

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca-Samuppāda)

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III. *Paṭicca-Samuppāda*: Dependent Origination

It is rather with some hesitation that I dare to speak to you on that profoundest of all Buddhist doctrines, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, “dependent origination,” that is to say, the conditional arising of all those mental and physical phenomena generally summed up by the conventional names “living being,” or “individual,” or “person.” Thus, being well aware of the great difficulty of speaking on this most intricate subject before an audience perhaps only little acquainted with Buddhist philosophy, I shall try my utmost to avoid, as far as possible, all the highly technical or confusing details. I shall use very plain and simple language, so that any one of you may be able to follow my explanations. At the same time I shall not lose sight of the real goal and purpose for which the Buddha taught this doctrine to the world. Thus I would beg you to listen carefully and give my words full and undivided attention. And I further beg you to try to retain in mind those very few technical terms in Pali and English which in the course of my talk I shall be repeatedly using.

You may not be aware that, up to this day, the real significance and purpose of *paṭicca-samuppāda* are practically unknown to Western scholars. By this, however, I do not mean to say that nobody in the West has ever written or spoken on this doctrine. No, quite the contrary is the case. For there is no other Buddhist doctrine about which Western scholars, and would-be scholars, have written and discussed so much—but understood so little—as just this doctrine of *paṭicca-samuppāda*. If you wish to get a fair idea of those mostly absurd and immature speculations and fanciful interpretations, often based on mere imagination, you may read the Appendix to my *Guide through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.² It seems that scarcely one of those Western authors and lecturers has ever put to himself the question, for what earthly reason the Buddha ever should have thought it necessary to teach such a doctrine. It was surely not for the sake of mental gymnastics and dialectics. No, quite to the contrary! For *paṭicca-samuppāda* shows the causes and conditions of all the suffering in the world; and how, through the removal of these conditions, suffering may rise no more in the future. P.S. in fact shows that our present existence, with all its woe and suffering, is conditioned, or more exactly said caused, by the life-affirming volitions or kamma in a former life, and that again our future life depends on the present life-affirming volitions or kamma; and that without these life-affirming volitions, no more future rebirth will take place; and that thereby deliverance will have been found from the round of rebirths, from the restless cycle of *saṃsāra*. And this is the final goal and purpose of the Buddha’s message, namely, deliverance from rebirth and suffering.

I think that after what you have heard just now, it will not be necessary to tell you that P.S. is not intended, as various scholars in the West have imagined, as an explanation of the primary beginning of all things; and that its first link, *avijjā* or ignorance, is not to be considered the causeless first principle out of which, in the course of time, all physical and conscious life has evolved. P.S. simply teaches the conditionality, or dependent nature, of all the manifold mental and physical phenomena of existence; of everything that happens, be it in the realm of the physical or the mental. P.S. shows that the sum of mental and physical phenomena known by the conventional name “person” or “individual” is not at all the mere play of blind chance; but that each phenomenon in this process of existence is entirely dependent upon other phenomena as conditions; and that therefore with the removal of those phenomena that form the conditions for rebirth and suffering, rebirth and therewith all suffering will necessarily cease and come to an end. And this, as already stated, is the vital point and goal of the Buddha’s teaching: deliverance from the cycle of rebirth with all its woe and suffering. Thus P.S. serves in the elucidation of the second and third noble truths about the origin and extinction of suffering, by explaining these two truths from their very foundations upwards, and giving them a fixed philosophical form.³

In the discourses of the Buddha, P.S. is usually expounded by way of twelve links arranged in eleven propositions. They are as follows:

²Published by the BPS (1983).

³For a detailed exposition of the Four Noble Truths, see Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha* (BPS, 1981).

1. *Avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā*: "Through ignorance the rebirth-producing volitions, or kamma-formations, are conditioned."
2. *Saṅkhāra-paccayā viññāṇaṃ*: "Through the kamma-formations (in the past life, the present) consciousness is conditioned."
3. *Viññāṇa-paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ*: "Through consciousness the mental and physical phenomena (which make up our so-called individual existence) are conditioned."
4. *Nāma-rūpa-paccayā salāyatanaṃ*: "Through the mental and physical phenomena the six bases (of mental life, i.e. the five physical sense-organs and consciousness as the sixth) are conditioned."
5. *Salāyatana-paccayā phasso*: "Through the six bases the (sensory and mental) impression is conditioned."
6. *Phassa-paccayā vedanā*: "Through (the sensory or mental) impression feeling is conditioned."
7. *Vedanā-paccayā taṇhā*: "Through feeling craving is conditioned."
8. *Taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ*: "Through craving clinging is conditioned."
9. *Upādāna-paccayā bhavo*: "Through clinging the process of becoming (consisting of the *active* and the *passive* life-process, that is to say, the rebirth-producing kammic process, and as its result, the rebirth-process) is conditioned."
10. *Bhava-paccaya jāti*: "Through the (rebirth-producing *kammic*) process of becoming rebirth is conditioned."
11. *Jāti-paccaya jarāmaraṇaṃ*, etc.: "Through rebirth, decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are conditioned. Thus arises this whole mass of suffering (in the future)."

This is in brief the whole P.S. or dependent origination. Now let us carefully examine the eleven propositions one by one.

1

Our first proposition was: *Avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā*: "Through ignorance the kamma-formations are conditioned."

Avijjā,⁴ also called *moha*, is delusion, infatuation: regarding fleeting things as permanent, miserable things as enjoyment, and egoless things as a self or ego. *Avijjā* is ignorance, not understanding that all our existence is merely an ever-changing process of mental and physical phenomena; it is not understanding that these phenomena, in the ultimate sense, do not form any real permanent entity, or person, or ego; and that there does not exist any permanent entity in, or behind, these fleeting physical and mental phenomena; that therefore what we call "I," or "you," or "he," or "person," or "Buddha," etc., does not, in the ultimate sense (*paramattha*), possess any reality apart from these ever-changing physical and mental phenomena of existence. *Avijjā*, or *moha*, is the primary root-condition underlying all moral defilement and depravity. In *avijjā* are rooted all the greed, hatred, conceit, envy and misery in the world. And the overcoming and extinction of *avijjā*, and therewith of all evil and misery, is the final aim of the Buddha's teaching, the ideal for any true Buddhist. And it is for these reasons that *avijjā* is mentioned first in the formula of P.S.

