT ARISING (*anuloma*)

With <u>ignorance</u> as condition, there are	volitional activities;
with volitional activities as condition, there is	consciousness;
with consciousness as condition, there is	name-and-form;
with name-and-form as condition, there are	the six sense-bases;
with the six sense-bases as condition, there is	contact;
with contact as condition, there is	feeling;
with feeling as condition, there is	craving;
with craving as condition, there is	clinging;
with clinging as condition, there is	existence;
with existence as condition, there is	birth;
with birth as condition there arise	decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.

—Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

(B) DEPENDENT ENDING (*paṭiloma*)

But with the utter fading away and ending of <u>ignorance</u> ,	volitional activities end;
with the ending of volitional activities,	consciousness ends;
with the ending of consciousness,	name-and-form ends;
with the ending of name-and-form,	the six sense-bases end;
with the ending of the six sense-bases,	contact ends;
with the ending of contact,	feeling ends;
with the ending of feeling,	craving ends;
with the ending of craving,	clinging ends;
with the ending of clinging,	existence ends;

³⁴ For further details, see **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16 (2).

³⁵ S 12.1/2:1 f, 12.15/2:16 f = SD 6.13. See **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16 (4).

with the ending of existence,
with the ending of birth, there end

birth ends;
decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation,
physical pain, mental pain and despair.

—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.

(S 12.1/2:1 f, 12.15/2:16 f) = SD 6.13

5.1.3 The mundane cycle. In the “normal” or forward (*anuloma*) mode of dependent arising (A)—in general terms (when applied to both the unawakened and the awakened)—some of the 12 links can each in themselves be a **sufficient condition** for its respective following link. That is to say, the following or subsequent link must arise sooner or later as a consequence of the preceding link or factor, as follows:

ignorance	—	volitional activities
[volitional activities	...	consciousness]
consciousness	—	name-and-form
name-and-form	—	the six sense-bases
the six sense-bases	—	contact
contact	—	feeling
...		
craving	—	clinging
[clinging	...	existence]
existence	—	birth
birth	—	suffering (sorrow, etc).

Thus, *under “normal” circumstances*, in an unawakened person, when there is ignorance, volitional activities *necessarily* follow, and so on leading to birth (that is, rebirth).³⁶ Here “normal” means the predominance of any of the three unwholesome roots, greed, hate, or delusion, or looking at the cycle *as a whole*. On the other hand, when none of the unwholesome roots is present, as in good meditation, or even when we are momentarily involved in some wholesome act, volitional activities (here meaning bad karma) does not arise. With this condition, negative consciousness (that is, cognitive consciousness),³⁷ does not arise.

In the case of the awakened, volitional activities do *not* arise, and so do not condition new consciousness. In other words, there is not negative cognitive consciousness in the arhat. What keeps the arhat going, so to speak, is his past karma and present conditions (that is, taking food, etc). Since the arhat has also overcome ignorance, no new existential consciousness arise in him either: hence, he is not reborn.

Generally speaking, when there is consciousness (that is, cognitive consciousness), it is a sufficient condition for the arising of name-and-form, the six sense-bases, contact and feeling. For the unawakened, however, feeling is sufficient for craving to arise, and craving is sufficient for clinging to arise. As a result, we *become* what we desire, hate or delude ourselves with: this is our existence.

However, with proper Dharma training and habits, if we are able to restrain ourselves, craving can be reduced or even stopped at least momentarily, so that we do not fall into any negative “existence” in this life itself. And if this wholesome habitual karma persists, our future existence is also a good one, or it might also be ended. That is, suffering is stopped.

Other than for the arhats, clinging in some way conditions existence, which leads to rebirth.³⁸ However, in the first three types of saints—the streamwinner, the once-returner and the non-returners—their rebirth or rebirths do not produce suffering as we know it (especially the non-returner). The streamwinner, for example, although they may undergo up to seven more births, do not suffer in the way other

³⁶ From hereon, I have analysed the relationships of the links, mostly based on Watts 1982.

³⁷ On cognitive consciousness and existential consciousness, see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a (6.1).

³⁸ See **Bhava S** (A 3.76/1:223 f).

unawakened beings do. A streamwinner wisely deals with his pains and sufferings so that they never overwhelm him as they do other worldlings.

In the unawakened, in other words, birth necessarily produce suffering. Therefore, the only escape from suffering is to cease from being reborn. As Sāriputta declares to the wanderer Sāmaṇḍakāni in **the Sukha Sutta** (A 10.65):

Abhinibbatti kho āvuso dukkhā; anabhinibbatti sukhā.

To be born, friends, is suffering; not to be born is happiness. (A 10.65/5:120 f)³⁹

5.1.4 The supermundane cycle. **The Upanisā Sutta** (S 12.23), too, gives the full twin cycles of dependent arising and depending ending of suffering. Its presentation of the dependent ending or supermundane cycle is unique in that it does not use the reverse of the well-known twelve links of the mundane cycle, but gives a set of twelve links echoing other Dharma models, especially those of “the nine states of great help (towards awakening)” (*nava dhammā bahu, kāra*)⁴⁰ and the seven awakening-factors.⁴¹

The full twin cycles of dependent arising is given in the Upanisā Sutta as follows:

MUNDANE CYCLE: DEPENDENT ARISING

ignorance	is the necessary condition for volitional activities,
formations	is the necessary condition for consciousness,
consciousness	is the necessary condition for name-and-form,
name-and-form	is the necessary condition for the six sense-base,
the six sense-bases	are the necessary condition for contact,
contact	is the necessary condition for feeling,
feeling	is the necessary condition for craving,
craving	is the necessary condition for clinging,
clinging	is the necessary condition for existence,
existence	is the necessary condition for birth,
birth	is the necessary condition for suffering,
suffering	is the necessary condition for faith,

SUPERMUNDANE CYCLE: DEPENDENT ENDING

faith	is the necessary condition for joy,
joy	is the necessary condition for zest,
zest	is the necessary condition for tranquillity,
tranquillity	is the necessary condition for happiness,
happiness	is the necessary condition for concentration,
concentration	is the necessary condition for knowledge and vision of things as they really are,
knowledge and vision of things as they really are	is the necessary condition for revulsion,
revulsion	is the necessary condition for dispassion,
dispassion	is the necessary condition for liberation,
liberation	is the necessary condition for the knowledge of the destruction (of the influxes).

