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## (Nidāna) Desanā Sutta

The (Nidāna) Discourse on Teaching, or The Teaching (on the Links) Discourse | S 12.1  
**Paṭicca,samuppāda Sutta** The Discourse on Dependent Arising

Theme: Dependent arising

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2021

### 1 The Sutta and significance

#### 1.1 SUTTA TITLES AND SUMMARY

##### 1.1.1 Dependent arising

As its title suggests, **the (Nidāna) Desanā Sutta** (S 12.1) is a short discourse on “the links” (*nidāna*), that is, the 12 links of dependent arising. Hence, the Sinhala Tipiṭaka and the Burmese Tipiṭaka call it **the Paṭicca,samuppāda Sutta**, the discourse on dependent arising. It serves as a summary and introduction to **the Nidāna Saṃyutta** (S 12), comprising suttas on dependent arising. [1.2.1]

##### 1.1.2 Paṭicca samuppāda

**1.1.2.1** The term *paṭicca,samuppāda* is usually translated as “dependent arising.” In the sutta explanations of *paṭicca,samuppāda*, such as in **the (Nidāna) Desanā Sutta** (S 12.1) and **the Kaccā(ya)na Sutta** (S 12.15), both the “arising” sequence and the “ending” sequence are given together in the same suttas. However, there is no mention of “dependent ending” for the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle, that of the ending of suffering.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, we see that the (Nidāna) Desanā Sutta lays out the 12 links both as dependent arising [§3] and as dependent ending [§4]. In other words, the term *paṭicca,samuppāda* (dependent arising) applies to both the cycles: the arising cycle and the ending cycle. How do we explain this?

**1.1.2.2** There are at least 2 ways of explaining this apparent “singularity” of **dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*). The first explanation is based on teachings such as that based on the well-known saying by the elder Sāriputta, “He who sees dependent arising sees the Dharma; he who sees the Dharma sees dependent arising” (M 28).<sup>2</sup> This saying clearly shows that when we see (understand or realize) dependent arising, we see both how it *arises* and how it *ceases*.

In other words, *paṭicca,samuppāda* is a “pregnant” term. It is “multi-semantic” or “co-semantic,”<sup>3</sup> in the sense that it carries both the negative and the positive senses, the arising and the ceasing aspects.

We further see similar “twin effects” in regards to mastery over the 4 noble truths. In **the Gavampati Sutta** (S 56.30), for example, the arhat Gavampati declares that when we realize any one of the 4 noble truths, we also realize all the other 3.<sup>4</sup> They are interconnected like a net with 4 corners. When we pull any corner, we will pull the whole net. In this sense, we may speak of the 4 noble truths as being multi-semantic, having multiple related meanings.

<sup>1</sup> S 12.1/2:1 f (SD 59.17); S 12.15/2:16 f (SD 6.13). See SD 5.16 (4.1).

<sup>2</sup> M 28,28/1:190 f (SD 6.16).

<sup>3</sup> The hyphenation is to highlight how the terms are formed. It is preferable that they are spelt simply as “multi-semantic” and “cosemantic.”

<sup>4</sup> S 56.30/5:436 f (SD 53.1).

