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 realized 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.

Realizing 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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January 2023

fleuron/paint.png=Fleuron:A drawing of a painters palette=10

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):

§1

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.

2. An overview of Dependent Arising

The origin of suffering

In my opinion the best way to explain Dependent Arising—also called Dependent Origination—is by starting with the second noble truth (or ‘noble one’s truth’, as I translate ariyasacca).[[12]](#footnote-13) This truth tells us that the cause of suffering is the craving that leads to a next life:

And what is the noble one’s truth of the origin of suffering? It is the craving that leads to a next life, which, along with enjoyment and desire, looks for happiness in various realms.[[13]](#footnote-14) That is what’s called the noble one’s truth of the origin of suffering.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Dependent Arising is in essence an expanded explanation of this truth:[[15]](#footnote-16)

And what is the noble one’s truth of the origin of suffering? Dependent on ignorance, there are willful actions. Dependent on willful actions, [the continuation of] consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. Dependent on sense impressions, sensations. Dependent on sensations, craving. Dependent on craving, fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, [further] existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates. That is what’s called the noble one’s truth of the origin of suffering.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Dependent Arising is often believed to be a very complicated teaching, but it is not. It’s very deep, very hard to see, but it should not be theoretically difficult. As said, it is essentially an explanation of the second truth of the noble one, and explanations should not be much more complicated than the thing they try to explain!

Venerable Sāriputta once explained the fundamental principles of Dependent Arising quite succinctly:

The Buddha said: ‘If you see the dependent arising of things,[[17]](#footnote-18) you see the Dhamma [the truth/teaching]. If you see the Dhamma, you see the dependent arising of things.’ And what has dependently arisen are these five taken up aspects of existence. Wanting them and holding on to them, being attracted and attached to them, will make suffering originate. Removing and abandoning the want and desire for them, will make suffering cease.[[18]](#footnote-19)

The arising of the five aspects of existence here means their overall existence. By this I mean, Sāriputta is talking about the origination of these aspects of existence as a whole, not about momentary changes within them. This origination of the aspects of existence happens at the start of life, when one is born. This is reflected by the definition of ‘birth’ in §20, which includes “the manifestation of the aspects of existence”. Sāriputta’s summary of Dependent Arising therefore aligns with the noble one’s second truth, on the craving that leads to a next life. That is to say, Dependent Arising primarily explains why rebirth happens.

Another short version of Dependent Arising likewise mentions that the origination of the five aspects of existence happens through birth, which in turn is caused by enjoyment and attachment:

And what is the origin of form, sensation, perception, will, and consciousness? Then you enjoy, welcome, and keep holding on. You enjoy, welcome, and keep holding on to what?

You enjoy, welcome, and keep holding on to form. It results in enjoyment, and when there is enjoyment of form, there is fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, there is [further] existence. Dependent on existence, there is birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates. [Similar for the other aspects of existence.][[19]](#footnote-20)

Because the aspects of existence are suffering which starts (or, more accurately, restarts) at birth, the Buddha also said:

Mendicants, the arising, continuation, production, and manifestation of form is the arising of suffering, the continuation of diseases, and the manifestation of old age and death. The arising, continuation, production, and manifestation of sensation, perception, will, and consciousness is the arising of suffering, the continuation of diseases, and the manifestation of old age and death.

The cessation, subsiding, and disappearance of form is the cessation of suffering, the subsiding of diseases, and the disappearance of old age and death. The cessation, subsiding, and disappearance of sensation, perception, will, and consciousness is the cessation of suffering, the subsiding of diseases, and the disappearance of old age and death.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The arising, continuation, production, and manifestation of the aspects of existence here means their continuation into a new life after death. It is this kind of continuation which results in more deaths: their continuation while one is already alive does not. Accordingly, the words ‘production’ and ‘manifestation’ are also found in the very definition of birth, namely in the phrases ‘the production of beings’ and ‘the manifestation of the aspects of existence’. In fact, the word for ‘production’ (abhinibbatti) also means ‘rebirth’.[[21]](#footnote-22) Venerable Sujato translated it as such in the above discourse, and Venerable Bodhi did so elsewhere.[[22]](#footnote-23)

The aspects of existence, and therefore death and other suffering, cease only when the enlightened being passes away. As the Buddha said after the death of the enlightened monk Dabba:

The body fell apart, perception ceased,  
all sensations cooled off,  
will subsided,  
consciousness disappeared.[[23]](#footnote-24)

When Sāriputta mentioned the cessation of suffering in §5, he referred to this final cessation of the aspects of existence. It is only then, after one final death, that old age and death and all suffering are truly overcome.

It is important to realize that Dependent Arising explains rebirth and its causes. If we fail to acknowledge this, it becomes impossible to properly understand the Buddha’s similes and terminology, including appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa. But since some prevalent interpretations don’t recognize or otherwise marginalize this central principle, I will return to it throughout this writing, showing in various ways that Dependent Arising indeed focuses on rebirth. My apologies if at some point this becomes repetitious, but I think a topic as important as this deserves to be treated thoroughly.

The principle of dependency

Although Sāriputta’s explanation in §5 captures the most important principles of Dependent Arising, it is still a summary. Dependent Arising is usually explained with a sequence of twelve factors starting with ignorance and ending with old age and death and all other suffering. These factors are:

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 1. The twelve standard factors of Dependent Arising

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Pāli** | **Translated here as** |
| 1 | Avijjā | Ignorance |
| 2 | Saṅkhārā | willful actions |
| 3 | Viññāṇa | Consciousness |
| 4 | Nāmarūpa | (Individual’s) immaterial aspects & body |
| 5 | Saḷāyatana | The six senses |
| 6 | Phassa | Sense impression |
| 7 | Vedanā | Sensation |
| 8 | Taṇhā | Craving |
| 9 | Upādāna | Fuel/taking up\* |
| 10 | Bhava | Existence |
| 11 | Jāti | Birth |
| 12 | Jarāmaraṇa | Old age & death |

(\* Upādāna means both ‘fuel’ and ‘taking up’, and often both meanings are implied. No single English word conveys both, so unless only one applies, I use the dual translation ‘fuel/taking up’. The idea is that craving acts as the fuel for the continuation of existence after death, but also that a next existence is taken up due to craving.)[[24]](#footnote-25)

The sequential arising of these twelve factors is usually followed by their sequential cessation, which has no official name in the discourses. Some have termed it ‘Dependent Cessation’, but I will just call it ‘the cessation sequence’. In the following text the Buddha gives both the arising sequence and cessation sequence in their standard form, after, just like Sāriputta, saying he is concerned with the arising and cessation of the five aspects of existence.

Mendicants, I, the Truth­finder—with ten powers and four reasons to be self-confident[[25]](#footnote-26)—claim the place of the alpha bull, roar my lion’s roar in gatherings, and put in motion the Supreme Wheel, saying: ‘This is how form is, this is how it originates, and this is how it disappears. This is how sensation is, this is how it originates, and this is how it disappears. This is how perception is, this is how it originates, and this is how it disappears. This is how will is, this is how it originates, and this is how it disappears. This is how consciousness is, this is how it originates, and this is how it disappears.

There will be this, only if there is that. This arises, because that arises. If there isn’t that, there won’t be this. If that ceases, this will cease. That is to say:

Dependent on ignorance, there are willful actions. Dependent on willful actions, consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. Dependent on sense impressions, sensations. Dependent on sensations, craving. Dependent on craving, fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

But if ignorance completely fades away and ceases, willful actions will cease. If willful actions cease, consciousness will cease. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. If the six senses cease, sense impressions will cease. If sense impressions cease, sensations will cease. If sensations cease, craving will cease. If craving ceases, fuel/taking up will cease. If fuel/taking up ceases, existence will cease. If existence ceases, birth will cease. And if birth ceases, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress, will cease. That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.[[26]](#footnote-27)

The Buddha first says he will explain how the five aspects of existence originate and cease, which means he is concerned with how life is brought about and how it comes to a complete end. He will base his investigation on a principle which he words as follows:

* + There will be this, only if there is that.[[27]](#footnote-28) This arises, because that arises.
  + If there isn’t that, there won’t be this. If that ceases, this will cease.
  + In other words, this depends on that.

We can rephrase this more modernly as:

* + There will be B, only if there is A. B arises, because A arises.
  + If there is no A, there won’t be B. If A ceases, B will cease.
  + B depends on A.

Much has been philosophized about these short sentences, but the principle they describe is not difficult to understand. For the sake of illustration, here is first an example of the principle applied to something outside of Dependent Arising:

* + There will be rain, only if there are clouds. Rain happens because clouds form.
  + If there are no clouds, there won’t be rain. If the clouds disappear, the rain will stop.
  + Rain depends on clouds.

The point is simple: there can be no rain without clouds. In other words, rain requires clouds. Clouds are needed for rain. Rain depends on clouds. Or, for those familiar with logical terminology, clouds are a necessary condition for rain.

But the Buddha did not apply his investigation to rain, nor to any other phenomena in the outside world.[[28]](#footnote-29) He was interested in suffering, which is found inside of beings. So next is an example of the principle that stays within the context where it was meant to be applied, that of Dependent Arising:

* + There will be death, only if there is birth. Death happens because birth happened first.
  + If there is no birth, there won’t be death. If birth ceases, death will cease.
  + Death depends on birth.

Put simply: you will die because you were born; but if you don’t get reborn, you won’t die again.

This principle is called ‘dependency’ (idap-paccayatā),[[29]](#footnote-30) which explains the name ‘Dependent Arising’ (paṭicca-samuppāda). The words paccaya and paṭicca both come from the verb pacceti, meaning ‘to fall back on, to depend on’. The principle has also been called ‘conditionality’, which loses the link between these two terms but means the same.

The principle of dependency applies not only to birth and death, but to all the links: death depends on birth, birth depends on the continuation of existence, and so on through the rest of the chain. So in the end all factors rely on ignorance. Imagine a tower of twelve bricks stacked on top of one another. If you remove the bottom brick, the whole stack will come crashing down. Why? Because the bricks supported one another, and they all relied on the bottom brick. Similarly, if you remove ignorance, all the other factors also will cease to be. Why? Because in the end they all depended on ignorance. If you end ignorance, you will therefore also end suffering. It takes some time for the tower to fall down, though. Suffering does not end immediately when ignorance ends, but only at the end of life.

To illustrate:

./img/bricksstack.png=A stack of twelve bricks. The bottom one is labeled ‘ignorance’, the top one ‘suffering’, and one in between ‘rebirth’.=30=border   
./img/bricksfalling.png=A hand grabbing the bottom brick and the tower falling over. The bottom brick is labeled ‘no ignorance’, the top one ‘no suffering’, and one in between ‘no rebirth’.=30=border   
Figure 1. Dependent Arising as a tower of bricks

Since this may all sound rather theoretical so far, I must emphasize that the principle of dependency is a means of reflection, not a mere philosophical theory. Whenever it is mentioned in the Pāli Canon, it always describes someone’s empirical insights or reflections. For example, in §49: “You closely and properly focus on the dependent arising of things, reflecting: ‘There will be this, only if there is that. […] That is to say: Dependent on ignorance […]” The principle is meant to be applied to your personal experience to understand, among other things, how you yourself have been creating rebirth and may do so again in the future.

The centrality of rebirth

Many of the links in Dependent Arising are not only necessary conditions but also sufficient conditions.[[30]](#footnote-31) Sufficient conditions guarantee their outcome. For example, if there is birth, there will always be death as a consequence. Birth guarantees death. Therefore, birth is a sufficient condition for death (as well as a necessary one). But not all links are sufficient conditions. Just like a cloudy sky does not guarantee that it will rain, sensations don’t guarantee craving, for example. If they did, there would be no way to stop craving! So sensations are not a sufficient condition for craving. Likewise, craving and ignorance do not guarantee birth, because you may have those defilements today, but get enlightened tomorrow, whereafter you will not be reborn again. So your craving and ignorance were not sufficient conditions for birth. That said, this distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions can quickly become too technical, if it hasn’t already. It is not mentioned in the discourses either, so it may be better to not overthink it. The links that are sufficient conditions are quite clear anyway, once the meaning of the factors is explained.

However, there is one link where sufficiency may not be evident, and it just so happens to be the most important one: that between birth and suffering. It means that once you are born and alive, suffering is inevitable. Only by not getting reborn again, can you end suffering. This insight forms one of the backbones of Dependent Arising. Rebirth therefore is the primary issue this teaching addresses. As the Buddha said to Ānanda:

It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this teaching [of Dependent Arising] that this population […] does leave behind the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world, and transmigration (saṁsāra).[[31]](#footnote-32)

The focal point of Dependent Arising is also very clear in the next passage. Here the Buddha says he obtained his own insights into Dependent Arising after wondering how rebirth can be stopped. He investigated this matter using the principle of dependency in its various phrasings, starting at old age and death and working his way back to ignorance. Discourses like this are usually abbreviated, but to clarify how the principle of dependency applies to all links, I included it in full.

Mendicants, before my awakening—when I was heading for awakening but not yet fully awake—I thought: ‘Oh no! People have really gotten into trouble. They are born, age, die, pass on, and are reborn again. Yet they don’t see any escape from this suffering, this old age and death and so on. When will an escape from all this finally be found?’

Then I thought: ‘There will be old age and death, only if there is what? What do old age and death depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be old age and death, only if there is birth. Old age and death depend on birth.

Then I thought: ‘There will be birth, only if there is what? What does birth depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be birth, only if there is [further] existence. Birth depends on existence.

Then I thought: ‘There will be existence, only if there is what? What does existence depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be existence, only if there is fuel/taking up. Existence depends on fuel/taking up.

Then I thought: ‘There will be fuel/taking up, only if there is what? What does fuel/taking up depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be fuel/taking up, only if there is craving. Fuel/taking up depends on craving.

Then I thought: ‘There will be craving, only if there is what? What does craving depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be craving, only if there are sensations. Craving depends on sensations.

Then I thought: ‘There will be sensations, only if there is what? What do sensations depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be sensations, only if there are sense impressions. Sensations depend on sense impressions.

Then I thought: ‘There will be sense impressions, only if there is what? What do sense impressions depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be sense impressions, only if there are the six senses. Sense impressions depend on the six senses.

Then I thought: ‘There will be the six senses, only if there is what? What do the six senses depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be the six senses, only if there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. The six senses depend on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.

Then I thought: ‘There will be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, only if there is what? What do the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, only if there is consciousness. The individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness.

Then I thought: ‘There will be consciousness, only if there is what? What does consciousness depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be consciousness, only if there are willful actions. Consciousness depends on willful actions.

Then I thought: ‘There will be willful actions, only if there is what? What do willful actions depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be willful actions, only if there is ignorance. Willful actions depend on ignorance.

So, dependent on ignorance, there are willful actions. Dependent on willful actions, consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. Dependent on sense impressions, sensations. Dependent on sensations, craving. Dependent on craving, fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

Mendicants, that is how I understood origination, gaining insight, comprehension, understanding, knowledge, and illumination of things not taught before.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be old age and death, if there isn’t what? Old age and death will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be old age and death, if there is no birth. If birth ceases, old age and death will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be birth, if there isn’t what? Birth will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be birth, if there is no existence. If existence ceases, birth will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be existence, if there isn’t what? Existence will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be existence, if there is no fuel/taking up. If fuel/taking up ceases, existence will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be fuel/taking up, if there isn’t what? Fuel/taking up will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be fuel/taking up, if there is no craving. If craving ceases, fuel/taking up will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be craving, if there isn’t what? Craving will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be craving, if there are no sensations. If sensations cease, craving will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be sensations, if there isn’t what? Sensations will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be sensations, if there are no sense impressions. If sense impressions cease, sensations will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be sense impressions, if there isn’t what? Sense impressions will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be sense impressions, if there are no six senses. If the six senses cease, sense impressions will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be the six senses, if there isn’t what? The six senses will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be the six senses, if there are no immaterial aspects and body. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, if there isn’t what? The individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, if there is no consciousness. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be consciousness, if there isn’t what? Consciousness will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be consciousness, if there are no willful actions. If willful actions cease, consciousness will cease.

Then I thought: ‘There won’t be willful actions, if there isn’t what? Willful actions will cease, if what ceases?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there won’t be willful actions, if there is no ignorance. If ignorance ceases, willful actions will cease.

So, if ignorance completely fades away and ceases, willful actions will cease. If willful actions cease, consciousness will cease. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. If the six senses cease, sense impressions will cease. If sense impressions cease, sensations will cease. If sensations cease, craving will cease. If craving ceases, fuel/taking up will cease. If fuel/taking up ceases, existence will cease. If existence ceases, birth will cease. And if birth ceases, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress, will cease. That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.

Mendicants, that is how I understood cessation, gaining insight, comprehension, understanding, knowledge, and illumination of things not taught before.[[32]](#footnote-33)

In this text ‘old age and death’ is used as a shorthand for all suffering. This is a common feature in the discourses, especially those on Dependent Arising. Old age and death are a shorthand for suffering not only because they are some of its more noticeable forms, but also because as long as there still is a possibility for old age and death—that is to say, as long as you are alive—there will still be suffering. To clarify, in the Discourse on Direct Conditions it is suffering which is said to be directly dependent on birth, not old age and death as in the standard sequence. It says: “And what is the direct condition for suffering? Birth, you should answer.”[[33]](#footnote-34) This also reinforces what was mentioned before, that once a being is born, suffering is inevitable as long as they are alive.

The meaning of the factors

While the principle of dependency and its application to the twelve factors are conveyed very clearly in the previous discourse, the actual meaning of the factors is not. The Buddha did not explain what ‘birth’ exactly refers to, for example. Most suttas on Dependent Arising similarly mention the standard sequence with little to no explanation of what the individual factors mean. I can think of two main reasons for this, and they are important to consider if we want to properly understand Dependent Arising.

One, the bare twelvefold sequence is not meant to be a full explanation itself, but primarily serves as a mnemonic device (something easy to remember).[[34]](#footnote-35) The audience would have heard more detailed explanations and definitions of the twelve factors in other discourses, which they would have had in the backs of their minds while listening to the more bare sequences of factors. We should do the same, not taking the factors in isolation but consider how they are used and defined elsewhere. If we were to focus on the twelve words and ignore the wider context, we could give these words—which moreover are in an ancient language that is not completely understood—almost any meaning we’d like.

Two, to people back then the individual links would have been more self-explanatory than they are to us. Many of the links may make immediate sense to us as well, such as that between birth and death and that between sensations and craving. But some links do not make sense right away, like that between consciousness and the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, especially when the latter (nāmarūpa) is translated as ‘name and form’. The Buddha discovered a timeless principle, but the words he used to explain this principle are not timeless. They were spoken at a specific point in time, to a certain audience that had different ideas than us. This we should also take into account. If we interpret these historical texts too much from a contemporary perspective, we are bound to misunderstand things. In linguistic studies this is called presentism: “the anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas and perspectives into depictions or interpretations of the past”.[[35]](#footnote-36)

The language gap and cultural divide also mean someone could fully understand the general principle of Dependent Arising through direct insight, even be fully enlightened, but still not understand what words like nāmarūpa mean (or what any Pāli word means, for that matter). For this reason we should also be careful to stay objective about the texts and not interpret them too much in light of our own subjective ideas, even if we are very wise. If we do have deep insights, it does become a lot easier to interpret the words rightly, but it is still no guarantee. Unfortunately, insight into the Dhamma does not come with miraculous linguistic abilities!

The reader should also be aware that translations are by their nature always imperfect. As K.R. Norman, one of the greatest Pāli linguists, said: “It is very difficult to give a one for one translation of Sanskrit and Pāli words into English. It is very rare that one Sanskrit or Pāli word has exactly the same connotations, no less and no more, as one English word.”[[36]](#footnote-37) This is even more true when dealing with topics as abstract as Dependent Arising. But leaving words in Pāli is no solution either, as Norman also continued to say, so I use English terms here, accepting their inevitable shortcomings. The meaning of these terms will have to be clarified by their explanations more so than by the translations themselves. This applies especially to ‘consciousness’, as we shall see.

Summary of Dependent Arising

With the above principles in mind, I arrived at an understanding of Dependent Arising that differs little from that of most traditional Buddhist schools.[[37]](#footnote-38) All will be explained in detail later, but to give a general overview: Unenlightened beings don’t know the true nature of life, not understanding suffering and its causes. Deluded by this absence of knowledge, or **ignorance**, they perform certain intentional acts, also known as karma. At death, driven along by craving, these **willful actions** direct the being’s **consciousness** into a next life—in part through guilt and rejoicing over past actions, in part through acts of the will arising around the time of death itself. The being’s actions influence where they take rebirth and thereby also shape **the individual’s immaterial aspects and body**, with the ‘immaterial aspects’ being general features of the being’s “inner world”. When beings are born, there are **the six senses**, the five physical ones plus the mind. When these senses are aware of things, there are **sense impressions**, which result in pleasant, painful, and neutral **sensations**. As long as there still is ignorance, **craving** arises to experience certain sensations and avoid others. Such cravings will continue at the time of death, when it becomes the fuel for rebirth. Or, from a different perspective, out of craving beings take up the five aspects of existence again. This **fuel/taking up** causes a next **existence** after death and a resultant **birth** in a next life. Once the being is born, there is **suffering, including old age and death**. But when the being gets enlightened, ignorance and craving disappear, and the whole chain collapses. Then suffering will come to an end at death, when all experiences cease as the six senses disappear.

All this can happen because there is no solid essence in any part of existence, no self involved in any of the links. This absence of a self (anatta) is not explicitly mentioned in the standard sequences, but it is always implied. It is explained in many discourses on Dependent Arising, and is of utmost importance for a correct understanding of it. However, it is not the focus here, so I will discuss it only in passing, primarily in Chapter 12 to explain why the cessation of existence (including consciousness) is not the annihilation of an essence.

To better illustrate the functions of the twelve factors, the table below displays them alongside the standard truth on the origin of suffering, the craving that leads to a next life. (‘Next life’ translates puna-bhava, more literally ‘re-existence’.) Since words are fluid but tables are not, this overview may box in some of the factors a bit too strictly. For example, the factor of existence is not just part of the rebirth process, it also continues after birth. The same applies to consciousness and the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. But the table can serve as a useful general overview, as will similar tables that are to follow.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 2. The two parallel sequences in Dependent Arising

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ignorance sequence** | **Craving sequence** | **Second truth** |
| **Causes of rebirth** | 1. Ignorance 2. willful actions | 8. Craving 9. Fuel/taking up | • Craving |
| **Rebirth** | 3. Consciousness 4. Imm. aspects & body | 10. Existence 11. Birth | • A next life (‘re-existence’) |
| **Results of rebirth** | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | 12. Suffering, incl. old age and death | • Suffering |

The sequence from craving down to suffering I call the ‘craving sequence’ and all preceding factors the ‘ignorance sequence’. These two sequences function side by side in the creation of a next life. Both contain factors pertaining to rebirth, which means the twelvefold sequence describes the process of rebirth twice, illustrating the same process from two different angles. This is useful, because it lets us reflect upon the origin and cessation of suffering in multiple ways. The Visuddhimagga says the two are different ways of teaching which are suitable for different people.[[38]](#footnote-39) To generalize, we might say the ignorance sequence focuses on the ethical and cognitive aspects, the craving sequence on the emotional and existential ones.

The double inclusion of the process of birth in the full sequence fits the Buddha’s inquiry in §11: “They are born, age, die, pass on, and are reborn again.” It also emphasizes that every birth is a rebirth. It is often assumed that in the Buddha’s India everybody believed in rebirth, but the discourses regularly mention the materialistic view of a single lifetime. This could have prompted the Buddha to describe the process of birth twice in the sequence, clarifying that it is about rebirth.

Possible development of the twelvefold sequence

Later chapters will repeatedly show that there are indeed two parallel descriptions of rebirth in the twelvefold sequence, but the link between sensations and craving already hints that at this place two shorter sequences may have been joined together. Take the statement, “if sensations cease, craving will cease”. While this may theoretically be true, the actual way to end craving is not through ending sensations. Craving can only be ended through wisdom, through removing ignorance. The link between sensations and craving therefore seems a little artificial, possibly inserted to connect the two shorter sequences into the twelvefold one.

Based on various other grounds, many scholars have come to similar conclusions.[[39]](#footnote-40) Tilmann Vetter for example concluded: “Two different chains of dependent origination of suffering were superficially combined into the twelvefold chain. The first part (links 1–7) [the ignorance sequence] is a more developed attempt at explaining the origin of suffering than the second part.”[[40]](#footnote-41) Franz Bernhard likewise thought: “It is noticeable that factors 8–12 [the craving sequence] are just a further elaboration of the basic idea of the four noble truths. […] Originally the Buddha identified only thirst [i.e. craving] as the cause of rebirth […] later—apparently influenced by and in controversy with competing contemporary systems—came then the rationale for rebirth through avidyā, ignorance.”[[41]](#footnote-42)

Text-critical evidence for such a possible development comes from three Chinese parallels to the Mahānidāna Sutta.[[42]](#footnote-43) They all start with the craving sequence beginning at old age and death, later mention a sequence going from craving down to consciousness, but never combine the two into the longer ninefold sequence found in the Pāli version, which goes straight from old age and death down to consciousness. See the table below, where for sake of comprehensiveness I also added the Dīrgha Āgama parallel to the same sutta, which contains all twelve factors.[[43]](#footnote-44)

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 3. Sequences in Mahānidāna Sutta and its parallels

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **MĀ 97, T 14 & T 52 (two shorter sequences)** | **DN 15, Mahānidāna (9-fold sequence)** | **DĀ 13 (full 12-fold sequence)** |
| • Old age & death • Birth • Existence • Fuel/taking up • Craving ————————— • Craving • Sensations • Sense impressions • (Six senses, T 52 only) • Imm. aspects & body • Consciousness | • Old age & death • Birth • Existence • Fuel/taking up • Craving • Sensations • Sense impressions • Imm. aspects & body • Consciousness | • Old age & death • Birth • Existence • Fuel/taking up • Craving • Sensations • Sense impressions • Six senses • Imm. aspects & body • Consciousness • willful actions • Ignorance |

As another indication for the combination of the two parallel sequences, one Pāli discourse joins the craving sequence in its cessation mode to part of the ignorance sequence in its origination mode. In this discourse the cessation of craving does not depend on the cessation of feeling, as in the default sequence.

And what is the cessation of suffering? A sight-consciousness arises dependent on the sense of sight and sights. The combination of the three is a sense impression. Dependent on sense impressions, there are sensations. Dependent on sensations, there is craving. But if craving completely fades away and ceases, fuel/taking up will cease. If fuel/taking up ceases, existence will cease. If existence ceases, birth will cease. And if birth ceases, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress, will cease. That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases. That is the cessation of suffering. [Similar for the other five senses.][[44]](#footnote-45)

Discourses such as this may have been precursors to the standard twelvefold sequence. I do not wish to discuss the possible development of this sequence further here, however, as such analysis quickly becomes overly speculative. My point is simply that it is one piece of evidence for seeing two parallel descriptions of rebirth in the twelvefold sequence. And to clarify, unlike some scholars I do not mean to suggest the twelvefold sequence, or any other version of Dependent Arising in the Pāli Canon, was devised by someone other than the Buddha.[[45]](#footnote-46)

Ignorance and craving as the two roots

When the twelve factors of Dependent Arising are seen to contain two parallel sequences, craving and ignorance together become the primary causes for rebirth. A Tibetan commentary to the Udānavarga indeed separates the twelvefold chain into two shorter parallel ones that start with these two factors.[[46]](#footnote-47) The Visuddhimagga also states: “When speaking of the cycle of rebirth, the Blessed One made two things the starting point: ignorance […] and craving for existence.”[[47]](#footnote-48)

Two sequential discourses in the Itivuttaka neatly illustrate the last point.[[48]](#footnote-49) These discourses are included below, but first it will be helpful to know that transmigration (saṁsāra) in the canon always means the cycle of repeated birth and death, never some sort of mental wandering, and that delusion (moha) is a close synonym for ignorance,[[49]](#footnote-50) as also borne out by these verses:

Those who journey again and again,  
transmigrating through births and deaths,  
going from one state of existence to another:  
their destinations are just due to ignorance.

Ignorance is indeed the great delusion  
because of which we have long transmigrated.  
But beings who have attained knowledge  
do not go on to a next life.[[50]](#footnote-51)

The two discourses from the Itivuttaka on ignorance and craving:

I heard this was said by the Buddha, said by the enlightened one: “Mendicants, I don’t see any other obstruction, obstructed by which people continue to roam around and transmigrate, like the obstruction of ignorance. Obstructed by ignorance, people continue to roam around and transmigrate for a long time.”

That is what the Buddha said, and this is said about it:

“There is no single other thing  
obstructed by which people  
continually transmigrate  
like being blinded by delusion.

Those who abandoned delusion,  
who pierced the mass of darkness,  
transmigrate no more,  
since they lack the condition for it.”

I heard that this was also said by the Buddha.[[51]](#footnote-52)

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I heard this was said by the Buddha, said by the enlightened one: “Mendicants, I don’t see any other chain, chained by which people continue to roam around and transmigrate, like the chain of craving. Chained by craving, people continue to roam around and transmigrate for a long time.”

That is what the Buddha said, and this is said about it:

“A person who has craving as a spouse,[[52]](#footnote-53)  
transmigrates for a long time,  
going from one state of existence to another,  
never getting out of transmigration.

Craving is the origin of suffering.  
Once mendicants know this problem,  
they should wander without forgetting it,  
free from craving, not taking anything.”

I heard that this was also said by the Buddha.[[53]](#footnote-54)

The close connection between ignorance and craving also presents itself in the phrase ‘obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving’ (or ‘hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving’). This phrase occurs frequently, always in direct connection with rebirth, most commonly in, “the transmigration of beings who roam around obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving”.[[54]](#footnote-55) Other examples are: “Existence in a future life is produced because beings, obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, look for happiness in various realms” and “the fool’s current body originated because they were obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving [in the past life]”.[[55]](#footnote-56) Particularly relevant for our discussion on consciousness is a statement in §71: “The consciousness of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, gets planted in the lower [or middle or higher] realm. That is how existence in a future life is produced.”

Ignorance and craving are also found as a pair in other contexts. In the Sangīti Sutta they are even recited as a specific group of two.[[56]](#footnote-57) Their joint connection with rebirth also comes to the fore in verses such as the following, where craving is sometimes substituted by desire (rāga):

Some renunciants and brahmins  
are plagued by desire and anger:  
men obstructed by ignorance,  
enjoying things that seem pleasing. […]

Shrouded in darkness [of ignorance],  
slaves of craving, led along,  
they take rebirth,  
swelling the horrible charnel grounds.[[57]](#footnote-58)

(A charnel ground is a place where corpses are deposited without burying them.)

Men set out for certain death,  
always being close to the King of Mortality.  
And when they discard this body here,  
they go where they desire.

Obstructed by ignorance,  
knotted by the four knots,[[58]](#footnote-59)  
caught in the net of the tendencies,  
the body drowns in the flood.

Hidden by delusion,  
chained by the five obstructions,  
afflicted by thoughts,  
following craving, the root.

That is how the body occurs,  
driven by the mechanism of deeds.  
Its acquirement ends in perishing:  
falling apart, it perishes.

Blind fools, ordinary people,  
who think the body is theirs,  
taking next lives,  
swell the horrible charnel grounds.

Those who avoid this body  
like a dung-smeared snake,  
having expelled the root of existence,  
the undefiled, will get fully extinguished.[[59]](#footnote-60)

(The five obstructions (nīvaraṇa) are the five hindrances in meditation.)

In the last passage, which is spoken by Kappa, craving is called the root for birth and death, which it is also called elsewhere.[[60]](#footnote-61) As we shall see shortly, ignorance is sometimes also called the root. To my knowledge, none of the other twelve factors is ever called such, which again shows that ignorance and craving were regarded as the two most fundamental causes of rebirth.

./img/rootsofrebirth.png=A prickly plant labeled ‘suffering of rebirth’ with a root labeled ‘ignorance and craving’.=30=border   
Figure 2. Craving and ignorance as the root of rebirth

To return to the tower of bricks, since ignorance and craving are intrinsically connected, when you pull out the brick of ignorance, you pull out craving at the same time. See the following drawing:

./img/brickspulltwo.png=A stack of twelve bricks with a rope tied around the bottom and eighth one from the bottom which are labeled ‘ignorance’ and ‘craving’ respectively. A hand pulls on the rope.=30=border  
Figure 3. Ignorance and craving are removed together

Some discourses on Dependent Arising contain only the craving sequence, omitting the preceding ignorance sequence. We already encountered an example of this at §6 and will see some others later.[[61]](#footnote-62) Such explanations are possible because the craving sequence by itself already forms a complete teaching on the origin of suffering, just like Sāriputta’s short explanation of Dependent Arising in §5, and just like the standard truth on the origin of suffering itself. We can therefore also contemplate the fundamental principles of Dependent Arising by considering only the five “bricks” of the craving sequence, as in the following illustration. This can be pragmatically relevant, since the ignorance sequence contains some terms which can be hard to relate to (particularly nāmarūpa) while the craving sequence may be more readily understood.

./img/brickssmall.png=A stack of five bricks with a hand pulling out the bottom one. The bottom brick is labeled ‘craving’, the top one ‘suffering’, and the one below the top one ‘birth’. The hand is labeled ‘wisdom’.=30=border  
Figure 4. The craving sequence as a stack of bricks

The hand that pulls out the brick of craving I labeled ‘wisdom’ to emphasize craving cannot be removed by an act of will or by simply being mindful. It requires deep insights into the nature of life. Craving itself depends on ignorance, on not seeing reality as it is. We will always desire existence as long as we think there is some sort of real happiness to be found in it, as long as we don’t understand what suffering is. That is why the Buddha said:

Mendicants, I mentioned you can find no beginning to the craving for existence, such that before that, there was no craving for existence, and after that, it came into being. However, the craving for existence is still seen to be dependent on something. I tell you the craving for existence has its nutriment, it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for the craving for existence? Ignorance, you should answer.[[62]](#footnote-63)

The phrase “you can find no beginning” also implies that this is about rebirth, because elsewhere it is always used with respect to saṁsāra.[[63]](#footnote-64)

The following verse also depicts the dependency of craving on ignorance:

All the wishes and delights that are always  
connected to the many and various realms,  
yearnings sprung from the root of unknowing:  
I eliminated them all, along with their root.[[64]](#footnote-65)

Here unknowing (aññāṇa), i.e. ignorance, is said to be the root of yearning, i.e. craving. Ignorance can be regarded as the root of craving, because craving can never be fully ended without destroying ignorance. We may be able to temporarily stop our desires, but as long as the root of ignorance still exists, the weed of craving will keep coming up.