By *saṅkhārā*, lit. "formations," are here meant the rebirth-producing, kammically unwholesome or wholesome volitions (*cetanā*), or volitional activities. Let us therefore remember *saṅkhārā* as kamma-formations, or simply as kamma.⁵

⁴Literally "not-knowing."

⁵Thus the Pali word *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) designates in Buddhist philosophy only rebirth-producing or rebirth-influencing wholesome or unwholesome action, i.e. volition (*cetanā*) manifested by body, speech, or mind. In no way, however, does kamma ever signify the *result* of action (*kamma-vipāka*), as the Theosophists and many Western Buddhists wish this term to be understood.

Now, all such evil volitions manifested by body, speech or mind, as above alluded to, are called *akusala* or unwholesome kamma-formations, as they bring unhappy results, here and in the after-life. *Kusala* or wholesome kamma-formations, however, are such volitions, or *cetanā*, as will bring happy and pleasant results, here and in the after-life. But even these wholesome kamma-formations are still conditioned and influenced by *avijjā*, as otherwise they would not produce future rebirth. And there is only one individual who no longer performs any wholesome or unwholesome kamma-formation, any life-affirming kamma. It is the Arahant, the holy and fully enlightened disciple of the Buddha. For through deep insight into the true nature of this empty and evanescent process of existence, he has become utterly detached from life; and he is forever freed from ignorance together with all its evil consequences, freed from any further rebirth.

Avijjā is to all unwholesome kamma-formations, or volitional activities, an indispensable condition by way of its presence and simultaneous arising. For example, whenever an evil manifestation of will, an evil kamma-formation, arises, at that very same moment its arising is conditioned through the simultaneous arising and presence of *avijjā*. Without the co-arising of *avijjā*, there is no evil kamma-formation. When, for example, an infatuated man, filled with greed or anger, commits various evil deeds by body, speech or mind, at that time these evil kamma-formations are all entirely conditioned through the *co-arising* and *presence* of *avijjā*, or ignorance. Thus if there is no *avijjā*, there are no evil kamma-formations. Therefore it is said that *avijjā* is to its associated kamma-formations a condition by way of *co-nascence*, or simultaneous arising (*sahajāta*). Further, as there is no evil kamma-formation without the presence of *avijjā*, and no *avijjā* without the presence of evil kamma-formations, therefore both are at any time, and under all circumstances, also *mutual conditions* to each other (*aññam-añña-paccaya*); and thus *avijjā* and the evil kamma-formations are inseparable. In so far as *avijjā* is an ever-present root of all evil kamma-formations, we say that *avijjā* is to the unwholesome kamma-formations an indispensable condition by way of *root* (*hetu*).

But there is still another and entirely different way in which *avijjā* may be a condition to unwholesome kamma-formations, that is, as *inducement*. For example, if a man, being filled with greed or anger, is induced by his infatuation and delusive thoughts to commit various crimes, such as murder, theft, adultery, etc., in that case *avijjā* is the direct inducement and driving power for the subsequent arising of all those bad manifestations of will, i.e. of all those unwholesome kamma-formations. In other words, those bad unwholesome kamma-formations are conditioned by a preceding state of *avijjā* as a *direct inducement* (*pakat' upanissaya-paccaya*).

There is still another way in which *avijjā* may become an inducement to unwholesome kamma-formations, namely, as object of thinking. Suppose somebody remembers some evil and foolish pleasure once enjoyed by him; and while he is pondering over that former foolish state, he finds delight in it and becomes again filled with infatuation and greed for it; or he becomes sad and despondent that he cannot enjoy it any more. In consequence of wrongly brooding over such a foolish object, over such a state of ignorance, many evil, unwholesome states arise in his mind. In such a way, *avijjā* may be to unwholesome kamma-formations a condition by way of *inducement as object* (*ārammaṇ'upanissaya-paccaya*).

Here I have to point out that for a detailed understanding of P.S., we should have to know at least something about those twenty-four different modes in which mental or physical phenomena may be the condition to other mental and physical phenomena. The entire *Paṭṭhāna*, the last book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which fills six bulky volumes, treats exclusively of these twenty-four conditions, or *paccaya*, which it first describes and then applies to all the innumerable mental and physical phenomena of existence.⁶ Here we shall consider only those most prominent ones, which we have already alluded to and applied to *avijjā*, namely: *hetu-paccaya*, root condition; *sahajāta-paccaya*, condition by way of co-nascence, i.e. co-arising; *aññam-añña-paccaya*, condition by way of mutuality;

⁶Of this gigantic and very important, but most complicated of all the Abhidhamma works, not a single line had hitherto been translated into any of the modern languages. Even of the Pali text, only one sixth, partly in form of an abstract, has been published by the PTS, London. Mrs. Rhys Davids in her preface to the *Paṭṭhāna* text says: "... the text remains very difficult and obscure to the uninitiated Western mind and I am far from pretending to solve any one of its problems." For a full synopsis of it see my *Guide through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, VII. (Ed.: Two volumes of the *Paṭṭhāna* have since been published by the PTS in English translation under the title *Conditional Relations*.)

upanissaya-paccaya, condition by way of either direct inducement (*pakat' upanissaya*), or inducement through object (*ārammaṇ'upanissaya*). Here, it may be mentioned that all these translations of technical Pali terms are only very inadequate makeshifts, and should be taken as such. I am therefore giving those technical terms repeatedly in both languages, in English as well as in Pali.

The *Paṭṭhāna* Commentary compares the *hetu-paccaya*, or *root condition*, to the root of a tree. The tree rests on its roots; and it has life only as long as these roots are not destroyed. In the same way, all kammically wholesome and unwholesome kamma-formations are at any time conditioned through the presence and co-nascence, or simultaneity, of their respective wholesome or unwholesome roots. The three unwholesome roots are *lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*, i.e. greed, hate and delusion. The three wholesome roots are *alobha*, *adosa*, *amoha*, i.e. non-greed, or unselfishness; non-hate, or kindness; non-delusion, or knowledge.