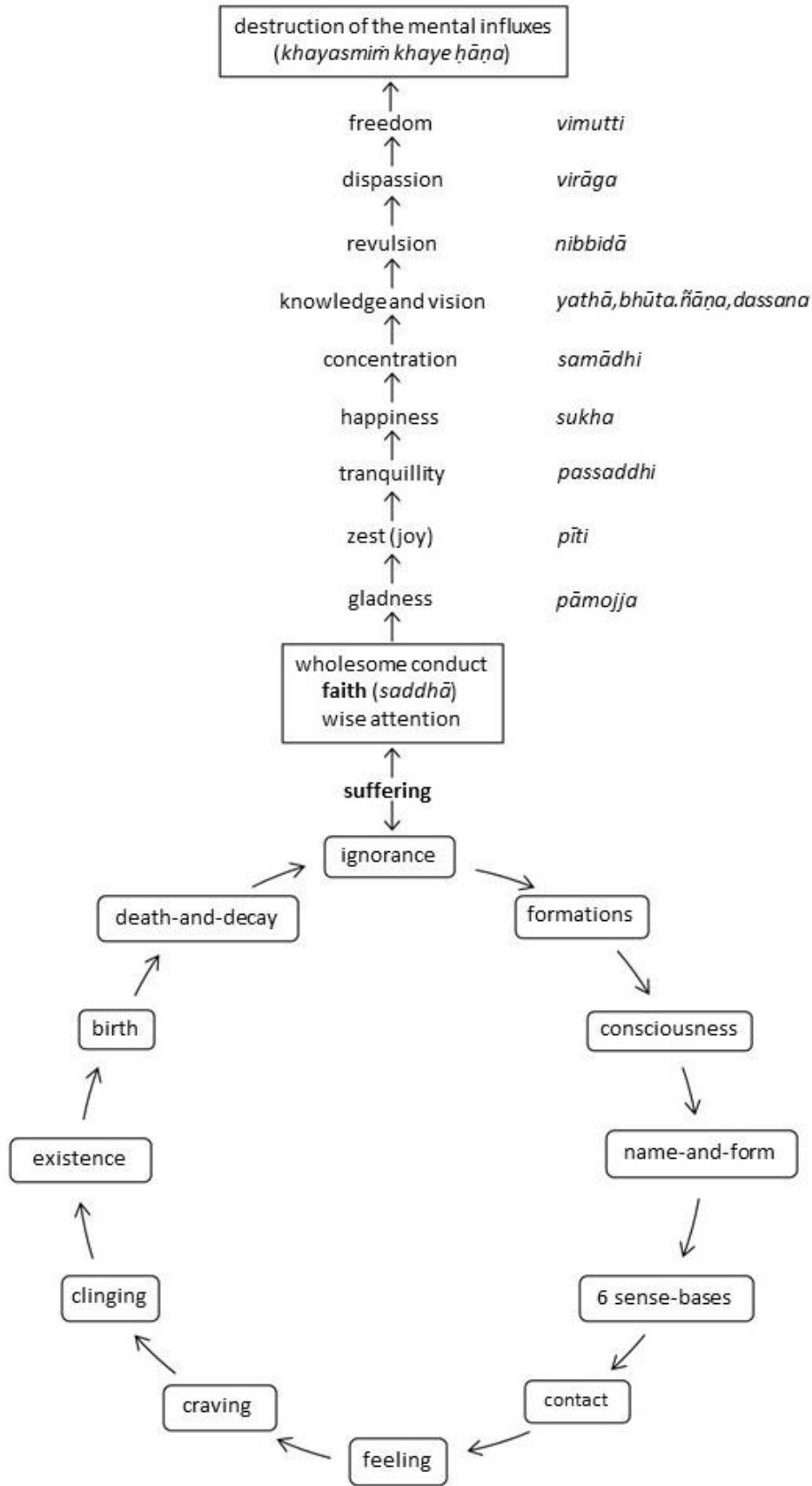


Table 1.1.3 Mundane and supramundane dependent arisings

### 1.1.3 Dependent arising

**1.1.3.1** Another way of explaining the singularity of *paṭicca,samuppāda* is that it has 2 levels of application: **the mundane** (*lokiya*), which is rooted in *ignorance*, resulting in suffering, and repeating the whole cycle, over and over: this is “the flood” (*ogha*);<sup>5</sup> and **the supramundane** (*lok’uttara*), which is rooted in *faith* arising from *wise attention* (such as seeing into the true nature of suffering): this is the “raft” (*kalla*).<sup>6</sup>

**1.1.3.2** It is possible to imagine a couple of Pali neologisms for **the dependent ending** or supramundane cycle. The opposite of *paṭicca,samuppāda*, for example, may be terms *paṭicca,sannirodha*: *sannirodha* comes from *saṃ* (like *saṃ* + *uppāda*, arising), a prefix meaning “together,” + *nirodha*, “ending.” This neologism is helpful in reminding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth, that of the ending (*nirodha*) of suffering, which dependent ending is actually about.

Another possible neologism for the opposite of *paṭicca,samuppāda* is *paṭiccānuppāda*, which comes from *paṭicca* + *anuppāda* (*a*, from *na*, “not,” + *uppāda*, “arising,” meaning the opposite of *uppāda*: “non-arising”). This neologism rhymes well with *paṭicca,samuppāda*; hence, it is easy to remember it.

The point is that both *paṭicca,sannirodha* and *paṭiccānuppāda* mean the same thing: *dependent ending*. These 2 terms have been discussed elsewhere, too.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

### 1.2.1 Nidāna in the suttas

**1.2.1.1 The Nidāna Saṃyutta**—the connected teachings on causation [the links]—is an anthology of suttas forming 9 chapters (*vagga*) comprising 93 short suttas on dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) [2.2.2]. This collection may well have been named the *paṭicca,samuppāda saṃyutta*, the collected teachings on dependent arising. This might have been too long a title, but perhaps more so because it only reflects one aspect of *nidāna*, “causation,” that is, the arising (*uppāda* or *samudaya*), but not the ending (*anuppāda* or *nirodha*). [1.1.2.1]

**1.2.1.2** The word *nidāna* is also the name given to the longest sutta on dependent arising, that is, **the Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15), the discourse on the great connections. When Ānanda remarks that dependent arising is “profound,” the Buddha decides to show how it is so! The Sutta starts with an exposition of its reverse cycle, followed by its forward cycle.

Using dependent arising, the Buddha shows how social problems arise. The Buddha then shows how consciousness and name-and-form form a cognitive loop. This teaching is followed by that of self-views,

<sup>5</sup> The “flood” (*ogha*) is threefold, called “influxes” (*āsava*): those of sensual lust (*kām’āsava*), of existence (*bhav’āsava*) and of ignorance (*avijjāsava*) [SD 30.3 (1.3.2); SD 56.4 (3.8)], which are seen as fourfold in later suttas, with those of views (*diṭṭh’āsava*) as the 3<sup>rd</sup> influx [SD 30.3 (1.4.2); SD 28.1 (8)]. While dependent arising is a “diachronic” cycle, occurring over a period of time, incl 3 lives, the influxes gives a “synchronic” (here and now) explanation of how the process work on us.

<sup>6</sup> The “raft” (*kalla*) broadly refers to the Buddha Dharma, famously given in **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,13 f), SD 3.13: fig, the raft refers to the eightfold path (broadly) [S 35.197,10 (SD 28.1)] and to self-effort (specifically: we must exert ourselves, “using our hands, go safely to the far shore,” which refers to meditation, esp 4 satipatthanas (such as the breath meditation, and so on) [SD 28.1 (10)].

<sup>7</sup> See **Upaṇisā S** (S 12.23) + SD 6.12 (2); **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (18+19.3.2); SD 53.15 (2.1).

the 7 stations of consciousness, and the 8 liberations. The Sutta closes with the mention of the arhat “freed both ways.”<sup>8</sup>

### **1.2.2 Paṭicca,samuppāda and nidāna: meanings and translation**

**1.2.2.1 Nidāna**, in the sense of “arising,” is synonymous with *hetu* (cause), *samudaya* (arising) and *paccaya* (condition).<sup>9</sup> Philosophically, *nidāna* as “causation,” is understood not as “causality” in terms of “the first cause” (of which there is none), but rather as a cycle of causes of effects, that is, **conditionality** (*paccaya*). Hence, the 12 links of dependent arising are also known as the “characteristic [distinctive property] of conditionality” (*paccay’ākāra*), that is, the mode or the process of conditionality.

**1.2.2.2 Paticca samuppāda** is sometimes (wrongly) translated as “dependent origination.” The word “origination” gives the impression that it *originates from* or is *caused* by that factor. However, *sam-uppāda* literally means “arising together.” Following the principle of **specific conditionality** (*idap,-paccayatā*), when x is, y is: they are co-nascent. [2.3.1]

In conventional language, we may speak of “rainclouds *causing* rain,” but we well know there is the water-cycle that brings about rain, which is itself a part of the larger convection cycle.<sup>10</sup> Hence, we may only speak of life as “causing” death in a poetic or conventional sense, but it is a kind of “package deal”: when there is one, there is also the other. Hence, we have translated *paṭicca,samuppāda* as “**dependent arising**.”