./img/rootofcraving.png=A flower growing from a root. The flower is labeled ‘craving’ and the root ‘ignorance’.=30=border  
./img/rootofcravingb.png=A root developing a small sprout. The root is labeled ‘ignorance’, the sprout ‘potential craving’.=30=border  
Figure 5. Ignorance as the root of craving

Since craving depends on ignorance, yet another way to depict Dependent Arising as a tower of bricks is with a stick between ignorance and craving, as illustrated next. It is another way to think about the two parallel sequences.

./img/bricksstick.png=A stack of five bricks on top of a stack of six bricks on top of one bottom brick. The five bricks also lean on the bottom brick by means of a connecting stick. The bottom brick has a string around it which is pulled by a hand. The bottom brick is labbeled ‘craving’, the stack of six bricks has ‘rebirth’ and suffering’. The bottom brick of the top stack of five bricks is labeled ‘craving’, the bricks above that ‘rebirth’, and the top brick ‘suffering’.=30=border  
Figure 6. The two sequences as connected stacks of bricks

I fear this illustration may be confusing, so let me explain. As long as ignorance stays in place, there will be craving; as long as there is ignorance and craving, there will be rebirth; and as long as there is rebirth, there will be suffering. The only way to end the problem is by removing ignorance, because it is the only brick with a string to pull. If you remove ignorance, then craving will cease, and as a result rebirth and suffering will too.

Please know that the illustration is limited by nature, and also do not think of it as a causal sequence working up from the bottom. There are not two separate rebirths, for example, even though the word ‘rebirth’ is included twice. The two bricks labeled as such are in reality not different rebirth processes. In a sense we might even say they are part of the same brick. The same applies to the two bricks labeled ‘suffering’, and to ignorance and craving, which may be seen as the combined root for rebirth.

With that in mind, let me give one last tower analogy. We can also think of the twelve factors of Dependent Arising like this:

./img/fivebricks.png=A stack of five bricks on top of a stack of six bricks on top of one bottom brick. The five bricks also lean on the bottom brick by means of a connecting stick. The bottom brick has a string around it which is pulled by a hand. The bottom brick is labbeled ‘craving’, the stack of six bricks has ‘rebirth’ and suffering’. The bottom brick of the top stack of five bricks is labeled ‘craving’, the bricks above that ‘rebirth’, and the top brick ‘suffering’.=30=border  
./img/fivebricksfall.png=A stack of five bricks on top of a stack of six bricks on top of one bottom brick. The five bricks also lean on the bottom brick by means of a connecting stick. The bottom brick has a string around it which is pulled by a hand. The bottom brick is labbeled ‘craving’, the stack of six bricks has ‘rebirth’ and suffering’. The bottom brick of the top stack of five bricks is labeled ‘craving’, the bricks above that ‘rebirth’, and the top brick ‘suffering’..=30=border  
Figure 7. The two parallel sequences as one stack of bricks

To briefly clarify, craving and ignorance are the fundamental problems. Together they underlie the more active defilements of willful actions and taking up. At death, the will causes the (re)taking up of the five aggregates, which leads to the continuation of consciousness into a next existence. This results in a birth in the respective realm, producing the immaterial aspects and body along with the six senses. Having six senses, there will be old age and death and all other suffering: all the sensations that come from sense impressions.[[65]](#footnote-66) That is how the two parallel sequences function together to create suffering.

But if there is no ignorance, there will be no craving either. Lacking them, there are also no (defiled) willful actions, which include taking up. Without the propulsive power of those, there will not be another existence and no consciousness continuing after death. Then there is no next birth, and therefore also no immaterial aspects & body, and no six senses. Having no six senses, there are no sense impressions, no sensations, and therefore no suffering. And, as the Buddha would say, that is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.

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The idea of there being two parallel descriptions of rebirth in the twelvefold sequence, which is also the fundamental interpretation of the Pāli commentaries, is in modern times often called the ‘three-lifetime model’. But this term is confusing and possibly ill-informed, because as explained, the factors can also span just two lives, with ignorance and craving working together in the creation of a single rebirth. To explain the general principles the commentaries give a specific example of how the factors can span three lives, but the model is not limited to this, as the commentaries themselves also make very clear. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains: “The [commentarial] distribution into three lives is only an expository device which, for the sake of concision, has to resort to abstraction and oversimplification.”[[66]](#footnote-67) None of the factors are limited to one particular life either. For instance, unenlightened beings were ignorant in the past life and still are in the current one, and as a consequence they suffer in the current life and will continue to do so in the next. It does not mean that ignorance only existed in the past life and suffering only in the future one. One would think this goes without saying, but it is a perennial misunderstanding of the model.[[67]](#footnote-68)

Putting this book in perspective

I hope the tower-of-bricks analogy in its various forms made the abstract idea of dependency a bit more tangible. However, it has its limits, like all analogies, and it does oversimplify some things. Most significantly, it paints a very static picture which fails to convey that rebirth is an active process. It does not properly depict the propulsive forces behind rebirth, the tendencies of the mind to move on to a next life, which are present primarily in the factors of willful actions and taking up. To offset this, Chapter 10 is dedicated to these factors. For now, with a preliminary understanding of Dependent Arising, we can turn to our main sutta, the If There is Desire Discourse, and start investigating the term appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa.

But before we do, I want to pause for one more moment to provide some perspective, because we will dive in the deep end and rarely get back to the shallows. We will discuss some of the factors in Dependent Arising that are most enigmatic, primarily those of willful actions, consciousness, and the immaterial aspects and body (nāmarūpa). It will take us into technical details, obscure texts, linguistic aspects of Pāli, and some hotly debated passages, all of which might make it seem like those who do not study a lot, have no chance of understanding Dependent Arising. But this is far from the truth. Real insights will come from meditation, not from study. The technical observations made here are not necessary to arrive at these insights.

Still, the Buddha taught Dependent Arising for good reasons. As long as we are able to appreciate some of the cultural and textual complications, there are some important lessons to be learned from every link in the chain. The following chapters will hopefully help unravel some of these complications and thereby shed some light not only on the Buddha’s teachings but also on the nature of life itself.

3. Rebirth and “name and form”

The meaning of ‘birth’, ‘old age’, and ‘death’

As explained in the previous chapter, the twelve factors of Dependent Arising should not be read in a vacuum. They have to be interpreted in a larger context, otherwise it is all too easy to misunderstand what they are about. It would be like visiting only the final lecture of a university course, when the professor summarizes all that he taught that semester, using terms that were defined in earlier lectures.

To give a concrete example, the factors of ‘birth’, ‘old age’, and ‘death’ are sometimes interpreted to refer to the constant arising and passing away of certain mind states or of a sense of self.[[68]](#footnote-69) But that the Buddha did not have this in mind quickly becomes apparent once his definitions of these terms are considered. These definitions occur at least seven times in the Nikāyas, including in texts with such names as The Analysis of the Truths and The Discourse on Right View.[[69]](#footnote-70) In the Nidāna Saṁyutta, the connected discourses on Dependent Arising, they occur four times:

And what is old age and death? The old age of all kinds of beings in any order of beings—them being old, having broken teeth, gray hair, wrinkled skin, decreased vitality, and failing faculties: that is what’s called old age. The passing on of all kinds of beings from any order of beings—their passing away, deceasing, dying, death, demise, the end of their life, their aspects of existence breaking up, them laying down the body: that is what’s called death. The two taken together, that is what’s called old age and death.

And what is birth? The birth of all kinds of beings into whatever order of beings—them being born, their conception, their production, their aspects of existence manifesting, them obtaining the sense faculties: that is what’s called birth.[[70]](#footnote-71)

It should be needless to say that states of mind don’t have broken teeth or gray hair, and are not the laying down of the body.

Another important text to consider is the Mahānidāna Sutta, the Great Discourse on the Sources [of Things],[[71]](#footnote-72) which is the most detailed discourse on Dependent Arising in the Pāli Canon. It explains the connection between birth and death as follows:

“Ānanda, I said old age and death depend on birth, which is to be understood as follows: If there were completely and utterly no birth at all, not of anyone anywhere—not of gods into the state of gods, not of celestials, not of spirits, not of ghosts, not of human beings, not of quadrupeds, not of birds, not of creepy-crawlies into the state of creepy-crawlies—not of any beings into any state. Then, with the total absence and cessation of birth, would old age and death occur?”

“No, sir.”[[72]](#footnote-73)

Another relevant discourse is the Mahāpadāna Sutta, where the Buddha tells the story of the bodhisattva Vipassī leaving his palace in a chariot. (This story in later centuries got mistaken to be about Gotama’s own life.)[[73]](#footnote-74) On his travels, Vipassī met an old person, a sick person, and a dead person. On coming back to his palace he said: “Curse this thing called birth! For old age, sickness, and death will come to those who are born.” He soon thereafter wondered, just like Gotama in §11: “People have really gotten into trouble. They are born, age, die, pass on, and are reborn again. Yet they don’t see any escape from this suffering, this old age and death and so on. When will an escape from all this finally be found?”[[74]](#footnote-75) This question resulted in Vipassī’s insights into Dependent Arising, which also shows that birth, old age, and death are not states of mind or other momentary processes.

But this might have been less clear if we only considered the words themselves and not the way they are used. It’s an example of using context to determine the meaning of words. Instead of focusing on single words, we should look at the canon as a whole. Unfortunately, things are not as obvious with the factors of ‘willful actions’, ‘consciousness’, and ‘the individual’s immaterial aspects and body’, but this makes it even more important to consider as many relevant contexts as possible. Although these factors are not as clearly defined, their role in Dependent Arising is clarified in many discourses, including the one we’re primarily concerned with, the If There is Desire Discourse, which I will introduce after a note on the term bhava.

The meaning of bhava

Earlier I said my interpretation of Dependent Arising differs a little from tradition. For all intents and purposes this is only true for the factor of bhava, which I translate dependent on context as ‘existence’ or ‘state of existence’. It basically means a life in a certain place, the continuance of existence after death in a certain realm. The Pāli commentaries include in this factor both rebirth into a next existence and the karma leading to that next existence, although they do so inconsistently.[[75]](#footnote-76) I do not think the inclusion of karma has any basis in the early texts and agree with Eviatar Shulman: “Bhava probably [just] means a state of existence, a rebirth as a creature in any one of the different realms. Such a reading of bhava has been suggested by numerous scholars.”[[76]](#footnote-77) One of these scholars, Lambert Schmithausen, more directly stated that the interpretation of bhava as karma is alien to the early discourses and from their perspective can safely be disregarded.[[77]](#footnote-78) Venerable Bodhi also notes at the Bhava Sutta: “What is meant [by bhava] is a concrete state of individual existence in one of the three realms”,[[78]](#footnote-79) which are the sensual, form, and formless realms. This is in accordance with how bhava is defined in context of Dependent Arising.[[79]](#footnote-80)

This interpretation also finds ancient support. The Arthaviniścaya Sūtra is a Sanskrit early text which in its section on Dependent Arising first explains the factor of bhava as occurring in three realms, just like the Pāli discourses, but then subdivides these realms further. Under the sensual realm it mentions animals, human beings, and lower gods, among others beings; under the form realm it mentions the gods of the Brahmā realm and higher; and under the formless realm it mentions the gods that spend their whole life span in one of the four formless states.[[80]](#footnote-81)

The Madhyama Āgama parallel to the Mahānidāna Sutta likewise explains the link between existence (有) and birth by saying that there is existence of fish in the state of fish, birds in that of birds, and so forth.[[81]](#footnote-82) The idea appears to be that the being first has to come to a certain realm before being physically born there. A curious but illuminating sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya confirms this when stating that certain highly developed non-returners will still obtain existence but not birth.[[82]](#footnote-83) They are said to attain full extinguishment (parinibbāna) “in between”, which means in a state of existence after death but before taking a proper rebirth.[[83]](#footnote-84)

Venerable Nāgārjuna, who held the same general interpretation of Dependent Arising as this book, wrote in the second century that for the liberated one there will be no further existence and that “existence (bhava) is the five khandhas”.[[84]](#footnote-85) Nāgārjuna’s view is well-supported by the Pāli Canon. For example, Uttara says in the Therāgātha:

No state of existence (bhava) is permanent,  
nothing created is eternal.  
The aspects of existence (khandhas) are reborn  
and pass away, one time after another.[[85]](#footnote-86)

It is also said that a being after death gets reborn in a certain state of existence (bhava-upapatti).[[86]](#footnote-87) The Ratana Sutta states the stream enterer won’t have an eighth bhava, meaning an eighth life.[[87]](#footnote-88) At least one discourse further says that all bhava only ends at the death of an enlightened being,[[88]](#footnote-89) which also disproves the common idea that it means some momentary “becoming” that ends at enlightenment.

The discourses in many other ways indicates that bhava means existence, not karma or becoming,[[89]](#footnote-90) but since this difference in interpretation is not of too much concern for the current discussion on consciousness, I will leave it at this. Let us instead turn to our main discourse.

The If There is Desire Discourse

The If There is Desire Discourse is included in full here, but various sections will be requoted and clarified later, with the main purpose of explaining appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa.

“Mendicants, there are four nutriments, which maintain beings who are born and support those to be reborn. What four? The first is edible food, whether coarse or fine, the second is sense impression, the third is intention, and the fourth is consciousness. Those are the four nutriments, which maintain beings who are born and assist those to be reborn.

If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout [in a next life]. Where consciousness is planted (patiṭṭhita) and sprouts, there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Where there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, willful actions develop [their results]. Where willful actions develop, existence in a future life is produced. Where existence in a future life is produced, there is future birth, old age, and death. Where there is future birth, old age, and death, there will be sorrow, anxiety, and distress, I tell you.

If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of sense impression … intention … consciousness, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout. […]

It’s like an artist or painter producing a complete figure of a man or woman on a well-polished board, a wall, or a canvas, using dye, lac, turmeric, indigo, and crimson. If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout. Where consciousness is planted and sprouts, there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Where there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, willful actions develop. Where willful actions develop, existence in a future life is produced. Where existence in a future life is produced, there is future birth, old age, and death. Where there is future birth, old age, and death, there will be sorrow, anxiety, and distress, I tell you.

If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of sense impression … intention … consciousness, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout. […]

Mendicants, if there is no desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food, then consciousness will not get planted (appatiṭṭhita) and will not sprout. When consciousness is not planted and does not sprout, then there will be no conception of any immaterial aspects and body. When there is no conception of any immaterial aspects and body, then no willful actions develop. When no willful actions develop, then no existence in a future life is produced. When no existence in a future life is produced, then there will be no future birth, old age, and death. When there is no future birth, old age, and death, then there will be no sorrow, anxiety, and distress, I tell you.

If there is no desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of sense impression … intention … or consciousness, then consciousness will not get planted and will not sprout. […]

Mendicants, imagine a house or a hall with windows facing the north, south, and east. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would that beam plant down?”

“On the western wall, sir.”

“And where would it plant down if there were no western wall?”

“On the earth, sir.”

“And where would it plant down if there were no earth?”

“On the water, sir.”

“And where would it plant down if there were no water?”

“It would not plant down anywhere, sir.”

“Likewise, if there is no desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food, then consciousness will not get planted and will not sprout. When consciousness is not planted and does not sprout, then there will be no conception of any immaterial aspects and body. When there is no conception of any immaterial aspects and body, then no willful actions develop. When no willful actions develop, then no existence in a future life is produced. When no existence in a future life is produced, then there will be no future birth, old age, and death. When there is no future birth, old age, and death, then there will be no sorrow, anxiety, and distress, I tell you.

If there is no desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of sense impression … intention … or consciousness, then consciousness will not get planted and will not sprout. […]”[[90]](#footnote-91)

Even though this discourse serves as an explanation of Dependent Arising, it is by no means the clearest text on the topic. It can be puzzling at first, so the remainder of this book will explain it in detail, finishing with my interpretation of the simile of the light beam.

To start, like most if not all suttas on Dependent Arising, the If There is Desire Discourse primarily concerns rebirth. That is why the Buddha said the four nutriments support those to be reborn.[[91]](#footnote-92) These four nutriments also maintain beings who are already born, which is most obvious in the case of the nutriment of edible food. Stop eating, and you’ll die. This is even the case for enlightened beings. However, as its title suggests, the If There is Desire Discourse is not about eating food, but about desiring food, and this desire is what will lead to being reborn.

If at death there still is desire for the four nutriments, the discourse says, it results in rebirth. To abbreviate: “If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving […], existence in a future life is produced.” This is just a rephrasing of second truth of the noble one, which says the origin of suffering is “the craving that leads to a next life, which, along with enjoyment and desire, looks for happiness in various realms”. Notice the identical terms ‘craving’, ‘enjoyment’, and ‘desire’. Also found in both statements is the word punabbhava, which I normally translate as ‘next life’, but the expression ayatiṁ punabbhava I translate as ‘existence in a future life’. This expression is elsewhere equated to “lying in a womb in the future”.[[92]](#footnote-93)

Sāriputta once rephrased the second truth as follows. Notice here the reappearance of ‘existence in a future life’ and ‘look for happiness in various realms’.

Existence in a future life is produced because beings, obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, look for happiness in various realms.[[93]](#footnote-94)

To clarify the connections between these three texts, the statement by Sāriputta has the following factors:

* Ignorance and craving
* Looking for happiness in various realms
* Production of existence in a future life

The truth on the origin of suffering has:

* Craving, desire, and enjoyment
* Looking for happiness in various realms
* A next life

And the If There is Desire Discourse has:

* Craving, desire, and enjoyment
* Planting of consciousness
* Conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body
* Development of willful actions
* Production of existence in a future life
* Birth

These three texts convey the exact same ideas, just in various levels of details. Some of the terminology may be a bit elusive at first—I’m referring specifically to the planting of consciousness and the conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body—but in essence they all say that craving and other defilements lead to rebirth.

We can also compare the If There is Desire Discourse to the standard sequence of Dependent Arising, using the following table. Observe how certain terms reoccur in different places.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 4. If There is Desire Discourse alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Ignorance sequence** | **Craving sequence** | **If There is Desire Discourse** |
| 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions | 8. Craving 9. Fuel/taking up | • Craving, desire & enjoyment |
| 3. Consciousness 4. Imm. & body | 10. Existence 11. Birth | • Planting of consciousness • Conception of imm. & body • Development of willful actions • Production of existence • Birth |
| 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | 12. Suffering,   incl. old age and death | • Suffering,   incl. old age and death |

This table not only further clarifies that the If There is Desire Discourse is about rebirth, it also is an indication that the craving and ignorance sequences indeed function in parallel, as was presumed when they were first introduced. The discourse takes an alternative route through the standard factors, namely: craving (8) › consciousness (3) › the individual’s immaterial aspects and body (4) › existence (10) › birth (11) › suffering (12).[[94]](#footnote-95) It therefore shifts from the craving sequence to the ignorance sequence and back, showing that these two sequences are different ways to describe the same process. (The development of willful actions in the If There is Desire Discourse is not equal to the willful actions of the ignorance sequence, though. It is the development, the outcome, of willful actions, not the actions themselves. I’ll return to this.)

Conception

That the If There is Desire Discourse is about rebirth can also be derived from the sentence, “where consciousness is planted and sprouts, there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body”. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi rightly concluded that this means “the arrival of the current of consciousness from the past existence into the new one [resulting in] the arising of a new psychophysical organism at conception”.[[95]](#footnote-96) Here ‘conception’ (avakkanti) means the kind that happens at a pregnancy. The word is also used in the definition of ‘birth’ (§20) and in the largest discourse on Dependent Arising in the Pāli Canon, the Mahānidāna Sutta, which mentions the conception of consciousness together with the immaterial aspects and body in the mother’s womb (§84). In the Sampasādanīya Sutta the Buddha also mentions conception in the mother’s womb, as does Raṭṭhapāla in the Therāgāthā. The nun Isidāsī likewise describes having been conceived in the wombs of various animals.[[96]](#footnote-97) ‘Conception’ clearly refers to the process of birth here.[[97]](#footnote-98)

Another reference to pregnancy in context of Dependent Arising occurs in the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

[…] there is a conception of a fetus. When there is a conception, there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. [And so on.][[98]](#footnote-99)

The meaning of avakkanti is also clarified by the Pāli Canon’s second-largest text on Dependent Arising, the Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving, which also mentions the conception of a fetus. It describes the birth of a child who, if he remains attached to sensations, will be reborn again. So there are two subsequent births in this passage, just like in the default sequence of Dependent Arising.

Mendicants, a fetus is conceived (avakkanti) when there is a combination of three things. No fetus is conceived when the mother is not in her fertile period, even though there is coitus of the mother and father, and a spirit to be reborn is awaiting. Nor is a fetus conceived when no spirit to be reborn is awaiting, even though the mother is in her fertile period, and there is coitus of the mother and father. But when there is coitus of the mother and father, the mother is in her fertile period, and a spirit to be reborn is awaiting, a fetus is conceived.

The mother then carries the fetus inside her womb for nine or ten months: a heavy burden, causing much anxiety. After those nine or ten months she gives birth: another heavy burden, causing much anxiety. When the infant is born she nourishes it with her own blood, for mother’s milk is called ‘blood’ in the training of the Noble One.

The boy grows up and his faculties mature. He plays children’s games such as somersaults, tipcat, pinwheels, toy ploughs, toy weights, toy carts, and toy bows. The boy grows up further and his faculties mature further. He amuses himself, being well supplied and provided with the objects of the five senses: sights cognized with the sense of sight, sounds cognized with the sense of hearing, smells cognized with the sense of smell, flavors cognized with the sense of taste, and tangibles cognized with the sense of touch, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasing, sensual, and alluring.

When he sees sights with the sense of sight, he gets attracted to pleasing ones and becomes averse to displeasing ones. He does not practice recollection of the body. He has a restricted mind, and does not accurately understand where those bad, unwholesome qualities completely cease: the liberation of the mind and liberation through understanding. Favoring and opposing in that way, whatever sensations he feels—whether pleasant, painful, or neutral—he enjoys, welcomes, and keeps holding on to them. It results in enjoyment, and when there is enjoyment of sensations, there is fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates. [Similar for the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, the sense of touch, and the mind.][[99]](#footnote-100)

Although in this specific passage we do not encounter ‘the individual’s immaterial aspects and body’, just prior the discourse includes it in the standard sequence of Dependent Arising. The following table puts this standard sequence alongside the main concepts of the passage. Take note of their similarity, in particular that the arising of the immaterial aspects and body is equivalent to the conception of the fetus.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 5. Birth of a child alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Standard sequence** | **Birth of a child in §26** |
| **Rebirth** | 3. Consciousness 4. Immaterial aspects & body | • Spirit to be reborn • Conception of fetus • Birth |
| **Results of rebirth** | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | • Six senses  • Sensations |
| **Causes of rebirth** | 8. Craving 9. Fuel/taking up | • Enjoyment • Fuel/taking up |
| **Rebirth** | 10. Existence 11. Birth | • Existence • Birth |
| **Results of rebirth** | 12. Suffering,   incl. old age and death | • Suffering,   incl. old age and death |

As a sidenote, ‘spirit to be reborn’ translates gandhabba. The term is rarely used in this context, and its meaning has been a matter of some debate.[[100]](#footnote-101) The commentary understands it to refer to the being to be reborn. The Ekottarika Āgama parallel uses ‘external consciousness’ (外識),[[101]](#footnote-102) which must refer to the being’s consciousness that has not yet entered the womb, similar to the description of the Mahānidāna Sutta (§84). This is what in part makes Venerable Anālayo “allow for an identification of the gandhabba with the viññāṇa” of Dependent Arising.[[102]](#footnote-103) In a similar context in the Assalāyana Sutta, the gandhabba is said to be either a ruler, brahmin, merchant, or worker.[[103]](#footnote-104) The Madhyama Āgama parallel clarifies that this refers to their past life and refers to the gandhabba as “the one to be born”.[[104]](#footnote-105) After an analysis of the term in both Buddhist and Vedic contexts, Wijesekera also concluded: “The term was deliberately employed by early Buddhism, perhaps for the first time in the religious history of India, to denote the ‘surviving factor’ in man.”[[105]](#footnote-106) The reason for the debate is that this conclusion has little connection with how the term is used in the rest of the canon, where it usually refers to a type of mythological heavenly being. I translate gandhabba here in line with the Pāli commentaries and Āgamas, as ‘spirit to be reborn’. (In accepting this interpretation, however, I would add that it seems reasonable the spirit can also arrive a considerable time after the intercourse of the parents, or put differently, that ‘conception of the fetus’ does not refer to the biological fertilization of the egg but to a later point during gestation, namely the moment the spirit enters the womb.)

Regardless of what gandhabba exactly means in this passage, its presence results in the conception of the fetus, which is followed by the arising of the sense faculties. Earlier the discourse also said, in line with the standard sequence of Dependent Arising, that the six senses are generated and brought about by the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.[[106]](#footnote-107) So in the same text we have fetus › six senses, and immaterial aspects and body › six senses. It is therefore logical to relate the immaterial aspects and body to the fetus also here, just as in §25, which said, fetus = immaterial aspects and body › the six senses. In these instances, ‘fetus’ and ‘immaterial aspects and body’ are practically synonymous, both leading to the six senses.

The development of the fetus into the boy whose “faculties mature” can be seen as more or less equivalent to the immaterial aspects and body leading to the six senses in the standard sequence. As Vetter observed: “The six sense organs cannot start to function fully before the moment of birth. They may be seen as the result of the growth of a person (‘name and form’) in the mother’s womb.”[[107]](#footnote-108)

The connection between the immaterial aspects & body and the six senses is also clarified by the Mahānidāna Sutta, which skips the six senses in its list of factors and has sense impressions depend directly on the immaterial aspects and body; see table 6. The six senses, which, as Vetter said, are the sense “organs”, cannot reasonably be included under sense impressions. If we assume the Mahānidāna Sutta describes the same basic principles as the default sequence—and there is no reason not to—they must therefore be included under nāmarūpa.[[108]](#footnote-109) This indicates that both the six senses and nāmarūpa are part of the same thing, namely the being. As Bhikkhu Bodhi explained the link between them: “The sentient organism with its physical form (rūpa) and its sensitive and cognitive capacities (nāma) […] is equipped with six sense bases (saḷāyatana), the five physical sense faculties and the mind as organ of cognition.”[[109]](#footnote-110)

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 6. Mahānidāna Sutta alongside standard sequence

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Standard sequence** | **Mahānidāna Sutta** |
| 3. Consciousness 4. Immaterial aspects & body 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations 8. … | • Consciousness • Immaterial aspects & body  • Sense impressions • Sensations • … |

To summarize this section, the conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body in the If There is Desire Discourse is the same type of conception described in the other passages included in the above, which is that of a being.

As a final observation, although both the Mahānidāna Sutta and the Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving specifically talk about human conception, this does not mean that the conception of the immaterial aspects and body always takes place in the human realm. Conception also happens for other beings, and also outside of wombs. Still, the Buddha’s teachings on Dependent Arising do tend to focus on human existence. The reason seems straightforward: most of his listeners were humans, who could relate to human birth more readily.

You too are a human, and when reflecting on rebirth it may even be helpful to wonder how you arrived in this particular life, how you ended up in your mother’s womb. This is what the Buddha encourages his followers to do when he describes the psychic power of past life recollection: “You remember passing away from [the last life], and being reborn here.”[[110]](#footnote-111) Most of your current attachments are likely also in the human realm, encouraging future rebirth in a womb again. The child in the Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving is not just any child: it represents the listener. Do you want to go through that process again? Being “a heavy burden, causing much anxiety” for yet another mother? Reflecting like this, these passages on fetuses and wombs, which at the surface might seem unpragmatic, start to become relevant.

Historical context of “name and form”

I have already deviated from the If There is Desire Discourse quite a bit, intending to show that the conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body (nāmarūpa) refers to rebirth. Before returning to this discourse, in the remainder of this chapter I will further clarify this nāmarūpa. Erich Frauwallner found the interpretation of this term “offers no difficulties”,[[111]](#footnote-112) but I disagree, even though we arrived at similar conclusions. Nāmarūpa is not an easy concept, because a rich cultural history lies behind it. It can be very unintuitive to us, especially when translated literally as ‘name and form’. It misses some of the ancient implications, but I prefer a more pragmatic and self-explanatory translation, ‘the individual’s immaterial aspects and body’, in part because in the Buddha’s time the term nāmarūpa would have been quite self-explanatory too. The Buddha had profound insights but always used everyday language to convey them.

The term nāmarūpa was not invented by the Buddha. It also occurs in the Upaniṣads, and has precursors in the earlier Vedas. That does not necessarily make the term specific to the Brahmins, however. “It seems safe enough to assume that Upaniṣadic terminology represents more or less the prevalent verbal conventions of the age contemporary with and immediately prior to the time of the historical Buddha, and that the Buddha did not deviate from these conventions without a compelling cause”, thought Reat.[[112]](#footnote-113) In other words, nāmarūpa already had certain connotations to the Buddha’s contemporaries. He simply adopted this term from society—although not without some philosophical differences, as we’ll see.

We no longer have the same connotations with “name and form”, which is why some clarification is required. Grammatically nāmarūpa is a compound consisting of two words: nāma and rūpa. It likely originated as a possessive adjective rather than noun, as Liudmila Olalde suggests in the excellent Zum Begriff ‘nāmarūpa’: das Individuum im Pāli-Kanon (On the concept ‘nāmarūpa’: the individual in the Pāli Canon).[[113]](#footnote-114) That is to say, the word meant ‘with a name and form’ rather than ‘the name and form’. In Pāli it is common for such adjectives to be used as nouns also. This is like the English adjective ‘wise’ being used as a noun in ‘the wise’, meaning people with wisdom. Likewise, the compound nāmarūpa refers to an individual being with a certain name (nāma) and form (rūpa).

As to the component of rūpa, in the suttas in general the word has a variety of meanings. It includes all sorts of appearances, such as colors, shapes, and dimensions, including those perceived with the mind, but it also encompasses the things which are perceived through their appearances.[[114]](#footnote-115) For example, both the appearance of a fire and the fire itself were considered rūpa. By extent rūpa also included the four elements which were believed to be the substratum out of which all appearances and material manifest.[[115]](#footnote-116) This does not align with modern ideas, which makes rūpa not only hard for us to grasp but also impossible to translate accurately. Most translators stick to ‘form’ regardless of context, which in some instances may be too specific and in others too general. Remember earlier, when K.R. Norman said it is impossible to give a one on one translation for Pāli terms? Rūpa is a good example of this.

In the compound nāmarūpa as it is ordinarily used, rūpa refers specifically to the physical form of the being, which is why I translate it as ‘body’ in this context. The word rūpa has this meaning in other places too. One discourse says, “the form (rūpa) of mortals gets old”, and another says, “with reference to this body: this form is seen to be discarded [at death]”.[[116]](#footnote-117) Yet another says the space enclosed by flesh and skin is called ‘form’.[[117]](#footnote-118) Although rūpa far from always refers to the body, it does mean the body in some instances, and one of these instances is nāmarūpa. The Upaniṣads also mention “my name (nāma) and my body (śarīra)”, where rūpa seems to be replaced with śarīra, a more literal term for body.[[118]](#footnote-119)

Nāma, which literally means ‘name’, will require a longer explanation. As part of nāmarūpa the Pāli discourses define it as “sensation, perception, intention, sense impression, and attention”,[[119]](#footnote-120) which are subjective, immaterial parts of an individual’s experience, hence my translation ‘immaterial aspects’.[[120]](#footnote-121) But this definition of nāma may, and perhaps should, strike us as odd. Why would such parts of the being be called ‘name’?

To answer this question we have to take a detour from the Pāli Canon into the texts of the Brahmins. In those texts the term nāmarūpa was used to refer to individual beings, who all had their own specific names and forms (or ‘visible appearances’, per Olivelle). Their names and forms made beings distinguishable from others. In the Rig Veda, cows are said to differ from all other types of animals in appearance and also in name (‘cow’ instead of ‘horse’, say) but individual species of frogs can only be distinguished from one another by their appearance, not by name since they are all called ‘frog’.[[121]](#footnote-122) The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad also shows that the term nāmarūpa was used in ordinary speech to refer to individual beings. It describes how gods, humans, and other beings were created at the start of time, and then says:[[122]](#footnote-123)

At that time this world […] was distinguished simply in terms of name and visible appearance—“He is so and so by name and has this sort of an appearance.” So even today this world is distinguished simply in terms of name and visible appearance (nāmarūpa), as when we say, “He is so and so by name and has this sort of an appearance.”[[123]](#footnote-124)

Other early Upaniṣads also speak of “the name and form of beings”.[[124]](#footnote-125) Even earlier, the Atharva Veda mentions the name and form of a man.[[125]](#footnote-126) The Buddha used nāmarūpa similarly, to refer to individuals with their name and form.

Name as one’s essence

There is a more complex layer to nāma, however, because there existed in society also a belief that the being’s name was an intrinsic part of that being. It was considered just as much a piece of them as their body, if not even more essential. The Buddha adopted the conventional term nāmarūpa as a reference to individual beings, but not the belief that the name was part of the individual. His “definition” of ‘name’ as sensations, perceptions, and so forth, therefore was in all likelihood a skillful reinterpretation intended to challenge such beliefs, formed only after he already adopted the term nāmarūpa conventionally.

Let me clarify what sort of ideas the Buddha was replying to. In the thought-world of the time the name was generally considered an intrinsic part of the one who carried it. “A personal name is not different from the name bearer, on the contrary, it is an essential part of it”, found Olalde after an analysis of nāmarūpa in Brahmanic texts.[[126]](#footnote-127) This notion was described more extensively by Jan Gonda:

Among students of comparative religion and cultural anthropology it is a matter of common knowledge that the name was widely regarded as an essential part of its bearer, as in a way identical with him; that it is “equivalent to his true existence” [quoting Eliade] or “is to be regarded as an essential part of his personality” [quoting Masani]. […] This belief obtained also in ancient India. Over and over again authors give evidence of their conviction that the connections between a name and its bearer, whether this is a person or a thing, is so intimate that there is for all practical purposes question of identity. […] Names are as essential a part of man’s personality as his physical strength, his organs, his life-breath.[[127]](#footnote-128)

The name “designates the whole character structure of man, perhaps because in ancient and archaic thought the name of a person magically incorporated its bearer’s personality”.[[128]](#footnote-129) It was also believed to survive death, and to travel with the person to the afterlife. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the brahmin sage Yājñavalkya is asked what doesn’t leave a person when he dies, and he answers, “his name”.[[129]](#footnote-130)

Such ideas about names are not unique to ancient India, nor are they merely theories of ancient texts. Anthropologist James George Frazer wrote in 1890:

Primitive man regards his name as a vital portion of himself and takes care of it accordingly. Thus, for example, the North American Indian regards his name, not as a mere label, but as a distinct part of his personality, just as much as are his eyes or his teeth, and believes that injury will result as surely from the malicious handling of his name as from a wound inflicted on any part of his physical organism. […] A Brahmin child receives two names, one for common use, the other a secret name which none but his father and mother should know. The latter is only used at ceremonies such as marriage. The custom is intended to protect the person against magic, since a charm only becomes effectual in combination with the real name.[[130]](#footnote-131)

We can assume that many of these ideas were not unique to the Brahmins either. The belief that one’s name was an intrinsic part of one’s being likely prevailed throughout the Buddha’s India.