Let us now consider *sahajāta-paccaya*, the condition by way of co-nascence. *Sahajāta*, literally means: "arisen together" or "arising together," hence our term "co-nascence," or simultaneous arising. This condition of co-nascence applies, above all, to consciousness and its concomitant mental phenomena, such as feeling, perception, volition, sense-impression, attention, etc. For consciousness and all these mental phenomena are mutually conditioned through their simultaneous arising. One cannot arise or exist without the other. All are inseparably associated. Thus if we say that feeling is to consciousness a condition by way of co-nascence, we mean to say that without the simultaneous arising of feeling, consciousness will never be able to arise. In exactly the same way it is with all the other mental phenomena.

Once a well-known Buddhist author, in a discussion with me, to my greatest surprise positively declared that there may be painful feeling without consciousness, for example during a painful operation whilst being under chloroform. This indeed is a most extraordinary blunder. How will it ever be possible to feel pain without being conscious of it? Painful feeling is a mental phenomenon and as such inseparable from consciousness and the other mental phenomena. If we do not perceive pain, and are not conscious of pain, how can we feel pain? Thus consciousness, feeling, perception and all the other mental phenomena are mutually conditioned by way of co-nascence.

Now let us consider *upanissaya-paccaya*, the condition by way of *inducement*. This condition is of various kinds, and it forms combinations with certain other conditions.⁷ It applies to a very wide field, in fact to anything whatsoever. We shall treat this condition here only in a very general way, without making any distinctions. Anything past or future, physical or mental, real or imaginary, may become an inducement to the arising of mental phenomena, or of actions, or occurrences.

So, for example, the Buddha and his Dhamma had been a condition for my coming to the East. So were the Pali scholars whose translations I had read. So was the first Buddhist lecture I had heard in Germany in 1899. Or Nibbāna, as object of our thinking, may become an inducement to our joining the Order, or living a pure life, etc. Also all those past thinkers, scientists and artists were by their works and activities an inducement to the developed culture of later generations. Money, as object of our desire, may become an inducement to our making the necessary exertions to get it; or it also may become an inducement to theft and robbery. Faith, knowledge, mental concentration, etc., may be a direct inducement to various noble and unselfish actions. Good or bad friends may be a direct inducement to good or bad conduct. Suitable or unsuitable climate, food, dwelling, etc., may be an inducement to physical health or ill-health; physical health or ill-health to mental health or ill-health. Thus all these things are conditioned through other things by way of inducement.

Now we shall consider *ārammaṇa-paccaya*, the condition by way of object. The object may be either one of the five sense-objects, as visible object, sound, smell, taste, or bodily impression; or it may be any object of the mind. Anything whatever may become the object of mind, be it physical or mental, past, present or future, real or imaginary. Thus the visible object, consisting in differences of colour, light and dark, is called the object-condition to eye-consciousness, or the visual sense. Similar it is with the four other senses. Without a physical sense-object no sense-consciousness ever will arise.

⁷The three classes of *upanissaya-paccaya* are: (1) *pakat' upanissaya*, simple or direct inducement; (2) *arammaṇ' upanissaya*, inducement by way of object; (3) *anantar' upanissaya*, inducement by way of proximity. About the latter see *Guide through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 2nd ed., pp. 119, 131, 139.

Further, past evil deeds, through being the object of our thinking, may, as we already have seen, become an inducement, or *upanissaya*, to repeat the same evil deeds; or they may arouse our disgust or repentance. Thus past evil deeds, by wrong thinking about them, may become an inducement to an immoral life by way of object; and by right thinking about them, the same past evil deeds may become an inducement to a moral life. In a similar way, good deeds, by right thinking about them, may become an inducement to further noble deeds; but by wrong thinking about one's own good deeds, they may become an inducement to self-conceit and vanity, and many other unwholesome states.⁸

Hence, also such an immoral thing as *avijjā* may become a condition to noble and wholesome kamma-formations. To show this, let us return to our first proposition: "Through *avijjā* are conditioned the kamma-formations." How may such an evil state as *avijjā* become a condition to noble and wholesome kamma-formations? It may become so in two ways, either by way of direct inducement, or inducement as mental object. I shall illustrate this statement by an example. At the Buddha's time many a heretic, induced by mere vanity and delusion, went to the Buddha and tried by dialectics to defeat the Master. However, after a short controversy he was converted: he became a virtuous follower and life-long supporter of the Blessed One, or even attained Arahantship. Here, all these virtuous actions, even the attainment of Arahantship of the new convert, were conditioned by his former *avijjā* as an inducement; had this delusive idea of defeating the Buddha not arisen in his mind, he perhaps might have never in his life even visited the Blessed One. Thus *avijjā* was to his noble and wholesome kamma-formations a condition by way of direct inducement (*pakat'upanissaya*). Further, suppose we take *avijjā* as object of our contemplation, considering it as something evil and rejectable, as the root-cause of all misery in the world, then we thereby may produce many noble and wholesome kamma-formations. In this case, *avijjā* is to these wholesome kamma-formations a condition by way of inducement as object (*ārammaṇ'upanissaya*).⁹

Before proceeding to the second proposition, I wish to call your attention to the fact that *avijjā*, or ignorance, though the main condition for kamma-formations, is in no way the only condition for them; and so are the kamma-formations to consciousness, etc. Each of the conditionally arising phenomena of P.S. is dependent on various conditions besides those given in the formula, and all may be interrelated and interdependent in manifold ways.

You may have noticed that nearly always I speak only of *conditions*, and rarely have I used the word "cause." This word "cause" is often used in a very vague or wrong sense. "Cause" refers really to that thing which—if all the necessary conditions are present—by inner necessity is in time followed by another thing as its "result," so that already in the cause the future result is lying latent, as it were, just as in the mango seed the future mango tree lies latent.

