Seeds, Paintings and a Beam of Light

Similes for Dependent Arising

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Short Abstract:

Dependent Arising is one of the Buddha’s most important and central doctrines, but in recent decades it has been interpreted in a large variety of ways. This book illustrates that the early Buddhist texts support the traditional multiple-lifetime interpretation of this teaching, taking a particular interest in the factor of consciousness. Centered around three similes, it connects this factor to rebirth and explains how it relates to the other factors of Dependent Arising. It also explains that appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa, a term used in the similes, refers to the cessation of consciousness.

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I will give you a simile. For some clever  
people understand the meaning of  
something through a simile.

The Buddha[[1]](#footnote-2)

Abstract

Dependent Arising is one of the Buddha’s most important and central doctrines, but in recent decades it has been interpreted in a large variety of ways. This book illustrates that the early Buddhist texts support the traditional multiple-lifetime interpretation of this teaching, taking a particular interest in the factor of consciousness. Centered around three similes, it connects this factor to rebirth and explains how it relates to the other factors of Dependent Arising. It also explains that appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa, a term used in the similes, refers to the cessation of consciousness.

Preface

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

About three years ago I wrote a rather technical essay on an obscure pair of Pāli words, viññāṇa anidassana.[[2]](#footnote-3) These words are sometimes understood to describe a kind of consciousness of nirvāṇa, but I argued they refer to a state of meditation instead. I expected few to be interested in such technical analysis, but it was surprisingly well received. Afterwards I was asked to explain a similar pair of words that gets likewise misunderstood, namely appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa. Initially I was reluctant to do more of the same, but then realised it would be a good opportunity to illustrate some aspects of the Buddha’s teachings which continue to amaze me and which may also amaze the reader, because this subject is a good example of how interconnected his teachings are, of how words and concepts reappear throughout the discourses, illuminating the same ideas from different angles. It also gives me a chance to showcase the Buddha’s beautiful use of metaphors for even the deepest of concepts, hopefully shedding some light on the more enigmatic parts of his teachings on Dependent Arising.

As such, this writing is not meant to be a critique but a constructive step towards a better understanding and appreciation of the Buddha’s teachings. But for context, let me briefly lay out the views I consider to be mistaken. The assumption is that enlightened beings experience a certain kind of objectless or contentless consciousness which the Buddha called appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa, usually translated by proponents of the idea as ‘unestablished consciousness’.[[3]](#footnote-4) Some further think this consciousness lies outside of conditioned phenomena and will continue to exist after the enlightened being passes away. Often referenced in support of these ideas is a passage wherein the Buddha supposedly compares this unestablished consciousness to a beam of light that does not land on any surface.[[4]](#footnote-5)

With this book I wish not to be argumentative but aim to present an alternative interpretation of the terms and simile in question. At some occasions, however, I do address the idea of an objectless consciousness directly. This was inevitable, because in my understanding the Buddha specifically denied the existence of such a consciousness, and this happens to be the exact point he was making with appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa. I will show that the term refers not to an unestablished consciousness but to the non-establishing of consciousness in any object or place, particularly at the enlightened being’s time of death, after which there will be no rebirth and hence no more consciousness. Also involved is a simile in which consciousness is a seed for rebirth, where appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa is more aptly translated as ‘consciousness is not planted’.

All this is explained in three parts:

1. The first part introduces the wider context of Dependent Arising and a simile of painting a picture of a person, which illustrates the creation of rebirth. It also provides some historical context for the factor of nāmarūpa, quite literally ‘name and form’, translated here as ‘the (individual’s) immaterial aspects and body’.
2. The second part explains the simile of the seed of consciousness, clarifying that this simile, like that of the painting, illustrates rebirth too. It also discusses the dependent existence of all consciousness, the impossibility for consciousness to be without object or content.
3. The third part gives my interpretation of the disputed simile of the light beam, showing that this simile implies the cessation of consciousness. Some connected statements on the final goal are also touched upon.

Since this writing is essentially a patchwork of translations and notes made over the span of nearly a decade, there will be a few tangents along the way as well. My hope is that these will not distract from the main ideas but add to them instead. Some of these tangents may also reflect that I am not an academic but a practitioner interested in the real-life application of these texts and that I write with a similar audience in mind. Still, please know that this is first and foremost a study of texts, not a guide to practice. A proper understanding of the texts can guide the practitioner in the right direction, however. If anything, I hope you will find some inspiration in the Buddha’s rich metaphors.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of the Buddhist canonical texts should be attributed to the Buddha. All translations of the Pāli, including any inevitable shortcomings in them, are my own. Unfamiliar translations will always raise some questions, but to not interrupt the continuity of ideas, I will not explain every translation choice I made and include the Pāli terms only when deemed relevant. Some translations directly connected to the topic are explained in the endnotes, which further contain only references to the source texts and contemporary works.

Realising that the Pāli Canon is not infallible, I also consulted the Chinese Āgamas, assisted by English translations of others. My knowledge of these texts is limited, so I cannot claim this to be a proper comparative study of early texts—nor was it intended to be—but some interesting observations were made regardless. I hope this will encourage a wider recognition of the Chinese canon and less reliance on unique Pāli passages.