## **2 Dependent arising**

### **2.1 SIGNIFICANCE**

As a key teaching of early Buddhism, dependent arising shows that we arise in this world on account of **ignorance**, not because of any external cause. Ignorance starts the wheel of life that is dependent arising spinning, and it is ignorance that keeps it spinning: we die, we are reborn, over and over in this non-stop turning wheel.

The very first thing about this cyclic process is that we don’t really know what it is about. This **ignorance** is the root of our suffering. However, when we keep on watching this process with mindfulness, we see patterns emerging [2.3]. Dependent arising works on these patterns called “**links**” (*nidāna*). When we see and understand any of these patterns, it is easier for us to break that link and the cycle stops. Theoretically, once a link is broken, the whole wheel of suffering, that is dependent arising, stops: this is **dependent ending**. [1.1.3]

### **2.2 THE CYCLES OF DEPENDENT ARISING**

**2.2.1 In the Nidāna Saṃyutta**, we often see that dependent arising is usually present as a cycle of 12 limbs (*dvādas’aṅga*) connected up in a chain of 11 links (*ākāra*). Very often, too, it is laid out in 2 cycles: by way of **forward** (*anuloma*) cycle, showing the arising of suffering, and by way of the **reverse** (*paṭilo-*

<sup>8</sup> D 15/2:55-71 (SD 5.17).

<sup>9</sup> See **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15,4/2:57,27 f), where the refrain—“this itself is the reason [cause], this is the connection [link], this is the arising, this is the condition” (*es’eva hetu etaṃ nidānaṃ esa samudayo esa paccayo*)—occurs 17 times (D 15: §§4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22), SD 5.17: see also SD 5.1 (2.1).

<sup>10</sup> Convection is the rising motion of warmer areas of a liquid or gas, and the sinking motion of cooler areas of liquid or gas, often forming a complete cycle.

ma) cycle, showing the ending of suffering. The forward cycle starts from the 1<sup>st</sup> limb (ignorance) to the last; the reverse cycle begins with the last limb (suffering) and moves down the chain back to the 1<sup>st</sup>.

The **Vipassī Sutta** (S 12.14), for example, first presents the reverse (*paṭiloma*) **dependent arising**, beginning with *suffering*, ending with *ignorance* (with 11 links in 12 stages).<sup>11</sup> Then, almost immediately, it switches to the standard forward (*anuloma*) dependent arising, beginning with *ignorance*, ending with *suffering*.<sup>12</sup> The Sutta closes with stating the forward (*anuloma*) **dependent ending**, calling the final result as “ending” (*nirodha*).<sup>13</sup>

There are other suttas that begin the cycle in the middle and work their way either reverse or forwards. A variety of presentations of dependent arising are found in the suttas of the Nidāna Saṃyutta [2.2.2].

### 2.2.2 The Nidāna Saṃyutta

The Nidāna Saṃyutta preserves a total of 93 short suttas in 9 vaggas [1.2.1.1]. They may be summarized with some key suttas highlighted here:

			<u>SD no</u>
S 12.1-10	<b>1 BUDDHA VAGGA</b>	all the 7 past buddhas awakened to dependent arising	
S 12.1	<b>(Nidāna) Desanā</b>	the bare formula in 2 cycles the forward and the reverse	59.17
S 12.2	<b>(Nidāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta</b>	standard <u>definition</u> of each of the 12 limbs <sup>14</sup>	5.15
S 12.3	<b>(Nidāna) Paṭipadā Sutta</b>	dependent arising as the “wrong way”; ending as the right	
S 12.4	<b>Vipassī Sutta</b>	dependent arising and dependent ending	49.9
S 12.10	<b>Gotama Sutta</b>	how our Buddha awakens to dependent arising	14.3
S 12.11-20	<b>ĀHĀRA VAGGA</b>	food-themed presentations of dependent arising	
S 12.11	<b>(Nidāna) Āhāra Sutta</b>	the 4 kinds of food; they arise through dependent arising	76.1
S 12.15	<b>Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta</b>	on being and non-being: the middle way	6.13
S 12.21-30	<b>2 DASA,BALA VAGGA</b>	pleasure and pain; the streamwinner	
S 12.23	<b>Upanisā Sutta</b>	mundane and supramundane dependent arisings	6.12
S 12.27	<b>(Avijjā) Paccaya Sutta</b>	specific conditionality; ignorance as root	39.12
S 12.31-40	<b>3 KAḬĀRA KHATTIYA VAGGA</b>	nature of consciousness	
S 12.41	<b>Pañca Vera Bhaya Sutta 1</b>	qualities of a streamwinner	3.3
S 12.41-50	<b>4 GAHA,PATI VAGGA</b>	the senses, consciousness; philosophical antinomies	
S 12.44	<b>(Nidāna) Loka Sutta</b>	dependent arising of the world	7.5
S 12.51-60	<b>5 DUKKHA VAGGA</b>	craving and dependent arising	
S 12.59	<b>(Nidāna) Viññāṇa Sutta</b>	dependent arising of consciousness	105.6
S 12.61-70	<b>7 MAHĀ VAGGA</b>	the 4 kinds of food	
S 13.65	<b>Nagara Sutta</b>	how the Buddha awakened: parable of the city	14.2
S 12.71-81	<b>8 SAMANA,BRĀHMAṆA VG</b>	(11 suttas) outsiders and dependent arising	
S 12.82-93	<b>9 ANTARA,PEYYĀLA</b>	(12 suttas) repetition cycles. Each sutta has all 11 limbs With their conditions abridged. Each of the 12 suttas forms its own cycle, bringing the vagga titles from 12 to 132 suttas. <sup>15</sup>	

<sup>11</sup> S 12.4,2.2-13 (SD 49.9). In the 1<sup>st</sup> link, it is states: “suffering, that is, decay-and-death,” which is simply a definition. The 1<sup>st</sup> link actually starts with 2.

<sup>12</sup> S 12.4,14 (summary)-26 (SD 49.9).