And just as from the mango seed only a mango tree may result, never an apple tree nor any other tree, just so may a cause result only in just one single thing of a similar character, never in various things nor in things of a different character. If, for example, a man grows furious on being scolded, people generally would say that the scolding man was the cause of the fury. But this is a very vague statement. The cause of the man's fury really lies in himself, in his own character, not in the person scolding him. The scolder's words were merely an inducement to the manifestation of his latent fury. The word "cause" signifies only one of the many kinds of conditions, and it should, in Buddhist philosophy, be reserved for kamma, i.e. the rebirth-producing volitional activities bound up with wholesome or unwholesome roots (*hetu*), constituting the cause of rebirth, and resulting in rebirth as their effect, or *vipāka*.

⁸In the *Guide* (p. 137) are given the following examples of how "a wholesome phenomenon may be to an unwholesome phenomenon a condition by way of object." This happens e.g., if after having given alms, etc., one indulges and delights in this act, and thereby arises greed, evil views, doubt, restlessness, or sadness ("either to oneself, or to others" says the Comy.). Or, if one indulges and delights in good deeds done formerly, and thereby arises greed, etc. Or, if after rising from the jhānas, one indulges and delights in this attainment, and thereby arises conceit, etc. Or if, while regretting that the jhāna (which one had attained) has vanished, sadness springs up.

⁹For details of the twenty-four conditions, see Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary* (BPS, 1988): *paccaya*.

2

Herewith we come to the second proposition: *Saṅkhāra-paccaya viññāṇam*: “Through the kamma-formations consciousness is conditioned.” In other words: through kamma, or the volitional activities, in the past birth, the conscious life in this present birth is conditioned.

Here the following has to be stated: The five links—consciousness, mental and physical phenomena, the six bases of mental life, impression, and feeling (*viññāṇa, nāma-rūpa, salāyatana, phassa, vedanā*)—refer here only to kamma-resultant (*vipāka*), neutral phenomena, thus representing the “passive” side of life. However, the five links—ignorance, kamma-formations, craving, clinging, and kammical life-process (*avijjā, saṅkhāra, taṇhā, upādāna, kamma-bhava*)—constitute kamma, thus representing the “active” side of life.¹⁰ Hence the five passive links, as consciousness, etc., are to be considered the five results (*vipāka*), and the five active links, as *avijjā*, etc., the five causes. Thus the life-affirming will, or volition (*cetanā*), manifested in these five kammic causes, is the seed from which all life has sprung, and from which it will spring again in the future. Our second proposition therefore shows that our present conscious life is the result of our kamma-formations produced in the past life, and that without these prenatal kamma-formations as the necessary cause, no conscious life would ever have sprung up in our mother’s womb.

Hence, the kamma-formations are to the rebirth-consciousness of the embryonic being, at its conception in the mother’s womb, a condition by way of *kamma*, or cause. And so are the kamma-formations to all the morally neutral elements of consciousness. Hence, also the five kinds of sense-consciousness with desirable and agreeable objects are the result, or *vipāka*, of the prenatal wholesome kamma-formations; and those with undesirable and disagreeable objects are the result of unwholesome kamma-formations.¹¹

3

Now we come to the third proposition, namely: *Viññāṇa-paccaya nāma-rūpaṃ*: “Through consciousness the mental and physical phenomena are conditioned.” The meaning of this proposition can be inferred from the Mahānidāna Sutta (DN 15), where it is said: “If *consciousness (viññāṇa)* were not to appear in the mother’s womb, would the *mental and physical phenomena (nāma-rūpa)* arise?”¹²

The *mental* phenomena (*nāma*) refer here to those seven universal mental phenomena inseparably bound up with all kamma-resultant consciousness, even with the five kinds of sense-consciousness. These seven inseparable universal mental phenomena are: feeling, perception, impression, volition, vitality, attention, concentration; in kamma-resultant mind-consciousness they are increased by three or four further phenomena. The *physical* phenomena (*rūpa*) refer to this body and its various organs, faculties and functions.¹³

Now, how are the mental phenomena, or *nāma*, conditioned through consciousness? And how the physical phenomena, or *rūpa*?

Any state of *consciousness*, as already explained, is to its concomitant *mental* phenomena, such as feeling, etc., a condition by way of *co-nascence*, or simultaneous arising (*sahajāta-paccaya*). Consciousness cannot arise and exist without feeling, nor feeling without consciousness; and also all the other mental phenomena which belong to the same state of consciousness are inseparably bound

¹⁰Cf. diagram p. 57.

¹¹It is really the quality of the five sense-objects allotted to each being that, in the main, decides the degree of his worldly happiness or unhappiness.

¹²All such translations of *nāma-rūpa* as “name and form,” etc., are totally out of place. *Nāma-rūpa = nāmañ ca rūpañ ca* (MN 9), i.e. “the mental and the physical,” apart from its application in the *paṭicca-samuppāda*, is a name for the five groups of existence, namely: the four *nāma-kkhandhas* or mental groups (feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness), and the *rūpa-kkhandha*, or corporeality group. Here, in the *paṭicca-samuppāda*, *nāma* stands only for the three mental groups: feeling, perception, mental formations, whilst consciousness is singled out, in order to show that all mental and physical life of beings is dependent on it.

¹³In the canonical texts only twenty-seven physical phenomena are mentioned, whilst in the commentaries this number is increased by the physical seat of mind (lit. ‘heart-base’; see pp. 45–46).

up with it into a single unit, and have no independent existence. These mental phenomena are, as it were, only the different aspects of those units of consciousness which, like lightning, every moment flash up and immediately thereafter disappear forever.

But how may *consciousness* (*viññāṇa*) be a condition for the various *physical* (*rūpa*) phenomena?

In planes of existence where both matter and mind exist, e.g. in the human realm, at the moment of conception consciousness is an absolutely necessary condition for the arising of organic physical phenomena; it is a condition by way of *co-nascence*. If there is no consciousness, no conception takes place, and no organic material phenomena appear. During life-continuity, however, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is to the already arisen physical phenomena (*rūpa*) a condition by way of *post-nascence*, or later-arising (*pacchājāta-paccaya*), and also by way of *nutriment* (*āhāra*), because consciousness forms a prop and support for the upkeep of the body. Just as the feeling of hunger is a condition for the feeding and upkeep of this already arisen body, just so is consciousness to this already arisen body a condition and support by its post-nascence, or later arising. If consciousness would rise no more, the physical organs would gradually cease their functioning, lose their faculties, and the body would die. In this way we have to understand the proposition: *viññāṇa-paccaya nāma-rūpam*: “Through consciousness the mental and physical phenomena are conditioned.”