My highest wish, and the real purpose behind this book, is for the Buddha’s words to help the reader find the escape from suffering. I will share some further thoughts on this in the conclusion.

With gratitude towards my teachers and supporters, without whom this work would not have been possible.

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PART I. The Simile of the Painting

1. The aggregate of consciousness

The all-encompassing scope of the aggregates

A handful of suttas in the Pāli Canon contain appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa, the term which I intend to show does not refer to an unestablished consciousness of nirvāṇa (nibbāna in Pāli) but to the cessation of consciousness. The If There is Desire Discourse (§23) will be our main focus, because it contains the disputed simile of the light beam that does not hit anything.

But first an important point on the five aggregates: form, sensation, perception, will, and consciousness (rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṇkhāra, viññāna). Most readers will be familiar with them, but many may not know why the Buddha called them ‘aggregates’ (khandhas). The suttas say they are so called because they include, or they “aggregate”, all the different types of the item in question.[[5]](#footnote-6) A khandha is literally a heap or a collection. The aggregate of perception, for example, is the collection of all perceptions. The same principle applies to the aggregate of consciousness (viññāṇa):

The aggregate of consciousness includes any type of consciousness whatsoever—whether past, present, or future; here or elsewhere; internal or external; coarse or subtle; lowly or sublime. That is how the term ‘aggregate’ applies to the aggregates.[[6]](#footnote-7)

That this statement is intended to be all-encompassing is clarified even further elsewhere when the Buddha says: “any type of consciousness whatsoever—whether past, present, or future [and so on]—all consciousness …”[[7]](#footnote-8)

Similar phrases are spoken of the other four aggregates, so if we were to suppose some special type of consciousness that’s excluded from the aggregate of consciousness,[[8]](#footnote-9) we also open the door for similar types of form, sensation, perception, and will. We then have to admit that the definitions of the other aggregates are also not all-encompassing. But this is not the intent behind these statements, which the Buddha meant to be comprehensive. As said, all types of consciousness are included in the aggregates, just like all types of form, sensation, perception, and will.

Accordingly, throughout the entire corpus the Buddha never tells his audience there is a consciousness outside of the aggregates. In one discourse a god called Baka seems to claim there is such a consciousness, but the Buddha disagrees with him.[[9]](#footnote-10) Whenever he uses the word ‘consciousness’, it always refers either to the whole aggregate of consciousness or otherwise to a certain part of it. This is the whole purpose of his definition of the aggregate: to make sure we don’t leave any type of consciousness out.

Consciousness in the If There is Desire Discourse

That ‘consciousness’ refers to the aggregate is even more clearly the case for the If There is Desire Discourse. It is located in the Nidāna Saṁyutta, the connected discourses on Dependent Arising, and in this context ‘consciousness’ is repeatedly and explicitly defined as the consciousnesses of the six senses—which is to say, as the aggregate of consciousness:[[10]](#footnote-11)

And what is consciousness? There are six kinds of consciousness: sight-consciousness, hearing-consciousness, smell-consciousness, taste-consciousness, touch-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. That [taken together] is what’s called consciousness.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Throughout the If There is Desire Discourse, including the simile of the light beam and appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa, ‘consciousness’ refers to this aggregate. We are not dealing with a special type of consciousness that is outside of this aggregate (or outside of this ‘aspect of existence’, as I will translate khandha from here on).

Moreover, the discourse contains not just the simile of the light beam which is sometimes taken to describe a type of “unestablished” consciousness of nibbāna. It is preceded by a simile of a painting which describes an establishing of consciousness. With this information the well-informed reader may already be able to tell what is going on, once they recall that the discourse is on Dependent Arising. In brief, the simile of the painting illustrates the origination sequence of Dependent Arising; the simile of the light beam illustrates the cessation sequence. The former sequence includes the arising of consciousness; the latter includes its ceasing. So appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa is actually about the cessation of consciousness.

All this will be explained in detail in this book. But before we consider the If There is Desire Discourse and its similes, we need a general understanding of Dependent Arising first.

1. [MN 24:14.1–14.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Sunyo 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For example Ñāṇananda 2016 p.71: “What the Arahants have done is to bring consciousness to such a state where it gets no footing on name-and-form. In other words, it is the state of unestablished consciousness (appatiṭṭhita viññaṇa).” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For example Harvey 1995 p.202, Ṭhānissaro 2008a p.118, Pasanno p.155, Cintita p.179 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Bodhi 2000 p.840 “The five aggregates are so called because they each unite under one label a multiplicity of phenomena that share the same defining characteristic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [SN 22.82:6.1–6.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [MN 109:8.1–8.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For example [SN 22.59:10.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. As Ṭhānissaro 2018 p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. [MN 49:25.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 330. For a discussion see Sunyo 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See [SN 22.56:13.1–14.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), where in context of the five aggregates, the aggregate of consciousness is also defined as that of the six senses. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. [SN 12.2:12.1–12.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:3.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:3.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)