<sup>13</sup> S 13.4,28 + SD 49.9 (4.1.1 f); SD 5.16 (9.1.2).

<sup>14</sup> S 12.2/2:2-4 (SD 5.15). For more defs on the 123 links, see SD 5.16 (1.4).

## 2.3 HOW DEPENDENT ARISING WORKS

### 2.3.1 *Idap,paccayatā*: The unified principle of conditionality

**2.3.1.1** The whole dependent arising formula is an expression of the principle of **specific conditionality** (*idap,paccayatā*) [1.2.2], which is defined thus:

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <i>imasmim̄ sati idam̄ hoti</i><br><i>imass'uppādā idam̄ uppajjati</i>        | when this is, that is;<br>with the arising of this, that arises.                    |
| 2 | <i>imasmim̄ asati idam̄ na hoti</i><br><i>imassa nirodhā idam̄ nirujjhati</i> | when this is not, that is not;<br>with the ending of this, that ends. <sup>16</sup> |
- (S 12.21/2:28), SD 63.14<sup>17</sup>

And its variant formula, thus:<sup>18</sup>

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | <i>Imasmim̄ sati idam̄ hoti</i><br><i>imasmim̄ asati idam̄ na hoti</i>        | when this is, that is;<br>when this is not, that is not.                      |
| 4 | <i>imass'uppādā idam̄ uppajjati</i><br><i>imassa nirodhā idam̄ nirujjhati</i> | with the arising of this, that arises;<br>with the ending of this, that ends. |
- (S 12.41,16/2:70), SD 3.3(4.2)

This structural principle must be understood as a **cause** or “causal law” only in the early Buddhist sense. In fact, we can even speak of this principle as that of emergence without causality. In other words, whenever there is condition A, we see condition B arising. The *temporal* sequence is only theoretical: it is apparent only because of the way we describe it, that is, a matter of language: words take time.<sup>19</sup>

**2.3.1.2** In other words, although A is **sufficient** for the arising of B, A does *not* cause B. For example, in the normal-sequence dependent arising, link 11 is stated briefly as follows: “When there is *birth*, decay-and-death arises.” [3.2]. Birth is *the sufficient condition* for decay-and-death: when there is birth, there is (or will be) decay-and-death. It is impossible that when we are *born*, we will *not decay and die*. But we do not say that *birth causes decay-and-death* (except perhaps in a poetic or joking manner).

We would apply the term **sufficient condition** to propositions 1 [2.3.1.1]: “when this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises.” These twin principles apply to all the 12 links of dependent arising.<sup>20</sup>

**2.3.1.3** We have thus described what can be conveniently called **the unified principle of conditionality** (*idap,paccayatā*). It is “unified” in at least 2 ways: the first is that it puts together the ideas about causes and effects in terms of conditionality (*paccayatā*) [2.3.1.1]; the second is that it also unifies *the principle* behind how mental states and physical conditions arise and how they cease [2.3.1.2].

<sup>15</sup> Comy says that they are spoken by way of each person’s readiness so that, by virtue of their inclination, they thus awaken (*sabbe pi tathā tathā bujghanakānaṃ veneyya,puggalānaṃ ajjhāsaya,vasena vutta*, SA 2:128).

<sup>16</sup> “With the ending of this, that ends” or better “with the non-arising of this, that does not arise.”

<sup>17</sup> On *idap,paccayatā*, see **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,11), SD 29.1a; **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,19), SD 1.11); SD 5.16 (6).

<sup>18</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> lines of the 2 formulas (1a = 3a), respectively, are the same; so are their last lines (1d = 4d). Only the middle 2 lines are switched around.

<sup>19</sup> On the philosophical difficulties with “cause” and “causality,” see Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1984:58 f causation; Baggini & Fosl, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit*, 2010:74-76

<sup>20</sup> On sufficiency and necessity, see SD 5.16 (6).

The general principle of conditionality (*paṭicca samuppāda*) is a model of how the unified theory works with actual conditions by which we exist—that arise, change, cease—on account of ignorance (the root of our actions or *why* we act) and craving (the nature of our actions or *how* we act). This is what we will endeavour to explain now.<sup>21</sup>

**2.3.1.4** Once we understand and accept any of the 4 aspects of this principle of **specific conditionality** or the unified theory of conditionality, we would also understand the whole principle [2.3.1.1], especially: “when this is not, that is not” (1a = 3b), for example: when there is no birth, there is no decay-and-death; “with the ending of this, that ends” (2b = 4b): the ending of birth brings the ending of decay-and-death. This is **the necessary condition**, that is the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle of specific conditionality, which underpins dependent arising and our understanding of conditionality in early Buddhism.

Philosophically, we say that “X is a necessary condition for Y, if and only if Y but non-X is an impossibility.”<sup>22</sup> Birth is a necessary condition for decay-and-death; it’s impossible that one is *not born*; hence, one is necessarily subject to *decay-and-death*.

Conversely, it means that only with the ending of birth will there be the end of decay-and-death; and this is true of all other pairs of links, which will all end with the ending of birth. Since dependent arising is a cycle, a repetitive circle or connected chain, breaking any of its links would stop it, at least theoretically. For example, it is impossible to know what ignorance (link 1) is, when ignorance itself means “not knowing.”

**2.3.1.5** Theoretically, the weakest link would be when the cycle, as it were, “changes gear,” that is, just before the present cycle renews itself karmically. This is the link between (7) **feeling** and (8) **craving**. In the 5 aggregates formula, this would be at the stage of **perception** (*saññā*), that is, when feeling arises, we do *not* perceive or recognize it as something based on our past experiences, but see it for what it really is here and now, that it is **mind-made**, impermanent and unsatisfactory.<sup>23</sup>

We can only make “sense” of it by projecting some past experience, that is, our memory (which is itself often a construction), onto it. In other words, we never really see our present experience for what it really *is*. We are perceiving something that has already *passed*, like a photograph of it, and imagining that it is still there. But there’s nothing there: this is an easy way of understanding that none of our experiences has any essence or “self.” Furthermore, that’s all they are: passing experiences without any “experiencer”: this is **nonself** (*anatta*). We just don’t get it!

