Dependent Coarising

Paṭicca Samuppāda

Meaning Construction in the Twelve Links

Bhikkhu Cintita

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meaning construction in the twelve links

Bhikkhu Cintita
©2021

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Preface

The human dilemma begins with ignorance. In our ignorance we presume too much. We presume a world out there, we presume a world in here, we presume a self both in here and out there. We presume a metaphysics that fills the outer world with substantial self-existing objects. Unfortunately we presume a world that is impossible to live in, in any satisfactory way, and we suffer for it. The fixed objects we presume matter to us, either as enticements or threats, and therefore evoke craving and appropriation. Our individual identity becomes defined in terms of what we appropriate. But these objects and the person we've become have in fact been insubstantial and contingent all along. We suffer as we grasp for solid ground that is simply not there. We've been caught in this soap opera of life for a long long time, and without a way out, we will be caught in *saṃsāra* for a long time to come.

In dependent coarising (Pali, *paṭicca samuppāda*) the Buddha explores the things that afflict us, how they arise, and what happens when we let go of them. We discover that they are part of a tangled and knotted mass of conditional dependencies, cross dependencies, circular dependencies, in which each knot in the snarl – held in place by the neighboring tangles – is a challenge to unravel. The twelve-link chain of dependent coarising is a single thread discovered by the Buddha that twists through the snarl, but that, if we follow it, allows us to proceed systematically, to unravel one knot after another (twelve in all), until the entire wad becomes disentangled and we are released from the human dilemma.

The teaching of the chain of dependent coarising is among the deepest

teachings of the *Buddhavacana*,[1] in which the conditioned arising of the illusory self caught in *saṃsāra* plays a staring role. The chain is an entrance into an understanding (1) of the nature of the human dilemma, that is, how we have managed to get ourselves so ensnarled in *saṃsāric* existence, and, at the same time, (2) of the resolution of that dilemma, that is, how we can weaken or break that chain and attain liberation.

In brief, the twelve-linked chain is short and straight. It looks like this:

ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form →
the sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving →
appropriation → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering

Each factor flows into the next, in the sense that one factor is a necessary condition for the arising of the one that follows, and the cessation of one factor entails the cessation of the next. In reference to both its depth and its comprehensiveness the Buddha once said,

> Whoever sees dependent coarising sees the *Dhamma*; whoever sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent coarising. (MN 28 i190-1)

Through this linear step-by-step formulation the Buddha provided us with a practicable means to approach this profound and difficult teaching. At one point the Buddha recognized that Ven. Ānanda naively failed to appreciate its full depth:

> "It's amazing, lord, it's astounding, how deep this dependent coarising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be."
>
> "Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Deep is this dependent coarising, and deep its appearance. It's because of not understanding and not penetrating this *Dhamma* that this generation is like a tangled snarl, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations." (DN 15 ii55)

Unfortunately, this seems to have become the historical norm among students

1 See the glossary at the end of this book for definitions of terms like *Buddhavancana*.

of the Dhamma, not to recognize the full depth of dependent coarising, particularly with regard to those links that reveal the insubstantial basis of the human experience. In fact, this was predicted by the Buddha:

> When those discourses spoken by the *Tathāgata* that are deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness, are being recited, they will not be eager to listen to them, nor lend an ear to them, nor apply their minds to understand them; and they will not think those teachings should be studied and mastered. … In this way, *bhikkhus*, those discourses spoken by the *Tathāgata* that are deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness, will disappear.
>
> Therefore, *bhikkhus*, you should train yourselves thus: "When those discourses spoken by the *Tathāgata* that are deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness, are being recited, we will be eager to listen to them, will lend an ear to them, will apply our minds to understand them; and we will think those teachings should be studied and mastered." Thus should you train yourselves. (SN 20.7)

In his lecture series on dependent coarising, Venerable Ñāṇānanda – the late Sinhalese scholar-monk, whose influence runs deep throughout the pages of the present book – spoke of "a path of *Dhamma* overgrown for centuries," and states in rather critical terms with regard to the Buddha's prediction:[2]

> This is precisely what came to pass. … At present what is called *Paṭicca Samuppāda* is a formula to be by-hearted and recited up and down. It has no other significance. But it is with this formula that the Buddha … solved the entire *Saṁsāric* puzzle. … This confusion is not of recent origin. It has gone on for quite a long time. … But what has been happening all this time? A basket was simply handed down without examining what is in it. "Our teacher has said this. We must not go beyond it. Our commentators have explained like this. We must not think beyond their explanations." A vast delusion has gone on for a long, long period getting hold of the brains – lay and monk alike.

Ñāṇānanda advanced an interpretation of dependent coarising that we can call

2 Ñāṇānanda, 2015, v. 4, 108-15 (sermon 20).

epistemic, for it centers on the mentally constructed nature of what we experience as real. This book likewise advances an epistemic interpretation based largely on Ñāṇānanda's profound insights.

This book is for advanced students of *Buddhavacana*, many of whom will have been already scratching their heads as they have attempted to understand dependent coarising. In writing yet another book in the rich literature on this topic, I hope to meld three perspectives that my particular background brings to the table. The first perspective is that of a cognitive scientist, my former academic profession before donning the robes of a mendicant. As such I hope accurately to impart a cognitively coherent reflection of this teaching of the world's *first* great cognitive scientist. The second perspective is that of many readers as well: that of a dedicated Buddhist practitioner looking for an understanding of *Buddhavacana* to support my own life of practice. The third perspective I bring is that of a scholar committed to recovering and understanding the Buddha's original intent, and willing to reconsider and when necessary dismiss traditional and time-worn interpretations in this effort. I fancy myself at this point to have worked most of the kinks in comprehending dependent coarising to my own satisfaction, but anticipate that mistakes remain, for which I take full responsibility.

The core of the book consists of twelve equal-length chapters, one chapter for each of the links of dependent coarising. We will explore the chain in "reverse order," that is, starting "downstream" at this mass of suffering, and working my way "upstream" to end at ignorance, the source of it all. This reverse order keeps the purpose of dependent coarising in mind, as we focus at each step on how the respective factor contributes to the human dilemma. In the forward order, as in so much of life, we do not have a good idea of where we are heading. Apparently the Buddha resolved the human dilemma in the reverse order in the first place.

My initial intention was to write just these twelve equal-length chapters on the twelve links, and to pass by, with little or no acknowledgment, alternative popular interpretations of the various links. However, I decided to add two additional, "lettered" chapters, one fore and one aft, to provide a broader context for the core chapters: The introductory chapter, "A. The Buddha's Method," puts the discussion that follows in the context of the methodological

framework of the *Suttas*, which the Buddha was rather clear about, but which most students of the *Buddhavacana* are not, to their detriment. Understanding the four parameters of the Buddha's method – practicality, subjectivity, insubstantiality and conditionality – is fundamental to understanding what follows, or for the study of the early texts overall. The final chapter, "B. Alternative Interpretations," provides a comparative analysis and of the various existing interpretations of dependent coarising, particularly the dominant "three-lives" model which turns biological where the current account goes epistemic.

There are three ways the reader might approach these chapters: (1) straight through, whereby the reader starts at page 1 and keeps going, (2) from the outside in, whereby the more skeptical reader reads the lettered chapters – A. and B. – first, in order to place the epistemic approach offered here within a broader context, and then proceeds to read the numbered chapters straight through if still interested, and (3) from the inside out, whereby the reader interested in a particular topic for study or practice, jumps to a relevant numbered chapter, say, "6. Feeling," then, on encountering unfamiliar terms, consults the glossary for quick definitions and, where appropriate, follows references into more detailed discussion provided in other chapters. All of these chapters are meant to be studied, contemplated and taken onto the cushion, for many aspects of dependent coarising are difficult to internalize. However, this should be viewed as a good thing: contemplation is at the center of practice, we need material for contemplation, and virtually everything presented here is subject to verification in the reader's own experience.

My hope is to provided in this book an accessible, comprehensive, practice-oriented discussion of this ancient and profound teaching for the modern reader. In writing about *Buddhavacana* I try to follow the principle "if you cannot describe something in simple terms, it is because you don't understand it yourself," a principle that has been a guide for my own study as much as for my writing. I can report that many times over many years I sat down confidently at the keyboard, intending to shine light on some topic, only to discover, to my surprise, that I really did *not* understand it myself. But in each case it has drawn me deeper into the topic and encouraged me to try anew.

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Bhikkhu Cintita Dinsmore
Austin, Texas, USA
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Notes on the Text

Foreign words are *italicized* insofar as they have not already entered the English language. For words recognized by an educated speaker of English, I use those familiar forms. Almost all Buddhist technical terms are in Pali or translated from Pali.

Quoted passages, unless otherwise stated, are from the following sources, often with adjustments in translation for terminological consistency.

DN, *Diigha Nikāya* (Walshe, 1996).
MN, *Majjhima Nikāya* (Ñaṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995).
SN, *Samyutta Nikāya* (Bodhi, 2000).
AN, *Anguttara Nikāya* (Bodhi, 2012).
Sn, *Sutta Nipāta* (Bodhi, 2017).
Iti, *Itivuttaka* (Ireland, 1997)
Up, *Udāna* (Ireland, 1997)
Dhp, *Dhammapada* (Fronsdal, 2005)
BU, *Bṛhadarāṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Olivelle, 2008)

Sutta references, for instance, "SN 45.2," are by *Nikāya* and by *sutta* number, following the scheme of Wisdom Publications and of the Access to Insight Web site (whose ennumeration may sometimes be off by one, reflecting the difference between Burmese and Thai sources). For most long discourses this reference will be supplemented by the Pali Text Society volume and page number, for which Wisdom Publications provides cross-indices, for instance, "DN 15 ii68."

Pericope is common in the Buddha's discourses. This is where a passage is repeated, perhaps multiple times, almost verbatim, but each time with the

change of a word or two. Pericope is nice for verbal recitation but fits poorly into the space constraints of written texts, and there are various techniques for removing the redundancy while remaining faithful to the content. I try something new here. Here is an example of my notation:

> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with form, supported by form, founded on form. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures. [as for form, so for feeling, perception, formations]

In the original this would be:

> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with form, supported by form, founded on form. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures.
>
> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with feeling, supported by feeling, founded on feeling. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures.
>
> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with perception, supported by perception, founded on perception. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures.
>
> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with formations, supported by formations, founded on formations. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures.

A. The Buddha's Method

I have to admit that on first encounter the early Buddhist texts struck me as abstruse and disconnected, and that – given their antiquity and obscure history – I fully expected them to remain so. With further engagement over time, however, I was delighted to discover a brilliant, methodical and consistent mind shining through those profound teachings, and now I marvel at how well time has treated these ancient texts. Among other things, I recognized the coherence and consistency of the Buddha's overarching methodology. Clarity about this methodology is a gateway to understanding the early texts and will be an aid to understanding the twelve chapters that follow.

Any field of learning sets parameters for what it investigates and how it investigates it. We've had the *scientific method* since at least the seventeenth century that bounces between empirical discovery or verification of objective data, and hypothesis formation. Mathematics, art criticism, philosophy, law, music, psychology and so on all have methods appropriate to their fields, sometime explicitly stated, sometimes carried implicitly within an adept community. In each case, its defining method reflects, but also shapes, the character of the respective field, by setting parameters for its scope of investigation and for its means of explanation. It is no different for the *Buddhavacana*.

The Buddha's method breaks down into four recognizable parameters, each of which the Buddha articulates explicitly and carefully, albeit in different places. Each of these plays a critical role in the Buddha's formulation of dependent coarising.

- **Practicality.** The *Buddhavacana* is limited to that which supports practice and produces benefit.
- **Subjectivity.** The scope of *Buddhavacana*, its practice and its benefit are limited to the world *as we experience it*.
- **Insubstantiality.** Experiencing things as real does not entail experiencing real things.
- **Conditionality.** The primary tool for discovering consistencies and structure is the discovery of dependencies.

We find that the Buddha is not rigidly consistent, but rather consistently deliberate in imposing these parameters. They are sometimes finessed, but when they are, a practical overriding concern is either clearly stated, or easily discernible. In other words, practicality overrides the other parameters where appropriate. These parameters accordingly express themselves differently among the widely diverse fields of practice, for instance, in daily mindfulness, in meditation, in devotional rites and in following ethical precepts. But the Buddha's method is nowhere more unmistakable than in dependent coarising.

Although time has preserved the earliest stratum of Buddhist texts well, it has not always faithfully upheld the intent of those texts. It makes sense that interpretations are most likely to falter when the Buddha's method is obscured, and vice versa. Needless to say, understanding the Buddha's method is a vital aid to the student of early Buddhism.

1. Practicality

The *Buddhavacana* is practical in the sense that it functions entirely as a support for practice, and practice in accord with the *Buddhavacana* produces benefit. A teaching would be impractical if it promoted no practice, or if it promoted a practice that has no prospect of benefit. Roughly, the *Buddhadharma* works as illustrated.

Practice is how we live our lives, and it encompasses ethical practices (like generosity and precepts), and contemplative practices (such as studying and reflection on *Dhamma*). It encompasses mental arts (like *jhāna* practice or like maintaining constant kindness and mindfulness), and encouragements to practice (like remembrance of the Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha), and so on. Like a cookbook, the *Buddhavacana* provides the guidance and conceptual understanding necessary to develop and maintain a range of skillful activities. These activities tend toward spiritual attainments, ultimately toward awakening, but also toward more immediate wellbeing for self and others – or, in the case of the culinary arts, good things to eat. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

The oft recited *recollection of the Dhamma* (*dhammānussati*) attributes six qualities to the *Dhamma* as follows:

> The *Dhamma* is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise. (SN 11.3, AN 3.70, AN 11.12, AN 11.13, Thag 6.2)

Two qualities of the six listed are immediately expressive of the practicality of *Buddhavacana*:

> (1) well-expounded (*subhāsita*), and
> (5) applicable (*openeyyika*).

To be well expounded requires that a teaching is, among other things, of benefit. To the point, the Buddha tells us:

> Upāli, those things which you might know thus: "These things do not lead exclusively to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace,

> to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *nibbāna*," you should definitely recognize: "This is not the *Dhamma*; this is not the discipline; this is not the teaching of the teacher." But those things which you might know thus: "These things lead exclusively to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *nibbāna*," you should definitely recognize: "This is the *Dhamma*; this is the discipline; this is the teaching of the teacher." (AN 7.83)

The Buddha's speech (*Buddhavacana*)should always produce benefit, it should not uselessly overshoot. 'Applicable' here is really synonymous with 'practical.' *Openeyyika* comes from the verb *upaneti*, meaning 'conduce to,' 'present,' 'give,' in other words 'productive,' which in particular suggests bringing practice to a conclusion, and of leading one onward to *nibbāna*, the soteriological benefit of practice.

> You may understand as the teacher's doctrine those things which you know lead to the goal. (AN 7.83)

Practicality naturally entails that the Buddha would take care not to teach more than was necessary, and indeed parsimony is characteristic of the *Buddha-vacana*, which consistently discourages useless speculation and is agnostic toward views irrelevant to the practice of the *Dhamma*. Other factors of the Buddha's method enforce this agnosticism as well. This narrow focus on what is practical is made most clear in the famous handful-of-leaves simile.

> What do you think, monks? Which are the more numerous, the few leaves I have here in my hand, or those up in the trees of the grove?"
>
> "Lord, the fortunate one is holding only a few leaves: those up in the trees are far more numerous."
>
> "In the same way, monks, there are many more things that I have found out, but not revealed to you. What I have revealed to you is only a little. And why, monks, have I not revealed it? Because, monks, it is not related to the goal, it is not fundamental to the holy life, does not conduce to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation,

> tranquility, higher knowledge, awakening or *nibbāna*. That is why I have not revealed it." (SN 56.31)

Speculative philosophy irrelevant to spiritual development is accordingly not *Buddhavacana*. But even practical *Dhamma* should not be clung to once it has outlived its usefulness, that is, once it has produced awakening. The Buddha famously provides a simile for this mistake as building a raft in order to cross a body of water, then once on the other shore to be so absurdly pleased with the raft as to carry it hither and thither on one's back.[1]

We will find that practicality is built into the structure of dependent coarising, in that it presents a new practical problem at each link. Our discussion of this topic will begin with the problem of this mass of suffering, for which our practical concern will be to limit or end this mass of suffering. Each conditioning link in turn (birth, becoming, …, ignorance) then represents a problem whose resolution would resolve the problem of the previous link. Certain practices are recommended at each step in order to address the respective practical concern.

2. Subjectivity

Practicality narrows the focus of the *Buddhavacana* squarely to beneficial practice. Practice, in turn, occurs squarely in the world *as we experience it*, or as it *appears* to us, often called the *phenomenal world*. It is in this world that suffering arises, that our incentive for practice arises, that the factors arise that inform our *kammic* decisions that constitute our practice, that we experience the fruits of practice, that we are able to track our progress, that we gain confidence in the *Dhamma*, and it is in this world that we awaken.[2]

The world of experience, fundamental to practice, contrasts with what we normally think of "natural reality," as something objective and mostly beyond normal experience, the realm of science and scholarship, where things manage

1 MN 22 i134-5.

2 The importance of understanding the *Buddhavacana* experientially is the primary theme of Hamilton's (2000) insightful book. This encompasses both the subjectivity and the insubstantiality that I am attributing to Buddha's method.

to persist or play out whether we experience them or not. But in fact, the word for 'world' (*loka*) is itself understood in the *Buddhavacana* precisely as this *world of experience*.

> In this fathom-long living body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

Notice that subjectivity – restricting the field of the *Buddhavacana*, its practice and its benefits to what we actually experience, to "the world" – is a natural extension of practicality, for what we cannot experience cannot be useful material for our practice. The greatest challenge to subjectivity is spinning out into pointless intellectual proliferation and speculation, which would unfortunately infect many later Buddhist traditions. By the same token, subjectivity reinforces the characteristic agnosticism of the *Buddhavacana* and the skepticism about underlying mechanisms and substrata hidden *beyond* actual experience. This is *not* to say that there are no hidden things (to take a simple example, modern science has shown how our experience of colors seems significantly to have a neurological basis). It is to say that speculating and debating about such underlying mechanisms can take us far afield from practice. Subjectivity is a methodological choice, not a theoretical position.

In short, the world of experience is treated as a closed system, and the benefit of practice within that closed system is achieved as we learn to *experience otherwise*, in particular, to experience in a more wholesome way, for instance, without anger, or greed or bias. The Buddha's method is clearly distinguished from the scientific method, which to a great extent is exactly about explanation of things we generally don't experience in terms of hypothesized underlying factors that are even further removed from experience. We will see momentarily that subjectivity therefore calls for a different kind of of explanation: conditionality.

The parameter of subjectivity is expressed in no less that four of the six qualities of the *Dhamma* mentioned above. The *Dhamma* is (excluding the two factors already discussed):

(2) visible (*sandiḍḍhita*),
(3) immediate (*akālika*),
(4) to 'come and see' (*ehipassika*),
(6) to be experienced by the wise (*paccattaṃ veditabba viññuhi*).

These four factors speak to accessibility and verifiability in actual experience.

Although the word 'subjectivity' is more suggestive of the cognitive realm of contemplative practice, it also applies, albeit less strikingly, to the realm of bodily and verbal behavior. For instance, *kamma* is understood not simply as *action*, but as *intentional* action. If we *accidentally* roll over our cat's tail with a rocking chair (like I once did), we have not violated the precept against assaulting living things, for our intentions may have been pure in terms of what was given to us in our experiential world. This is in distinct contrast, for instance, to the Jain understanding of *kamma*, whose metaphysics is less forgiving. Similarly, serious monastic transgressions generally have an insanity clause: they are not violations for those not of right mind. In short, *kamma*, (which is equivalent to practice), is made within the experiential world, not in conditions beyond our awareness.

Within the cognitive teachings (of which the twelve links of dependent coarising are the most comprehensive account) subjectivity is comparable to what would be a phenomenological perspective in western philosophy, with its focus on what we actually experience and suspension, or "bracketing," of speculation about whatever mechanisms might underlie experience. Most modern Buddhist practitioners find the subjective perspective gratifying in their practice, since it is based squarely on what we can see for ourselves directly, particularly in quiet meditative states, in a nuts and bolts fashion without obscure intellectual abstractions.

Nonetheless, the material of our practice does go deeper than a naive apprehension of experience, for we train ourselves to become attuned to many experiential phenomena that we once overlooked. For instance, where once we experienced the dog, now we experience our *awareness* of our dog as well, that is, where once the dog seemed to be simply there if we but show up, now

we recognize that this experience does not arise without turning some mental effort towards the shapes and colors out of which our dog materializes. In fact, we may come to realize that all experience consists of awareness events, each an awareness *of* something.

Two teachings of the Buddha are prominent in this book and serve to enforce this deeper subjective perspective: The *five aggregates* (*khaṅdha*) provide a scheme to divide up the world of experience with reference to modes of awareness: form, feeling, perception, formations and cognizance.[3] The *sixfold sphere* (*saḷāyatana*, aka the (six) *sense spheres*) does much the same thing, but arrays the world in terms of sense channels: our eyes, our ears, our nose, our tongue, our body and our mind. Either teaching defines a world of experience that is a complete basis for practice, and also bears in mind the ever present mental constructedness of experience. With reference to the sixfold sphere,

> In the six the world has arisen,
> In the six it holds concourse.
> On the six themselves depending,
> In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

Our experiential world is dysfunctional, at least for most of us, in that it produces great suffering. The subjectivity of *Buddhavacana* and practice gives us the opportunity to understand this dysfunction, and through practice to learn to experience in a more wholesome way, to experience otherwise, and thereby to limit or overcome this dysfunction.

We should acknowledge that hidden mechanisms sometimes seem to lie just below the surface or right on the margin of subjectivity, such that we cannot describe what we experience without at least hinting at an underlying mechanism that we do not entirely experience directly. *Memory*, for instance, would seem necessary to connect various awareness events to the same dog, our dog, on various occasions. Moreover, the description of fermentations (*āsava*), *kamma*, habit patterns (*anusaya*) and formations (*sankhārā*) seem to call for some form of memory, for these represent dispositions that (1) (in most

3 Hamilton (2000, 26-31), Cintita (2018, 48-49).

cases) are habituated by previous experience, (2) lie dormant for long periods, but then (3) manifest in the future as a condition for perceptual and intentional responses. In fact, Buddhist practice is substantially about re-habituating or abandoning such dispositions, so that we act progressively in *kammically* more skillful ways. The point is that (1) we experience A, then (3) we later recall, but that (2) we stored A in memory seems hidden (but barely) from the inner world.

With this qualification, each link in dependent coarising – but one! – and whatever is attributed to that link, is in the range of experiential verification. The one exceptional link is birth. Birth – along with its implicated concepts of rebirth, *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* –seems well beyond direct experiential verification for the great mass of us. (Similarly, we do not experience the Buddha directly: even though we take refuge in him, few of us have had the opportunity to meet him in person.) These are cases in which practicality overrides subjectivity, specifically in order to frame our practice in a way that instills wholeheartedness. In general, when a teaching goes beyond the parameter of subjectivity, we should always be able to ask for what practical basis the Buddha would teach that, and expect to receive an answer to that question.

3. Insubstantiality

Most of us find that the Buddha's teachings on topics like emptiness and non-self are the hardest aspects of *Dhamma* to comprehend, and the Buddha predicted these would be the first to be forgotten.[4] These topics are actually natural consequences of the parameter of insubstantiality, and insubstantiality provides a natural entry point for these teachings. To begin with, we recognize that our world is a duality: inner and outer:

The *inner* world "in here," is clearly in the scope of experience: mental events like awareness, hearing, seeing, lust, pleasure, interest, attention, anger, pain, thinking, craving, intentions, plans, urges, ideas, bodily sensations, inspiration,

4 SN 20.7.

devotion, serenity and *jhāna*. We experience the inner world generally as rather chaotic and unpredictable, a flood of activity, if we are paying attention at all, and a whirling, billowing fog if we are not.

But what is the status of the *outer* world "out there," where "real" things dwell, like trees, keys, bees, and waterfalls, cars and airplanes, dogs and cats, bank accounts, yoga classes, other people and the moon? Certainly we *experience* such things, so we are justified in referring to an 'outer *world*.' But we have to take care to notice a fine line here, lest we admit too much to the world of experience: (1) "experiencing things as real" is not the same as (2) "experiencing real things." We certainly do (1), and because we do (1) we are *convinced* that we do (2), but we do not *know* that these things are real. The reason we equate (1) and (2) is that we presume that how we experience the outer world, accurately reflects natural reality, what is true "out there," beyond experience. In other words, we take out experience of "out there" at face value. We don't know how true this presumption might be, because we cannot actually see beyond our experience to check. (Imagine we live in *The Matrix*.)

We make a lot of presumptions about the outer world. But presumptions themselves are mental events, experiences that belong to the inner world. Insubstantiality means that the *Buddhavacana* avoids ontological claims, claims about what is real "out there." That we experience something as real is *Buddhavacana*, but not that something is real in the absolute or substantial sense of "real independently of experience." This is a pivotal point for the Buddha, who claims, right at the beginning of the *Dhammapada*,

> All phenomena are preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. (Dhp 1-2)

Trees, keys, bees, and waterfalls, dogs and cats are preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind, in our world of experience. This is not to deny that real objects are somehow underlying causal factors in our experience; the *Buddhavacana* simply does not take a stand. "Reality" becomes another underlying mechanism behind our experiential world that we might be inclined

to speculate about, but that we know not of.[5]

If we experience something as "out there," we can explain it in one of two ways. Suppose we experience a UFO; we see lights moving in the sky, say, in a bizarre pattern. We might seek to explain it *objectively*: "It must be of extraterrestrial origin, because the technology to produce that pattern is unknown on earth. But from what planet did it come? How did it get here?" Alternatively, we might seek to explain it epistemically: "Am I hallucinating? Did I pop one too many pills? Is a twiddle bug larva creeping across my glasses? Can weather or optical effects explain what I am seeing? …" Insubstantiality is agnosticism or skepticism toward objective explanation; it does not take the outer world at face value. It therefore favors the *epistemic* perspective of attributing our experience not to natural reality, but rather to the processes that produced that experience. These are for the most part mental processes, and this is the significance of mind preceding all things. Insubstantiality points toward the *epistemic perspective* of what makes us think we know what we think we know, rather than toward the *objective perspective* of what is actually going on "out there." This is a key point in properly understanding the chain of dependent coarising.

Notice that insubstantiality is a reasoned consequence of subjectivity. It might at first seem like needless hair-splitting, but in fact it makes a huge difference for Buddhist practice. We tend to take the outer world at face value, presuming all over the place that it simply reflects natural reality directly. In fact, the link of contact is just this mode of experience. As we presume, the outer world becomes a predetermined thing, and therefore not something we can experience differently. Since our practice is directed at experiencing differently, our options in practice are greatly reduced when we take the outer world at face value. This is a problem, for what we contact, we feel, what we feel we crave, and so on, leading to this mass of suffering. About presumption the Buddha said,

5 In the second century CE, the great philosopher-monk Nāgārjuna (Garfield, 1995) would demonstrate logically that what we are calling reality cannot be as we presume it without absurd consequences, actually a stronger claim than the Buddha ventured.

> Presumption is a disease, presumption is a tumor, presumption is a dart. By overcoming all presumptions, *bhikkhu*, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die; he is not shaken and does not yearn. For there is nothing present in him by which he might be born. (MN 140 iii246)

Accordingly, we will find in the chapters that follow that the *Buddhavacana* guides our practice toward presuming otherwise and ultimately toward not presuming at all. The teaching and internalization of non-self is part of this project, for "me" is the most vexing of the things we experience as real. The practice of *samādhi*, and its cultivation as a particular mode of perception in which we view concepts or experience as *empty* (*suñña*), is also part of that project. More generally, we turn away in our practice from the objective task of trying to figure out what is going on "out there" and instead turn toward the epistemic task of analyzing in detail the cognitive processes that produce our presumptions, to acquire a sense of the (mental) *constructedness* of our presumed reality, and to learn to presume otherwise. In fact, this epistemic project is really the main function of the five links of dependent coarising that lead to contact. Our aim is, as Hamilton puts it, to acquire insight into the very nature of *cognition*, into how our experience operates.[6] which she equates with *knowledge and vision of how things are*,[7] which famously brings us oh so close to awakening.

So far we've looked at *things* in the outer world in terms of insubstantiality. A further aspect of insubstantiality is the Buddha's routine refusal to endorse *views*. For the Buddha, we have no basis for ever knowing if something is really true or false:

> There are five things, Bhāradvāja, that may turn out in two different ways here and now. What five? Faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view. These five things may

6 Hamilton (2000 , 41-2).

7 Shulman (2014, 62) points out that almost all scholars miss that the Buddha's interest was psychological and soteriological, not in discovering universal ontological truths.

> turn out in two different ways here and now.
>
> Now something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken. [as for faith, so for approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view] (MN 95 ii170)

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes views in *Buddhavacana* as tangles, knots and matting in the works that prevent living beings from passing beyond *samsāra*.[8] Nonetheless, some views are right view, which has been described not as a corrective to wrong views, but as a "*detached* order of seeing, to be put into practice, not to be believed in,"[9] or as something "to be taken seriously, but held loosely."[10]

A telling discourse about views illustrates how practicality, subjectivity and insubstantiality cohere:

> [The wanderer Kokanada approached a monk (who would turn out to be Ānanada) to ask some questions about Buddhist doctrine.]
>
> "How is it, sir? Do you hold the view 'The world is eternal; this alone is true, anything else is wrong'?"
>
> "I don't hold such a view, friend."
>
> "Then do you hold the view 'The world is not eternal; this alone is true, anything else is wrong'?"
>
> "I don't hold such a view, friend."
>
> [He then asks further questions in this vein, such as whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the soul and the body are the same or different, whether or not the Tathāgata exists after death, and in each case Ānanda replies, "I don't hold such a view, friend."]
>
> [Taken aback at the monk's obliviousness, Kokanada asks,]
>
> "Could it then be that you do not know and see?"
>
> "It isn't the case, friend, that I do not know and see. I know and

8 Bodhi (1995, 29).
9 Fuller (2005, 1).
10 Cintita (2019s).

> see."
>
> [Huh? Completely bewildered, Kokanada asks,] "How, friend, should the meaning of this statement be understood?"
>
> "'The world is eternal; this alone is true, anything else is wrong,' friend: this is a speculative view." [And so on for the other suggested views.] "To the extent, friend, that there is a speculative view, a basis for views, a foundation for views, obsession with views, the origination of views, and the uprooting of views, I know and see this. When I know and see this, why should I say: 'I do not know and see.' I know, friend, I see." (AN 10.96)

Ānanda and Kokanada talk past one another precisely because Ānanda's perspective is epistemic and Kokanada's objective. Ānanda's answers follow naturally from the parameters of practicality, subjectivity and insubstantiality and their consequent resort to an epistemic viewpoint. For Ānanda, speculative views are not practical; they do not form a basis of practice and benefit. Speculative views are not subjective; they are matters outside of the world of experience. Speculative views are insubstantial; they are presumptions pure and simple. Through Ānanda's epistemic focus he knows and sees how the view arises, even while he refuses to endorse it.

4. Conditionality

Conditionality is a defining feature of dependent coarising. It is at root a *technique* for revealing the structures and regularities of the experiential world, and in particular the world's dynamics. Where *Buddhavacana* most scrupulously follows the parameters of practicality, subjectivity and insubstantiality, the techniques of explanation are quite limited, since they cannot resort to underlying mechanisms or hypotheticals beyond experiential verification (in stark contrast, for instance, to the scientific method). Conditionality is essentially what remains to explain the single stratum of what is directly observable. Just as insubstantiality tends to limit explanation to epistemic processes, subjectivity tends to limit explanation to conditional relations. Nonetheless, conditionality serves this need well, and it reveals and describes complexities in a way that highlights reference points for practice.

Conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) is a simple principle most typically described in the *Suttas* as follows:

> When this is, that is,
> From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
> When this isn't, that isn't.
> From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. (Ud 1.3)

A conditional relation or dependency is a statement about an observable patterns of co-occurrence. A primary example of a conditional relation is the second noble truth: "the truth of the origin of suffering, which is craving," abbreviated as **craving → suffering**, or "craving gives rise to suffering." This means that when suffering arises, it is in the presence of craving.

The world is such that we can easily discover for any given factor many dependencies. However, we typically find in the *Buddhavacana* linear chains of dependencies, expressive of an unfolding of phenomena, each giving rise to the next in sequence. For instance,

> With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man … (MN 18, i112-3)

Similarly, the seven *factors of awakening* (*bojjhaṅga*) express an unfolding that produces meditative states as follows,

> **mindfulness → investigation → energy → delight → serenity → samādhi → equanimity** (MN 118)

Most famously, the unfolding of the *twelve links of dependent coarising* gives rise to the entire human dilemma. These twelve links are the respective subjects of the twelve chapters that follow:

> **ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form → sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving → appropriation →**

becoming → birth → this mass of suffering

It should be noted that the world does not naturally arrange itself into such linear chains. Rather they are artifacts of a technique that keeps our practice focused on one condition at a time, where in fact the world presents a dense snarl of conditionality. We will work with this principle a lot in the course of this book.

Conditionality not only gives us a means of explaining the complexities of the experiential world, but also a basis for practice as a means of allowing us to experience that world otherwise. The great beauty of conditionality is that in discovering how the human dilemma arises, step by step, it also provides a handle on how the human dilemma might be limited or cease, step by step, overturned through practice. Let's use fire as an illustration of this principle. Fire is conditioned by the following factors:

(1) heat,
(2) (hydrocarbon-based) fuel, and
(3) oxygen.

When all three of these are present, all else being equal, there is fire. Now, understanding conditionality allows us to *engineer* desirable outcomes. Fire is sometimes desirable (for instance, in the hearth) and sometimes undesirable (for instance, in a pile of oily rags and paint cans, or in California's forests and grasslands). If we want to *start* a fire, we need to ensure that all three conditioning factors are present. If we want to *stop* a fire, we need only ensure that at least one of the conditioning factors is absent. Any one will do. Dousing fire with water deprives it of oxygen and heat. Blowing on fire may give it more oxygen, but also lowers its temperature. Building a fire break might eventually deprive it of fuel. Of course fire itself gives rise to heat, which then becomes a condition for the next moment's fire.

Ultimately we hope, through Buddhist practice, to bring the fires of suffering under some degree of control, to experience otherwise. We cannot will suffering to end – "Don't worry, be happy!" – but we can, with effort, control many of its various conditions, such as craving. It happens we cannot will

craving to end either – "Don't crave, be content" – but we can look for the conditions of craving, such as feeling, and then try to control *those*, and so on. This is the usefulness of chains of conditionality, and the genius of the parameter of conditionality.