But for Brahmins the implications of names went further still. A Brahmin child was not fully recognized until given their (secret) name. Without a name they did not really exist as a person, because it was their name and form that separated beings from the shapeless, nameless universe, so Brahmins believed.

The naming of a child brings us back to conception and birth. Joanna Jurewicz wrote about a Brahmanic birth ritual “in the course of which the father accepted his son and gave him a name. By accepting his son, he confirmed his own identity with him; by giving him a name he took him out of the unnamed, unshaped chaos and finally created him.”[[131]](#footnote-132) The ritual, which was done to get a boy, started at the moment of intercourse. At this point in the process the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad contains a verse which is particularly interesting for our discussion, since it speaks of a fetus and forms in the mother’s womb. The father-to-be needed to recite this verse to his wife during intercourse in order to invoke the gods:

May Viṣṇu prepare your womb,  
and Tvaṣṭṛ mold the forms;  
May Prajāpati impregnate you,  
and Dhātṛ lay the fetus in you.[[132]](#footnote-133)

The text continues. After ten lunar months the baby boy is born. Before he is allowed to drink his mother’s milk, the father has to give him a name, apparently whispering it into his ear to keep it secret. At this point the child was deemed truly “created”.

So the Upaniṣads also contain a process of conception and birth, using the terms ‘womb’, ‘fetus’, ‘name’, and ‘form’—with the Sanskrit words all being equivalent to the Pāli: yoni, garbha, nāma, and rūpa respectively. There is a clear linguistic connection with Dependent Arising here, however distant, especially when we consider the Mahānidāna Sutta’s passage on the conception of “name and form” in the mother’s womb. (§84) Jurewicz believes the connection could explain the Buddha’s choice of “the term nāmarūpa to denote an organism in which vijñāna [consciousness] settles”,[[133]](#footnote-134) although we should not assume he did so based on this Brahmanic ritual alone. The Buddha surely did not believe in the efficacy of the Brahmanic birth ritual, nor did he adopt the philosophy of one’s name being a part of one’s being. But he did use nāma and rūpa in a similar fashion as the Brahmins. These words seem to have been a common way to refer to an individual.

The Buddha’s definition of nāma

The belief that one’s name was an essential part of one’s being may have prompted the Buddha’s definition of nāma, which he defined as sensation, perception, intention, sense impression, and attention. Initially he used the word nāmarūpa as it was used in common speech: to refer to the individual. The specific definition of nāma was likely formed later. As Frauwallner observed: “The name, according to a very old idea, is a separate entity […] With the gradual development of the term ‘form’ […] the meaning of the idea ‘name’ also shifted. Thereunder were [by the Buddha] understood in contrast to corporeality the psychical factors [of sensation, perception, etc.]”[[134]](#footnote-135)

Their name is something beings tend to identify with. It is something that “provides an abstract identity for the individual”,[[135]](#footnote-136) something beings tend take to be ‘them’. But this type of identification is contrary to the Buddha’s view of reality. “The fact that nāma could easily have been identified with the core of a person or with a component subsisting after death may explain why its reinterpretation became necessary”, concluded also Olalde.[[136]](#footnote-137) The Buddha’s definition (or, rather, reinterpretation) of nāma was not meant as an exact classification of certain parts of the being, nor was it intended to pinpoint what ‘name’ exactly is. It was a way to tell people that their names were just impersonal things, a way to teach anatta, the absence of self. Instead of telling them what ‘name’ is, the Buddha basically said, “this is how this thing we call ‘name’ should be looked at” (that is, not as a self-like entity, but as made of sensation, perception, and so forth). The Buddha was a pragmatist. Rather than giving a textbook-style definition, he taught something people could use for contemplation.

But why did he use these specific five factors: sensation, perception, intention, sense impression, and attention? Contemporary interpreters have presented their thoughts on this as if they are canonical, but no early discourse actually gives an explanation. The Visuddhimagga’s interpretation of ‘bending (namana) towards things’ is based on a playful but false etymology of nāma and cannot be taken seriously.[[137]](#footnote-138) The Śāriputra Abhidharma suggests that the factors take part in the mental process of naming things.[[138]](#footnote-139) We might go along with this suggestion, as long as we keep in mind that nāma does not mean ‘naming’ but ‘name’, particularly one’s proper name, like the one given at birth.[[139]](#footnote-140) A name is a label, not a process. So sensation, perception, and so forth, were not meant to be what ‘name’ is but what bring it about. The Buddha was then saying that the name is not an innate part of the being but something arisen through processes like attention and perception. In other words, the names of beings in reality are nothing more than constructs formed by the mind based on its experiences.

Accepting this suggestion requires some assumptions, however, because no sutta says how or even if these five factors would be involved in such a process. At best a dense passage in the Mahānidāna Sutta on “designation contact” (§109) may hint at such ideas, but it leaves almost all of the factors of the definition of nāma unmentioned. So on the basis of the earliest texts this idea has to remain speculative.

As will be discussed later, consciousness is said to be dependent on nāmarūpa. With this in mind, let me propose another possible reason for the specific factors in the definition of nāma. It could be that the factors emphasize specific things consciousness depends on.[[140]](#footnote-141) Some passages say it relies on sense impressions and mental engagement (samannāhāra), a synonym for attention; it also relies on sensations and perception, which are intrinsically linked with it; and in the default sequence of Dependent Arising it is preceded by willful actions, which is synonymous with intentions.[[141]](#footnote-142) This neatly covers all five factors. Other conditions for consciousness, such as the physical senses, may then perhaps be included under rūpa.

But whatever the Buddha’s exact intentions behind the definition of nāma may have been, this definition is only a minor teaching in the suttas, one which plays no critical role in the standard teachings on Dependent Arising, where nāmarūpa conventionally refers to the individual. The definition of nāma, whatever its exact implications, is only a secondary layer on top of this, likely intended to challenge ideas about names being an intrinsic part of the being.

The definition of nāma in other texts

The Pāli Abhidhamma had lost contact with the ancient ideas about names and, with its aim to categorize phenomena into systematic frameworks, started defining nāma more strictly. It did so differently than the suttas, in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī as the four non-form aggregates of sensation, perception, will, and consciousness; see table 7.[[142]](#footnote-143) Richard Gombrich said about this: “The later Buddhist tradition did not understand how the Buddha had appropriated this term nāmarūpa from the Upaniṣads. Realizing that at this point in the chain [of Dependent Arising] there should be a reference to the emergence of the individual person, and knowing that the Buddha identified the person with the five khandhas, the tradition made nāmarupa equivalent to the five khandhas” (with nāma encompassing four of them, rūpa being the fifth).[[143]](#footnote-144) Gombrich then correctly states that the Abhidhamma’s definition is not in accordance with the suttas, where the consciousness is always separate from nāmarūpa. This definition seems to be relatively early, though, for it was also used by the Sarvāstivādins in the Saṁyukta Āgama, who thus shared the same general interpretation as the Theravādins.[[144]](#footnote-145)

An earlier layer of the Pāli Abhidhamma, the Vibhaṅga, defined nāma only as three aspects of existence: sensation, perception, and will.[[145]](#footnote-146) While this definition still differs from the suttas, by omitting consciousness it aligns better with the sutta definition. The Vibhaṅga realized that the aspect of existence of will (saṅkhāra) is effectively equal to intention. The Majjhima Nikāya commentary further suggests that alongside intention, sense impression and attention should also be seen as part of saṅkhāra.[[146]](#footnote-147) This seems to me somewhat of a stretch, but with intention being equivalent to saṅkhāra, the Buddha’s definition of nāma does contain three of the five aspects of existence (sensation and perception being the other two). And since nāmarūpa also includes the aspect of existence of form (rūpa), the compound functionally contains four of the five aspects of existence. From a pragmatic perspective the arising of consciousness along with the individual’s immaterial aspects and body is therefore equivalent to the arising of the five aspects of existence—which, as mentioned before, refers to the birth of the individual person.

The Śāriputra Abhidharma, which according to Frauwallner has an ancient core, seems to define nāma with the same factors as the Pāli suttas, as do some parallels in the Ekottarika Āgama.[[147]](#footnote-148) The Paṭisambhidāmagga, an early Pāli commentary, defines it with these factors as well, although it also adds some other observations.[[148]](#footnote-149) This definition of nāma seems to be the earliest one, in part also because it is the most difficult reading. As Gombrich stated, later traditions tried to fit the unfamiliar concept of nāma into the more familiar framework of the aggregates. This also suggests the exact intention behind its definition was already forgotten at an early age, at least by some traditions.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 7. Various definitions of nāma

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Pāli Suttas Śāriputra Abhidharma Ekottarika Āgama Paṭisambhidāmagga** | **Dhammasaṅgaṇī Saṁyukta Āgama** | **Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga** |
| • Sensation • Perception • Intention • Sense impression • Attention | • Sensation • Perception • Will (saṅkhāra) • Consciousness | • Sensation • Perception • Will |

The Buddha’s definition of rūpa

The rūpa part of nāmarūpa is defined by the Buddha as, “the four elements, along with form (rūpa) derived from the four elements”.[[149]](#footnote-150) Like other ancient civilizations, the Indians believed that the world was made of the elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Unfortunately, the suttas never directly explain what the form derived from these four elements is,[[150]](#footnote-151) and the Abhidhamma’s explanation seems way too contrived. I understand the elements to be the abstract qualities of solidity, fluidity, heat, and movement, and the form derived from them to be specific manifestations of these qualities, such as rocks, water droplets, or flames—or in the case of nāmarūpa, the various parts of the body.

A number of suttas tell us that physical form can be internal or external.[[151]](#footnote-152) The Longer Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint explains that internal form is parts of the body, such as bones and skin in the case of the element of earth, and saliva and sweat in the case of the element of water. External form is things outside of the person, such as the water in the ocean in the case of the element of water, and a fire in a village in the case of the element of fire.[[152]](#footnote-153) We have seen that nāmarūpa in the standard sequence of Dependent Arising refers to the being, which means that rūpa here refers to the internal (or ‘personal’, ajjhattaṁ) elements, not the external.

This is akin to how the factor of the six senses (saḷāyatana) refers to the internal six sense faculties of the eyes, ears, and so on, not to the external objects of sights, sounds, etc. Although in some texts the term saḷāyatana encompasses both the senses and their objects, as a factor of Dependent Arising it is specifically defined as the senses only, excluding the objects. To illustrate, the Analysis of the Six Sense Spheres says:

I said the six internal senses should be comprehended. What did I mean by that? The sense of sight (cakkhāyatana),[[153]](#footnote-154) the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, the sense of touch, and the mind. […]

I said the six external sense objects should be comprehended. What did I mean by that? Sights (rūpāyatana), sounds, smells, flavors, tangibles, and mental phenomena.[[154]](#footnote-155)

And the Analysis of Dependent Arising says:

And what are the six senses (saḷāyatana)? The sense of sight (cakkhāyatana), the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, the sense of touch, and the mind.[[155]](#footnote-156)

This shows that the external sense objects are not part of saḷāyatana in Dependent Arising.[[156]](#footnote-157) While sometimes the six sense faculties are specifically called ‘internal’, when saḷāyatana is used as a factor of Dependent Arising, it is assumed that the audience understands it refers to these internal senses, not to external objects. The same applies to rūpa in nāmarūpa: it is not specifically said to refer to the internal elements that compose the being’s physical form, but context indicates that it does. The water of the ocean and fires in a village do not exist in the mother’s womb, for example.

I mentioned that rūpa is defined as the four elements. Direct connections between the body and the four elements are also made throughout the Nikāyas. A common phrase says “this body (kāya) consists of form (rūpa), is made up of the four elements”.[[157]](#footnote-158) The Satippaṭṭhāna Sutta instructs meditators to look at their body as consisting of the four elements, like a butcher might look at the various cuts of a cow.[[158]](#footnote-159) This instruction aims to remove attachment to the body. This also seems to be the primary intent behind the definition of rūpa in context of Dependent Arising. Earlier I argued that the Buddha’s definition of nāma is not an exact classification of parts of the being but a means to contemplate the absence of a self. With rūpa the situation is similar. Its definition is not a metaphysical statement on what ‘form’ really is, but a way to contemplate that the body is a part of nature. As with nāma, the Buddha is not saying “this is what I mean by rūpa” but “this is how this rūpa should be looked at”. We should look at the body as made of the elements, of aspects of nature that we do not own and cannot control.

According to Hamilton, this is also why the term rūpa is used rather than kāya (body): “It stresses that the body is comprised of a group of processes which are classified according to four kinds of characteristics [of] solidity, fluidity, heat, and motion, [which] allows the reader to gain more understanding of how the body is constituted in a way the designation kāya does not.”[[159]](#footnote-160) I would add that in our day and age we might prefer to look at the body as made of chemical elements or atoms. This would serve the same function as the Buddha’s definition of rūpa, at least in this context. (I should note again that the term rūpa can have other connotations which do not apply in the current context.)

Considering the Buddha’s pragmatism, ‘definition’ may even be a wrong way to think about these things. Instead of strict, technical classifications, we are dealing with didactics (ways of teaching), not only in the case of nāmarūpa but also for some of the other factors. Consider craving:

And what is craving? There are six kinds of craving: craving for sights, craving for sounds, craving for smells, craving for flavors, craving for tangibles, and craving for mental phenomena. That is what’s called craving.

If the Buddha meant to explain what craving exactly is, we would be better helped with synonyms for craving or with an explanation of how it functions. This list tells us absolutely nothing about what craving is. But it does remind us of the things we crave for, and that is helpful. We encountered a similar case already at §2: the definition of consciousness as consisting of six types. It doesn’t really tell us what consciousness exactly is, but it tells us what things we can be conscious of. When the Buddha concludes this definition with, “that is what’s called consciousness”, in this case it means something like, “what you call ‘consciousness’ in reality is this”—which is to say, it is not a homogeneous entity that underlies all experience, but something made up of six different types of consciousness. Similarly, the definitions of nāma and rūpa are to be seen as didactic tools.

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To summarize the main ideas of this chapter, the factor of nāmarūpa refers to the individual, and its two components represent certain aspects of that individual, which is why I translate it as ‘the individual’s immaterial aspects and body’. These things exist throughout the being’s entire lifespan, but their arising refers specifically to the start of life, to the being’s conception. The Buddha adapted the term nāmarūpa from the Upaniṣadic Brahmins, or more likely from general society, to whom it meant the individual with their visible form and intrinsic name. His definition of nāma was meant to challenge traditional ideas about names being part of oneself, and his definition of rūpa meant to challenge attachments to the body.

To close this chapter properly, it has to be noted that although the oldest use of nāmarūpa was a referent for individual beings,[[160]](#footnote-161) it was also used for individual objects. “The essence of a thing was expressed in its name and its visible appearance”, wrote Patrick Olivelle in the introduction to his translations of the Upaniṣads, with ‘thing’ meaning a person or an object.[[161]](#footnote-162) This philosophy seems to have resulted at least in part from the belief that objects had within them the essence of divine beings that bore their names. Campfires, for instance, as well as cooking fires, forest fires, and all other fires, were all considered to be part of the god Agni, whose name just means Fire. There was, to some Brahmins at least, no separation between the divine and the worldly, and hence also no clear boundary between the animate and inanimate. All bore intrinsic names and forms. But while nāmarūpa refers to external objects with some regularity in the Upaniṣads, in the Pāli Canon the word is used in this fashion very rarely, and always outside the standard teachings on Dependent Arising. Because of the minor place of this so-called external name and form, its discussion can wait until Chapter 9.

Chapter 8 explains nāmarūpa further, particularly its dependency on consciousness. Now we have a basic understanding of the concept, we can return to the If There is Desire Discourse, starting with the simile of the painting.

4. Painting a next life

The simile of the painting

To recall the If There is Desire Discourse:

It’s like an artist or painter producing a complete figure of a man or woman on a well-polished board, a wall, or a canvas, using dye, lac, turmeric, indigo, and crimson. If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout [in a next life]. Where consciousness is planted and sprouts, there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Where there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, willful actions develop [their results]. Where willful actions develop, existence in a future life is produced. Where existence in a future life is produced, there is future birth, old age, and death. Where there is future birth, old age, and death, there will be sorrow, anxiety, and distress, I tell you.

If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of sense impression … intention … consciousness, then consciousness will get planted and will sprout. […][[162]](#footnote-163)

Before turning to the actual simile, I want to address the order of the factors, which is as follows:

1. Craving, desire, and enjoyment
2. Planting of consciousness
3. Conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body
4. Development of willful actions
5. Production of existence in a future life
6. Birth, followed by old age and death and other suffering

In the standard sequence of Dependent Arising, willful actions precede consciousness, but here they are mentioned later. On this basis the commentary concludes that factors 2 and 5 signify two separate rebirths, with the planting of consciousness being the start of one life and the production of existence being the start of another. But this approaches the text too analytically, not allowing any flexibility in the order of the terms. Factors 2 through 6 instead all refer to a single rebirth. The word ‘where’ should be understood as the place of rebirth (as the commentary does note correctly) and where consciousness is reborn, there the immaterial aspects and body are conceived, there willful actions develop, and there a future life is produced. These things happen more or less in tandem, not sequentially. The order of factors therefore does not signify anything out of the ordinary. More significantly, as some readers may already have noticed, the factor following consciousness is not just ‘willful actions’ but ‘the development of willful actions’. This refers to the outcome of the actions, not the actions themselves. The outcome of willful actions is a specific rebirth with its attributes.

The following table may clarify the difference in interpretation:

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 8. Function of ‘development of willful actions’ in the If There is Desire Discourse

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Factor** | **Commentary** | **My interpretation** |
| 1. Craving, desire & enjoyment | Causes of rebirth | Causes of rebirth |
| 2. Planting of consciousness | First rebirth | One rebirth |
| 3. Conception of nāmarūpa | " | " |
| 4. Development of willful actions | Causes of rebirth | " |
| 5. Production of existence | Second rebirth | " |
| 6. Birth | " | " |

Regarding the simile of the painting, it is just a single line, but it contains a lot: “It’s like an artist or painter producing a complete figure of a man or woman on a well-polished board, a wall, or a canvas, using dye, lac, turmeric, indigo, and crimson.” This is a metaphor for how willful actions determine the quality of one’s birth and thereby one’s immaterial aspects and body.[[163]](#footnote-164) In detail: the artist or painter (wholesome or unwholesome actions) produces a complete figure of a man or woman (an incarnation) on a board, wall, or canvas (the sensual, formed, or formless realm) using five paints (the five aspects of existence). Further, the word for ‘figure’ (rūpa) in “producing a complete figure of a man or woman” refers to the bodily part of nāmarūpa. Even ‘producing’ (abhinibbatti) refers to rebirth. It is also used in the Mahānidāna Sutta, which mentions the production of the immaterial aspects and body in the mother’s womb;[[164]](#footnote-165) in the If There is Desire Discourse itself in “existence in a future life is produced”; and in the very definition of birth at §20.

Many people relate better to visual images than abstract ideas, which is why the Buddha gave similes such as this. To aid visualization, here is my painting of the simile of the painting (with apologies for my artistic skills):

./img/painterrealms.png=A board, a wall, and a canvas, labeled ‘the three realms’.=30=border  
./img/painter.png=A painter labeled ‘willful actions’ painting a person labeled ‘next life’ with five colors of paint labeled ‘five khandhas’.=30=border  
Figure 8. Painting a person as a simile for rebirth

The production of existence in one of the three realms according to one’s actions is further illustrated in the Bhava Sutta at §71.

The simile of the painting and transmigration

Despite the If There is Desire Discourse mentioning future birth and the production of existence in a future life, some interpreters do not think the simile of the painting is about rebirth, believing it instead illustrates the formation of certain thought constructs or cognitions.[[165]](#footnote-166) But there is a reason the painted figure is specifically a being, not a lifeless object like a bowl of fruit or a landscape: the simile specifically depicts the production of a next life. This is further clarified by the Second Discourse on the Leash, where the Buddha uses the same simile to describe the varieties of births beings produce within transmigration (saṁsāra):

“Mendicants, transmigration has no discernible beginning. You can find no beginning to the transmigration of beings who roam around obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving. Imagine a dog on a leash tied to a strong post or pillar. Whenever he would walk, stand, sit, or lie down, he would do so right beside that post or pillar. Likewise, unlearned ordinary people regard form to be them, to be theirs, to be their self. They regard sensation, perception, will, and consciousness to be them, to be theirs, to be their self. Whenever they walk, stand, sit, or lie down, they do so right along those five taken up aspects of existence. Therefore, you should regularly reflect upon your mind, thinking: ‘For a long time this mind has been contaminated with desire, anger, and delusion.’ Beings are contaminated because the mind is contaminated. They are purified when the mind is purified.

Mendicants, have you seen the picture called ‘Wandering’?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The diversity in that picture called ‘Wandering’ is made by the mind. Yet the mind is even more diverse than that picture. Therefore, you should regularly reflect upon your mind, thinking: ‘For a long time this mind has been contaminated with desire, anger, and delusion.’ Beings are contaminated because the mind is contaminated. They are purified when the mind is purified.

I do not know any order of beings so diverse as the animal realm. The diversity in the animal realm is also made by the mind [through rebirth]. Yet the mind is even more diverse than that. Therefore, you should regularly reflect upon your mind, thinking: ‘For a long time this mind has been contaminated with desire, anger, and delusion.’ Beings are contaminated because the mind is contaminated. They are purified when the mind is purified.

It’s like an artist or a painter producing a complete figure of a man or woman on a well-polished board, a wall, or a canvas, using dye, lac, turmeric, indigo, and crimson. When unlearned ordinary people produce a next life,[[166]](#footnote-167) they produce just form, sensation, perception, will, and consciousness.”[[167]](#footnote-168)

This is how I understand the primary messages of this sutta: Our minds have been defiled for a long time (meaning many lifetimes) and because of this we have been going through the cycle of birth and death for a long time. Throughout our journey, obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, like a dog leashed to a pillar, we have been reborn as animals (probably even as dogs) and also in many other circumstances. But wherever we were reborn, life was always just the five aspects of existence, which we foolishly desired and mistakenly took to be ‘us’. Wherever we were reborn, we always reproduced these five aspects of existence and never went beyond them, like the dog can’t ever leave his pillar. The mind is responsible for creating all these various rebirths, just like painters are responsible for their paintings.

The preceding sutta in the Saṁyutta Nikāya, the First Discourse on the Leash, also clarifies these ideas. It specifically says that if one keeps circling like a dog around the five aspects of existence, one is not liberated from birth.[[168]](#footnote-169)

As a sidenote, the name of the picture ‘Wandering’ (caraṇa) can also be translated as ‘Conduct’. About this picture the commentary says, in Venerable Bodhi’s translation: “The Sankha were a sect of heretical Brahmins. Having taken a canvas, they had various pictures painted on it of the good and bad destinations to illustrate success and failure, and then they took it around on their wanderings. They would show it to the people, explaining, ‘If one does this deed, one gets this result; if one does that, one gets that.’”[[169]](#footnote-170)

Much more could be said about this discourse, which is also full of puns that don’t show in translation, but my point here is merely that the simile of the painting refers to the creation of rebirth in this discourse, and therefore it also does in the If There is Desire Discourse. This in turn tells us something about the simile of the light beam in that same discourse, namely that it is about the cessation of rebirth.

But that simile will be discussed only in Chapter 11. First we will have a further look at the factors of willful actions and consciousness.

5. Karma and rebirth

Just as the quality of a painting is determined by the skill of its painter, the quality of a being’s rebirth is determined by the moral wholesomeness of the actions performed throughout their life. To simplify, like bad painters make ugly paintings and good painters make beautiful ones, bad actions lead to bad rebirths and good actions to good ones. This chapter discusses how this principle relates to the factors of willful actions and consciousness.

Willful actions as a synonym for karma

As the title of this section indicates, I will show here that willful actions are a synonym (or near synonym) for karma.[[170]](#footnote-171) This may already be known and accepted by most readers, but it bears repeating, for many non-traditional interpretations of Dependent Arising err here.

Karma is the Sanskrit form of the Pāli word kamma, which I translate as ‘deeds’. Throughout the discourses deeds are continually connected to rebirth. They are also connected directly to Dependent Arising, as in these verses:

This is how the wise  
see deeds (kamma) in line with reality,  
seers of the dependent arising of things,  
knowing deeds and their results.

Deeds make the world go round and round,  
deeds make people go round and round.  
Beings are bound [to saṁsāra] by their deeds,  
like a cartwheel by the linchpin.[[171]](#footnote-172)

./img/linchpin.png=A cartwheel held by a pin through the axle. The wheel is labeled ‘samsara’ and the linchpin ‘karma’.=30=border  
Figure 9. A linchpin as a simile for karma

Given the direct connection with Dependent Arising in these verses and elsewhere,[[172]](#footnote-173) deeds should fit somewhere in the twelvefold scheme, and the primary if not only candidate is willful actions. (By ‘willful’ I mean ‘intentional/volitional’, not ‘stubborn’.) The Pāli for ‘willful actions’ is saṅkhāra. It is linguistically connected to kamma, which is a bit more apparent in the Sanskrit form karma. (Saṅkhāra = saṁ+√kar+a. Kamma/karma = √kar+ma.)

In the context of Dependent Arising saṅkhāra and kamma are effectively synonymous. The following extracts bear witness to this, showing the close connection between the two. The first extract gives the definition of saṅkhāra not as a factor of Dependent Arising, but as one of the five aspects of existence. In this context I usually translate it as ‘will’ instead of ‘willful actions’, but the Pāli word is the same in both cases, and the two contexts are intrinsically linked.

And what is will [or ‘willful actions’, saṅkhāras]? There are six types of intentions: intentions with respect to sights, intention with respect to sounds, intentions with respect to smells, intentions with respect to flavors, intentions with respect to tangibles, and intentions with respect to mental phenomena. That is what’s called will/willful actions.[[173]](#footnote-174)

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I define deeds (kamma) as intention. You intend something before you perform a deed, whether a physical, verbal, or mental one.[[174]](#footnote-175)

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And what are willful actions (saṅkhāras)? There are three kinds of willful actions: physical, verbal, and mental willful actions. That is what’s called willful actions.[[175]](#footnote-176)

The last extract is the definition of saṅkhāra in the context of Dependent Arising. In this context saṅkhāra depends on ignorance, so it only concerns the intentional actions performed by the unenlightened. Enlightened beings still have intentions, so the general aggregate of saṅkhāra (the will) still exists. But these intentions are not based on ignorance and will not lead to rebirth, so they are not part of the saṅkhāra in Dependent Arising. The same applies to karma. Enlightened beings still do certain intentional deeds, but they no longer count as karma, basically by definition, because they are not based on defilements and do not lead to rebirth.

In the above quotations, saṅkhāra and kamma are both said to be based on intention (cetanā) and are both described as being physical, verbal, and mental. Their synonymity is even more apparent in the following texts, which also show their connection to rebirth.

And what are dark deeds (kamma) with dark results? Then someone performs harmful physical, verbal, and mental willful actions (saṅkhāras). That is what’s called dark deeds with dark results.

And what are bright deeds with bright results? Then someone performs pleasing physical, verbal, and mental willful actions. That is what’s called bright deeds with bright results.[[176]](#footnote-177)

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If you possess three qualities, you end up in hell as if dragged down there. What three? Unwholesome physical, verbal, and mental deeds. If you possess these three qualities, you end up in hell as if dragged down there.

If you possess three qualities, you end up in heaven as if carried up there. What three? Wholesome physical, verbal, and mental deeds. If you possess these three qualities, you end up in heaven as if carried up there.[[177]](#footnote-178)

(To be clear, heaven and hell in the canon are always places of rebirth, not states of mind.)[[178]](#footnote-179)

Some have done bad physical, verbal, and mental acts, and have not done good physical, verbal, and mental acts. Because of what they have done (kata) and have not done, when their body falls apart, after death, they will be reborn in the lower plane, in a bad destination, a netherworld, a hell.

But others have done good physical, verbal, and mental acts, and have not done bad physical, verbal, and mental acts. Because of what they have done and have not done, when their body falls apart, after death, they will be reborn in a good destination, in a heaven.[[179]](#footnote-180)

(The word for ‘done’, kata (= √kar+ta), is also linguistically connected to kamma and saṅkhāra.)

And what are dark deeds with dark results? Then someone performs harmful physical, verbal, and mental willful actions. Having performed those willful actions, they get reborn in a harmful world. Being reborn in that world, harmful sense impressions impinge upon them. Being impinged by these, they feel exclusively painful sensations, as in the case of beings in hell. So the being’s rebirth is caused by the being itself: it will undergo rebirth according to its deeds. Once reborn, it is impinged by certain sense impressions. That is why I say beings inherit their deeds.

And what are bright deeds with bright results? Then someone performs pleasing physical, verbal, and mental willful actions. Having performed those willful actions, they get reborn in a pleasing world. Being reborn in that world, pleasing sense impressions impinge upon them. Being impinged by these, they feel exclusively pleasant sensations, as in the case of The Deities of Great Delight. So the being’s rebirth is caused by the being itself: it will undergo rebirth according to its deeds. Once reborn, it is impinged by certain sense impressions. That is why I say beings inherit their deeds.[[180]](#footnote-181)

The last quote is from the Dog-Duty Ascetic Discourse, which continues afterwards, saying beings can also perform a mixture of harmful and pleasing willful actions, leading to rebirth in places with a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as the human world. A text specifically called the Saṅkhāra Sutta says the same thing.[[181]](#footnote-182) Such statements are of course generalizations, but the basic idea is clear: willful actions determine the quality of the being’s rebirth.

The ways in which this happens fall outside the scope of this work. What matters for the current discussion is that since willful actions lead to rebirth, the link between willful actions and consciousness is about rebirth too.

When comparing the passage of the Dog-Duty Ascetic Discourse to the default teachings on Dependent Arising, we can also observe that ‘rebirth’ (upapatti) encapsulates the factors of consciousness and the immaterial aspects & body in the default sequence. See the following table for clarity. The six senses are not explicitly mentioned in the discourse, but they are clearly implied by the sense impressions, which is why I add them in brackets.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 9. Dog-Duty Ascetic Discourse alongside ignorance sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ignorance sequence** | **Dog-Duty Ascetic Discourse** |
| **Causes of rebirth** | 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions | • Deeds = Willful actions |
| **Rebirth** | 3. Consciousness 4. Immaterial aspects & body | • Rebirth |
| **Results of rebirth** | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | • (Six senses) • Sense impressions • Sensations |

At this point it may be good to mention that in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta the bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā also speaks of three types of activities (saṅkhāras).[[182]](#footnote-183) She limits physical activities to the breathing, verbal activities to mental processes that lead to speech, and mental activities to perceptions and sensations. The surrounding discussion is about the order in which these things cease when someone attains the deepest state of meditation, the cessation of perception. This is a different context from Dependent Arising. To illustrate, breathing is not based on ignorance, does not lead to the arising of consciousness, and is neither wholesome nor unwholesome. So Dhammadinnā’s definitions do not apply to saṅkhāra in Dependent Arising.[[183]](#footnote-184) She is using the three types of saṅkhāra in a different, more creative way.

The physical, verbal, and mental actions we are dealing with here are the ten kinds of wholesome and unwholesome deeds. To focus on the wholesome side:

There are three kinds of willful actions: physical willful actions, verbal willful actions, and mental willful actions.[[184]](#footnote-185)

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If you possess three qualities, you end up in heaven as if carried up there. What three? Wholesome physical deeds, wholesome verbal deeds, and wholesome mental deeds.[[185]](#footnote-186)

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If you possess ten qualities, you end up in heaven as if carried up there. What ten? (1–3) You don’t kill, steal, or engage in sexual misconduct. (4–7) You don’t lie, speak divisively, speak harshly, or engage in inappropriate chatter. (8–10) You don’t long, are kind, and have right view.[[186]](#footnote-187)

Qualities 1–3 are the physical deeds; 4–7 the verbal ones; and 8–10 the mental ones. These wholesome deeds are phrased primarily in terms of abstinence here, but longer expositions also tell us that not killing includes developing compassion, not stealing includes being generous, not speaking divisively means to converse in ways that unite people, and so forth. The Sāleyyaka Sutta is a good example of this. It also clarifies the above groupings, saying: “Physical conduct that’s principled and moral is threefold. Verbal conduct that’s principled and moral is fourfold. Mental conduct that’s principled and moral is threefold.”[[187]](#footnote-188) The Buddha then divides these three groups of conduct into the same ten listed above.

Throughout the discourses kamma (deeds) focuses on ethical conduct of this sort. Saṅkhāra (willful actions) often has a somewhat more technical slant, being more closely connected to the rebirth process itself. For example, there are so-called undisturbable (or ‘imperturbable’) saṅkhāras that lead to the rebirth in mental realms of pure and stable equanimity (hence the name ‘undisturbable’).[[188]](#footnote-189) There is also a discourse on determining one’s particular rebirth using will (saṅkhāra), the Saṅkhāra-upapatti Sutta.[[189]](#footnote-190) The term kamma is never used in such nuanced ways. It also seems that, while kamma refers to the general actions one does throughout life, saṅkhāra also includes the will that happens around the time of death itself, which would not be called kamma.[[190]](#footnote-191) This difference in usage may explain in part why not kamma but saṅkhāra is employed in Dependent Arising, where the factor is directly connected to the actual rebirth process. Saṅkhāra also does not seem to imply results of actions that occur in this life, unlike kamma, which can lead to being praised or blamed by others, getting a good or bad reputation, and similar results which are irrelevant to Dependent Arising.[[191]](#footnote-192)

Showing another link between willful actions and deeds in context of rebirth, the following verse talks about ‘meritorious deeds’ (puñña-kamma), which means the same as wholesome deeds.[[192]](#footnote-193)

All beings will die,  
for life ends in death.  
According to their deeds they will go on,  
reaping the fruits of meritorious and bad acts:[[193]](#footnote-194)  
those of bad deeds to hell,  
those of meritorious deeds to heaven.[[194]](#footnote-195)

The link with willful actions may not be immediately clear, but instead of meritorious deeds leading to a good rebirth, §55 mentions meritorious willful actions doing so: “If people influenced by ignorance perform meritorious willful actions, [after death] their consciousness will travel on to a place of merit.”