**2.3.1.6** Basically, this is what we do upon emerging with a calm and clear mind after some level of concentration in a meditation. This is the “insight” (*vipassanā*) aspect of our meditation training, as a result of which we create wholesome karma. Hence, **craving** does not arise (at least temporarily). The dependent arising chain is broken for that experience. We train ourself to keep on doing this until we are able to overcome craving, the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 5 higher fetters, when we will attain non-returning, if not arhat-hood.<sup>24</sup>

Should we have any difficulty attaining that high stage in this life, then we should at least learn not to identify with any part of our mind-body existence, whether with the body itself, or with our feelings, perceptions, karma (formations) or consciousness itself. They are each of the nature to arise and pass

<sup>21</sup> See also **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

<sup>22</sup> Eg, being male is necessary for being a king; or, that oxygen must be present for combustion. See Sparkes, *Talking Philosophy*, 1991:93 (4,16).

<sup>23</sup> On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-khandha*), see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56), SD 3.7; def: SD 3.7 (6+7).

<sup>24</sup> See higher fetters (*uddham.bhāgiya saṃyojana*): **Uddham,bhāgiya S** (S 45.180) + SD 50.12 (2.4); SD 10.16 (1.6.8).

away. It is when we see our “self” in any of them that we feed and harden the chain of dependent arising of our being, and continue to chain ourself to redeaths and rebirths, seemingly without end.

### **2.3.2 Paṭicca,samuppāda: The general principle of conditionality**

**2.3.2.1** What actually happens when we “feed” the chain of dependent arising? In our (1) **ignorance** (*avijjā*), we engage our body, speech and mind (the 3 karmic doors) in greed, hate and delusion—we are rooted in unwholesome karma—because we do not see this as suffering; we do not know why we do so; hence, we do not know how to stop it, and we keep on going, chained to the wheel of redeaths and rebirths.

In short, through ignorance, we engage in (2) **volitional formations** or karmic activities of the 3 doors. This opens our consciousness to being propelled from one life to the next, and determines where it re-arises. In this way, volitional formations condition (3) **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*). We become our karma.

**2.3.2.2** At the moment of our conception, consciousness re-arises with (4) **name-and-form** (*nāma,-rūpa*), a sentient being with a body (*rūpa*) and cognitive senses (*nāma*). We are endowed with (5) **the 6 sense-bases** (*saḷ-āyatana*), that is, the 5 physical sense-faculties and the mind as the cognitive faculty. Through these sense-bases, we experience (6) **contact** (*phassa*) between our consciousness (as attention) and the sense-objects. This sense-contact produces (7) **feelings** (*vedanā*), how we experience the objects as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

**2.3.2.3** Compelled by the hedonic tones of such feelings, we react, conditioned by memories of our past experiences, projected as (8) **craving** (*taṇhā*), We are drawn to what we perceive as pleasant, repelled by what we see as unpleasant, and bored by what we feel to be neither, so we reject it. This is how we intensify our perceptions, giving rise to (9) **clinging** (*upādāna*), pushed and pulled by the strings of sensual desire and views. Propelled by these attachments, we continue to create new karma that feed and prolong our (10) **existence** (*bhava*).

**2.3.2.4** Our existence is, of course, mental, or more exactly, our mind acts in a variety of existential states. Our mind morphs into the subhuman states of *the exploitative asuras, the instinctively routine animals, the addictive preta demons, and the habitually violent hellbeings*.<sup>25</sup> We only have a human body but our mind is rarely human.

Hence, upon dying, this mind, losing its human body, is attracted to the kind of new existence it is used to, be it any of the abovementioned states, and there takes renewed (11) **birth** (*jāti*) and so continues to undergo (12) **decay-and-death** (*jarā,maraṇa*) all over again.

## **3 DEPENDENT ARISING, LIFE AND REBIRTH**

### **3.1 THE 3-LIFE DEPENDENT ARISING**

**3.1.1** From our study so far, it should be clear that the sutta teaching on the 12-link dependent arising spans over 3 lives. The “3 lives” refers to our past lives (not just the previous one), the present, and countless more future lives. The ignorance and volitional formations of **the past**, evolve into our **present** consciousness, along with its name-and-form, 6 sense-bases, contact and feelings, pushed on with craving, clinging and existence, preparing our impending **future** birth and continued decay-and-death. [Table 3]

<sup>25</sup> As the 4 subhuman states (*cat’upāya*): SD 54.3f (2.2.4).



**Table 3:** The 12-link dependent arising according to the Commentaries<sup>26</sup>

the 3 periods	the 12 links	the 20 modes and 4 cycles
PAST EXISTENCE	1. <u>ignorance</u> 2. volitional formations	<b>karma cycle</b> ( <i>kamma, bhava</i> ) 5 past <u>causes</u> : 1, 2, 8, 9, 10
PRESENT EXISTENCE	3. consciousness 4. name-and-form (mental and physical existence) 5. the 6 sense-bases 6. contact 7. feeling	<b>rebirth cycle</b> ( <i>upapatti, bhava</i> ) 5 present <u>results</u> : 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	8. <u>craving</u> 9. clinging 10. existence	<b>karma cycle</b> ( <i>kamma, bhava</i> ) 5 present <u>causes</u> : 8, 9, 10, 1, 2
FUTURE EXISTENCE	11. birth 12. decay-and-death	<b>rebirth cycle</b> ( <i>upapatti, bhava</i> ) 5 future <u>results</u> : 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

the 2 roots (*mūla*)

- (1) ignorance (from past to present)  
(2) craving (from present to future)

the 3 connections (*sandhi*)

- (1) past causes with present effects (between 2 + 3)  
(2) present effects with present causes (between 7 + 8)  
(3) present causes with future effects (between 10 + 11)

the 3 cycles or processes (*bhava*)

- (1) the defilement cycle 1, 8, 9  
(2) the karma cycle 2, 10 (in part)  
(3) the result cycle 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 (part), 11, 12

<sup>26</sup> For further details, see SD 59.12 (3.1.2).