It is worth noting that conditionality is, for the Buddha, not a metaphysical theory – but it would become that in later Buddhist traditions – but a technique of investigation that works well in the inner domain that is the focus of much of the *Buddhavacana* and certainly of dependent coarising, in which it is a means of *avoiding* metaphysics. For each chapter that follows, I provide a section entitled "*X* as the origin of *Y*" by way of explanation.

5. Conclusions

The four parameters of the Buddha's method gives us a progressively more refined notion of what the *Buddhavacana* is, and what it is not. Practicality tells us the the *Buddhavacana* is squarely a practice tradition, not a set of obscure theories. Subjectivity tells us that its scope is the world as we experience it, not what is hidden from us. Insubstantiality admits to that world the *presumption* of things being real "out there," but not the things themselves . Conditionality excludes what is hidden from experience from playing a role in discovery and description.

The Buddha's method is the proper container for the teaching of *Buddhavacana*. Dependent coarising fits comfortably within those parameters like shoes in a shoe box or eggs in an egg carton. On the other hand, if Buddha's method is misunderstood, understanding *Buddhavacana* might well end up being like trying to fit a tuba in a violin case, or like trying to store milk in an egg carton. I hope that this brief account of the Buddha's method will facilitate the reader's engagement with the following twelve chapters on the Buddha's most profound and comprehensive teaching.

Opening Verse

Aneka·jāti·saṃsāraṃ,	
Sandhāvissaṃ anibbisaṃ,	***Through many births in saṃsāra,***
Gaha·kārarakaṃ gavesanto.	***I wandered on, I didn't cool down,***
Dukkhā jāti punappunnaṃ.	***Seeking the house-builder.***
	Painful is birth again and again.
Gaha·kāraka diṭṭhosi.	
Puna gehaṃ na kāhasi.	***House-builder, you are seen!***
Sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā,	***You shall not make this house again.***
Gaha·kūṭaṃ visaṃkhitaṃ.	***All your rafters broken,***
Visaṃkhāra·gataṃ cittaṃ,	***Your roof beam destroyed.***
Taṇhānaṃ khayam ajjhagā.	***Gone beyond formations, the mind,***
	Has attained the dissolution of craving.
	(Dhp 153-4)

1. This Mass of Suffering

Jāti·paccayā jarā·maraṇaṃ soka·parideva·dukkha·
domanass' upāyāsā sambhavanti: evam etassa
kevalassa dukkhak· khandhassa samudayo hoti.

Because of birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain,
grief, and despair arise. Thus does this
entire mass of suffering's arising come to be.

Buddhism begins with suffering or dissatisfaction as the central aspect of the human dilemma. Life, in spite of its promises, is persistently experienced as a problem if not as downright painful, in all of its aspects. There is sickness, old age and death, bodily pain and mental distress, unaccountable perpetual dissatisfaction, loss of loved ones, fear of failure, fear of loss, isolation, disconnection, confusion and meaninglessness. Then there is stress and anxiety, awkwardness, irritation, frustration, restlessness and mosquitoes. On top of personal suffering, there is the suffering we cause or allow to happen to others. We live our entire lives somewhere in the space between suffering and an expectation of wellbeing.

Most of us hope to find relief through action, by seeking personal material advantage "out there," but with surprisingly limited success. With or without success, we are sucked into the *confusion* of distraction and denial, which makes things even worse, and is unfortunately the dominant alternative in these modern times of mass marketing and mass entertainment. Some of us resort to therapy, a few undertake a religious or spiritual *quest*, and the very

few who discover *mature* religion or spirituality may actually have some success in substantially addressing the dilemma.[1] *Confusion* and *quest* are the primary alternative foundations of our life.

The *Buddhavacana*, when practiced devoutly, supports profound maturity, sees ethical depravity as inseparable from personal suffering, and has a strong historical track record in seeking a resolution of the human dilemma. But more akin to therapy, the *Buddhavacana* relies not on a higher power, but on an extremely sophisticated understanding of the mind, and on the conviction that suffering is something we humans do to ourselves and, by golly, we can just as well stop doing it. Beyond this, the Buddha developed a systematic method of *practice* that uses this understanding to release us, in optimal cases, from the whole of human dilemma, bringing progressively greater satisfaction and virtue and ultimately leading to liberation, awakening, *nibbāna*. The twelve links of *dependent coarising* describe how we ensnarl ourselves in suffering moment by moment, and in this entire mass of suffering, and at the same time provide a guide for how we release ourselves step by step.

'Suffering' is the most common translation of *dukkha* in Pali, but most commonly occurs as an adjective, so we will also use 'painful' where appropriate. 'Stress,' 'dissatisfaction,' 'unpleasantness' and 'dis-ease' (with hyphen) are alternative translations. There is no exact equivalent in English, for it covers everything from mild anxiety to excruciating agony, either physical or mental. The opposite of *dukkha* is *sukha*, 'pleasure,' 'happy.' 'Mass of suffering' is (*dukkhakkhandha*)' *dukkha* + *khandha* 'mass,' 'aggregate.' *Dependent coarising* is *paṭicca samuppāda* in Pali, *paṭicca* 'dependent' + saṃ 'together' + uppāda 'arising.'[2]

In this chapter we begin to understand the nature of this entire mass of suffering as something we hope to limit if not eliminate altogether, and then

1 *Mature* religion, later called *intrinsic* religion (Allport 1956, Batson, et al. 1993), is an important concept in the psychology of religion that separates the devout wheat separated from the self-involved chaff. Quantifiable research (Hackney, 2003) demonstrates the wellbeing experienced by the intrinsically religious in contrast to the merely religious or non-religious.

2 Kalupahana (2015) points out that there appears to be no term paticca-samuppada in pre-Buddhist literature, an indication of the uniqueness of this profound teaching.

outline how we will proceed to peel back one layer of conditionality after another in the rest of this book,

1. The origin of suffering

Most of us look for external causes for our suffering – conditions in the world "out there" – and think that this is where the work of relieving suffering is to be done. To a degree this is true: we suffer less if we have adequate food, health, security from fear, shelter from severe weather and social connection. Rejecting the severe austerities of many of his fellow spiritual seekers, the Buddha-to-be recognized that a certain level of material security was necessary to progress spiritually, and specified a modicum of material needs that monastics should expect: food, robes, shelter and medicine.

However, in our confusion, we commonly conclude that more food, a bigger house or even two, a larger social network or celebrity, and more security will reduce suffering even more, and if that doesn't work it is because we need *two* million dollars in the bank rather than merely *one*. Beyond a modicum of wellbeing, however, the availability of greater resources does nothing to alleviate suffering, rather quite the opposite. There is extensive psychological research that indicates that those of "materialist orientation" actually have, on average, *lower* levels of vitality, self-esteem, and positive emotions, and *higher* levels of depression or anxiety, health issues, and alcohol and drug consumption. Their relations tend to be of lower quality and they tend to be more aggressive. They even have more bad dreams. Moreover, attaining wealth, possessions or status yields *no* long-term increase in wellbeing *whatever*. In fact, lottery winners end up on average being less happy then before.[3] We are such fools. Materialism is the way of confusion, distraction and denial. Its failure indicates that, beyond a modicum of material security, the source of suffering lies deep in the human mind, and that relieving our suffering is more fundamentally a spiritual problem than a material one.

The human mind is a complex thing, a snarl of entangled factors. We will discover here that a plethora of factors is implicated in the arising of this mass

3 Kasser (2002).

of suffering: our presumptions about the things of the world, our emotive responses to those things, our conceptual proliferations, what we hold dear, what we cannot stand, our views, our expectations, our habit patterns, our sense of who we think we are, and so on. Moreover, these factors condition one another in complex ways. This book is about the range of such things, and what we do about them. Our challenge, once the Buddha's challenge, is to make some coherent sense of what we can expect to be a very complex dynamics, and to turn this understanding to practice.

The most central and concise teaching about suffering that the Buddha gives us is the *four noble truths* (*cattāri ariya-saccāni*):[4]

- Suffering, which is to be understood,
- The origin of suffering, which is craving, and which is to be abandoned,
- The cessation of suffering, which is the cessation of craving, and which is to be realized,
- The way to the cessation of suffering, which is the noble eightfold path, and which is to be developed.

Each of the truths comes with a practice imperative, the final of which is to develop *the noble eightfold path* or simply *the path*, which is an outline of advanced Buddhist practice in eight bullet points as follows:

- right understanding,
- right intention,
- right action,
- right speech,
- right livelihood,
- right effort,
- right mindfulness, and
- right *samādhi*.

The path is also the way to the cessation of the entire chain of dependent coarising.[5] The formulation of the four noble truths has been compared to a

4 For instance, SN 56.11.

5 Cintita (2018) and many other works provide a detailed description of the

doctor's evaluation:

- Suffering is the *symptom.*
- The origin is the *diagnosis*: craving.
- The cessation is the *prognosis* : suffering can be cured by curing craving.
- The way to the cessation is the course of *treatment*: the noble eightfold path.

The corresponding tasks are also taken up as part of the treatment: understanding, abandoning, realizing and developing, respectively.

Let's focus on the second truth, the diagnosis. It expresses a *conditional relation*, stating that suffering is consistently conditioned by one experiential factor in particular: craving. We abbreviate "craving is a condition of suffering" as **craving → suffering**. This is the first significant application in this book of the technique of conditionality in the Buddha's method, for analysis of a subjective world. We will see a lot of ' → ' in this book. Buddha recognized how each phenomenon in our world of experience, including our deepest aspirations, arises impersonally from causes and conditions and, in turn, drives the arising of other phenomena. The great beauty of conditionality is that in discovering how the human dilemma *arises*, step by step, it also provides a handle on how the dilemma *ceases*, step by step, when overturned through practice. Notice how the four noble truths already provide valuable insight into what ails those unfortunates of "materialist orientation": they crave.

2. Understanding suffering

Good: we've got our *Dhamma* – the four noble truths – and we've got our first practice task – to investigate suffering, which includes investigating its association with craving. According to the parameter of subjectivity in the Buddha's method: the arena of *Dhamma*, of practice and of benefit is our world of experience (except in the case of overriding practical concerns). Our

individual folds.

practice is what we choose to do in this world of experience. In this case we choose to investigate in order to understand. This is a mental practice, but we might in another context choose to act or speak *Dhammically* as a matter of practice, for instance in following precepts. Our practice is entirely *kamma*, intentional choices of body, speech and mind. The *benefit* of practice according to *Dhamma* is realized in experiencing the world otherwise, for instance, with less suffering … or more bliss.

So, what is suffering? We want to develop a sense of what the Buddha meant by *dukkha*, what is and what is not *dukkha*. The English word might not do justice, the Pali word is more likely to. We do best to orient ourselves over time with regard to the examples the Buddha provides and to contemplate these in our experience, mindful of the associated teachings. Here are some examples:

> Birth is painful; old age is painful; illness is painful; death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress are painful; association with the disliked is painful; separation from the liked is painful; not getting what you wish for is painful. In brief, the five aggregates of appropriation are painful. (AN 6.63)

This passage begins with a list of inevitable events in every (full) life: “Birth is painful; old age is painful; illness is painful; death is painful.” We are born afraid when we leave the comfort of the womb. As children, can hardly be expected to foresee the scope of the tragic losses that are yet to come, and the relentless decay that will bring us ever closer to death. However, one by one we see that what we are trying to hang on to is swept away; one by one everyone we love is swept away, our very bodies deteriorate. We realize that life is like trying to hold a handful of sand and watching it run through our fingers, and we have no way to cope with that realization. We lose our loved ones one by one until … they lose us.

The passage continues with a list of the ways in which we experience suffering: “sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress are painful.” We suffer physical as well as mental pain. *Dukkha* is the umbrella category for

suffering, but then differentiates into *dukkha* 'physical pain' and *domanassa* 'mental pain,' 'grief' when these appear side by side. Physical pain ranges from itch to injury, mental pain from anxiety to agony. Most of the factors on this list are mental, but physical and mental are intertwined. For instance, physical pain weighs heavily on our emotional health, as well as on our physical wellbeing. Stress and anxiety turn to sleeplessness, to panic attacks, to addiction. Headaches, ulcers, persistent back problems, high blood pressure and heart disease arise from distress, and our very appearance is shaped by our emotional turmoil, as our youth and beauty are prematurely sacrificed and our lives shortened.

The passage then continues with circumstances that involve craving explicitly: "separation from the liked is painful; not getting what you wish for is painful." We are creatures of need and aversion, ever on the lookout for personal advantage, and we live our lives largely on that basis. For the Buddhist practitioner, this provides a fertile field for investigating suffering, for the various forms of painful experiences arise in this context. This is also a fertile field for investigating depravity and virtue. We might discover that craving, suffering and depravity tend to arise together. Our neediness and aversion are painful, immediately painful in themselves, and demand actions that entangle us more and more in a web of unskillful impulses and habits. We learn to take from others, to scheme, to lie, to compete, to exhaust ourselves at work, to eliminate competition, whatever we think it takes to satisfy our needs. Envy, resentment, anger and conflict soon follow in our quest for personal advantage. And this does us little good, for personal neediness is never satisfied even by abundance, and the shadow side of this is a feeling of deprivation, perpetual dissatisfaction, discontent that we just cannot shake. As the Buddha warns,

> Not even with a shower of gold coins would we find satisfaction in sensual craving. (Dhp 186)

The passage ends with a technical term to encapsulate a particularly pernicious and complex category of suffering associated with developing and maintaining a full-blown sense of self: "In brief, the five aggregates of appropriation are

painful." Let's look at this term in brief, since it and its parts stand for major themes in the *Buddhavacana* (and unique to Buddhism) and are associated with various other factors of dependent coarising. This is a first pass. The *five aggregates* (*khandha*) constitute *the world as we experience it*. Recall from section A.2 that the word 'world' (*loka*) itself refers specifically to the totality of our experience, which is also the realm of practice, understanding and attainment. Clearly the five aggregates intend more structure than that, but we will take that up in due time. The *five aggregates of appropriation* (*upādānakkhandha*) then refer to what we appropriate (*upādāna*) within that world, that is, what we identify with as "me" or "mine." Appropriation is also an "upstream" link in the chain. The five aggregates of appropriation are therefore our *personal footprint*, everything we choose to have a stake in, within that world. A personal footprint is painful, for in the course of our lives even if we begin to build up stature and become somebody, when we thought we would feel happy with what we had become, we instead feel all the more threatened, for we now have more to lose, and therefore more to protect than before, more to crave.

3. Dependent coarising

The four noble truths are a start in making sense of the human dilemma, but they actually kick the can down the road. They tell us how to get rid of *suffering*, but not how to get rid of *craving*. *The twelve links of dependent coarising* expand the scope of the four noble truths by acknowledging the complicity of a wide swath of conditionally interconnected factors in this mass of suffering, and identify a relatively small set of factors that can potentially provide points of engagement through the practice of the noble eightfold path. In dependent coarising we move beyond one conditioning factor (craving) and one conditioned factor (suffering) to comprehend the whole snarl of conditioning and conditioned factors. In doing this we can track various themes: the conditioned development of the self from agent into articulated and needy personality, the presumed nature of reality and of subjects and objects; cognizance and intention, learned habit patterns and the continuity of *saṃsāric* processes from life to life. All of these things get entangled with

craving and so trap us in suffering.

The more we explore conditionality, the more it will seem that *all* factors we experience are contingent on other factors, which are contingent on still other factors, and so on. In this way, everything seems to be in constant flux, groundless, with nothing we can rely on. This can be disturbing, but it can also be liberating. It makes our world of experiences quite malleable if we but know where to tweak. The problem is that when scaled up into a network of such factors, each related to other factors through multiple conditions and effects, the resulting system can be quite complex and difficult to track – more of a tangle, with many loops, overlaps, cross-entanglements and collateral effects – with fires burning at many sites at once. It becomes, in other words, like a hopelessly entangled wad of yarn, knotted and difficult to disentangle.

The twelve links of dependent coarising put these into a semblance of order, taking us straight through the snarl. This is the purpose of the 12-link chain. Each factor is allocated exactly one conditioning factor, while other conditioning factors – always there – are sidelined. This is an expository sleight of hand that requires that we implicitly qualify the arising of each link with "… all else being equal," or "… given other requisite factors."[6] Here is the standard formulation of the chain:

> Because of ignorance, formations. Because of formations, cognizance. Because of cognizance, name and form. Because of name and form, the sixfold sphere. Because of the sixfold sphere, contact. Because of contact, feeling. Because of feeling, craving. Because of craving, appropriation. Because of appropriation, becoming. Because of becoming, birth. Because of birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair arise. Thus does this entire mass of suffering's arising come to be. (SN 12.2)

We gain a shorter overview if we represent this chain as follows:

> **ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form →**

6 In Pali the links are called *nidāna* 'foundation, occasion origin.'

sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving →
appropriation → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering

For simplicity we will refer to this as '*the chain*,' for the chain is the very topic of the current book, with twelve chapters representing the twelve links and the current chapter representing the last: this mass of suffering. It should be noted that there are a number of variants of this chain in the *Suttas*, in which links are often skipped, for instance **… → name and form → contact → ….** (skipping the →**sixfold sphere**). This is not a significant departure from the twelve-ford formula if we keep in mind that conditionality is *transitive*, that is, if **a** → **b** → **c**, then **a** → **c**.

I should point out that the twelve links do not attempt to comprehend all of the human mind but are limited to that which brings about trouble and suffering, to the human *pathology*, to *saṁsāra.* For instance, although we learn, through understanding the chain, a lot about the arising of greed, aversion and delusion, we learn nothing about where kindness, compassion and generosity come from, though these seem naturally to displace the former as our practice begins to weaken the chain. Interestingly, the pathology that the chain exposes also turns out to have little to do with the actual *content* of experience, and much to do with its *architecture*. Craving, for instance, is just craving, regardless of whether it is rooted in childhood deprivation or in unrequited love or in too much exposure to TV advertising. Although each instance of craving has content, the pathology results primarily from the *epistemic* process expressed in the various links, not from *objective* particulars.

A simile that the Buddha sometimes uses to describe this and other analogous chains of conditionality is the flow of water, lending a naturalness to this otherwise puzzling progression:

> Just as, monks, when rain descends heavily upon some mountaintop, the water flows down along with the slope, and fills the clefts, gullies, and creeks; these being filled, it fills up the pools; these being filled, it fills up the ponds; these being filled, it fills up the streams; these being filled, it fills up the rivers; and the rivers being filled, it fills up the great ocean — in the same way, monks, ignorance is the condition

> for formations, formations are the supporting condition for cognizance, cognizance is … (SN 12.23)

Since this book begins at the end of the chain and ends at the beginning of the chain, in order to avoid confusion I will often mix metaphors a bit and use the words '*upstream*' and '*downstream*' in reference to the links of the chain. We begin far downstream, in the present chapter, at the ocean of sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair that characterize the human dilemma, and we will work our way upstream chapter by chapter, past the pools of craving and finally reach the droplets of ignorance that are the source of it all.

Let me quickly introduce each of these links, this time moving from upstream to downstream:

Ignorance is the failure to see the delusive nature of the world as almost all of us experience it.

Formations are conceptual and intentional choices we make as we perceive, anticipate and plan.

Cognizance is the comprehension of the world based on these conceptual choices.

Name and form is the world we cognize, the objects we are cognizant *of*.

The ***sixfold sphere*** is the process of awareness from the viewpoint of the senses.

Contact is the encounter between "me" and an object of the world "out there."

Feeling is the immediate emotive evaluation to what is contacted as pleasing or painful.

Craving is the neediness triggered by what is contacted and felt. Of course, it is, at the same time, the source of suffering.

Appropriation is the identification with what is craved, along with our views about the world as "me" and "mine."

Becoming is the growth of the experiential world and the consolidation of a personal footprint within that world based on appropriation.

Birth is the projection of what we have become into a new life, that is, it is rebirth.

This ***mass of suffering*** is suffering at the scale of *saṃsāra*, that is, the suffering we experience now, but that we are born into again and again, life after life, until liberation.

The links of the chain fall into three thematic sequences. These are:

Conceptual links. These have to do with how we conceptualize the world:

ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form → sixfold sphere → contact →

Emotive links. These have to do with emotional responses to what we conceptualize in the world:

feeling → craving → appropriation →

Existential links. These have to do with establishing personal identity and perpetuating the self through *saṃsāra*:

becoming → birth → this mass of suffering.

In this book we will explore the chain in reverse order (*paṭiloma*, as opposed to *anuloma* 'forward order'), starting "downstream" at **this mass of suffering**, and working our way "upstream" to end at **ignorance**, the source of it all, as the Buddha reports having done in his original discovery of dependent coarising.[7]

4. The cessation of this mass of suffering

Each link can be limited or brought to cessation by limiting or eliminating its immediate upstream link. That is how the links cooperate in resolving the human dilemma. Moreover each link has its own set of conditioning factors, not mentioned in the chain, that can be similarly brought under control. Most

7 This is the method of presentation in DN 15, the most comprehensive discourse on dependent coarising.

generally, each link is assailable by practice (just as suffering is in the four noble truths) through the development of the noble eightfold path, a kind of universal elixir for the human dilemma. For each link along the chain we apply the same template that is applied to suffering in the four noble truths.[8] For instance, applying it to craving, gives us:

- craving, which is to be understood,
- The origin of craving, which is feeling, and which is to be abandoned,
- The cessation of craving, which is the cessation of feeling, and which is to be realized,
- The way to the cessation of craving, which is the noble eightfold path, and which is to be developed.

The path, as the cure-all for all that ails us, serves to weaken and finally break down the links of the chain. In fact the various factors of the path tend to have some specialization in this regard. For instance, right speech, right action and right livelihood (known as the ethics group) with the support of right intention and right effort, tends to weaken craving, the weakest link in the chain. As craving weakens, so do subsequent factors. Right effort, right mindfulness and right *samādhi* (together known the *samādhi* group) tends to weaken upstream links, which, in the end, results in the utter breakdown of the entire chain.

A doctor may prescribe the appropriate cure, but that does not mean that the patient will take his pills without fail, give up smoking, drinking and poker, properly prep for surgery, make necessary dietary modifications, do the proper stretches and lifts, and so on. However, just as a serious ailment is likely to produce a more compliant patient, this mass of suffering also provides the impetus for doing something about it. The *Upanisā Sutta*[9] is striking in that it presents the standard chain of dependent coarising that entangles us in this entire mass of suffering step-by-step, but then continues the series with further links that *dis*entangle us. Suffering is the pivot, both the end result of the human pathology and the starting point of its resolution. Yes, there is an upside to suffering:

8 MN 9.
9 SN 12.23.

ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form →
sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving →
appropriation → becoming → birth → SUFFERING →
faith → joy → delight → tranquility → happiness → samādhi →
knowledge and vision → disenchantment → dispassion →
emancipation → knowledge of the destruction
of the fermentations

In the later tradition these additional links are referred to as *transcendent dependent coarising*,[10] for whereas the standard twelve links mire us in *saṃsāra*, the additional links show us how we transcend that same *saṃsāra*. Recognizing the full nature and depth of this mass of suffering can drive us either to urgency or to despair:

> It's when someone who is overcome and overwhelmed by suffering that he sorrows and pines and cries, beating his breast and falling into confusion. Or else, overcome by that suffering, he begins an external quest, wondering: "Who knows one or two phrases to stop this suffering?" The result of suffering is either confusion or quest, I say. (AN 6.63)

Confusion and quest are matters of motivation. It is our choice. Life-altering decisions, such as undertaking a spiritual quest, generally arise from a sense of urgency that demand big acts of faith and therefore enormous courage; they are way beyond the reach of the timid or of the deniers who cling fearfully to their certitude. This is the courage of the great explorers, of the hippies of yore on quest in India with nothing but a backpack, and more commonly of the betrothed or of the career bound, stirred by deep longing or by desperation. Establishing ourselves on the path toward awakening will shake our life to the core and this will demand particularly courageous faith.

The Pali word for faith, *saddhā*, apparently means etymologically 'placing the heart on' and therefore 'wholeheartedness.' Buddhist faith takes the form of *refuge*, trust in and devotion to the three sources of Buddhist wisdom: the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* – our original teacher, his teachings and

10 See Bodhi (1980).

the historical and living teachers, the ones who know “one or two phrases.” Refuge – so named because it is the alternative to despair – makes the mind open and receptive, devoted, elated and trusting. With refuge we put aside our already calcified modes of thinking and open ourselves to the teaching so that we can begin to make rapid progress. Otherwise we will lack the will and energy to undertake the difficult understanding and practice of the *Dhamma*, and the twelve links of dependent coarising will lie unread or uncomprehended in our *Dhamma* books.

The sequence in the transcendent chain that leads from faith – **joy → delight → tranquility → happiness → samādhi → knowledge and vision → disenchantment → dispassion → liberation → knowledge of the destruction** – refers to qualities of mind that pool together in right *samādhi*, the final factor of the noble eightfold path. It is in right *samādhi* that we most clearly see the functioning of the twelve links of dependent coarising, dispel ignorance (the most upstream link of the chain) and attain liberation. Implicit here is the rest of the noble eightfold path, which also culminates in right *samādhi*.

2. Birth

Bhava·paccayā jāti.
Jāti·paccayā jarā·maraṇaṃ soka·parideva·dukkha·
domanass·upāyāsā sambhavanti.

Because of becoming, birth.
Because of birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation,
pain, grief, and despair arise.

Birth is what we think it is: a biological process that begins (at least in the familiar human and animal realms) a single life of a psycho-physical organism in a particular environment. In the Buddhist context it is also understood as repeated birth, or the round of life and death that we call *saṃsāra*. The idea is that we live one life, die, then are reborn into another life, over and over again, and that we've been doing this from beginningless time and will continue to do this indefinitely into the future, but for our practice.

'Birth' is *jāti* in Pali, which is generally used to refer to the initial event in the context of a single life. In the context of *saṃsāra*, it becomes equivalent to '*re*birth.' 'Rebirth' is more commonly *punabbhava*, *puna* 'again' + *bhava* 'becoming,' but perhaps the Buddha chooses *jāti* here rather than *punabbhava* in order to distinguish it clearly from its conditioning link, becoming (*bhava*).

Saṃsāra means 'faring on,' 'circulation' or 'returning again and again,' generally in reference to living one life after another. Dependent coarising actually clarifies how *saṃsāra* is possible with no actual entity – a self, soul or "me" – to pass from life to another! *Saṃsāra* is regarded as an undesirable

because as long as we are stuck in *saṃsāra*, we are stuck in amassing the suffering of the preceding chapter. Although *saṃsāra* is defined in terms of rebirth, it seems to be something also felt in this life, as the entanglement that we can't seem to free ourselves from. We talk about the "rat race," or say, "Stop the world, I want to get off," or we might call *saṃsāra* "the soap opera of life," for we seem intent on generating problems for ourselves episode after episode. (Imagine that we've been watching the same soap opera since the beginningless past.)

1. Birth as the origin of this entire mass of suffering

Suffering is something we experience in a single life – in the ways revealed in coming chapters. But the "mass of suffering" referred to in the preceding chapter is clearly the suffering of *saṃsāra*. Otherwise the condition **birth → this mass of suffering** would be trivially true, and something it would be too late to do anything about in this life. Rather, the condition **birth → this mass of suffering** is like pushing a toddler in a swing. Each push sustains the back-and-forth motion of the swing, allowing the toddler to amass fun over many cycles: **push → this mass of fun**. (Tibetan prayer wheels work on the same principle, as I understand it: **push → this mass of merit**.) The birth here is not specifically our last birth or our future birth, but any birth: as long as the chain of dependent coarising is playing out, new births are generated, and as long as new births are generated, we will continue to amass suffering in *saṃsāra*. On the other hand, if but a single birth fails, this mass of suffering will cease to accrue. We suffer in any life, but birth puts the 'mass' in 'this mass of suffering.'

Birth is a bit of an outlier within the chain of dependent coarising, distinguished from every other factor in that it seems to fall outside of the parameter of subjectivity. We are able to observe moment by moment in this life of practice the unfolding of the other links of the chain, to study how we've entangled ourselves, and to observe the fruits of practice as we begin to loosen their knots a bit. But not so for birth. It is beyond our purview, unless we have a really good memory. In fact, it *seems* – at first sight – that we can

leave birth out of the chain altogether without loss of coherence: just let practice be about easing the pain of this one life, rather than this entire mass of suffering. This is how many Buddhists actually frame their practice, including, I daresay, most modern Buddhists, for many westerners balk at the cosmology of rebirth and *saṃsāra* in any case.[1]

All of this means that we deserve an explanation of how the teaching of birth is at least within the parameter of practicality, even while it oversteps subjectivity. The practicality of teaching birth has to do with motivation, much like refuge. Recall from the preceding chapter how suffering determines our motivation, bringing us to either *confusion or quest*, despair or refuge. The difference between suffering in this life and this mass of suffering in the whole of *saṃsāra* is that the latter is bigger … much bigger, and when comprehended, that much greater a motivator. The teaching of rebirth benefits our practice because it *reframes* the motivation underlying our practice, scaling it up from eliminating or limiting suffering in this life, to ending *saṃsāra* and the suffering it brings life after life, until we do something about it through practice. It raises the stakes of our practice enormously, for the cessation of birth thereby entails not only the loss of a single life's suffering but the mass of an entire string of such lives. It can easily make the difference between despair and refuge, confusion and quest, and induce us to take the measures that the doctor recommends, and certainly determine the wholeheartedness of our practice.

In what follows, I discuss a bit more the cosmology of *saṃsāra* and the benefits and pitfalls of framing our practice in terms of *saṃsāra*, with the sensitivities of skeptical readers in mind.

2. Buddhist cosmology

For the most part Buddhism is more likely to *disabuse* us of metaphysical presumptions that we already have, than to *give* us new ones. In fact, that is the basis of subjectivity, insubstantiality and conditionality in the Buddha's

1 Some modern scholars have proposed that birth in dependent coarising not be understood literally. I discuss such proposals in chapter B.

method. Yet we all start out in life with a lot of old, generally unquestioned presumptions. Modern people have a lot of them, even scientists. Similarly, Buddhist cosmology seems to share many elements with *Védic* and *Upaniṣadic* cosmology and to have some unique features of its own, but not to have been as systematically developed in the early texts as it would become in later Buddhist traditions.[2] Its cosmology involves multiple *realms of existence* distributed over many world systems, into which any of us might be reborn. Two of the realms are already quite familiar to us all: the *human realm*, in which, I trust, most of the readership lives, and the *animal realm* ("Hi, Fluffy").

Lower realms are unfortunate realms of woe. They include at least:

- the animal realm,
- the hungry ghost realm, and
- a number of hell realms.

Higher realms are happier places, though even they still entail some suffering. They include:

- the human realm, and
- multiple heavenly (*deva*) realms.

Alternatively, birth is described as taking us into any of three categories of existence:

- the sensual realm,
- the form realm, and
- the formless realm.

Humans, all lower beings, and many deities are consigned to the sensual realm, and higher deities to either the form realm or the super-high formless realm.

We can in principle be reborn into any realm, there to die and to be reborn anew into another realm. However, we will learn that being reborn is, in fact, a kind of conceptual mistake that the *arahant* will not make, since with the

2 Kalupahana (1992, 106), Ñāṇavīra (2003,186-7) point out that that the metaphysical perspective became distinctly more elaborate with time.

ending of ignorance, the great snarl of *saṃsāric* existence has unraveled, after which there is nothing left that can even mistakenly be reborn. Nonetheless, the vast majority of beings have been reborn over and over again in this way since beginningless time, sometimes slipping from one realm into another, now high, now low, and will generally continue to doing so indefinitely into the future … in the absence of practice on the Buddhist path. This is Buddhist cosmology in a nutshell.

Buddhists are fond of describing practice attainments in terms of this cosmological model, and indeed this seems to have begun with the Buddha: meritorious acts tend to produce rebirths in higher realms, demeritorious acts tend to produce rebirths in lower realms. However, it is pointed out that Buddhist cosmology tends to run parallel to Buddhist psychology, which has been called the *principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology*.[3] In fact, some scholars have argued that mythic elements of religions in general often serve to communicate an underlying psychology, rarely so directly articulated as it is in Buddhism, and to a limited extent in the early *Upaniṣads*. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that many mythic elements of early Buddhism have traditionally been taken as literally true, lest we engage in gratuitous demythologizing.[4] On the other hand, the Buddha often demythologizes these matters himself, for instance, with regard to the demon Māra, whose mission is to subvert Buddhists in their practice:

> Where the eye exists, Samiddhi, where visible forms, eye-cognizance and *dhammas* cognizable by the eye exist, there Māra or the manifestation of Māra exists. (SN 35.65)

This situates Māra in within cognition. Similarly for the bottomless abyss, apparently a kind of hell realm:[5]

> *Bhikkhus*, when the uninstructed worldling makes the statement, "In the great ocean there is a bottomless abyss," he makes such a

3 Gethin (1998, 114).
4 Gethin (1997).
5 According to Kalupahana (1992, 176).

> statement about something that is nonexistent and unreal. This, *bhikkhus*, is rather a designation for painful bodily feelings, that is, "bottomless abyss." (SN 36.4)

Also as examples of this equivalence of cosmology and psychology, we should note that each of the realms seems to correspond rather precisely to a mental state within the scope of human experience. For example, it is possible to create a figurative but recognizable hell realm right here as part of the human realm and many of us do, for instance, by habituating anger and hatred. Through the accrual of *kammic* benefits or deficits a saint can create a heaven right here in this world, while a scoundrel can create an animal or hungry ghost realm for himself. The figurative hell of deep suffering we might have created for ourselves in this life might then cosmologically project us into a hell in the next. Similarly, different levels of *samādhi* are said to provide glimpes into different levels of deity realms in the early texts. The four *jhānas* tend to produce rebirths in Brahmā realms, while the formless (*arūpa*) attainments produce rebirths in formless heavenly realms, where beings are said to have no bodies, only minds.

3. Framing our practice

> *All my ancient twisted karma,*
> *From beginningless greed, hate and delusion,*
> *Born through body speech and mind,*
> *I now fully avow.*

This is a personal account. I first encountered this verse in one of my early meditation retreats, at a Zen *sesshin* in the Spring of 1998. My first suspicious thought on hearing this was, "Oh, someone is trying to push the rebirth thing," which I had decided by this point that I'd believe in only if I could ever personally remember a previous life. Rather, I viewed practice as a matter of how I meet the present, having little to do with past and future in any case. Practice was for me like a new office job in which my task is to take documents, let's say, insurance claims, mindfully one by one from the "in" box, process them and place the results in the "out" box, thereby remaining

totally in the present, as I was told I was supposed to, but with the prospect of a future pay-check, as I was told was forthcoming.

However, the next morning, while we were once again intoning this verse, I discovered that my eyes had unaccountably teared up and that I had such a lump in my throat that it was difficult for me to croak along with the words, and every morning thereafter I had the same experience. Somehow the meaning of this verse had struck me to the core. Without at first knowing how or why, I was surprised that it affected me this way. In fact, in retrospect I can report that my *viewpoint* regarding this rebirth thing remained, but my *outlook* had changed. What does this mean?