There are still more discourses that show a connection between karma and willful actions,[[195]](#footnote-196) but I think the point has been made, and we should look at how they relate to ignorance.

Karma and ignorance

Willful actions are said to be done out of ignorance, and in the following verses Raṭṭhapāla says deeds are done out of delusion. As observed earlier, delusion is a close synonym for ignorance, so these verses again show that deeds and willful actions are synonyms too.

So understanding is much better than wealth,  
because through understanding you reach perfection.  
Out of delusion you do bad deeds  
[i.e. out of ignorance you do bad willful actions],  
going from life to life, never reaching the goal.

Those who go to wombs and afterlives  
transmigrate repeatedly.  
Those of little understanding who place faith in them  
also go to wombs and afterlives.

Just as a thief caught at the door,  
is made to suffer for his bad deed,  
people, after departing, in the world beyond  
are made to suffer for their bad deeds.[[196]](#footnote-197)

The dependency of deeds on ignorance is also mentioned in an interesting exchange between Mahāmoggallāna, the Buddha, and a Jain named Vappa. Like other Jains, Vappa had a different idea of karma than the Buddha.[[197]](#footnote-198) The Jains thought all actions bind one to saṁsāra, regardless of intention. The only way to not create any karma therefore was being totally inactive, especially physically. Even eating was considered karma, so this inactivity went on until the Jain saint starved himself to death. But what mattered to the Buddha are the intentions behind the deeds. And because wrong intentions exist only in the deluded mind, to make karma stop, ignorance needs to be removed.

Like other Jains, Vappa also believed karma to attract physical particles that flow into and stick to the soul. These particles (also called āsavas, ‘defilements’)[[198]](#footnote-199) weigh the soul down, binding it to earth. They can only be worn away by long periods of abstinence from any actions. Even if your behavior is completely pure in this life, rebirth will still happen if these karmic particles are not yet completely worn away. The Buddha’s response to this belief is predictable: the defilements are completely removed as soon as ignorance disappears. Then all results of previous karma end at death, after which there will be no more rebirth. The Buddha phrased his response to Vappa as a question, which I will clarify afterwards.

[Mahāmoggallāna:] “Vappa, suppose someone is physically, verbally, and mentally restrained because their ignorance has faded away and knowledge has arisen. Do you see any reason why that person would after this life be affected by painful sensations produced by defilements?”[[199]](#footnote-200)

“I do, sir. The results of bad deeds done in the past may not have ripened yet. Because of that, after this life that person would still be affected by painful sensations produced by defilements.” […]

[The Buddha:] “What do you think, Vappa? Suppose for someone the troubling and feverish defilements that arise from ignorance no longer exist, because their ignorance has faded away and knowledge has arisen. They don’t do any new deeds, and [the results of] old deeds come to an end after being repeatedly impinged by them. […] Do you see any reason why that person would after this life be affected by painful sensations produced by defilements?”

“No, sir.”[[200]](#footnote-201)

The exchange contains a lot of Jain terminology used in a different sense by the Buddha, which makes it impossible to translate accurately.[[201]](#footnote-202) So if the passage sounds a bit odd, that is why. I hope the general idea is clear regardless. According to the Buddha, if you are enlightened, you still feel the results of past karma, because it created this life, but ignorance is gone, so you don’t do any new karma, and therefore you will not be reborn. The remainder of the discourse illustrates this further. The Buddha says liberated mendicants still experience sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, and mental phenomena—that is, they still have the six senses as a result of past deeds—but when they die, all that is experienced, not being desired, will “cool off”.

The word translated in the above as ‘impinged’ is phussa, which is related to phassa (sense impression). With this in mind, the Vappa Discourse portrays the sequence: ignorance › deeds › results of old deeds › sense impressions › sensations. As shown in the next section, the results of old deeds are the body and the six senses. What we have here, then, is a more basic version of the ignorance sequence, as shown in the following table:

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 10. Vappa Discourse alongside ignorance sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ignorance sequence** | **Vappa Discourse** |
| **Causes of rebirth** | 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions | • Ignorance • Deeds |
| **Rebirth** | 3. Consciousness 4. Immaterial aspects & body | • Results of deeds |
| **Results of rebirth** | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | • Results of deeds • Sense impressions • Sensations |

Willful actions creating rebirth

Knowing that deeds (kamma) are based on intentions and that they lead to the six senses through rebirth, we can also make sense of statements such as this:

And what is [the result of] old deeds? The sense of sight is [a result of] old deeds, and should be seen as created by will and intention, as something to be experienced. The sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, the sense of touch, and the mind are [the results of] old deeds, and should be seen as created by will and intention, as something to be experienced.[[202]](#footnote-203)

A similar statement occurs in the Nidāna Saṁyutta:

This body (kāya) does not belong to you nor to anyone else. It is [a result of] old deeds, and should be seen as created by will and intention, as something to be experienced.

Concerning that, as a noble disciple you closely and properly focus on the dependent arising of things, reflecting: ‘There will be this, only if there is that. This arises, because that arises. If there isn’t that, there won’t be this. If that ceases, this will cease. That is to say:

Dependent on ignorance, there are willful actions. Dependent on willful actions, consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. … That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

But if ignorance completely fades away and ceases, willful actions will cease. If willful actions cease, consciousness will cease. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease. … That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.’[[203]](#footnote-204)

The six senses and the body are said to be experienced, which means they must be experienced until one passes away, even for the enlightened. They should be seen as created, which refers to their creation at the start of life.

The word for ‘created’ here is abhisaṅkhata, a verb connected to the noun saṅkhāra. So when the Buddha says the six senses and body should be seen as created, this also means they are the result of willful actions. Hence I used the compound expression ‘created by will’ for abhisaṅkhata, following Venerable Sujato’s example.[[204]](#footnote-205)

Translating saṅkhāra is complicated in part because the word is not only used for the act of creating; it is also employed for the outcome of the creative act. This is similar to the English word ‘creation’, which can indicate both the active act and the passive outcome of it, as in “the creation of a creation”. The passive meaning applies to phrases such as sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, ‘all that is created [through rebirth] is suffering’,[[205]](#footnote-206) but it does not apply to saṅkhāra as a factor in Dependent Arising, which are the active physical, verbal, and mental actions that create rebirth.[[206]](#footnote-207)

The next passage speaks on these two sides of saṅkhāra too. It is impossible to convey the linguistic connections in translation without losing some of the meaning, so I included the Pāli alongside.

And why do you call them willful actions (saṅkhāras)?[[207]](#footnote-208) They willfully create (abhisaṅkharonti) the created (saṅkhata),[[208]](#footnote-209) that is why you call them willful actions. And what are the created things they create? Form is created; they create it. Sensation is created; they create it. Perception is created; they create it. Will is created; they create it. Consciousness is created; they create it.[[209]](#footnote-210)

As already indicated by the linguistic twists, this is not a hard-and-fast definition of saṅkhāra but more a loose, almost playful explanation of why the word is used. The explanation of ‘form’ in the same sutta even contains an unmistakable pun.[[210]](#footnote-211)

The idea here is that willful actions are the creative forces in the rebirth process. Along with craving they fabricate the aspects of existence of the future life. Venerable Sumedhā therefore says in the Therīgāthā: “The aspects of existence, elements, and senses are created (saṅkhata), rooted in birth.”[[211]](#footnote-212) This aligns with the definition of birth (§20), which includes the manifestation of the aspects of existence and the obtainment of the sense faculties. The Buddha similarly said about the five aspects of existence that they are “created, dependently arisen”.[[212]](#footnote-213)

Now we are also able to understand why in the simile of the painting willful actions are represented by a painter. A painter is a creator. Using the five paints, they produce the figure of a person, just like with the five aspects of existence you “produce” the next life.

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Another discourse linking willful actions directly to birth is the Precipice Discourse. This discourse also serves as a great example of the Buddha’s skillful use of metaphors, which in this case he appears to make up on the spot:

At one time the Buddha was staying at Rājagaha on Mount Vulture’s Peak. There he addressed the mendicants: “Mendicants, let’s go to the Peak of Inspiration to spend the day.”

“Yes, sir,” the mendicants replied.

Then the Buddha and a number of mendicants went to the Peak of Inspiration. A certain mendicant saw the deep precipice off the Peak of Inspiration and said to the Buddha: “Venerable sir, that precipice is really deep and truly scary! Is there any precipice that is even deeper and scarier?”

“There is such a precipice indeed, mendicant.”

“Which precipice is that, sir?”

“Some renunciants and brahmins do not understand in line with reality what suffering is, what the origin of suffering is, what the cessation of suffering is, and what the practice leading to the cessation of suffering is. They enjoy willful actions that lead to birth, to old age, to death, to sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. Enjoying those willful actions, they will perform them. Having performed those willful actions, they will fall down the precipice of birth, the precipice of old age, the precipice of death, the precipice of sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. They won’t get liberated from birth, old age, and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. They won’t get liberated from suffering, I tell you.

But some renunciants and brahmins do understand in line with reality what suffering is, what the origin of suffering is, what the cessation of suffering is, and what the practice leading to the cessation of suffering is. They do not enjoy willful actions that lead to birth, to old age, to death, to sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. Not enjoying those willful actions, they won’t perform them. Not having performed those willful actions, they won’t fall down the precipice of birth, the precipice of old age, the precipice of death, the precipice of sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. They get liberated from birth, old age, and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress. They get liberated from suffering, I tell you.

Mendicants, that is why you should take action to understand what suffering is, what the origin of suffering is, what the cessation of suffering is, and what the practice leading to the cessation of suffering is.”[[213]](#footnote-214)

./img/precipice.png=A person walks down a precipice. The person is labeled ‘ignorance’ and ‘willful actions’, the precipice ‘rebirth’, and the ground below ‘suffering’.=30=border  
Figure 10. Walking over a precipice as a simile for willful actions leading to rebirth

In this discourse, ignorance is represented by not understanding the four truths of the noble one, in accordance with the standard definition of ignorance:

And what is ignorance? Not knowing suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice leading to the cessation of suffering. That is what’s called ignorance.[[214]](#footnote-215)

This ignorance is followed in the discourse by willful actions, which in turn is followed by birth and so on. So the basic sequence is: ignorance of four truths › willful actions › birth › old age and death. The discourse therefore shifts from the ignorance sequence to the craving sequence, with the former half of its factors being the causes of rebirth and the latter half the outcome. See also the table below.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 11. Precipice Discourse alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Precipice Discourse** | **Ignorance sequence** | **Craving sequence** |
| • Not understanding truths • Willful actions | 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions | 8. Craving 9. Fuel/taking up |
| • Birth | 3. Consciousness 4. Imm. aspects & body | 10. Existence 11. Birth |
| • Suffering,   incl. old age and death | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | 12. Suffering,   incl. old age and death |

Willful actions leading to consciousness

With a basic understanding of the factor of willful actions, we can now consider how it connects to consciousness in the standard phrase, “dependent on willful actions, there is consciousness”. This will also clarify what the planting (or ‘establishing’) of consciousness refers to. To start, let’s consider the first paragraph of the First Discourse on Intention, which describes the continuation of consciousness in a next life as a result of certain intentions, plans, and tendencies:

Mendicants, what you intend, what you plan, and what you have a tendency towards, that is a foundation for the continuation of consciousness [after death]. If there is a foundation, there will be a support for the planting of consciousness.[[215]](#footnote-216) If consciousness is planted, it will sprout, and then existence in a future life is produced. If existence in a future life is produced, future birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress will come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.[[216]](#footnote-217)

The phrase “what you intend, what you plan, and what you have a tendency towards” is a reference to willful actions, as is evident from the word ‘intend’ and from it being placed before the continuation of consciousness, just as willful actions precede consciousness in the default sequence. Functionally the three items of this phrase overlap to a large extent. They are not further detailed in the early texts, but I reflect on some of their differences as follows:

1. ‘What you intend’ implies not only intentions around the moment of death but also intentional actions done throughout life. These can be recollected around death, causing remorse and elation, making one feel deserving of a certain rebirth. A discourse in the Aṅguttara Nikāya speaks of someone falling seriously ill, reflecting on their bad deeds, and deciding that after death they must go to a bad place. The Discourse on the Foolish and Wise in the Majjhima Nikāya mentions the same recollections, and then also says these “fools” are indeed reborn in a bad place.[[217]](#footnote-218)
2. ‘What you plan’ includes intentions to be reborn in a specific place. This is described in the Discourse on Rebirth Through Will (Saṅkhāra-upapatti Sutta), a text which also brings out the connection between saṅkhāras and rebirth.[[218]](#footnote-219)
3. ‘What you have a tendency towards’ refers to subtler underlying attachments that can trigger the will at death. It essentially represents ignorance and craving.[[219]](#footnote-220) The tendency (anusaya) of desire for existence,[[220]](#footnote-221) for example, may only surface when one is faced with imminent death.

The discourse says these three are “a foundation for the continuation of consciousness” and “a support for the planting of consciousness”. The **continuation** of consciousness means its continuation after death, as others have also argued, not some sort of continuation while one is still alive.[[221]](#footnote-222) This should already be evident from the subsequent phrase alone: “then existence in a future life is produced”. The general continuation of consciousness during life also does not depend on willful actions, so this can’t be what is referred to here. To illustrate, the consciousness of enlightened beings still continues as long as they live, even though they have no ignorance and resulting willful actions. The **planting** of consciousness is the mind moving on towards a certain place of rebirth, where it then “sprouts”, meaning the next life is started.[[222]](#footnote-223) The next chapter illustrates this further with the simile of the seed of consciousness. The Chinese parallel skips this phrase and even more directly says: “When there is a foundation for the continuation of consciousness, there is future birth [and so on].”[[223]](#footnote-224)

The First Discourse on Intention is part of the Nidāna Saṁyutta, the connected discourses on Dependent Arising, so we should compare it to the standard sequence. The discourse effectively follows another route through the factors: willful actions (2) › consciousness (3) › existence (10) › birth (11) › suffering (12). This reconfirms that the ignorance and craving sequences are parallel descriptions of the same process.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 12. 1st Discourse on Intention alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Ignorance sequence** | **Craving sequence** | **1st Discourse on Intention** |
| 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions | 8. Craving 9. Fuel/taking up | • What you intend, etc. |
| 3. Consciousness 4. Imm. aspects & body | 10. Existence 11. Birth | • Planting of consciousness • Production of existence • Birth |
| 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. Sensations | 12. Suffering,   incl. old age and death | • Suffering,   incl. old age and death |

The sutta that follows the First Discourse on Intention, unsurprisingly called the Second Discourse on Intention, also helps bring home all these points. It is more similar to the standard sequence of Dependent Arising, showing more clearly that ‘what you intend’ refers to the factor of willful actions. The conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, which we have seen refers to the conception and birth of a being, reoccurs here too.

Mendicants, what you intend, what you plan, and what you have a tendency towards, that is a foundation for the continuation of consciousness. If there is a foundation, there will be a support for the planting of consciousness. If consciousness is planted, it will sprout, and there is a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. Dependent on sense impressions, sensations. Dependent on sensations, craving. Dependent on craving, fuel/taking up. Dependent on fuel/taking up, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.[[224]](#footnote-225)

We can compare this to the First Discourse on Intention and the standard sequence:

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 13. 1st and 2nd Discourse on Intention alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **1st Discourse on Intention** | **2nd Discourse on Intention** | **Standard sequence** |
| • What you intend, etc. | • What you intend, etc. | 1. Ignorance 2. Willful actions |
| • Planting of consciousness • Production of existence • Birth | • Planting of consciousness • Conception of immaterial  aspects & body | 3. Consciousness 4. Imm. aspects & body |
| • Suffering,   incl. old age and death | • Six senses • Sense impressions • … | 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. … |

In the First Discourse on Intention, the planting of consciousness is followed by the production of existence in a future life; in the Second it is followed by the conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. So the production of a future life must be equivalent to the conception of the immaterial aspects and body. And indeed, the words ‘production’ and ‘conception’ are both part of the definition of birth: “The birth of any kind of being into whatever order of beings—them being born, their conception, their production, their aspects of existence manifesting, them obtaining the sense faculties.” The Saṁyukta Āgama parallel to the Second Discourse on Intention even places birth (生) directly after the conception of the immaterial aspects and body.[[225]](#footnote-226)

All this confirms once again that nāmarūpa refers to the being and that its conception means rebirth. It also shows that the planting of consciousness, which precedes this conception, is part of the rebirth process too.

Consciousness traveling on

The connections between ignorance, willful actions, and consciousness are also explained in another discourse in the Nidāna Saṁyutta. It says consciousness will ‘travel on’ as a result of ignorant willful actions which are either meritorious, demeritorious, or undisturbable. (‘Meritorious’ and ‘demeritorious’ are synonyms for ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome’, meaning good and bad.)[[226]](#footnote-227)

If people influenced by ignorance perform meritorious willful actions, their consciousness will travel on to a place of merit. If they perform demeritorious willful actions, their consciousness will travel on to a place of demerit. If they perform undisturbable willful actions, their consciousness will travel on to an undisturbable place.[[227]](#footnote-228)

The discourse that defines karma as intention uses similar terminology in the phrase: “Influenced by ignorance you produce a corresponding incarnation according to your merit or demerit.”[[228]](#footnote-229) We discussed the term ‘produce’ (abhinibbati) before, which can also be translated as ‘rebirth’. So a connection is made here between ignorance, karma, and rebirth. The above passage on consciousness traveling on speaks on the same ideas, on rebirth happening according to one’s ignorant meritorious or demeritorious actions.

This can also be derived from the term ‘travel on’ (upaga) itself, which in this context refers to traveling on after death.[[229]](#footnote-230) Later passages clarify this when mentioning that “when their body falls apart, fools will travel on to another body”, and that with the psychic power of divine sight “you see beings passing on and being reborn, understanding that they travel on according to their deeds”.[[230]](#footnote-231) The connection between ‘deeds’ and ‘travel on’ in the latter example is the same as that between ‘willful actions’ and the ‘traveling on’ of consciousness in the above passage.

The Way to the Undisturbable Discourse more explicitly says that this traveling on of consciousness happens after death:

When their body falls apart, after death, it is possible that their onward-going consciousness will travel on to an undisturbable place. […] When their body falls apart, after death, it is possible that their onward-going consciousness will travel on to the state of nothingness […] the state of neither awareness nor nonawareness.[[231]](#footnote-232)

The next passage also mentions consciousness in connection with ‘traveling on’. Stemming from the Mahānidāna Sutta, the passage illustrates the function of the factor of consciousness in Dependent Arising. It speaks about seven abodes (or ‘stations’) where consciousness can go after death. These are seven realms, seven general places of rebirth.[[232]](#footnote-233)

Mendicants, there are seven abodes for consciousness. What seven?

There are beings with diverse bodies and diverse perceptions, such as humans, some gods, and some in the netherworlds. That is the first abode for consciousness.

There are beings with diverse bodies but identical perceptions, such as the Brahmā Gods produced [or ‘reborn’, abhinibbatti] through the first jhāna. That is the second abode for consciousness.

There are beings with identical bodies but diverse perceptions, such as the Gods of Streaming Radiance. That is the third abode for consciousness.

There are beings with identical bodies and identical perceptions, such as the Gods Replete with Glory. That is the fourth abode for consciousness.

There are beings who, after the complete transcendence of perceptions of form and the ending of impinging perceptions, not focusing on diverse perceptions, aware of unbounded space, had traveled on [from their last life] to the state of unbounded space. That is the fifth abode for consciousness.

There are beings who, after the complete transcendence of the state of unbounded space, aware of unbounded consciousness, had traveled on to the state of unbounded consciousness. That is the sixth abode for consciousness.

There are beings who, after the complete transcendence of the state of unbounded consciousness, aware of there being nothing, had traveled on to the state of nothingness. That is the seventh abode for consciousness.

Those are the seven abodes for consciousness.[[233]](#footnote-234)

I do not want to get lost in the details here, but in brief, going by the examples of the various beings that are given for each abode, the first abode for consciousness is the sensual realm; the second, third and fourth are part of the realm with form; and the fifth, sixth and seventh are part of the realm without form. In other texts other subdivisions are made, so it seems unimportant what the exact distinctions between these seven abodes are. The more significant message is that all existence is within a certain abode of consciousness. Even beings in the highest realms are subject to the dependent arising of consciousness as a result of willful actions, which means they too are reborn in a certain place because of their intentions and actions.

Someone can also attain some of these states, for example that of unbounded space, in meditation, but it only becomes an abode of consciousness if they are reborn in the realm of unbounded space. As long as they are a human being, they are still bound to the human realm, which will be the abode of their consciousness until they die. Accordingly, the abodes are described as certain types of beings and as places where one gets reborn or ‘travels on to’, not as states of mind.[[234]](#footnote-235)

Summary of Part I

We have come to the end of the first part. To summarize the main points so far:

* The simile of the painting in the If There is Desire Discourse describes the origination sequence of Dependent Arising.
* The origination sequence is primarily concerned with how rebirth is brought about.
* This sequence describes the rebirth process in two different but parallel ways, one starting with ignorance and one with craving.
* The immaterial aspects and body (nāmarūpa) are certain parts of the being.
* The conception of these immaterial aspects and body refers to birth.
* Willful actions (saṅkhāras) are intentional deeds that together with craving lead to rebirth in a certain place.
* The arising of consciousness as a result of willful actions also refers to rebirth.

The next part discusses the arising of consciousness in more detail, centered around a simile of a seed.

fleuron/seeds.png=Fleuron:A drawing of some seeds=10

PART II. The Simile of the Seed

6. The four nutriments

This part focuses on discourses that treat consciousness as a metaphorical seed which gets planted (patiṭṭhita) in a next life. Some of them, particularly the Seeds Discourse (§76), also include the four nutriments, which we already encountered in the If There is Desire Discourse. Since a basic knowledge of these four nutriments is assumed by these texts, I will share my understanding of them first.

The four nutriments and rebirth

In the canon the Buddha regularly mentions four nutriments (literally ‘foods’, āhāras). These nutriments he says “maintain beings who are born and support those to be reborn”. That is to say, these nutriments perform two functions: they maintain the life of beings who are already born, and they are involved in their rebirth. The former is not the concern of the If There is Desire Discourse, where the matter at hand is only how the four nutriments lead to rebirth. The same is true for the Seeds Discourse, as we shall see. Both discourses explain what happens when there is desire, enjoyment, and attachment, which don’t keep beings alive who are already born (e.g., enlightened beings continue to live without them), but they do cause rebirth, and this is what these discourses are concerned with. In the If There is Desire Discourse we were also able to derive this from phrases like “the conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body”. The Seeds Discourse even directly mentions rebirth (upapatti). Throughout the canon the main focus of the four nutriments also is rebirth. However, in the following I will also touch upon how they facilitate existence in the present life, how they maintain beings who are already born.

The four nutriments are edible food, sense impressions, intentions, and consciousness. The primary explanation of these nutriments in the Pāli Canon is the Child’s Flesh Discourse. The discourse is named after a rather gruesome simile which instructs monks and nuns to not eat more food than necessary, just like parents stuck in the middle of the desert would not eat more of their child’s flesh than they would need to survive. This simile is not of relevance to our main discussion, because it is about how physical food keeps alive beings who are already born. The same applies to the nutriment of sense impressions, which is illustrated with a skinned cow who gets bitten by insects wherever she tries to hide. This refers to the fact that the six senses are unavoidable suffering for anybody who is born. So this simile too is not about rebirth but about what happens while being alive.

However, the similes for the nutriments of intentions and consciousness—respectively, being dragged into a charcoal pit and being stabbed by spears—do illustrate rebirth. And even though the similes for edible food and sense impressions concern those already born, in the Child’s Flesh Discourse the Buddha still explains, apart from the similes, how these two nutriments lead to rebirth.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 14. Similes in the Child’s Flesh Discourse

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Nutriment** | **Simile** | **Is about** |
| Edible food | Child’s flesh | This life |
| Sense impressions | Bitten cow | This life |
| Intentions | Being dragged into a charcoal pit | Rebirth |
| Consciousness | Spears | Rebirth |

The Child’s Flesh Discourse

**The nutriment of edible food** (more literally ‘food of solid food’—it’s a bit of a pun) symbolizes all sensual pleasures. This is because good food entices most of the physical senses—tasting, looking, and smelling good—but also because the desire to enjoy food is only fully abandoned when all sensual desires are abandoned. Sensual pleasures themselves do not cause rebirth: it’s the desire for them that does. When at death there is still a yearning for certain sensual pleasures, it can lead to rebirth in the sensual realm. To recall our central discourse, the If There is Desire Discourse: “If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food [after death] a future life is produced.” Here the desire, enjoyment, and craving refer to the causes of rebirth in the sensual realm, the desires for sensual pleasures. The Child’s Flesh Discourse accordingly says:

When you fully understand the nutriment of edible food, you fully understand the desire for the objects of the five senses. When you, as a noble disciple, fully understand the desire for the objects of the five senses, there is no more chain which could make you come back to this world [i.e. the human world] again.[[235]](#footnote-236)

The absence of any chain that binds one to this world refers to the non-returners, who have abandoned all desires for the five senses. They have removed the five chains (or ‘fetters’) that tie them to rebirth in the sensual realm.

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**The nutriment of sense impressions (or ‘contact’)** also implies the pleasant, painful, and neutral sensations that result from sense impressions. Just like with edible food, sense impressions and sensations themselves are not a nutriment for rebirth: it is the desire for them that is. Non-returners have abandoned desire for sensations coming from the five senses, but only fully enlightened beings have abandoned desire for all sensations, including those of the mind. As the Child’s Flesh Discourse says:

When you fully understand the nutriment of sense impression, you fully understand the three kinds of sensations. When you, as a noble disciple, fully understand the three kinds of sensations, there is nothing further for you to do.

The three kinds of sensations are the pleasant, painful, and neutral ones. Having nothing further to do refers to having finished the eightfold path, as in a common description of enlightened beings, who “understand that the holy life is finished, that the work is done”.[[236]](#footnote-237)

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**The nutriment of intention** refers to willful actions, which at death steer the mind towards certain realms of rebirth. In the Child’s Flesh Discourse the nutriment of intention does have a simile for rebirth, although it is not very explicit so will benefit from some explanation afterwards:

And, mendicants, how should you look at the nutriment of intention? Imagine a charcoal pit deeper than a man’s height, filled with glowing coals that neither flamed nor smoked. A man would come along who wanted to live and not die, who wanted pleasure and was averse to pain. But two strong men would grab him by the arms and dragged him towards that charcoal pit. The man’s volition, aim, and aspiration would be to get far away from that pit. Why? Because he would think: ‘If I fall into that charcoal pit, that will result in death or in deadly pains!’ Mendicants, that is how you should look at the nutriment of intention, I tell you.

./img/coalpit.png=Two muscled man pulling a third man towards a fire pit. The two men are labeled ‘good & bad intentions’, the fire pit ‘rebirth’.=30=border  
Figure 11. A charcoal pit as a simile for rebirth

In the simile we might initially assume that the nutriment of intention is represented by the man’s desire to get away from the pit, but the commentary astutely suggests it is instead represented by the two strong men, being unwholesome and wholesome (but still deluded) willful actions.[[237]](#footnote-238) These willful actions lead to rebirth, as illustrated in the previous chapter. Being thrown in the pit stands for being reborn, and the “death or deadly pains” are the suffering and death that result from being reborn. The man’s desire to avoid the glowing coals stands for the desire to avoid suffering. Desire alone is not enough to overcome suffering, though: one needs to overcome the intentions, the two strong men, through wisdom.

The Child’s Flesh Discourse continues:

When you fully understand the nutriment of intention, you fully understand the three kinds of craving. When you, as a noble disciple, fully understand the three kinds of craving, there is nothing further for you to do.

The three kinds of craving are specified in the truth on the origin of suffering: “It is the craving that leads to a next life, which, along with enjoyment and desire, looks for happiness in various realms. That is to say: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for annihilation.”[[238]](#footnote-239) Someone who fully understands these three types of craving that lead to a next life (puna-bhava) also understands how intentions (i.e. willful actions) lead to rebirth.

A comparable simile of a charcoal pit occurs in the The Longer Discourse on the Lion’s Roar, where it more clearly represents rebirth, in particular rebirth in a low realm.[[239]](#footnote-240) The simile is also referred to in verse by Venerable Migajāla, who connects it directly to Dependent Arising and deeds (kamma), and hence to intentions. More specifically, he mentions “the mechanism of deeds”, which is the process that creates rebirth through intentions.[[240]](#footnote-241) Migajāla encourages us to contemplate existence to be like a charcoal pit. This reflection will cut off craving, which is also called a slaughterhouse, because it leads to repeated death.[[241]](#footnote-242) He says, with reference to the eightfold path:

It is well-taught by the insightful one,  
the Awake One, Kinsman of the Sun,[[242]](#footnote-243)  
who transcended all chains,  
destroyed the whole cycle of rebirth.

Emancipating, it leads across,  
withering the root of craving.  
Cutting off the poisonous root, the slaughterhouse,  
it guides us to extinguishment.

By breaking the root of unknowing,  
it shatters the mechanism of deeds,  
and drops the thunderbolt of knowledge  
on the seizing of consciousnesses.

Informing us about sensations,  
it liberates from taking up,  
those who meditate with knowledge  
on existence as a charcoal pit.

Very sweet and truly deep,  
obstructing birth and mortality:  
it is the noble eightfold path,  
the auspicious, the subsiding of suffering.

When knowing deeds to be deeds,  
and results as results,  
seeing what has dependently arisen  
as if a light was shone on it,  
it excels at the end,  
bringing great safety and peace.[[243]](#footnote-244)

Breaking the root of unknowing (i.e. ignorance) to shatter the mechanism of deeds (i.e. willful actions) to no longer seize consciousnesses (i.e. future lives)—this is just a poetic rewriting of the first three links of the cessation sequence: no ignorance › no willful actions › no consciousness. Notice that Migajāla mentions the seizing of consciousnesses (plural), which context indicates refers to taking up future lives. As Hamilton stated: “Each ‘station’ [or ‘abode’] or life is sometimes simply referred to as ‘a consciousness’.”[[244]](#footnote-245) This leads us nicely to the final nutriment.

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**The nutriment of consciousness** is described as follows:

“And how should you look at the nutriment of consciousness? Imagine a thief, a criminal, would be caught and brought before a king. They would say: ‘Sire, this man is a thief, a criminal. Impose on him whatever punishment you see fit.’ The king would say to them: ‘Men, go and stab him with a hundred spears!’ And in the morning he would be stabbed with a hundred spears. At noon the king would ask: ‘How is that man doing?’—‘Still alive, sire.’—And the king would say: ‘Go and stab him with a hundred spears again!’ And at noon he would be stabbed with a hundred spears again. In the evening the king would again ask: ‘How is that man doing?’—‘Still alive, sire.’—And the king would say: ‘Go and stab him with a hundred spears again!’ And in the evening he would be stabbed with a hundred spears yet again.

What do you think, mendicants? Would that man experience pain and suffering from being stabbed with three hundred spears on a single day?”

“Venerable sir, he would experience pain and suffering from being stabbed with just a single spear, let alone three hundred.”

“Mendicants, that is how you should look at the nutriment of consciousness, I tell you.”

./img/king.png=A king pointing at a tied up person. A knight aims a spear at the person’s chest. Behind the knight are many more spears leaning against a wall. The king is labeled ‘karma’, the spear ‘rebirth of consciousness’.=30=border  
Figure 12. Spears as a simile for the rebirth of consciousness

The simile of the spears does not explicitly refer to rebirth here, but elsewhere it more clearly does. In a discourse called A Hundred Spears, the Buddha says that if you were given the choice of becoming a stream enterer in exchange for being stabbed with three hundred spears a day for a hundred years (a hundred in the morning, afternoon, and evening each) you should take the deal. Why? “Transmigration has no discernible beginning”, the Buddha explains.[[245]](#footnote-246) The many spears you would avoid by taking the deal stand for the amount of potential rebirths you, as a stream winner, would no longer take. In the Therīgātha, Venerable Sumedhā also refers to this simile. She says one should take the deal, because those who stay in saṁsāra get killed again and again.[[246]](#footnote-247)

In the Child’s Flesh Discourse the spears likewise stand for rebirth and re-death. Each spear stands for another life, for another “planting” of consciousness, each of which unavoidably ends in death. Repeated death is even directly implied: being stabbed by just a single spear will usually end one’s life, let alone hundreds! Each stab with a spear represents one rebirth and consequent death. Consciousness itself doesn’t “die”, though, since it keeps coming back to future existences. The king stands for karma, say the commentaries, because he casts the judgment, like we judge our past actions and determine our rebirth based on that.

After giving the simile of the spears, the Buddha connects consciousness directly to nāmarūpa, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body:

When you fully understand the nutriment of consciousness, you fully understand the immaterial aspects and body. When you, as a noble disciple, fully understand the immaterial aspects and body, there is nothing further for you to do.

This is another indication the simile is about rebirth. The arising of consciousness along with the individual’s immaterial aspects and body occurs at birth, as discussed in Chapter 3, and as later chapters will clarify. Helmut Hecker understood the simile in the same way: “[Consciousness] always nourishes rebirth, descending into a womb, and building a new name and form (nāmarūpa). Just as the robber in the simile did not die despite three hundred strokes, so, despite all the suffering of saṁsāra, consciousness does not die and does not want to. Again and again, it nourishes a mortal form (corporeality).”[[247]](#footnote-248)

The two functions of the nutriment of consciousness

In the above I mentioned that food and sense impressions themselves do not cause rebirth, that the desire for them does so. With the nutriment of intention things are a little different, because it is primarily the intentions themselves that lead to rebirth, not the desire for them. The situation is still more complicated with the nutriment of consciousness, which is involved in rebirth in two ways: one is the desire for the continuation of consciousness after death, the other is consciousness as the so-called life force that perpetuates rebirth. On the latter Venerable Nyanaponika wrote: “Consciousness as a nutriment […] is explained primarily as rebirth consciousness.”[[248]](#footnote-249) This function of the nutriment of consciousness is also what the simile of the spears refers to, where each spear stands for a new rebirth.