(S 12.23.28/2:33) = SD 6.12

In the Upanisā Sutta context, *upanisā* refers to the *necessary* manner in which one link or factor affects the next (or “proximate”) one. In a philosophical sense or as a technical term, it can thus be rendered

³⁹ For a more detailed study, see **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16 (4).

⁴⁰ **Das’uttara S** (D 34.2.2(1)/3:288).

⁴¹ For a study, see *Nibbidā* = SD 20.1 (4.2). See **Upanisā S** (S 12.23/2:29-32) = SD 6.12.

as “**necessary condition**,” which works well in reflecting how each pair of links work in an “if p, then q” sequence.

This notion of “necessary condition” is well supported by the Abhidhamma notion of *upanissaya* (“decisive support condition”), a term related to *upanisā* [1.1], and is used in three psychological senses:

- (1) where a mental object (*ārammaṇa*) conditions states apprehending it to arise, ie, an “object decisive support” (*ārammaṇūpanissaya*);
- (2) where a preceding state immediately causes the next by way of proximity (*anantara*), ie, a “proximity decisive support” (*anantarūpanissaya*); and
- (3) where past physical or mental states lead to the arising of present conditioned states (such as prior lust may be natural cause in motivating the breaking of a precept), that is, a “natural decisive support” (*pakatūpanissaya*).⁴²

The relationship of “**object decisive support**” (*ārammaṇūpanissaya*, or necessary condition by way of mental object) is a description of certain mental processes involved in dependent arising. “**Proximity decisive support**” (*anantarūpanissaya*, or necessary condition byway of proximity) describes the conditionality of some of the links where the cause-and-effect are *immediate*, such as “contact” leading to “feeling” (eg, a pleasant sight arouses pleasure in us). The “**natural decisive support**” (*pakatūpanissaya*, or necessary natural condition) describes, for example, how feeling (when unrestrained) *naturally* leads to craving, which in turn reinforces itself as clinging.⁴³

The notion of “necessity” is philosophically connected with that of “sufficiency,” and these are western philosophical and logical categories. As such, care must be taken in using them in the Indian Buddhist context. The main difficulty that students should note here is that these two western categories tend to be *word-based* (eg syllogistic), while early Buddhist “logic” is always “truth-based.”⁴⁴ [3.1, 3.3, 3.6]

5.2 CONTACT AND FEELING. Here, we will focus on the two key links—contact (*phassa*) and feeling (*vedanā*)—in the dependent arising formula, as they are useful in giving us some understanding in the difference between necessity and sufficiency in terms of their relationship with suffering. We have noted [5.1.2] that both contact and feeling are *sufficient* conditions that lead up to suffering. In other words, they are necessary conditions only as part of a set of links (that is, in the dependent arising of suffering).

As unawakened beings, during our lapses of mindfulness, contact and feeling are *sufficient* to bring on suffering in us [5.1.2]. However, even then, they need not be *sufficient conditions* for suffering if we have some level of mindfulness or restraint.⁴⁵ This means that either contact or feeling in itself may not cause suffering (such as when we are deep in joyful meditation or practising mindfulness). For, if either or both of them are sufficient for suffering to arise, then it would be possible to uproot our suffering by sense-deprivation.

In fact, in **the Indriya Bhāvanā Sutta** (M 152), for example, the Buddha declares that if this were possible (that is, stopping sense-stimuli could lead to self-development or overcoming suffering), then “the blind would be one with developed faculty, the deaf would be one with developed faculty. For, Uttara, the blind sees no form with the eye, the deaf hears no sounds with the ear!”⁴⁶ In other words, neither contact nor feeling (nor both of them) are sufficient conditions for suffering.⁴⁷

In **the Sall’atthena Sutta** (S 36.3), the Buddha explains how an unawakened person suffers *both* bodily *and* mentally through not understanding the true nature of pain (such as its being impermanent). The awakened person, however, experiences bodily pain, but understanding its true nature, is not mentally

⁴² See Abhs:BRS 315 f.

⁴³ See Karunadasa 2010:269 f.

⁴⁴ These problems have also been noted amongst scholars of western philosophy themselves, see eg Andrew Brennan 2003.

⁴⁵ (**Vaṅgīsa**) **Ānanda S** (S 8.4), eg, records how Ānanda counsels the monk Vaṅgīsa when he confesses to being troubled by sexual thoughts (S 8.4/1:188) = SD 16.12. See also (**Taṇhā**) **Bhikkhuṇī S** (A 4.159/2:144-146) = SD 10.14. See also **Sexuality** = SD 31.7 (3).

⁴⁶ M 152.2a/2:298 = SD 17.13.

⁴⁷ See **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63/3:410 f) = SD 6.11.

affected by it. In other words, craving is not reinforced when we *do not delight* in sensual pleasure; aversion is not reinforced when we *do not show aversion* towards pain; ignorance is not reinforced when we *do not ignore* a neutral feeling. The training is, for example, to regard them all as being *impermanent*. Then, the latent tendencies (lust, aversion and ignorance) are not reinforced.⁴⁸

Furthermore, in **the Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137), the Buddha gives the teaching on the “three foundations of mindfulness” (*ti satipaṭṭhāna*), where he declares that as a teacher, he feels *sad* when his followers do not listen to him or practise the teaching, and he feels *joy* when some or all of them do so. However, he declares, in any such case, “he dwells *untroubled, mindful and fully aware*.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the arhats, and possibly the other saints, too, are of the same nature.⁵⁰

In **the Saḷ’atthena Sutta** (S 36.3), the Buddha explains that in the case of the instructed noble disciple, that is, the arhat, he *responds* to the three kinds of feelings (both physical and mental), thus:

Feeling	Response	Reason
Painful	He shows no aversion towards painful feeling.	He knows an escape other than through sensual pleasure.
Pleasant	He does not delight in sensual pleasure.	He understands, according to reality, the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.
Neutral	He understands it according to reality.	The feeling does not lie latent in him.