It felt as if my whole bungled karmic past, the mistakes I had made, the people I had hurt, the opportunities and energy I had squandered, were suddenly laid bare and extended far back in time, beyond memory, as an accumulation of karmic results that now loomed menacingly and inescapably behind me, around me, and *in* me. Indeed, the quality of my Buddhist practice changed quickly and markedly after avowing my ancient twisted karma. The outlook that emerged with my developing sense of karmic continuity was like learning from an office colleague that the person who had had my job processing insurance claims previously had become so lazy and so woefully behind in his work that he had routinely taken handfuls of documents from the “in” box and stored them in the adjacent room for *eventual* processing. Looking in the adjacent room, I discovered an alarming backlog of boxes of unprocessed documents, along with bundles of still more documents tied together with twine, stacked up high, bundle on bundle, box on box and bundle on box. I recognized that there was suffering in the form of an unpaid claim in *each* of those pending documents.

Dismay toward a bungled past brings with it an urgent sense of responsibility toward a still untainted future. I would have to put in many overtime hours on my watch to make sure these valid claims were paid. Suddenly, rather than trying to sustain purity of mind moment by moment, I was engaged in a cosmic battle with terrible ancient twisted karmic forces that threatened the future, and, standing at the gateway between past and present, I was boldly

proclaiming, staff in hand, “You shall not pass!”

This was the point of discovering the full depth of suffering, described in chapter one, that leads either to *confusion* or to *quest*. I experienced a new urgency in my practice as I was struck by the depth of what I was dealing with. I had experienced a profound change in *outlook* that framed my practice in a new way. Indeed, it resonated with the concept of rebirth, but I chose for the time being not to question my actual *viewpoint* in this matter, rather to enjoy the enhanced depth of my practice. The urgency I felt came with the sense of this alarming *backlog* in my practice.

The Buddha assumes a similarly charged outlook when he highlights the bare monotony of human existence:

> Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating and wandering this long, long time — crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — or the water in the four great oceans?… This is the greater: the tears you have shed… (SN 15.3)

Elsewhere, he spoke in similar terms about the “blood spilled,” “the mountains of bones we have left behind,” “the cemeteries swelled.”[6] We might similarly talk about our addictive behaviors, the flaring up of anger, hatred turning to retribution, lust that overcomes wisdom, all of the stuff of our lives that leads to relentless suffering, fear, anxiety, pain, then to imagine these projected over an unfathomable past and threatening an unfathomable future. Such considerations reveal the full horrifying depth of the human dilemma. We’ve been making the same mistakes over and over again for an awful long time; isn’t it time to knock it off? A wise American monk writes,

> …, to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and explain the entire import of the *Dhamma* as the amelioration of mental suffering through enhanced self-awareness is to deprive the *Dhamma* of those wider perspectives from which it derives its full breadth and

6 SN15.13, SN15.10 and SN15.1.

> profundity. By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than a sophisticated ancient system of humanistic psychotherapy.[7]

The wider perspective also seems to fulfill a fundamental principle observed in many other contexts about what we experience as most meaningful in life: that which is bigger than we are. For instance, higher meaning for the scientist is found in the forward march of human knowledge. Higher meaning in most religions seems to come with God above and heaven or hell beyond. The eminent psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, noticed that an important predictor of survival of the inmates of death camps is what kind of future lay beyond the barbed wire that one might live for, be it surviving family members, God or, in Frankl's case, the desire to complete his disrupted research.[8]

4. Viewpoint and outlook

> *A friend was visiting in the home of Nobel Prize winner Niels Bohr, the famous atom scientist. As they were talking, the friend kept glancing at a horseshoe hanging over the door. Finally, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, he demanded:*
>
> *"Niels, it can't possibly be that you, a brilliant scientist, believe that foolish horseshoe superstition?"*
>
> *"Of course not," replied the scientist. "But I understand it's lucky whether you believe in it or not."*[9]

I anticipate at this juncture some raised eyebrows among my readership, for rebirth is not across the board an accepted viewpoint in modern culture. But it wasn't in the Buddha's time and place either. The Buddha has advice for us in this regard, which I preface here by clarifying the distinction between *viewpoint* and *outlook*.

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7 Bodhi (2010). These means that we deserve an explanation of how the teaching of birth is at least within the parameter of practicality if not subjectivity.

8 Frankl (2006).

9 "*American Weekly*" (1956).

A *viewpoint* is what one actually believes, what one would assert in one's most rational and sober moments, for instance, when one is participating in a quiz show or lecturing at a university. An *outlook* is what guides one's actual behavior, as a basis of one's everyday decisions in life. Outlook is the primary motivator in life. One behaves *as if* one's outlook were true, … or maybe it actually is. We thereby hope that our viewpoints are always factual and that our outlooks are ever … *practical*. The Buddha seems to have liked outlooks more than viewpoints.

We all have both and – this is the significant point – we don't generally seem to mind if they are logically inconsistent with one another. Here are some examples:

- ✔ Someone raised as a Christian may sincerely believe (viewpoint) that after death his behavior will be judged and his soul will accordingly go either to heaven or hell, and yet may nonetheless "live like there is no tomorrow," that is, hedonistically, under the overwhelming influence of a materialist culture (outlook).
- ✔ A Skinnerian behavioral psychologist might believe (viewpoint), in the lab or in the classroom, that human mental states are not real, yet shouts out encouraging motivational words (outlook) to his teenage son as he plays on the school football team, or consoles his little daughter when the dog steals her cotton candy.
- ✔ One might sincerely believe that physical death is the end of cognizance (viewpoint), and yet one treats one's newly deceased loved ones with great care and respect, having their rotting remains arranged to produce a pretense of peace and comfort (outlook).
- ✔ Many believe that the universe is entirely material, simply playing itself out mechanically and deterministically (viewpoint). Yet *none* of us knows how to live in such a world! As Isaac Bashevis Singer put it, "You have to believe in free will. You have no choice"[10] Free will is a universal outlook, even for all of those of contrary viewpoint.
- ✔ How many of you talk to your dog or cat (outlook)? How much do you think they understand (viewpoint)? I personally talk to squirrels,

10 Quoted in Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011, 32).

frogs and even bugs.

- ✔ Something like half of American scientists find consolation in God (outlook), Who nonetheless virtually never finds His way as a factor into their published work (viewpoint).
- ✔ There is physically nothing more to money than 1's and 0's in computer memory or markings on pieces of paper or metal (viewpoint), and yet we behave as if it is something of substantial value (outlook), and count on others to do the same, with remarkable *practical* results.[11]
- ✔ Even *knowing* that the beautiful blonde in the car ad does not actually come with the car (viewpoint), he buys it anyway, just in case (outlook).

For the Buddha rebirth is always a beneficial outlook, regardless of one's viewpoint. Indeed, he fully acknowledges that many will have a viewpoint that conflicts with rebirth (and *kammic* fruit), yet recommends the outlook anyway:

> Householders, there are some recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world." … it is to be expected that they will avoid these three wholesome states, namely, good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct, and that they will undertake and practice these three unwholesome states, namely, bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, and mental misconduct. (MN 60 i401-2)

Here is the kicker: this unwholesome viewpoint cannot win: whether or not it turns out to be true, their viewpoint is of no *practical* value:

11 *The Onion* (2010) published a satirical news article in which the economy grinds to a halt as "Nation Realizes Money Just a Symbolic, Mutually Shared Illusion."

> Now, whether or not the word of those good recluses and brahmins is true, let me assume that there is no other world: still this good person is here and now censured by the wise as an immoral person, one of wrong view who holds the doctrine of nihilism. But on the other hand, if there is another world, then this good person has made an unlucky throw on both counts: since he is censured by the wise here and now, and since on the dissolution of the body, after death, he will reappear in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. He has wrongly accepted and undertaken this incontrovertible teaching in such a way that it extends only to one side and excludes the wholesome alternative. (MN 60 i403)

Indeed, our viewpoint does not need to lock us into a particular outlook. This pragmatic favoring of outlook is the primary message of the *Kālāma Sutta*:

> Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken as a whole, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them. (AN 3.65)

This *sutta* also goes on to recommend rebirth as a pragmatically justified outlook. Actually what seems like a slight of hand comes easily, since the Buddha does not really countenance viewpoints in any case; they overstep the parameter of insubstantiality, no matter by what conventional means they have been acquired:

> Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon repetition; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor as a result of thought; nor upon an axiom; nor upon careful reasoning; nor out of delight in speculation; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the thought, "The monk is our venerable teacher." (AN 3.65)

In terms of veracity, what we *can* rely on is what we discover through direct unmediated experience. Until then all of our assumptions should be

held loosely, and favor what we experience as clearly beneficial.[12]

5. The middle way

Most people assume that rebirth requires that there is someone to be reborn: a self, a soul, a "me" that wanders on from one life to the next. In Buddhism rebirth is simply a continuation of a process, much as a fire perpetuates itself from one candle to another, or from an improperly extinguished camp fire, to dry grass, to trees and to houses and neighborhoods. It keeps going without there being a fixed thing that moves from one place to the next. The twelve links of dependent coarising describe such a process.[13] Rebirth in Buddhism is accordingly a *middle way* between the extremes of *annihilationism* and *eternalism*.

The Middle Way (Pali, *majjhimā paṭipadā*) is identified in the Buddha's first discourse as the noble eightfold path, a path in the middle between the pursuit of mortification of the body and the pursuit of hedonism.[14] Elsewhere it is identified as the twelve links of dependent coarising, a process in the middle between the two opposing philosophical viewpoints of eternalism and annihilationism.[15] Eternalism (*sassatavāda*) is the view that the soul or self is constant and endures indefinitely. Annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) is the view that the soul or self ceases to exist at the time of physical death. Each viewpoint seems to have enjoyed significant currency at the time of the Buddha, and, coincidentally, enjoys significant currency today.

In fact, the two definitions of the middle way are related: Eternalism tends to *frame* religious practice as a matter of sacrifice in this life in favor of the future liberation of the self or soul, and thereby to encourage the pursuit of

12 For some readers it might be helpful to challenge your viewpoint in the matter of rebirth. I suggest reviewing some of the research evidence concerning early childhood memories of previous lives, for instance Stevenson (2000), Anālayo (2018). The case of the Sri Lankan boy Dhammaruwan mentioned in the latter is particularly fascinating.

13 When asked the question, "What is reborn if there is no fixed self?" Tibetan master Chogyam Trungpa is reported to have aptly replied, "Your neuroses."

14 SN 56.11.

15 SN 12.17.

self-mortification. The Buddha to-be seems to have practiced along these lines in his years as a wandering ascetic before his eventual awakening. Annihilationism tends to see in sensual gratification an appealing basis for one's life, since any personal happiness or spiritual development gained would expire at death, and an arduous path toward awakening would be unreasonable. The Buddha-to-be seems to have practiced hedonistically, from all accounts as something of a young Nepalese playboy, prior to the beginning of his wildly successful spiritual quest.

The *Middle Way* is a radical means of avoiding the pitfalls of the extreme views of eternalism and annihilationism. It posits a continuity past physical death, but it loses the ontology of the soul or self, common to *both* eternalism and annihilationism. At the same time, it preserves enough of the continuity of eternalism to encourage responsibility for the future. By analogy, if Little Timmy lights a fire – which is not a *thing* that passes from one place to another – and as a result his neighbor Elmo's house burns, he cannot avoid the inevitable blame by claiming, "The fire I lit was over there and much smaller than the one that burned Mr. Elmo's house."[16]

6. The cessation of birth

The cessation of birth is the cessation of *saṃsāra*, the final goal of the Buddhist path, the achievement of the *arahant*. A standard passage is repeated throughout the discourses to describe awakening:

> When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the fermentation of sensual desire, from the fermentation of being, and from the fermentation of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: "It is liberated." He understands: "Birth is ended, the holy life is fulfilled, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."
> (MN 65 i442)

16 This analogy is based on Nagasena's answer to King Milinda when asked about karmic consequences without a self. See Pesala (2001, 46).

The cessation of birth is a high bar. With any of the links of the chain, we might be inspired to bring that link, through diligent practice, to cessation, and thereby to end *saṁsāra* (in principle, any link will have this effect). An alternative to bringing the link to full cessation is to limit the worst effects of the link. In the case of birth we might seek a felicitous rebirth, for instance, rebirth into a heavenly realm or into comfortable circumstances within the human realm, rather than into a realm of woe. That would not end this mass of suffering, but would limit future suffering for a while. Heavens, for instance, are reached as the *kammic* result of practicing generosity and ethics. By leading a virtuous life, much as we can create a heaven for ourselves here on earth we can be born into a heavenly realm in the next life. By leading a depraved life, much as we can create a hell for ourselves here on earth we can be born into a hellish realm in the next life. Heavenly rebirth has historically been, for probably most Buddhists, the primary goal of practice for this life, not *nibbāna*.

Since birth is uniquely inaccessible among the links of the chain to observation or practice in this life, it is weakened or brought to cessation only by limiting becoming or by bringing becoming to cessation.

3. Becoming

Upādāna·paccayā bhavo.
Bhava·paccayā jāti.

Because of appropriation becoming.
Because of becoming, birth.

We become someone, someone of importance, someone of wealth, someone of impeccable taste, someone wise, nice or cool and casual. We become celebrities, business tycoons, whizzes with a sketch pad, sports fans, book worms. We have a irrepressible need to distinguish ourselves, then to assert and defend who we think we have become, fearful and desperate if we discover we are not who we thought we were, or if the conditions change on which our personal identities depend. The world around us also assumes a certain form, warm and supportive of our goals, harsh and perilous, full of fellow travelers or full of suckers who don't deserve an even break. Becoming is the most complete manifestation of the human pathology in this life – and of the self – and a locus of suffering, struggle and distress. It is also the direct condition for continuation of *saṃsāra*, as what we have become is propelled into the next life. Becoming manifests in two aspects: (1) the *growth* or unfolding of the world as it appears to us, and (2) the development of a *personality* imprinted within our world.

The Pali term for 'becoming' is *bhava*, often translated as 'existence,' but the continuous growth and reshaping of world and personality suggests something

more dynamic than 'existence,'[1] for it is a productive cognitive process. The word *bhava* is also incidentally used elsewhere in the meaning of 'rebirth': For instance the sensual, form and formless realms mentioned in chapter two are *kāmabhava*, *rūpabhava* and *arūpabhava* respectfully, and rebirth itself is most often called *punabbhava*, 'again' + 'becoming.'

The Pali for *personality* is *sakkāya*, *sat* 'existing' + *kāya* 'body,' also translated as 'personal identity,' 'embodiment,' simply 'identity,' or perhaps 'sense of self.' A metaphysical or ontological self or soul is not presumed in the *Dhamma*. Rather the very real experience of being someone is a mental construct based on conditions that are clarified in dependent coarising.

We've already seen that the Pali word for 'world' is *loka*. In accord with the parameter of subjectivity, this refers to the world of experience, not to that natural reality which presumably extends far beyond our direct experience.[2] It has been pointed out that the origin of the word *loka* actually suggests 'appearance': the related verb *oloketi* means 'looks at' and a related noun *āloka* means 'light.'[3]

In becoming, world and personality unfold in relation to one another, they are mutually conditioning. Imagine a skier, a geologist and a miner, looking at the same mountain:[4] A skier experiences that mountain as slopes, snow and ski lifts, a geologist as ancient strata thrust up along a fault line, a miner as opportunities for extracting mineral resources. At the same time, how the mountain is experienced is what makes a skier a skier, a geologist a geologist and a miner a miner. The alcoholic, the unattached young man and the insurance broker will experience a cocktail party differently. An habitually angry personality will experience his world perpetually as conspiring to vex effort and blight dream. A kind personality of impeccable virtue will live in a world that is warm, bright and full of joy.

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1 See Thanissaro (2008, 14).
2 As Hamilton (2000, 140) states, if we forget that Buddha's focus is on the world of experience we will misunderstand his teachings. This is critically important!
3 Shulman (2014, 71).
4 This example is from Thanissaro (2008, 3).

1. Becoming as the origin of birth

A fundamental principle in Buddhism is that our past deeds (*kamma*, Sanskrit *karma*), whether wholesome or unwholesome, have fruits that are primary determinants of both our personality and our world, and likewise determine our future wellbeing or detriment in future lives. Personalized behaviors or practices have a strong influence on the circumstances of rebirth. Predicting just what parts of personality or world in this life become the inclinations and the circumstances after rebirth into the next, is for the most part obscure in the literature. To begin with, the language of rebirth is largely cosmological, and that of becoming is psychological. Accordingly, if we have become angry, selfish, deluded people, at war with the world in this life, we might expect to be born in a hell realm in the next. Nonetheless, the *cosmological* language of rebirth often intrudes into the description of becoming in *this* life. When asked by Ānanda to explain the meaning of *bhava*, the Buddha stated:

> The cognizance of sentient beings – hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving – is established in a lower realm. That's how there is rebirth into a new state of existence in the future. [as for lower, so for middle and higher] (AN 3.76)

In contrast, a similar passage confines the cosmological language to the next life:

> Here, *bhikkhus*, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, some person enters and dwells in the first *jhāna*, which consists of rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by thought and examination. He relishes it, desires it, and finds satisfaction in it. If he is firm in it, focused on it, often dwells in it, and has not lost it when he dies, he is reborn in companionship with the devas of Brahmā's company. … [as for first/…, so for second/…, third/…, and fourth/…, with corresponding *jhāna* factors and companies] (AN 4.123)

The very common intrusion of cosmological language into the context of

becoming may derive from pre-Buddhist tradition. Brahmanical ritual sacrifices generally defined a sacred sphere of ritual reality that was understood to provide *temporary* rebirth from the profane sphere into the sacred sphere, from which the sacrificer must return at the conclusion of the ritual.[5] Becoming is effectively within the profane sphere of this life, but certain practices, in particular *jhāna*, bring us temporarily into a sacred space, with qualities of realms of rebirth.

Another way in which the mapping from becoming to circumstances of rebirth is obscured in the *Buddhavacana*, is what I call the *sampling problem*. Sometimes we read that a single action in *one* life results in a specific circumstance in a *subsequent* life; for instance, offering a certain worthy monk alms on a single occasion in *one* life, results in birth into great wealth and riches in the *next* life. The problem is that we perform hundreds, nay, thousands, of actions each day. They cannot all be determinants of specific circumstances in future lives. Such examples, in which a specific *kammic* action results in a specific rebirth circumstance, are actually relatively rare in the earliest texts and could well be entirely allegorical, serving to produce an *outlook* that has the benefit of treating each action as if it alone were to determine your next birth – in spite of the logical flaws of that scenario. There seems to be liberal hyperbole in the determinism attributed to the rebirth process.

The sampling problem does not completely go away when repeated practices, like sitting in *jhāna* or being nice to people a lot, are described as landing us in a corresponding realm of rebirth. For instance, what happens if we spend varying times in each of the *jhānas*, or if we spend twenty percent of the time within some *jhāna* and eighty percent of our lives being mean, or what if we are nice one quarter of the time, but work as a ruthless investment banker the rest of the time? The sampling problem entails that some balancing out must be involved.

The main determinant of the conditions of rebirth that we can glean from the early texts is the kind of personality we develop through practice. Developing

5 As Collins (1990, 47-8) points out.

virtue is a primary concern of the noble eightfold path, through which we practice harmlessness and benefit for others, and develop purity of mind, and through which we reduce greed, aversion and delusion. Through virtue we generally find ourselves in heavenly circumstances in this life, potentially extending into a heavenly realm in the next life. More specifically, the Buddha states that the fruits of practice (*kamma*) can ripen in this life, in the next life or in subsequent lives, but the realm of heavenly rebirth is highlighted for most as the goal of one's practice in this life.[6]

2. The elements of personality

In a story from the *Suttas*, Bhaddiya Kaligodha was often heard by other monks to exclaim, "What bliss, what bliss!" Since he had, as a layman, been a king, they did not assume that he was enjoying the delights of the renunciate life, but rather that he was reminiscing about his previous cushy life. Upon word of this, the Buddha summoned Bhaddiya and discovered that the monks were underestimating his level of attainment. Bhaddiya explained:

> "Before, when I was a householder, maintaining the bliss of kingship, I had guards posted within and without the royal apartments, within and without the city, within and without the countryside. But even though I was thus guarded, thus protected, I dwelled in fear – agitated, distrustful, and afraid. But now, on going alone to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, I dwell without fear, unagitated, confident, and unafraid – unconcerned, unruffled, my wants satisfied, with my mind like a wild deer. This is the meaning I have in mind that I repeatedly exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'" (Ud 2.10)

What Bhaddiya had left behind is not so different from the things most of us live with day after day and refuse to give up: an asset-laden personal footprint protected by high-tech security system and a financial adviser. Although for many of us the threat is not of bodily violence, the consequences are much the

6 See Cintita (2018) for discussion of virtue in relation to *kamma*.

same. Our personal footprint, widely understood, defines who we think we are, our personality or sense of individuated personal identity. Our footprint might include assets like these:

- car, house, boat
- stock portfolio
- family, dog
- friends
- social status
- education
- profession
- hobbies
- power, influence
- sparkling conversation
- personal charm
- youth, vigor, beauty
- sex appeal
- intellect
- musical talents
- political views
- daily gym workout
- religious convictions

To establish a personality we *appropriate* such assets as "me" and "mine," that is, we *identify ourselves* with such assets. Four kinds of features are distinguished for appropriation:

- the things we desire,
- our views about how our world works,
- our presumably efficacious behavioral patterns,
- or views about who we are in relation to our world.

Shaping views and behavior is an apparent need for a coherent and unified concept of the self as a perceptive, needy agent.[7] In the end it is our footprint that defines us. What most of us fail to notice is that our footprint makes us miserable, a larger footprint even more miserable. There is craving connected with every asset, and we are terrified of losing or failing to attain what is at stake for us. Craving floods our personal footprint, as explained in later chapters, and is, as we know, the origin of suffering. The odd thing is that, all the while, we imagine a larger personal footprint will make us more secure. For the Buddha,

> *Bhikkhus*, just as even a trifling amount of feces is foul smelling, so too I do not praise even a trifling amount of becoming, even for a mere finger snap. (AN 1.328)

7 Varela (2016, 51).

It is strikingly praiseworthy on the part of Ven. Bhaddiya that he had succeeded in renouncing the bulk of his one-time personal footprint, reducing it to that of a wild deer, and was blissful for it. Effectively, this reversed the process of becoming: this is *unbecoming* (*vibhava*). The details of this process of appropriation will be described in the next chapter.

3. Some words on cognition

To understand the growth of the experiential world in the Buddha's teaching, we have to get clear about a few things concerning cognition. Let the following serve as a brief introduction. Dependent coarising is at heart a *cognitive system*, and cognition is the basis of the epistemic perspective touted in section A.3. Cognition is in brief human information processing: it includes the processes of perception and reasoning and their supporting processes. It is often distinguished from intentionality (that is, planning actions) and from emotion, but all of these are highly interdependent in cognition as we will see. Therefore we will generally include all of these various aspects of mind when discussion cognition. Because of the parameter of subjectivity in the Buddha's method, we are not interested in underlying mechanisms, such as neural pathways, that plausibly play a role in human cognition, because they are beyond the purview of practice.

From the epistemic perspective, *cognition constructs our entire world of experience*. We experience many things that we are convinced exist "out there" independent of our experience of them: our dog, our car, rain, and so on, but these things are never experienced separate from cognition; it is only through cognition that they enter the world. This is why the *Dhammapada* tells us that "all experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind."[8] We can experience things as existing "out there" only because cognition can refer to things outside of itself, it carries *meaning*; in fact, it fills the world with *content*, where the meaning or content is something that natural reality "out there" might be like.[9]

8 Dpd 1.
9 In phenomenology such a meaning is called an *intention* (German, *Absicht*).

We can call the experience something "out there" an *awareness event*. If I see a dog, that is an awareness event. If I hear a dog, or think about a dog, that is an awareness event. The dog never enters my world except as a part of an awareness event. We can say that the world as a whole is a collection of awareness events, and an awareness event has two parts: first, there is *awareness itself*, which is a cognitive event occurring at a certain time, and then there is the *content* or the *meaning* or the object that the event carries: the dog, which is typically presumed to be "out there." Cognition involves a continual arising and ceasing of events of seeing, attending, presuming, feeling, intending and so on. Multiple awareness events can cohere around some specific content. In this way the steam of cognitive events assembles meaningful content into meaningful wholes, much as we put meaningful words together to produces meaningful sentences, or put jigsaw pieces together produces a meaningful picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. In this way, the meaningful content of the world is *constructed*. How the world appears to us is therefore no more reliable that our cognitive apparatus.

I would like to highlight two kinds of awareness events: cognizance and presumption. *Cognizance* is the master factor of cognition, and is in fact appears as a far upstream link. Other cognitive factors are effectively facets of cognizance, and dependent coarising itself has been equated with cognizance.[10] The content of cognizance is very rich in content: the dog is not just perceived: it is three-dimensional, alive and independently existing. 'Cognizance' is *viññāṇa* in Pali, *vi* 'apart' + *ñāṇa* 'know.' Although a far upstream link, but its relevance flows all the way down to becoming.

Presumption is a means by which we extend awareness to what is not directly perceived. Cognizance is very presumptuous. The Pali word for 'presume' is *maññati*, sometimes translated as 'imagine' or 'conceive,' but generally in a self-centered way. The noun 'presumption' is *maññanā*. I see the cat one moment, the next moment I don't see the cat, but I presume that the cat still exists and that he's behind the sofa, and later I see the cat and I presume it is the *same* cat. We perceive Fido's tail sticking out from behind the sofa, but we presume the whole dog. The Buddha asked us to be careful with our

10 Ñāṇavīra (2003,26).

presumptions, for these are unreliable:

> In whatever way they presume, thereby it turns out otherwise. (SN 3.12)

This is an expression of the parameter of insubstantiality in the Buddha's method discussed in section A.3, which declines to endorse presumptions, thereby promoting the epistemic perspective of dependent coarising.

In sum, an awareness event is **awareness + content**. We might feel inclined to add a third part, the *agent* responsible for the event, as in "*I* see the dog." Here is where the Buddha takes great care. We can only presume an "I," we cannot experience it directly in any way. Such an agent would be a *self*. Rain is a water-carrying event but without an agent, there is nothing that does the raining. This keeps cognition as impersonal as rain in the *Buddhavacana*.

4. Growing the world

Recall that becoming manifests as growth and as personality. The world as it appears to us grows in meaning or content with each new awareness event, that is, the scope of our cumulative experience expands. Cognition constructs the world as it appears to us; this is the better part of becoming. About this, the Buddha states,

> Suppose, *bhikkhus*, an artist or a painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson, would create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas. So too, when the uninstructed worldling produces anything, it is only form that he produces, only feeling that he produces, only perception that he produces, only formations that he produces, only cognizance that he produces. (SN 22.100)

There are five kinds of cognitive factors (or brush strokes) mentioned: form, feeling, perception, formations and cognizance. These five colors are the *five aggregates* (*khandhas*) that we encountered in an earlier chapter as a bearer of

appropriation. The word for 'aggregate,' *khandha* in Pali refers simply to a unstuctured mass, heap or pile. 'Mass' as in 'this mass of suffering' (*dukkhakkhandha*) is another translation of *khandha*. We are therefore given five heaps of something, what is that something? Awareness events! Each aggregate a different category of awareness, broad enough that, if something is in the world, even "out there," awareness of it falls into at least one of these five categories.[11] Therefore the aggregates produce our entire experiential world. The five categories of awareness are as follows:

- *Form* (*rūpa*) is bare awareness mediated by the senses, for instance, of shapes and colors.
- *Feeling* (*vedanā*) is awareness as *mattering*, particularly as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.
- *Perception* (*saññā*) is awareness as belonging to a recognizable category, typically associated with a name.
- *Formations* (*saṅkhāra*) are awareness through derivation, a putting together by inference from other objects.
- *Cognizance* (*viññāṇa*) extends awareness to comprehension of a full-blown, substantial, existing object.[12]

The aggregates account for the content of the world, and at the same time some of the cognitive processes that construct that world. These twin aspects of aggregates are evident in the Buddha's simile of the painting: brush strokes are paint-application events, but also serve to construct the meaning of the painting: the man or woman. Analysis in terms of aggregates effectively annotates content and meaning in terms of categories of awareness.[13] This annotation serves, among other things, to remind the practitioner that every

11 Hamilton (2000, 75).

12 In cognizance, objects present themselves as going beyond our immediate experience of them. If we see a house in profile, we comprehend to whole house complete with back and sides (Detmer 2013, 96). There will be much more about this in the course of this book.

13 An analogy: Normally when we tell a story, we paint a picture of a real or imagined reality through speech. There are languages – for instance, many Native American languages – that require words carry inflections (called *evidentials*), much as English verbs require past, present or future, but to mark the *source* of the meaningful content, for instance, whether the speaker saw, heard, made an inference, or was told about it.

experience is mediated by mind. The full purpose in teaching this peculiar fivefold way of annotating our world – for there are countless ways to array the world – will become evident in the next chapter.

While awareness events come and go, the meanings constructed persist and grow, as a kind of accretion left behind by these events. Among the aggregates, cognizance has the starring role in becoming, standing apart or across from the other four aggregates like a thumb from the other four fingers. The typical life cycle of a cognizance event is described in two phases:

- **Descent.**[14] Cognizance arises when attention is drawn to a specific object or situation within the aggregate-made world that becomes a *site of cognizance* (*viññāṇaṭṭhita*).

For instance, within our world of experience we might give attention to an unusual bird sound.

- **Growth.** The content of the world is augmented with respect to that site.

For instance, we might become aware of additional details about the source of the bird sound and even identify a species. In this sense the content of cognizance grows. Accordingly,

> That which is called mind, mentality or cognizance arises as one thing and ceases as another all day and all night.[15] (SN 12.61)

An analogy is an acorn that falls to earth at a particular site and gives rise to an oak at that site. Or a painter – after his lunch of croissant, Camembert and Cabernet – returns to work and chooses a particular point on the canvas that attracts his interest and applies paint to canvas to add a boat, tree or person.

Now, it happens that growth is most productive in the presence of certain emotive factors.

14 The Pali word *okkanti* is often used here. Though it means 'descent' literally, it is also used more generally for the 'arising' of any phenomena, like craving or thinking.

15 Here 'mind' is *cittaṃ,* 'mentality' is *mano* and 'cognizance' is *viññāṇaṃ.*

> As long as cognizance stands, it stands involved with form, supported by form, founded on form. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it grows, increases, and matures. [as for form, so for feeling, perception, formations] (DN 33, iii 228)

For instance, a random man perceives the form of a woman, cognizance descends and discovers there a sprinkle of relishing. Growth ensues to reveal further details concerning the woman's appearance and perhaps additionally to conceive a plan of action regarding her: straightening the tie and saying something clever and charming. Note that in this case an *intention* or plan of action is grown alongside an *assessment* of a situation. Relishing (*nandi*) is particularly important here, for it and similar sentiments have a hugely important role in the shaping of becoming. Here the Buddha incorporates it, along with passion (*rāga*), into a common simile for growth:

> The four sites of cognizance should be seen as like the earth. Relishing and passion should be seen as like the water element. Cognizance … should be seen as like the five kinds of plants propagated from seeds. (SN 22.54)

Where relishing and passion are implicated here, elsewhere the upstream link craving is identified with the water as nourishment for the growth of cognizance.

> Thus, Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, *kamma* is the field, cognizance the seed, and craving the moisture for their cognizance to be established …. (AN 3.76)

The role of *kamma* as earth in this passage will become clear only in chapter eleven. Of importance now is the role of relishing, passion or craving here as the moisture or sprinkling that nourishes the growth of cognizance. Accordingly, the world that is constructed by cognizance *tends* to be built up unevenly, in a manner biased toward self-interest. This nourishment is a kind of condition, but not a *necessary* condition: we will call it an *encouragement*. Since the personality, in particular the personal footprint or range of appropriated assets that define the personality, is also the range of self interest

(in fact as we will discover, flooded with craving), the world that grows and develops will tend to be deformed and twisted to fit that damp personality, much like lush vegetation grows along the course of a river.[16]

Consequently, not only is the personality self-centered, but the entire world in which that personality moves about is centered around the interests of the self. This explains why a skier, a geologist or a miner will each see a different mountain, and why those things most dear or most fearsome – food, football, poisonous snakes or irksome neighbors – are larger than life, while those things of little consequence to the self – dirt, leaves, species extinction or the poverty of the masses – are shadows or specks. Because craving is woven into becoming at almost every point of growth, so is suffering. Moreover, the site at which cognizance has descended and grown becomes a conditioning factor for birth (though keep in mind the sampling problem and expected balancing out of these influences):

> When cognizance is established and has come to growth, there is the production of future renewed existence. When there is the production of future renewed existence, future birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. (SN 12.38)

5. The cross-entangled snarl

More words about the logic of dependent coarising may be helpful at this juncture. It will be noticed that the following upstream links of dependent coarising are already implicated in becoming: formations, cognizance, feeling and craving, alongside many other factors that appear in relation with these and other links. For instance, we've seen that craving is the moisture that allows the seed of cognizance to grow to produce becoming. I will call such spurious conditional relations, that is, the ones not among the eleven that define the chain, *cross-entanglements*. We will see many examples of cross-entanglements as we go along. This aspect of dependent coarising has

16 Johannason (1979, 13-4, 118) likewise makes the point that perceptions are not evenly distributed over the perceptual field, but governed by needs, loaded with feelings.

undoubtedly caused endless confusion among students of Buddhism, but the confusion can be resolved by properly understanding the domain of discussion.

The cognitive conditions that keep us trapped in *saṃsāra* are a massive snarl of factors, each conditioning and conditioned by many others, out of which this mass of suffering emerges and sustains itself in a way we can *just barely* hope to track. The domain of *saṃsāra* is much like a hopelessly entangled and knotted snarl of string that a pride of kittens has been swatting, chewing on and rolling in for the past month, nay, from beginningless time. Each string in this mesh enters, becomes entangled within, and leaves one knot after another, sometimes encountering a given knot once, then a second time from a different direction.

The twelve links are among the tightest thorniest knots to disentangle in this snarl, but also happen to be related conditionally in a linear way. The method suggested by the twelve links is to study each knot in the chain on its own terms, including its various concomitant conditions and effects. That link also becomes a locus for practice through which we try to bring it to cessation or to limit its effects. Among the various other strands entering and leaving that particular knot, we can expect to see many cross-entanglements. They are in the nature of a snarl.

That each factor in the chain is a necessary condition for the immediate downstream factor allows us to untangle the snarl in a systematic way. To rectify what the kittens have wrought, we first find one loose end and simply proceed backward knot by knot, unthreading our current loose end from the current knot (…from becoming, to appropriation, to craving…), sometimes having to tease a few neighboring knots apart (…to contact, to the sixfold sphere….) in order to extricate at each knot our current end. Even while the snarl is quite chaotic, the logic of disentanglement is linear and much simpler: We proceed in this way, and eventually – this is the Buddha's great discovery – the whole snarl unravels. That is the reason for the simplicity of the linear chain of dependent coarising shorn of cross-entanglements in the context of a tortuous snarl.