### **3.1.2 The 3 periods of dependent arising**

**3.1.2.1** We have arisen here and now on account of our **ignorance and karma** [Table 3]. Our present life is rooted in past karma and present conditions. These **present** conditions comprise links (3) **consciousness** right up to (7) **feeling**: this is the resultant phase of the present, that is, resulting from past ignorance and karma.

**3.1.2.2** The stages from (8) **craving** right up to our current (10) **existence** constitute the karmic phase of the present. The new karma we have created feed into our future existence. Hence, there are 2 phases of our *existence*: the karma-existence (*kamma, bhava*), resulting from our past karma, and the rebirth-existence (*upapatti, bhava*), our **future** existence fed by present karma.

### **3.1.3 The 3 cycles of the 12 links**

**3.1.3.1** Furthermore, the 12 limbs operate over 3 “cycles” (*vaṭṭa*): **the defilement-cycle** (*kilesa, vaṭṭa*) includes *ignorance, craving, and clinging*; **the karma-cycle** (*kamma, vaṭṭa*) includes *volitional formations and karma-existence*; all the other factors belong to **the result-cycle** (*vipāka, vaṭṭa*). Defilements fuel and feed defiled actions, actions ripen into results, and results are the ground for more defilements. The cycle of redeaths and rebirths rolls on with neither discernible beginning nor foreseeable ending.<sup>27</sup>

**3.1.3.2** This method of dividing up the limbs of dependent arising should not be misconstrued to mean that the past, present, and future limbs are mutually exclusive. The distribution into 3 lives, while applicable, is only a teaching method which, for the sake of brevity and clarity, spread out what is an integrated dynamic network into an easy-to-grasp sequence of limbs. Such a linear layout conjures up an apparent diachronic (over past-present-future) process, when it is really a synchronic (current) interaction that moves through time as an integrated existence.

In fact, many of the suttas in the Nidāna Saṃyutta show how these discrete limbs form dynamic groups that overlap and mingle in our daily lives. Thus, whenever there is **ignorance, craving and clinging** invariably are present, too; and whenever there is **craving and clinging, ignorance** follows them.

We should imagine that the cycle of 12 limbs as composed of 2 parallel series (like the DNA helix) spiralling as a single process, the conditioned cycle of samsara with its different aspects and phases working together, twisting and feeding together like a serpent feeding on its own tail!

## **3.2 IGNORANCE AND CRAVING**

**3.2.1** The twin roots of dependent arising are ignorance and craving, **the blind and the lame**: the blind bears the lame (who is unable to walk), who dictates the blind where to move. They work together, but not for any mutual benefit for us. Another dramatic metaphor for craving and ignorance is **the uroboros**: ignorance is like a serpent craving for its own tail and devouring it, not knowing it is living part of itself, forming an endlessly painful cycle.

**3.2.2** The 1<sup>st</sup> series—our current conditioned habits (1-7)—is rooted in **ignorance**. Through ignorance, we blindly engage in **karmic activity**, that is, the volitional formations, from which arises a new existence that is a dance of **consciousness** and **name-and-form**.

<sup>27</sup> See *anamatagga*: SD 28.7a (2); SD 48.3 (1.2.3).

**3.2.3** The 2<sup>nd</sup> series (8-12) is rooted in **craving**, and shows how craving leads to **clinging** and **karmic activity**, that is, our active existence. This results in the arising of a new **existence** beginning with **birth** and ending in **decay-and-death**. To join the 2 series, the limbs within name-and-form from which craving arises are drawn out, reprising the 3 links—**the 6 sense-bases, contact and feeling**.

### 3.3 THE 3-LIFE DEPENDENT ARISING IN THE SUTTAS

**3.3.1** The 3-life interpretation of dependent arising should not be dismissed as a “commentarial invention” just because the suttas do not seem to divide the links up into different lives. However, while it is true that the suttas do not explicitly lay out the limbs over 3 lives, a close study of the various presentations of the standard dependent arising strongly imply a 3-life process.

**3.3.2 The Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta** (S 12.19), for example, places ignorance and craving together first in a past life, giving rise to a new life lived in a conscious body with its 6 sense-bases. Then, in the case of the fool (but not the wise man), ignorance and craving again work together in the present life to bring about renewed birth and suffering in the future life.<sup>28</sup>

**3.3.3** As we study other suttas of **the Nidāna Saṃyutta**, presenting variant versions of dependent arising, they would only affirm that the dependent cycle of limbs extends over many lives as the manifestation of karma and rebirth, the 2 key teachings of early Buddhism. The “**3 lives**” is just a synecdoche for “the 3 periods of time,” *the past, the present and the future*, over which we come into existence endlessly. Only nirvana is beyond time and space.

## 4 Dependent arising as personal experience

### 4.1 TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

#### 4.1.1 Texts

The suttas are not textbooks on Buddhism where everything is laid out cut and dry. In fact, some suttas may give *great details* on certain practices, such as satipatthana or breath meditation, than on their theory. In other words, the suttas are, for the most part, records of **awakening experiences** or **practical teachings** based on the experiences of the Buddha and the arhats of his time, remembered and transmitted by various reciters (*bhāṇaka*).<sup>29</sup>

Most of the suttas are but bare bones of the spiritual experiences of the Buddha and his early saints. Merely heard, read or studied, they are unlikely to at once make much sense. They are like photos of some beautiful foreign land we have not visited but would like to. As we collect these photos, collate them, study them along with their notations, we have a better idea of that wonderful land—but we have yet to go there ourselves.

The suttas, the early Buddhist texts, are very much like a **coded computer programme** for personal study and practice, with a working knowledge of Pali, ideally under the guidance of trained and experienced Dharma teachers. As a sutta student, we should habitually keep up mindfulness or meditation practice, preferably under the tutelage of an experienced teacher, so that we are able to understand our experiences to further our understanding and insight into the Buddha’s teachings and experiences.

<sup>28</sup> S 12.19/2:23-25 (SD 21.2).

<sup>29</sup> On the *bhāṇaka*, see SD 26.11 (3.2.1.1).