This function of the nutriment of consciousness is also clarified in the Nidāna Saṁyutta:

The nutriment of consciousness is a prerequisite for the production of existence in a future life. When the being is born, there are the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, there are sense impressions.[[249]](#footnote-250)

Here the nutriment of consciousness stands for the consciousness that continues after death, or “the stream of consciousness coming from the preceding existence”, as Venerable Bodhi annotated this passage.[[250]](#footnote-251) This reminds us that all birth is rebirth, that it does not happen out of nowhere but as a continuation of a past being’s consciousness.

It is worth pointing out that in this passage the phrase ‘the being is born’[[251]](#footnote-252) is positioned where we usually find the individual’s immaterial aspects and body (nāmarūpa): between consciousness and the six senses. This confirms the ideas of Chapter 3, where nāmarūpa was shown to refer to the being.

The discussion in that chapter also included a passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya where the conception of a fetus was connected directly to nāmarūpa (§25). I abbreviated the passage there, not showing that consciousness is also involved. Here is a more complete quotation:

These are these six elements: earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness. […] From the six elements there is a conception of a fetus. When there is a conception, there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. Dependent on the six senses, sense impressions. […][[252]](#footnote-253)

Usually the suttas speak of just four elements, but here space and consciousness are added. The resulting six elements are also mentioned in the Analysis of the Elements Discourse, where they are said to constitute a person.[[253]](#footnote-254) This fits the above passage, where the six elements are conditions for the conception of the fetus, i.e. the person. The four standard elements together with space make up the body or form (rūpa) of the fetus. Relevant is the Longer Discourse on Advice to Rāhula, which explains the four elements as various body parts and the “internal” space as the holes in the ears, the nose, the mouth, and so on.[[254]](#footnote-255) While rūpa is normally explained as the four elements, in these cases space is included as a fifth.[[255]](#footnote-256)

The element of consciousness, since it is said to be a condition for the conception of the fetus, must refer to consciousness that existed before birth, to consciousness that continued from the past life. This use of the term ‘consciousness’ as the carrier of life, if you will, will be further explained in Chapter 8. Because the six elements do not include any other mental aspects such as sensations or will, in this context consciousness stands more generally for person’s inner world as a whole, which I will also get back to. For now, just know that the term ‘consciousness’ is fluid.

If we compare the two previous extracts to the default sequence of Dependent Arising, the function of the factor of consciousness in the sequence is clarified. In §65 the nutriment of consciousness leads to the birth of a being; in §66 the element of consciousness leads to the conception of a fetus. Both passages then result in the six senses, followed by the rest of the standard sequence. Therefore, in the standard sequence the arising of consciousness and immaterial aspects and body refers to the same birth of a being and conception of a fetus.

{SimpleNoRowBorders}Table 15. Passages on consciousness alongside standard sequence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Standard sequence** | **§65** | **§66** |
| 3. Consciousness  4. Imm. aspects & body | • Consciousness • Production of existence • Being is born | • Consciousness & 5 elements • Conception of fetus • Immaterial aspects & body |
| 5. Six senses 6. Sense impressions 7. … | • Six senses • Sense impressions • … | • Six senses • Sense impressions • … |

In the standard sequence of Dependent Arising ‘consciousness’ represents one side of the nutriment of consciousness: the continuation of consciousness from life to life. But the nutriment of consciousness has two sides: it can not only represent the whole life that starts when the stream of consciousness enters a new incarnation, it can also represent the desire for consciousness that fuels process of rebirth. This distinction may seem overly detailed now, but it may help in understanding the Seeds Discourse later.

Summary of the four nutriments

To recall the start of this chapter, the four nutriments have two functions: they (A) ensure the existence of beings who are born and (B) aid those to be reborn. With no intention to be comprehensive, this is how the four nutriments ensure existence (A):

1. The nutriment (āhāra) of edible food is physical food that beings need to consume to stay alive. The idea is simple: “The body depends on food (āhāra), and will die without it.”[[256]](#footnote-257)
2. The nutriment of sense impression gives rise to sensations, without which there is no existence. There are even gods who are said to feed on delight.[[257]](#footnote-258)
3. The nutriment of intention refers to the intentions that keep us alive, including the intentions to avoid deathly dangers and to look for food.
4. The nutriment of consciousness refers to the reestablishment of consciousness at birth, which results in the whole life that follows.

And this is how the four nutriments aid in rebirth (B):

1. The nutriment of edible food symbolically represents all sensual pleasures. Desire for them leads to rebirth in the sensual realm.
2. The nutriment of sense impression implies sensations. Desire for sensations leads to rebirth in any of the realms, including the non-sensual ones.
3. The nutriment of intention stands for willful actions, which result in rebirth in a place that aligns with those actions.
4. The nutriment of consciousness implies existence as a whole. Desire for further existence after death leads to rebirth of both consciousness and the immaterial aspects and body.

The reestablishment of consciousness at birth (A4) depends on the four nutriments when they function as causes for rebirth (B1–4). To jump ahead a bit, the Seeds Discourse therefore says: “consciousness with its [four] nutriments should be seen as the five kinds of seeds [for rebirth]”. The five seeds are the consciousness that moves from life to life (A4) plus the four nutriments as causes for rebirth (B1–4). The If There is Desire Discourse similarly mentioned: “If there is desire, enjoyment, and craving for the nutriment of edible food [or any of the other three nutriments], then consciousness will get planted and will sprout [in a next life].” The consciousness that gets planted is the continuing stream of consciousness that is supported by the desire for the four nutriments. This will all become clearer when we discuss the simile of the seed in the next chapter.

Food and life

Not only are the four nutriments explained with similes (the charcoal pit, spears, etc.), the nutriments themselves are metaphorical too. How nutriment (or literally ‘food’) sustains day-to-day existence represents how craving sustains long-term existence through rebirth. Just like eating food keeps beings alive, craving for the nutriments keeps them existing in saṁsāra.

./img/food.png=A table with four types of fruit on it (a pear, an apple, grapes, and a banana). A fat man is eating them. The fruits are labeled ‘edible food’, ‘sense impressions’, ‘intentions’, and ‘consciousness’, the eating man ‘craving’, and his fat belly ‘more life’.=30=border  
Figure 13. The four nutriments as a metaphor for rebirth

As is quite well known, the word for ‘craving’ (taṇhā) literally means ‘thirst’. But taṇhā is sometimes also compared to hunger. It is the hunger for existence that makes beings take up the five aspects of existence again at rebirth.

The five aspects of existence truly are burdens,  
and the person is their bearer.  
Picking up the burden creates the suffering in the world;  
putting it down creates ease.

Putting this heavy burden down,  
and not picking up another,  
with craving and its root pulled out,  
hungerless, you get fully extinguished.[[258]](#footnote-259)

The Buddha also said:

All beings are kept in existence by nutriment.[[259]](#footnote-260)

Considering that beings have to eat to survive, at first this may seem an obvious statement. However, it includes all beings, including the heavenly ones, so it refers to something more profound than just physical food. Let me explain.

The basic idea that all beings require food is not originally the Buddha’s. The early Upaniṣads state:

From food are born all creatures; they live upon food, they are dissolved in food. Food is the chief of all things, the universal medicine. They who think of food as Spirit [Brahman], shall never lack. From food all beings are born, all beings increase their bulk; all beings feed upon it.[[260]](#footnote-261)

The idea that all beings rely on food is one of the major themes of the entire Vedic corpus, including the Upaniṣads. “Life and society are understood by the Vedic poets in terms of the basic struggle of acquiring food”, wrote Carlos Lopez.[[261]](#footnote-262) This struggle was not limited to humans. The departed ancestors and gods were also believed to constantly require food, and even the creator of the universe was. Only food could ensure their immortality. This meant literal food, such as butter, grains, and so on, which had to be offered to heavenly beings in sacrificial fires by those on earth. We find echoes of these ideas also in the Pāli Canon. Brahmins (of the more traditional kind) are doing fire sacrifices in a number of suttas, and one particular text talks in detail about the benefit of offering food to departed spirits.[[262]](#footnote-263)

K.R. Norman summarized the Buddha’s reply to these beliefs: “In Brahmanical thought we find the idea that food is required to sustain the existence of the inhabitants of other worlds or in the next life. The gods needed sacrifices as their food, the pitṛs [ancestors] needed offerings to continue their existence […]. The Buddha, however, speaks of four sorts of food [āhāra], which are instruments of continuity, and imply the future process of rebirth.”[[263]](#footnote-264) The importance society put on physical food may well explain why the Buddha chose to represent all sense pleasures with edible food. But he also played with these ideas in several other ways. By saying beings don’t just rely on physical food but also on “food” of sense impressions and consciousness, he questioned the validity of food offerings to the gods, who don’t actually need physical food to continue existing. More importantly, while to Brahmins food was considered a good thing—because it ensures a long or eternal life in heaven—the Buddha said the nutriments were a problem, exactly because they lead to more existence:

Whatever suffering there may be,  
all originates dependent on intake of nutriments.  
If intake of nutriments ceases,  
no suffering will come to be.[[264]](#footnote-265)

The Buddha taught his disciples to be “hungerless” and no longer feed themselves on these nutriments. The idea is quite striking. If you stop eating, your life will soon come to an end. The Buddha is telling his disciples to no longer “eat” the four metaphorical nutriments, so they “starve” and won’t keep existing after death. In other words, if you stop craving, you will stop the intake (or uptake, upādāna) of nutriments, which leads to the end of existence. This is stated in the cessation sequence as: “If craving ceases, fuel/taking up (upādāna) will cease. If fuel/taking up ceases, existence will cease.” Here upādāna stands for both the nutriment (‘fuel’) and the intake of the nutriment. (To convey both ideas I use the dual translation ‘fuel/taking up’.) Statements such as this must have been especially challenging to the Brahmins, who worshipped both food and existence.

./img/foodno.png=A skinny man not eating the four fruits. He is labeled ‘no craving’ and his thin belly ‘no rebirth’.=30=border  
./img/fooddead.png=A dead skinny man labeled ‘no life’.=30=border  
Figure 14. Stopping nutrition as a simile for ending existence

The four nutriments have many more implications,[[265]](#footnote-266) but what has been discussed so far will serve as a backdrop for the If There is Desire Discourse and the Seeds Discourse, where the nutriments are mentioned without details.

7. Plant life as a metaphor for sentient life

With the four nutriments, the Buddha used the life of a sentient being as a metaphor for continued existence after death, but he also frequently used the life of plants as a metaphor for these things. This chapter illustrates some of these metaphors, which shed a lot of light on the term patiṭṭhita viññāṇa (‘consciousness is planted’).

Consciousness as a seed for rebirth

A prominent simile for rebirth in the canon is one wherein consciousness acts as a seed for rebirth. Earlier passages already implied this simile in phrases such as, “if consciousness is planted, it will sprout”. In the Bhava Sutta, the Buddha describes it explicitly:

Venerable Ānanda approached the Buddha, bowed to him, and sat down to a side. He then asked: “Venerable sir, you mentioned existence (bhava), but how is there existence?”

“Ānanda, would existence in the sensual worlds occur if there were no deeds that ripened [or ‘resulted’] in the sensual realm?”

“No, sir.”

“So with deeds as the field, consciousness as the seed, and craving as the moisture, the consciousness of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, gets planted in the lower realm. That is how existence in a future life is produced.

Would existence with [non-physical] form occur if there were no deeds that ripened in the form realm?”

“No, sir.”

“So with deeds as the field, consciousness as the seed, and craving as the moisture, the consciousness of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, gets planted in the middle realm. That is how existence in a future life is produced.

Would existence without form occur if there were no deeds that ripened in the formless realm?”

“No, sir.”

“So with deeds as the field, consciousness as the seed, and craving as the moisture, the consciousness of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving, gets planted in the higher realm. That is how existence in a future life is produced.

Ānanda, that is how existence comes to be.”[[266]](#footnote-267)

The word I translate as ‘planted’ (patiṭṭhita) is usually translated as ‘established’. This translation is not wrong per se, but it does not fit the simile very well, because in English we wouldn’t say a seed is “established” in the ground. However, in Pāli seeds are “patiṭṭhita-ed” there. It is said, for example, that a farmer first ploughs his field and then plants (patiṭṭha) his seeds.[[267]](#footnote-268) So the translation ‘planted’ gives a better sense of how people at the time would have understood the term in this context.[[268]](#footnote-269)

Using similar reasoning, I translate virūḷhi as ‘sprouting’. It too is part of the simile of the seed. In one passage the word is used with reference to a dormant seed of a creeper. Venerable Bodhi translated, following Venerable Ñāṇamoli: “Being moistened by rain from a rain-bearing cloud, the seed in due course sprouted (viruheyya)”.[[269]](#footnote-270) Although in other contexts ‘growth’ might be a more suitable translation for virūḷhi, considering this passage, ‘sprouting’ must be the intended meaning in the seed simile.

With that in mind, the general idea of the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda is as follows: When a being produces rebirth, the seed of their consciousness is metaphorically planted in a certain realm that aligns with their karma. Like bad fields produce bad plants and good field good plants, bad deeds lead to bad rebirths and good deeds to good ones. Wherever consciousness is reborn, there the next life with all its characteristics takes shape, which is represented by the seed sprouting and growing into a plant. In order to grow, a seed needs water too, and this water represents craving. For clarification, see the following illustrations:

./img/seed0.png=A seed labeled ‘consciousness’ in the ground labeled ‘karma’ being watered by water labeled ‘craving’.=30=border  
Figure 15. A planted seed as a simile for rebirth

./img/seed1.png=A field with rocks and cracks labeled ‘bad karma’ with growing from it a small plant called ‘bad life’.=30=border  
./img/seed2.png=A field with some stones rocks labeled ‘medium karma’ with growing from it a medium-sized plant called ‘medium life’.=30=border  
./img/seed3.png=A smooth dark field labeled ‘good karma’ with growing from it a beautiful flower called ‘good life’.=30=border  
Figure 16. Plants as a simile for the quality of rebirth

The three kinds of karma leading to rebirth in the three respective realms are similar to the demeritorious, meritorious, and undisturbable willful actions mentioned in §55, which lead to consciousness traveling on to the respective places.

The sprouting of seeds is a striking representation of rebirth and would have been even more so in a society that was as agriculture-centered as the Buddha’s. It creates a very visual image of the cyclic nature of life. A plant develops a seed, which sprouts and grows into a new plant, which develops a new seed, and so forth. When the first plant dies, its offshoot will live into the future, in something like the plant’s next life. I think we would be hard-pressed to come up with a more fitting simile for rebirth.

./img/seed5.png=A plant with a seed hanging off. The seed is labeled ‘potential next life’.=30=border  
./img/seed6.png=A dead plant with next to it a seed in the ground developing into a sapling. The sapling is labeled ‘next life’.=30=border  
Figure 17. A plant developing a new seed as a simile for rebirth

Although it does seem to be implied by the simile, the idea of repeated plants growing from repeated seeds is not specifically mentioned in the early Pāli texts. But it is mentioned in the Questions of Milinda, a late text included in the Burmese canon:

The king [Milinda] said: “Venerable Nāgasena, you speak of this ‘transmigration’ (saṁsāra). What is this transmigration?”

“Your Majesty, someone is born somewhere and dies there, and is reborn somewhere else. He is born there and dies there, and is reborn somewhere else again. That is how there is transmigration.”

“Can you give a simile?”

“It’s like a person eats a ripe mango and plants its stone. It produces a big mango tree which grows fruits. Then the person eats a ripe mango from it and plants its stone. It too produces a big mango tree which grows fruits. In that way no end to the trees is seen. Likewise, someone is born somewhere and dies there, and is reborn somewhere else. He is born there and dies there, and is reborn somewhere else again. That is how there is transmigration.”[[270]](#footnote-271)

The eating of the mango I understand to represent death, the shedding of the body. The stone (or pit) of the mango is the remaining part of the being which moves on to the next life. However, to be clear, this remaining part is also without any real essence. The Visuddhimagga uses the same simile in context of anatta, reminding us there is no self involved in the process of rebirth, just like no part of the original tree is found in its ancestors.[[271]](#footnote-272)

Verses on the seed simile

Throughout the Pāli Canon there are a number of verses that refer to the seed simile, in each case connecting it directly to rebirth. The first example is a set of verses spoken by the nun Selā:

This puppet [i.e. being] is not made by oneself;  
this misery is not made by another.  
It has come into being dependent on conditions,  
and ceases by the destruction of those conditions.

Just as a seed sprouts  
when sown in a field,  
based on two things:  
nutriments in the earth and moisture,

so the aspects of existence and the elements,  
and these six senses too,  
have come into being dependent on conditions,  
and cease by the destruction of those conditions.[[272]](#footnote-273)

As often happens in verse, Selā points to certain similes assuming the listener knows what is being referred to. She effectively says that, just like a plant will sprout when a seed is planted in earth and given water, the being—the aspects of existence, six elements, and senses—will be reborn when it is supported by karma and craving.

By saying that the being is not made by oneself and that it is just the aspects of existence, Selā also refers to the concept of anatta, the absence of a soul or self. The seed simile also conveys this idea, because the new plant, although it is directly linked to the parent plant through the seed, does not actually share any physical parts with it. Similarly, one life of a sentient being is linked to its next life through an ever-changing stream of consciousness. There is a clear connection between the two lives—it’s not a completely separate being after all—but nothing of essence, such as a soul, transfers from one life to the next.

The well-known Ratana Sutta contains another verse on the seed simile. The Buddha says that the enlightened ones, with no desire for further existence, will not create a new life (“nothing new comes to be”). All existence (“the old”) comes to an end, because they have ended rebirth (“the seed”), and have no wish to be reborn (“to sprout”).

The old ended, and nothing new comes to be:  
with minds that lost the desire for future existence,  
having ended the seed, not wishing to sprout,  
bright people get extinguished just like this lamp.[[273]](#footnote-274)

A less famous set of verses in the Suttanipāta describes the same ideas. The moisture still represents craving here, but the ground now represents the various realms of rebirth instead of karma:[[274]](#footnote-275)

Those who cut down what is born and do not resow it,  
who do not nurture what gets born,  
they are called solitary sages.  
Such great seers have seen the place of peace.[[275]](#footnote-276)

Having surveyed the grounds and crushed the seed,  
they wouldn’t nurture it with moisture.  
Truly, those sages who see the final end of birth,  
having abandoned speculation, can’t be compared.

Having understood all abodes [i.e. realms],  
not wanting a single one of them:  
truly, those greedless sages free from greed  
no longer strive, for they’ve reached the other shore.[[276]](#footnote-277)

All these verses did not mention consciousness to be the seed. We have a more basic metaphor, where the seed represents the possibility for rebirth more generally.

The Seeds Discourse

Another text which equates consciousness to a seed is the Seeds Discourse. It has the same basic simile as the exchange with Ānanda on how existence comes to be (§71) but it differs in some details:

* Consciousness is still said to be the seed, but now it is joined by the four nutriments.
* The seed is still said to be watered, now not by craving but by desire and enjoyment, which are just different manifestations of craving.
* The seed is still said to be planted, now not in the field of karma but in the earth of the four aspects of existence other than consciousness. These ideas are closely linked, because the quality of one’s future aspects of existence is directly connected to the quality of one’s karma, like the quality of the earth is directly connected to the quality of the field.

The discourse also specifically mentions the situation where the seed is not planted (appatiṭṭhita). Here it makes a new point, namely that consciousness can’t continue to exist without the other aspects of existence. To avoid any possible confusion, since consciousness is mentioned alongside the other four aspects of existence, it should be clear that ‘consciousness’ throughout the discourse simply refers to the fifth aspect of existence, whether it is planted or not planted, not to some “unestablished” consciousness outside of these five.

With all that in mind, here is the Seeds Discourse:

“Mendicants, there are five kinds of seeds. What five? Seeds of plants grown from roots, from stems, from joints, from cuttings, and from seeds. If these seeds are fertile and well-preserved—not broken, spoiled, or damaged by the wind or sun—but they lack earth and water, would they develop, sprout, and mature?”

“No, sir.”

“If these seeds are fertile and well-preserved—not broken, spoiled, or damaged by the wind or sun—and they have earth and water, would they develop, sprout, and mature?”

“Yes, sir.”[[277]](#footnote-278)

“Mendicants, the four supports for consciousness [i.e. the four other aspects of existence] should be seen as the earth. Enjoyment and desire should be seen as the water. Consciousness with its nutriments should be seen as the five kinds of seeds.

Consciousness would continue to exist [after death] if it is attracted to form. Founded on form, planted in form, and sprinkled with enjoyment, it would develop, sprout, and mature. Consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to sensation. Founded on sensation, planted in sensation, and sprinkled with enjoyment, it would develop, sprout, and mature. Consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to perception. Founded on perception, planted in perception, and sprinkled with enjoyment, it would develop, sprout, and mature. Consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to will. Founded on will, planted in will, and sprinkled with enjoyment, it would develop, sprout, and mature.

Some might say they will describe the departing or arriving of consciousness, its passing on or rebirth—its development, sprouting, or maturation—apart from form, sensation, perception, and will. But that is not possible. If you have abandoned desire for the elements of form, sensation, perception, and will,[[278]](#footnote-279) there will be no support for the planting of consciousness, because when desire is abandoned, its foundation is destroyed. Not planted, consciousness will not sprout [i.e. be reborn].

And not willfully creating anything, the mind is liberated.[[279]](#footnote-280) When liberated, it will be steady. When steady, it will be content. When content, you do not stir. Unstirred, you personally get fully extinguished. You will understand that the holy life is finished, that the work is done, that rebirth has ended, so there won’t be another life.”[[280]](#footnote-281)

Because this discourse is very helpful to understand what the planting and not planting of consciousness imply, allow me to explain it in detail. The following illustration visualizes the main ideas:

./img/seedsuttaa.png=A big planted seed with four small ones being watered by a watering can. The ground is labeled ‘4 khandhas’, the seeds ‘consciousness & four nutriments’, the can ‘desire & enjoyment’.=30=border  
./img/seedsuttab.png=A seed sprouting labeled ‘sprouting of the next life’.=30=border  
Figure 18. The seed simile in the Seeds Discourse

The discourse is centered around rebirth, which is particularly evident when it mentions “the departing or arriving of consciousness, its passing on or rebirth”. The words ‘passing on’ (cuti) and ‘rebirth’ (upapatti) are sometimes translated along the lines of ‘passing away’ and ‘reappearing’, which may slightly obscure what they are about, but that they refer to rebirth is unambiguous in many places, one of which is the standard description of the psychic powers of past life recollection and the divine eye (or ‘divine sight’):

You direct [your mind] to recollecting past lives. You recall many kinds of past lives: one birth; two, three, four, five births; ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births; a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand births; […]. You remember you name in a certain place, your clan, appearance, and food, the pleasure and pain you experienced, and how you died. You remember passing on from there, and being reborn somewhere else. You remember your name there too, your clan, appearance, and food, the pleasure and pain you experienced, and how you died. You remember passing on from there, and being reborn here. That is how you recall many kinds of past lives in detail. […]

You direct [your mind] to knowing the passing on and rebirth of beings. With pure and superhuman divine sight you see beings passing on and being reborn, having high or low births, in good or bad places, becoming beautiful or ugly. You understand that beings travel on according to their deeds. Those with bad physical, verbal, and mental conduct, who criticize the noble ones, have wrong view, and do deeds based on wrong view, get reborn in the lower plane, in a bad destination, a netherworld, a hell. But those with good physical, verbal, and mental conduct, who do not criticize the noble ones, have right view, and do deeds based on right view, get reborn in a good destination, in a heaven. That is how you see beings passing on and being reborn, understanding that they travel on according to their deeds.[[281]](#footnote-282)

In another passage the Buddha talks about the possibility of going to heaven, asking his non-enlightened disciples to reflect: “I too have the kind of faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and understanding that those gods had, that resulted in their passing on from here and being reborn there.”[[282]](#footnote-283) In the definition of death at §20 he mentioned, “the passing on of any kind of being from any order of beings—their passing away, deceasing, dying […]” Still elsewhere he said: “A being laid down their body and is not yet reborn in another body.”[[283]](#footnote-284)

The terms ‘departing’ (gati) and ‘arriving’ (āgati)—also translated as ‘going’ and ‘coming’—are euphemisms for passing on and rebirth.[[284]](#footnote-285) When Anuruddha spoke of his divine sight, he said: “I see the passing on and rebirth of beings, their departing and arriving, going from one state of existence to another.” In The Great Lion’s Roar Discourse the Buddha used the same ability to see renunciants (samaṇas) traveling to heavens and hells and said: “I know the departure and arrival, the passing on and rebirth of those renunciants.” More down to earth, Paṭācārā talked about the death of her son, saying: “He passed away having a human body and will go on transmigrating. As he arrived, so he departed: why grieve over that?”[[285]](#footnote-286)

There are many similar instances of these words in the Canon, so there should be no question what the Seeds Discourse is about: the “departing or arriving of consciousness, its passing on or rebirth—its development, sprouting, or maturation” means rebirth.[[286]](#footnote-287) The last three terms might seem strange ways to refer to rebirth, but like ‘planting’ they are part of the simile in which consciousness is the seed for rebirth. Literal seeds that are buried in the earth and then given water are also said to develop, sprout, and mature.[[287]](#footnote-288) The three individual terms might refer to different stages of the rebirth process, like entering a womb, getting born, and growing up, but this is not clarified anywhere. They could also be synonyms.

In any event, it indicates that an earlier statement in the Seeds Discourse also refers to rebirth: “Consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to form. Founded on form, planted in form, and sprinkled with enjoyment, it would develop, sprout, and mature [i.e. be reborn].” ‘Sprinkled with enjoyment’ is also part of the simile, because enjoyment is compared to water. The phrase ‘consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to form’ refers to the continuation of consciousness after death, because, as I argued earlier, the continuation of consciousness while one is alive does not depend on being attracted to something. The phrase is not grammatically intricate but has been translated rather cryptically by some translators, who either through over-literalism or not understanding the context speak of the “standing” of consciousness.[[288]](#footnote-289) But that ‘consciousness would continue to exist’ implies rebirth is also reflected in the following:

Mendicants, it would be better for your eyes to be lacerated by a searing, burning, glowing, red-hot iron nail, than for you to, because of its features, get caught up in the aspects of a sight you might see. I say this because I have seen the following problem. Consciousness would continue to exist if it stays bound to the gratification in those aspects or features. And if you die at that time [when you’re caught up in sights], it is possible that it goes to one of two destinations: hell or the animal realm.[[289]](#footnote-290)

In the Seeds Discourse the four nutriments together with consciousness are compared to five seeds. Since one of the four nutriments is consciousness itself, it seems like it is included twice in the five seeds. However, this double inclusion represents the two different functions of the nutriment of consciousness: one is the desire for consciousness, the other is the stream of consciousness that continues from life to life. So the five seeds are:

1. Desire for the five senses (the nutriment of edible food)
2. Desire for sensations (the nutriment of sense impressions)
3. Willful actions that lead to rebirth (the nutriment of intentions)
4. Desire for existence (the nutriment of consciousness in one sense)
5. The stream of consciousness (the nutriment of consciousness in the second sense)

Although there are five metaphorical seeds, their result is of course only one rebirth, not five. In a sense, the first four seeds just assist the fifth. This is why in figure 18 I drew one big seed surrounded by four smaller ones.

To return to my main point, there are many indications the Seeds Discourse is about rebirth: the similarity with the exchange with Ānanda on the seeds for existence (§71); the words ‘departing’, ‘arriving’, ‘passing on’, and ‘rebirth’; the phrase ‘consciousness would continue to exist’; and the four nutriments that assist beings to be reborn. I clarified this in detail, because this central point is sometimes overlooked, and as a result the term appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa is also misunderstood. What this refers to, is explained next.

Not planting the seed

The Seeds Discourse compares the four aspects of existence (khandhas) to the earth. This tells us that, just like a seed cannot grow if it is not planted in the ground, consciousness cannot continue to exist without any other aspect of existence. The discourse therefore also calls these four aspects of existence ‘the four supports for consciousness’. Consciousness is especially closely connected to sensation and perception. The three cannot be separated from one another (see §99), so the desire for any type of sensation or perception is always accompanied by a desire for consciousness.

Since consciousness is intrinsically connected to the other four aspects of existence, if desire for them is abandoned, consciousness gets abandoned too. The figurative seed of rebirth then cannot sprout again. As the discourse says: “If you have abandoned desire for the elements of form, sensation, perception, and will, there will be no support for the planting of consciousness, because when desire is abandoned, its foundation is destroyed. Not planted (appatiṭṭhita), consciousness will not sprout [i.e. be reborn].” See also the following illustration:

./img/seedsuttac.png=A broken seed next to a spade next to a a hole dug in the ground. The hole is labeled ‘no khandhas, no rebirth’.=30=border  
Figure 19. Not planting consciousness as a simile for the end of rebirth

So the suggestion that appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa is an unestablished consciousness separate from and uninfluenced by the aspects of existence, does not seem valid. The point is the exact opposite. The Buddha taught that consciousness cannot exist without the other aspects of existence, that it always depends on something, always is “established” somewhere.

Other botanical similes for rebirth

There are still more discourses that connect seeds to rebirth, like some that call noble ones who will be reborn only once more ‘one-seeders’.[[290]](#footnote-291) But I want to introduce instead three discourses that use other botanical similes for rebirth, for they are more helpful in explaining the principles of Dependent Arising.

The first discourse depicts the continuation of existence as a sapling that is being kept alive. It begins with ‘focusing on the gratification of things that can chain’ (or ‘that can fetter’), which means perceiving things as pleasant which are actually suffering: a major aspect of ignorance. This ignorance gives rise to craving, after which the usual factors of the craving sequence follow.

Mendicants, for those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, craving increases. Dependent on craving, there is fuel [for rebirth]. Dependent on fuel, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

Imagine a sapling. From time to time a man would clear the area around it and give it fresh soil and water. With that nutriment, with that fuel, that sapling would develop, sprout, and mature. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, craving increases. Dependent on craving, there is fuel. Dependent on fuel, existence. Dependent on existence, birth. And dependent on birth, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress come to be. That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

For those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, craving ceases. If craving ceases, fuel will cease. If fuel ceases, existence will cease. If existence ceases, birth will cease. And if birth ceases, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress, will cease. That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.

Imagine a sapling. A man would come along carrying a spade and basket. He would cut off the sapling at its roots and then dig up and pull out the roots, even the small roots and the root fibers. He would cut the entire stalk into pieces, split the pieces, and break them into splinters. He would dry those in the sun and wind and then burn them in a fire, turning them into ashes. He would let the ashes get blown away by a strong wind or get carried away by a swift river. In that way the sapling would be cut off at its roots, made like a palm stump, put to an end, so that it would not rearise in the future. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, craving ceases. If craving ceases, fuel will cease. If fuel ceases, existence will cease. If existence ceases, birth will cease. And if birth ceases, old age and death, and sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, and distress, will cease. That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.[[291]](#footnote-292)

The life of the plant is a metaphor for the existence of the being. A plant can only stay alive if it is given water. Likewise, existence can only continue in saṁsāra as long as there is craving. But when the problems with existence are understood, craving will cease, and there will be no more fuel for the continuance of existence after death.

./img/sapling.png=A sapling being watered by a watering can. The sapling is labeled ‘existence’, the can ‘craving’.=30=border  
./img/saplingno.png=A person letting ashes be blown away by the wind. On the ground next to him are a shovel, an axe, and a burned out fire. The ashes are labeled ‘no existence’, the person ‘no craving problems’.=30=border  
Figure 20. Watering a sapling as a simile for rebirth

The word for ‘fuel’ is upādāna, which earlier I translated with the two terms ‘fuel/taking up’. Often both meanings are implied, but in this discourse ‘fuel’ is the primary meaning, since it reoccurs in the metaphor in which the water and soil are called fuel (upādāna) for the plant. This stands for craving, which acts as the fuel for rebirth.

The metaphor of fuel is more famously applied to fires, but the Buddha also used it with reference to plants, as we see here. This is one reason I translate the verbal meaning of upādāna as ‘taking up’ instead of the more common ‘clinging’ or ‘grasping’, which I think are slightly inaccurate.[[292]](#footnote-293) Plants are also said to ‘take up’ (upādiyati) nutrients from the soil.[[293]](#footnote-294) They don’t ‘cling to’ or ‘grasp’ such nutriments. So when the Buddha instructs his followers to stop upādāna, one implication is that we should no longer take up the five aspects of existence through craving, especially not at the end of life.

The next text illustrates this concept more explicitly. It describes a tree that draws up (or takes up) sap through its roots. The life of the tree stands for the continuation of existence, just like the life of the sapling in the previous discourse.

Mendicants, for those who[[294]](#footnote-295) live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, there will be a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body [after death]. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

Imagine a big tree with roots spreading downwards and across that would all draw sap upwards. With that nutriment, with that fuel, that tree would keep existing for a very long time. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, there will be a conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

For those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, there will be no conception of any immaterial aspects and body. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases

Imagine a big tree. A man would come along carrying a spade and basket. He would cut off the tree at its roots, and then digs up and pulls out the roots, even the small roots and the root fibers. He would cut the tree into pieces, split the pieces, and break them into splinters. He would dry those in the sun and wind and then burn them in a fire, turning them into ashes. He would let the ashes get blown away by a strong wind or get carried away by a swift river. In that way the big tree would be cut off at its roots, made like a palm stump, put to an end, so that it would not rearise in the future. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, there will be no conception of any immaterial aspects and body. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.[[295]](#footnote-296)

Here the focusing on gratification is not followed by the craving sequence as in §79, but by the conception of the immaterial aspects and body, which is followed by the rest of the standard sequence. The conception of the individual’s immaterial aspects and body always happens in tandem with the conception of consciousness, because these two factors together constitute the being. This will be further clarified in §84, which describes the conception of consciousness alongside the immaterial aspects and body in a mother’s womb. The following sutta, which in all other aspects is identical to the last, places the conception of consciousness before the individual’s immaterial aspects and body:

For those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, there will be a conception [i.e. rebirth] of consciousness. Dependent on consciousness, there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Dependent on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, there are the six senses. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering originates.

Imagine a big tree with roots spreading downwards and across that would all draw sap upwards. With that nutriment, with that fuel, that tree would keep existing for a very long time. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them, there will be a conception of consciousness. [And so on.]

For those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, there will be no conception of consciousness. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.