6. The cessation of becoming

> Now this holy life is lived in order to abandon becoming. (Ud 3.10)

Fire is a metaphor for becoming itself, since, like fire, becoming is an ongoing process that spreads out through growth and appropriation, then ignites new fires through birth. The cessation of becoming is *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), a word that means 'extinguishing,' as in extinguishing a fire. If becoming ceases, birth ceases, and *saṃsāra* ceases along with the mass of suffering that we would otherwise experience life after future life. Just as we do not ask, once a fire is no longer there, "Where did it go?", it makes little sense to ask where the person, personality, self or the world has gone upon the attainment of *nibbāna*.

However, when becoming ceases things do not come to an immediate halt, for birth was not scheduled for some time in any case, and the still living organism will continue to function in the world. What happens next is described in two stages: (1) *Nibbāna* with fuel remaining (*saupādisesā*) is the stage before physical death of the biological organism. (2) *Nibbāna* with no fuel remaining (*anupādisesā*) is the stage at physical death. The final stage is also called *parinibbāna* ('complete *nibbāna*').

> What, *bhikkhus*, is the *nibbāna* element with fuel remaining? Here a *bhikkhu* is an *arahant*, one whose fermentations are destroyed, the holy life fulfilled, who has done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained the goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming, completely released through final knowledge. However, his five sense faculties remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable and feels pleasure and pain. It is the extinction of lust, hate and delusion in him that is called the *nibbāna* element with residue left. Now what, *bhikkhus*, is the *nibbāna* element with no residue left? Here a *bhikkhu* is an *arahant* … completely released through final knowledge. For him, here in this very life, all that is experienced, not being delighted in, will be extinguished. That, *bhikkhus*, is called the *nibbāna* element with no

fuel remaining. (Iti 2.17)

The residue here is compared to hot burning coals that remain for a time after a fire has been extinguished.[17]

Those of modest expectations short of *nibbāna*, who do not foresee the cessation of becoming in this life, might nonetheless aspire to felicitous rebirth, through limiting personality, shrinking one's personal footprint, establishing a more wholesome lifestyle and enjoying more satisfaction in life, in order to enjoy a more agreeable rebirth into the next.

17 MN 24 i148.

4. Appropriation

Taṇhā·paccayā upādānaṃ,
Upādāna·paccayā bhavo.

Because of craving, appropriation,
Because of appropiration, becoming,

"I want one of *those*, Mommy. Hey, Timmy's in *my* chair." We teach small children a lot of concepts and values to help them function in the world, but we never have to teach them the concept "mine." With "I want *that*," they are already established in their way of personally identifying with aspects of their ever flowing world of experience, of becoming someone and of ensnarling themselves in this mass of suffering.

A major theme that runs through dependent coarising is what we might call *the scourge of the self*. We will see that this begins far upstream as the conceptual mistake of presuming the existence of an agent self (*atta*), that then puts itself into relation with other things, producing cognitive and emotional implications at contact and feeling. The self actively seeks personal advantage in craving and appropriation and becomes fully manifest in a full-blown personality (*sakkāya*) with a defensive sense of personal identity in the contoured environment of becoming. The course of this development is an escalating affliction for wellbeing and wisdom. Fortunately, appropriation is also a point in which targeted practice can directly counter this scourge.

The Pali word for 'appropriation' is *upādāna*, more often translated as 'attachment' or 'clinging.' It's derivation is *upa* 'near' + *ādāna* 'take', so the

compound means ‘take up’ or ‘appropriate.’ I prefer ‘appropriate’ to other translations because it suggests assuming ownership improperly.

Appropriation is the process of personal identification with the objects of the world as “me” or “mine,” thereby augmenting our personal footprint, that is, the scope of our personality. *How* I might appropriate something is described as follows:[1]

- I regard it as *me*, for instance, my body,
- I regard it as *mine*, for instance, my sports car,
- I regard it as *part of me*, for instance, my irresistible smile, wit or good looks, or
- I regard *myself as part of* it, for instance, my family, ethnicity or volleyball team.

What I might appropriate as “me” or “mine” falls into one of four categories,[2] appropriation of:

- *Sensuality*, for instance, daily lunch of croissant, Camembert and Cabernet, or vast riches,
- *Views*, for example, that wealth is a mark of divine favor or that education guarantees success,
- *Conduct and observances*, for instance, daily workout, greeting everyone with a smile or spending Saturday mornings in *jhāna*, or
- *A doctrine of self*, for instance, that one is destined for riches.

1. Appropriation as the origin of becoming

We learned in the last chapter that becoming involves two processes: (1) growth of our experiential world, and (2) the development of our personality or sense of identity imprinted on that world. We also saw that the two twist around each other, mediated by craving. Cognizance, we saw, was the engine of growth. Appropriation is the engine of personal development.

The five aggregates served in the preceding chapter primarily in the

1 MN 44 i300.
2 MN 11 i66.

description of growth of the experiential world. They also appear as objects of appropriation. The following is a common refrain in the *Suttas*:[3]

> … the uninstructed worldling … regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He lives obsessed by the notions: "I am form, form is mine." … [as for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 22.1, etc.)

Recall that the five aggregates (*kandhas*) provide a simple annotation of the world of experience in terms of modes of awareness. Given that anything we appropriate is found within the world, and therefore among the aggregates, the totality of what we have appropriated in the world is called the *aggregates of appropriation* (*upādānakkandha*). The aggregates of appropriation constitute our personal footprint, which is personality itself. In conversation with her former husband about this, the nun Dhammadinnā clarified this:

> "Lady, 'personality, personality' is said. What is called personality by the Blessed One?"
>
> "Friend Visākha, these five aggregates of appropriation are called personality by the Blessed One; that is, the form aggregate of appropriation, the feeling aggregate of appropriation, the perception aggregate of appropriation, the formations aggregate of appropriation, and the cognizance aggregate of appropriation. These five aggregates of appropriation are called personality by the Blessed One."
> (MN 44 i299)

In short, we are what we appropriate. The five aggregates refer to the world in general as we experience it, and the five aggregates of appropriation refer specifically to our personal footprint within that world, everything we choose to have a stake in as "me" and "mine."[4] Cleverly, the Buddha's choice of the term 'aggregates of appropriation' reflects the fire simile for becoming mentioned in the last chapter, by which *extinguishing* a fire (*nibbāna* or Sanskrit *nirvāna*) is the cessation of becoming, for the word *upādāna* can also

3 Particularly in the *Khandha Saṃyutta*, SN 22.*.
4 Thanissaro (2008, 69).

refer to fuel for a fire, in the Buddha's time probably wood, cow dung, grass or certain kinds of oil. Since *khandha* (aggregate) refers to an unordered heap or pile, *upādānakkhandha* thereby can refer to piles of firewood and other fuels. As long as we feed the fire through appropriation, becoming will continue to burn and extinguishing (*nibbāna*) will elude us.[5]

> Form is burning, feeling is burning, perception is burning, formations are burning, cognizance is burning. (SN 22.61)

The fire simile and its association with suffering also serves as a parody of the Brahmanical view of the desirability of fire.[6]

2. Appropriating sensuality

Sensuality (*kāma*) is what we presume will provide a support for pleasure or gratification for us in a very broad sense. This includes things that are immediately felt, such as touch, taste, sounds, agreeable appearances; assets that support our needs, such as gold and silver, a stock portfolio, classy attire, house, car, a second house in the country, mobile home, boat, swimming pool; social relations, such as family, friends, pets, fame, power; personal qualities, such as beauty, wit, charisma, glamour; and so on.

Our relationship to sensual pleasure is sometimes obscure, in that both craving and appropriation are often driven more by the *thought* of sensual pleasure than by the sensual pleasure itself. The Buddha tells of a blind man who proudly wears. and proclaims satisfaction in possessing, what he was told by a crooked merchant was “a white cloth, beautiful, spotless, and clean,” but is in fact “a dirty soiled garment.”[7] Moreover, we often appropriate what we have yet to acquire. Many people see riches, fame or success in their future; or sense an imminent business tycoon or an about-to-get-lucky lottery winner in their person; or imagine a yet-to-be-discovered star or celebrity looking back at them in the mirror. We often appropriate as “me” or “mine” what we have

5 Thanissaro (1993) discusses the clever use of the fire metaphor in detail.
6 Thanissaro (1993, 19).
7 MN 75 i509.

long lost, for instance, youth and beauty, even as we get older, chubbier, feebler, drunker, duller and less attractive. All of these things define our personal identity. We will look more closely at this major theme of sensuality in following chapters.

3. Appropriating views

Views (*diṭṭhi*) about how the world functions and what our role in that world is, come naturally to the thinking and learning creatures who constitute the human race. The product of self-centered beings, these views tend to focus on our own interests, and we tend to appropriate views that advance those interests. Many of the other views come from our culture, through civic, moral or religious education: views about fairness, social responsibility, etc. I suspect that we often appropriate this latter set of views simply because we seek stability in time-honored ways to order the world. This is especially true of the elderly, who are characteristically "socially conservative," for instance, about gender equality, LGBT rights, tatoos, what passes for music, and so on.

Views about matters conditionally related to our own personal advantage are certainly prominent candidates for appropriation. Once we appropriate one object, we are likely to appropriate the things upon which that object depends. For instance, we appropriate our stock portfolio because we view this as enabling the sensual pleasures and social status that we had already appropriated. Next we appropriate a politico-economic philosophy that enables, justifies and helps defend our hefty stock portfolio.

Likewise, we appropriate social status because we view it as being to our personal advantage, then appropriate an array of socially constructed views (most of them otherwise of dubious merit) that define that social status, for instance, concerning our education, wealth or social class, along with views about what is to be regarded as superior or inferior. The Buddha warns his monks of various backgrounds against this particular kind of appropriation:

> *Bhikkhus*, what is the character of an untrue man? Here an untrue man who has gone forth from an aristocratic family considers thus: "I

> have gone forth from an aristocratic family; but these other *bhikkhus* have not gone forth from aristocratic families." So he lauds himself and disparages others because of his aristocratic family. This is the character of an untrue man. [As for aristocratic family, so for wealthy family, enjoying fame, receiving abundant alms food and robes, having a good education, being a teacher, attaining *jhānas*, dwelling in the wilderness, wearing rag robes, eating but one meal a day] (MN 113, iii 37)

Nonetheless, monks' resources for lauding self and disparaging others are relatively limited. The rich array of social categories available to *lay* people affords even greater opportunities.

Having appropriated a particular social status, we appropriate views about how a person of that status presents himself to the world. This illustrates a way in which views limit us: a tycoon will not be caught dead driving a Toyota, or even traveling without a chauffeur, and a new Ph.D. feels humiliated if forced to drive a Taxi to make ends meet, for these behaviors step beyond the presumed bounds of the appropriated personality. Others, convinced of their inferiority in some aspect of their lives, perhaps for belonging to a lesser caste, gender or education, presume and manifest limits on what they might accomplish.

Once appropriated, the ferocity with which we defend our views is comparable to how we defend our material assets. A contradiction to an appropriated view easily becomes a matter of personal attack. A psychotherapist I know who provides marriage counseling, will put it to his clients at a critical impasse, "Would you rather be *right* or would you rather *get along*?" He is always dismayed how many would rather be *right*.

Venerable Kaccāna warns us that where lay people commonly fight over sensuality, it is monks who are most prone to fighting over views, albeit generally views about *Dhamma*:

> It is, brahmin, because of adherence to lust for sensual pleasures, bondage to sensual pleasures, that *khattiyas* fight with *khattiyas*,

> brahmins with brahmins and householders with householders. … It is, brahmin, because of adherence to lust for views, bondage to views, that ascetics fight with ascetics. (AN 2.37)

4. Appropriating conduct and observances

Conduct and observances, which are concerned with how we function effectively in the world, come naturally to the active creatures who constitute the human race. They might include working out at the gym, reading one's daily horoscope, hosting formal dinners, partying like there is no tomorrow and deporting ourselves in certain ways. Also these may be appropriated as part of our personality. Many of the practices are religious or Buddhist in nature: special magical rites and incantations, meditation, bowing, reciting the refuges and precepts. Typically, not to be able to engage in an appropriated habit or practice – for instance, one finds the gym closed – is then a cause of distress. We generally appropriate conduct and observances because we presume some efficacy in them that benefits us personally. In this sense they are the active counterpart of appropriated views. In fact the presumed efficacy of the behavior generally *is* an appropriated view.[8]

The Pali for 'conduct and observances' is *sīlabbata*, *sīla* 'conduct' + *vata* 'observance'. We know *sīla* as 'precepts' or 'virtuous behavior,' but it actually has a range of meanings that includes 'nature,' 'character,' 'habit' and 'behavior,' not always virtuous. *Vata* is defined as 'a religious duty,' 'observance,' 'practice' or 'custom.' So, most generally, we can understand *sīlabbata* as 'conduct and observances.' It is sometimes translated by modern authors as 'habits and practices.' and also as 'rites and rituals,' but the latter seems to narrow the scope of this term unnecessarily to devotional religious practices.

To observe certain conduct and observances does not itself constitute appropriation: indeed we are capable of holding our habits lightly. For instance, the Buddha recommended adherence to prevailing social conventions

8 Thanissaro (2008 87).

and etiquette for the sake of harmonizing with others. There are those who eschew social conventions as restrictive, but nonconformity ends up as just another conduct or observance, one that tends particularly toward appropriation, since it is most often an attempt to individuate oneself. Certain social classes have their own characteristic social conventions, like drinking white wine with fish. Often these behaviors are appropriated by the snobs among us to underscore group identity.

5. Appropriating self-doctrine

"I see, I want, I act, I control, I used to be little, but now I'm big, I think … therefore I am!" The "I" here is the self (*atta*). We experience the self as an experiencer and agent, needy and afraid, enduring, standing apart from other things and other people in all the things we do, a fixed point with change unfolding all around it. When we have conceptualized the self as a substantial thing, we then develop views about it.

There seems to have been a number of established theories about the self at the time of the Buddha,[9] having to do with its material or immaterial existence, its finiteness or infinitude, whether it is conscious or not, whether it survives death or is annihilated at death, etc., many of which are current today. When we presume one of these doctrines and then appropriate it, it often makes a big difference in how we frame our life, our goals, our practice.

Self-doctrine in Pali is *attavāda* = *atta* 'self,' 'soul' + *vāda* 'doctrine,' 'theory.' We discussed two chapters ago how the self-doctrines of annihilationism and eternalism make a difference in spiritual practice. I presume it is because of the implications of self-doctrine for framing our practice that the Buddha distinguished this particular form of view as one of four objects of appropriation, rather than simply including it among the other appropriated views.[10] We also noted that the *middle way* exhibits the most beneficial

9 Some of these are found in DN 9, i186-187, DN 1, i31, 34.

10 Anālayo (2012, 31) notes that the Chinese parallels of the relevant Pali *suttas* refer not to *self-doctrine* but simply to *self* as the object of appropriation (Sanskrit, *ātmopādāna*).

features of both annihilationism and eternalism, but – in accord with insubstantiality – presumes no doctrine of self at all, seemingly unique among the world's religions.

In fact, for the Buddha the scourge of the self is at the heart of the human pathology. It begins upstream as a conceptual artifact of contact, then leads to feeling, to craving, to appropriation and to becoming. Appropriation and becoming escalate the problem into a scourge, for these links knot the self into a personality, a self with a full range of assets and self-interest, a personal footprint in the thick of things that must be defended and maintained. And just as we develop self-doctrine from self, we develop personality view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) from personality. We become convinced of the essential reality of "me": "this [thing, ranging over the five aggregates] really *is* me or mine, or part of me or I really am part of it."[11] At this point we are in deep trouble.

6. The cessation of appropriation

We can limit the process of appropriation, step by step, through a number of practices detailed in the *Buddhavacana*. However, the complete eradication of appropriation, and thereby of becoming and *saṃsāra*, will depend on work done upstream. The aggregates serve to structure most of these practices. In fact, the *Khandha Saṃyutta*, (*Connected Discourses on the Aggregates*), which includes 159 *suttas* for reflection and constitutes 131 pages in the Wisdom edition of SN, is primarily aimed at weakening appropriation. Clearly the Buddha saw this as a primary locus of practice.

Reflection on the aggregates of appropriation. Why the aggregates? OK, it makes sense to frame the world of experience as consisting of heaps of awareness events, each carrying some outer content, for this is a counterweight to what we normally do, which is to look *past* cognition, to appropriate directly what we presume are substantial things "out there" in the *outer* world: cars, people, plunder, facts and even our selves, things that we presume would exist even if we did not experience them. It is their very promise of substantial

11 MN 44, i 300.

existence outside of cognition that allows us to take our appropriations seriously. We easily forget that, in order for us to appropriate them, we must first construct them cognitively by piecing them together, like a jigsaw puzzle or a coherent sentence, from heaps of awareness events.

Understanding what we appropriate as aggregates reminds us that we can control them and thereby experience them otherwise. The expression 'aggregate of appropriation' actually draws together two discordant categories: aggregates as cognitively constructed and appropriations as "out there" existing independent of experience, and oh so alluring and substantial. When we see our precious appropriations so constructed, we see shoddy merchandise, with cognitive seams left from their presumption.[12]

OK, this is a clever slight of the Buddha's hand. But why the particular modes of awareness: form, feeling, perception, formations and cognizance? They are not even discrete categories: a little reflection reveals that feelings and perceptions are also formations, and that all modes of awareness are also instances of cognizance broadly speaking. Nonetheless, although they overlap technically, the labels for these modes have differing semantic centers, each is used to bring out a particular aspect of awareness. For instance, form, feeling and perception are typically experienced as immediate, requiring no noticeable effort. Formations and cognizance can be more deliberate. In formations we notice that we derive wholes from the parts or make thoughtful connections or inferences. In cognizance we find a deep level processing: we see directly one side of a house, yet are aware of a three-dimensional object with sides all around. In terms of semantic centers, the five aggregates are modes of awareness listed *in ascending order of cognitive complexity*. I am convinced that the primary reason for these particular categories of awareness has to do with bringing the aggregates onto the cushion. As the mind stills in *samādhi*, the experienced world begins progressively to retreat from the more cognitively complex modes of awareness: from cognizance, then from

12 As Thanissaro (2008, 140) describes it, through the aggregates and senses we see events rising and passing away. Assumptions of existence are thereby abandoned. This is not a matter of logic or will-power, but certain assumptions no longer even occur to the mind that are necessary for appropriation to find an object.

formations, then from perception, then from feeling, finally leaving the bare awareness of form.[13]

form – feeling – perception – formations – cognizance
◄■■■■ samādhi ■■■■■

As this proceeds, what constitutes the world, "out there," once presumed to be independent of cognizance, appears to retreat as well, and the immediate experiences of *craving*, and *appropriation* dissipate. We begin to notice, as the mind stills, that our world undergoes a noticeable shift, that it becomes progressively less differentiated and that the substantiality of what we otherwise appropriate becomes more obscure. The aggregates really represent levels of cognitive unfolding of our experienced world, that is, a cognitive overlaying of different facets of presumed reality. Therefore we might notice in our practice at which point in this progression the unfolding of craving or appropriation appears. This further highlights the cognitive constructedness of our appropriations, and actually allows us to associate them with specific modes of awareness.

For instance what aspects of my chariot do I identify with? If it is the shine of the chrome trimmings, my appropriation centers on form and/or feeling; if the quality of the wooden parts, the length of the yoke or the diameter of the wheels, then on perception; if the many uses I find in my chariot and the prestige I gain by appearing on the byways and crossroads in it, then on formations; if the chariot as a whole rather than any specific aspect, then on cognizance.[14]

This is our first practice encounter with the application of insubstantiality in the Buddha's method to what are generally presumed to be substantial objects. Insubstantiality will become particularly important as we work our way

13 As far as I know,Thanissaro is the first to make this connection of the aggregates to meditation practice.

14 There is, by way of analogy, a decompositional practice of contemplating the body as being composed of thirty-two parts found in many *suttas*, such as the *Sati-paṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10), as well as the description of the world in terms of the sixfold spheres (chapter eight).

upstream past contact and beyond. In support of this analysis, we notice that reflection on the aggregates is one of the practices mentioned for mindful observation of phenomena in the *satipaṭṭhāna* ('foundations of mindfulness'), a practice that we carry into *samādhi*. Impermanence is the partner of insubstantiality, and so:

> *Bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* sees as impermanent form, which is actually impermanent: that is his right view. Seeing rightly, he experiences revulsion. With the destruction of delight comes the destruction of lust; with the destruction of lust comes the destruction of delight. With the destruction of delight and lust the mind is liberated and is said to be well liberated. [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 22. 51)

Reflecting on the danger of appropriation. What we appropriate is not only viewed as insubstantial, it gets us into a heap of trouble. At this point the Buddha applies an oft-repeated formula referring to "gratification, danger, and escape."

- The *gratification* (*assāda*) of the aggregates is the pleasure and joy dependent on *khaṅdhas*.
- The *danger* (*ādīnava*) is that the aggregates are impermanent, suffering and subject to change.
- The *escape* (*nissaraṇa*) is the removal of desire and lust for the aggregates.[15]

The Buddha states with regard to this formula,

> So long as I did not directly know the gratification, the danger and the escape in the case of the five aggregates of appropriation, I did not claim to have awakened. (SN 22.27)

Our job with regard to gratification is to understand the appeal of objects that lead to their appropriation. Tracing this appeal back to craving, as we will do in the next chapter, fulfills this task and reveals that the appeal is generally

15 MN 109 iii18. This formula is also repeated throughout the *Khaṅdha Saṃyutta* (SN 22), for instance in SN 22.26, and elsewhere.

misleading.

Reflecting on the five aggregates of appropriation, we ask, “What is the danger here?” The five aggregates of appropriation are painful, a root of suffering.[16] What we appropriate we want to be reliable; when we discover it is instead impermanent, then we have a problem.

> The uninstructed worldling regards form thus: “this is mine, this I am, this is my self.” That form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair. [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 22.8)

Impermanence is a reason that appropriation leads to suffering. I often advise students that if they acquire a new car, the best thing they can do is to get it over with: take out a hammer and put a few dents in it. Otherwise they will prolong the misery that starts with the mere *anticipation* of that first dent or scratch.

Renunciation. The escape from the objects of appropriation is renunciation. Do we really need all this stuff and all these responsibilities? Some of our wisest grandparents say periodically, “You know, you don’t own things, they own you,” and we nod in assent. We think back at how happy we were as students when we didn’t own anything, and are inspired to reduce our personal footprint. The Buddha gave us a perspective on this:

> “*Bhikkhus*, what do you think? If people carried off the grass, sticks, branches, and leaves in this Jeta Grove, or burned them, or did what they liked with them, would you think: 'People are carrying us off or burning *us* or doing what they like with *us*'?”
>
> “No, venerable sir. Why not? Because that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.”
>
> “So too, *bhikkhus*, whatever is not yours, abandon it; when you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness

16 SN 22.31.

> for a long time. What is it that is not yours? form is not yours … Abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (MN 22, i 141)

Our problems will be gone if we simply regard the objects we otherwise appropriate the way we regard grass, sticks, branches, and leaves, as not us, as not ours, as not part of us and as not including us, but as sitting out there in the environment, beyond our personal footprint.

Most of the practices of the *Khaṅdha Saṃyutta* involve prying up the identification with the aggregates. This is a recurring refrain:

> This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self. He does not consider form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 22.*)

Once we burn ourselves on a hot stove we tend to not touch it again. Once we are fully cognizant of the dangers of appropriation, letting go requires little effort. Just as kids lose their lust and desire for a sandcastle, then destroy and scatter it, so we must destroy our lust and desire for the aggregates and destroy and scatter what we have built,[17] a metaphor that is enacted by Tibetan monks who painstakingly construct a mandala of colored sand over many days, then sweep it away at once upon completion.

Non-fashioning. We don't actually need to sell the car we've appropriated, nor give up the view nor the practice. Some of these may actually be useful in our lives, certainly Buddhist practices are. We need only take a backward step, or avoid the forward step in the first place, so as to avoid appropriation. This is the somewhat more subtle practice of *non-fashioning*. About this, specifically with respect to appropriating *jhāna* practice as a conduct or observance, the Buddha said,

> But a true man considers thus: "Non-fashioning even with the

17 SN 23.2.

> attainment of the first *jhāna* has been declared by the Blessed One; for in whatever way they presume, the fact is ever other than that." So, putting non-fashioning first, he neither lauds himself nor disparages others because of his attainment of the first *jhāna*. This too is the character of a true man. (MN 113, iii 42-43)

In Pali 'Non-fashioning' is *atammayatā*, literally 'not made of that-ness,' *a* 'not' + *taṃ* 'that' + *maya* 'made' + *tā* 'ness.' We don't need to turn our assets into becoming. Many years ago I was ordained as a Zen priest. Zen priests train to perform many ceremonial rituals, wear robes in prescribed ways, offer incense and bow at prescribed times, and so on. On that auspicious day my teacher told me, "A Zen priest does special things. He is not a special person." This advice was an important hedge against any tendency I had toward pride. This was a warning not to fashion myself according to whatever skills or public attention I would acquire, a warning I took to heart. Assets, including personal qualities, are like tools that happen to be available and should be put to good use when it is fitting, but then put down. We don't need to identify with them, nor carry them with us. Similarly, the Buddha refers to the sense in which "… a monk is virtuous, but not fashioned of virtue."[18] This is to continue to live virtuously, yet with no thought whatever that this virtue is "me" or "mine." We just do it.

Appropriation is a link that responds well to practice.

> If, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu's* mind has become dispassionate towards form, it is liberated from the fermenations by non-appropriation. By being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, he is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains *nibbāna*. He understands: "Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being." [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 22.45)

18 MN 78 ii27.

5. Craving

Vedanā·paccayā taṇhā,
Taṇhā·paccayā upādānaṃ.

Because of feeling, craving,
Because of craving, appropriation.

Craving is at the center of the human dilemma in several ways: It is the origin of suffering. It is the root of greed, aversion and delusion, and thereby of unwholesome *kamma*. It is the moisture that nourishes growth in becoming and twists it to personal advantage. Craving is also one of the weakest links in dependent coarising, and therefore among the most responsive to Buddhist practice.

The Pali word for craving is *taṇhā*, from a root that originally meant 'thirst' or 'drought,' and is sometimes translated as 'grasping,' 'desire,' or more accurately but also more awkwardly as 'dissatisfaction.' We crave to acquire what we don't have, we crave to keep what we do have, we crave to get rid of what we have and we crave to avoid what we don't have. It is defined as follows in the context of the four noble truths:

> Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for unbecoming. (SN 56.11)

We see therefore that craving is of three kinds:

- craving sensuality,
- craving becoming, and
- craving unbecoming.

We already learned in the last chapter that sensuality is something we appropriate; now we learn that it is also something we crave as well. Craving it gives us the impulse to act, in the form of *seeking* how we want things to be, or *guarding* what we want to stay the same. Either involves *perception* and *intention* in order to *assess* the situation related to what is craved and to *plan* actions that satisfy the craving. These functions, in turn, require cognizance, which we learned in chapter three tends to arise and grow where craving has pooled. Craving specifically encourages unwholesome *kammic* acts: intentional bodily, verbal and mental action played out on the basis of the greed, aversion and delusion associated with craving.

Craving for becoming and for unbecoming is the ongoing driving impulse behind the downstream links of appropriation and becoming. Alongside sensualtity, we crave the development and maintenance of ourselves, that is, of our personality. This drives becoming and protecting of what we imagine ourselves to be.

1. Craving as the origin of appropriation

One might, at first sight, imagine that appropriation is simply an escalation of craving. Something appeals to me, so I appropriate it as “mine.” However, only sensuality among the objects of craving (sensuality, becoming and unbecoming) corresponds to one of the four objects of appropriation (sensuality, views, conduct and observances, and doctrine of self). Nonetheless, craving for sensuality does indeed give rise to appropriation of sensuality, as the Buddha expresses in a pun:

> One is stuck, Radha, tightly stuck, in desire, lust, delight, and craving for form. Therefore one is called a being. [as for form, so for feeling, perception, formations, cognizance] (SN 23.2)

This is a play on words, in which 'stuck' is *satta*, the past participle of the verb *sajjati*, and 'tightly stuck' is *visatta*, and 'a being,' that is, what we become, is also *satta*. So, because we get stuck in craving, we become a being, that is, what is craved is appropriated into our personality. Notice the reference to the aggregates in this passage, which range in this case over the objects of craving, as they do over the objects of appropriation. Some of those things we appropriate will be the things we already enjoy: car, dog, family, bank account, fame, power, social network, reputation. Others may overshoot our actually lived sensual experience but not our imagined experience, such as that Ferrari that we test drove, but cannot possibly afford, but that accords so well with the real "me" we want to become. Recall from section 4.3 that we can appropriate the identity of a tycoon or celebrity even with no prospect of actually becoming one objectively … and we will suffer for it.

Craving for becoming is the main driver of appropriation, wanting to become someone, to appropriate the parts of a coherent personality, to acquire a personal footprint. We see this kind of craving constantly at work in our lives. Since the object of this craving in this case is within our personal footprint, this has the hugely unfortunate consequence of flooding our footprint with suffering. We have a personal stake in attaining or preserving what is "me" and "mine." Just as craving sensual pleasure is painful – as we long for what we don't have, grieve for what we've lost, and get anxious for what we know we will lose – so also is craving painful with regard to our personal footprint. However, our personal footprint is bigger, more pervasive and even more important to us than sensual pleasure. If there is a threat of losing some part of it through accident, repossession, wear, tear and rust, we suffer; or if we have not yet achieved it we suffer. As we worry about scratch, theft or accident, not only is the immediate comfort and power of our BMW at stake, but *who we are* is at stake, if we have let it define us. The greater the personal footprint, the greater the craving and the greater the suffering: if we have also appropriated a second car, a vacation home, a yacht, a Rolex watch, or Testoni shoes as "me" or "mine," we suffer all the more. Of course we nervously watch the stock market throughout the day. And with craving, cognizance will be encouraged to grow, increase and flourish, giving us still more to

appropriate.

2. Craving as the origin of suffering

Craving has both conceptual and emotive aspects. We can think of craving conceptually as a perceived gap between two presumptions: "the world is such and such," and "if only it were this and that," or as Ñāṇānanda has it, a gap between object and subject.[1] Ever seeking opportunities for personal advantage, we discover a lot of these gaps, each of which presents us with the problem of closing the gap. We will see in future chapters how this whole issue actually results from conceptual mistakes arising in upstream links, but in the meantime the gap is experienced as suffering at some level or another: as stress, as anxiety or restlessness, as grief or as excruciating pain. 'Dissatisfaction' as a translation of *dukkha* seems to cover both the conceptual and emotional aspects of craving, but fails to cover the full range of emotional levels.

We crave certain things, but cannot attain them, or if we do attain them we fear losing them. We crave to live forever, but must someday die. We crave to rid ourselves of that which irks us. We crave to become pain-free, but experience pain. We crave to retain every aspect of what we own, but see it all slipping through our fingers like sand. In spite of life's many broken promises, we generally do not have the wherewithal to still our craving, even as our car becomes dented, worn out and rusted, as our spouse gets old, bent and wrinkled, as our own health deteriorates, and as one by one we lose our family members and friends.

> From a dear one comes sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress and despair. (MN 87)

Given enough time we lose everything that we count as "me" and "mine": our youth, beauty and health, our family and friends; our possessions. If these challenges come suddenly, without hope of either recovering or attaining who we think we have become, we go into great despair or become even suicidal.

1 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 33).

To the extent we appropriate personal reputation, we defend ourselves against verbal attack or rumor in a barrage of angry tweets. We suffer when the views we espouse are threatened. We suffer when we are unable to maintain our accustomed behaviors and circumstances. We even suffer when we have personal doubts about who or what we think we are. We are forever compelled to shore up and repair our personal footprint. It is painful to be someone; the cost of maintenance is enormous. A lot of drama happens around craving.

3. Craving sensuality

Sensuality begins with physical sensations that we enjoy: laying in the warm sun with eyes closed listening to the rustling of leaves, the taste of vanilla ice cream on the tongue, a rhythmic melody on the radio, the sight of an attractive person of the preferred gender. Sensuality, broadly speaking, can include "… land, goods, gold, cattle, horses, serving men, women or kinfolk …,"[2] which are experienced more abstractly than the initial examples, as things we might take pleasure in *possessing* or which provide a kind of footing in the physical world that may provide *conditions* for comfort or security. Wealth, for instance, is not something we can eat, drink or swim in, but is an instrument for acquiring something we can eat, drink or swim in. Modern people's lists of comforts and pleasures might similarly include football games, financial success, designer clothing, great hair, wild parties, fast women and fast cars, and abundant thumbs up for our social media posts.

The Pali for sensuality is *kāma*, which can mean 'desire' or 'pleasure,' but its use tends to center around sexual pleasure or passion. It is helpful to distinguish sensual pleasure itself from *craving* for sensual pleasure, even though the Pali word *kāma* is somewhat ambiguous between the two. Actually, most of us have trouble distinguishing the two, for sensuality *per se* tends to give immediate rise to craving *ipso facto*. Although a pleasurable sensual feeling is, uh, pleasurable, the craving itself is painful. However, one can, in fact, experience sensual pleasures without craving; last night after a beautiful sunset I looked up and saw Jupiter and a dimmer Saturn just slightly to east;

2 Sn 766-771.

how cool is that? Sensual pleasure without drama.

Strangely, what we appropriate is often not what we crave, but rather the craving itself, or rather the seeking behavior that craving typically gives rise to. This may be the case in addiction or in other compulsive behaviors. We become not "an enjoyer of drugs," or "an enjoyer of TV entertainment," but we become "a seeker of a fix," that is, an "addict," or "a seeker of TV entertainment," that is, "a channel surfer." We become not a possessor of great wealth, but an entrepreneur intent on greater wealth. In other words, we appropriate the quest rather than the rewards of the quest, sometimes to the extent of losing interest in the actual object of that quest.[3]

Much of the sensuality we crave might also be appropriated as "me" or "mine." But we should beware, for …

> That is not a strong fetter, the wise say, which is made of iron, wood or hemp. But the infatuation and longing for jewels and ornaments, children and wives—that, they say, is a far stronger fetter, which pulls one downward and, though seemingly loose, is hard to remove. This, too, the wise cut off. Giving up sensual pleasure, and without any longing, they renounce the world. (Dhp 24)

This might be the case with our own bodies, our natural good looks, our sparkling personality, our new sneakers, our spouse, our Oscar, and with more abstract things like money, fame and power.