4

Now, we come to the fourth proposition: *Nāma-rūpa-paccaya saḷāyatanaṃ*: “Through the mental and physical phenomena the six bases of mental life are conditioned.” The first five of these bases are the five physical sense-organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body; the sixth base, the mind base (*manāyatana*), is a collective term for the many different classes of consciousness, i.e. for the five kinds of sense-consciousness and the many kinds of mind-consciousness. Hence five bases are physical phenomena, namely, eye, ear, etc., and the sixth base is identical with consciousness.

In which way, now, are the mental and physical phenomena a condition for the five physical bases, or sense-organs, and how for the sixth base, or consciousness? Here we really get four chief questions:

The first question is: How are the mental phenomena (*nāma*) a condition for the five physical bases (*āyatana*), or sense-organs? The seven inseparable mental phenomena associated with sense-consciousness, such as feeling, perception, etc., are to the five physical bases, or sense-organs, a condition by way of post-nascence, and in other ways. The mental activity during life, namely, is a necessary support to the five physical bases, or sense organs, already produced at birth, as explained before.

The second question is: How are mental phenomena a condition to the mind-base (*manāyatana*) or consciousness? The mental phenomena, as feeling, perception, volition, etc., are at any time to the mind-base, or consciousness, a condition by way of simultaneous arising, or co-nascence (*sahajāta-paccaya*).

You will remember that I repeatedly said that consciousness cannot arise without the co-arising of feeling and the other phenomena, because consciousness and all its mental concomitants are inseparably bound up together, and mutually dependent upon one another. Thus I have shown how the mental phenomena are a condition to the five physical bases or sense-organs, as well as to the mind-base or consciousness (*manāyatana*).

Now we come to the third question: How are the physical (*rūpa*) phenomena a condition for the five physical bases (*āyatana*), or sense-organs? The four primary physical elements, i.e. the solid, fluid, heat, and motion, are to any of the five physical bases, or sense-organs, at the very moment of their first coming into existence, a condition by way of simultaneous arising (*sahajāta-paccaya*); but during life these four physical elements are to the five bases, or sense-organs, a condition by way of foundation (*nissaya*) on which the sense-organs are entirely dependent. Further, the physical phenomenon “vitality” (*rūpa-jīvit’ indriya*) is to the five bases, or sense-organs, a condition by way of presence (*atthi-paccaya*), etc.; in other words, the five bases, or sense-organs, depend on the presence of physical life, without which the five sense organs could not exist.

The physical phenomenon “nutrition” (*āhāra*) is to the five physical bases a condition by way of presence, because the five sense-organs can only exist as long as they get their necessary nutriment. Thus I have shown how the physical phenomena, or *rūpa*, are a condition for the five physical bases, or *āyatana*.

There remains only the fourth question: How are the physical phenomena (*rūpa*) a condition for the mind-base (*manāyatana*), or consciousness? The five physical phenomena, as eye, ear, nose, etc., are to the five kinds of sense-consciousness, i.e. to seeing, hearing, etc., a condition by way of foundation (*nissaya*) and by way of pre-nascence, presence, etc. These five kinds of sense-consciousness, during life, cannot arise without the pre-arising (*purejāta*) of the five physical sense-organs as their foundation (*nissaya*); therefore without the pre-arising and presence of the eye, no seeing; without the pre-arising and presence of the ear, no hearing, etc.; so that, if these five sense-organs are destroyed, no corresponding sense-consciousness can arise any longer.

In a similar way is the physical organ of mind the condition for the various stages of mind-consciousness.¹⁴ In the canonical books no special physical organ is mentioned by name as the physical foundation of the mind-consciousness, neither the brain nor the heart, though the heart is taught as such by all the commentaries, as well as by the general Buddhist tradition. I think it is my Burmese friend Shwe Zan Aung who first made this fact known in his *Compendium of Philosophy*.¹⁵ For the Buddhist it matters little whether it is the heart or the brain or any other organ that constitutes the physical base of mind.

Thus we have seen how the physical (*rūpa*) phenomena are a condition to the mind-base (*manāyatana*), or consciousness. And herewith we have settled the meaning of the proposition: “Through the mental and physical phenomena the six bases of mental life are conditioned.”

5

Now we come to the fifth proposition: *Salāyatana-paccayā phasso*: “Through the six bases sense-impression is conditioned.”¹⁶ In other words: Conditioned through the physical eye is visual impression, conditioned through the ear sound impression, conditioned through the nose smell impression, conditioned through the tongue taste impression, conditioned through the body bodily impression, conditioned through the mind-base or consciousness (*manāyatana*) mental impression.

The five physical bases (*āyatana*) are to their corresponding sense-impressions (*phassa*) a condition by way of foundation (*nissaya*) and by way of pre-nascence (*purejāta*) and in other ways besides. The five sense-organs are not only the foundation for consciousness, as we have seen, but also for all its mental concomitants, hence also for sense-impression. And as these five bases, or sense-organs, have already come into existence at birth, they are called a pre-nascent condition (*purejāta-paccaya*) to the later arising five sense-impressions.

The mind-base or consciousness is at any time to its concomitant sensory or mental impression a condition by way of simultaneous arising or co-nascence, etc. In other words, eye-consciousness arises simultaneously with visual impression, ear-consciousness with sound impression, etc., and mind-consciousness with mental impression.

Also the external physical bases—the five sense-objects, as the visual object, sound, smell, etc.—these too are an indispensable condition to the arising of sense-impression. So visual impression could never arise without the pre-arising of the visible object, sound impression never without the pre-arising of the sound-object, etc. Hence the arising of the five sense-impressions (*phassa*) depends

¹⁴*Mano-viññāṇa*, or mind-consciousness, does not depend upon the simultaneous function of any of the five physical sense-organs, although visible objects, sounds, etc. may nevertheless reappear as mental objects therein. Of this fact, dream-consciousness furnishes a vivid illustration.

¹⁵Shwe Zan Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy* (London, 1910), pp. 277f.