Table 5.2 The arhat’s response to feelings

The Buddha concludes by saying that for the arhat, “If he feels a pleasant feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him” (S 36.6).⁵¹ Feeling, as such, is not a sufficient condition for craving (*taṇhā*). Even in ordinary people, not all feelings produce craving.⁵² [5.3.4]

5.3 CAUSAL FACTORS.

5.3.1 The arising of faith in the Dharma. Now, when the links of the dependent arising or mundane cycle (in the unawakened) are taken *singly* or *as a set*, we can clearly see sufficiency at work [5.1.2]. In other words, we can say that each pair of links is a case of “if x, then y,” that is, one proximate link gives rise to the next, and so on. However, in the traditional dependent ending or supermundane cycle (leading to arhathood), such as that mentioned in **the Upanisā Sutta**,⁵³ this is not the case. In its presentation of dependent arising, for example, feeling necessarily leads to suffering, but in dependent ending (that is, for an arhat), it does *not*. [5.2]

Interestingly, the Upanisā Sutta states that on account of suffering, *faith* arises:⁵⁴ suffering is a necessary condition for faith. When we have suffered internally or are able to relate to suffering externally, that is, we accept *the universality of pain*, we begin to have faith in seeking its opposite, liberation from pain. When we examine the natural process *our own pain*, we begin to understand our true nature: this is wisdom. When we are able to relate to *the suffering of others* (that is, we, too, could suffer in the same way), compassion arises. In other words, this faith is both wise and compassionate.

5.3.2 Absence of ignorance and craving. The question now is what is it that is present in the mundane cycle (in the unawakened), but absent in the supermundane cycle (in an arhat), which makes **feeling a**

⁴⁸ S 36.6/4:207-210 = SD 5.5. On the latent tendencies, see *Anusaya* = SD 31.3.

⁴⁹ M 137.21-24/3:221 f = SD 29.5.

⁵⁰ This is surely one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest statement on professionalism. In this case, it is a profession of not only faith in the true teaching, but of compassion and wisdom that are undaunted by worldly vicissitudes. For further reading on *phassa* and *vedanā* in this context, see Watts 1982:410-413.

⁵¹ S 36.6.10f/4:209 f = SD 5.5.

⁵² On formations and latent tendencies, see SD 17.6(6.2).

⁵³ S 12.23/2:29-32 = SD 6.12.

⁵⁴ S 12.15/2:31 = SD 6.12.

sufficient condition for the arising of suffering? We know that arhats *do* have feelings but they are *untroubled* by them [5.2]. This is simply because arhats do *not* have any craving at all. An arhat, in other words, is a living being, awakened to the four noble truths, that is, the true nature of life. In other words, *ignorance* and *craving* are not present in the supermundane cycle: the arhat has abandoned both.

However, as living beings, the arhat still has causal factors for his life-process, but they are purely “functional” (*kiriya*), so that all his actions are karmically neutral. The mundane cycle (in the unawakened), however, is fuelled by ignorance and craving.

From the list of twelve links (*nidāna*) or conditions (*paccaya*), it is obvious that at least four must remain as causal factors for the remainder of life of an arhat or the Buddha. These four are

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---|
| (1) name-and-form | <i>nāma,rūpa</i> | here meaning the psycho-physical being; |
| (2) the six sense-bases | <i>saḷ-āyatana</i> | the six sense-faculties (including the mind); |
| (3) contact | <i>phassa</i> | sense-stimuli; and |
| (4) feeling | <i>vedanā</i> | feelings attending the six sense-faculties. |

These links or conditions are necessarily found in all living humans, too, whether awakened or not. Here, *name-and-form* simply arises as material and mental phenomena for the awakened. We might say that these phenomena arise as “pure experience,” without karmic consequences, as activities at *the six sense-doors*, when *sense-stimuli* occur, bringing about the attendant *feelings*.

5.3.3 Feeling and its quality. At this point, it is useful to understand the difference between *feeling* (as a karmic experience) and the *quality*⁵⁵ of feeling (pleasant, painful, or neutral). While the *fact* that our feeling exists is the result of past karma,⁵⁶ the *quality* of feelings is simply natural phenomena. For example, if the day is warm, we will feel warm; if we see someone suffering pain, we are likely to feel sad.

In the **Devadaha Sutta** (M 101), notes **Brahmavamso**, the Buddha refers to *the type* (or quality) of feeling, rather than to *feeling itself*. Whichever one of the three types of feeling—happiness, or suffering, or neutral feeling⁵⁷—that we experience is *not* always due to karma from a past life.⁵⁸

Here, Brahmavamso uses a helpful imagery: the TV channel parable. The fact that a layman possesses a TV on a public holiday is due to his having purchased it on some previous day. Its presence, as it were, is due to karma from a past event. But whichever one of the *three* available channels that appears on the screen—Channel Happiness, or Channel Suffering, or Channel Neutral—is not always due to what he did on some previous day. The quality⁵⁹ is not at all due to what he did on some previous day: *the quality is not due to karma from the past*. (2003b:66 f)

Hence, with *wisdom* and *mindfulness*, we can decide *how* we want to respond to a feeling. And if we cultivate ourselves further, we can actually *prevent* negative feelings from arising, such as during a good meditation or when our mind is focused on a wholesome task. In short, it is how we respond (whether wholesomely or unwholesomely) to the feelings in the present moment that decides the karmic potential or result of our actions.

5.3.4 A master of perception. We have mentioned how, according to **the Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.3), an unawakened person suffers both bodily and mentally, on account of delighting in a pleasurable experience, or showing aversion to pain, or ignoring a neutral feeling; and how the arhat

- delights not in a pleasant feeling as he enjoys a higher bliss,
- shows no aversion to pain as he understands its true nature, and
- regards a neutral feeling⁶⁰ as being impermanent.⁶¹ [5.2 & Table]

⁵⁵ Alternatively, “content” or “type” may also be used here: see below.

⁵⁶ That we are reborn as humans is the result of past good karma, and this entails that we have feelings, too.

⁵⁷ That is, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings, respectively.

⁵⁸ M 101/2:214-228 = SD 18.4.

⁵⁹ Brahmavamso’s original word here is “content,” and elsewhere he uses “type,” which I have standardized as “quality,” which I think reflects the situation better here. However, see **Vedanā** = SD 17.3 (6).