4. The hunting expedition

We saw in the last chapter that craving plays a role in the process of growth of our experiential world. This process proceeds as follows. (1) craving has arisen or "pooled" somewhere, (2) cognizance descends upon that site, and (3) cognizance grows, increases and flourishes. Recall the simile in which craving is moisture and cognizance a seed that grows in the presence of moisture. This

3 Thanissaro (2008, 36, 72) points out that the mind is more addicted to sensual desire than to sensual pleasure.

is a cognitive process that cross-entangles both becoming and craving, in which craving provides an enabling condition, an *encouragement*, such that, overall, where there is craving is where the world tends to grow.

From the perspective of craving, this cognitive process makes complete functional sense: It is a hunting expedition. Craving defines a goal – since craving represents the most immediate needs of the self – and cognizance brings the full range of cognitive capabilities to bear in achieving that goal. Cognizance descends and *seeks* a way to fill the gap, whereby it grows an *assessment* of the situation (perception) and then grows a *plan* of action to achieve the goal (intention). The goal we seek is presumed to provide some personal advantage. As perception and intention grow, the moisture of craving will naturally extend to objects that are newly revealed as instrumental factors in the intended plan.

For instance, suppose I crave the prospect of closing a business deal. Cognizance descends like Superman, assesses the relevant conditions and reveals that my sloppy physical appearance is an impediment to closing the deal. It produces a plan to improve my physical appearance by acquiring a suit and tie. Craving then extends to the suit and tie as instrumental in achieving the original goal, and through renewed descent, seeking, assessment, planning and enactment, I end up gaining said suit and tie.

Later, looking quite dapper, I go proudly into a coffee shop before my meeting and perceive (though a series of **craving → cognizance → growth** steps) a looming danger to my new attire in the form of a clumsy gentleman with a topped off cappuccino bumping into people and chairs and heading in my general direction. Craving to preserve the pristine integrity of my new clothing, additional assessment and planning ensues. Much of our life goes on like this. The moisture of craving spreads along chains of instrumental conditions, nurturing cognizance-driven growth and further extending such chains into ever more refined seeking. The Buddha clearly describes such processes in terms of yet another chain of conditional relations, one that diverges from the twelvefold chain at craving:

> **… → feeling → craving → seeking → gain → valuation → fondness → possessiveness → ownership → avarice → guarding → many bad unskillful things.**[4] (DN 15 ii58-61)

Starting from an initial object of →**craving** (e.g., a successful business deal), the conscious process of →**seeking** will spin off an assessment and a plan. When this has been enacted, the →**gain** of something (hopefully) follows. When cognizance alights on what is gained (the suit), →**valuation** → **fondness** → **possessiveness** plays out, which is just a new instantiation of **feeling** → **craving** → **appropriation**. →**Avarice** here is specifically craving for what we already own and →**guarding** is the counterpart of seeking (→**seeking** was in response to craving what we did not already have, while →**guarding** is in response to craving what we do already have).

Cognizance arises anew at each step, producing growth of assessment and plan. Among the →**many bad unskillful things** the Buddha mentions in this text are: taking up the rod and the sword, quarrels, arguments, and fights, accusations, divisive speech, and lies. In our case, we have reached this karmic point when we pick up a chair to fend off the looming clumsy cappuccino-wielding gentleman. An equivalent of this step is described by the Buddha with a bit more drama:

> And as he guards and protects his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. … Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, …, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with son, son with mother, … And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now … the cause being simply sensual pleasures. Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause … men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and

4 The Pali here is *pariyesanā 'seeking, lābho 'gain,' vinicchayo 'valuation, chandarāgo 'fondness', ajjhosānaṃ 'possessiveness', pariggaho 'ownership', macchariyaṃ 'avarice', ārakkho 'guarding.'*

> quivers, and they charge into battle … there they are wounded by arrows and spears and splashed with boiling liquids and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. … men break into houses, plunder wealth, commit burglary, ambush highways, seduce others' wives, and when they are caught, kings have many kinds of torture inflicted on them. … Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, …, people indulge in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, on the dissolution of the body, after death, they reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. … (MN 13, i85-88)

With all this fending off, quarreling, attacking, plunder and misconduct, we've clearly wandered into the realm of ethics and *kammic* decision-making. Craving has a strong penchant for the unwholesome, as the root of greed and aversion, as well as an encouragement for delusion. However it is cognizance that makes *kammic* choices, sometimes under the influence of competing factors, such as kindness or dutifulness. We'll look at cognizance and *kamma* in more detail as we make our way upstream.

5. Craving for becoming

We saw in chapter three that becoming entwines two processes: (1) growth, that is, of new circumstances in our world, and (2) development of personality, that is of our footprint within that the world. Craving motivates both.

Personality. Craving for becoming drives the project of forging a personality. When we crave sensual things, we sometimes appropriate them as part of our personal footprint if they resonate with us. We then crave anew as part of our personal identity, because they are the stuff of what we have become. All the disappointment, defensiveness, longing, and so on that craving for sensuality brings with it, arises again with regard to craving for becoming. In this way, craving floods the downstream links with suffering. What we appropriate we crave, for we crave becoming and are intent on extending and defending our personal footprint as "me" and "mine." In the case of sensuality, if we pile

craving for becoming on top of craving for sensuality, we are doubling down on suffering.

If we have appropriated our sparkling wit rather than not allowing ourselves to be fashioned by it, then we dread losing it, for instance, through stroke or the onset of dementia, not just for loss of the enjoyment it provides, but for far worse: for loss of who we have become. A beautiful woman who in her youth turns heads, some decades later suffers distress as she sees men obliviously stare into their smartphones. If we are not (yet) the tycoon that we identify with, then it feels like we are missing a part of who we really are, like missing an arm or a foot. Anything that challenges what is "me" and "mine" raises a loud alarm – the smallest personal insult, even the thought of theft, suspected unfaithfulness of our partner, a downturn in the stock market, criticism of our adherence to modern science … or to voodoo if that is our preference – and we counter such challenges with hatred and aggression. Becoming someone is fraught with suffering, which is why it is compared to a fire, with appropriation providing the five heaps of fuel. In a moment we will see that all the while we are ever hungry for more experience and for the production of more things that we can appropriate and throw on the fire. Having become someone in this life, birth ensures we will carry the flames of craving into saṃsāra, in which we've been amassing suffering over beginningless time.

Craving for becoming also applies to what is not based in sensuality: our views and our habits. We appropriate our politics, our religion, our religious observances like praying or practicing mindfulness, our meticulous etiquette, our daily workout at the gym. We also appropriate the qualities that distinguish our character as sensitive and creative, as spiritual but not religious, as super smart, as a cut above the rest yet humble about it. These also are craved, often with the tenacity with which we crave our car, our McMansion with wine cellar, our dog, our genuine samurai sword or our family members.

Growth redux. The examples of craving for becoming so far involve craving of appropriated *personality*, where personality is a primary factor of becoming. What we have described can be summarized as:

craving for becoming → appropriation → personality

Craving for becoming can similarly involve craving with respect to *growth*, the other primary factor of becoming. This is to crave the descent of cognizance itself, which is to hunger for more and more experience. The Buddha spoke of this in terms of four *nutriments* (*āhāra*) for which we all hunger:

1. the nutriment of edible food,
2. the nutriment of contact,
3. the nutriment of mental activity,
4. the nutriment of cognizance. (SN 12.11)

The first nutriment provides a metaphor for the others, for just as animals are voracious consumers of physical food, the human mind is a voracious consumer of experience. Craving food, properly speaking, would be craving for sensuality rather than for becoming. Contact and mental activity, on the other hand, are modes within the umbrella category of cognizance. Contact (*phassa*) is experiencing objects through the senses – eyes, ears, etc., which entails cognizance. Mental activity (*manosañcetanā*) is active cogitation, of the kinds that plan, aspire, struggle, conquer, build, destroy, do, undo, invent, discover, form, transform, organize and create, which also implicate cognizance.[5] All are concomitant aspects of cognizance that feed our hunger for experience. They, like appropriation, are conditioned by craving for becoming, and lead to the growth of experience:

craving for becoming → nutriment → growth

Take Quincy, for instance. Quincy loves football, he is *obsessed* with football, particularly with his home team, the Hedgehogs. Quincy actively seeks out ways to maximize his contact with the sport. He has bought a wide-screen TV, posted the Hedgehogs' schedule on the wall, and puts all else aside when the schedule demands. All of his buddies are Hedgehogs fans. He has season tickets for the Hedgehogs' home games. Moreover, Quincy reads voraciously about football players, buys Hedgehogs fan paraphernalia and fantasizes about how he would have played the ball if he had brought his beer-belly onto the

5 Nyanaponika (1981).

field for that crucial pass. He even dreams about football under his Hedgehogs blanket. He just cannot get enough of those Hedgehogs.

Rather than simply taking interest in football as the opportunity arises, Quincy is actively *feeding*: foraging, hunting, doing whatever he can to quell an appetite that cannot be quelled. It is through feeding that we grow the world around the most pronounced features of our personality: as a football fan, as a ruthless business tycoon, as a body builder, as a glamorous celebrity, as a drug addict, as a world leader, or as the most awakened guy in the room. The growth of the experiential world, with us right in the center, kicks into high gear, giving us all the more content to appropriate as "me" and "mine."

We often prefer any kind of experiencing at all, whether pleasant or painful, to having no experience at all.[6] This is why most people find solitude unbearable and why solitary confinement is regarded by many authorities as psychological torture. Our craving is often not so much for pleasant experiences as it is for the growth of any experience. In fact, as we've seen, we tend to spend more time seeking than enjoying.

Effectively, *nutriment* is parallel to *appropriation* in the chain, each conditioned by craving and conditioning becoming:

> These four kinds of nutriment have craving as their source, craving as their origin; they are born and produced from craving. (SN 12.11)
>
> With the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation. (SN 12.31)

In short, **craving → nutriment → becoming** runs parallel to **craving → appropriation → becoming**. Nutriment and appropriation play strikingly similar roles, though one is officially in the chain and the other only cross-entangled. Notice that *āhara* ('nutriment') and *upādāna* ('appropriation,' 'fuel') are also close in meaning. Likewise, parallel passages are found in the *Suttas*:

> If, *bhikkhus*, there is lust for the nutriment edible food, if there is

6 Nyanaponika (1981).

> delight, if there is craving, cognizance becomes established there and comes to growth … there is the production of future renewed existence. [As for edible food, so for contact, mental activity, cognizance] (12.64)

6. Craving for unbecoming

'Unbecoming' (*vibhava*) is never clearly defined by the Buddha,[7] and its use admits of three related interpretations that I am aware of, and perhaps encompasses all three: (1) annihilation of the self, (2) achieving spiritual liberation and (3) renunciation of some facet of personality. All three are clearly within the scope of human craving.

The first way craving for unbecoming might be understood is as desire for annihilation of the self, which manifests most obviously as a suicidal impulse or perhaps weariness with life but willingness to await its natural conclusion. Craving annihilation makes sense in terms of *annihilationism* (*uccedavāda*), the view that when we die physically, that is the end and there is no continuation of existence in any form.

The second way craving for unbecoming might be understood is as a spiritual goal, for instance, in Brahmanism through merging the self with ultimate reality,[8] or in Buddhism and other teachings through escaping the cycle of birth, suffering and death, that is, *saṃsāra*. This is more upscale than the first alternative, but certainly shares some of its motivation. After all, we encourage Buddhists to recognize the tediousness of relentless suffering as we live life after life, always with the same basic plot, shedding mountains of bones and oceans of tears (section 2.3). Both alternatives would find inspiration in the following:

> When this self, at the break-up of the body, after death, perishes and is destroyed, and does not exist after death, that is peaceful, that is exquisite, that is sufficiency. (Iti 49)

7 As Thanissaro (2008, 30) notes.
8 Anālayo (2012, 14-16).

The final way craving for unbecoming might be understood is as as the natural complement to becoming in the process of shaping and remaking our personality: add a little here, shave off a little there. Personality is multifaceted, malleable and often contains aspects we would like to outlive. We might be a ruthless business tycoon in the office, but a loving father at home, but then decide to let go of one to devote ourselves to the other. We dream of being a celebrity, beautiful, famous and wealthy, identify with that dream and try to live up to that identity, yet at the same time we relish the anonymity of being dumpy, obscure and impoverished. Getting married or having a religious conversion often entails sacrifice of some fundamentals – the stereotype for guys is drinking, womanizing and gambling – in favor of a more domestic existence. Sometimes we even call such remakings in English "rebirth." Often we reach a moment of truth, in which we suddenly recognize what we have become, are repelled or see clearly the amount of suffering for self and others it has cost, and subsequently strive to rid ourselves of that identity. This happened to Emperor Asoka, after his conquest of Kalinga.

7. The cessation of craving

Craving is, as the origin of suffering, the link most directly implicated in the human pathology. Much of our practice is focused right here, because our craving is quite responsive to practice and, as we reduce craving, we get in return instant gratification through an immediate downturn in suffering. Craving is at the same time one of the most vexing links, yet one of the weakest. Although the complete cessation of suffering is difficult and requires realizing non-self in the upstream links, we can limit the grosser manifestations of craving with dedicated practice.

We learn to limit craving directly through ethical practices. We've seen that craving expresses itself through seeking personal advantage, through greed and aversion. Ethical practices seek benefit for all and, when faithfully observed, override the impulse of craving. We choose virtue and replace greed and aversion with generosity and kindness. Moreover, we notice that turning toward virtue feels good, acting out craving does not, since craving is painful.

This gives us incentive to develop further in this direction.

Most of Buddhist practice serves to develop virtue. If we scan through the noble eightfold path we find a section clearly concerned with ethics: right speech, right action and right livelihood. Additionally, right intention upholds the three behavioral standards of renunciation, kindness and non-harming; right effort is largely concerned with cultivating what is wholesome in the mind and with weakening what is unwholesome; and the final three folds concern contemplative practice, useful particularly in upstream links, but also critical to ethical practice, for it shines a light into the dark corners of craving, appropriation and becoming.

6. Feeling

Phassa·paccayā vedanā,
Vedanā·paccayā taṇhā.

Because of contact, feeling,
Because of feeling, craving.

Most people prefer pleasure to pain, and they hope their Buddhist practice will serve this interest. Indeed, the cessation of this mass of suffering is the overarching concern of the *Dhamma*, to be achieved by breaking the chain of dependent coarising. Before the Buddha, pleasure or joy seems to have been regarded as incidental to spiritual progress, but then the Buddha discovered the middle way and with that the actual boon of *supramundane* pleasure on the path to awakening. *Feeling* has to do with pleasure or pain, happiness or grief, like and dislike. It has to do with preference. Feeling is also one of the five aggregates, and investigation of feeling is one of the four fundamental practices of mindful observation (*satipaṭṭhāna*). It is through feeling that the world matters or becomes meaningful, through feeling that we value and take interest.

Feeling is *vedanā* in Pali, a gerund of the verb *vedeti*, which means 'experience' or 'know.' It is used for the most part with respect to a preference scale: 'pleasurable' (*sukha*), 'painful' or 'suffering' (*dukkha*) and 'neither painful nor pleasurable' (*adukkham-asukha*), which is to say 'neutral.' 'Sensation' and 'hedonic tone' have also been suggested as translations. Feeling is sometimes further differentiated as bodily or mental, mundane or

supramundane, and in limited other ways. Experience tells us that pleasure and suffering come in a variety of intensities, from mild pleasure or agitation to bliss or agony. Feeling is an emotive quality that follows from, and accompanies, an instance of contact, as an immediate positive, negative or neutral evaluation of the thing contacted.

Feeling arises quite quickly without warning. The adventitious nature of *vedanā* is described in two similes. The first compares feeling as the arriving from all directions and the departure to all destinations, of guests representing all kinds of people. The second is roughly the same, but concerns winds of all kinds: warm, cool, etc.[1] Although *vedanā* is thereby subject to little immediate control, feeling has strong implications in setting both cognitive and emotive processes in motion, and, moreover, it is itself habituated in a way dependent on how these play out. It gives rise not only to craving, but also to perception and therefore to whatever perception gives rise to. It is also profoundly implicated in the inner wellbeing, ease and calm that are experienced as results of Buddhist practice, contemplative or ethical.[2] The Buddha states,

> All things … come together in feeling (AN 9.14).

… which suggests multiple cross-entanglements. For this reason it is important to monitor feeling as an indicator of what is going on elsewhere in the chain.

1. Feeling as the origin of craving

Feelings can arise in simply enjoying the pleasures of the world, or enduring the displeasures, as these arise. We stop to enjoy a beautiful sunset, or settle into the bliss of *jhāna*, or chomp into a mango. This is not a problem if we leave it at that, and don't turn to craving (which is itself consistently painful as we saw in the last chapter). Feeling instills meaning into the things of the world, such that this is preferable to that, this is good and that is bad. Craving is our active response to a meaningful world.

1 SN 36.12, 36.14.
2 Weber (2018, 13).

Feeling doubtlessly has primitive evolutionary origins: move toward nutriment, move away from toxin. Even bacteria practice this. For humans, this might manifest as move toward chocolate almond cluster, move away from liverwurst sandwich. However, for humans, craving quickly takes on more complex patterns: **taste chocolate → crave chocolate→ seek more chocolate**. More generally, we find that feeling might be related to craving in either of two ways: a feeling arises and this triggers craving, or craving arises in anticipation of *future* feeling.[3] Typically both are in play:

stimulus → craving → reward

For instance, we may find that a familiar red wrapper stimulates a positive feeling, and we then crave acquiring it (and consequently purchase it), and finally we are rewarded with the anticipated pleasant chocolate experience. Or, we are triggered by a wasp, we crave avoiding it (and consequently run away screaming with our jacket pulled over our head), and we are rewarded by not getting stung. Craving is conditioned by feeling in either of these two ways: by the stimulus (the push) and by the anticipated reward (the pull).

Notice that in these cases there is a recognizable association between stimulus and reward. The red wrapper served as a stimulus because we already associated it with a superior chocolate experience. The wasp served as a stimulus because we already associated it with the pain of getting stung. The stimulus is effectively a cue for the reward, and this has been learned through experience. As we have seen, craving is itself the entry point into a potentially complex behavioral response, which involves seeking, assessment and planning (and sometimes graft, effort, violence or financial dealings). Just as a chicken is the egg's way to get another egg, craving becomes pleasure's way to get another pleasure. In fact, a simple principle of behavioral psychology can help us out there. The following pattern,

stimulus → response → reward

… is familiar as a learned, conditioned response to the stimulus, in accord with

3 Thanissaro (2008, 73).

a learned, learnable and unlearnable *habit pattern*, that is reinforced each time it is replayed and the reward successfully achieved.

The Pali word for 'habit pattern' is *anusaya*, literally 'sleep-along,' apparently because habit patterns lie dormant until a stimulus wakes them up. They are often called 'obsessions,' 'tendencies' or 'predispositions' but we will call them 'habit patterns' here. *Anusaya* seems always to be used in reference to *undesirable* proclivities[4] of the following seven types: lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, becoming and ignorance.[5]

> A habit pattern for lust underlies one who, on being touched by pleasant feeling, delights in it, welcomes it and persists in holding on to it. A habit pattern for aversion underlies one who, on being touched by painful feeling, sorrows, becomes miserable, is aggrieved, wails beating the breast and becomes bewildered. (MN 148 iii286)

In short, where feeling turns to craving, a habit pattern is involved.

The examples so far involve a rather palpable association between stimulus and reward. But we humans, in all of our complexity, are not always so rational as an amoeba. Marketing experts, who understand the ins and outs of craving better than anyone, design packaging as an effective stimulus, even while obscuring the reward, and customers repeatedly fall for it, crave and buy. Moreover, **stimulus → craving → reward** often becomes so reinforced through repetition that it continues to define our behavior even when the reward consistently fails to live up to expectation, or even after the pleasure associated with the reward has become a distant memory.

Consider, for instance, the tycoon who gains his next billion, or the alcoholic who gulps down the next drink, in either case without joy but simply because that is who he has become. The reward is a mere ghost of its former self, even though it may still be a source of appropriation and personality. Nonetheless, each time the reward is indifferently fulfilled, the habit pattern, along with the craving, is still strengthened. The craving complex and its associated suffering

4 Hamilton (1996, 76).
5 AN 7.11.

have been reinforced, but ironically not the feeling of pleasure responsible for the habit pattern in the first place. For alcoholics, such a pattern persists even after the addict no longer enjoys inebriation.[6] As long as we keep attaining what *should* satisfy our craving, our craving will be reinforced even though insatiable.[7]

The Buddha provides a rather extreme example of disassociation between stimulus and reward in which a *painful* stimulus turns to craving for a *pleasurable* reward:

> When he harbors aversion towards painful feeling, the habit pattern for aversion towards painful feeling lies behind this. Being contacted by painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the uninstructed worldling does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. When he seeks delight in sensual pleasure, the habit pattern for lust for pleasant feeling lies behind this. (SN 36.6)

For instance, a harrowing day at work might lead one to go party with friends or to go shopping. We actually crave seeking behavior directly, rather than craving the object that we seek. There is certainly an established habit pattern behind this for the subject in the last passage.

An important topic for reflection with regard to any of these patterns of the form **stimulus → craving → reward** is that of benefit vs. cost. Here we humans may be at our least rational. Each of stimulus, craving and reward is potentially associated with a degree of pleasure or pain, in the case of craving consistently with pain. But how do these add up? If the stimulus and reward are pleasurable, to take the simplest case, is the sum of this pleasure greater than the pain of the intervening craving? Most of us will discover, through mindful observation, that the balance between whatever pleasure may be found in stimulus or reward typically does not reach the pain of craving. For instance, we often find that we crave (pain) and plan for our next chocolate

6 Brewer (2017, 2).
7 Weber (2018, 17).

before we have a chance to enjoy (pleasure) the current one, leaving us dissatisfied and in need of yet another, and so we find ourselves in a cycle of pleasure and pain, which in our confusion we often label as "fun." However, the pleasurable part of the cycle tends to be quite fleeting and this vicious cycle tends to perpetuate itself, for a point of satisfaction is rarely reached. The Buddha pointed out,

> Not even with a shower of gold coins would we find satisfaction in sensual craving. (Dhp 186)

Moreover, if we fail to achieve the pleasure of reward altogether, our frustrated craving is likely to turn to the even greater pain of frustration. Similarly, with the stimulus of bodily pain, craving often arises to end the pain even when the prospect of ever attaining relief is poor. This craving then just adds mental pain to the physical, but leads to no relief:

> *Bhikkhus*, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings: a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, and then they would strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling . . . he feels two feelings: a bodily one and a mental one. (SN 36.6)

2. The relativity of feeling

As a practical matter, feeling is rather quirky. For instance, if we go into a hedonic binge – eating, drinking, sex, enjoying all of the pleasures of the flesh – we will quickly discover that we've inadvertently tapped into a deeper despair at the meaninglessness of all this. Somehow a profound level of suffering underlies what should by all rights be care-free pleasure.

Feeling is remarkably slippery particularly in the case of positive feelings.

Many people would say that this is the story of their lives. In the early Buddhist teachings feelings seem to come in layers, so that a particular experience may be pleasant at one level, but when we peel away that layer we find that the very same experience is painful. This often results in seemingly paradoxical statements about feelings.

> Whatever is felt is included in suffering. (SN 36.11)

> What others call happiness, the noble ones call suffering. (Sn 762)

Moreover, we can have feelings about feelings.

> Friend Visākha, pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge and painful when there is no knowledge. (MN 44, i303)

Likewise context influences whether a given experience is pleasurable or painful.

> "Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit; the more he scratches the scabs and cauterizes his body, the fouler, more evil-smelling and more infected the openings of his wounds would become, yet he would find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in scratching the openings of his wounds.
>
> So too, Māgandiya, beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with fever for sensual pleasures, still indulge in sensual pleasures; the more such beings indulge in sensual pleasures, the more their craving for sensual pleasures increases and the more they are burned by their fever for sensual pleasures, yet they find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in dependence on the five

> cords of sensual pleasure. (MN75 i507-8)

We are then told that the leper was cured, after which that fire became "painful to touch, hot, and scorching." The Buddha concludes that "previously too that fire was painful to touch, hot, and scorching," but "his faculties were impaired … he acquired a mistaken perception of it as pleasant."[8]

Among the most elusive feelings is spiritual pleasure, that which is *non-carnal* (*nirāmisa*) or spiritual. It has a way of showing up unexpectedly. *Carnal* (*sāmisa*) are those feelings that follow habit patterns that lead to craving. Common examples of non-carnal pleasures are the spiritual rapture and pleasure experienced in *jhāna*[9] or *nibbāna*, which is described as …

> … a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss. (MN75 i504-5)

The discovery of such spiritual pleasure was a key aspect of the discovery of the middle way. The Buddha-to-be practiced extreme austerities for many years, thinking,

> Whatever recluses or brahmins in the past have experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this … But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any super-human states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening? (MN 36 i246)

But then he recalled an experience he had had as a child,

> … sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to awakening? Then, following on that memory, came

8 MN 75 i508.
9 MN 44 i303.

> the realization: "That is indeed the path to awakening." (MN 36 i246)

Likewise, the fourth *jhāna* is characterized as a state of complete equanimity (which is to say as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but rather neutral) is also described as "more sublime than the previous pleasure [of the third *jhāna*]."[10] This raised the question, "How can it be *sublime* if the feeling is *neutral*?" To this the Buddha replied:

> … The Blessed One describes pleasure not only with reference to pleasant feeling; rather, friends, the Tathāgata describes it as pleasure of any kind wherever and in whatever way it is found. (MN 59 i400)

Nibbāna is likewise a state in which feelings, along with all other factors of the chain, have ceased. And yet …

> The Venerable Sāriputta said this, "Happiness, friends, is this *nibbāna*. Happiness, friends, is this *nibbāna*."
>
> When this was said, the Venerable Udāyī said to the Venerable Sāriputta, "But friend, what happiness could there be here when nothing is felt here?"
>
> "Just this, friend, is happiness here, that nothing is felt here." (AN 9.34)

3. The fishing expedition

In the previous chapter we saw how cognizance tends to grow where craving is present, in order to implement *seeking*: goal-directed *assessment* and *planning*. What does cognizance do when it descends to a site where craving is absent? This question is particularly relevant to meditation practice, which is achieved in the context of "having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world."[11] It seems that either pleasure or pain provides a high enough level of interest to sustain cognizance by itself, but that in this context cognizance is less goal-oriented and more erratic and spontaneous than in the case of craving. In fact, it tends to spin out of control:

10 MN 59 i399.

11 Refrain in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, MN 10.

> With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present form cognizable through the eye. [as for form/eye, so for sound/ear, odor/nose, taste/tongue, sensation/body, phenomenon/mind] (MN 18, i112-3)

Notice that – like the chain that diverges at *craving* to give us *seeking* in the previous chapter – this passage describes a chain that diverges at *feeling* to give us *proliferation*. In summary,

contact → feeling → perception → thought → proliferation → perceptions-and-notions

Proliferation is the heart of this process, where the mind runs wild. 'Proliferation' is *papañca* in Pali, sometimes translated as 'obsession.' This process should seem abundantly familiar in the experience of most readers. For instance, we hear a catchy tune, and before we know it we are caught in a wave of a mindless disco fantasy. More generally, as we walk around contacting the things of the world, this or that announces itself as attractive or repulsive, and each time it initiates a new wave of conceptual proliferation, thought and concern, only to be cut through by a more newly triggered wave of conceptual proliferation, thought and concern. Cognitively this process makes sense: it is a fishing expedition, looking for something important enough to then crave and seek.

We commonly go through our whole day like that, assaulted over and over by this or that circumstance, producing a cloud of new and yet newer, equally mindless waves of mental activity, unable to control, nor make sense of, any substantial part of it. What's more, we seek out proliferation: We turn on the TV or go shopping just to turn up the level of proliferation. Most people think that also this is "fun." This course of experience applies to painful feelings as well as pleasurable, as when we see an ugly twiddle bug run behind the sofa, and are soon playing out a scene from a horror movie in our head.

Proliferation puts us into a kind of mental fog, is largely undirected, but does produce perceptual content, and might just hit on something crave-worthy.

It has been said that abandoning proliferation is more difficult than abandoning sense pleasures.[12] The Buddha warns us about the dangers of proliferation. On one occasion, the Buddha learns that his distinguished disciple Anuruddha teaches that the *Dhamma* is for people of seven kinds of thought,

> "This *Dhamma* is for one (1) with few desires …, (2) who is content …, (3) who resorts to solitude …, (4) who is energetic …, (5) who has mindfulness established …, (6) who is concentrated …, and (7) who is wise …,"

The Buddha suggests that Anuruddha add an eighth bullet point:

> "Good, good, Anuruddha! It is good that you have reflected on these thoughts of a great person … Therefore, Anuruddha, also reflect on this eighth thought of a great person: (8) 'This *Dhamma* is for one who delights in non-proliferation, who takes delight in non-proliferation, not for one who delights in proliferation, who takes delight in proliferation.' (AN 8.30, enumeration mine)

Proliferation is a common effect of pleasurable or painful feelings. It takes just a little bit of interest to set us off. However, *neutral* feelings about objects of contact work differently. They typically give rise to boredom, dullness or confusion, or lead us elsewhere to alternative distractions or to daydreaming, just to keep the engine of proliferation running. Nonetheless, sometimes life requires of us that we give matters of neutral feeling our full attention. Imagine being a quality control inspector at the end of an assembly line that makes identical plastic Buddhas and your job is to pick out the ones that in any way deviate from normal. Or imagine being a greeter at a Walmart:

> "Welcome to Walmart [smile] … Come see us again … Welcome to Walmart [smile] … Come see us again …"

12 Kalupahana (2015, 18).

Without deliberate attention, we ignore altogether what is most immediately before us but is *neutral*, and this ignorance gives us a stilted view of the world. However(!!), neutral feelings provide at the same time a unique contrasting opportunity for gaining clear insight and wisdom not generally available to us through the fog of *papañca*. In fact, our meditation is based on this principle. Notice that we begin with bland, neutral meditative objects, like the breath, rather than a more provocative plate of freshly baked cookies. In the absence of pleasant or painful feelings we are unlikely to spin out of our meditation into proliferation. And with a modicum of mindfulness, we can keep the mind stabilized on these neutral objects without daydreaming or seeking distractions elsewhere. Then, with a stable mind, we see such objects for what they are, with clear, unbiased understanding. We thereby distribute perceptions more evenly within the perceptual field and become cognizant of details not usually perceived.[13] This is the window, normally tightly shuttered, through which we direct our attention in mindful observation, in order to gain knowledge and vision. As a result,

> Neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge and painful when there is no knowledge. (MN 44 i303)

Effectively, neutral feeling flips from indifference to equanimity, and at the same time from ignorance to knowledge, through properly directed attention. Now, mindful, undistracted observation is a kind of stepping back from mundane engagement in experience, a skill that leads to a similar degree of serenity and *samādhi*. Observation of feelings is one of the four fundamental practices of *satipaṭṭhāna*, whereby we move toward this equanimity along with its clarity while examining even the pleasant and unpleasant to gain wisdom.[14]

> When one is touched by a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, if one does not understand as it actually is the origination, the disappearance, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in regard to that feeling, then a habit pattern for ignorance lies within one. (MN 148 iii285)

13 Johannason (1979, 118).
14 See Anālayo (2017).

4. The cessation of feeling

Not all feelings are problematic: we do not seek the cessation of spiritual or non-carnal pleasure. Accordingly, the Buddha tells us,

> … when someone feels another kind of pleasant feeling, unwholesome states diminish in him and wholesome states increase, that I therefore say, "Enter upon and abide in such a kind of pleasant feeling." (MN 70 i475-6)

We most commonly associate spiritual pleasures with the *jhānas*, as discussed above. In fact *jhāna* or *samādhi* arises in various conditioning contexts, out of which the sequence **delight → tranquility → *samādhi*** is described as arising naturally without effort. These are immediate *kammic* fruits. These contexts include the practice of virtue, remembrance of the triple gem and of course mindful observation, the latter particularly described in relation to the seven factors of awakening.[15] Although spiritual pleasures flow naturally from devout wholesome practice, and apparently also characterize *nibbāna*, they can also (much like sensual pleasures) give rise to craving and appropriation. For instance, we often crave *today* regaining the bliss that we attained in *yesterday's* meditation. Practitioner, beware.

An effective way to limit the effects of feeling is through reflection on feeling as a condition for sensual craving alongside awareness of the pain inherent in that craving. Much material for such reflection has been presented in this chapter. Here, as elsewhere, when we clearly discover that something leads to pain, we tend to let go of it. We should give particular attention to reflecting on how our habit patterns play out to connect feeling and craving, much as a addict gives attention to the behaviors that lead to another fix. In fact, clinical mindfulness techniques have been successfully developed for mitigating addictions that work by observing such habit patterns.[16]

Friend Visākha, the habit pattern for lust should be abandoned in

15 See AN 11.2 on virtue, AN 11.12 on triple gem, SN 46 on the factors of awakening, and SN 36.31 on *jhāna*.

16 Brewer (2017, 33).

> regard to pleasant feeling. The habit pattern for aversion should be abandoned in regard to painful feeling. The habit pattern for ignorance should be abandoned in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. (M 44 i303)

The cessation of these habit patterns can lead to the cessation of craving and suffering.

> When, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* has abandoned the habit pattern for lust in regard to pleasant feeling, the habit pattern for aversion in regard to painful feeling, and the habit pattern for ignorance in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, then he is called a *bhikkhu* without habit patterns, one who sees rightly. He has cut off craving, severed the fetters, and, by completely breaking through conceit, he has made an end to suffering. (SN 36.3)

The common "gratification, danger, escape" formula is also applied to reflection on feeling is as follows:

> With the arising of contact there is the arising of feeling. With the cessation of contact there is the cessation of feeling. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of feeling; that is, right view . . . right *samādhi*. The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on feeling: this is the gratification in feeling. That feeling is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in feeling. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for feeling: this is the escape from feeling. (SN 36.15)

We can similarly reflect beneficially on the problematic nature of proliferation, which has its source in feeling.

> "*Bhikkhu*, as to the source through which perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man: if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the habit pattern of lust, of the habit pattern of aversion, of the habit pattern of views, of the habit pattern of doubt, of the habit pattern of conceit, of the habit

> pattern of desire for becoming, of the habit pattern of ignorance. (M18 i109-110)

Another topic of reflection is the comparison of mundane, carnal pleasure with the sublime, non-carnal pleasure that comes from devout, wholesome practice. Recognizing the gratification, danger and escape with regard to mundane feeling, and the pure, taintless nature of sublime feeling, tends to inspire our practice and orient our way of life away from pursuit of sensual pleasures.

> If by giving up lesser happiness,
> One could experience greater happiness,
> A wise person would renounce the lesser,
> To behold the greater. (Dhp 290)

7. Contact

Saḷāyatana·paccayā phasso,
Phassa·paccayā vedanā.

Because of the sixfold sphere, contact,
Because of contact, feeling.

I play with my dog, A helicopter is flying above my head. That's contact. Contact involves a *subject* or an observer/agent: me. It involves an *object* in relation to the subject: my dog or the helicopter above my head, which the subject might touch, see, hear, think about and so on. We tend to find the many objects of contact captivating, which is a huge problem because this gives rise in turn to feeling, craving, appropriation and becoming, birth and this mass of suffering.