¹⁶The literal and usual translation of *phassa* as “contact” is very ambiguous and misleading. *Phassa* does not denote a physiological function, but a purely mental phenomenon. It is heading the list of those fifty phenomena which in Buddhist classification are summed up in the group of mental formations (*saṅkhāra-kkhandha*). See Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary* (BPS, 1988), Table II: The Formations Group.

on the pre-arising of the visual object, the sound-object, etc. Therefore the arising of the five sense-impressions depends just as much on the pre-arising and presence of the five physical sense-objects as on the pre-arising of the five sense-organs, as already stated. Thus sense-impression is also conditioned through the five external physical bases, i.e. through the five sense-objects.

Further, as all the physical sense-objects may also become objects of mind-consciousness, therefore they are also a condition for mind-consciousness as well as for its concomitant phenomena, such as mental impression (*phassa*), etc. Thus without physical sense-organ and physical sense-object there is no sense-impression; and without mind and mind-object no mental impression. Therefore it is said: "Through the six sense bases sense-impression is conditioned."

6

Thereafter follows the sixth proposition: *Phassa-paccaya vedanā*: "Through impression feeling is conditioned." There are six kinds of feeling: feeling associated with visual impression, feeling associated with sound impression, feeling associated with smell impression, feeling associated with taste impression, feeling associated with bodily impression, and feeling associated with mental impression. *Bodily* feeling may be either agreeable or disagreeable, according to whether it is the result of wholesome or unwholesome kamma. *Mental* feeling may be either agreeable, i.e. joy, or disagreeable, i.e. sadness; or it may be indifferent. The feelings associated with visual, sound, smell and taste impression, are, as such, always indifferent, but they may have either desirable or undesirable objects, according to the kamma in a previous life. Whatever the feeling may be—pleasant or painful, happy or unhappy or indifferent, whether feeling of body or of mind—any feeling is conditioned either through one of the five sense-impressions or through mental impression. And these impressions (*phassa*) are a condition to their associated feeling (*vedanā*) by way of co-nascent or simultaneous arising, and in many other ways.

Here you will again remember that all the mental phenomena in one and the same state of consciousness, hence also impression (*phassa*) and feeling (*vedanā*), are necessarily dependent one upon another by their simultaneous arising, their presence, their association, etc. But to any feeling associated with the different stages of mind-consciousness following upon a sense-impression, the preceding visual or other sense-impression is an inducement by way of proximity (*anantar'upanissaya-paccaya*). In other words, the preceding sense-impression is a decisive support, or inducement, to any feeling bound up with the succeeding mind-consciousness.

Thus we have seen how through sensory and mental impression, or *phassa*, feeling, or *vedanā*, is conditioned.

7

Now comes the seventh proposition: *Vedanā-paccayā taṇhā*: "Through feeling craving is conditioned."

Corresponding to the six senses, there are six kinds of *craving* (*taṇhā*), namely: craving for visible objects, craving for sounds, craving for odours, craving for tastes, craving for bodily impressions, craving for mind-objects. If the craving for any of these objects is connected with the desire for sensual enjoyment, it is called "sensuous craving" (*kama-taṇhā*). If connected with the belief in eternal personal existence (*sassata-ditṭhi*), it is called "craving for existence" (*bhava-taṇhā*). If connected with the belief in self-annihilation (*uccheda-ditṭhi*) at death, it is called "craving for self-annihilation" (*vibhava-taṇhā*).

Any (kamma-resultant and morally) neutral feeling (*vedanā*), whether agreeable, disagreeable or indifferent, whether happy or unhappy feeling, may be to the subsequent craving (*taṇhā*) a condition either by way of simple inducement, or of inducement as object. For example, conditioned through pleasurable feeling due to the beautiful appearance of persons or things, there may arise craving for such visible objects. Or conditioned through pleasurable feeling due to pleasant food, craving for tastes may arise. Or thinking of those feelings of pleasure and enjoyment procurable by money,

people may become filled with craving for money and pleasure. Or pondering over past pleasures and feelings of happiness, people may again become filled with craving and longing for such pleasures. Or thinking of heavenly bliss and joy, people may become filled with craving for rebirth in such heavenly worlds. In all these cases pleasant feeling (*vedanā*) is to craving (*taṇhā*) either a condition by way of simple inducement, or inducement as object of thinking.

But not only agreeable and happy feeling, but even disagreeable and unhappy feeling may become a condition for craving. For example, to a man being tormented with bodily pain or oppressed in mind, the craving may arise to be released from such misery. Thus, through feeling unhappy and dissatisfied with his miserable lot, a poor man, or a beggar, or an outcast, or a sick man, or a prisoner, may become filled with longing and craving for release from such a condition. In all these cases unpleasant and miserable feeling (*vedanā*) of body and mind forms for craving (*taṇhā*) a condition by way of inducement, without which such craving might never have arisen. Even expected *future* feeling of happiness may, by thinking about it, become a mighty incentive, or inducement, to craving. Thus, whatever craving arises depends in some way or other on feeling, be it past, present, or even future feeling. Therefore it is said: *Vedanā-paccayā taṇhā*: “Through feeling craving is conditioned.”

8

Now we have reached the eighth proposition: *Taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ*: “Through craving clinging is conditioned.” *Upādāna*, or clinging, is said to be a name for developed or intensified craving. In the texts we find four kinds of clinging: sensuous clinging, clinging to wrong views, clinging to faith in the moral efficacy of mere outward rules and rituals, and clinging to the belief in either an eternal or a temporary ego-entity.¹⁷ The first one, sensuous clinging, refers to objects of sensuous enjoyment, while the three other kinds of clinging are connected with wrong views.

Whenever clinging to views or rituals arises, at that very moment also craving must arise; without the simultaneous arising of craving, there would be no such attachments to these views and rituals. Hence craving, or *taṇhā*, is for these kinds of clinging, or *upādāna*, a condition by way of co-nascence (*sahajāta-paccaya*). But besides this, craving may be to such kind of clinging also a condition by way of inducement (*upanissaya-paccaya*). Suppose a fool, who is craving for rebirth in heaven, thinks that by following certain outward moral rules, or by mere belief in a creator, he will attain the object of his desire. So he firmly attaches himself to the practice of mere outward rules and rituals, or to the belief in a creator. In this case, craving is for such kind of clinging a condition by way of inducement, or *upanissaya-paccaya*.