#### 4.1.2 Translations

**4.1.2.1** Most of us, especially those not familiar with Pali, or have very limited knowledge of it, are unable to directly study the early Buddhist texts in Pali. Fortunately, there are today many good translations, done by Buddhist monastics and lay practitioners, of very high scholarly standards. Unlike **the Mahāyāna texts**,<sup>30</sup> which are often presented as profound statements on religious, mythical, even ideological or polemical, matters, **the Pali texts**, on the other hand, comprise a significant amount of records of the states of mind and the teachings of the Buddha and arhats, and literature based on these [4.1.1]. Such records often describe how *we can and should attain such states by our own practice* to reach the very same path realized by the Buddha and the arhats.

**4.1.2.2** Most of the Mahāyāna texts, originally in **Sanskrit**, were lost, and are only available (if they are extant) in translation, that is, in Chinese, Tibetan, or some other ancient Indian vernacular (generally called Prakrit) or some Asian language (such as Gāndhārī,<sup>31</sup> Sogdian<sup>32</sup> and Tocharian).<sup>33</sup> Most of these ancient Mahāyāna texts are today found only in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

Buddhism first arrived in **China** during the first 2 centuries CE, that is, in the time of the later Han dynasty. Scholars now know that these translations faced various serious difficulties. Translation of Buddhist texts began in the following centuries. The Indian or Central Asian missionaries who arrived in China during these times were often described in the traditional Chinese records as having little or no skill in Chinese, and no Chinese of this early period knew any Indian literary language.<sup>34</sup> Such problems still occur significantly in the translations of Chinese texts into English even in our own time.<sup>35</sup>

**4.1.2.3** Any **translation** is a new cultural product and literary work. It is influenced by the translator and his society, and it is effectively *a new work* by the translator himself in terms of language and style at least. **Jan Nattier**, one of the most brilliant religious scholars of our time, who specializes in Mahāyāna texts, writes in the conclusion of her essay [see n above] [4.1.2.2]:

“There can be no perfect or definitive translation, of course, just as there has not yet been, in the two and the [sic] half millennia or so since the time of the Buddha, any one definitive articulation of his message.” (2000:258).

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<sup>30</sup> By Mahāyāna, I mean Buddhist traditions, especially those that believe in various kinds of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of a “cosmic” or “divine” nature, and do not see arhathood as the goal of Buddhist training.

<sup>31</sup> Gāndhārī was a Prakrit (vernacular) found in NW India, such as the Gandhara area in Afghanistan. Gāndhārī texts were written right-to-left in Kharoṣṭhī (an ancient Indian script of the Khasa, Saka and Yuezhi peoples), whose alphabet is known as *arapacana*, an *abugida*, ie, a segmental writing system comprising units of consonant-vowel sequences, with vowel notation secondary (such as Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala, Burmese, Lao and Khmer). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early\\_Buddhist\\_texts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Buddhist_texts) and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kharosthi>.

<sup>32</sup> Sogdian, the language (a branch of Indo-Iranian) of Sogdiana, a kingdom in Inner Asia (the Greek Transoxiana) in modern Uzbekistan. The Sogdians dominated the China-India trade from 2<sup>nd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> cent CE, when Sogdian was the mercantile language and Buddhist texts from China were translated into Sogdian and used locally. (PDB: Sogdiana)

<sup>33</sup> Tocharian is a generic name for Tocharian A (East Tocharian, language of Turfan, oasis petty kingdom, and Shorchuk/Yanqi) (MSS, 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cent); and the older Tocharian B (West Tocharian, language of Kucha) (MSS, 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> cent), related languages but prob mutually unintelligible. In 9<sup>th</sup> cent, both peoples were assimilated into the Uighurs (a Turkish ethnic group; present-day Xinjiang, China).

<sup>34</sup> See eg Daniel Boucher, “Gāndhārī and the early Chinese Buddhist translations,” 1998; SD 48b.2 Chinese challenges to Buddhism.

<sup>35</sup> See eg Jan Nattier, “The teaching of Vimalakirti: a review of 4 English translations,” *Buddhist Literature* 2 2000: 234-258.

This carefully worded remark, as I interpret it, refers significantly to scholars and writers of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its immense library of ancient texts. These Mahāyāna texts, in countless, often colourful, ways, describe the nature of Mahāyāna doctrines, theology, even polemics against early Buddhism, but little of it actually defines what the historical Buddha actually taught or practised.

Thankfully, this unenviable situation is rarely shared by **scholars of early Buddhism**, whose main field of study and analysis is the Pali texts, commentaries and related literature. Even when discussing some tricky points of interpretations of texts and teachings, such scholars are able to produce definitive and helpful studies which often benefit the practitioners of early Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> These practitioners, who are familiar with the Pali canon, would then be able to understand and interpret its teachings better, which will improve their personal practice and experience for the benefit of others.

## 4.2 THE SPOON AND THE TONGUE

**4.2.1** Even if we are **scholars** trained in critical analysis, and open, disciplined debate, who spend our professional lives in close “unbiased” studies of early Buddhist teachings—but *without* taking up **the 3 trainings** in moral conduct, mental concentration and insight wisdom—we would clearly end up like music critics (who have neither skill nor love for music) writing volumes on who played what great classical pieces, how they fared, even how the pieces themselves should have been written or played.

We may even be respected as experts amongst peers, and have our own festschrifts! Then, almost suddenly, in our twilight years, the last 7 (if we are fortunate), we spend forgetting or wanting to forget what we have professed; that is, if we have not lost our way in the fog of dementia, lost our loves and friends into the cloud of time.

When we have not morally cultivated our body (and speech), we would neither mentally cultivate to gain samadhi nor truly understand such an experience, much less to focus the mind to directly see into the true reality of life. When we study Buddhism without taking up the 3 trainings, we are like **spoons** that never taste the soup. When we are mere spoons, whether of silver or gold, or studded with gems, no matter how venerably titled, we are still but spoons, dispensing “doctored” doctrines. Only when we *study, practise and realize the Dharma*, are we then that tongue truly tasting the soup. (Dh 64 f)

**4.2.2** Religion and religion-inspired literature can be anything to anyone, all things to everyone. We only need to *act* religious before our audience or intended audience, and leave the rest to imagination, ours and others. This is often enough to capture a loyal following and profitable market.