More generally, the world continually rolls by in our experience as two fundamentally separate tracks, actually as *two* worlds, but with some cross-talk between them through contact. The first world is the *inner* world in which mental events like hearing, seeing, lust, comfort, interest, attention, anger, reasoning, craving, intentionality, creativity, urges, ideas, awareness, some bodily sensations and so on arise and vanish. The inner world has been the primary focus of dependent coarising so far, and its complexity is largely responsible for the snarl.

The second world is the *outer* world "out there," where objects like trees and

waterfalls, cars and airplanes, dogs and cats, bank accounts, pizza, yoga classes, other people – mostly physical things in time and space – *exist* with some degree of stability, order and negotiability. This outer world is substantial and grounded in natural reality … or so we presume. It is where the moon continues to exist even if we don't happen to be looking at it at the time. It is also the realm of resources and dangers critical to the needs of the self.

The subject, "me" or my self, is interesting: it has one foot in each world. It exists as an identifiable physical object in the outer world, actively bumping into things, eating fellow objects and so on. But the inner world of tangled, fleeting cognitive processes is somehow contained within that self, expressing all of its needs and fears, registering what it senses and controlling its actions "out there," like eating and avoiding bumping into things. We direct our inner attention toward some thing "out there," and our mouths inwardly begin to water, or direct it to another and our hair stands on end. Likewise we make inward decisions to dig holes in the outer world or to pick its apples. Or some event in the outer world, like a virus, rainfall or a famine, might without warning create a disturbance in our inner world, even before we are aware of that thing. Or sleepiness "in here" might lead inadvertently to a five-car pile-up "out there." Because the outer world is orderly, at least compared to the inner world, we can make sense of it to a significant degree and to manipulate it to our inner advantage, to exploit its resources and to protect ourselves from its dangers.

The Pali word for 'contact' is *phassa*, which also means 'touch.' The Pali word for 'inner' is *ajjhatta*, which is derived from *atta* (self). The Pali word for 'outer' is either *bahiddhā* or *bāhira*.[1]

Contact appears to be a direct relation between "me" and a thing "out there."[2] The elemental self steps forth as observer, agent and experiencer, and is also the one ever seeking personal advantage, that is, who needs things "out there" and who must be protected from things "out there." This is "me," in a kind of fortress world that both exploits, and protects itself from, the allures and

1 *Bahiddhā* and *bāhira* seem to be interchangeable (Ronkin, 2005, 101).
2 Ñāṇavīra (2010, 73).

hazards beyond the ramparts. “Where there is a fence, there is offense and defense.”[3] The self is perhaps the greatest kink in the *saṃsāric* tangle, the thorniest knot, responsible for much suffering, and subject and object turn out to be at the heart of soap-operatic dilemma, in which feeling, greed, aversion, appropriation, obsession, scheming, speculation, views, self-identity, in turn appear, and in which the perpetuation of *saṃsāric* existence unfolds. Caught in this duality, we find life to be a problem, full of neediness, aversion and anguish. Insight into contact is central to the mission of dependent coarising.[4] This is the crux of the epistemic project.

1. Contact as the origin of feeling

After we contact an object in the outer world, that object is immediately evaluated in terms of self-interest. This is feeling; feeling flags things for further cognitive processing, as *mattering* to the self. Feeling is therefore for the most part about the things of the outer world: chocolate, snakes, twiddle bugs, poverty, “clicks and likes,” puppies, tornadoes, freedom from debt, sunsets, a good hug, a zombie movie, praise. Once we contact something, we can go on to feel it, to proliferate about it, to fear it, to crave it, to seek it, to plan around it, to appropriate it, to become it.

It is instructive to track the actual rise of the elemental self, at least where it first asserts itself inwardly in this process. In the previous chapter we considered the arising of conceptual proliferation in connection with feeling. The wording of the primary passage in which the Buddha describes this, is revealing:[5]

> “Dependent on eye and form eye-cognizance arises. … The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What *one* feels, that *one* perceives. What *one* perceives, that *one* thinks about. What *one* thinks about, that *one* mentally proliferates. With what *one* has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions

3 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 15).
4 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 16).
5 Observed by Thanissaro (2013) and others.

> and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset *a man* with respect to past, future, and present things cognizable through the mind.
> (MN 18 i111-2)

Notice that the passage begins with the impersonal arising of factors up to → **contact**, but after this point introduces an agent, "one," as the grammatical subject for what follows – "What *one feels*, that one perceives …" – which remains for subsequent factors: → **feeling** → **perception** → **thought** → **proliferation**. What was the agent then becomes the grammatical *object* for the final factor – "Perceptions and notions … *beset a man*" expressing the agent's loss of control in the inner world: → **perceptions and notions**. The conceptual basis for the elemental self arises at contact, and then first asserts itself at feeling.[6] In short, feelings are about objects of contact, at least (setting aside supramundane feelings) those feelings that tend to lead to craving, appropriation and so on.

2. The scourge of the natural attitude

Without generally noticing it, every time we experience contact we are in fact endorsing a significant set of metaphysical propositions:

(1) that there is an independent natural reality "out there,"
(2) that natural reality consists of substantial self-existing objects in relation to one another,
(3) that there is a "me," as agent, observer and experiencer, among these substantial objects,
(4) that most of what we experience as real *is* real,

I will borrow the term '*natural attitude*' from phenomenology to refer to this set of propositions. The natural attitude is simply common sense for the worldling, and seems to have been largely unquestioned in science until the twentieth century.[7] The parameter of insubstantiality in the Buddha's method

6 For Varela (2016, 113), at feeling one is struck by the world or thrown into the world.

7 A dilemma of twentieth century quantum physics is that the observer cannot be separated from many statements about natural reality. See Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011).

minimally "brackets" these propositions, that is, remains agnostic about their validity. Let's look at these propositions more closely.

First, natural reality and its objects are assumed to exist "from from their own side," that is, independent of our experience of them. As I type this I certainly appear to be sitting right in the middle of such a natural reality. Through the windows a rainy day, the neighboring cabin, trees and foliage, thunder in the distance, a squirrel jumping from one branch to the next. Many shades of brown, beige, green, red, yellow. These things certainly don't seem to need my help, and I am convinced that these things would have been there even if I were not here to experience them. This all seems reasonable.

Second, natural reality is assumed have a certain structure, particularly to be populated with substantial objects. This means that objects exist "out there" from their own side, in and for themselves, that they have characteristics that make them individually distinguishable and knowable, that they endure in relation to one another, generally remaining intact until affected by other objects. This is certainly what the outer world *looks* like, like billiard balls of different shapes and sizes continuously reconfiguring themselves.

Third, the self is assumed to be one of those substantial object in natural reality, able to interact with other objects, but at the same time the seat of inner experience, sometimes decomposed in the *Suttas* as body outside and perception and thought inside, or the 'cognizant body' (*saviññāṇaka kāya*, SN 22.71) or even the body outside and the *world* inside (as in AN 4.45).[8] Checks out: I can reach out, carry out my intention to pick up the coffee cup that is out there, empty its contents into my mouth and enjoy the inner buzz.

Fourth, natural reality seems to be immediately apparent, with virtually no necessary effort "from our side" in becoming aware of it.[9] We just show up. This is to say that the *outer world*, how natural reality appears to us in our experience, is firmly grounded in how natural reality really is. This certainly

8 In at least one place the body is left out of the equation and 'a being' is simply analyzed as the aggregates, that is, as the world (SN 5.10).

9 In philosophy this is known as *naive realism*, that we experience things directly as they really are.

seems to work for us as we interact successfully with the things of the world. Nevertheless, we should consider that taking the outer world at face value attributes remarkable capabilities to cognitive processes that are indeed required to make any experience of the outer world possible. A little thought experiment puts this in perspective:

Let's assume, quite plausibly, that cognition depends on the underlying mechanisms of the brain. The brain sits in the skull in total silence and darkness, with neurons ablaze. Meanwhile, out in nature, my eye turns toward my coffee cup, a visual image appears on my retina as raw data, optic nerves communicate that to my brain, and somehow the brain is able to *reconstruct* what is going on where my eye has alighted and then report, "That's a coffee cup, by golly." At best there is a real cup, *beyond* experience, and a hopefully accurately cognitively reproduced cup *within* experience. Unfortunately, we cannot assess accuracy of this process directly, because we cannot get *behind* natural reality to check it out independently of what we experience, but *only* report how it appears from the front, through our experience of it. In fact, we will discover in the pages that follow many rather erratic and presumptuous subjective conditioning factors whose capabilities would suggest many ways in which what we experience must *misrepresent* natural reality.[10]

The natural attitude is in the nature of contact. Unfortunately it causes profound problems, because it presents a captivating world in which there are objects, firmly grounded beyond the chaos of the human mind, that are fixed and reliable, and a world in which there is a fixed self, also firmly grounded in nature, for whom such objects are potential resources … or dangers. The allure of its objects leads inevitably to feeling, craving and appropriation, and thereby to this whole mass of suffering.

Most problematically, contact leaves little room for experiencing otherwise, which is the basis of spiritual progress. The natural attitude gives us such

10 Science probes deeper into natural reality than normal individuals can hope to. Some physicists now propose that even such mainstays as time and space are absent in natural reality. Hoffman's (2019) *The Case against Reality* argues that cognition is more about hiding natural reality than revealing it, much like the user interface of a computer hides the inner complexity of the computer.

certitude in an outer world that we can do nothing about from a practice perspective, except to a limited extent through personal action. This is where the epistemic perspective becomes most critical. Recall the parameter of insubstantiality in the Buddha's method states that experiencing things as real does not entail experiencing real things. That is, even though we experience it as real, the natural attitude is in the end a *presumption*, an unproved *metaphysical proposition*. This is *good* news because, if we understand the epistemic basis for that presumption, we might just presume otherwise, and if we can presume otherwise, we can experience otherwise.

The Buddha was not really a philosopher concerned with understanding natural reality[11] – that is not the world we live in – but he was concerned with the oft neglected role of mind in producing what we presume is "out there," and with the way many of our presumptions affect adversely our wellbeing and how we live our lives, as we seek something fixed to hang onto. Therefore he raises the epistemic question, "Why do we presume the way we do?" We can proceed by undermining our confidence in contact by investigating the cognitive constructedness of the world.

3. Outer unreliability

The downstream links of dependent coarising presume a substantial outer world grounded in natural reality. But how reliable is the outer world? There are in fact many observable inconsistencies in the outer world (how natural reality appears to us) that demonstrate they cannot reflect a consistent natural reality. I need hardly mention the most obvious examples: mirages, hallucinations, optical illusions, magicians' slights of hand, which reveal themselves as illusory when they become inconsistent with other sources of evidence within the outer world.

More pervasively, the outer world *appears* consistently more permanent, more pleasurable, more personalized and more beautiful than natural reality could possibly be, given other sources of evidence. The Buddha summarizes this

11 Kalupahana (1992, 6), Loy (2019, 223) agree with this assessment. It actually follows from subjectivity(section A.2) and insubstantiality(section A.3).

point in terms of the four *perversions* alluding to this mismatch:

> (1) Perceiving permanence in what is impermanent,
> (2) perceiving pleasure in what is suffering,
> (3) perceiving a self in what is non-self,
> (4) perceiving beauty in what is foul,
> … beings resort to wrong views, their minds deranged, their perception twisted. (AN 4.49, enumeration mine)

Elsewhere the Buddha asks us to keep in mind three signs, corresponding to the first three of these perversions, that apply to everything in the experiential world: *impermanence* (*anicca*), *suffering* (*dukkha*), and *non-self* (*anatta*). Without bearing these in mind, we tend to think that our car will last indefinitely, pristine in appearance and function, that that our spouse and we will live happily ever after, forever young and indestructible. We feel, crave and appropriate on the basis of such presumptions, but then later, faced with rust, dents and breakdowns, with old age, sickness and death, we will suffer because we foolishly expected otherwise.

Everything in the outer world as we experience it is, when we are mindful, in a state of flux, continually born of conditions and also dying with conditions: the food we buy, our furniture, our car, our own bodies, even mountains. Everything and everyone we cherish will be lost to us one by one … until the ones that remain lose us. The world is slipping by like sand through our fingers. There is no "happy ever after" with regard to the things or people of the world. We have been duped, because we presume that enduring substantial objects exist in nature. We particularly suffer when what we cherish is closely identified with ourselves, such as our immediate family members or our bowling championship, duped because we presume a self and invest in it. We allow ourselves to crave because we do not fully apprehend and live by the three signs of the false promises of the outer world.

Reflecting on impermanence, suffering and non-self reveals the false premises that underlie much of the world as we have grown to experience it. As an empirical matter, the three signs win all debates, yet we find it perplexingly easy to overlook them because of our presumptions about the substantiality of

objects. The three signs remind us of the primary human absurdity, that we presume the world "out there" in our own minds in a certain way, then we take it seriously as natural reality, then we become infatuated with its objects, and then we crave them, much like Pygmalion of Greek legend. The three signs remind us that these objects are by nature unreliable, and explain why they cause us distress when we have a stake in them or try to identify with them. These reflections aim at *the fading of passion* (*virāga*): Our infatuations are over things that are too hot too handle, things that are not what they promise. A meaningful life lies in experiencing the outer world otherwise.

> In whatever way they presume, thereby it turns out otherwise. (SN 3.12)

As a result, our experiential world is littered with the shards of broken promises. The Buddha expresses this as a conflict between this-ness (*itthatta*) and otherwise-ness (*aññathābhāva*), such that "life is a vain struggle to withstand 'otherwise-ness.'"[12]

> The man who has craving as his second and keeps going around for a long time, does not transcend this *saṃsāra*, which is an alteration between this-ness and otherwise-ness. (Sn 144)

Our immediate experience of the outer world simply does not keep pace with the unfolding of what is playing out over time. To this extent its fidelity to what is really out there is skewed. This is a fault in cognition, not in natural reality.

4. Intrusion from within

We mentioned the fourth perversion, beauty, as unreliable. It also stands as a good example of how we tend to *project* what would otherwise be *inner* factors into the *outer* world, then take them as real.[13] That we do this is well acknowledged even in popular culture, as when someone wise tells us,

12 Ñāṇānanda (2015, sermon 2, v.1, 81).
13 Johnnson (1979, 83, 87).

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!" and all of us nod in assent. Still, few us fail to presume that beauty is an *essential* property of the person, of the gemstone, of the symphony or of the landscape "out there." Our inner response intrudes into our outer experience, and we can't seem to help it. Similarly, we classify people "out there" as good or evil, jerk or numskull, according to how well our *inner* needs are being met in a given situation. Notice that even a close friend "out there" can momentarily appear as an ogre because of some disappointment we experience, only to morph back into her more amiable self after we cool down. Likewise, scariness of a rattlesnake is not essential to the rattlesnake out there, but depends on our inner response to it … but notice not entirely: it is also dependent on the outer teeth, venom, tendency to lie hidden and defensive behavior of the rattle snake.[14] Clearly a degree of projection is going on from the inner to the outer world.

But what is the extent of this projection? Our understanding of what is "out there" is furthermore conditioned by what we want to do with it, or what we imagine ourselves doing with it. A real estate agent sees a landscape as property, a miner as a mineral resource, a painter as nature manifest in all its glory. A wooden horizontal surface with legs under it is a footstool, a stool or a table depending on how we imagine our bodies moving in relation to it, and what makes a fan a fan has little to do with physical composition.[15]

Science has methods for probing more deeply into what is going on in natural reality than our senses afford us. In the outer world, there is something called vanilla and it has a delicious flavor. Science tells us that the primary compound of vanilla, has the molecular structure $C_8H_8O_3$. There is nothing intrinsic in this structure that would account for vanilla's delicious flavor. For all we know, the taste of feces to a dung beetle could well be how vanilla tastes to us.[16] Yet we attribute the flavor to the vanilla "out there," not to ourselves. Even Galileo, so long ago, maintained that whereas objects exist in time and space, that is, in natural reality, tastes, odors and colors exist only in

14 Detmer (2013, 13).
15 These examples are by Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 8).
16 Hoffman (2019, 85-6).

cognizance, to be wiped away if no one were there to experience them.[17] In fact, modern science bears this out, for what we experience as being vibrant red in the outer world is *not* reducible to measurable wavelengths of light, but also depends on the physiology and neurology of human visual perception and on various contextual factors combined, which emerge only in deep levels of cognitive processing.[18]

There is a more deliberate way that the inner world intrudes into the outer, that is through self-reflection. The inner world is generally in the foreground; we look past it, if we notice it at all. However, we might turn our attention deliberately toward some factor of the inner world, to observe our own suffering, the arising of anger, our breath, a bodily pain, as we do in meditation. As we do so, what we find there is *objectified* into something substantial, standing in relation to other objects, including in relation to ourselves. It is as if the inner/outer boundary follows attention into what we previously presumed to be within the inner world. In fact, sorting the world into inner and outer is more challenging than we at first think and we may discover the whole endeavor is pointless, for both worlds are almost inextricably intertwined.[19] Withholding this effort, the outer world ceases to be something separate from ourselves, and, when this occurs, there is no place for the personal self to dwell.

5. The cessation of contact

Our practice is in the world as we experience it, and this is where the benefits of practice accrue. Progress in our practice therefore entails experiencing otherwise. This is the parameter of subjectivity in the Buddha's method. The outer world is also a part of our experience, as is contact with the things of the outer world. The natural attitude gives us the means to explain contact objectively, but it grounds and fixes the experienced outer world in natural reality, leaving little opportunity for experiencing the outer world otherwise,

17 Hoffman (2019, 20).
18 Valera, et al. (2016, 160).
19 Hamilton (2000, 92) describes subject and object as linked poles of a single process.

rendering feeling, craving and appropriation nearly unavoidable.[20]

However, the natural attitude also oversteps the parameter of insubstantiality, and this is where the epistemic perspective comes to the fore. The question becomes one of understanding the cognitive processes that construct the presumption of the natural attitude. It is on this basis that we learn to presume otherwise. The Buddha endorses this epistemic project:

> All experience is preceded by mind,
> Led by mind, made by mind.
> Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows,
> As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of an ox.
>
> All experience is preceded by mind,
> Led by mind, made by mind.
> Speak or act with a peaceful mind, and happiness follows,
> Like a never-departing shadow. (Dhp 1-2)

The outer world, in particular, does not stand merely by virtue of natural reality, but is cognitively constructed, though perhaps at least partially in dependence on whatever might be going on in natural reality beyond our experience.

To get a sense of epistemic explanation: If we wanted to evaluate how reliably our local newspaper, the *Daily Trumpet*, is reporting the news, we could either do our own investigation into the facts of a particular matter and compare it with theirs (objective perspective), or we could more easily visit their newsroom and watch their journalistic standards at play (epistemic perspective): are they checking their sources, verifying claims, sending reporters into the field, conducting background research to understand the context of events, or are they just making things up? To call into question how reliably the outer world reflects reality, the Buddha similarly takes the second approach: he says virtually nothing about the situation on the ground (in natural reality), but rather questions the professionalism of the various

20 For instance, in the three-life interpretation of dependent coarising of later tradition (B.1), contact is taken at face value and only ceases through first ending the cycle of rebirth.

identifiable cognitive factors involved in constructing the outer world's appearance of reality. For instance, a conspiracy theory spun by a nonprofessional newsroom hardly deserves credibility, even when it is not (yet) demonstrably false.

We have begun this kind of epistemic analysis here and we will see in the following chapters how the Buddha prosecutes his analysis relentlessly step by step, through attributing contact to senses – eye, ear, etc. – and then analyzing the cognitive architecture of the senses and ultimately tracing back the subject/object duality to the inherent nature of cognizance itself. In this way we will begin to realize that the natural attitude is a conspiracy theory of dubious credibility. We are able instead to experience a world "empty" of the natural attitude, empty of subject and object. The cessation of the natural attitude is the cessation of contact.

Meditation practice allows us to examine more directly the conditioning factors of contact. We can begin by returning to the experience the five aggregates described in section 3.4 – form, feeling, perception, formations and cognizance – as successively more complex modes of awareness. These remind us, to begin with, that nothing we experience, even the outer world, is separate from mind. In addition, through *samādhi* we can back up from cognizance and formations, to bring awareness to the level of bare attention, which is to say, to form, as described in section 4.6. At this level, the subject/object duality should vanish: there is awareness without differentiation into self and other, only pure events of seeing and hearing. I think for many meditators this will be a familiar. Bare awareness fails to grant object status to what is experienced. But when we reverse the ascent into *samādhi* to restore the other aggregates, the outer world becomes substantial and then more substantial. As a hedge, Ñāṇānanda suggests that meditators who practice labeling thoughts, not use labels like 'sound' 'sound' 'odor' 'odor,' for these tend to refer to things "out there" and therefore ask to be endowed with object status. Rather they should use labels like 'seeing' 'seeing' 'hearing' 'hearing' which comprehend experiences in a more refined way as a whole without

explicitly acknowledging the duality.[21]

The practice of relinquishing contact in meditation seems also to be reflected in a place where it has been largely unnoticed,[22] in the common "insight" refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

> In this way he abides contemplating body as body inwardly [*ajjhattaṃ*], or he abides contemplating body as body outwardly [*bahiddhā*], or he abides contemplating body as body both inwardly and outwardly. Or else he abides contemplating in body their nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in body their nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in body their nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that "there is a body" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. [as for body, so for feeling and mind, phenomena] (MN 10)

Described here is experiencing the object inwardly (which would be as no object), outwardly (granting object status), and then seeing both perspectives at once, a practice seemingly directed precisely at gaining insight into this critical link of contact.

The unmediated experience of *nonduality* is praised as a fundamental step in spiritual awakening in many religious traditions, including some Buddhist traditions like Zen. We find evidence of this in the Buddha's teachings as well:

> When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seeing only the seeing, in the hearing, only the hearing, in the sensing only the sensing, in the cognizance only the cognizance, then, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that. When Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that, there is no 'you' there. When, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering. (Ud 1.10)

21 Ñāṇānanda (2009, 9).
22 An exception is Ñāṇānanda (2015, sermon 20).

It would seem that Bāhiya is being given a superhuman task after lifetimes of routine bifurcation into inner and outer. But I think we can get a handle on what is going on here more easily with respect to ear and sounds, than with respect to eye and visual forms: Consider the way we listen to music. At first we are aware of a loudspeaker or an orchestra playing and the ear responding: me, loudspeaker and hearing. However, as we relax into it, we may experience pure music for music's sake, as it bubbles up in the mind, whence we care not. The object “out there” disappears, and with that the self in relation to that object: nothing but music or the process of hearing remains, with no distinction between awareness and content. Probably the reason this works for music, in particular, is that the process of hearing itself is more captivating than the orchestra or the loudspeaker, the music itself is the entertainment.[23] This experience is beautifully animated in the Tocata and Fugue scene of Disney's movie *Fantasia* as the orchestra fades away in favor of visual images of musical notes.[24] It’s fun as well as instructive to explore the various dimensions of experience in this way.

23 Loy (2019, 63-65) discusses the case of music, and quotes T.S. Eliot: “… music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts.”

24 The reader can find this online.

8. The sixfold sphere

Nāma-rūpa·paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ,
Saḷāyatanaṃ ·paccayā phasso.

Because of name and form, the sixfold sphere.
Because of the sixfold sphere, contact.

Sometimes, if we look at something more closely, it reveals itself to be other than what we originally thought. The sixfold sphere is contact looked at more closely, revealing the cognitive functioning of the six *sense faculties*: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and an analogous mind sense behind the objective appearance of contact. Without presupposing the natural attitude, the teaching of the sixfold sphere invites the practitioner to understand and internalize its epistemic perspective. The Buddha makes clear it is critical that we learn to know and see the sixfold sphere as it actually is. We will now call the link "contact" as a relation between self and other "*naive contact*," for the Buddha is about to give us an alternative cognitively grounded definition of contact as an impersonal, productive cognitive process, which we can call "*sense contact*":

> The six classes of contact should be understood …Dependent on the eye and form, eye-cognizance arises; the meeting of the three is contact. [as for eye/form, so for ear/sound, nose/odor, tongue/flavor, body/tangible, mind/phenomenon] *(*MN 128 iii 281)

The idea behind this simple definition is that the world as we experience it originates when the respective *sense faculty* (for instance, ear) meets the

respective type of *sense impression* (for instance, a sound) and this gives rise to the sense-cognizance of some object (for instance, a bird). In summary:

eye contact:	**eye**	**+**	**form**	**→**	**eye-cognizance**
ear contact:	**ear**	**+**	**sound**	**→**	**ear-cognizance**
	… (and so on)				

The process described here is epistemic in focusing on the process of constructing meaning without presupposing either subject or object "out there" (in stark contrast to naive contact). Moreover, each factor is verifiable in experience in accord with subjectivity: we are aware of a sense impression (i.e., the sound) prior to full cognizance of an object. We are aware of the involvement of the eye (this will be explained momentarily). We are aware of cognizance (i.e., of the bird). However, cognizance might itself be presumptive, and we will see in coming chapters that this is the in fact the source of the natural attitude when the sixfold sphere gives rise to the illusion of naive contact. Sense contact is explicitly not an objective relationship between self and other, but is rather a process that relates two modes of awareness – form and cognizance – mediated by a sense faculty. In short, this epistemic perspective of contact is cognitively coherent, subjective and insubstantial.

The factors related to each of the sense faculties constitute a *sphere*, the eye sphere, the ear sphere and so on, giving us a *sixfold sphere*. Sometimes each sphere is extended to include factors conditioned by contact within that sphere:

> The six classes of feeling should be understood. … The six classes of craving should be understood… *(*MN 148 iii 281-2)

We recognize here some of the links in the twelvefold chain that are conditioned by contact: feeling and craving. The spheres therefore look like this:

eye	**form**	**eye-cognizance**	**eye-contact**	**feeling**	**craving, …**
ear	**sound**	**ear-cognizance**	**ear-contact**	**feeling**	**craving, …**
	…				

The Pali for sixfold sphere is *saḷāyatana, saḷ* 'six' + *āyatana* 'sphere,' often

translated as 'the six sense bases.' The six spheres are the eye sphere, the ear sphere, the nose sphere, the tongue sphere, the body sphere and the mind sphere. The Pali word for *sphere, āyatana*, suggests, like its English translation, a space or location, or a realm of activity. Eye, ear and so on are themselves sense *faculties* (*indriya*) each serving the cognitive function of mediating between a sense impression and cognizance of an object. The sense faculties as a group are also called the inner (*ajjhattika*) sphere, and the sense impressions (form, sound, etc.) are also called the outer (*bāhira*) sphere.

The sixfold sphere is a hugely important teaching repeated throughout the early discourses, for it is here, at the crux between inner and outer, that the Buddha commits decisively to the epistemic perspective. The remaining four upstream links are solely refinements of that perspective. This makes of the sixfold sphere an exhaustive account of the experiential world, referred to here as the "all":

> And what, *bhikkhus*, is the all? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangibles, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called "the all." If anyone, *bhikkhus*, should speak thus: "Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all," that would be a mere empty boast on his part.[1] (SN 35.23)

With this the Buddha rejects the independence of the outer world; it is rather a matter of appearances constructed within the inner world (to be clear, this is not rejection of natural reality, only lack of confidence our capacity to accurately reflect it). Nothing beyond the epistemic perspective of the sixfold sphere is necessary to understand the human dilemma:[2]

> In the six the world has arisen,
> In the six it holds concourse.
> On the six themselves depending,

1 Notice that this passage limits the "all" to the six outer and the six inner spheres, omitting cognizance, contact, feeling, craving, and so on. Similar passages (e.g., SN 35.26) list further conditioned factors.

2 See also SN 35.82, *The World Sutta*.

In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

1. The sixfold sphere as the origin of contact

The sixfold sphere includes at its core a epistemic explanation of how sense contact arises as cognizance of a fully constituted object, that also meets the criteria of subjectivity and insubstantiality. It does not rely on mechanisms out of the reach of experience, including what is going on in natural reality. Naive contact arises only with sense contact under the concomitant presumption of the natural attitude; in particular, naive contact is what happens when we allow the self to sneak into sense contact. Naive contact is how sense contact appears to the common worldling,[3] much as a solid bounded cloud is how fog appears when we move out of the mist and fog of which it is made. This is the nature of conditionality of **sixfold sphere → contact**. We will see in chapter eleven that cognizance is the culprit in presuming subject and object.

2. What is the eye?

The eye is at the heart of understanding the sixfold sphere and its role in dependent coarising. An eye and visible form are dangerous things. For convenience we will proceed with reference to "the eye" unless otherwise noted, with the understanding that what applies to the eye also applies analogously to ear, nose, tongue, body and ofttimes mind.

We have seen that the eye is that which, together with a form in the visual field, produces an object of cognizance, that is:

eye + form → eye-cognizance

Most people, if asked, would describe the eye in physical terms before describing its cognitive function, taking the ophthalmologist's perspective[4] of a round white ball with iris and pupil, embedded along with its partner in the

3 Ñāṇavīra (2010) makes a similar observation, that *phassa* is more than just eye + form → cognizance, but for the *pathujjana* (worldling) is a relationship between subject and object.

4 Roughly as in Buddhaghosa (1999, XIV.37, 443, 445).

middle of the face. But this is not our everyday, all-day experience of the eye, which is rather as a "probe," comparable to a thermometer, an oscilloscope, or even a Mars probe. A probe is something we place into a rich sense field (where sense data can be detected: auditory, visual, electrical data, temperature, pressure, and so on) in order to gain meaningful intelligence (a "reading": degrees Fahrenheit, a three-dimensional MRI scan, DNA sequences, and so on). A probe performs some degree of analysis for us in order to produce a meaningful result, sometimes quite complex analysis as in the case of an MRI scanner. Similarly, an eye is a probe: if we place the eye into a visual field, it returns a reading: the cognizance of an object or situation. The eye explains how a simple raw form is turned into cognizance of a full-blown object.

It is clear that the eye produces, like the MRI scanner, an extremely deep level of analysis … and typically overshoots. For instance, a small vague red shape within a bright color scheme is apparent within the visual field, and cognizance of a bird, a cardinal, a full-fledged 3D living, breathing object in the world arises, and this object appears so real "out there" in the immediate outer world, enjoying full object status in natural reality. Add the presumption of a self in relation to the bird and we have all of the components of naive contact. The naively contacted object would in turn give rise to pleasure, but probably not craving in this case. Similarly, a hissing sound is apparent in the auditory field, then the ear gives rise to cognizance of a full-fledged snake, naively grants it object status and places it "out there" right next to "me." In this case displeasure arises, then fear (a mode of craving), and ultimately a physical response arise in which I assume a startled expression and jump backward two feet.[5]

In summary, the eye (or the ear, etc.) is a cognitive event that arises in

5 Just to avoid possible confusion: Some readers might be thinking, "I thought naive contact and craving are supposed to be *bad* things. Isn't it a *good* thing to be able to avoid the snake in this way?" Although the human cognitive architecture fulfills the evolutionary imperative of survival well, it fulfills spiritual imperatives poorly. The idea is have the fluidity to presume otherwise, or not at all, at least when you are *not* about to be bitten by a snake, in order to fulfill spiritual imperatives. By all means presume a self and an object if you need to cross a busy street.

response to an form (a mode of awareness), and that gives rise to cognizance (another mode of awareness). As with other cognitive events, the eye arises and then disappears momentarily.[6] George Berkeley, some 300 years ago, wrote, "When I hear a coach drive along the street, immediately I perceive only the sound: but, from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear a coach."[7] By George, he's got it! That is the fully functioning ear.

Clearly there must be a lot of know-how built into the eye and a vast reserve of previous experience informing its best guess about what is going on "out there." In fact, the eye would be quite useless in the absence of past conditioning; it would never make any sense beyond the visual forms, the shapes and colors, with which it started. It would have to know that people eat with their mouths, that earth is down and rough and sky is up and blue, that houses enclose people, that dogs propel themselves with four feet, and so on. It is well established in cognitive science and neuroscience, for instance, that tasks like visual processing must integrate bottom-up and top-down processes to arrive at an interpretation of the input. *Bottom-up* would apply as the eye uses the incoming visual data from the retina to formulate a theory about what is out there. *Top-down* would apply when the eye tries to confirm a cognitively inferred theory about what is out there, against the shapes and colors of form. Either requires prior knowledge and context. This is what connects the sound with the coach for Berkeley. Similarly, it is often reported that if a long-blind person's eyesight is restored surgically, they become immediately aware of forms, but are unable to perceive objects for some time, until they accrue the necessary conditioning.

Top-down processing is for the most part conditioned by learned patterns that make the context "familiar." Think of how easy it is to recognize faces, or the face of someone we are most intimately connected with. As an example of the acquired dispositions of the eye, where the farmer might see a cow, say, the hunter might see a moose. Where the shopkeeper might see broken glass, the

6 As Buddhadāsa (1992, 34) states, the eye is born when it performs its function.

7 Quoted in Loy (2019, 74).

jeweler might see spilled diamonds. Where the farmer might see a fertile field, the realtor might see an excellent home site and the child might see a playground. The eye is conditioned to see in certain ways based on a history of past experience. Notice, with regard to these examples, we have expressions in English like "as seen through the eye of the stock broker" that capture just this insight.

In Buddhist terms we sometimes call the body of such learned dispositions that have accumulated dependent on previous actions or perceptions *old kamma* (*purāṇa kamma*), which then in turn becomes a critical determinant of how the world is experienced in the present.[8] We will look at old *kamma* in more detail in chapter eleven. The Buddha accordingly draws the connection between the eye and *old kamma*:

> And what, *bhikkhus*, is old *kamma*? The eye is old *kamma*, to be seen as generated and fashioned by intention, as something to be experienced. [As for eye, so for ear, nose, tongue, body and mind] This is called old *kamma*. (SN 35.146)

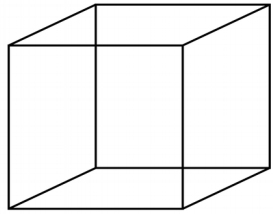
A note with regard to the six spheres: Each of the five physical sense faculties has its own sense field and can't experience that of another: visual form and sound are quite distinct. However cognizance produced in one sense sphere is not necessarily distinct from cognizance produced in another. The same dog can be the object both of eye cognizance and of ear cognizance. Cognizant of the dog behind the sofa, we might have even forgotten whether we first *saw* or first *heard* the dog. Nonetheless, in one place in the *Suttas* it is mentioned that the mind is the one sense faculty that has the capacity to collate data from different sense spheres.[9]

8 Thanissaro (2008, 180) describes this as the input from senses going through many stages of filtering in which some sensory contacts highlighted/elaborated, others ignored or suppressed. Filtering in turn is part of present kamma conditioned by past *kamma*.