⁶⁰ The Sutta actually uses the term “agreeable-and-disagreeable” (*manāpāmānāpa*). Comy says that when a desirable (*iṭṭha*) object comes within the range of the sense-organ, an agreeable state (*manāpa*) arises; when an undesirable (*aniṭṭha*) object appears, a disagreeable state (*amanāpa*) arises; and when a neutral (*majjhatta*) object arises,

In other words, the arhat, like every other human, experiences bodily pain (*dukkha,vedanā*) and bodily pleasure (*sukha,vedanā*), and also mental pain (*domanassa*) and mental pleasure (*somanassa*). However, the key difference here is that the arhat (including the Buddha) is *not troubled* by them, as stated in **the Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137).⁶²

Not only is the arhat untroubled (*anavassuta*) by any feeling, he is able to look at them in any whole-some way that he wishes. According to **the Indriya Bhāvanā Sutta** (M 152), since the arhat is a “noble one accomplished in the cultivation of the faculties” (*ariyo bhāvito indriya,bhāvanā*), so that he is a master of the five perceptions, applying them *as he wishes*.⁶³

In brief, **the 5 perceptions** regarding the repulsive [loathsome] (*paṭikkula*) and the unrepulsive [unloathsome] (*appaṭikkula*), are:

- (1) he perceives the unrepulsive in the repulsive (he either pervades *the unrepulsive* with lovingkindness or regards it as physical elements),
- (2) he perceives the repulsive in the unrepulsive (he either pervades the repulsive with lovingkindness or regards it as being impermanent),
- (3) perceives the unrepulsive in the repulsive and in the unrepulsive (he either pervades both with lovingkindness or regards both as physical elements),
- (4) perceives the repulsive in unrepulsive and in the repulsive (he pervades both with the thought of foulness or regards both as impermanent), and
- (5) rejects both the unrepulsive and the repulsive, and dwells in equanimity, mindful and fully aware.

According to the Sutta, the good worldling is one who notes the sensation, and regards it as “conditioned, gross, and dependently arisen,” and he notes its *momentariness* or impermanence.⁶⁴ The learner on the path (a saint short of the arhat) “is pained, ashamed, disgusted” by the sensation (whether they are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral).⁶⁵ As for the arhat, he is a master of the five perceptions, applying them “as he wishes.”⁶⁶

6 Dependent arising over three lives

6.1 DEPENDENT ARISING AS A LOOP. Dependent arising, although often depicted as a sequence of twelve links, is really *a loop* that is, in itself, with neither beginning nor ending. In other words, the traditional 12-link sequence we often see in the suttas forms part of a psycho-physical loop, a cycle that keeps our mind and body, our mental and physical existence, incessantly going in samsara. This is the notorious wheel of life and death, the uroboros painfully biting its own tail.⁶⁷

As dependent arising is a cycle, *it is impossible to point out a first cause*. Each of its links is conditioned (*paṭicca.samuppanna*) by previous conditions, as well as conditioning (*paṭicca.samuppāda*) subsequent ones. They are all relative, interdependent or interconnected, not something absolute. Hence, it has no first cause. The formula is best illustrated by a circle rather than a chain, for *paṭicca.samuppāda* simply

es, a state that is both agreeable and disagreeable (*manāpāmānāpa*) arises (MA 5:107). “It should be noted that though these three terms are ordinarily used to qualify the sense objects, here they also seem to signify the subtle states of liking, aversion, and dull indifference that arise due to the influence of the underlying tendencies” (M:NB 1366 n1354). An agreeable object arouses lust (*rajjitum*), the disagreeable arouses hate (*dussitum*), and the neutral arouses both as well as delusion (*muyhitum*) (MA 5:107; MAṬ:Be 2:440).

⁶¹ S 36.6/4:207-210 = SD 5.5.

⁶² M 137.21-24/3:221 f = SD 29.5.

⁶³ M 152.11-16/3:301 f = SD 17.13, where see also Tables 3b & 4.

⁶⁴ M 152.4-9/3:299 f = SD 17.13

⁶⁵ M 152.10/3:300 = SD 17.13

⁶⁶ Here the 5 perceptions are powers accomplished in the arhat. Elsewhere, the Buddha teaches them to his unawakened disciples as a way to overcome the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hate and delusion, ie, in **Metta,sahagata S** (S 46.54.12-13/S 5:119 = SD 10.11 Intro 2) & at **Tikaṇḍaki S** (A 5.144.2/3:169 = SD 2.12), where they are explained in some detail. In both cases, however, the sequence of the perceptions are 2, 1, 4, 3, 5. For further details, see **Paṭisambhidā,magga** (Pm 22.26/2:212 f) and Vism 12.36/381 f.

⁶⁷ See **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16 (8).

means “arising and coming into existence causally.” The term usually translated as “link” is *nidāna* (origin, cause), but each link arises by having the previous one as support (*paccaya*), beginning and ending with ignorance.⁶⁸

However, we can theoretically and usefully look at the dependent arising as occurring over three lives, as depicted in Table 6 above. In this table,

links 1-2, together with 8-10, are *the karma-process*, containing the five karmic conditions for rebirth;

links 3-7, together with 11-12, are *the rebirth-process*, containing the five karmic effects on life.

In other words, although the various pairs of links have a necessary connection, they also work as *sets*—as past causes, as present effects and as future causes. And so the snake continues to painfully bite its own tail.

	1. Ignorance 2. Volitional activities	Karma-process (<i>kamma.bhava</i>) 5 causes: 1,2,8,9,10
PRESENT EXISTENCE	3. Consciousness 4. Name-and-form 5. The six sense-bases 6. Contact 7. Feeling	Rebirth-process (<i>upapatti.bhava</i>) 5 results: 3-7
	8. Craving 9. Clinging 10. Existence	Karma-process (<i>kamma.bhava</i>) 5 causes: 1,2,8,9,10
FUTURE EXISTENCE	11. Birth 12. Decay-and-death	Rebirth-process (<i>upapatti.bhava</i>) 5 results: 3-7

Table 6: Dependent arising over three lives

6.2 PAST DEPENDENT ARISING. As unawakened beings, much of our present condition is the result of our past karma-process, and we continue to be conditioned by it. This past karma-process comprises of *ignorance* and *volitional activities*. So we continue to think, act and speak, often unconsciously influenced by ignorance and past karma, the first two links of dependent arising, thus:

- 1 ignorance (*avijjā*), and
- 2 volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*).

Ignorance (*avijjā*) here is not intellectual knowledge or technical skill, but a special term for our lack of fully fathoming of the four noble truths.⁶⁹ That is to say, we have not really understood the true nature of suffering (or, we have not really examined our sufferings with care and wisdom). Although we might see that craving leads to suffering, we are still not wise enough in letting craving go. As such, although we may know something about nirvana, we have still not realized it yet, as we have yet to really stepped on the noble eightfold path to begin our journey to liberation.

Now, we know that ignorance conditions every birth: it is a causal factor for rebirth. Even an arhat *was* born on account of ignorance, but he *is* no more conditioned by it. In other words, it is possible to escape from rebirth. This means that ignorance can also be abandoned in this life. Ignorance, in other words, is not a link in the supermundane dependent arising. As such, it must be unique to the mundane dependent arising.