To sensuous clinging, or *kāmuṇupādāna*, however, craving may only be a condition by way of direct inducement. The craving for sense-objects itself gradually develops and turns into strong sensuous clinging and attachment, or *kāmuṇupādāna*. For example, craving and desire for objects of sensual enjoyment, for money, food, gambling, drinking, etc. may gradually grow into a strong habit, into a firm attachment and clinging.

Thus I have shown how craving is the condition for clinging. As it is said: *Taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ*: “Through craving clinging is conditioned.”

9

Next we come to the ninth proposition: *Upādāna-paccayā bhavo*: “Through clinging the process of becoming is conditioned.” Now this process of becoming or existence really consists of two processes: (1) the kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*), i.e. the kammically *active* side of life; and (2) the kamma-resultant rebirth-process (*upapatti-bhava*), i.e. the kammically *passive* and morally neutral side of life. The kammically active side of this life-process is, as we have seen, represented by five links, namely: ignorance, kamma-formations, craving, clinging, kamma-process (*avijjā, saṅkhāra, taṇhā, upādāna, kamma-bhava*). The passive side of life is represented by five links, namely: consciousness, mental and

¹⁷*Kāmuṇupādāna; diṭṭhupādāna; sīlabbatūpādānaṃ; attavādūpādāna.*

physical phenomena, the six bases, impression, feeling (*viññāṇa*, *nāma-rūpa*, *saḷāyatana*, *phassa*, *vedanā*). Thus the five *passive* links, as consciousness, etc., refer here only to kamma-resultant phenomena, and not to such as are associated with active kamma. The five *active* links, as ignorance, etc., are the causes of the five *passive* links of the future, as kamma-resultant consciousness, etc.; and thus these five passive links are the results of the five active links. In that way, the P.S. may be represented by twenty links: five causes in the past life, and five results in the present one; five causes in the present life, and five results in the future one.¹⁸

As it is said in the *Visuddhimagga* (Chap. XVII):

Five causes were there in the past,
Five fruits are found in present life;
Five causes which are now produced,
Five fruits are reaped in future life.

Let me here recall to you my definition of the term “cause” as “that which by inner necessity is followed in time by its result.” There are twenty-four modes of conditioning, but only one of them should be called *cause*, namely, kamma.

Though this kammic cause is in time followed by its result, it nevertheless may depend on (but not be produced by) a preceding kamma-result as its inducement condition. Thus for example, feeling, within the P.S., is a kamma-result; but still, at the same time, it is an inducement-condition to the subsequent arising of craving, which latter is a kamma cause.

Now, let us return to our proposition: *upādāna-paccaya bhavo*: “Through clinging the process of becoming is conditioned,” that is, (1) the kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*), and thereafter, in the next life, (2) the kamma-resultant rebirth-process (*upapatti-bhava*). The kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*) in this ninth proposition is, correctly speaking, a collective name for rebirth-producing volition (*cetanā*) together with all the mental phenomena associated therewith; while the second link, “kamma-formations” (*saṅkhāra*), designates as such merely rebirth-producing volition. But in reality both links amount to one and the same thing, namely kamma.

Clinging, or *upādāna*, may be an inducement to all kinds of evil and unwholesome kamma. Sensuous clinging, or attachment to sense-objects and sensual enjoyment, may be a direct inducement to murder, robbery, theft, adultery, to envy, hatred, revenge; to many evil actions of body, speech and mind. Clinging to the blind belief in mere outward rules and rituals may lead to self-complacency, mental torpor and stagnation, to contempt of others, presumption, intolerance, fanaticism and cruelty. In all these cases, clinging (*upādāna*) is to the kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*) a condition by way of inducement, and is a direct inducement to evil volitional activities of body, speech or mind. Moreover, clinging is to any evil kamma-process also a condition by way of simultaneous arising.

Thus I have shown how clinging (*upādāna*) is the condition of the kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*). Now I shall show how the kamma-process (*kamma-bhava*) is the condition for the kamma-resultant rebirth-process (*upapatti-bhava*). Here we come to the tenth proposition.

10

Bhava-paccaya jāti: “Through the process of becoming (here kamma-process) rebirth is conditioned.” That means: the kamma-process dominated by the life-affirming volitions (*cetanā*) is the cause of rebirth. Rebirth includes here the entire embryonic process which in the human world begins with conception in the mother’s womb and ends with parturition. Thus kamma volition is the seed from which all life germinates, just as from the mango seed germinates the little mango plant, which in the course of time turns into a mighty mango tree. But how does one know that the kamma-process, or kamma volition, is really the cause of rebirth? The *Visuddhimagga* (XVII) gives the following answer:

¹⁸The past kamma-process (1–2) and the present kamma-process (8–10), though here represented by different links, are nevertheless throughout identical, and both therefore include the five kammic causes. In the same way, the two links (11–12) represent the five kamma-results (3–7). See diagram on p. 57.

Though the outward conditions at the birth of beings may be absolutely the same, there still can be seen a difference in beings with regard to their character, as wretched or noble, etc. Even though the outward conditions, such as sperm, or blood of father and mother, may be the same, there still can be seen that difference between beings, even if they be twins. This difference cannot be without reason, as it can be noticed at any time, and in any being. It can have no other cause than the pre-natal kamma-process. As also for the life of those beings which have been reborn, no other reason can be found, therefore that difference must be due to the pre-natal kamma-process. Kamma, or volition, indeed, is the cause for the difference among beings with regard to their character, as high, low, etc. Therefore the Buddha has said: "kamma divides beings into high and low." In this way we should understand that the kammic process is the cause of rebirth.