Imagine a big tree. A man would come along carrying a spade and basket. [Continued as §80.] In that way the big tree would be cut off at its roots, made like a palm stump, put to an end, so that it would not rearise in the future. Likewise, for those who live focusing on the problems with things that can chain them, there will be no conception of consciousness. [And so on.][[296]](#footnote-297)

./img/greattree.png=A tree sucking up sap. The tree is labeled ‘consciousness & immaterial aspects and body’, the moisture in the ground ‘focusing on gratification’.=30=border  
./img/greattreeno.png=A person letting ashes be blown away by the wind. On the ground next to him are a shovel, an axe, and a burned out fire. The ashes are labeled ‘no conception, no consciousness, no immaterial aspects and body’, the person ‘focusing on problems’. =30=border  
Figure 21. A tree as a simile for existence

This discourse contains the saying, “there will be no conception of consciousness. If consciousness ceases”, hence ‘no conception of consciousness’ implies the cessation of consciousness. The cessation of consciousness happens when an enlightened being passes away. Therefore, the opposite statement, ‘there will be a conception of consciousness’, must refer to the time of rebirth. Along similar lines of reasoning, the conception of nāmarūpa in the previous discourse also refers to rebirth, which is relevant to our primary text, the If There is Desire Discourse, because it contains the same phrase.

If we compare the three suttas in this section, we can also confirm that the two parallel sequences in the full twelve-factored sequence describe rebirth, because we see that the conception of consciousness and the conception of the immaterial aspects and body are alternative ways to describe the creation of another existence and birth. Put schematically:

Table 16. Parallel descriptions of rebirth in ‘gratification’ suttas

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **§79** | **§80** | **§81** |
| • Focus on gratification • Craving • Fuel | • Focus on gratification  • (Fuel) | • Focus on gratification  • (Fuel) |
| • Existence • Birth | • Conception of imm.   aspects and body | • Conception of consciousness • Immaterial aspects & body |
| • Suffering,   incl. old age and death | • Six senses • … | • Six senses • … |

The last two texts do not specifically mention the factors of craving and fuel after the focusing on gratification (although they do include them later in the standard sequence), but they are still implied. The fuel is also still mentioned in the plant metaphor in all cases, which is why I include it in brackets in the table.

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To repeat the main points of this chapter, the similes of the seeds and plants visualize the continuation of existence through rebirth. The planting (patiṭṭhita) of the seed of consciousness stands for taking rebirth in a certain place, and it not being planted (appatiṭṭhita) means not being reborn. Similarly, the conception of consciousness and nāmarūpa refers to the start of a life, and when they are not conceived again, it means they will both cease.

8. Consciousness and nāmarūpa

The dependency of consciousness on the khandhas

The Seeds Discourse explained that it is impossible for consciousness to be reborn without other aspects of existence, which are metaphorically called the earth in which the seed of consciousness is planted. The next passage phrases the same idea differently, with these four aspects of existence being ‘shelters’ for consciousness:

The element of form is a shelter for consciousness. If, by desiring it, your consciousness is bound to the element of form, you are called ‘a migrant going from shelter to shelter’. The elements of sensation … perception … will is a shelter for consciousness. If, by desiring it, your consciousness is bound to the element of will, you are called ‘a migrant going from shelter to shelter’.[[297]](#footnote-298)

The Truth­finder (tathāgata) is then said to be without a shelter. Without any desire for the aspects of existence they “cut them at the roots, made them like a palm stump, so that they will not rearise in the future”, which means the aspect of existence won’t reoccur in a next life.

Wijesekara already concluded that in this passage consciousness is “the surviving factor of an individual [which produces] repeated births resulting in what is generally known as saṁsāra.”[[298]](#footnote-299) But he does not note that the word sārin (migrant) comes from the same root as saṁsāra (transmigration), and therefore also implies rebirth. In the Seeds Discourse, consciousness was said to continue in a next life if it is attracted to the other four aspects of existence; here it is said to migrate if it is bound to them by desire. It is the same principle in different words.

Both the Seeds Discourse and this passage also uniquely call the aspects of existence ‘elements’ (dhātus), which may also show a close connection between the two texts. They both tell us that there is no possibility of consciousness continuing in isolation, without any other aspects accompanying it. Whenever there is awareness, it is always aware of something and always depends on the sense faculties. There are no realms or places where this does not apply. Wherever consciousness is reborn, it is always along with other aspects of existence.

The mutual dependency of consciousness and nāmarūpa

In some discourses on Dependent Arising, consciousness is said to be dependent not on the other four aspects of existence but on the immaterial aspects and body (nāmarūpa), which then effectively stand for these aspects of existence. The City Discourse is one example:

Mendicants, before my awakening—when I was heading for awakening but not yet fully awake—I thought: ‘Oh no! People have really gotten into trouble. They are born, age, die, pass on, and are reborn again. Yet they don’t see any escape from this suffering, this old age and death and so on. When will an escape from all this finally be found?’

[As §11.]

Then I thought: ‘There will be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, only if there is what? What do the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, only if there is consciousness. The individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness.

Then I thought: ‘There will be consciousness, only if there is what? What does consciousness depend on?’ Then, by focusing properly, I comprehended it, understanding that there will be consciousness, only if there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.’

Then I thought: ‘Consciousness can’t go beyond the immaterial aspects and body. That is what it always turns back to. This is the extent to which beings can get born, age, die, pass on, and get reborn again—namely, consciousness which depends on the immaterial aspects and body along with the immaterial aspects and body which depend on consciousness.’[[299]](#footnote-300)

The Buddha says consciousness always turns back to nāmarūpa, which means wherever it exists or is reborn, there are always other aspects of existence. Afterwards he goes through the cessation sequence, concluding that nāmarūpa ceases when consciousness ceases and vice versa.

The dependency is said to be mutual: the immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness, just as in the standard sequence of factors, but consciousness in turn also depends on the immaterial aspects and body. The Mahānidāna Sutta explains both these dependencies in more detail. For ease of reference I label them **1** and **2**.

[1] “Ānanda, if you are asked whether the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on something, you should answer that they do. And if you are asked what the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on, you should answer that the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness.

[2] If you are asked whether consciousness depends on something, you should answer that it does. And if you are asked what consciousness depends on, you should answer that consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. […]

[1] Ānanda, I said the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness, which is to be understood as follows: If consciousness is not conceived in [or ‘does not enter’, avakkanti] the mother’s womb, would the individual’s immaterial aspects and body take shape there?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“And if, after being conceived in the womb, consciousness is misconceived [or ‘departs’], would the individual’s immaterial aspects and body be produced further so as to start the life here?”

“No, sir.”

“And if the consciousness of the little boy or girl is cut off, would the individual’s immaterial aspects and body develop, sprout, and mature?”

“No, sir.”

“Therefore, the condition, source, origin, and requirement for the individual’s immaterial aspects and body is consciousness.

[2] Ānanda, I said consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body, which is to be understood as follows: If consciousness does not find a support of any immaterial aspects and body to be planted in, would there be an origination of suffering, of future birth and old age and death?”

“No, sir.”

“Therefore, the condition, source, origin, and requirement for consciousness is the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.

This is the extent to which beings can get born, age, die, pass on, and get reborn again; the extent to which the cycle of rebirth continues so life here manifests; the extent to which there is a way for designation, language, and descriptions; the extent to which there is a realm of understanding—namely, the immaterial aspects and body along with consciousness.”[[300]](#footnote-301)

Throughout both the City Discourse and this passage of the Mahānidāna Sutta, the Buddha continually refers to rebirth, not only when he talks about consciousness in the womb, but also when he mentions ‘future birth’, ‘the extent to which beings can get born’, and ‘the cycle of rebirth’. This is a clear indication that the dependency between consciousness and nāmarūpa concerns the process of rebirth and the life that results from it, not momentary states of mind or processes of recognition, as some have suggested.[[301]](#footnote-302)

The Sarvāstivāda and Dharmaguptaka parallels to this passage in the Āgamas differ in some ways, but convey the same basic ideas. The former even says that “name-and-form manifest as this body” and “if consciousness did not acquire name-and-form, if consciousness were not established on name-and-form and reliant on it, then would there, for consciousness, be birth, old age, disease, death, and dukkha?”[[302]](#footnote-303) The latter explains the dependency similarly: “If consciousness didn’t abide in name and form, then consciousness would have nowhere to reside. If it had nowhere to reside, would there be birth, old age, illness, death, grief, sorrow, pain, and trouble?”[[303]](#footnote-304) Both parallels tie the establishing of consciousness directly to rebirth. Its abiding and residing in nāmarūpa refers to its continuation in a new existence.

Because there can be no sentient existence without consciousness and nāmarūpa, they are the extent to which there is birth and death, “the extent to which the cycle of rebirth continues so life here (itthatta) manifests”. This statement links back to an earlier sentence in the passage: “Would the individual’s immaterial aspects and body be produced further (or ‘be reborn’, abhinibbatti) so as to start the life here (itthatta)?” The term itthatta is difficult to translate consistently, but it means a life in a certain place, not a state of “thisness” or “a concept of a something”.[[304]](#footnote-305) In this sutta the term specifically refers to a human life, but it can also refer to other forms of existence.[[305]](#footnote-306)

The Mahānidāna Sutta contains two more abstract statements as well. The Buddha says that outside of consciousness and nāmarūpa there is (a) no way for designation, language, and descriptions (three terms which are pragmatically synonymous)[[306]](#footnote-307) and (b) no realm of understanding. Before further explaining the individual dependencies between consciousness and nāmarūpa, I want to address these two statements first.

The extent of language and understanding

Although the statements on the extent of language and understanding are present in the Mahānidāna Sutta, they do not occur in the City Discourse, which only mentions that consciousness with nāmarūpa is the extent to which there is rebirth and death. A virtually identical passage in the Mahāpadāna Sutta does the same.[[307]](#footnote-308) The Dharmaguptaka parallel to the Mahānidāna Sutta also lacks the statements on language and understanding.[[308]](#footnote-309) On these and other bases Vetter concluded these statements to be late additions to the Pāli version.[[309]](#footnote-310) They are possibly brought in from a later passage in the discourse, where they fit the context much better, since it speaks of the limitations of using the word ‘truth­finder’ (tathāgata) to describe what happens to an enlightened being after death.[[310]](#footnote-311) (Chapter 12 will expand on this.)

Putting their questionable authenticity aside, the statements on the limited extent of language and understanding can be understood once we recognize that without consciousness and nāmarūpa there simply is no existence at all. Outside of them there is only the cessation of existence, also known as parinibbāna (full extinguishment). With this in mind, I think there are two possible interpretations of statement a, on there being no way for language without consciousness and nāmarūpa.

The first option takes what we could call a third-person perspective on parinibbāna, looking at it from the point of view of a person who has not attained it. It argues that after the full extinguishment of someone else (or of oneself projected into the future) there is no longer anything to be named or described.[[311]](#footnote-312) Even negations can be misconstrued. As Venerable Ajahn Brahm wrote, “it is a problem with language that when we describe what a thing is not, what qualities are absent, then the negation or the absence can easily be misunderstood as a thing in itself”.[[312]](#footnote-313) This is certainly true in general. However, throughout the discourses the Buddha does describe parinibbāna in various ways—the cessation of consciousness along with nāmarūpa being in fact one of these ways—so clearly it is not fully indescribable.

The second option, the one I prefer, takes more of a first-person perspective. It argues that without consciousness and the immaterial aspects and body there is no way for language, simply because there is no longer anybody or anything left to use language. In other words, after the cessation of consciousness and nāmarūpa there is no descriptive activity anymore. Bhikkhu Bodhi seems to understand the statement in the same way: “It is in the mental body that designations, linguistic expressions, and descriptions take shape.”[[313]](#footnote-314) Without such a mental body (or ‘immaterial aspects’) there is no longer a way to use language.

The veracity of this interpretation is backed up by statement b, on there being no understanding (or ‘wisdom’, paññā) outside of consciousness and nāmarūpa. We can’t take the third-person perspective here. That is to say, this can't mean that understanding only reaches as far as consciousness and nāmarūpa go, because what lies beyond them—i.e. parinibbāna—can also be understood. In this case it must mean that after the cessation of consciousness and nāmarūpa there is no understanding anymore, simply because there is nothing left to have the understanding. Put differently, when the enlightened being passes away, their mental faculty to understand things passes away as well. Understanding only exists as long as consciousness and nāmarūpa exist. This is supported by §92, where it is said that understanding ceases when consciousness and nāmarūpa cease. The Cūḷaniddesa comments on this: “When the enlightened one is fully extinguished by the kind of extinguishment which leaves no remnant (anupādisesa nibbānadhātu), with the cessation of their final consciousness, understanding and the immaterial aspects and body cease too.”[[314]](#footnote-315)

This interpretation might not have the intricate implications others have derived from these terse and, frankly, rather unexplanatory statements on the extent of language and understanding.[[315]](#footnote-316) But a fundamental principle in textual analysis is to interpret the doubtful and rare in light of the clear and common. This interpretation does so, as it aligns with the more transparent and frequent statement that consciousness and nāmarūpa are the extent to which beings can exist, and with the passage on the womb which contains these statements, where nāmarūpa refers to the being, not to concepts or cognitive processes. The idea is simple: life, including language and understanding, only exists as long as there is consciousness and nāmarūpa. When consciousness and nāmarūpa cease, these things can no longer be.[[316]](#footnote-317)

With those two statements addressed, hopefully to some satisfaction, we can consider the actual dependencies between consciousness and individual’s immaterial aspects and body.

The dependency of consciousness on nāmarūpa

We start with **dependency 2**, that of consciousness on the immaterial aspects and body. This dependency is not part of the default chain of twelve factors, where consciousness depends on willful actions instead, but it is mentioned in a handful of suttas, including the Mahānidāna.[[317]](#footnote-318) When the Buddha explains this dependency to Ānanda in the passage on the womb, he says there would be no future birth if consciousness “does not find a support of any immaterial aspects and body to be planted in”.[[318]](#footnote-319) The Seeds Discourse conveys the same principle, saying consciousness can’t continue to exist if it is not planted in the other aspects of existence. The similarity between these two statements confirms two earlier observations: the planting of consciousness indeed refers to rebirth, and nāmarūpa can indeed stand for the other four aspects of existence.

The same concepts were also expressed in the passage on consciousness migrating from shelter to shelter. All these texts tell us that consciousness depends on other things. There is no place where consciousness exists in isolation. Wherever beings can be reborn, there are always other aspects of existence as well. In the words of Hamilton, “the mutual dependence of nāmarūpa and viññāṇa […] is established in order to prevent independent existence being ascribed to viññāṇa.”[[319]](#footnote-320) This is why consciousness together with nāmarūpa is the extent to which there is existence, “the extent to which the cycle of rebirth continues so life here manifests”.

The Mahānidāna Sutta explains the origination of consciousness along with nāmarūpa, which refers specifically to birth. This should be kept in mind when contemplating the origination sequence of Dependent Arising. However, the mutual dependency between consciousness and nāmarūpa continues after birth as well. Venerable Bodhi stated: “Consciousness requires mentality-materiality [nāmarūpa] not only at conception, but all throughout life. It depends on a vital functioning body with its brain, nervous system, and sense faculties. It also depends on the mental body [i.e. immaterial aspects], as there can be no cognition of an object without the more specialized functions performed by contact, sensation, perception, volition, attention, and the rest.”[[320]](#footnote-321) Langer likewise concluded: “An obvious explanation for the dependence of viññāṇa on nāmarūpa is that—at least in the sensual realm—the process of consciousness takes place with the sense organs as its basis […] and therefore a functioning viññāṇa […] requires a body.”[[321]](#footnote-322) In simple terms, for consciousness to be reborn and continue to function, there needs to be other stuff, there need to be ‘immaterial aspects and body’.

This might all sound very abstract, but some discourses ask the meditator to reflect on this as follows:

When your mind has been unified in this way—cleansed and purified, free from blemishes and impurities—it becomes wieldy and workable, still and undisturbable. Then you direct it to knowledge and insight, reflecting: ‘This is my body (kāya) which is made of form (rūpa), made up of the four elements, created by my mother and father, built from rice and porridge, of a temporary nature, of the nature to deteriorate and degenerate, to decay and fall apart. And this is my consciousness which is bound and tied to it.’

Imagine a beryl gem that has all good qualities, being naturally beautiful, eight-faceted, well-worked, transparent, clear, and unclouded. It is strung with a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread. Someone with good eyesight would take it in their hand and examine it, thinking: ‘This beryl gem has all good qualities, being naturally beautiful, eight-faceted, well-worked, transparent, clear, and unclouded. And it is strung with a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread.’

Likewise, when your mind has been unified in this way […] you direct it to knowledge and insight, reflecting: ‘This is my body […] And this is my consciousness which is bound and tied to it.’[[322]](#footnote-323)

When a similar simile occurs elsewhere, it is about the rebirth of the Bodhisattva or, when used by non-Buddhist, about a self that survives death.[[323]](#footnote-324) Survival after death is also implied in the above. The pure gem represents consciousness, which in this case stands for the mind or spirit more generally. (More on this shortly.) The different color threads stand for the various bodies consciousness can be reborn into.

./img/gem.png=A gemstone with a green thread running through it. Beside it lay four other different color threads. The gem is labeled ‘the mind (consciousness)’, the green thread ‘this body’, and the other threads ‘other bodies’.=30=border  
Figure 22. A threaded gem as a simile for consciousness being tied to the body

The reflection is done after the meditator emerges from the deep meditative states called jhānas. In the jhānas you have looked at the mind directly, vividly seeing it function separately from the five bodily senses. It is like going to different universe, the universe of the mind. If you reflect on this experience even briefly, it will be difficult if not impossible for you to still hold a materialistic view of life. You realize the mind is non-material and can survive after death. However, in this life it is bound to this particular body, like the gem is tied to a particular color string.

This realization, even though it can be life changing, in the discourses is only the first and lowest of a series, so it is still far from a full insight into the conditioned existence of consciousness. But it is a significant way in which the dependency of consciousness on nāmarūpa has pragmatic relevance even before deeper insight develops. It is a start to directly seeing the mechanisms of rebirth and therefore Dependent Arising.

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So, consciousness depends on nāmarūpa throughout life. However, in the origination sequence, which describes its arising, the terms refer specifically to rebirth, which is why the Buddha explains the dependency by describing the conception of a fetus in a womb. The cessation sequence accordingly refers to the end of life:

If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, consciousness will cease. If consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease. If the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, the six senses will cease. [And so on.] That is how this whole mass of suffering ceases.[[324]](#footnote-325)

When nāmarūpa ceases, consciousness ceases too, and so do the six senses, sense impressions, and sensations. A later passage on the difference between the foolish and the wise (§108) shows that enlightened beings still have these things, so this cessation only happens when they pass away.

Brahmanic beliefs in nāmarūpa-less consciousness

Before addressing the other dependency—depencency 1, that of nāmarūpa on consciousness—it will be helpful to consider the historical context of these teachings. As said before, the Buddha did not teach in a social vacuum. Most if not all of his teachings are dialectical, which means they were formed as a reply to others. When the Buddha said consciousness depends on nāmarūpa, this was also dialectical. He was specifically addressing Brahmanic beliefs, because some Brahmins thought that by shedding their “name and form” at death they could merge with a kind of universal objectless consciousness. This has been pointed out by various scholars of Buddhism,[[325]](#footnote-326) and was summarized by Venerable Sujato as follows:

The terminology of nāmarūpa was adopted by the Buddha from the pre-Buddhist Upaniṣadic philosophy. In the Upaniṣads, nāmarūpa refers to the limited and diverse ‘names’ and ‘shapes’ in the world, each of which has its own identity, like a river; but for the enlightened [Brahmin] they flow and merge together into infinite consciousness, like the great ocean. In stating that consciousness was itself dependent on nāmarūpa, the Buddha was turning this Upaniṣadic idea on its head. Consciousness is not an independent metaphysical absolute, but a part of everyday empirical reality, as fragile and dependent as anything else.[[326]](#footnote-327)

In other words, Brahmins believed that their name and form separated them from a universal nameless and shapeless existence. Abandoning these aspects of one’s being was thought to bring the Brahmin to an everlasting state of unity with a sort of infinite consciousness. This happened at death but was prepared for in life by gaining knowledge about the process beforehand. In the book Nāma-rūpa and Dharma-rūpa, Maryla Falk explained that the process was believed to happen in two steps. First one’s form, one’s body, was abandoned, thereafter one’s name:

The first part of the process […] follow[s] the dissolution of the organic frame [i.e. the death of the body] whose functions [e.g. awareness] are now unified with the vijñānamaya ātma [the self made of consciousness]. The second part of this process of mukta [liberation] goes beyond this sphere of rūpaless unity […] and abuts in the sphere of the transcendent Purusa [the heavenly Person] the attainment of the transcendent sphere […] the utter abandonment of both rūpa and nāma.[[327]](#footnote-328)

Unlike Buddhism, the Upaniṣads were not the creation of a single person but of various spiritual leaders, who did not always have the exact same ideas.[[328]](#footnote-329) As a result this process of liberation may be detailed variously throughout the Upaniṣads. Not all Brahmins aimed for the absolution of nāmarūpa either. Many pursued more worldly aims or still the older Vedic goal of an eternal afterlife amongst one’s forefathers. But the ultimate goal of at least some Brahmins was to release themselves from “name and form” so that only pure consciousness remained, in an everlasting state of unity with the heavenly “Person”, also known as brahman, ‘the supreme’. (The word ‘Person’ is symbolic. It was by these Brahmins not regarded as a real person or even personal god, but more like the source of consciousness itself.) It was these heterodox Brahmins the Buddha was primarily addressing when explaining that consciousness always depends on nāmarūpa.

For clarification, here are some relevant passages from the Upaniṣads, translated by Patrick Olivelle:

As the rivers flow on and enter into the ocean  
giving up their names and appearances [nāmarūpa];  
So the knower [i.e consciousness], freed from [its] name and appearance,  
reaches the heavenly Person, beyond the very highest.[[329]](#footnote-330)

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Now, take these rivers. They flow toward the ocean and, upon reaching it, merge into the ocean and lose their name and visible appearance; one simply calls it the ocean. In just the same way, these sixteen parts of the person who is the perceiver [i.e. consciousness] proceed toward the Person and, upon reaching him, merge into that person, losing their names and visible appearances; one simply calls it the person. He then becomes partless [i.e. infinite] and immortal.[[330]](#footnote-331)

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Now, take these rivers, son. The easterly ones flow toward the east, and the westerly ones flow toward the west. From the ocean, they merge into the very ocean; they become just the ocean. In that state they are not aware that: ‘I am that river,’ and ‘I am this river.’ In exactly the same way, son, when all these creatures reach the existent, they are not aware that: ‘We are reaching the existent.’ No matter what they are in this world—whether it is a tiger, a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a moth, a gnat, or a mosquito—they all merge into that. The finest essence here—that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (ātman).[[331]](#footnote-332)

After introducing nāmarūpa in Chapter 3, I mentioned that in the Upaniṣads the term can also refer to the names and forms of objects, not just of individual beings. It could be that the abandoning of such concepts is also implied in these passages, but in the last passage the idea is abandoning one’s personal name and form, since it talks about beings no longer identifying with their own names, like ‘tiger’ or ‘wolf’ (or ‘Sue’ or ‘Harry’). This passage is also the only one coming from what is generally accepted to be a pre-Buddhist Upaniṣad, the Chāndogya. Since nāmarūpa refers to certain aspects of the individual here, this is likely what is referred to in the other two passages as well.[[332]](#footnote-333) This is reinforced by the second passage mentioning “parts of the person” losing their names and appearances.

The Buddha never quotes the Upaniṣads verbatim, but he appears to have been well aware of some of them, or at least of their general purport. He too used the metaphor of rivers flowing towards the ocean, although with the ocean representing extinguishment (nibbāna) instead of a universal consciousness.[[333]](#footnote-334) About the supposed conscious self which constitutes the whole world (or ‘universe’, loka) he said:

A self or anything belonging to a self are not found to actually or really exist. So is it not a totally foolish idea to think that there is a self which is the universe, and that after death one will be that—permanent, constant, eternal, unchanging, everlasting?[[334]](#footnote-335)

This statement, which reflects the standard eternalist belief in the Canon, directly refutes Brahmanical ideas about a universal self. With the dependency of consciousness on nāmarūpa the Buddha was also addressing such ideas. While Brahmins believed that the abandonment of nāmarūpa would result in a state of transcendent consciousness, the Buddha taught that consciousness is intrinsically dependent on nāma and rūpa, so that their abandonment results in the cessation of consciousness. Existence is always a combination of consciousness **and** nāmarūpa. Hence it is said, in the words of a deity named Ghaṭikara:

Where the immaterial aspects and body  
completely come to cease:  
they who understanding this teaching,  
cut their bonds to existence.[[335]](#footnote-336)

Later in the sutta, in his reply to Ghaṭikara the Buddha says that those who understand this statement bear their final body, meaning the life of the enlightened being is their final nāmarūpa.

The Pārāyana Vagga confirms that these teachings specifically addressed Brahmanical ideas. In this text a Brahmin student named Ajita asks the Buddha how to end nāmarūpa. By this he meant, according to Lauren Bausch, “a conditioned form of existence [which is] an idea already found in the Kāṇva Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa”, a text preceding the Upaniṣads.[[336]](#footnote-337) The Buddha replies that these conditioned parts of existence only cease when consciousness ceases too:

<Ajita asked:

“Understanding and memory,  
and the immaterial aspects and body,  
please tell me, sir, I ask:  
where do these come to cease?”

<The Buddha replied:

“The question you asked, Ajita,  
I can answer.  
As to where the immaterial aspects and body  
fully come to cease:  
when consciousness ceases,  
then those come to cease.”[[337]](#footnote-338)

The same essential teaching is given in the Kevaddha Sutta, which I discussed at length in a previous essay, although without detailing its connections to Brahmanism. The discourse stems from the first section of Dīgha Nikāya, the Sīlakkhandha Vagga, which is aimed at converting outsiders, Brahmins in particular. In the relevant part of the discourse the Buddha tells Kevaddha a story in which he shows his knowledge to surpass that of Brahmā. This indicates that the discourse specifically addresses Brahmanical ideas. In the story, which I take to be symbolic, an unnamed monk travels to Brahmā to ask him how to get liberated from earth, water, fire, and air, which represent form. Brahmā doesn’t know and sends the monk to the Buddha. The story intends to illustrate, among other things, that the Buddha’s teachings surpass those of the Brahmins. This context helps us understand the primary message of the discourse.

In the story the Buddha speaks the following verses to the monk:

[1]Where do earth, water,  
fire, and air find no footing?  
[2]Where do the long and short,  
the fine and coarse, the fair and ugly—  
where do the immaterial aspects and body  
fully come to cease?

The explanation for that is:

[1]Unbounded consciousness,  
without appearance, all-shining:  
here earth, water,  
fire, and air find no footing.

[2]Here the long and short,  
the fine and coarse, the fair and foul—  
here the immaterial aspects and body  
fully come to cease:  
when consciousness ceases,  
then those come to cease.

To summarize the conclusions of my earlier essay, these verses contain two separate questions and answers. The first answer describes a state of consciousness where the four elements (i.e. form) cannot infiltrate or “find no footing”. This is the state of unbounded consciousness, the second formless attainment. (In this context form goes beyond the body and also includes a mental perception of “bounded” space.) The second answer describes the cessation of all consciousness, including unbounded consciousness, at which time nāmarūpa ceases too. This reflects the standard dependency of nāmarūpa on consciousness, just as taught to Ajita.

Richard Gombrich already observed that “the opening statement of the answer seems prima facie to reify consciousness and the language sounds as if it could come from an Upaniṣad”. He did not provide further sources, but I have no doubt these verses indeed reference Brahmanic ideas. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the Brahmin sage Yājñavalkya describes the highest form of existence as “an unbounded, limitless mass of consciousness” and also calls it “neither fine nor coarse, neither long nor short”, in both cases using the direct Sanskrit equivalents of the terms used in the Kevaddha Sutta. He also describes this form of existence as being different from, and uninfluenced by, the four elements. Further, the Taittirīya Upaniṣad calls this highest essence “invisible”, i.e., without appearance.

It is a bit more speculative, but the term ‘all-shining’ (sabbato pabhaṁ) might have a link with a statement from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad: “Far above here [is brahman] the light that shines from heaven on the backs of everything, on the backs of all (sabba) things, in the very highest of the high worlds—it is clearly this very same light here within a man. […] This self of mine that lies deep within my heart—it is made of mind, […] luminous is its appearance.” It seems one idea here is that this consciousness makes awareness of things in the world possible. It “illuminates” them, making them in a sense visible. However, the term ‘all-shining’, which to Yājñavalkya would have implied a pure eternal entity, to the Buddha merely referred to the purity of a temporal experience.

Yājñavalkya’s unbounded consciousness likely differed from the Buddha’s, not only philosophically but also in practice, because the Upaniṣads seem to indicate Yājñavalkya arrived at it through reason rather than meditation. But regardless, the Buddha did use the exact same terminology, which indicates he (or whoever composed the Kevaddha Sutta) was very familiar with these Brahmanic ideas and was addressing them directly.

Before I explain exactly how the Buddha responded to these ideas, it is worth noting that although Brahmins called the highest goal a self (ātman), this did not mean that the person continued forever as a separate individual, a personal self. The term ātman had several senses. Any type of essence of the being was called a ‘self’. The goal was an impersonal attainment, the ultimate conscious state of existence. Karel Werner wrote: “There is no trace of the individual in it, even though [it] is an individual experience accessible at the moment of its duration just to that one particular person.” Yājñavalkya himself said: “It is to be seen by the mind alone that nothing exists separately here. […] It is to be seen as just oneness, immeasurable and constant. The self is stainless, beyond space, unborn, immense, constant.” This supposed eternal, unborn, immeasurable experience, although called a self, therefore was also in a sense self-less. That is exactly why in order to attain it, one’s personal name and form had to be abandoned, leaving only unbounded consciousness.

Gombrich also commented on the Kevaddha Sutta that “it is a bit risky to take a riddle or its solution as a philosophical tenet or argument”. I wholeheartedly embrace this sentiment in general, but in this particular case the overall meaning seems clear enough to me. My interpretation of these verses is also a safe one, for rather than taking them as a unique statement on the nature of nibbāna, it aligns with the Buddha’s overall teachings. In short, he acknowledged the existence of an unbounded consciousness but denied its unconditioned nature. To the Buddha all consciousness is dependently arisen, including unbounded consciousness. His actual response to the Brahmanic ideas is therefore two final lines of verse: “when consciousness ceases, then those come to cease”. While Yājñavalkya’s goal was a type of consciousness free from name and form, his goal was the cessation of consciousness.

However, some suggest the Buddha’s final goal was also a state of unbounded consciousness, and these verses are often taken as primary evidence for that. As I discussed in the essay, this is a consequence of interpreting the two answer verses as a single answer instead of two separate ones. I actually suspect this was intended to happen, to a certain extent. That is because, as Gombrich noticed, the verses seem like they’re right in line with Brahmanic beliefs… but only until the final two lines are added! If we remove those lines, we get: “Unbounded consciousness, without appearance, all-shining: here earth, water, fire, and air find no footing. Here the long and short, the fine and coarse, the fair and ugly, here the immaterial aspects and body fully come to cease.” This sounds exactly like Yājñavalkya’s neither-fine-nor-coarse, neither-long nor-short unbounded mass of consciousness which is untouched by the four elements. However! The addition of “when consciousness ceases, then those come to cease”, completely changes the meaning of the verses. They now have to be read as two different answers, in the way I suggested. It’s like the Buddha said, “I got something… stolen from me.” The meaning is only revealed at the end, and it turns the goal from a presence of something (an unbounded consciousness) into an absence.

To conclude this little detour into Brahmanic thought, it is important to keep in mind that the Buddha spoke to a certain audience. When we put his teachings into practice, they can sometimes feel so alive, it is easy to assume everything he said is timeless, as relevant today as ever. But while such a mindset may be inspiring for the practitioner, it is problematic when interpreting ancient texts. Although it is true that the deep truths the Buddha’s teachings point at have remained unchanged, the pointers themselves are sometimes a bit outdated. As a result some of the pragmatic implications of these teachings are lost on us. Nāmarūpa is a good example. If the Buddha were to teach in our day and age, he would not speak about “name and form”, since most of us aren’t Brahmins aiming to leave our “name and form” behind to reach a state of unconditioned consciousness.

What has remained very relevant, however, is the general idea that consciousness can’t exist in isolation, because some Buddhists believe the Buddha taught the highest goal to be some consciousness free from objects or content. But it was the Brahmins who did so, not the Buddha. The Buddha said all consciousness is dependently arisen. Or, as he chose to put it, consciousness depends on nāmarūpa.

The dependency of nāmarūpa on consciousness

Also connected to some ancient concepts, although to a lesser extent, is **dependency 1**, that of nāmarūpa (the body and other individual aspects of a being) on consciousness. This dependency is part of the standard sequence of Dependent Arising, where it is phrased as: “Dependent on consciousness, there are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body (viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṁ).” In isolation this statement is rather non-explanatory, so how should it be understood?

The passage of the Mahānidāna Sutta on conception in the womb (§84) contains the most detailed explanation of this dependency in the Pāli Canon. Quite significantly, before giving this explanation the Buddha says: “I said the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness (viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṁ), which is to be understood as follows.” This indicates that whenever the phrase viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṁ occurs, such as in the standard sequence, it should be understood in line with the explanation given in the Mahānidāna Sutta. Since there is no other direct explanation of this dependency in the canon, this passage should not be lightly swept aside. It is not merely an example of the dependency of nāmarūpa on consciousness, but the foremost explanation in the canon.

In Chapter 3 I showed that nāmarūpa refers to the individual being, and in the last chapter I discussed the rebirth of consciousness. In this passage these two ideas come together. The Buddha describes the “entry” (or ‘conception’, avakkanti) of consciousness at the immaterial aspects and body inside the mother’s womb, mentioning various words already familiar to us: ‘produced’, ‘conception’, ‘consciousness is planted’, and even ‘develop, sprout, and mature’, which all refer to rebirth.

The primary message is that a being is not born out of nowhere. It had a past life, a past consciousness. This consciousness (or spirit, we might say more freely) is what gets reborn in the new life and thereby becomes a conditioning factor for the rest of the individual. Without consciousness continuing on in such a way, if it were “cut off” in the womb, there can be no new life. This specifically refutes the materialistic understanding of life, the assumption that the being is just physical stuff, a view mentioned regularly in the canon as being wrong.

We find another pragmatic application of this link when we consider that consciousness itself depends on willful actions. We aren’t just “thrown” into the world, to use a Heideggerian term. We were born in this human life because our past will and intention drove us here. If we remain attached to the human realm—to our country, our families, our body, our five senses, and so on—then our will and intentions are likely to be directed towards another human life. Our consciousness will be reborn in a womb again.