⁶⁸ For a definition of each of the 12 links of dependent arising, see eg **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12:2/ 2:2-4). See SD 5.10.

⁶⁹ For a detailed def, see **Sammā Diṭṭhi S** (M 9.64-67/1:54) = SD 11.14.

Volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*), the second link in dependent arising, is an important psychological term that is polysemous, whose meaning depends on its context and usage.⁷⁰ As a link in dependent arising, it is generally translated as “volitional activities.” This term is always plural, reflecting its nature of working in a *duality* (eg, self-other) to form or conjure up multiplicities or mental proliferation (*papañca*).⁷¹

Since volitional activities make a situation seem bigger than it really is, or habitually project virtual realities on account of whatever we can sense, we are simply overwhelmed by them. Hence, it is said, “all formations are suffering” (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkha*).⁷² All formations are impermanent (Dh 277a), too; hence, they are suffering. This suffering arises conditioned by the three unwholesome roots: greed, hate and delusion. When these three roots are uprooted, the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), that is, nirvana, is attained.⁷³ As such, nirvana is also said to be “the stilling of all formations” (*sabba,saṅkhāra,samatha*).⁷⁴

From all this, it is clear that volitional activities are not part of the supermundane dependent arising, since they have all been stilled, that is, the arhat does not create new karma. As such, volitional activities are unique to the mundane dependent arising.

6.3 PRESENT DEPENDENT ARISING

6.3.1 Rebirth-process

6.3.1.1 TWO KINDS OF CONSCIOUSNESSES. According to the mundane cycle, dependent upon volitional activities, **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) arises. If we take volitional activities as the past condition for the arising of *present* consciousness, this consciousness must be “existential consciousness” or “rebirth consciousness.”⁷⁵ Both these terms refer to the “life-continuum” (*bhav’āṅga*), a commentarial term for what might today be called “the subconscious.”⁷⁶

While we live, the life-continuum as existential consciousness maintains continuity in our mental processes.⁷⁷ At the moment of dying, it is called “death consciousness” (*cuti citta*), the last thought-moment that gives the momentum into the next life. From the viewpoint of the “other” side of rebirth, it is called “rebirth consciousness” (*paṭisandhi citta*). Technically, they refer to the same thought-moment, but it depends from which side of rebirth we are looking from.

The subconscious, all the same, is rooted in ignorance, which underlies all the links of the mundane cycle under normal circumstances.⁷⁸ The arhat has abandoned this kind of consciousness, as for him, “birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more of this state of being.”⁷⁹

6.3.1.2 ARISING OF PERSONAL SUFFERING. At this point, it is helpful to examine a variant dependent arising used by the Buddha, as recorded in such discourses as **the Mahā Nidāna Sutta** (D 15), **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14) and **the Nalakaḷapiya Sutta** (S 12.26).⁸⁰ From feeling, it returns to craving and then, from craving a new series—a secondary sequence—of nine factors are listed, each of which arises in dependence on its predecessor. This is famously called the looped version, so called because it represents

⁷⁰ See *Saṅkhāra* = SD 17.6 esp (5). For a study, see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285) = SD 26.8. See also Kalupahana 1967.

⁷¹ See eg **Madhu,piṇḍika S**, M 18 = SD 6.14 Intro (2).

⁷² A 3.134/1:286; Dh 278a.

⁷³ **Kāya S** (S 43.1/4:359 = SD 12.21.1; **Parāyana S** (S 43.44/4:373) = SD 83.4.

⁷⁴ **D 14.3.1/2:36; M 26.19/1:167; S 6.1/1:136, 22.90/3:133; A 3.32.1/1:133.**

⁷⁵ On cognitive consciousness and existential consciousness, see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a (6.1).

⁷⁶ This term is used in a Buddhist sense, not the modern or Freudian sense, both of which however may have certain similarities: see **The unconscious** = SD 17.8b (6).

⁷⁷ See **The radiant mind** = SD 8.3 (11).

⁷⁸ “Under normal circumstances,” here simply means without any proper spiritual practice or mindfulness; but can also refer to a situation there is proper spiritual effort (for the unawakened) [6.5].

⁷⁹ V 1:14,32, 2:292,23, 3:5,35; D 1:84,12+35, 124,33, 158,21; M 1:23,25, 38,35, 40,7; S 1:140,29, 2:51,3+15 f, 82,21; A 1:165,20, 167,25, 197,3; U 23,27; Sn p16,11. See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9.56c/1:203)n = SD 7.14.

⁸⁰ See **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15.21-22/2:63 f = SD 5.17. On the 2 forms of consciousness described here, see **Nagara S** (S 12.65) = SD 14.2 Intro (2) & *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a (6).

consciousness and name-and-form as mutually (*añña-m-añña*) conditioning each other, and “this causal loop is confirmed when the series is reiterated in summary in the forward direction,”⁸¹ thus:

Conditioned by name-and-form is	consciousness.	
Conditioned by consciousness is	name-and-form.	
Conditioned by name-and-form is	contact...	(D 15.2/2:56) = SD 5.17

6.3.1.3 ARISING OF SOCIAL SUFFERING. This mundane sequence shows how “there are born various evil unwholesome states” (D 15.9).⁸² The purpose of this sequence is clear: it is to show that dependent arising not only explains the arising of individual suffering, but can also be used to *explain the arising of social disorder*.⁸³ Thus, craving not only brings further rebirth with personal suffering, but it also causes various unwholesome conditions leading to social disorder.⁸⁴ Craving, in short, is both a necessary and sufficient cause of social discontent and strife.

6.3.1.4 NAME-AND-FORM. *Nāma,rūpa*, often translated as “name-and-form,” is a dvandva (copulative compound), made up of *nāma* and *rūpa*. *Nāma* or name (this word should not be taken literally), is defined in the **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2) as the aggregate of mental factors involved in cognitive processes (comprising what we might call “the mind”): feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*).⁸⁵

Rūpa traditionally refers to the four great elements (*mahā bhūta,rūpa*): earth, water, fire, air and their derivatives,⁸⁶ that is, the four phases or states of matter. But this is only one of the several meanings of the term according to context. Elsewhere, *rūpa* means “visible form,” that is, the object of eye-consciousness.⁸⁷ However, as used in the suttas, the term *rūpa* in *nāma-rūpa* seems to denote physicality or materiality. (Bucknell 1999:321).⁸⁸

Whether one is enjoying a present object (that is, a physical sensation) or planning to do so (a mental experience), craving has **feeling** (*vedanā*) as its condition. Feeling, in turn, has **contact** (*phassa*) as condition.⁸⁹ Contact (sense-stimulus) is a coming together of sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness.⁹⁰

The **Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15) introduces two helpful terms here—conceptual impression (*adhivācana,samphassa*) and sense-impression (*paṭigha,samphassa*), or more simply, labelling contact and impact contact, respectively.⁹¹ The Commentary glosses “conceptual impression” with *mind-contact*, and “sense-impression” with *the five kinds of sense-contact*, without discussing their special meanings here.