9 MN 43 i295. See also Hamilton (1996, 26).

3. Subject and object

The sixfold sphere is impersonal in that neither subject nor object is presupposed in sense contact. Subject and object may be constructed, but on the basis of three factors of cognition: (1) raw sense data, (2) a complex mental process represented by the eye, and (3) a cognizance event that carries content. We will see in chapter ten that cognizance is highly presumptive as a rule, and accordingly the content of cognizance may presume a self and the full objectification of the object according to the natural attitude, producing for the worldling the illusion of naive contact. The value of understanding and fully internalizing the sixfold sphere, is to forestall the arising of naive contact, and thereby of feeling, of craving, and of the rest.



What happens at the sixfold sphere is like a Neker cube that easily flips from one interpretation to another (the drawing illustrated here can alternately be seen as a cube viewed from above or from below), flipping between objective and epistemic perspectives.[10] To fully understand and internalize the sixfold sphere is to see clearly the arising of the sixfold sphere and this leads to liberation:

> … when a *bhikkhu* is thus perfectly liberated in mind, even if powerful forms cognizable by the eye come into range of the eye, they do not obsess his mind; his mind is not at all affected. It remains steady, attained to imperturbability, and he observes its vanishing. [as for eye/forms, so for ear/sounds, nose/odors, tongue/tastes, body/tangibles, mind/phenomena]
>
> If one is intent on renunciation and solitude of mind; if one is intent on non-affliction and the destruction of appropriation; if one is intent on craving's destruction and non-confusion of mind: when one sees the sense spheres' arising, one's mind is completely liberated.

10 This is analogous to the differing perspectives of Kokanada and Ānanda with regard to views in section A.3.

(AN 6.55 iii377-8)

The problem is that without full comprehension of the sixfold sphere we generally find a way to presume a self.[11] In particular, the eye (ear, etc.) itself is easily identified with the self.

> The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. … [as for eye, so for ear, nose, tongue, body and mind] (SN 35.116)

For this reason, the Buddha is intent on rooting out this tendency to presume that there is a self lurking within the sixfold sphere;

> "*Bhikkhus*, I will teach you the way that is suitable for uprooting all presumptions. Listen to that. … And what, *bhikkhus*, is the way that is suitable for uprooting all presumptions? What do you think, *bhikkhus*, is the eye permanent or impermanent?"
>
> "Impermanent, venerable sir."
>
> "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"
>
> "Suffering, venerable sir."
>
> "Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"
>
> "No, venerable sir."
>
> "Are forms permanent or impermanent?" … eye-cognizance … eye-contact … any feeling that arises with eye-contact … [as for eye/form in all of the above, so for ear/sound, nose/odor, and so on].
>
> "Seeing thus, *bhikkhus*, the instructed noble disciple experiences disillusionment towards the eye … eye-cognizance … eye-contact … whatever feeling arises with eye-contact. He experiences revulsion towards the ear … [as for eye, …].
>
> "Experiencing disillusionment, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion he is liberated. When liberated there comes the knowledge: 'Liberated.' He understands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy

11 *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (MN 1 i1) describes the ubiquitous tendency to presume a self in relation to whatever we presume.

> life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.' This, *bhikkhus*, is the way that is suitable for uprooting all presumptions." (SN 35.32)

Eye and form are impermanent, because they are momentary cognitive events, rising and ceasing, then rising and ceasing anew, each time with new content and, in the case of eye, with new context and conditioning dispositions. We presume the eye is permanent when we presumptively objectify it. Furthermore, eye-cognizance, contact, feeling, craving and the rest are likewise impermanent because they depend on what is impermanent, namely eye and forms, which we take up in the next chapter.

> In dependence on the eye and visible forms there arises eye-cognizance. The eye is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise; visible forms are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Thus this dyad is moving and tottering, impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Eye-cognizance is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. (SN 35.93)

Moreover, in the Buddha's teaching what is impermanent, subject to change cannot be a self:

> If anyone says, "The eye is self," that is not tenable. The rise and fall of the eye are discerned, and since its rise and fall are discerned, it would follow: "My self rises and falls." That is why it is not tenable for anyone to say, "The eye is self." Thus the eye is not self. (MN 44 iii282)

As a result, the entire world is empty of a self:

> It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, "Empty is the world." And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye, Ananda, is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-cognizance is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-contact is empty of self and of what belongs to self. … ear … mind … (SN 35.85)

There is nowhere the self can hide. This is the realization of the noble ones who see the arising of the sixfold sphere. But most of us do not share this realization, and will continue to be a self entangled in becoming:

> Now, *bhikkhus*, this is the way leading to the origination of personality. One regards the eye thus: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self." One regards forms thus … One regards eye-cognizance thus … One regards eye-contact thus … One regards feeling thus … One regards craving thus: "This is mine, this I am, this is my self." (MN 44 iii284)

4. Passion for the eye

The presumption of the natural attitude within the misunderstood sixfold sphere turns sense contact into naive contact and this has predictable consequences that flow downstream through contact, feeling, craving and so on. The following passage takes us all the way through becoming, rebirth and this mass of suffering.

> *Bhikkhus*, when one does not know and see the eye as it actually is, when one does not know and see visible forms as they actually are, when one does not know and see eye-cognizance as it actually is, when one does not know and see eye-contact as it actually is, when one does not know and see as it actually is what is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact as condition, then one is inflamed by lust for the eye, for forms, for eye-cognizance, for eye-contact, for what is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact as condition. When one abides inflamed by lust, fettered, infatuated, contemplating gratification, then the five aggregates affected by clinging are built up for oneself in the future; and one's craving – which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that – increases. One's bodily and mental troubles increase, one's bodily and mental torments increase, one's bodily and mental fevers increase, and one experiences bodily and mental suffering. [as for

> eye/form, so for ear/sound, nose/odor, tongue/taste, body/tangible and mind/phenomena] (MN 149 iii287-8)

The point is that one can, through internalizing an epistemic understanding of the eye, experience the outer world otherwise or not experience it at all. The failure to do so is felt down the chain of dependent coarising. Sometimes the language that traces suffering specifically back to the misperceived sixfold sphere is quite startling. The following famous passage projects the metaphor of fire, generally used in reference to becoming, back to its origins in the misunderstood sixfold sphere, here again referred to as "the all."

> "*Bhikkhus*, all is burning. And what, *bhikkhus*, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-cognizance is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition – whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant – that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say. The ear is burning . . . The mind is burning … (SN 35.28)

We are cautioned that a form entering the eye can be a seductive but dangerous thing as it is reflected downstream.

> There are, *bhikkhus*, forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing. If a *bhikkhu* seeks delight in them, welcomes them, and remains holding to them, he is called a *bhikkhu* who has swallowed Māra's hook. He has met with calamity and disaster, and the Evil One can do with him as he wishes. [as for eye/form, …] (SN 35.230)

Forms become hazards through which we must navigate.

> "The eye, *bhikkhus*, is the ocean for a person; its current consists of forms. One who withstands that current consisting of forms is said to have crossed the ocean of the eye with its waves, whirlpools, sharks,

> and demons. [as for eye/forms, …] (SN 35.228)

A primary theme of many of such passages is that if we can control in the present moment what arises in the eye and forms, we can control the immediate downstream consequences.

> "So too, *bhikkhus*, in regard to forms cognizable by the eye . . . even trifling forms that enter into range of the eye obsess the mind, not to speak of those that are prominent. For what reason? Because lust still exists and has not been abandoned, hatred still exists and has not been abandoned, delusion still exists and has not been abandoned. [as for eye/forms, …] (SN 35.231)

In the end such consequences extend to future rebirth, perhaps with a bit of hyperbole.

> It would be better, *bhikkhus*, for the eye faculty to be lacerated by a red-hot iron pin burning, blazing, and glowing, than for one to grasp the sign through the features in a form cognizable by the eye. For if cognizance should stand tied to gratification in the sign or in the features, and if one should die on that occasion, it is possible that one will go to one of two destinations: hell or the animal realm. Having seen this danger, I speak thus. [as for eye/forms, …] (SN 35.235)

5. The cessation of the sixfold sphere

The eye and form are the initiator of the playing out of the rest of the human pathology. The sixfold sphere defines a narrow locus from which our practice will have great consequences downstream. The Buddha tells us,

> On seeing a form with the eye, do not crave any theme or details by which, if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye, evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice for its restraint. Guard the faculty of the eye. Secure your restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye. [as for eye/form, so for ear/sound, …] (SN 35.199)

If we control where we place our attention we can control what plays out. Our practice at this level is called *faculty restraint* (*indriya-saṃvara*) or *guarding of the faculties* (*indriyānaṃ gutti*), whereby we avoid the sensual contacts that go on to give rise to our passions. Aside from reducing *saṁsāric* suffering, restraint of the senses is an important basis for meditation practice.[12] Sense restraint is implemented physically, or as a matter of attitude. Physically, one can always avert the eye where passions might arise, or avoiding placing ourselves in a context where passions might arise. Monks commonly avoid association with women, and nuns with men, as matters of practice. In meditation retreats, social interactions and eye contact are generally discouraged, lighting is dim, and participants are segregated by gender as a means of implementing sense restraint.

Various tricks can modify our attitude toward what does manage to fall under the gaze of the eye. In order to moderate lust for women the Buddha recommended that the monks regard women old enough to be their mother *as* their mother, women old enough to be their sister *as* their sister, and women old enough to be their daughter *as* their daughter.[13] In order to moderate lust for food, they should recall,

> This food is not for the sake of amusement, but to sustain health of the body for the sake of practice … (SN 35.120)

… a paragraph that we recite in Pali before each meal at the monastery at which I live, even as lay donors ply us with delicious meals to weaken our resolve. We might also develop enough discipline that we simply do not pursue "themes and details" of visible forms. Specific contemplative practices can help develop this discipline, for instance, contemplation of loathsomeness (*asubha*), or contemplation of our own body parts – "… kidney, heart, liver, pleura, spleen …" – or corpses, all of which fall under observation of body (*kāyānupassanā*), the first *satipaṭṭhāna.* These tend to decondition our dispositions toward lust.

12 SN 35.97.
13 SN 35.127.

As with other links in the chain, contemplating the dangers of the sixfold sphere is an effective way to let go of its grip. Before his awakening, the Buddha asked himself,

> "What is the gratification, what is the danger, what is the escape in the case of the eye?" … Then, *bhikkhus*, it occurred to me: "The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye; this is the gratification in the eye. That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye: this is the escape from the eye." … [as for eye, so for ear, nose, …] So long, *bhikkhus*, as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification, the danger and the escape in the case of these six internal spheres, I did not claim to have awakened … (SN 35.13)

If one does not understand these, one is "far from the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*."[14] The eye must be understood, because:

> Without directly knowing and fully understanding the eye, without developing dispassion for it and abandoning it, one is incapable of destroying suffering. (SN 35.111)

We've discussed the gratification and danger of the eye in the course of this chapter.

Specifically, the key danger of the sixfold sphere is that it is a producer of objects of cognizance, which are generally full-blown with the usual presumptions of self-existence and substantiality. Aside from creating growth in becoming, such objects tend to be alluring and lead to feeling, craving and appropriation. The primary way to limit this process – or to bring about its cessation – is to recognize epistemically how the sixfold sphere produces our outer world, and thereby to gain insight into the outer world's subjective constructedness and its insubstantiality. We've demonstrated this constructedness in association with the sixfold sphere, primarily by pointing out that the cognizance of objects out there necessarily depend on the

14 SN 35.71.

subjective sense faculties. The demonstration of such constructedness began way back in chapter four in our discussion of appropriation with regard to the aggregates, by pointing out that the entire experiential world depends on our subjective modes of awareness, as expressed in the aggregates. As we make our way further upstream, we will continue to demonstrate the constructedness of our world, by looking more closely at the factors of form, eye, cognizance and objects of cognizance.

9. Name and form

Viññāṇa·paccayā nāma·rūpaṃ,
Nāma·rūpa·paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ.

Because of cognizance, name and form,
Because of name and form, the six·fold base.

Name and form is the content of cognizance, the objects of contact, the things of the world "out there," however we experience them. At the same time, in the spirit of the epistemic perspective, it refers to the cognitive processes that produce that content. Recall that in section 3.4 this same hybrid of cognitive constructedness and meaning was attributed to the aggregates. The role of name and form as the content of content is illustrated as follows:

> So, there is this body and outer name and form: thus this dyad. Dependent on this dyad there is contact. There are just six sense spheres, contacted through which – or through a certain one among them – the fool experiences pleasure and pain. (SN 12.19)

'Body' here suggests a self, but the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* equivalent to this Pali passage makes the role of 'body' a bit clearer. It begins,

> Within the body there is this cognizance and outside the body there is name and form.[1]

Similarly to what has been described here, scholars have described name and

1 Bucknell (1999, 324).

form as cognizable content,[2] as the structure of the cognitive system,[3] and as inner thought constructions projected onto an outer world, giving independent existence.[4] However, this link is understood or misunderstood in many more imaginative ways than perhaps any other link in the chain.

The expression 'name and form' is found in the early pre-Buddhist *Upaniṣads*:

> At that time this world was without real distinctions; it was distinguished simply in terms of name and forms – "He is so and so by name and has this sort of an form." So even today this world is distinguished simply in terms of name and form … (BU 4.7)[5]

This is to say, name and form refers, once again, to the cognitively constructed world of experience. A similar passage from the same *Upaniṣad* adds another component:

> Clearly, this world is a triple reality: name, form, and action. (BU 6.1)

The Pali word for 'name and form' is *nāmarūpa*, *nāma* 'name' + *rūpa* 'form,' which is often translated, in my view mistakenly, as 'mind-and-body,' or 'mentality-materiality,' although, as we will see, both name and form have both bodily and mental aspects. Form represents *sense impressions*. Although form (*rūpa*) refers specifically to visual sense impressions in the sixfold sphere, here it seems to range over all *sense impressions (*forms, sounds, odors and so on). Name represents conceptualized or nameable things.

Name and form is most explicitly defined in the discourses by listing its component cognitive categories broken down into subcategories:

Name: feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention.

Form: earth, water, air, fire and derivatives thereof.[6]

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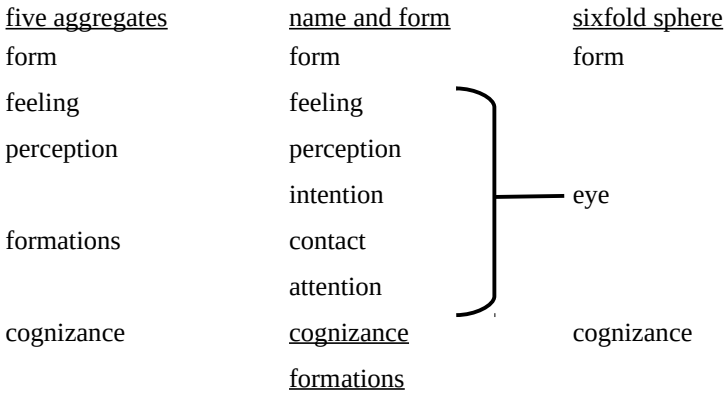
2 Ronkin (2005, 247).
3 Hamilton (2000, 150)
4 Reat (1990, 74, 79, 303, 306).
5 See also Reat (1987, 18), Jurewicz (2005, 175), Hamilton (2000, 151).
6 For instance, as in SN 12.2 and in many other *suttas.*

This lays out the cognitive structure that produces the experiential world. We notice a degree of correspondence with the aggregates, particularly given that the sole factor found in the aggregates but not in name and form – cognizance – is the immediate upstream link from name and form. In fact, name and form and cognizance are actually mutually conditioning, that is, **cognizance ↔ name and form.**[7] Moreover, we will see that name and form (together with cognizance) is a closer, more detailed look at the sixfold sphere.

1. Name and form as origin of the sixfold sphere

Name and form provides a more detailed epistemic analysis of the eye, particularly of what resources the eye needs to produce an object from colors and shapes in the visual field. Name and form is in this sense the origin of the sixfold sphere, much like atmospheric variables (moisture, molecular properties of H_2O, temperature, pressure and so on) are the origin of clouds … or of fog. They are really the same thing at different levels of resolution.

Let's look at name and form alongside the sixfold sphere, and throw in the aggregates, to see what is going on here:



Cognizance and formations are the upstream links from name and form, listed here because they supplement name and form to complete the comparison. Name and form includes three additional factors not found among the

7 DN 15 ii63-4.

aggregates, which will be described presently. But let's focus on the correspondence between eye in the sixfold sphere and the name factors of name and form, which I've marked.

First, we note that the sixfold sphere shares with the aggregates and with name and form the dual role of representing the world of experience as well as of describing a cognitive architecture that constructs that world. Second, recall that eye functions as a probe in that architecture, that is, it functions to detect form and to produce cognizance of an object. We note that that is also the function of the name factors in name and form: they provide cognitive analysis of what appears in the sensual field, and cognizance arises as a result. Therefore, name and eye serve the same function in constructing the world. Name is a more detailed account of the cognitive function of the eye.

Unfortunately this comparison is somewhat confounded when we note that the sixfold sphere provides details lost in name and form, namely the differentiation into six sense spheres. Name and form, like the aggregates, seems to allow *rūpa* '(normally visual) form' to stand implicitly for the full range of visual fields.

Although the aggregates, the sixfold sphere and name and form (the latter along with cognizance) are similar in representing the world with attention to cognitive constructedness, each has a different secondary function. We have seen that the aggregates secondarily provide a simple basis for reflection and contemplation in meditation. Likewise, we have seen that the sixfold sphere secondarily undercuts the objective metaphysics of contact, providing an epistemic analysis contact as mediated procedurally by the senses without presupposition to the natural attitude. Name and form secondarily provides the deepest account of cognitive processing that produces the objects that we naively take to be real and of substantial existence in the world "out there."[8]

8 The aggregates and name and form might also derive from different periods in the Buddha's teaching career. The aggregates seem to be a more primitive first draft of the detailed analysis of name and form + cognizance + formations, or perhaps it is a simplified summary of the earlier name and form analysis, adapted for meditation practice.

> Just see the world, with all its gods, fancying a self where none exists, entrenched in name and form it holds, the conceit that this is real. (Sn 3.12)

Moreover, it might seem puzzling that name and form already embeds the downstream links of contact and feeling within itself. However, this kind of conditionality is also present when we say that the function of the whole body is a necessary condition for the function of the lungs (which is already part of the whole body), or a healthy biosphere is necessary to support the health of individual organisms, like tree frogs and trees (which are parts of the biosphere). In fact, name and form effectively provides a stage on which the drama of all of the downstream links play out, including contact, feeling, craving, appropriation and becoming. It is at the level of whole body or biosphere. Moreover, this is all in the nature of entanglement and is also found, in some accounts, in the sixfold sphere.

2. The dynamics of name and form

The Buddha describes name and form cognitively as an interactive process among the diverse factors that we have listed, that produces new outer content, when supplemented by cognizance and formations, the two immediately upstream links. Imagine a committee charged with, say, organizing a marketing campaign, or with editing a newspaper, the *Daily Trumpet*. Such a committee has a typical cast of characters:

Form is the data guy, always ready with facts and figures, however vague. His is the only view from outside into the otherwise windowless committee room.

Feeling is the most expressive member who constantly chimes in with “Oh, I don’t like that,” “Now you’re talking,” “Thumbs down,” and “That blows me away,” as well as an array of facial expressions and full-body gestures, including simulated gagging and – new to her repertoire – a feigned heart attack.

Perception is the analytical member who is adept at spotting patterns in the data and in the ongoing products of analysis, the guy who notices.

Intention is the one who needs to get the feel of something, to put herself in the driver's seat and take it for a spin, and ultimately the one who comes up with plans of action.

Contact is the most self-assured among the committee members about what is going on "out there," known to pound his fist on the table and assert, "… and *that*'s a *fact*."

Finally, Attention is the meeting facilitator, in charge of the agenda, responsible for getting all of the other members to focus on one issue at a time.

A committee functions as an interactive process, a negotiation, with individual members – each with specialized qualifications – allowed to make proposals and respond to critiques and counter-proposals from other members. As a group they bounce around alternatives and try to reach a decision, which cognizance might then endorse. The Buddha describes this process with respect to the interaction between form and name, but it seems that the interactive process also characterizes the interactions *within* the name group. Emotions run high within this committee, in which contact leads to feeling, feeling to craving, craving to appropriation and appropriation to becoming and the committee finds itself continuing these negotiations even in the next life and beyond, until sound Buddhist practice reaches fruition. The committee room of name and form is a place in which the whole chain can be seen to unfold.

For the Buddha, form represents what's in the visual field, like colors and shapes, but invites further analysis by producing an *impingement impression* (*paṭigha-samphassa*), which provides input to the name elements.[9] "Impingement impression" suggests the impact of a physical force as if from outside; in fact, it provides the most direct evidence that there is an "out there." Name represents conceptualizations that *presume* content inspired by form, and invites verification by producing a *designation impression* (*adhivacana-samphassa*), which provides input to form, bringing certain aspects of it into sharper conceptual focus. An interactive process between name and form thereby proceeds as a negotiation mediated by designation impression and impingement impression. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes such a

9 DN 15.

process as an oscillation between reception (form) and response (name) where form as sense perception brings content within the range of the designation impression.[10] This can also be compared to the cooperative involvement of bottom-up processing and top-down processing noted in section 8.2 with respect to the functioning of the eye. I find the Buddha's description of the interaction *between* the name and form components quite elegant.

> "If those various characteristics by which name were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of designation impression with regard to form?"
>
> "No."
>
> "If those various characteristics by which form were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of impingement impression with regard to name?"
>
> "No."
>
> "If those various characteristics by which both kinds were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of either designation or impingement impression with regard to name?"
>
> "No." (DN 15)

In short, nothing is discerned in form without name, and name has nothing to discern without form. Impingement impression initiates a bottom-up process of conceptualization and designation impression initiates a top-down process of verification. The resulting interdependence between name and form rules out the common assertion that form is physical and name mental.[11] In fact the *content* of both name events and form events is typically *physical*, while all of the cognitive *events* themselves are *mental*.

Form, until it is conceptualized, seems to be much like peripheral vision. The eye is narrowly focused within the visual field at any one time, but even as it is focused on a perceived and named object, we are vaguely aware of shapes and

10 Bodhi (1995, 15-17).

11 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 30-1), who also states that the Buddha does not recognize a formal dichotomy between mind and matter.

colors at the periphery or background without conceptualizing them. It has been noted that peripheral awareness does not seem to have been acknowledged by the Buddha,[12] though it does seem to affect how we perceive what is in focus, for instance, if a blue and wavy texture is present in the unnamed periphery, an object in focus is likely to be perceived as boat rather than as a car.[13] In any case, the periphery remains untouched by name or by cognizance, whose content is conceptual or nameable.

As a final illustration of how the committee of name and form collude in the production of conceptual content, consider how a young child encounters his first rubber ball.[14] He looks (that's form). He finds something interesting in the blur of colors and shapes (that's feeling). He discerns red and round (perception). He takes the lollipop out of his mouth and lays it on the shag rug where the dog likes to sleep, and turns his undivided attention in that direction (that's attention). He imagines what he finds there to be an object "out there" (contact). He cries out in delight (more feeling). He smells it, touches it (more form) and recognizes some of its qualities (more perception). He tries to eat it, rolls it on the floor, picks it up (intention), assesses its weight, texture and sponginess (perception once again). He drops it (more intention), watches it bounce and roll (perception). It becomes a ball, and oh so real (contact). Soon craving, "mine," possessiveness and the rest flood the mind. After a few such encounters with this wondrous plaything, he will effortlessly perceive "ball" at a glance as a full-fledged object with an array of intrinsic properties.

There is a question we should keep in mind for the various factors of name and form. We can watch them in the committee meeting of our own minds as they collude to produce our experience of the world "out there," then take it as real, as consisting of fixed, substantial objects, ripe for craving and appropriation. With regard to reliability, we have no access to natural reality except through the reports of this committee. We can ask, however, "Do these dunderheads really know what they are doing?" Being able to ask that question is the value of understanding name and form. This is another step in recognizing the

12 Ronkin (2005, 90-91).
13 Detmer (2013, 155).
14 This example is based on that presented by Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 1).

insubstantiality of the world: watching the mind construct it.

3. Members of the committee

Let's take up each factor in turn.

Form. Form (*rūpa*) is undifferentiated, pre-conceptual or barely conceptual awareness by means of the eye. We can also think of it as bare awareness, or raw data. Name holds virtually all of the concepts. We saw above that the Buddha defined form, within name and form, as the primary elements of earth, water, air, fire and derivatives thereof. Surprisingly, the great elements are a *conceptually* rather complex basis for defining pre-conceptual sense experience: *earth* exhibits solidity, *water* liquidity or cohesion, *fire* heat or cold or combustion, and *air* motion. I think the Buddha's intention here is not to *define* form, but to ask us to imagine the most most basic (i.e., pre-conceptual) level of experience we can. He needs words to teach, and words are conceptual, but the great elements would have had the advantage of familiarity for the Buddha's immediate disciples. For modern readers we might similarly describe form as an array of pixels, or as shapes and colors playing against our retina, vibrations of our ear drums and so on, which, while they would strike an ancient Indian as enormously complex conceptually, might suggest the most basic level of awareness for *modern* people. Ñāṇānanda suggests that forms are like ghosts, not recognizable until name provides an intital perception of appearance.[15] However, raw, pre-conceptual experience is extremely rich: this is where the taste of vanilla, or of an orange resides, aesthetic experiences, mystical experiences, all that we cannot put words to, but that are, in contrast, obscured by our concepts.

The members of committee, in its deliberations, will appeal to the eye over and over again to place itself where it can probe new forms in an attempt to accurately assess what is going on outside the committee room and to plan its response.

Feeling. We have seen that feelings (*vedanā*) are emotive tones associated with

15 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 1).

aspects of the experiential world along a pleasant-unpleasant scale. We devoted chapter six to feeling. Although feeling adds little direct conceptual content, the conceptual factors are very sensitive to feeling: When feeling arises, it draws in perception, which easily leads to conceptual proliferation. It also easily leads to craving, which then gives rise to seeking, and then to perception and intention. In these ways feeling shapes the growth of the world. In terms of the committee analogy, the articulations of Feeling will nudge the other members this way and that in their deliberations, giving it a major role in the shaping of conceptual content.

Often, other factors will read feelings in making specific conceptual distinctions. For instance, slight differences in feeling may make a convincing difference in perception of "friend" or "foe" or "ripe" or "unripe."[16] Moreover, we saw in section 7.4 that (inner) feelings are often projected into (outer) qualities of objects. This then forms the basis of additional conceptual content.

Perception. Objects spring out of our experiences and declare themselves as familiar, things that you can probably give names to, for instance tree trunks standing, leaves rustling, rabbits hopping, and bluebirds fluttering. We've seen such things before and they are immediately recognizable. I daresay, without any past experience there would be no perception and without perception the world would be limited to undifferentiated form, a blur of shapes and colors with no prospect of making any sense of it. Perception is responsible for filling in probably *most* of the detailed content of our outer world. Other committee members are highly dependent on perception to give them something they can wrap their heads around. It is therefore right at the center of producing conceptual content as the committee assesses the situation it presumes is playing out outside of the committee room.

Perception is *saññā* in Pali. *Saññā,* like *viññāṇa* 'cognizance,' is one of the variants of *ñāṇa* 'knowledge' in Pali. Perception is critically contingent on past experience, and past experience depends on personal history including cultural and educational influences. Therefore, the content of the world outside of the committee room will differ vastly if that one committee member is replaced by

16 Bodhi (1995, 16).

another.

Intention. Where perception is receptive, intention is active. In early Indian thought, perception and action are not so clearly distinguished as they are for modern people.[17] This may be why intention is missing as a separate factor in the aggregates. But intention is highlighted as a critical part of the world in the pre-Buddhist *Upaniṣads*, "this world is a triple reality: name, form, and *action*."[18] Intention supplements perception by looking forward, to "What do I do about that?" It is about planning actions, generally in response to craving. Like perception, intention makes largely familiar responses in familiar perceived contexts: making coffee, offering incense, driving a car, walking.

Intention is *cetanā* in Pali, 'active thought,' 'intention,' 'purpose,' 'will,' 'thought underlying action.' In a real sense, directing action is a primary function of all of the cognitive factors and these factors bend toward intention. As we are engaged in world, the world is saturated with meaning from the start of the kind: "this is an aid, this is an obstacle, this is what I'm trying to get,"[19] according to what we imagine ourselves doing with them, and it makes a big difference in what we experience the world to be.

> *Bhikkhus*, when there are hands, picking up and putting down are discerned. When there are feet, coming and going are discerned. When there are limbs, bending and stretching are discerned. When there is the belly, hunger and thirst are discerned. (SN 35.236)

For instance, what is perceived as a door is not just a physical thing of such and such dimensions and such and such composition, it is an invitation to pass through, pregnant with possibilities. It is not a door at all unless we can envision ourselves, given its dimensions and position, as able to pass through it. The world presents itself to perception in whatever way is useful for us to act in it. For a hunter intent on prey, or a birdwatcher with binoculars in hand, or a fire lookout, certain objects come to the fore, such as bunny, bluebird or

17 Reat (1990, 225).
18 BU 6.1.
19 Detmer, David (2013, 20). Popper and Heidegger also point to how from the start we perceive the world in terms of utility (Loy, 2019, 75-6, 120).

billowing smoke. Like feelings, our intentions often result in our attributing qualities to objects "out there" as projections of what we inwardly want to do with them.

Contact. We have contact when we state that such and such exists outside of the committee room. Contact was the topic of chapter seven and significantly of chapter eight, and in section 10.3 we will attribute contact to cognizance itself. Here contact represents the presumption and then conviction that that object really exists "out there," that "I" experience it "in here," but that its existence is independent of my experience of it. It is such fixed and reliable contacted objects that then give rise to feeling, craving, appropriation and the rest. Its placement here expresses the epistemic dependence of contact on the remaining unreliable factors of name and form: form, feeling, perception, intention and attention. The *Sutta Nipāta* tells us,

> Having understood name and form as proliferation that is the root of inner and outer disease, one is released from bondage to the root of all disease. Such a one is called in truth "one who knows well."
> (Sn 530, iii98)

As Ñāṇānanda states,

> "The discrimination between an inner and an outer is the outcome of the inability to penetrate name and form, the inability to see through it. "[20]

The point is that contact and its objects are *presumed*, but not necessarily substantial. And yet, this is what the committee does: it attempts to pin down what is going on in the world beyond the committee walls and to plan actions appropriate to what is going on. For that, it needs contact with substantial objects.

Attention. Attention is a focal point for mental activity. Normally our attention is drawn sporadically from one place to another – think of how the eye moves from moment to moment around the visual field. It is also strongly conditioned

20 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 9).

by desire, through which the eye can become relatively fixed on a specific form. But we can also deliberately choose to pay attention to something, even if it is not particularly interesting. Attention is involved critically in the life cycle of cognizance – descent and growth – which we discussed in in sections 3.4 and 5.4 and will return to in section 10.2. Attention is the unnamed factor that determines the site of descent, while cognizance is the unnamed factor that creates objects there:

> Friends, (1) all things are rooted in desire. (2) They come into being through attention. (3) They originate from contact. (4) They converge upon feeling. (AN 8.83)

Attention is *manasikāra* in Pali, *manasi* 'in mind' + *kāra* 'doing,' 'placing.' It is a center of mental activity. An important feature of attention is that it is subject to willful control and seems able, with some effort, to override the allure of immediate craving, as when we "make ourselves" pay attention. This is often necessary, for instance, to study for an exam in a subject that we find decidedly uninteresting (see section 6.3). This capability is critical in meditative exercises like following the breath. We have a choice between *appropriate attention* (*yoniso manasikāra)*) or *inappropriate attention* (*ayoniso manasikāra*), where *yoniso* means 'from the source,' 'getting to the bottom of things.' Deliberate appropriate attention forms an important basis for all of Buddhist practice, about which the Buddha states:

> For a *bhikkhu* who is a learner, there is no other thing so helpful for reaching the highest goal as the factor appropriate attention. Wisely striving, a *bhikkhu* may attain the destruction of all suffering. (Iti 1.16)

The last passage about the root of all things continues:

> (5) They [all things] are headed by *samādhi.* (6) Mindfulness exercises authority over them. (7) Wisdom is their supervisor. (8) Liberation is their core. (AN 8.83)

This authority is exercised by appropriate attention. Attention plays a huge role

in what we understand the world to be. As the locus of cognizance it determines where the world will grow in content or what objects will thereby be presumed.

Normally, attention is subject to the influence of the other cognitive factors, including feeling and craving. The hunter, ever interested in game, finds attention drawn to ground movement and the birdwatcher to the bush. In this way, the experienced world of name and form is highly individuated, largely excluding what is beyond personal desire. Slight differences in attention can frame the world differently, for instance, to determine whether an object is perceived as moving or stationary.[21] Yet through careful control of attention we can get to the bottom of things and penetrate name and form.

4. The cessation of name and form

We have proceeded, in chapters past, by teasing apart knot after knot while working our way through the tangle of *saṃsāra*. Having reached the knot of name and form, we hear from the Buddha the importance of its cessation:

> [The Blessed One is asked:]
> "A tangle inside, a tangle outside,
> This generation is entangled in a tangle.
> I ask you this, O Gotama,
> Who can disentangle this tangle?"
>
> [The Blessed One replies:]
> "A man established in virtue, wise,
> Developing the mind and wisdom,
> A *bhikkhu* ardent and discreet:
> He can disentangle this tangle.
>
> "Those for whom lust and hatred,
> Along with ignorance have been expunged,
> The *arahants* with taints destroyed:
> For them the tangle is disentangled.

21 Bodhi (1995, 16).

> “Where name and form ceases,
> Stops without remainder,
> And also impingement and perception of form:
> It is here this tangle is cut.” (SN 7.6)

The tangle outside is certainly the mutual conditioning of cognizance and name and form discussed in the following chapter and productive of objects “out there.” The tangle inside is presumably the ensnarling factors of name and form.[22] What understanding of name and form teaches us is, most fundamentally, how the world arises on the basis of unreliable cognitive and emotive factors that inspire little confidence that what we see is real. Shining the light of wisdom to reveal name and form’s many specious presumptions and impaired partiality, we let go of contact, feeling, craving and the rest. When we see reality “out there” as cheap props, cardboard and thin paint, we become disenchanted.

> The one untrammeled by name and form,
> And passionless, no pains befall. (Dhp 221)

22 Ñāṇānanda (2015, sermon 4).

10. Cognizance

Saṅkhāra·paccayā viññāṇaṃ,
Viññāṇa·paccayā nāma·rūpaṃ.

Because of formations, cognizance,
Because of cognizance, name and form.

Cognizance is the central link in the chain and its presence has been implicit or explicit in every downstream link we have discussed. Ñāṇānanda asserts, "To see the arising of cognizance is to see the Law of Dependent Arising."[1] Without cognizance there would be no conceptual experience, ergo there would be no world.[2] Whatever we turn our attention to, it is a product of cognizance, is painted by cognizance, is grown, expands and flourishes by cognizance.