Such a well known case is that of Cyril Henry Hoskin (1910-1981), “an unemployed surgical fitter, the son of a plumber” from Plymton, Devon, in the UK, a high school drop-out, “seeking to support himself as a ghostwriter.”<sup>37</sup> Using the name, Lobsang Rampa, he produced some 18 books (in one he claimed it was dictated to him by his cat), directly or indirectly related to Tibetan Buddhist mysteries. He had neither been in Tibet nor knew any Tibetan.

Despite his works being *fiction*, they attracted a huge fandom, many of whom actually believed his tales were actually Tibetan Buddhism! We must concede, though, that through his works, many came to Buddhism. But we must move on.<sup>38</sup>

**4.3** We should not worship even a single sutta for any reason. No sutta is likely to give us a precise explanation of **dependent arising** (or any other early Buddhist teaching): this almost seems intentional. The

<sup>36</sup> See eg Ethan Mills, “Cultivation of moral concern in Theravāda Buddhism: Towards a theory of the relation between tranquillity and insight,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Donald S Lopez, Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 1998:112.

<sup>38</sup> For refs, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lobsang\\_Rampa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lobsang_Rampa).

suttas are not definitive tenets of what should be believed or even known, like what we do in an academic classroom. **Suttas** are records of narratives, practices and awakening experiences of the Buddha and the early arhats. They serve as inspirations and guides for our own practice to gain that very same liberating insight through our own self-effort. In other words, we can and must gain the awakening and freedom that the Buddha himself had gained through his own efforts.

Such seemingly intuitive latitude and spiritual self-reliance has often compelled modern interpreters of early Buddhism to assume that the Buddhists themselves have confounded their beliefs and interpretations of the Buddha's teachings, including that of this most basic teaching on dependent arising; and they propose their own often whimsical theories about the "original" teachings and meaning of such teachings. The next generation of scholars would then debunk them and come up with better theories, and so on. Professional Buddhism has its value, but they are not the Buddha's teaching for awakening.

**4.4** Not all scholars are arbitrary or willful in projecting Buddhism in their own image. We are fortunate when serious and expert scholars of Buddhism are sympathetic to it, and even keep up their own practice of early Buddhism. Their thoughts and writings are very valuable to any student of early Buddhism at least on the historical and textual levels, which are vitally useful to begin any study of a living religion.

Early Buddhism itself has over 2 millennia of **exegetical tradition** rooted in numerous ancient Indian masters, and others who had lived, and continued to live, in the ordination lineages that have come down to us to this day, especially through the forest contemplative traditions, whose practitioners live closely keeping to the Vinaya and upholding the Dharma. Although they may sometimes vary in some details of teaching or tradition, they all basically teach us the very same **silence** of a calm and clear mind, freed from thought and language in direct experience with true reality.

**4.5** The spoon, the tongue and soup: **the Udāyi-t,thera Vatthu** (DhA 5.5/2:31 f), SD 48.3.<sup>39</sup>

<i>Yāva,jīvam 'pi ce bālo paṇḍitaṃ payirupāsati na so dhammaṃ vijānāti dabbi sūparasaṃ yathā</i>	Even though all his life a fool closely associates with the learned [the wise], <sup>40</sup> he knows not the truth [the Dharma], any more than a spoon the soup's taste. (Dh 64)
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<i>Muhuttam api ce viññū paṇḍitaṃ payirupāsati khippaṃ dhammaṃ vijānāti jivhā sūparasaṃ yathā</i>	Even if for but a moment the wise closely associates with the learned, he quickly knows the truth, as the tongue knows the soup's taste. (Dh 65)
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<sup>39</sup> **Udāyi-t,thera Vatthu** (DhA 5.5/2:31 f), SD 48.3; **Dh 64**: SD 24.6a (1.2). **Dh 65**: SD 48.3. **Dh 64 f**: SD 24.10b(1.1); SD 36.1(3.4.3); SD 43.5 (1.2.1); SD 59.17 (4.5). Reflection: R460, *Revisioning Buddhism* 156.

<sup>40</sup> This refers to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 12 stages of discipleship (ie, being stuck there): see **Caṅkī S** (M 95,20), SD 21.15 & **Kīṭā,giri S** (M 70,23-24), SD 11.1.

## (Nidāna) Desanā Sutta

### The (Nidāna) Discourse on Teaching, or The Teaching (on the Links) Discourse

S 12.1

1 Thus have I heard.

1.2 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Anathapiṇḍika's park-monastery in Jeta's grove, outside Sāvattḥī.

2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus: "Bhikshus!"  
"Bhante!" the monks replied.

3 The Blessed One said this:  
"Bhikshus, I will teach you **dependent arising**.  
Listen to that and attend closely, I will speak."  
"Yes, bhante," those monks replied.

3.2 The Blessed One said this:<sup>41</sup>

And what, bhikshus, is **dependent arising**?

<p>With <b>ignorance</b> as condition, with volitional formations as condition, with consciousness as condition, with name-and-form as condition, with the 6 sense-bases as condition, with contact as condition, with feeling as condition, with craving as condition, with clinging as condition, with existence as condition, with birth as condition,</p>	<p>there are volitional formations; there is consciousness; there is name-and-form; there are the 6 sense-bases; there is contact; there is feeling; there is craving; there is clinging; there is existence; there is birth; there are [come into being] decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.</p>
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Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.

3.3 This, bhikshus, is called dependent arising.

<p>4 But with the utter fading away and ending of <b>ignorance</b> with the ending of volitional formations, with the ending of consciousness, with the ending of name-and-form, with the ending of the 6 sense-bases, with the ending of contact, with the ending of feeling, with the ending of craving,</p>	<p>volitional formations end; <b>[2]</b> consciousness ends; name-and-form ends; the 6 sense-bases end; contact ends; feeling ends; craving ends; clinging ends;</p>
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<sup>41</sup> For the Pali of these links of the dependent arising formula, see SD 5.16 (4.1).

with the ending of clinging,	existence ends;
with the ending of existence,	birth ends;
with the ending of birth,	there end decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.

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

5 This is what the Blessed One said. Satisfied, those monks delighted in the Blessed One’s word.

— *paṭhamam* —

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