⁸¹ **Mahā Nidāna S**, D 15.2/2:56 = DĀ 61b20 = 243c2-3 = MĀ 580a1-2 = 845b11-12; **Mahāpadāna S**, D 14.2.-18/2:32; **Nala,kalapiya S**, S 12.26/2:114 = SĀ 80c3-6. See Bucknell 1999:315 n13.

⁸² D 15.9/2:58 f = SD 5.17.

⁸³ Well known examples of the causal origins of social problems are found in the **Aggañña S** (D 27/3:80-98), the **Cakka,vattī Siha,nāda S** (D 26/3:57-79, esp 26.14-22/3:67-75) and the **Vāseṭṭha S** (Sn 594-656): see discussion in Payutto 1994:73-75. Other suttas that investigate the causal conditions behind social disorder are **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21), **Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 13) and **Kalaha,vivāda S** (Sn 4.11). Despite their differences in formulation, they all come to the same conclusion. See **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15) = SD 5.7 Intro (3).

⁸⁴ Comy labels the two sides of craving as “craving that is the root of the rounds” (*vaṭṭa,mūla,taṅhā*) and “obsessional craving” (*samudācāra,taṅhā*) (DA 2:500).

⁸⁵ S 12.2.12/2:3 f = SD 5.15. For a detailed def of *nāma,rūpa*, see **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12/2:3 f) = SD 5.15.

⁸⁶ See eg **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8-11/1:421-423).

⁸⁷ Eg in **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.16/1:111 f).

⁸⁸ On the problem of the term *rūpa*, see R Bucknell 1999:322 ff & D Seyfort Ruegg 1995:146. See also the useful article by Harvey 1993:3-5 (digital ed).

⁸⁹ **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15.20/2:62) = SD 5.17.

⁹⁰ See eg **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.16/1:111) = SD 6.14.

⁹¹ Also rendered as “resistance contact” or “resistance impression.”

The Buddha states that conceptual impression is impossible in the physical body (*rūpa, kāya*) when the special qualities of the mental body (*nāma, kāya*) are absent.⁹² As such, contact here depends both on the mental body and the physical body. Experience occurs both ways: from the mind outwards into the world, or from the world inwards into the mind.

Outward experience occurs with mind-consciousness, resulting in conceptual and volitional activity. Inward experience occurs with sense-consciousness, when the mind passively receives the sense-objects. Outward experience begins with designation (*adhivacana*) or naming, and so organizes the raw data of experience into a coherent picture of the “world.”⁹³

In this context, we can usefully take **sense-impression** or “impact context” as how we *sense* or experience the world through the physical senses (and their respective consciousnesses): this whole process conjures up forms (*rūpa*), that is, our “physical” experience of the external world. **Conceptual impression** or “labeling contact” is how we perceive, recognize or *make sense* of such experiences: this is what we project “ourselves” onto the external world. The result of both processes is a self-created stereoscopic virtual world. This is, as a rule, the usual mental process of the unawakened mind.

6.4 PRESENT RESULTANT PROCESS. According to the dependent arising formula [Table 6], our present life is rooted in five results, arising from past ignorance and volitional activities. These five resultant links are

3 consciousness	(<i>viññāṇa</i>),
4 name-and-form	(<i>nāma, rūpa</i>),
5 the six sense-bases	(<i>saḷ-āyatana</i>),
6 contact	(<i>phassa</i>) and
7 feeling	(<i>vedanā</i>).

These five links are clearly present in all living human beings (and other beings of the sense-world), both unawakened and awakened. In other words, these processes are present in both the mundane cycle as well as the supermundane cycle.

To live is to be *conscious*, which means experiencing the “world” as *sense-impressions or as mental images* [6.3.1.4], which in turn reinforces how our *six sense-faculties* work. These senses are not mechanical or predictable “sensors,” but we actually “programme” them to perceive and construct the world, our “world.” Relying on these *sense-stimuli*, we react to present experiences by way of *feeling* like, dislike or neutrality, dictated by our past unconscious store of experiences, memories and constructions, that is, volitional activities [6.2].

The same five resultant links occur in the case of the awakened mind, but with an important difference: they (the Buddha or the arhat) do *not* react to their sense-experiences in terms of past conditionings. They are aware of whatever feelings arising in response to circumstances, but they are “untroubled, mindful and fully aware,” as stated in **the Saḷ-āyatana Sutta** (M 137).⁹⁴ [5.2].

In other words, the five links of the present resultant process are found in both the mundane and the supermundane cycles. However, for the unawakened mind, this process is still rooted in past ignorance and volitional activities, and they react in the present according to such past conditionings. In the case of the awakened mind, on the other hand, there is only *a non-karmic response*, a mirror-like unshaking reflection, of present events.

6.3.2 Karma-process. As for the unawakened mind, it goes through a karma-process, resulting from the rebirth-process, both occurring in the present. Due to the pervasion of *ignorance* [6.2], we are *drawn to* pleasant experiences, desiring to accumulate them; we *reject* painful feelings, dislike them, and *ignore* neutral ones. As a result, we reinforce the latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance, respectively.⁹⁵

The present karma-process comprises three links of the mundane dependent arising, thus:

⁹² **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15.19-20/2:62) = SD 5.17.

⁹³ See **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15) @ SD 5.17 (5); Bodhi 1984:19-22. For a fuller discussion, see *Saññā* = SD 17.4 (2.2).

⁹⁴ M 137.21-24/3:221 f = SD 29.5. On lust for existence, see *Anusaya* = SD 31.3 (7).

⁹⁵ **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44.25/1:303) = SD 40a.9. See *Anusaya* = SD 31.3.

- 8 Craving (taṇhā),
 9 Clinging (upādāna), and
 10 Existence (bhava).