Consciousness as the carrier of life

There is a little language barrier between Pāli and English here, for in English we do not use the word ‘consciousness’ to describe what gets reborn, and are more likely to use something like ‘spirit’ or ‘mind’ instead. We do not say things like “the rebirth of consciousness” or “consciousness is conceived in the womb”. In Pāli, however, viññāṇa has a wider meaning than just consciousness in the sense of awareness.

First of all, viññāṇa can also stand for the mind more generally. In some instances it is used as a direct synonym for citta and mano, both commonly translated as ‘mind’. It is also said that the consciousness of the unenlightened becomes preoccupied with change. In such instances consciousness stands for something more than the plain awareness it signifies as one of the five aspects of existence. It represents the whole mind, including its perceptions, thoughts, and sensations. In at least one passage, the Thai Pāli manuscripts even use viññāṇa where other editions have citta. The Āgamas sometimes also use ‘mind’ (心) as a translation for what must in the original have been viññāṇa or its Sanskrit equivalent vijñāna. Also deserving consideration is a discourse in the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṁyutta where not viññāṇa but citta is said to depend on nāmarūpa: “The mind (citta) originates from the immaterial aspects and body. The mind will disappear if the immaterial aspects and body cease.” The context here is a little different, but it is an alternative way to phrase the dependency of consciousness on nāmarūpa, with citta being a synonym for viññāṇa.

Aside from referring to the mind in general, viññāṇa was also a name for the surviving aspect of the being, or as Venerable Anālayo describes it, “what provides the transition from one body to another”. The suttas mention “the body with consciousness”, consciousness is said to be bound to the body as long as one is alive, and the person dies when consciousness (and vitality and heat) leave the body. It is also said that consciousness roams and transmigrates in saṁsāra; that it passes on and gets reborn; that it travels on after death; and, in the Mahānidāna Sutta, that it enters the womb.

The PTS Pāli-English Dictionary therefore glosses under viññāṇa, before discussing more analytical meanings of the word: “the bearer of (individual) life, life-force (as extending also over rebirths), principle of conscious life, […] mind as transmigrant, […] In this (fundamental) application it may be characterized as the sensory and perceptive activity commonly expressed by ‘mind’. It is difficult to give any one word for viññāṇa, because there is much difference between the old Buddhist and our modern points of view, and there is a varying use of the term in the Canon itself.” Many scholars have echoed these observations, and Kalupahana summarized: “At least three important uses of viññāṇa can be clearly distinguished. First, it is used to denote psychic phenomena in general, synonymous with the terms citta, ‘mind’, and mano, ‘thought’. Second, it is used to describe a complete act of perception or cognition [i.e. instances of awareness]; and third, it stands for the connecting link between two lives.”

The reason viññāṇa was used to indicate what travels between lives, is that awareness seems to be a constant. This subjective feeling of continuity made people think consciousness was permanent and would keep existing after death. The Buddha knew consciousness to be impermanent and ever-changing, but he did not shy away from using the term in a more conventional sense as well. Just like with nāmarūpa, he did not introduce the term viññāṇa but adopted it from society, where it already had various meanings. After all, to get new ideas across you have to start with some shared terminology. “In order to make himself understood the Buddha had to talk in terms with which his audiences were already familiar,” wrote Gombrich. In this case, the audience was already familiar with using viññāṇa to refer to what survives death.

The Thai nowadays also use viññāṇa (วิญญาณ) to refer to the surviving spirit. The English word ‘consciousness’ ill fits such contexts, and according to Schmithausen might even be considered misleading: “This viññāṇa [of Dependent Arising] is somewhat misleadingly rendered as ‘Wahrnehmung’ [‘consciousness/awareness’], because it primarily concerns a subtle carrier of life.” It might be unintuitive for a word to have multiple meanings which no single English term can encapsulate, but as long as we keep the language gap in mind, the essential ideas behind the factor of consciousness are clear enough. In the discourses it includes more than just moments of awareness, referring also to the mind or life-force that travels from one life to the next.

This meaning of consciousness applies not only to its links with nāmarūpa but also to its link with willful actions. As Frauwallner stated: “Out of these passages we get the valuable information that knowledge [Frauwallner’s translation of viññāṇa] in the oldest Buddhism is the essential bearer of the cycle of existence, which enters in the next embodiment after death […]. From these cited passages, the chain of causes is understood as follows: the impulses of the will (saṅkhāra) as the cause of knowledge (viññāṇa) do not call forth knowledge itself [in the moment] but only bring about its entry into the mother’s womb.” In §55 & §56 consciousness was said to travel on to a certain place after death depending on one’s willful actions. This rebirth of consciousness is what Frauwallner is talking about.

The same general principle also applies to the planting or establishing of consciousness in a certain realm. Hamilton wrote: “The individual life is sometimes expressed by stating that viññāṇa is ‘stationed’ [or ‘planted’]: the centrality of consciousness allows it to be used as a general metaphor for an entire life.”

The cessation sequence also confirms that the factor of consciousness concerns the entire life, not the arising of individual instances of consciousness. Otherwise enlightened beings, who have no more ignorance and resultant willful actions, would have lost all consciousness the moment they became enlightened. But consciousness instead only ceases when they pass away. Therefore, the phrase “if willful actions cease, consciousness will cease” means that consciousness will cease at death, as a result of (ignorant) willful actions ceasing at an earlier time. By extent, in the origination sequence, the factor of consciousness also does not refer to the arising of instances of consciousness. It refers to the start of life, to the arising of the entire aspect of existence of consciousness.

All that said, I think the commentaries get too technical when specifically calling the consciousness of Dependent Arising ‘linking consciousness’ (paṭisandhi-viññāṇa), by which they mean it links the past life to the new one. The commentaries correctly understand that the factor of viññāṇa focuses on rebirth, but the Buddha phrased things more generally. Consciousness as a factor of Dependent Arising still refers to the aspect of existence of consciousness, which does not just link lives together but also continues to exist in the new life. The arising of consciousness as a result of willful actions is the general continuation of this aspect of existence into a next life, not a separate type of ‘linking consciousness’ that exists only for a moment or so.

In a similar spirit, although the suttas call the process that continues from life to life ‘consciousness’, this does not mean that consciousness exists without other aspects of existence at any point in time. Between lives consciousness still depends on other things, including some subtle form of nāmarūpa. However, such technical considerations about the in-between state are not what the standard sequence intends to convey, where the arising of consciousness and nāmarūpa concerns their continuance into a new life.

Consciousness as a stream

Using ‘consciousness’ to refer to the process that continues from life to life has a downside, however, because it can be mistaken to refer to some entity or self, like some Brahmins believed consciousness to be. The Brahmins used the term in similar ways as the Buddha, as the transmigrating aspect of the being, but to them it signified a permanent entity, while the Buddha understood consciousness to be an impermanent process. “There is no doubt that the Upaniṣadic tradition took the vijñāna as the surviving factor at death in the metaphysical sense of an ātman [self] that leaves the body at death”, wrote Wijesekera. “Thus it is easy to see how the Buddhist theory of viññāṇa as the surviving factor shows a distinct difference from the parallel Upaniṣadic concept.” The difference being that the Buddhist viññāṇa lacks any constancy or self.

It is not strange the Brahmins had such absolutist ideas. As said earlier, for unenlightened beings there is this sense of sameness, this watcher or knower people feel is behind all of their experiences. That very sameness is what the Brahmins also felt. They concluded this consciousness was indestructible and would continue unchanged after death. They (or more likely society at large) were already using the word viññāṇa in this sense before the Buddha appeared on the scene. He then challenged these preexisting ideas in various ways but without completely changing the terminology.

Here is an example from the Upaniṣads:

What is that self? It is this person—the one that consists of consciousness (vijñāna) among the vital functions, the one that is the inner light within the heart. […] When at birth this person [i.e. the consciousness] takes on a body, he becomes united with bad things, and when at death he leaves it behind, he gets rid of those bad things.

In the Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving, a monk named Sāti has such a view. “It is this unchanging consciousness that roams and transmigrates”, he claims. “It is he [i.e. the person/self] who speaks, he who feels, who in various realms experiences the results of good and bad deeds.” The Buddha rebukes Sāti, saying consciousness is not an unchanging entity. It is inconstant and fluctuating, with its contents depending on changing objects of awareness. As Vetter explained:

Perception [Vetter’s translation of viññāṇa] was thought of as transmigrating (perhaps accompanied by faint feeling, apperception and emotions). This perception was seen as a kind of substance, though not (or, no longer) as unchanging [by the Buddha]. This is a relic of an ancient idea that ‘perception’, as the subtlest part of a person, is the transmigratory entity. […] But we must be cautious. This part of the twelvefold chain, though showing traces of old ideas, probably presupposes discriminating insight at a stage where ‘perception’ was considered transient as well. In this sense the monk Sāti is rightly criticized […] for stating that it is always this same ‘perception’ which transmigrates.

The Buddha tells Sāti that consciousness occurs dependent on the objects of the six senses, describing the arising of different types of consciousness depending on sense impressions. (This is a different concept from consciousness arising dependent on willful actions, as the next chapter illustrates.) The Buddha effectively tells Sāti that consciousness is not a constant entity but an ever-changing stream of unique instances that succeed one another.

In the Sampasādanīya Sutta, although the passage is abstract and lacks context, Sāriputta indeed mentions a stream of consciousness (viññāṇasota) that can be planted in this world or another world. The analogy with a stream is apt, because as Heraclitus’ famous saying goes, you can’t step in the same river twice. A stream of water seems to be a solid entity, yet the water flowing in it is never the same. Similarly, consciousness may seem to be continuous, but in reality it constantly changes. As the Buddha said: “What is called ‘mind’, ‘sentience’, and also ‘consciousness’, that arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and night.”

This important principle—that there is no constancy or self in consciousness, yet it still transmigrates—has sometimes been misunderstood by writers challenging the multiple-lifetime interpretation of Dependent Arising. They claim that this interpretation necessarily entails an eternalist view that sees a stable self in consciousness, similar to the view of Sāti. But such arguments are just semantics. Streams of water are ever-changing, but we can still use the word ‘stream’ to point to this impermanent phenomena. Likewise, we can use the term ‘consciousness’ without implying a self. Notice also that the Buddha actually didn’t challenge Sāti’s statement that consciousness transmigrates. He only challenged it being a stable entity. As already observed by the PTS Pāli-English Dictionary more than a century ago: “It was [by Sāti] also held to be an immutable, persistent substance, a view strongly condemned [by the Buddha]. Since, however, the persistence of viññāṇa from life to life is declared […], we must judge that it is only the immutable persistence that is condemned.”

We can assume the Brahmanic idea of an unchanging transmigrating consciousness was quite prevalent in the Buddha’s days, given that even a Buddhist monk believed in it. Sāti even thought it was the Buddha’s own teaching! For this reason I think the Buddha’s definition of viññāṇa as the six types of consciousness (§2) was largely a teaching on the absence of a self. It told the audience that consciousness, although it does continue from life to life, is not a fixed entity. It consists of six different types of consciousness. This makes the definition of viññāṇa similar in function to the definitions of nāma and rūpa. Rather than being a technical explanation of the word, it was meant to challenge existing notions about what a person is. As Olalde summarized: “[The Buddha’s] reinterpretation of nāma mirrors that of viññāṇa, in which the older notion of viññāṇa as a transmigrating entity was eventually replaced by the sixfold [consciousness].” The Buddha’s definitions of ‘consciousness’ and ‘the immaterial aspects and body’ together imply that the whole being is without any fixed essence. In short: one’s “name” is the result of a collection of mental processes, one’s body is an experience of “form” made of the four elements, and one’s consciousness is an ever-changing stream of events. None of these contains an essence or self.

The simile of the bundles of reeds

The absence of a self is also implied by the mutual dependence between the factors of consciousness and that of the immaterial aspects and body. Sāriputta once explained this to Koṭṭhita with a simile of two bundles of reeds leaning against one another. We join their conversation after they’ve already gone through the sequence of factors starting at old age and death, having arrived at nāmarūpa.

[Koṭṭhita the Great:] “Tell me, Venerable Sāriputta, are the individual’s immaterial aspects and body made by oneself? Or by another? Or by both oneself and another? Or do they arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another?”

“Venerable Kotthita, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body are not made by onself, nor by another, nor by oneself and another, nor do they arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another. Rather, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness.”

“Tell me, is consciousness made by oneself? Or by another? Or by both oneself and another? Or does it arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another?”

“Consciousness is not made by oneself, nor by another, nor by both oneself and another, nor does it arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another. Rather, consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.”

“Venerable Sāriputta, I understand you say the individual’s immaterial aspects and body are not made by oneself, nor by another, nor by oneself and another, nor do they arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another. Rather, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness. But you also say consciousness is not made by oneself, nor by another, nor by oneself and another, nor does it arise at random, being made by neither oneself nor another. Rather, consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. Now, how am I to interpret this?”

“Well then, venerable, I will give you a simile. For some clever people understand the meaning of something through a simile. Like two bundles of reeds leaning against one another, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness, and consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body. […] If you pull away the left bundle of reeds, the right one falls, and if you pull away the right bundle of reeds, the left one falls. Likewise, if consciousness ceases, the individual’s immaterial aspects and body will cease, and if the individual’s immaterial aspects and body cease, consciousness will cease.”

The exchange between these venerable monks may benefit from some clarification. To start, it is interesting to note that according to the Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Koṭṭhita was also born a Brahmin, just like Sāriputta. So again these teachings on consciousness and nāmarūpa may be addressing Brahmin views. The terms ‘made by oneself’ and ‘made by another’ to Brahmins would have meant made by the person’s own self or by higher powers in the universe, like a creator god or brahman. Sāriputta explains that no self or higher power underlies consciousness or the immaterial aspects and body. Instead, they rely on one another, like bundles of reeds leaning against each other.

The imagery was probably derived from farmers drying bundles of hay in a field. Just like the simile of the seed, it was something people could link directly to their experience of the world. The simile has its limits, though, because if you pull away one physical bundle of reeds, the other will fall to the ground, but it will still exist. With consciousness and nāmarūpa, however, if one ends, the other also completely ceases.

./img/reedslean.png=Two bundles of reeds leaning against one another with the sun shining on them. The left bundle is labeled ‘consciousness’, the right ‘immaterial aspects and body’.= 30=border  
./img/reedsfall.png=The two bundles fallen on the ground. Above is a caption ‘no rebirth, no consciousness’.=30=border  
Figure 23. The bundles of reeds simile

In the following illustration I added the mutual dependency to the tower of bricks. This reminds us that consciousness and the individual’s immaterial aspects & body rely not just on one another but also on willful actions. That is also why Sāriputta said these factors do not arise at random. Although there is no self, where the being is reborn is not random, because it is still determined by actions and intentions.

The dependency of the immaterial aspects and body on consciousness is not just an absolute dependency but also a conditioning dependency. By this I mean, consciousness does not just underlie the mere existence of the immaterial aspects and body; it also shapes them. The being’s willful actions determine where their consciousness takes rebirth, which in turn determines the quality of their immaterial aspects and body.

./img/bricksreeds.png=A stack of bricks. From the bottom: two bricks lying flat on one another, then two bricks leaning against one another, then another eight bricks. The bricks leaning against one another are labeled ‘consciousness’ and ‘immaterial aspects and body’.=30=border  
Figure 24. The dependency of consciousness and nāmarūpa on willful actions

The cessation of nāmarūpa

When the bottom bricks are pulled away, it takes some time for the tower to topple to the ground. Similarly, when ignorance and willful actions are removed, the cessation of consciousness along with the immaterial aspects and body does not occur at the very same instant. It happens only when the enlightened one passes away. Part three will discuss this final cessation of existence in more detail, focusing on consciousness in particular. For now, the next verses connect understanding and knowledge (that is, the cessation of ignorance) to the cessation of existence and to nāmarūpa. Being verses, they are unsurprisingly somewhat cryptic and may have multiple intended meanings, but the basic message still shines through.

Look at the world with its gods,  
resorting to immaterial aspects and bodies,  
imagining what has no self to have a self,  
imagining they know the truth.

For whatever they imagine it is,  
it is different from that.  
That is indeed their falsity,  
for the ephemeral is delusive in nature.

But extinguishment has a non-delusive nature:  
the noble ones know it as truth.  
By comprehending the truth,  
they are hungerless, extinguished.

I heard this was said by the Buddha, said by the enlightened one: “Mendicants, beings are truly deprived when they are deprived of noble understanding. In this life they suffer and undergo discomfort, distress, and fevers; and when their body breaks down, after death, they can expect a bad destination. […]”

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That is what the Buddha said, and this is said about it:

“Look at the world with its gods,  
resorting to immaterial aspects and bodies,  
deprived of understanding,  
imagining they know the truth.

The best thing in the world is understanding,  
as it leads to penetration  
with which you correctly understand  
the end of rebirth and existence.

Gods and humans envy them,  
the awake ones, who are non-forgetful,  
and who with joyful understanding  
bear their final body.”

Let me rephrase all that. The world thinks existence including nāmarūpa has a self, but it is deceptive, and different from what the world imagines it is. Life is actually without a self (in the Buddhist sense of the word), and also ephemeral, ever changing. If you have right view, you understand things to be this way. This preliminary understanding inevitably leads to full penetration, the removal of ignorance. At that point you also know that your current body is your final body. Existence will come to an end after this life.

Another discourse which mentions the cessation of ignorance and nāmarūpa is the Tangle Discourse, which is quite well known for introducing and closing the Visuddhimagga:

The brahmin Bhāradvāja Tangled-Hair went to the Buddha and exchanged greetings with him. After a friendly greeting and exchange he sat down to a side. He then addressed him in verse:

“In an inner tangle and outer tangle:  
people are entangled in a tangle.  
I ask you this, Gotama:  
who can untangle this tangle?”

“A wise man grounded in virtue,  
developing the mind and understanding,  
a motivated and heedful mendicant:  
he can untangle this tangle.

They whose desire, anger,  
and ignorance are removed,  
enlightened ones free from defilements:  
they have untangled the tangle.

When the immaterial aspects and body  
completely cease  
along with impingement and perceptions of form:  
then the tangle is cut.”

It is not unusual for verses to leave some things open to interpretation. In this case neither the brahmin nor the Buddha explicitly explains what it means to be entangled in the inside and outside. The Visuddhimagga has a somewhat uninspired take on this, thinking it refers to craving for things of one’s own and things of others. I suggest something a bit more poetic. The inner tangle is indeed the defilements in the mind including craving, but the external tangle refers to existence, to being stuck in the “external” world. The Mahānidāna Sutta refers to this, saying people are entangled like string, knotted like a ball of thread, being stuck in saṁsāra. There are two different tangles, then, but since they are closely connected, the rest of the discourse refers to them just as ‘the tangle’.

Bhāradvāja only asks who can untangle the tangle. This question is already answered in the Buddha’s first verse, but he then adds two more. The three verses refer to three stages on the path: the first describes the one in training, the second the enlightened one, and the third parinibbāna. The trainee can untangle the tangle, but the enlightened one has untangled it. In the third verse the tangle is not just untangled: it is completely cut. This refers to parinibbāna, the end of existence, when nāmarūpa ceases along with consciousness.

The latter is referred to as ‘perceptions of form’, but other perceptions are also implied. One Saṁyukta Āgama parallel indeed more simply says that along with nāmarūpa all types of consciousness cease. Another says the mind ceases, but as pointed out before, these parallels sometimes use ‘mind’ (心) as a substitute for ‘consciousness’.

Summary on consciousness and nāmarūpa

In brief, the two dependencies are:

1. **The individual’s immaterial aspects and body depend on consciousness.** This means there is no birth of an individual without a consciousness coming from a previous life. It reinforces the concept of rebirth and is a negation of materialism. The stream of consciousness travels wherever the willful actions direct it, and the being’s immaterial aspects and body are shaped accordingly, for example like a human or animal. The link also implies that existence, and therefore suffering, can only cease with the cessation of consciousness.
2. **Consciousness depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body.** This means consciousness can’t continue to exist without other aspects of the being. There is no realm of pure consciousness, such as the state of unbounded consciousness some Brahmins believed in. Consciousness also depends on the individual’s immaterial aspects and body because a being requires the senses to be aware of things. If someone abandons the immaterial aspects and body—or abandons the other four aspects of existence, we might alternatively say—then consciousness can’t possibly continue, and it must also cease.

As Rita Langer summarized in Das Bewußtsein als Träger des Leben (Consciousness as the Carrier of Life): “At conception viññāṇa acts as the animating and life-carrying principle, which is why it is called the condition for the living body (nāmarūpa). Vice versa, the living body is a condition for viññāṇa: on the one hand because it functions as a support for the life-carrying principle (viññāṇa) which only leaves it again at death; on the other hand because acts of consciousness generally rely on the (physical) sense organs.” To put the two together, sentient life is always a combination of consciousness and nāmarūpa. It is never just one of the two.

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)
12. [SN 56.28](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) explains: “They are called ‘noble one’s truths’ (ariya-sacca), because in this world […] the Truth­finder (tathāgata) is the noble one (ariya).” Norman 1997 p.16 wrote: “My own feeling is that it is very likely that ‘the truth of the noble one (the Buddha)’ is the correct translation.” See also Norman 2008 and Harvey 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Tatra tatra, ‘in various realms’. [MN 2:8.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) and [MN 38:5.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) use tatra tatra (more literally ‘in various places’) explicitly for rebirth in different realms. That this is also the intended meaning in the second truth is indicated by it being about the craving that leads to a next life. Sujato 2023 translates “in various different realms”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. [SN 56.13:3.1–3.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See also Piyadassi p.5, Bodhi 1984 p.5 n.2, Bodhi 2015 p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. [AN 3.61:15.1–15.14](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Paṭiccasamuppādaṁ, ‘the dependent arising of things’. By this I mean the actual principles existing in nature, rather than the Buddha’s teachings on these principles, which I call ‘Dependent Arising’.

    The term is sometimes translated as ‘dependent coarising’, but the prefix saṁ- in samuppāda is simply a redundancy for the following prefix up- (=ud-). As PED says under saṁ-: “very often merely pleonastic, esp. in comb[inatio]n with other prefixes.” Therefore, under samuppajjati it simply has, “to arise, to be produced”. No other dictionary suggests ‘coarising’ either. To give some examples of the word samuppāda in a daily-life context: [SN 3.25:2.14](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) mentions the arising (samuppanne) of a great peril, namely a mountain that crushes everything; [AN 8.54:6.1, 6.7, 7.1, 7.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) mentions wealth that has arisen (samuppannānaṁ); [Kp 8:1.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) mentions the arising (samuppanne) of a need to use stored up wealth; [Thag 1.30:1.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) mentions the arising (samuppanno) of sickness; and [Iti 43:3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) uses ‘arisen’ (samuppannaṁ) as a synonym for ‘born’ (jātaṁ) and ‘came to be’ (bhūtaṁ). We do not speak of a coarising of sickness or wealth, nor does there seem to be a good justification, certainly not on a linguistic basis, to speak of a coarising of death, for instance. Samupajjati is simply a synonym for upajjati, including in the context of Dependent Arising. There is also no such thing as “saṁ-nirodha” (“co-cessation”) but only nirodha (cessation), which indicates “co-” is not intended in samuppāda either. See also Jones 2021 p.234: “When translating the expression paṭicca-samuppāda in the Pāli Canon, it therefore seems inappropriate to use words like ‘coarising’ or ‘co-production’.” Schmithausen 1997 n.73 similarly concluded: “It is not probable that the prefix saṁ- was, from the outset, intended to convey such a heavy meaning.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. [MN 28:28.5–28.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 191 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. [SN 22.5:2.1–4.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. [SN 22.30](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. As glossed by PED, CPD, CPED, DOP, DPD. I translate it as ‘production’ primarily to illustrate the simile of the painter, which uses the same word for producing a painting. See also note 166 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. For example Bodhi 2012, [AN 10.65](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. [Ud 8.9:5.1–5.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For the meaning of ‘fuel’ see for example [SN 44.9:6.5–6.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “When a being laid down their body and is not yet reborn in another body, I say craving is their fuel (upādāna), because craving is what fuels them at that time.” For the meaning of ‘taking up’ see for example [MN 75:24.6–24.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 512: “I have long been tricked, cheated, and deceived by this mind. For what I have been taking up was just form, sensation, perception, will, and consciousness. And dependent on that taking up (upādāna) of mine, there was existence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. For the ten powers and four reasons to be self-confident see [MN 12:9.1–27.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. [SN 12.21](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Imasmiṁ sati idaṁ hoti, ‘There will be this (idaṁ hoti), only if there is that (imasmiṁ sati)’. The clause imasmiṁ sati forms a locative absolute. There have been discussions whether this implies that the factors of Dependent Arising happen simultaneously or whether it allows for a separation in time (e.g. Brahmavamso 2002). But this misses the fact that the locative absolute, although it can have temporal connotations, can also form a conditional. Wijesekera 1993 §184 states: “the temporal notion is not the only idea expressed by the loc[ative] absolute. […] It may also signify a condition that exists or should exist for the fulfillment of the main action, which may be rendered by such expressions as ‘if, on condition, provided that’ etc.” See also Duroiselle §603 iii: “Sati, the locative singular of santo […] may also often be translated by ‘if, such being the case’.” This conditional meaning applies here. The clause imasmiṁ sati describes a general principle of dependency without any temporal implications.

    By “a condition that exists or should exist” Wijesekera means the locative absolute can denote either a sufficient or a necessary condition. A necessary condition can be indicated with ‘provided that’, as Wijesekera suggests, but also with ‘only if’, as I have done. It is a subtle difference, but I think imasmiṁ sati idaṁ hoti should not be translated as “there will be this if there is that” (omitting ‘only’), because this forms a sufficient condition, and sufficiency does not apply to all the links—yet this statement is individually applied to all links, as in §11.

    To give a general example first, “there will be rain if there are clouds” would mean it always rains whenever there are clouds. Clouds are sufficient for rain. However, “there will be rain only if there are clouds”, just means it cannot rain without clouds. Clouds are necessary for rain. In the context of Dependent Arising “there will be craving if there are sensations” would mean there will be craving whenever there are sensations. Sensations would be sufficient for craving. This is incorrect, because enlightened beings still experience sensations yet don’t have craving, and even when you’re not enlightened, you can experience sensations without craving, like in deep meditation. However, the translation “there will be craving only if there are sensations” instead means sensations are just a necessary condition for craving. Likewise, birth is not a sufficient condition for old age, since beings can die young. So there will be old age only if there is birth, not if there is birth. Or, if in §83 we were to translate the mutual dependency between consciousness and the immaterial aspects and body as “there will be the immaterial aspects and body if there is consciousness [and] there will be consciousness if there are the immaterial aspects and body”, we would technically say that the two factors keep each other in existence, since there are two statements of sufficiency. However, “there will the immaterial aspects and body only if there is consciousness [and] there will be consciousness only if there are the immaterial aspects and body” leaves room for ignorance and willful actions to also be required. This mutual dependency is of course exactly what the simile of the bundles of reeds portrays (§95). The idea is that one bundle can stand only if the other stands; not that if one stands, the other also stands automatically.

    Furthermore, if the links in Dependent Arising were translated as sufficient conditions (that is, using ‘if’ instead of ‘only if’) technically there could also be other sufficient conditions that lead to the same results. For example, willful actions could then logically have been the result of something other than ignorance—knowledge, let’s say. For it would then be possible to say: “There will be willful actions if there is ignorance, and there will be willful actions if there is knowledge.” With ‘only if’ this does not work (as it shouldn’t): “There will be willful actions only if there is ignorance, and there will be willful actions only if there is knowledge.” The two statements conflict, because they are necessary conditions with opposing requirements. The whole point of the sequence of dependent arising is that all links are necessary conditions. Otherwise suffering could technically have been brought about through something other than ignorance.

    The underlying issue is, this difference between ‘if’ and ‘only if’ does not exist in Pāli. The locative absolute can be translated as either, depending on the context. However, the context of Dependent Arising demands the latter. It demands necessary conditions. See also Jayatilleke p.449 on this phrase: “B does not occur unless A is present and occurs only when A is present.” (emphasis added) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See also Shulman p.299 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. More literally, ‘dependency (paccayatā) on something (idap)’. The term idappaccayatā is sometimes translated as ‘causality’, which may work too. However, to many people ‘to cause’ means “to actively produce as a result” (Wiktionary.com s.v. ‘cause’)—think of billiard balls bouncing against one another—and in context of Dependent Arising this kind of causality does not always apply. Birth does not actively produce death, for example. It is heart attacks and car crashes that do so, arguably. Neither do sensations actively produce craving: it is ignorance that does. Also, consciousness and nāmarūpa, which are mutually dependent, do not cause one another in an active way. They just rely on one another, as the simile of the reeds at §95 illustrates, both being in a sense “actively produced” by willful actions. Jones 2022 p.135 agreed: “To understand them as a causal sequence, whereby ignorance is the cause of the inherited conditioning factors (saṅkhārā), feeling (vedanā) is the cause of craving, birth is the cause of ageing and death, and so on, leads to obscurity and contradiction. But to understand each of these conditionally-arisen phenomena as necessary and sometimes sufficient conditions for the arising of the next in the sequence allows for interpretations that are truer to the teachings.”

    In everyday contexts the words paṭicca and paccaya also do not indicate what we normally call ‘causes’. It is said that the body depends on (paṭicca) food, and will die without it. ([SN 46.2:1.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY)) Food is not the cause of the body: it is just one condition necessary for its continuance. In context of Dependent Arising itself, the Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving mentions that fire depends on (paṭicca) fuel. (§102) Fuel by itself does not really cause fire either. As to paccaya, a noble disciple is said to be ‘not dependent on others’ (aparappaccaya). These and other everyday uses of the words also indicate that Dependent Arising is about dependencies, not causalities, at least not in the way the word ‘cause’ is sometimes understood.

    The word nidāna is sometimes also translated as ‘cause’, particularly in the title of the Mahānidāna Sutta, then called ‘The Great Discourse on Causality’. But a common translation for the word itself is ‘source’, which I think is more accurate. See for example Sujato 2023 at [AN 3.34](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), Nidāna Sutta, titled ‘Sources’. As another example, discourses stemming from Sāvatthi are called Sāvatthi-nidānaṁ. In this light, the Mahānidāna Sutta should be called something like ‘The Great Discourse on the Sources [of things]’, although that definitely doesn’t sound as good. Schmithausen 2000 calls it the Great Discourse on the Underlying Factors (Großen Lehrrede von den zugrundeliegenden Factoren). In this book I just refer to the discourse by its Pāli name.