Thus, according to Buddhism, the present rebirth is the result of the craving, clinging and kamma volitions in the past birth. And the craving, clinging and kamma volitions in this present birth are the cause of future rebirth. But just as in this ever-changing mental and physical process of existence nothing can be found that passes even from one moment to the next, just so no abiding element can be found, no entity, no ego, that would pass from one birth to the next. In this ever repeated process of rebirth, in the absolute sense, no ego-entity is to be found besides these conditionally arising and passing phenomena. Thus, correctly speaking, it is not myself and not my person that is reborn; nor is it another person that is reborn. All such terms as "person" or "individual" or "man" or "I" or "you" or "mine," etc., do not refer to any real entity; they are merely terms used for convenience sake, in Pali *vohāra-vacana*, "conventional terms"; and there is really nothing to be found beside these conditionally arising and passing mental and physical phenomena. Therefore the Buddha has said:

To believe that the doer of the deed will be the same, as the one who experiences its result (in the next life): this is the one extreme. To believe that the doer of the deed, and the one who experiences its result, are two different persons: this is the other extreme. Both these extremes the Perfect One has avoided and taught the truth that lies in the middle of both, that is: Through ignorance the kamma-formations are conditioned; through the kamma-formations, consciousness (in the subsequent birth); through consciousness, the mental and physical phenomena; through the mental and physical phenomena, the six bases; through the six bases, impression; through impression, feeling; through feeling, craving; through craving, clinging; through clinging, the life-process; through the (kammic) life-process, rebirth; through rebirth, decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Thus arises this whole mass of suffering.

This phenomenality and egolessness of existence has been beautifully expressed in two verses of the *Visuddhimagga*:

No doer of the deeds is found,
No one who ever reaps their fruits.
Empty phenomena roll on.
This only is the correct view.
No god nor Brahma can be called
The maker of this wheel of life:
Empty phenomena roll on,
Dependent on conditions all.

In hearing that Buddhism teaches that everything is determined by conditions, someone might come to the conclusion that Buddhism teaches some sort of fatalism, or that man has no free will, or that will is not free. Now, with regard to the two questions: (1) "Has man a free will?" and (2) "Is will free?" the Buddhist will say that both these questions are to be rejected for being wrongly put, and therefore unanswerable.

The first question "Has man a free will?" is to be rejected for the reason that, beside these ever-changing mental and physical phenomena, in the absolute sense no such thing or entity can be found that we could call "man," so that "man" as such is merely a name without any reality.

The second question "Is will free?" is to be rejected for the reason that "will" is only a momentary mental phenomenon, just like feeling, consciousness, etc., and thus does not yet exist before it arises, and that therefore of a non-existent thing—of a thing which is not—one could, properly speaking, not

ask whether it is free or unfree. The only admissible question would be: "Is the arising of will independent of conditions, or is it conditioned?" But the same question would equally apply also to all the other mental phenomena, as well as to all the physical phenomena, in other words, to everything and every occurrence whatever. And the answer would be: Be it "will," or "feeling," or any other mental or physical phenomenon, the arising of anything whatsoever depends on conditions; and without these conditions, nothing can ever arise or enter into existence.

According to Buddhism, everything mental and physical happens in accordance with laws and conditions; and if it were otherwise, chaos and blind chance would reign. But such a thing is impossible and contradicts all laws of thinking.

11

Now we have reached the eleventh and last proposition: *Jāti-paccaya jara-maraṇaṃ*: "Through rebirth decay and death are conditioned." Without birth there cannot be decay and death. If we had not been born, we would not have to die, and would not be exposed to all sorts of misery. Thus rebirth is a necessary condition for decay and death, and for all other forms of misery. Hence it was said: "Through rebirth decay and death are conditioned."

Herewith the explanation of the eleven propositions of the *paṭicca-samuppāda* formula has been brought to a close. From my explanations you will have seen that the twelve links of the formula are distributed over three successive lives, and that they may be applied to our past, present and future lives. The first two links, *avijjā* and kamma-formations, represent the kamma causes in the past life; the next five links, consciousness, etc., represent the kamma-results in the present life; the following three links, craving, clinging and kamma-process, represent the kammic causes in the present life; and the two last links, rebirth, and decay and death, represent the kamma-results in the future life.

You ought, however, to remember that the full kammic causes are five, namely: ignorance, kamma-formations, craving, clinging, kamma-process existence, and that thus we really get five causes in the past and five results in the present; five causes in the present and five results in the future. Therefore it was said:

Five causes were there in the past,
Five fruits are found in present life.
Five causes which are now produced,
Five fruits are reaped in future life.

Now, if there had been no ignorance and no kamma-formations or life-affirming volitions in the past life, no consciousness and new life would have sprung up in our mother's womb, and our present birth would not have taken place. However, if by deep penetration and deep insight into the evanescent nature and the egolessness of all existence, one becomes fully detached from all forms of existence, and freed from all ignorance, craving and clinging to existence, freed from all those selfish kamma-formations or volitions, then no further rebirth will follow, and the goal taught by the Buddha will have been realised, namely, deliverance from rebirth and suffering.

The following diagram shows at a glance the relationship of dependence between three successive lives.

Dependent Origination		
3 periods	12 Factors	20 Modes & 4 Groups
Past	1. Ignorance 2. Kamma-formations	Past causes 1, 2, 8, 9, 10
Present	3. Consciousness 4. Mentality-&-corporeality 5. Six sense bases 6. Impression 7. Feeling	Present effects 5: 3-7
	8. Craving 9. Clinging 10. Existence	Present causes 5: 8, 9, 10, 1, 2
Future	11. Rebirth 12. Decay-&-death	Future effects 5: 3-7

Three Connections

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)

Three Rounds:

1. Round of defilements: 1, 8, 9
2. Round of kamma: 2, 10 (part)
3. Round of results: 3-7, 10 (part), 11, 12

Two Roots:

1. Ignorance: from past to present
2. Craving: from present to future

About the Author

Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (1878–1957) was the first Continental European in modern times to become a Buddhist monk and one of the foremost Western exponents of Theravada Buddhism in the twentieth century. Born in Germany, he developed a keen interest in Buddhism in his youth and came to Asia intending to enter the Buddhist Order. He received ordination in Burma in 1903. The greatest part of his life as a monk was spent in Sri Lanka, where he established the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa as a monastery for Western monks. His translations into German include the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the *Visuddhimagga*, and the *Milindapañha*. Ven. Nyanatiloka passed away in Colombo in 1957.

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