In simple terms, *craving* here refers to our perceiving a lack within and looking for external “objects” to fill this existential emptiness. While *craving* has the characteristic of delighting in an object, *clinging* has the characteristic of holding on to that source of pleasure, not letting it go (VbhA 137). While *craving* refers to the thirst for what we do not have and, as such are seeking, while *clinging* is the desire to hold on to what we have found.⁹⁶ As such, clinging “fuels” craving.⁹⁷

6.4 FUTURE DEPENDENT ARISING. If the karma-process of present dependent arising runs its course, it brings about the rebirth-process in a future cycle. It brings about new *a birth* or rebirth, which has its own potential of *decay and death*, forming the last two links of dependent arising, thus:

- 11 Birth (jāti), and
 12 Decay and death (jarā, maraṇa).

Here, we have a special case where *birth* is both necessary and sufficient for decay and death. To be born is to be alive; to be alive means we start decaying from day one. We give all sorts of names for these various stages of bodily *decay*—infancy, youth, adulthood, middle age, seniority, sunset years—but they are all phases of decay all the same, ending in *death*.⁹⁸

The Buddha and the arhats, too, pass away, but no more returning to the painful cycle of rebirth. The uroboros no more bites its own tail: no more uroboros, no more tail. The postmortem state of such a saint is said to be *unconditioned*. The ignorant or unawakened fear both death and nirvana. They fear *death* out of ignorance, uncertainty and pain. They fear *nirvana*, unable to make anything of it, except perhaps that it is a bland emptiness of non-activity. Let us say, words allowing, that *nirvana is more blissful than any heaven we can imagine, lasting beyond even any universe*; for, nirvana is timeless and blissful.

6.5 “UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES.”

6.5.1 Three-life model. In practical terms, how are we, as unawakened practitioners, to make of dependent arising here and now? How are we to properly conduct ourselves *under normal circumstances*? One of the most useful ways of seeing dependent arising is in its three-life model. What we *are* now is mostly conditioned by our *past*, especially by way of **ignorance** and **volitional activities** (karmic habits). We tend to be creatures of the past, often repeating our mistakes and afraid of rising out of our karmic rut, or ignorant of how to do so.

Consequently, our ignorance and karmic activities continue to dominate our lives, our **consciousness**, shaping and autopiloting us from our birth to date. Dictated by our past, we conjure phantoms and mirages of **name-and-form**. From the moment of birth, we were taught to make sense of our world, and we struggled to work with our various sense-faculties. Our **six sense-bases** begin to evolve, and are still evolving even now as we read this.

6.5.2 Breaking the chain. Through **contact** or sense-impressions of our physical senses, we continue to conjure up our own worlds, perceiving, recognizing and **feeling** only what *was* pleasant or painful, measuring them against our past store of likes and dislikes. We ignore what we cannot make sense of,

⁹⁶ Comy speaks of 2 kinds of craving (taṇhā): craving for what is sought (*esana, taṇhā*) and craving for what i been found (*esita, taṇhā*) (DA 2:499). See

⁹⁷ On *upādāna* as meaning “fuel,” see **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16 (11).

⁹⁸ **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2) mentions the sectarian teacher Makkhali Gosāla’s notion of “the 8 stages of man” (*aṭṭha purisa, bhūmi*) (D 2.20/1:54), elaborated in Comy (DA 1:162 f). **Buddhaghosa** gives his famous “the stages of maturation” (*vaya, vuddh’atthagama*) in 10 decades, viz the tender decade, the playful decade, the beauty decade, the strength decade, the understanding decade, the decline decade, the stooping decade, the bent decade, the dotting decade and the prone decade (Vism 20.48-51/619 f). See also **Shakespeare’s As You Like It** (1600): the melancholy Jaques’s cynical verse monologue on the 7 ages of man (Act II, Scene VII, lines 139-166), of infancy, childhood, the lover, the soldier, the justice, dementia and death. The poem is parodied into a limerick by the historian **Robert Conquest**, thus: “Seven ages: first puking and mewling, | Then very pissed off with your schooling, | Then *** and then fights, | Then judging chaps’ rights, | Then sitting in slippers, then drooling.” (2007).

thus reinforcing our ignorance. But this is one of the strategic phases, a weak point in the chain, where we can break the painful cycle.

Although some modern Buddhists claim that this break could lead to awakening itself, there is no canonical support for it. From meditation experience, we can best say that this is a strategic point where we can or should attempt to let go of the any unwholesome feeling. In doing so, we easily go on to attain samadhi, even dhyana.

In numerous discourses, the Buddha teaches us to see and respond to phenomena *simply as they are*.⁹⁹ In the face of tantalising and troubling sense-impressions, we are taught to grasp “neither their sign nor their details,” that is, to wisely ignore unwholesome sense-stimuli.¹⁰⁰ In this way, craving would not arise. Or if craving were to arise, we are able to lessen, even abandon, it altogether, at least for a safe period.

Craving, and hence, clinging, too, as such, although *necessary* for existence, are not, by themselves or either one, *sufficient* for existence. Through the cultivation of the noble eightfold path, no new craving or clinging is generated, and all previous craving or clinging no more become the ground for generating a new existence.

6.5.3 Dealing with feelings. This is even more true in the case of **feeling** *not* serving as a sufficient condition for craving. Even in ordinary people, not all feeling produces craving. When we experience a pleasant feeling (on account of any of the five senses), we simply enjoy it *in the moment for what it is*: a beautiful impermanent feeling. It is like enjoying a great meal, *even as we mindfully chew it*, savouring every mouthful. If we were to chat away, or start wondering when or how we will again have this great meal, we no more enjoy it, and so would keep on wanting it. We have never really enjoyed the meal (or our lives).

When an unpleasant feeling arises, we observe its true nature, *without owning it* (not using “I”, “me” or “mine”). Nothing arises on account of a single cause; *everything is conditioned by numerous causes and conditions*. If we look deep enough, we will notice these causes and conditions that have brought about this painful feeling. Above all, we will notice that it is impermanent.

When we are unable to recognize whether a feeling is pleasant or painful (we only realize this after the fact), then we know that it is a neutral feeling. We should not ignore this feeling, but examine it for what it really is. A neutral feeling is *impermanent*, too. In fact, when we notice this, we feel a deep sense of calm joy. In short, the most effective way of dealing with feelings wholesomely is to regard them all as being *impermanent*.