    All that said, ‘causality’ is not wrong per se. There are various ways to define the term, some of which do not differ much from dependency, if at all. Pragmatically the difference between the two may have limited relevance as well, because whether we say death depends on birth or death is caused by birth, the fundamental problem remains the same. Many of the links are also causal no matter how we interpret it. I also use the word ‘cause’ in the main text, although in the translations I stuck to ‘condition’ for hetu and ‘requirement’ for paccaya. The words have a range of meaning that does not match a single English word, so these translations are not applicable throughout the canon, but they do work in the present context. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. See also Brahmavamso 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. [DN 15:1.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. [SN 12.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. [SN 12.23:4.3–4.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See Collins p.109 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. [Wikipedia s.v. ‘presentism’](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentism_(historical_analysis)). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Norman 1997 p.21 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. For traditional interpretations see for example Wayman 1971 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Vism 523. See also Nyanatiloka p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. For example Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.156 & 167, Bernhard p.56, Wayman 1971 p.186, Collins p.108, Vetter 1988 p.46, Vetter 1994, Mejor p.123, Schmithausen 2000 p.45, Jurewicz p.177, Ronkin n.43 p.238, Shulman p.89 n.71, Gombrich 2009 p.138 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Vetter 1988 p.46 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Bernhard p.56, translation mine [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. [MĀ 97](https://suttacentral.net/ma97), [T 14](https://suttacentral.net/t14), and [T 52](https://suttacentral.net/t52). As also observed by Vetter 1994 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. [DĀ 13](https://suttacentral.net/da13) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. [SN 12.43](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Arguing for a late construction of the twelvefold sequence are for example Vetter 1994 and Bucknell. On the other hand, Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.156, although he suggests two separate sequences were later joined together, believes it was the Buddha who did so. Wayman 1971 p.185 is also of this opinion. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. See Bernhard [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Vism 525 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. See also Ronkin n.43 p.238 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. See for example SN 15 on transmigration having no discernable beginning. For the synonymity see for example [AN 3.66:11.1–13.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “‘Salha, is there delusion?’—‘Yes, venerable sir.’—‘That is what I mean by ignorance.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. [Snp 3.12:12.1–13.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. [Iti 14](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. The meaning of ‘craving as a spouse’ is explained in [SN 35.63](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): like the mendicant wanderers should be solitary, without a spouse, they should dwell free from craving. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. [Iti 15](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Avijjānīvaraṇānaṁ sattānaṁ taṇhāsaṁyojanānaṁ sandhāvataṁ saṁsarataṁ, more literally ‘the transmigration and roaming around of beings who are obstructed by ignorance and chained by craving’, for in example §33, [SN 15.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.13](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.14](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.15](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.16](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.17](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.18](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.19](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 15.20](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), and [SN 56.33](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. §24; §108 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. [DN 33:1.9.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D III 212. See also [SN 45.159:2.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.254:3.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [MN 149:11.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 289 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. [AN 4.50:9.1–12.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. The four knots are explained in [DN 33:1.11.169–1.11.170](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) as longing, ill will, attachment to precepts and observances, and dogmatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. [Thag 10.5:5.1–10.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. For example §62, [Dhp 337](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [Dhp 338](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. §26, §79. See also [SN 12.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), which first goes through the ignorance sequence in reverse order, from sensations back to ignorance, but then through the whole twelvefold sequence in forward order, from ignorance down to old age and death. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. [AN 10.62:1.1–2.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. For example in [SN 15.1–SN 15.20](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. [SN 7.18:5.1–5.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. See for example [SN 12.24:4.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “The Buddha said suffering arises dependently. Dependent on what? Dependent on sense impressions.” Or [Snp 3.12:21.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “Whatever suffering there may be, all comes to be dependent on sense impression.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Bodhi 2000 p.520 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. As e.g. Ñāṇavīra p.19, Ñāṇananda 2015 p.56, Brasington p.67, Jones 2009 p.244. See Bodhi 1998 p.172 for a further response to such ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. For example Harvey 2013 p.71, Jones 2011 p.73, Amaro p.44 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. [MN 141:11.1–11.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 249 and [MN 9:24-26.2–24-26.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 50. Also in the Mahā­sati­paṭ­ṭhā­na Sutta, [DN 22:18.3–18.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 305 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. [SN 12.2:3.1–4.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). Similar at [SN 12.27:2.1–3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:2.1–3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:3.1–4.2, 9.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. For the translation of the discourse title see note 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. [DN 15:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. See Dhammika 2022 p.58 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. [DN 14:2.18.2–2.18.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 26. Also at [SN 12.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). The other Buddhas have the same reflections at [SN 12.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. The dual explanation of bhava is found e.g. at Vism 571. In contrast, Vism 414 explains ‘birth’ as the continuity of the khandhas in a single existence (ekabhava) ending with death, where bhava doesn’t include karma. See also Bodhi 2000 n.4 at [SN 12.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Shulman n.18. One of the earliest scholars to equate bhava to existence in English scholarship was Thomas 1933/1953 p.61: “It is this grasping after the things (upādāna) [which results in] passing into a new existence (bhava).” [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Schmithausen 2000 p.52 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Bodhi 2012 n.503 at [AN 3.76](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) (§71). See also Rhys Davids p.53, referring to the same text: “Bhava [here] is meant to convey the more special concrete sense both of a particular span of life and of a particular world or mode of existence wherein that span is lived.” [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. [SN 12.2:5.1–5.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:3.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:3.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. [Arv 5](https://suttacentral.net/arv5) [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. [MĀ 97](https://suttacentral.net/ma97), similar at [T 14](https://suttacentral.net/t14) [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. [AN 4.131:3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. See Somaratne p.142 and note 479 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. MMK 26.8, using the Sanskrit form skandha instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. [Thag 2.1:1.1–1.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. [MN 127:9.1–9.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. [Kp 6:9.1–9.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [Snp 2.1:9.1–9.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. [Iti 44:5.5–5.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. See Sunyo 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. [SN 12.64](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. See also Langer p.5 (translation mine): “Before the quoted extract [of the If There is Desire Discourse] there is a passage on […] the four nutriments. These same four nutriments are also mentioned in other passages, where it is stated that they […] are the cause for the rebirth of the being which is to be reborn (saṁbhāvesīnaṁ).” [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. [AN 8.11:10.2–10.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. [MN 43:16.2–16.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 294 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. I deliberately avoided using the arrow symbol (as in A →‍ B) for it is used in logical notation to indicate A is a sufficient condition for B, which isn’t what is meant. I use the symbol › merely to indicate the order in which the terms occur in the discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. Bodhi 2000 p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. [DN 28:5.3–5.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D III 102; [Thag 16.4:22.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY); [Thig 15.1:37.4, 39.3–39.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. See also Langer (translation mine): “Okkanti [an alternative spelling of avakkanti] is a synonym for birth (jāti).” DOP, DPD, PED, and CPD all attest this. In unrelated contexts the word can mean more literally ‘entering’. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. [AN 3.61:13.4–13.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. [MN 38:26.1–30.16](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 266 [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
100. See e.g Langer p.12, Sujato 2008 p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
101. [EĀ 21.3](https://suttacentral.net/ea21.3) [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
102. Anālayo 2010 p.254, n.243. See further Anālayo 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
103. [MN 93:18.62–18.63](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) M II 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
104. [MĀ 151](https://suttacentral.net/ma151), translation Anālayo 2022(a) [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
105. Wijesekera 1994 p.175 [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
106. [MN 38:16.9–16.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 260 [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
107. Vetter 1988 p.48. See also Kalupahana 1976 p.32 [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
108. As also argued by Harvey 1995 p.263 n.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
109. Bodhi 2000 p.518 [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
110. §77. See also ‘Remembering Past Lives’ in Brahmavamso 2006 Chapter 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
111. Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.163 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. Reat p.15. Reat’s specific conclusions about nāmarūpa I disagree with, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. Olalde 2014 p.40 (translation mine): “As a substantive bahubbīhi [compound] it means ‘that which has a name and form’.” Bahubbīhi compounds are fundamentally adjectives, but like all adjectives in Pāli, they can be adopted as nouns (substantives), see Warder 2010 p.62 [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. See Hamilton [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. See for example [SN 12.2:11.4–11.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) where rūpa is explained as: “The four elements and the form derived from the four elements: that is what’s called rūpa.” [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. [SN 1.76:3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY); [SN 22.95:11.1–11.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. [MN 28:26.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. JU 3.20.8, see also Olalde 2015 p.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. [SN 12.2:11.2–11.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. In the current age this translation is more pragmatic than ‘name’. Other possible translations are ‘mind’ and ‘mentality’, agreeing with the commentaries that nāma is purely mental (cetasika). But in my view, sensations, perceptions, and sense impressions exist for all six senses, not just the mind. However, compare [SN 1.61](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 1.62](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), where nāma and citta appear to be used synonymously. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. RV 10.169; RV 7.103 [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. See also Olalde 2015 p.21 [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. BU 1.4.7, translation Olivelle [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. TB 3.12.7, see also Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.163 [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. Atharvaveda 10.2.12 and 12.5.6, see also Olalde 2014 p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
126. Olalde 2015 p.8 [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
127. Gonda p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. Werner p.28 [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
129. BU 3.2.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
130. Frazer [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
131. Jurewicz p.89 [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
132. BU 6.4.21, translation Olivelle [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
133. Jurewicz p.90 [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
134. Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.164 [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
135. Hamilton p.127 [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
136. Olalde 2014 p.156 [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
137. See Wayman 1997 p.507 [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
138. T1548.28.689a20, translation Patton “If it recognizes, designates, and makes names, then this is called name.” See also Bodhi 2000 p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
139. See Olalde 2015 p.2, referring to certain views: “They understand ‘name’ as ‘designation’ and neglect the fact that it also (or may I say actually) means ‘proper name;’ in this manner they understand name as ‘naming’ and assume that it always encompasses conceptualisation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
140. See also Bodhi 1984 p.25: “It [i.e. consciousness] also depends on the mental body [i.e. immaterial aspects], as there can be no cognition of an object without the more specialized functions performed by contact, sensation, perception, volition, attention, and the rest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
141. See for example §101, §99, §35 [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
142. For example [Ds 2.3.3](https://suttacentral.net/ds2.3.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
143. Gombrich 2009 p.136 [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
144. For example [SĀ 298](https://suttacentral.net/sa298). For a further discussion see Choong p.163 [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
145. [Vb 6:9.4](https://suttacentral.net/vb6/pli/ms" \l "9.4) [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
146. MN-A 1.221: ‘Vedanā’ti vedanākkhandho. ‘Saññā’ti saññākkhandho. ‘Cetanā phasso manasikāro’ti saṅkhārakkhandho veditabbo, “‘Sensation’ is the aggregate of sensation. ‘Perception’ is the aggregate of perception. ‘Intention, sense impression, and attention’ should be understood as the aggregate of saṅkhāra. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
147. T1548.28.689a20; Frauwallner 1995 p.108; [EĀ 49.5](https://suttacentral.net/ea49.5), [EĀ 46.8](https://suttacentral.net/ea46.8) [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
148. Pṭs 1.183 [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
149. [SN 12.2:11.4–11.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
150. See also Bodhi 2000 n.81 at [SN 22.56:3.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), and Hamilton p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
151. For example [MN 109:16.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
152. [MN 28:17.1–17.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 185. See also:

     [MN 62:8.1–12.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 422 and

     [MN 140:14.1–18.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 240 [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
153. Rather than the standard translation ‘the eye’ I translate cakkhu as ‘the sense of sight’, and likewise for the other senses. Olivelle p.22 notes on the Upaniṣads: “In dealing with sight and hearing, and to some extent also in the case of the other faculties, these documents clearly distinguish the power or the act of seeing and hearing from the respective external organs, the eyes and the ears. Indeed, they consistently use different Sanskrit terms for the two—cakṣus and śrotra for sight and hearing, and akṣan and karṇa for eye and ear, respectively.” I think this distinction is to some extent also present in the Pāli suttas, with the respective terms being cakkhu and sota, and akkhi and kaṇṇa. Hamilton p.18 similarly states: “One might suggest that what is referred to [in the Pāli suttas] by the terms cakkhu, sota, ghāna and so on is not primarily the sense organs eye, ear, nose, etc., but that the terms are to be interpreted figuratively as the faculties of vision, hearing, smell and so on.” [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
154. [MN 137:4.1–5.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 261. See also:

     [DN 33:2.2.4–2.2.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D III 243 and

     [MN 148:4.1–5.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 280 [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
155. [SN 12.2:10.1–10.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). Also at [SN 12.27:3.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:3.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
156. See also Frauwallner 1953/1973 p.158: “By [saḷāyatana in Dependent Arising] are meant the six inner spheres, i.e., the six sense organs.” Also Hamilton p.16: “In the Saḷāyatana Vagga of the Saṁyutta Nikāya, the six senses are defined as being ajjhattaṁ, personal or internal, and the six corresponding objects are defined as being bāhiraṁ, external, thus giving two ‘sets’ of six āyatanas. In the Nidāna Saṁyutta, however, which is concerned with explaining paṭiccasamuppāda, only the personal āyatanas [i.e. the sense ‘organs’] are referred to by the term āyatana.” [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
157. [DN 2:83.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 76,

     [DN 10:2.21.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 208,

     [MN 23:4.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 143,

     [MN 74:9.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 499,

     [MN 77:29.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
158. [DN 22:6.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 294, [MN 10:12.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
159. Hamilton p.104 [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
160. Olalde 2014 p.114 (translation mine): “But first I would like to recall that nāmarūpa in the Vedic texts and Upaniṣads can refer to both an individual, i.e. a person, as well as [things in] the entire world, with its application to individuals being actually older.” [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
161. Olivelle p.47 [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
162. [SN 12.64:4.1–5.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
163. See Hecker p.53 and the commentary, translated by Bodhi 2000 n.173 at [SN 12.64](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
164. §84 [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
165. For example Ñāṇananda 2015 p.120, Cintita p.61 [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
166. Abhinibbattento abhinibbatteti, ‘when [they] produce a next life, they produce’. The word abhinibbatteti has a strong connection with rebirth. For example see [AN 10.65:2.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), “being reborn (abhinibbatti) is painful”, or the definition of birth in §20, which includes abhinibbatti. To capture this meaning, which is surely implied given the context of transmigration, I translate it here as ‘they produce a next life’, following the example of Sujato 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
167. [SN 22.100](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
168. [SN 22.99:2.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
169. Bodhi 2000 n.206 at [SN 22.100](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
170. See also Piyadassi p.6 (ed. p.15 in PDF), Bodhi 1984 p.5, Nyanatiloka p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
171. [MN 98:13.1–13.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
172. For example §49 and §62 [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
173. [SN 22.56:10.1–10.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
174. [AN 6.63:33.3–33.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). [MN 136:2.13–2.14, 6.10–6.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 207, [AN 10.217](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 10.218](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) and [AN 10.219](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) also speak of intentional deeds (sañcetanika kamma). [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
175. [SN 12.2:13.1–13.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.10–9.13](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
176. [AN 4.237:2.1–3.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.238:1.2–2.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
177. [AN 3.146](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
178. See for example [AN 1.43](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) & [AN 1.44](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), where “end up in heaven as if carried up there” follows “if a person dies”. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
179. [AN 2.17:2.1–2.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
180. [MN 57:8.1–9.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 389, similar at [AN 4.233:2.1–3.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). Compare also [AN 4.234](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.235](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.236](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.237](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.238](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.240](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
181. [AN 3.23](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
182. [MN 44:13.2–13.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 301, similar at [SN 41.6:1.3–1.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
183. For similar arguments see Bodhi 1998 p.57, contra e.g. Ñāṇavīra p.16, Ñāṇananda 2015 p.125, Ṭhānissaro 2008b p.3 (ed: p.8 in PDF). Bodhi also argues: “In analyzing the teaching of paṭiccasamuppāda, the texts use the two terms cittasaṅkhārā and manosaṅkhārā as though they were interchangeable.” Sanskrit parallels to [SN 12.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) indeed use manaḥsaṁskāra instead of cittasaṅkhāra ([SF 165](http://suttacentral.net/sf165), [SF 238](http://suttacentral.net/sf238)). [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
184. [SN 12.2:13.1–13.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:9.10–9.13](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
185. [AN 3.146:2.1–2.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
186. [AN 10.221:2.1–2.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
187. [MN 41:7.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 287, idem at [MN 42](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). See also [AN 10.176:24.1–24.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 10.220:8.1–8.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
188. §55 [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
189. [MN 120](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
190. See also Vetter 1988 p.50: “Saṅkhārā as a condition of ‘perception’ [viññāṇa] which is conceived as the first moment of a new existence must belong to a period before this moment. We can think of actual emotions in the former life preparing the constituent perception for a future existence and of dispositions maintained or strengthened by these emotions which, after death, cause perception to seek a new place for reincarnation. Both aspects might have been meant, but they are not clearly distinguished.” [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
191. See for example [AN 2.18](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
192. See for example [SN 2.23:12.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), which equates deeds of merit (katānaṁ puññānaṁ) to wholesome deeds (katānaṁ kusalānaṁ); or [AN 3.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), which says moral physical, verbal, and mental conduct results in merit. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
193. There seems to be a play on words here, because it could also be rendered, “traveling on to (upaga) the fruits of meritorious and bad acts”, which implies rebirth. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
194. [SN 3.22:4.1–4.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
195. For example [AN 1.314](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 1.315](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.25](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 4.171](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
196. [MN 82:42.35–42.46](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 73, [Thag 16.4:16.1–18.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
197. See for example Gombrich 1980 p.50 [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
198. In Jain context āsava/āsrava refers to the inflow of physical karmic particles, which in the Jain texts is compared to water flowing into a pond. (Malvania p.47, 83) The Buddha used the same terminology, possibly having adopted it directly from the Jains. For him āsavas are not physical particles but states of mind that defile (saṅkilesikā), that lead to rebirth—see [MN 36:47.1–47.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
199. More literally it says the pain-producing āsavas (lit. ‘inflowings’) flow into (assaveyyuṁ) that person. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
200. [AN 4.195](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
201. See Gombrich 2009 p.56: “The Buddha converts a Jain by making play with two words, āsava and samārambha.” [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
202. [SN 35.146:1.3–1.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
203. [SN 12.37](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
204. Sujato 2023 at [SN 12.37](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “It’s old deeds, and should be seen as produced by choices and intentions, as something to be felt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
205. For example [Dhp 278](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
206. See also Piyadassi p.6 (ed: p.15 in PDF) [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
207. Contextually this refers to the aggregate of saṅkhāra, which I usually translate as ‘will’, but to show the connections with Dependent Arising I translated it here as ‘willful actions’. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
208. Saṅkhata, quite literally ‘put (khata) together (saṁ)’, means ‘fabricated’, ‘constructed’, ‘created’, and so forth. In daily speech it is used for a raft that is properly assembled and for a well-made meal ([Snp 1.2:4.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY); [AN 4.57:3.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)). The noun saṅkhāra is used for medicine that is prepared ([Kd6](https://suttacentral.net/pli-tv-kd6)). In none of these contexts does the common translation ‘conditioned’ work, and neither is it intended in deeper philosophical contexts such as Dependent Arising. For example, in [Dhp 154](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) vi-saṅkhata describes taking apart a house—with the prefix vi- indicating the opposite of putting together—where the house is symbolic for lives in saṁsāra. The point is that lives are created by craving and karma, not merely conditioned by it. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
209. [SN 22.79:5.1–5.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
210. See Bodhi 2000 n.110 at [SN 22.79](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY), Hamilton p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
211. See also PED under sankhata: “‘created’, brought about as effect of actions in former births”. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
212. [SN 22.21](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
213. [SN 56.42](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), cf. [SN 56.43](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 56.46](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
214. [SN 12.2:14.1–14.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.27:4.5–5.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.28:4.5–5.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.33:10.1–11.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
215. Patiṭṭhā viññaṇassa, ‘a support for the planting of consciousness’. Bodhi 2000 n.112 at [SN 12.38](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) explains: “‘a support for the establishing of consciousness’ renders patiṭṭhā viññaṇassa. I find that ‘established’ works consistently better as a rendering for the participle patiṭṭhita, but ‘support’ for the noun patiṭṭhā, so to bridge the participle and the noun in the present passage (and at [SN 22.53](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 22.54](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)) I have coined this compound expression.” I followed this example, although with ‘planting’ instead of ‘establishing’. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
216. [SN 12.38:1.2–1.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
217. [AN 4.184:5.1–5.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY); [MN 129:5.1–5.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
218. [MN 120](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
219. See also Bodhi 2000 p.522 [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
220. See for example [AN 7.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
221. Langer p.30 says the three discourses on intention ([SN 12.38](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.39](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.40](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)) “limit themselves […] to descriptions of rebirth” (translation mine). Likewise, although I believe he misunderstands appatiṭṭhita viññāṇa to be a state of mind, Ñāṇananda 2016 p.97 states: “The point at issue [in the First Discourse on Intention] is the question as to how consciousness gets a footing—how consciousness gets established at the moment of death. In fact, it is an attempt to show us the connection between two lives.” See also Anālayo 2018 p.28 [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
222. See also Langer p.32 (translation mine): “In [[SN 12.38](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.39](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.40](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)] viruḷhi [means] ‘a new growth’, like a part taken from the mother plant grows again somewhere else. With that, viruḷhi marks the beginning of a new existence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
223. [SĀ 359](https://suttacentral.net/sa359), translation mine. Compare [SĀ 360](https://suttacentral.net/sa360) in Choong p.170 [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
224. [SN 12.39](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
225. [SĀ 360](https://suttacentral.net/sa360): 入名色故, 有未來世生. Choong p.170 translates: “Because of the entry [i.e. conception] of name-and-material form, there are, in the future, birth, ageing-sickness-and-death […]” [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
226. See note 192. The translation ‘demerit’ for apuñña is perhaps a bit artificial, having connotations with demerit points on a driver’s license, but it keeps consistency with ‘merit’ (puñña). I tried various other translations for puñña, but overall ‘merit’ just seems to work best. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
227. [SN 12.51:9.1–9.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
228. [AN 6.63:30.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
229. See DPD under upaga: “passing on to (used of consciousness’s linking at death with a new existence)”. See also Bodhi 1998 p.161 [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
230. §108; §77 [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
231. [MN 106:3.12, 4.7, 5.10, 6.12, 7.5, 8.5, 9.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
232. See also Langer p.28 [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
233. [DN 15:33.0–34.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 69. Also at [AN 7.44](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
234. See also Bodhi 2003 p.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
235. [SN 12.63:3.7–3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
236. For example §118, §119 [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
237. See Nyanaponika 1981 for a translation of the commentary to this sutta. Also see Bodhi 2000 n.166 at [SN 12.63](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
238. For example [SN 56.11:4.4–4.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
239. [MN 12:37.1–37.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
240. See for example §17 [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
241. See also [AN 7.74:8.1–8.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [Snp 3.8:7.1–7.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
242. Ādicca (‘Sun’) was a name for the clan of the Buddha, possibly an honorific. See [Snp 3.1:19.1–19.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) and DPPN under ‘Ādicca’. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
243. [Thag 6.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
244. Hamilton p.98 [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
245. [SN 56.35](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
246. [Thig 16.1:26.1–26.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
247. Hecker p.50 [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
248. Nyanaponika 1981 p.9. See also PED s.v. viññāṇa: “As one of the four āhāras viññāṇa is considered as the material, food or cause, through which comes rebirth. As such it is likened to seed in the field of action (kamma), and as entering (a body) at rebirth the phrase viññāṇassa avakkanti is used.” [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
249. [SN 12.12:2.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
250. Bodhi 2000 n.24 at [SN 12.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
251. Bodhi 2000 n.25 at [SN 12.12](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “The conjunction bhūte sati [‘when the being is born’] is unusual and the redundancy can only be avoided if the past participle bhūte is here understood to function as a noun denoting the being that has come to be.” [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
252. [AN 3.61:9.3, 13.4–13.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
253. [MN 140:8.1–8.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 239. See also Wynne p.31: “There are also a number of lists in which ‘space’ and/or ‘consciousness’ are added to this basic set of four elements […] in most places they occur in teachings where they form the objects of a detailed contemplation of the human person.” [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
254. [MN 62:12.1–12.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 423 [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
255. See Hamilton p.5 and Bodhi 2000 n.339 at [SN 18.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “To the four primary elements of the form aggregate the suttas sometimes add the space element.” [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
256. [SN 46.2:1.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
257. For example [SN 4.18:4.3–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
258. [SN 22.22:6.1–7.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
259. [AN 10.27:10.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [Kp 4:1.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
260. TU 2.2.1, translation Purohit [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
261. Lopez [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
262. [Kp 7:6.3–13.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
263. Norman 1991 p.194 [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
264. [Snp 3.12:38.1–38.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
265. See for example Nyanaponika 1981 [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
266. [AN 3.76](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
267. [AN 3.92:1.3–1.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). See also [DN 23:31.3, 31.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 353 [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
268. This translation fits other contexts of the word too. Patiṭṭhita is used for a cow planting down her feet—see [AN 9.35:1.4, 3.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). In English we also say “to plant an arrow”, and patiṭṭhita is also used for planting arrows in a target—see [DN 3:1.23.17–1.23.20](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 97 and [SN 20.6:1.4, 2.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). English also uses ‘plant’ as a synonym for ‘establish’, like in “to plant a religion in a country”. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
269. [MN 45:4.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M I 307. See also [AN 3.34:5.1–5.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), which says seeds that are put underground will “develop, sprout, and mature” when rained upon. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
270. [Mil 3.6.9](https://suttacentral.net/mil3.6.9) [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
271. Vism 602 and 688 [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
272. [SN 5.9:4.1–6.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
273. [Kp 6:15.1–15.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [Snp 2.1:15.1–15.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
274. See Bodhi 2017 p.523 [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
275. Santipada, ‘place of peace’. In contexts such as this, pada is commonly translated as ‘state’. But related to the English ‘pedal’, it literally means ‘foot’ or ‘step’ and by extent can mean ‘path’ (where one walks) or ‘place’ (where one stands). For example, janapada, ‘country’, is literally ‘people’s place’. Monier-Williams lists ‘a plot of ground’ as one meaning of the Sanskrit pada, and refers to padajñā in RV 1.62.2, which seems to refer to knowing (jñā) the places (pada) where to find cattle. I am not aware of any instance in the Nikāyas where pada unambiguously means ‘state’, so, following Norman 1997 p.13, I translate ‘the sorrowless place’, ‘the peaceful place’, and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
276. [Snp 1.12:2.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
277. I follow the Burmese edition, which mentions two situations: unbroken seeds with earth and water and unbroken seeds without earth and water. The PTS edition mentions three situations: unbroken seeds without water and earth, broken seeds with water and earth, and unbroken seeds with water and earth. This seems incorrect, for at no point can consciousness (the seed) be broken while desire (the water) still remains. The Chinese parallel at [SĀ 39](https://suttacentral.net/sa39) mentions three situations too, but all with unbroken seeds: unbroken seeds with earth but no water, unbroken seeds with water but no earth, and unbroken seeds with both water and earth. This makes more sense contextually, for the point of the sutta is that the continuance of consciousness requires both desire (water) and the other aggregates (earth). [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
278. As an exception I have adopted the reading of the Chinese parallel. The Pāli adds consciousness to the aggregates here, though it does not do so in the previous statements. The Chinese mentions only the other four aggregates, which matches the four things that support consciousness. Also favoring the Chinese is that the addition of consciousness in order to complete the five aggregates would have been a more natural mistake or purposeful edit than its omission. Since there is a peyalla (…) here, it may have been repeated once too many times by the reciter, accidentally adding the aggregate of consciousness. The addition of consciousness also does not add much pragmatic value, since sensation, perception, and consciousness are intrinsically connected (§99), so any desire for consciousness will be accompanied by a desire for sensation and perception. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
279. I follow tadappatiṭṭhitaṁ viññāṇaṁ avirūḷhaṁ anabhisaṅkhārañ-ca vimuttaṁ, instead of alternative manuscripts which have anabhisaṅkhacca. Both anabhisaṅkhāraṁ (not willing) and vimuttaṁ (liberated) could be taken as adjectives of viññāṇaṁ. However:

     (1) Consciousness as one of the khandhas is just aware of things, it does not do things nor stop doing things at enlightenment, so ‘not willing’ would likely not be said of it.

     (2) The before is about how consciousness comes to cease when “its foundation is destroyed”, not about liberating it.

     (3) Although viññāṇa can be a near synonym for the mind (citta), the two words are still used in different senses, and elsewhere in the Nikāyas it is always either the mind or the person that is said to be liberated, never viññāṇa.

     (4) [SN 22.45](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) & [SN 22.46](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) share their closing paragraph with this sutta, and there it is nmistakably the mind that is liberated.

     For these reasons I think the mind is intended in this sutta as well. I take ca (and) to indicate there to be two separate sentences: Tadappatiṭṭhitaṁ viññāṇaṁ avirūḷhaṁ. Anabhisaṅkhārañ-ca vimuttaṁ. Seeing the first part as a full sentence is supported by [SN 12.38:3.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.38:3.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) & [SN 12.40:3.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), where tadappatiṭṭhite viññāṇe avirūḷhe is an absolute, hence a separately functioning clause; and seeing the second as a separate sentence makes it match the other two-word sentences that follow. The translation thus becomes: “Not planted, consciousness will not sprout. And not creating, ‘it’ is liberated.” The ‘it’ refers to the mind, like in the common phrase vimuttasmiṁ ‘vimuttam’iti ñāṇaṁ hoti, “when liberated, there is the knowledge ‘it [the mind] is liberated’.” Previous translators similarly separated viññāṇaṁ from vimuttaṁ in the Seeds Discourse (see note 504). Nyanaponika 1990 has “ist man befreit”, meaning “one is liberated”. But vimuttaṁ being neuter, ‘the mind’ is preferable over ‘one’, which would require the masculine.

     The Chinese parallel at [SĀ 39](https://suttacentral.net/sa39) also supports the separation of consciousness and liberation, as it disjoints the two with a set of phrases not found in the Pāli. Anālayo 2014 translated: “The basis being abandoned, that consciousness is not established anywhere and does not grow further and increase. Because of not growing, there is no creating of formations. Not creating formations, one is steady. Being steady, one is contented. Being contented, one is released.” So again the Chinese, as in note 277 and note 278, seems more on point than the Pāli. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
280. [SN 22.54](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
281. For example [AN 3.58:5.1–6.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
282. [AN 6.10:7.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
283. [SN 44.9:6.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
284. Gati, ‘departing’, is usually translated as ‘going’ (with agati as ‘coming’). But it being a euphemism for dying in this context, I prefer ‘departing’, which in English is also a euphemism for death. I translate āgati accordingly as ‘arriving’. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
285. [Thag 16.9:26.1–26.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY); [DN 8:3.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 162; [Thig 6.1:4.1–4.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
286. See also Harvey 1995 p.97f [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
287. [AN 3.34:5.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). See also [SN 45.150:1.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 55.25:10.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 6.62:7.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
288. Rūpupayaṁ viññāṇaṁ tiṭṭhamānaṁ tiṭṭheyya, ‘consciousness would continue to exist if it is attracted to form’. Bodhi 2000 translates: “Consciousness, while standing, might stand engaged with form.” Ṭhānissaro 2008a p.27 has: “Should consciousness, when standing, stand attached to form […]” Under tiṭṭhati DOP glosses the literal ‘stands’ but also ‘continues to exist’. The latter is meant here, not ‘stand’, which is too literal. Choong p.50 more accurately translates ‘may persist’. See also Hamilton p.97: “This term [ṭhiti] itself implies continuity: being ‘stationed’ means that [consciousness] ‘persists’.” Harvey 1995 p.97 also renders this term as ‘maintenance’.

     Although viññāṇaṁ tiṭṭhamānaṁ tiṭṭheyya literally is ‘existing consciousness would continue’, a present participle followed by a finite form of the same verb is a form of emphasis. For example, cittaṁ bahulaṁ gacchamānaṁ gaccheyya, literally ‘the straying mind may often stray’, simply means the mind may often stray. ([SN 35.117:1.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)) So I excluded the present participle tiṭṭhamānaṁ, like other translators have done in this example case and similar instances, and instead emphasize the verb with ‘continue to exist’. Further, rūpupayaṁ is a bahubbīhi compound, so the sentence literally says, “existing consciousness which has an attraction to form will continue”. Like Choong I therefore also think it is incorrect to treat rūpa as an object of tiṭṭheyya, as in “stand engaged with form” of other translators. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
289. [SN 35.235:1.4–1.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
290. On one-seeders see for example [AN 3.87](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). Other suttas on seeds and rebirth are [AN 3.34](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 3.77](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [AN 6.62](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
291. [SN 12.57](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). Compare also [SN 12.55](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.56](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) and [SN 12.60](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
292. See also Sunyo 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
293. [AN 1.314:1.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
294. Saṁyojaniyesu, bhikkhave, dhammesu assādānupassino viharato, ‘for those who live focusing on the gratification of things that can chain them’. Bodhi 2000 translates the phrase here as “*when* one dwells contemplating gratification in things that can fetter”, but in his later translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya he translates -anupassino viharato as “for one who dwells contemplating”. (Bodhi 2012, [AN 5.30](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)) Assādānupassino viharato is a genitive absolute of “whom it concerns” (cf. Wijesekera 1993 §159), so is best translated with “for those who”, like Olalde 2014 p.84, “für denjenigen”. The point is that for those who live dwelling on these things, there will be rebirth, but for those who do not, there won’t be. There are no temporal implications of “when” here. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
295. [SN 12.58](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
296. [SN 12.59](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
297. [SN 22.3:4.1–4.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
298. See also Wijesekera 1994 p.106 [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
299. [SN 12.65:1.2–3.8](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY). See also [DN 14:2.19.1–2.19.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
300. [DN 15:2.15–2.18, 21.1–22.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
301. See note 435 and note 436 [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
302. [MĀ 97](https://suttacentral.net/ma97), translation Anālayo 2020(a), emphasis added [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
303. [DĀ 13](https://suttacentral.net/da13), translation Patton [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
304. Contra Ñāṇananda 2015 p.65, p.36. PED states that translating itthatta as ‘thusness’ is incorrect. The word instead refers to existence, literally ‘a state (-tta) here (ittha)’. See for example [AN 2.36:2.4, 3.5, 4.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYYhttps://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato%23YYY): so tato cuto […] āgantā itthattaṁ, “passing on from there […] he comes to ‘life here’”. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
305. For example, in [DN 24:2.17.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D III 29 itthatta refers to a state of existence in the realm of Brahmā. See also Bodhi 2015 p.168 [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
306. See Bodhi 1984 p.29 [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
307. [DN 14:2.19.1–2.19.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
308. [DĀ 13](https://suttacentral.net/da13) [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
309. Vetter 1994 p.151 [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
310. [DN 15:32.11](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
311. As argued by Olalde 2014 p.102 [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
312. Brahmavamso 2006 p.221 [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
313. Bodhi 1984 p.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
314. [Cnd 5](https://suttacentral.net/cnd5) [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
315. For example Ñāṇananda 2015 p.33: “What is meant by the Buddha’s statement is that name-and-form together with consciousness is the rallying point for all concepts of birth, decay, death and rebirth. All pathways for verbal expression, terminology and designation converge on name-and-form together with consciousness. The range of wisdom extends only up to the relationship between these two. And it is between these two that there is a whirling round so that one may point out a this-ness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
316. See also Sujato 2023 note at [DN 15:22.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “Any state of being ultimately depends on the codependency of name and form with consciousness. Within this key relationship is the extent not only of language, but also of wisdom, and the secret to the undoing of transmigration itself. One of the many profound implications of this is that there is no such thing as a state of pure consciousness independent of concepts.” [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
317. [DN 14:2.18.40–2.18.43](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 32,

     [DN 15:22.1–22.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 63 (§84),

     [SN 12.65:2.14–2.16](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) (§83),

     [SN 12.67:4.2–4.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) (§95),

     [SN 22.57:14.5](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 22.82:7.10](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
318. Viññāṇañca hi, Ānanda, nāmarūpe patiṭṭhaṁ na labhissatha. For patiṭṭhaṁ as ‘support to be planted’ see note 215. See also Sujato 2023 note at [DN 15:22.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY): “Just as name and form—the organic, sensual, and sense-making body—cannot grow without consciousness, so too consciousness must acquire a landing or grounding place to be ‘planted’ in name and form.” Interestingly, JU 3.20.8 also mentions “my name, my body (śarīra), my support (pratiṣṭhā)”. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
319. Hamilton p.129 [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
320. Bodhi 1984 p.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
321. Langer p.25, translation mine [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
322. [DN 10:2.22.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 209. Similar at [DN 2:84.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D I 76, [MN 77:29.9](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
323. [DN 14:1.21.2](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 14, [MN 123:12.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M III 121;

     [MN 79:11.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 33, [MN 80:4.1](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) M II 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
324. [SN 12.65:6.3–6.7](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 12.67:7.12–7.16](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [DN 14:2.21.3](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) D II 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
325. For example Falk p.40, Hamilton p.123, Gombrich 2009 p.120, Olalde 2014 p.38ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
326. Sujato 2012 Section 3.2—Insight 2.3: Im­perm­anence of the Mind [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
327. Falk p.40 [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
328. See for example Flood p.274: “The Brahmanical tradition was not a monolithic entity.” Or Bausch 2015 p.1: “There was never a unitary Vedic tradition against which Buddhism reacted. Vedic religiosity was a dynamic aggregate, alive with regional variation.” See also Olivelle pp.8–11. In [DN 13](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) different brahmin traditions are said to teach different paths to Brahma(n). [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
329. MuṇU 3.2.8, translation Olivelle [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
330. PrU 6.5, translation Olivelle [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
331. CU 6.10, translation Olivelle [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
332. See also Olalde 2014 p.39 (translation mine): “[On the basis of CU 6.10 (§89)] it seems most likely to me that nāmarūpa in MuṇU 3.2.8 and PrU 6.5 (§87 and §88) refers specifically to a person, who until the depicted point in time existed as an individual with his (proper) name and visible form.” See also Olalde 2015 p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
333. [SN 45.91](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.92-95](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.96](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.97](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.98-102](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.103](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.104-108](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.109](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.110-114](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.115](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.116-120](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.121](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.122-126](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.127](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.128-132](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY),

     [SN 45.133](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY), [SN 45.134-138](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
334. *[MN 22:25.5–25.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY)* M I 138. See also Wijesekera 1994 p.261 [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
335. [SN 1.50:6.1–6.4](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
336. Bausch 2018 p.39 [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
337. [Snp 5.2:5.1–6.6](https://suttacentral.net/XXX/en/sujato" \l "YYY) [↑](#footnote-ref-338)