6.5.4 Feeling and feeling-quality. One final point. We have noted that feeling exists on account of karma from the past, even past lives [5.3.3]. However, the content, type or *quality* of such a feeling—whether it is pleasant, painful, or neutral—is not always due to past karma. It is mostly the result of *present* responses to the situation around us.¹⁰¹ This may be a natural response, such as feeling warm, if the weather is warm; or, it could be psychological, such as feeling sad when we lose someone dear.

However, how we respond to such feelings is really up to us: we can choose (or train ourselves) to be *untroubled* by them [5.2]. This is clearly stated in such discourses as **the Tittḥ’āyatana Sutta** (A 3.61)¹⁰² and **the Deva,daha Sutta** (M 101).¹⁰³ In other words, it is important to make a distinction between feeling as a fact and as a quality. When we truly understood the true nature of feeling, we would not be caught or crushed by the wheel of dependent arising.

⁹⁹ One important way is to examine their basic nature in terms of the 3 characteristics (impermanence, suffering and not self): see **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2; **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285) = SD 26.8.

¹⁰⁰ See **Nimitta anuṣāṅjana** = SD 19.14.

¹⁰¹ If all our present responses to events around us are the results of past karma, then we have no control over them at all! This means that we can either ignore them or change them.

¹⁰² A 3.61:173-177 = SD 6.7.

¹⁰³ M 101/2:228 = SD 18.4.

7 Acinteyya Sutta (A 4.77)¹⁰⁴

When reading the Suttas, we are often reminded how phenomena (*dhammā*) are conditioned (*saṅkha-ta*), that is, constructed of numerous causal factors (*paccayā*). **The Acinteyya Sutta** (A 4.77) is a clear statement of those things that are simply beyond human thought because they consist of countless causal factors. The Acinteyya Sutta, a very short discourse, is fully translated here:

SD 35.1.7

Acinteyya Sutta

The Discourse on the Unthinkable | A 4.77/2:80

A 4.2.3.7 = Aṅguttara Nikāya 4, Catukka Vagga 2, Duttiya Paṇṇāsaka 3, Aparaṇakka Vagga 7
Theme: Four things beyond the purview of thought

Bhikshus, there are these four unthinkables (*catu acinteyya*) that one should not think about [not speculated on], thinking of which would madden one, would vex one.

What are the four?

(1) The range of understanding of the Buddhas,¹⁰⁵ bhikshus, should not be thought about, thinking about which would madden one, would vex one.

(2) The range of a meditator's dhyana,¹⁰⁶ bhikshus, should not be thought about, thinking about which would madden one, would vex one.

(3) Karmic fruit [result of karma],¹⁰⁷ bhikshus, should not be thought about, thinking about which would madden one, would vex one.

(4) Thoughts about worlds,¹⁰⁸ bhikshus, should not be thought about, thinking about which would madden one, would vex one.

These, bhikshus, are these four unthinkables that one should not think about, thinking of which would madden one, would vex one.¹⁰⁹ (Also at SD 27.5a(5.5.2))

— evaṃ —

The Buddha's range of understanding (*buddhānaṃ buddha,visaya*) is simply beyond normal human thought because the Buddha is one who is the most evolved being in the whole universe at any time. Compared to other beings, the Buddha has experienced the widest range of sufferings and situations, and has the broadest range of power, wisdom and compassion. Above all, he has found the liberating wisdom so that he is free from what continues to bring unsatisfactoriness in own unawakened lives.

The range of a meditator's dhyana (*jhāyissa jhāna,visaya*), or “the range of a meditator's meditation,” cannot be encompassed by human thought, for the simple reason that such meditation or spiritual experience goes beyond our thinking processes. In terms of the four dhyanas (and the higher formless attainments), only the first dhyana has some traces of “initial application and sustained application” (*vitakka, -vicāra*) of thought. When these thought traces are transcended, we attain to the second dhyana and so on, so that beyond the first dhyanas, the physical senses and the language centre shut down: this is what we

¹⁰⁴ Also called **Acintita S**, A 4.77/2:80; DhA 2:199.

¹⁰⁵ *Buddhānaṃ buddha,visayo*.

¹⁰⁶ *Jhāyissa jhāna,visayo*.

¹⁰⁷ *Kamma,vipāko*.

¹⁰⁸ *Loka,cintā*.

¹⁰⁹ See the enigmatic **Loka,cintā S** (S 56.41/5:446-448).

might call “sensory suspension.” As such, dhyana or true meditation (as defined here in the Buddhist sense) is beyond the realm of thought.¹¹⁰

Karmic fruit or the result of karma (*kamma, vipāka*) cannot be fully comprehended by the unawakened mind because it does not fully understand the nature of *conditionality* and is incapable to encompassing the huge amount of data that constitute the working of karma, even for a single living being. This inability to understand the workings of karma is even more limited in one who thinks in terms of permanent entities (such as an eternal soul or creator idea), and where causality is limited to a “first cause,” whatever that may be. The fact is that nothing here arises from a single cause or condition, but everything works as part of an ineffable network of causal conditions.

Thoughts about worlds (*loka, cintā*), here referring to speculations about first beginnings, should not be pursued; for, when one is lost in such worldly thoughts, it would madden, or at least, vex, us. The Aṅguttara Commentary explains “thoughts about worlds” as referring to such notions as: “Who created the sun and the moon? Who created the earth, the ocean, beings, mountains, mangoes, coconuts, etc?” (AA 3:109). It is most interesting when we consider world history, we see how the most devastating wars, destructiveness and oppressions are perpetrated mostly by those whose minds are rooted in the belief of a single almighty God. The manifestations of widespread human violence against humans and the environment, even to this day, continues to be inspired by such monotheistic dogmas.¹¹¹

The truth and philosophy of dependent arising teaches us that we are all conditioned and dictated by our past. Only when we are willing and able to look within ourselves for that calm clarity, are we able to see truly the present moment, which is our true wholesome being. We begin to see ourselves as an “inter-being,” a part of a universal network of living beings and living conditions. Our actions will somehow affect others and the environment, which means that we can make this a better world through our common efforts.

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¹¹⁰ Another important point here is that proper Buddhist meditation *transcends* thoughts: see **Unconscious views** = SD 31.9 (2.1); **The Buddha discovered dhyana** = SD 33.1b (6.2.2); cf **Thāna S** (A 4.192.5/2:189) = SD 14.12. See also “To live is to feel,” in Piya Tan, *Simple Joys*, Singapore, 2009: 64-66 (§6.7).

¹¹¹ This apparently sweeping statement is not to discount the numerous saintly people in all the world faiths who have risen to selfless goodness and compassion towards others.

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