We commonly naively presume the primacy of natural reality and the receptivity of cognizance as a faculty that simply reflects that reality impartially like a mirror or a video camera. This is cognitively or epistemically incoherent, and to assume so oversteps the parameter of insubstantiality. In fact, when dependent coarising is taught with this presumption in mind, it leads to inevitable confusion, leaving us entangled in the *teachings*, as well as in *saṃsāra*. This presumption is simply the *natural attitude* (section 7.2) elevated to the level of doctrine. Recall that "All phenomena are preceded by

1 Ñāṇānanda (2016, 21).
2 As Ñāṇavīra (2010, 26) suggests, all factors depend on cognizance, for there is no experience without cognizance.

mind, led by mind, made by mind."[3]

Viññāṇa, the Pali word for 'cognizance,' is yet another variant of *ñāṇa* (knowledge). With the prefix *vi-* it means literally 'knowledge apart,' or 'discriminative knowledge,' hence it is conceptual. It is most often translated as 'consciousness,' sometimes as 'discernment.' It is the last of the five aggregates. Its fundamental function is to construct the world conceptually.

I've called the name factors of the chapter nine, *cognitive factors*. In fact, they are each inseparable from cognizance itself:

> Feeling, perception, and cognizance, friend—these states are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognizes. That is why these states are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. (M 43 i293)

I daresay that the other name factors can also be identified with cognizance in this way. However name and form on the one hand and cognizance on the other highlight different dimensions of the cognitive process: transitory and continuous. Any process is a continuous stream of transitory events. Cognizance is consistently represented as one of these transitory cognitive events in the *Buddhavacana*,[4] forever arising anew, doing its thing and then vanishing. Name and form, on the other hand, is an aggregation of persisting *contents* of cognitive events, much in the manner of ongoing negotiations among committee members. In this way, cognizance is the house builder of name and form, constructing an at least somewhat persisting understanding of the world as well as game plans. We've already witnessed cognizance in this role in section 3.4. Recall there that the short life cycle of cognizance is characterized by two phases:

- **Descent.** Find a site, something already experienced within the

3 Dhp 1-2.
4 MN 38 i 258.

experiential world.

- **Growth.** Augment the content of the experiential world at that site.

An instance of cognizance descends to a site and growth occurs. For instance, it lands on the catchy tune, which then blossoms into an array of melody and rhythm, or an orchestra of strings, brass and percussion functioning as a harmonious whole. Name and form represents our world, which consists of sites available for descent, where growth then occurs. "It is in name and form that consciousness [i.e., cognizance] finds an object. It is here that a world is created."[5] This requires that name and form, as content, persists before and after the event of cognizance. We should note that the two-step process of cognizance is exactly the same process already introduced in relation to becoming and with regard to the aggregates rather than to name and form.

It is worth repeating that the most striking quality of cognizance is that it carries meaning, that is, it is "cognizant *of* something," where that something lies beyond the event of cognizance itself, and typically in the outer world. For instance, we can be cognizant of a dog barking or of the moon rising. Cognizance per se is the momentary *awareness* of the dog or the moon, not the dog or the moon itself, which – for all we know – might persist long beyond the cognitive event … or not exist at all. The persistence of name and form allows the *presumption* that we are cognizant of the same dog as before – "Why, that's Fido!" – or of the same moon, and that objects persist "out there" when we are not looking at them. Effectively name and form is cognizance's memory, although the Buddha never describes it in this way. Meanwhile, cognizance does its work with astonishing facility, insight and imagination. It conjures up with ease a wondrous world "out there," then points to it as if it were simply bearing silent witness, and finally convinces us that it is real.

1. Cognizance as the origin of name and form

We can think of name and form as a workshop and cognizance as the craftsman who enters, turns raw materials into half-finished products and half-

5 Ñāṇānanda (2015 v. 4, 108, sermon 20).

finished products into wondrous things, and then leaves. Or we can think of the factors of name and form as apprentices in the workshop, but frozen in time as cognizance the master craftsman descends, finishes up what the apprentices have wrought, and leaves some wondrous object. Without the workshop there can be no master craftsman, without the master craftsman it's not a workshop. Without cognizance there could not be an aggregation of name and form, without name and form cognizance would have nowhere to descend. In the seminal *Mahānidāna Sutta* we learn that cognizance and name and form are, in fact, mutually conditioning:[6]

> Thus far then, Ānanda, we can trace birth and decay, death and falling into other states and being reborn, thus far extends the way of designation, of concepts, thus far is the sphere of understanding, thus far the cycle goes as far as can be discerned in this life, namely to name and form together with cognizance. (DN 15 ii63-64)

All of the downstream links are sustained by this mutual conditioning of cognizance and name and form, which we can represent as:

cognizance ↔ name and form

The interplay of cognizance and name and form was already implicit in the artist simile of section 3.4, in which the painted surface repeatedly provides focal points to which the brush stroke descends, thereby augmenting the painted surface, providing more sites to which cognizance might later descend. It is in the nature of cognizance to find a site in name and form and, reciprocally, name and form cannot grow nor long be sustained without cognizance.[7]

Sāriputta gives us another analogy for this mutual conditioning:

> Suppose there were two bundles of reeds leaning up against each other. In the same way, name and form are conditions for cognizance. Cognizance is a condition for name and form. Name and form are

6 See also SN 12.67.
7 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 3, 61-63).

> conditions for the sixfold sphere. The sixfold sphere is condition for contact. … That is how this entire mass of suffering originates. If the first of those bundles of reeds were to be pulled away, the other would collapse. And if the other were to be pulled away, the first would collapse. In the same way, when name and form cease, cognizance ceases. When cognizance ceases, name and form ceases. When name and form ceases, the sixfold sphere ceases. When the sixfold sphere ceases, contact ceases. … That is how this entire mass of suffering ceases. (SN 12.67)

Another way to think about the dynamics of cognizance and of name and form is that the two continuously orbit around each other to form a *cycle* (*vaṭṭa*), which we will also call a '*whirlpool*,' sometimes translated as a 'vortex,' or which, living in Texas, I tend to picture as a 'tornado.' The interplay of cognizance and name and form underlies the entirety of *saṃsāric* life:

> "In so far only, Ānanda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designation, in so far only is the range of wisdom, in so far only is the cycle kept going for there to be a designation as the this-ness, that is to say: name and form together with cognizance." (DN 15 ii63-4)

Name and form and cognizance set the parameters and provide the material in which *saṃsāra* plays out. It is on the basis of designation, what we are cognizant *of*, that cognizance can conjure up a reality "out there" within name and form. Cognizance then fills that world with stuff, gives us a self with a reason to crave it, gives that self a personality as a suffering creature with needs and fears, intent on self-preservation, and makes it all seem so real. It is through personality that there is something there to be born, to grow old, to die or to reappear. This interaction provides the conditions under which the entirety of the experiential world arises.

2. The dynamics of the whirlpool

To repeat, we encountered cognizance in relation to becoming where it was described as the engine responsible for the growth of the experiential world, but in relation to the aggregates in lieu of name and form:

> As long as cognizance remains, it remains involved with form, supported by form, founded on form. And with a sprinkle of relishing, it exhibits growth, increase, and flourishing. [As for form, so for feeling, perception, formations] (DN 33 iii228)

The cycle of cognizance and name and form is exactly this same engine of growth. We might notice that many passages that describe the downstream consequences of the cycle refer to birth, but skip over the intermediate links of **sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving → appropriation**. The explanation is that the cycle is also a *direct* condition (albeit a cross-entanglement) for *becoming*, which is why it was introduced so early, in chapter three. In brief, an alternative (cross-entangled) chain of dependent coarising might be formulated: **ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering**. The longer chain running through → **craving** will intersect at becoming to encourage growth and personality, but will have its origin in earlier instances of cognizance. In short, the actual dynamics of dependent coarising is much more complex and entangled that the logic of the linear chain suggests.

The name factor of attention corresponds to the "involved with" referred to in the last passage. Recall that attention is a locus of mental activity, likely involving a complex of cognitive factors at the same time. Attention plays a significant role in determining the site of descent. Relishing *encourages* the involvement of attention and thereby the subsequent growth of the aggregates or of name and form. 'Growth, increase and flourishing,' in Pali *vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullaṃ*, is a recurring description of growth of the experiential world. The following passage describes growth from yet another perspective:

> For one dwelling, *bhikkhus*, watching the allure in phenomena, which leads to bondage, there is a descent of cognizance. Conditioned by

> cognizance there is name and form … (SN 12.59)

Watching the allure in phenomena likewise involves attention in establishing a locus for descent within name and form, encouraging growth as new phenomenal content: ”there is name and form.” The new content provides new potential points of attention and possibly of allure. One cognizance event after another aggregates the world in this way.

Cognizance is present in all cognitive processes, though not always explicitly mentioned. Recall the following passage dealing with proliferation, which we we discussed in section 6.3 in relation to the fishing expedition triggered by feeling.

> What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present phenomena cognizable through the mind. (MN 43, i 293)

Cognizance produces content at perception and again at thinking. At proliferation a series of cognizance events in quick succession begins, producing new content, shifting attention to the new content, producing yet newer content, and so on. Proliferation is this process repeating itself and running wild with growing the experiential world, quickly and erratically, generally in unhealthy ways, fishing for content that might be of subsequent interest for craving, appropriation and becoming. Wherever cognizance arises, growth within becoming also arises. Craving for becoming is generally present as an encouraging force in sustaining this fishing expedition, creating an across-the-board hunger for the nutriments of contact, mental activity and cognizance.

If craving for sensuality is present where cognizance descends, growth becomes directed toward seeking to fulfill self-centered needs, through assessment and planning. As newly produced objects arise, they may be craved

in turn for their instrumental role in those plans, craving will often flow along such links of instrumentality, drawing in new instances of cognizance to grow further assessment and planning, as described in section 5.4. This process is rooted in greed, hatred and delusion.

Cognizance is also present as phenomena are objectified and appropriated, producing the development of a personal footprint, a personality within becoming. Our personal footprint becomes a strong locus of craving for becoming, and thereby tends to sustain attention and encourage accelerated growth, increase and flourishing. Cognizance is like the "artist or a painter using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson to create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas" discussed in section 3.4.

Cognizance spinning around name and form is the basis for the playing out of all of the downstream links, flooding the downstream factors with new things to feel, crave and appropriate, kerosene for the fires of greed, hate and delusion. A key factor in this process that remains to be discussed is cognizance's vexing tendency to place objects "out there," in accord with the natural attitude, to presume – much like a well-targeted advertisement – things that are substantial, reliable, stable, real and worthy of feeling, craving and appropriation. This is the source of contact.

3. Cognizance and contact

Cognizance is an adept salesman. He persuades us to buy an item of merchandise, shining, solid, durable, ever new and indispensable. We take it home, take it out of the box and discover shoddy construction, cheap materials, ill-fitting seams. It falls apart on use, the paint peels off, but that's OK, because it barely performed its intended function anyway. Our purchase history is littered with the shards of such broken promises.

Cognizance always has something to sell. It is itself an inner, mental event, but offers us alluring content, something "out there" and more substantial than a mere transitory event. It presumes its content in an unrealistically favorable

light: as substantial, discrete, relatively fixed, existing independently, unchanging until affected by other objects, ripe for craving and appropriation. And we believe it all, for we suffer from the natural attitude. This is the presumption of naive contact.

This is, in a nutshell, what cognizance does, and if it did not do it, we would never experience an outer world as separate from us. Cognizance is a productive instrument of presumption. It *objectifies*. Objects "out there" spring into bloom everywhere we turn our attention. Cognizance presumes its content through consulting the various factors of name and form, but, as we've seen, name and form is manned by an unreliable group of dunderheads, starting with vague shapes and colors, then imposing conceptualizations upon these and then conceptualizations upon conceptualizations.

Cognizance, with the support of name, quickly and quite effortlessly far overreaches what is given in form, going way beyond direct experience. For instance, the perceptual field of forms turns to a front surface of a house or dog. But that surface unfolds immediately and gratis into a three-dimensional object, with a back and sides, something we can walk around and, in the case of the house, something we can enter – none of which is *directly* apparent. On top of that, anticipations arise of what we will see, should we decide to walk around or enter the house.[8]

The result of cognizing many objects is the appearance of an outer world so real, so substantial, so three-dimensional, so vivid, so pregnant with possibilities and so immediately present we can reach out and touch it. Objectifying in this way is the origin of contact. Recall from section 8.1 that sense contact is the coming together of eye, form and cognizance. Eye is how we get from form to cognizance, and is therefore equivalent to name. However, it turns out that cognizance is the *origin* of naive contact, not its *product*, for it adds the entire range of metaphysical presumptions that constitute the natural attitude. As Ñāṇānanda points out, if I see a cup, cognizance is the very discrimination between seer and seen, me and cup.[9]

8 Detmer (2013, 96, 103).
9 Ñāṇānanda, (2009, 22-23).

There can be no “I see a cup” prior to cognizance of the cup in the epistemic perspective.

4. Cognizance as magic

In the *Phena Sutta*, the Buddha describes the *five aggregates* (*khandha*) that make up our experiential world, with cognizance as the fifth:

> Form is like a mass of foam,
> And feeling but an airy bubble.
> Perception is like a mirage,
> And formations a plantain tree.
> Cognizance is a magic show,
> A juggler's trick entire. (SN 22.95)

This verse expresses the elusive and contingent nature of each of these factors, and the insubstantiality or emptiness of their contents. (BTW, a plantain or banana tree is characterized as having no core or hardwood, but just layer upon layer of the same woody substance.) The Buddha likens cognizance to magic in that it conjures up an experienced “reality,” often outrageously, by slight of hand and illusion, but one which the wise are able to see through if they look carefully. He continues:[10]

> Now suppose that a magician or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any cognizance that is past, future, or present; inner or outer; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what

10 Ñāṇānanda (2007) elaborates and modernizes this simile in a wonderfully illustrative way.

substance would there be in cognizance?" (SN 22.95)

The appearance the magician creates is the content of cognizance and also the object of naive contact. This generally involves presumption of the natural attitude. Sneaking behind the stage to discover his tricks is the practitioner's epistemic perspective. Understanding the constructedness of the appearance, we recognize that it is not substantial. So it is with all that we cognize.

A magician creates an imaginary world through props and sleights of hand, but a more modern example makes his point perhaps as vividly. A television is a physical object with a flat screen and a speaker. When it is turned on, pixels of changing colors dance around on the screen and the speaker vibrates audibly, producing forms and sounds. Name apprehends this, but cognizance does not stop there: We are suddenly transported into another time and place in which John Wayne is a gunslinger whose inner goodness is brought out by a young Quaker woman, who cares for him as he recovers from a gunshot wound.[11] And John Wayne is more than a shape on the screen: he is three dimensional, and with emotions and plans, and is even now standing there obscured by his horse, while we experience his presence. We cry and we laugh in empathy with the characters present in this other time and place. We "see through" the screen and experience something quite different than forms and sounds.

Cognizance has conjured up a whole alternate world simply as an interpretation of flickering pixels and audible vibrations, and it has then transported us there, where we may even forget occasionally that we are at the same time sitting in front of a television munching popcorn. It seems so real. It doesn't matter that this alternate world does not *really* exist; it becomes part of our experience and we are conscious of things in that world way "out there," just as we can be conscious of the popcorn in our mouths.

Whoa, how did all this happen? A substantial level of content and realism seems to have arisen that is entirely out of place in our everyday world. Such is the creative, magical, power of cognizance, to turn shapes, colors and sound waves into a remote time, place and situation, to place us there as an invisible

11 This scenario refers to the 1947 movie "The Angel and the Badman."

witness and to make it seem so real, an hallucination, but an oddly coherent one. Perhaps even more remarkably, we can sit with an open book on our lap, we perceive directly simple ink letters on paper and suddenly "see through" the pages into Victorian London, into the adventures of Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger and Fagin. Even *that* seems real. Cognizance is the master of illusion.

Cognizance is also the master of many worlds. Suppose sounds impinge on the ear. (It is music.) What we become conscious of as a result varies in some remarkable ways with small shifts in attention. At first we might be cognizant of a loudspeaker – we objectify the loudspeaker as there in the corner and as producing sound. But we might instead "hear through" the speaker and be cognizant of an entire orchestra. Though we are in a rather small room, the orchestra includes many people and their various instruments producing the sound, as we clearly cognize the individual instruments: brass, strings and percussion. But further, we can "hear through" the orchestra, to become cognizant of the music itself – the melody, rhythm and harmony, the overall temporal structure of the composition, its aesthetic qualities, evocative of certain emotional states, completely abstracted from any spatial dimension. Notice that we seem to presume multiple worlds of different sizes and shapes, each with a kind of internal coherence, and each with a claim to being "reality," in some however obscure sense.

Simple shifts in attention create radically new experiences, slipping from an interior reality into a more exterior reality and back again. Trying to sort out what is inner and outer in these various experiences can by dizzying. But that is what cognizance does all day every day: it produces worlds and convinces us they are real. Contact and objectification are "part and parcel of the phenomenological essence of consciousness [cognizance]."[12] It's magic.

5. The cessation of cognizance

As long as we cognize, we are producing potentially alluring content for feeling, for craving and for appropriation, and thereby entangling ourselves into the human pathology, into *saṃsāra*, into this mass of suffering. We can

12 Detmer (2013, 105).

find relief either by limiting cognizance through controlling its conditions, or by bringing about its cessation through insight into the insubstantiality of what it produces.

Because cognizance is so cross-entangled, there are a number of choke points involving conditioning or encouraging factors that can be exploited to limit the effects of cognizance. Most important is the role of attention, which effectively controls the site to which cognizance descends and can thereby limit its opportunities for descent and growth. This makes *appropriate attention* particularly important.

> *Bhikkhus*, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever one has a tendency towards: this becomes a basis for the maintenance of cognizance. When there is a basis there is a support for the establishing of cognizance. When cognizance is established and has come to growth, there is the production of future renewed existence.

Recall from section 6.3 that a proliferation of cognition commonly begins at feeling and then spins out of control, and from section 5.5 that the general craving for becoming produces a hunger for the nutriments of contact, mental activity and cognizance that fuel growth. This whole cross-entangled process can be disrupted through appropriate attention at this choke point so that cognizance has no opportunity to descend. The Buddha stresses the importance of limiting cognizance in this way:

> This *Dhamma* is for one who likes and delights in non-proliferation and not for one who likes and delights in proliferation.
> (AN 4.30 iv 228)

An effective use of appropriate attention that most readers will be familiar with is to stabilize the mind on the breath. Watching or listening to provocative media content or multitasking is *inappropriate attention*. Similarly, recall that cross-entangled craving provides moisture to encourage the growth of cognizance. Any practice that reduces craving or appropriation or develops dispassion will also limit the available moisture in which cognizance

flourishes. Ethical practices are particularly important here. Less growth reduces the mass of the *saṃsāric* snarl.

In order to bring about the cessation of cognizance, our job as practitioners is to learn to assume the epistemic perspective, to become that man with good eyesight who discovers the magician's tricks, to understand cognizance as conditioned and constructed – for the illusion gets us into trouble – and finally to let go of the illusion. Ñāṇānanda states that penetration into the conditioned nature of cognizance is like "storming the citadel of the illusory self."[13] Insight into the presumptive nature of cognizance is of utmost benefit in untangling the tangle. This is to see how the "magic show, a juggler's trick entire" actually works, "to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it," until cognizance appears "empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in cognizance?" Through contemplative practice we can see through the illusion. The result is something like this:

> Where cognizance is non-manifestive, boundless, luminous all around. That's where earth, water, fire and air find no site. There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there name and form are wholly destroyed. With the cessation of cognizance, this all is destroyed. (DN 11 i223)

The most important term for us is non-manifestive (*anidassana*), for it suggests cognizance without content, and consequently without site of descent and without growth. For instance, the Buddha uses a simile of paint used to draw pictures in the sky, whereby the monks reply that that is impossible, for the sky is immaterial and non-manifestive (*arūpī anidassano*).[14] The reference to earth, water, fire and air indicates form, generally the simplest site of cognizance. The reference to long, short, etc. exemplifies the conceptualizations of name. Ñāṇānanda suggests that the detached gaze of *arahant*, as he looks through concepts, has no object as point of focus.[15] The following is another look at non-manifestive cognizance (notice that this passage gives some insight into

13 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 38).
14 MN 21 i 127. See Nyananda (2008, sermon 7, 25) for discussion.
15 Ñāṇānanda (2012, 64).

the understanding of geology at the time of the Buddha):

> "Suppose, *bhikkhus*, there was a house or a hall with a peaked roof, with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established?"
>
> "On the western wall, venerable sir."
>
> "If there were no western wall, where would it become established?"
>
> "On the earth, venerable sir."
>
> "If there were no earth, where would it become established?"
>
> "On the water, venerable sir."
>
> "If there were no water, where would it become established?"
>
> "It would not become established anywhere, venerable sir."
>
> "So too, *bhikkhus*, if there is no lust for the nutriment edible food … contact . . . mental activity . . . cognizance . . . , cognizance does not become established there and come to growth. Where cognizance does not become established and come to growth, there is no descent of name and form. (SN 12.64)

11. Formations

Avijjā·paccayā saṅkhārā,
saṅkhārā·paccayā viññāṇaṃ.

Because of ignorance, formations,
Because of formations, cognizance.

To cognize a world, or even an object, action or event within that world, requires a long string of conceptual decisions. For instance, suppose in one of our comings or goings to or from home, certain new bright and pleasing shapes and colors appear. These are quickly perceived as balloons attached to Bif and Mildred's fence across the street. On the basis of social conventions, we cognize an imminent festive event. The next day the emergence of a young child from a car is perceived, along with brightly colored box in his hands with bow affixed. A birthday party is presumed, in fact, Little Wilbur's birthday party. Proliferation of thoughts about birthday parties past ensue, including the recollection of a shopping bag of left-over party favors on a shelf in our closet. A conditioning link potentially satisfying our persistent craving to ingratiate ourselves is intended, and as craving spreads down that link and pools around this recollection, cognizance descends to that site anew and the intention is formulated to bring that bag to Bif and Mildred as a contribution to the merriment. And so we do.

Each conceptual or inferential step – and there are many hundreds if not thousands unmentioned in this scenario – is a *formation*. Formations are conceptual choices that are generally enabled by dispositions. They are

choices, that is, volitional, because they admit of alternative perceptions or intentions. They are enabled by *dispositions* because they depend on a lot of background experience, a huge amount, about how to deal with specific kinds of situations that arise: notions about how the world works, of what birds and bunnies look like, of what televisions, scissors or books are for, of what emotive or karmic responses are socially appropriate in given situations, of what the roles of the self are, of what kinds of actions a given goal calls for, of what things are worth feeling, craving and appropriating, of what potential obstacles things pose toward our intentions, and so on. Such dispositions are learned by habituation. Formations are the building blocks of the world, the Legos® of the mind.

The Pali word for 'formations,' *saṅkhārā*, is sometimes translated into English as 'volitional formations,' 'dispositions,' 'preparations,' 'activities' or simply 'choices.' The word means literally 'put together,' indicative of the productivity and presumptiveness of formations. The word in Pali apparently also carries a connotation of spuriousness or deception.[1] Because of their volitional character, formations are often equated with *cetanā* , *sañcetanā*, or *kamma*, each of which belongs to the general semantic field of volition or intention, but each of which is likely to occur in a context slightly different from the others. I've translated *cetanā*, a name factor in our discussion of name and form, as 'intention,' which refers potentially to an elaborate plan or to a long-aspired goal.[2] An intention would be constituted of formations, which tend to be smaller and recurrent enough to be habituated into dispositions, while intentions tend to be compounded and one-off. Formations seem closer to *sañcetanā* in this sense.[3] Discussion of *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*), 'volitional action,' has been noticeably thin in the preceding ten chapters, but is closely aligned with formations, from which it finds itself injected into the downstream links.

In fact, formations are the choices that constitute perceptions or intentions, as

1 Ñāṇānanda (2015, sermon 2, 34).
2 The PTS dictionary points out that *cetanā* is often in combination with *patthanā* and *paṇidhi* (wish and aspiration), indicative of larger structures.
3 See AN 4.171, *Sañcetanā Sutta*, where it is used fairly interchangeably.

well as feelings, contact, attention and cognizance itself. For instance, perception of a particular person is conditioned by formations that are habituated through previous encounters with that person. An intention of self-nourishment is conditioned by perception of spoon and pudding and of familiarity with that recurrent situation. A particular sequence of sounds is "put together" to produce a chickadee. Formations produce everything from recognition of simple things we encounter, to engineering feats built step by step from simpler formative structures. Everything cognizable is constituted through formations, for cognizance produces it all: from roads to greed, all of the *khandhas*, *saṃsāra* itself.[4] Anything seen, heard, sensed or cognized is composed of *saṅkhārā*.[5] We are creatures of habit, both conceptual and behavioral.

1. Formations as the origin of cognizance

Without formations there is no conceptualization, without conceptualization there would be no cognizance nor any cognitive event, no name, no aggregates (except for maybe form at a bare "ghost" level):

> They [formations] construct conditioned form as form; they construct conditioned feeling as feeling; they construct conditioned perception as perception; they construct conditioned formations as formations; they construct conditioned cognizance as cognizance. (SN 22.79)

In particular, cognizance works its magic through formations much as a magician creates presumptions through props and sleights of hand. Ñāṇānanda points out the magician's instruments would have been called *saṅkhārā* in Pali, as would the spectators' expectations that they subvert.[6] A magician presents activities on stage in such a matter that each spectator is conscious of a reality that just cannot be. The magician has his scantily clad assistant lie in a box, saws the box in half, and the assistant emerges unscathed. How can that be? The answer is that the spectator has perceived

4 Hamilton (2000, 110, 218; 1996, 67).
5 MN ii231.
6 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 15).

what he sees on stage according to certain dispositions learned without the props, but the magician has utilized props and sleights of hand that serve to defy those expectations, through false bottoms, mirrors, black curtains and so on, conditions for perception not apparent to the spectator.

Formations are what we see when we view name and form, cognizance, intentions and aggregates at a very high level of resolution, the level of individual predisposed cognitive decisions, much as water droplets are what we see when we view clouds more closely. Therefore, just as cognizance produces growth of name and form, by extension it produces growth of formations. This is reflected in passages such as the following:

> Wherever cognizance becomes established and comes to growth, there is a descent of name and form. Where there is a descent of name and form there is the growth of formations. (SN 12.64)

Formations are the stuff of cognizance, both as site of descent and as product of growth. Formations, much as words or jigsaw puzzle pieces, carry content and when assembled carry the deeper content of cognizance events.

2. The sundry facets of formations.

Let's take a few paragraphs to appreciate the richness of the content of formations. Alongside *perceptions* of how the world is, formations can carry *intentions* aimed at making the world different. In between the two, it can provide *meanings*, *values* and *anticipations* which both assess the world and critically influence our actions.

Let's take a simple flower as an example. A flower is physical, and has physical properties: size, color, smell, freshness. (Recall that most of these properties are substantially projections of mind, that get objectified as "out there" along with everything else.) But a flower is even more than that: it has value, symbolizes something, has cultural meaning and is loaded with widely recognized possibilities for action. We can smell a flower, marvel at it, cut it or pick it, collect it into a carefully arranged bouquet, which can then be given

to a loved one, or to the sick or newly departed, in accord with culturally conveyed dispositions that attach to flowers. Furthermore, we anticipate that the flower will wilt, and certain dispositions give us an array of means to forestall that inevitability. A wide range of such formations concerning flowers is likely to arise with the cognizance of the flower – they define what it is to be a flower – and some may introduce objects that may become sites for further elaboration, such as **flower → craving non-wilt → seeking vase**.

Noticed that *almost* any formation that arises depends on previous experience. We are predisposed to experience the realm of flowers in particular ways. We would not perceive a visual appearance as a flower unless we had encountered flowers before. It would not occur to us to smell a flower, nor to begin cutting flowers into a bouquet, had we not seen others doing that before. Cultural expectations around the giving of flowers and the particular role of flowers in the realm of romance or grief must have been learned. Formations that do not depend on dispositions would be conceptual choices that are exceptionally creative and imaginative. Without this extensive background of previous experience such a simple thing as a flower would remain no more than a blurry form playing out in the eye and a pleasant odor in the nose.

I like to visualize dispositions as free-floating templates that can be snapped into place as needed as cognizance builds the world. Certainly many formations are produced as candidates that do not make it into the final content of perception, intention or cognizance. This is because formations typically arise as alternative hypotheses that must give way, where necessary, to a consistent, more comprehensive interpretation.[7] Readers have probably seen movies about killer robots in which the screen suddenly shifts to the robot's point of view. Yellow lines and numbers appear over the visual field, assessing dimensions, testing different parameters and other features of the environment, and finally blinking on and off with the achievement of a consistent positive interpretation. Those yellow lines and numbers are formations.

Each formation is a conceptual nugget of presumed content. The domain of flowers is rich in content; we've barely touched here on all that is required to

7 Varela (2016, 136).

successfully cognize within that realm. Similarly complex are the domains of eating dinner, house cleaning, writing this book, playing poker, sitting down to meditate, driving a car, and on and on. A TV western would hardly make sense unless the trappings of the wild west (saloons, general store, dusty streets, gunslingers, crooked tycoons, jails and lynch mobs, white hats and the extreme oddity of the showdown all well-worn clichés) were not already thoroughly habituated through previous consumption of that genre.

3. Habituation

'Dispositions' is the preferred translation of *saṅkhārā* (formations) for many authors, though new formations are more aptly considered the *application* of old dispositions to present cognition. Formations are conditioned by their own habituation; they are learned … or unlearned. This is immensely significant for our practice, for the actions of body, speech and mind are developed through the deconditioning of our unskillful habits, and through the habituation of skillful habits.

We saw some examples of the process of habituation in section 6.1 in connection with *habit patterns* (*anusaya*), which are regarded as undesirable dispositions[8] classified under the following seven types: lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, becoming and ignorance.[9] *Anusaya* is often translated 'obsession,' 'tendency' or 'disposition,' and reflects the dispositional aspect of formations as conditioning factors in present cognizance. They are broad in range, but do not seem to exhaust the range of formations. I might mention *fermentations* (*āsava*) which seem to be the most fundamental kinds of dispositions, such that eliminating them constitutes awakening. We'll look at fermentations in the next chapter.

With regard to perception, consider how a bird watcher becomes very adept at accurately identifying many species of birds over time. "That's a red-winged blackbird" is a formation. In order for that formation to arise, the bird watcher will have had to learn early on that a red-winged black bird is black, smaller

8 Hamilton (1996, 76) points out that they are uniformly undesirable.
9 AN 7.11.

that a crow and has red bars on it wings, before she would identify her first red-winged black bird. The perception of each of these three features is also a formation. Through a series of such identifications, such formations will begin to arise effortlessly and habitually for the birdwatcher; the disposition toward identifying a red-winged blackbird, certainly alongside a plethora of other species, will develop and strengthen. This disposition is likely to become so habituated that the simplest movement in a tree or a flash of color suffices for the appropriate formation to kick in. We've all gone through many similar learning processes in many different domains.

With regard to intention, consider an occasion in which someone does not satisfy some need we might have, and as a result anger arises. We decide to reciprocate through a clever plan, cobbled together from formations: "I know: I will compromise his social status through malicious slander and venomous backbiting. Haha!" The next time a similar situation arises, we remember how successful this plan was in the past, so we adapt it to the new situation, keeping the relevant formational structure. After a while we find this template has developed and become a well-established disposition, activated in a variety of similar irksome contexts, and applied with the barest thought. This pattern will have evolved from a creatively constructed intention into a disposition.

One of the Buddha's discourses featured Puṇṇa, a "dog-duty ascetic," whose practice was to curl up like a dog, to eat food on the floor, to move on all fours, and so on. Puṇṇa expected that, "By this virtue or observance or asceticism or holy life I shall become a [great] god or some [lesser] god." The Buddha corrected Puṇṇa's presumption:

> Here, Puṇṇa, someone develops the dog-duty fully and uninterruptedly; he develops the dog-habit fully and uninterruptedly; he develops the dog-mind fully and uninterruptedly; he develops dog-behavior fully and uninterruptedly. Having done so, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the company of dogs. (MN 57 i387-8)

All Puṇṇa will have achieved is an even more established disposition for

canine behavior, which he will carry with him right into the circumstances of the next life.

I find it helpful to think of formations as shaping a landscape by driving an ox cart hither and thither.[10] The wheels create ruts depending on our choices, and the tracks are dispositions. Even while we make choices, the wheels are disposed to falling into old ruts, particularly into the deepest ruts. When the wheels follow established ruts, those ruts become ever deeper and wider. If we let the ox decide which way to go, we are barely cognizant that we are doing anything at all. Unfortunately, these ruts are most typically the products of an unskillful fruitless search for personal advantage, and likely to perpetuate themselves as such into the future … until proper practice unlearns them.

However, we can, at any time and with diligence, steer toward open ground, to begin a new rut, or to choose the rut least traveled on. This is what we do in Buddhist practice. Dispositions tend to nudge us into ruts that allow us to go heedlessly into autopilot, and make it ever more difficult to do otherwise. It is through our actions that we shape our formational landscape and shape our character, and through our *deliberate* actions that we *remake* our landscape, *reshape* our character and learn to experience the world otherwise. It is through Buddhist practice that we reshape our mental landscape to liberate us from the most problematic of our habituated ruts. We probably want to choose the ruts of neither dog nor scoundrel.

The mind is the basis of all of our practice. All of our actions begin in the mind. Whether we adhere to precepts or choose to earn merit, they come from the mind, and they then reshape our mental landscape. The Buddha describes this process of strengthening dispositions:

> Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking and pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. *Bhikkhus*, whatever a *bhikkhu* frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon

10 Similarly, Ñāṇānanda, (2007, 41) refers to obsessions as ruts and grooves in a mental terrain.

> thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of ill will … upon thoughts of cruelty, he has abandoned the thought of non-cruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty.
> (MN 19 i115)

4. Formations as kamma

Kamma or (Sanskrit) *karma* is defined as volitional action, action of body, speech or mind. Since volition is mental and must arise prior to acts of body and speech, *kamma* is often simply defined as volition or intention (*sañcetanā* or *cetanā*). However, the word *kamma* is typically used in the context of ethical valuation. A *kammic* action can be of benefit, for instance, or of harm. The most important valuation is in terms of the quality of the volition, which can be *skillful* or *wholesome* (*kusala*), or *unskillful* or *unwholesome* (*akusala*). For instance, a bodily act motivated by kindness is skillful *kamma*, an utterance motivated by ill-will is unskillful *kamma*. Misconceived thought processes or false views are likewise unwholesome *kamma*.

Kamma might be identified either with the intention that is a factor of name described in section 9.3, or with the formations described in the current chapter. An intention would be the case of a plan or aspiration formulated (constructed of formations) prior to actualization by body or speech; for instance, we might formulate a plan to distribute socks to hobos. A formation would be a case of applying a disposition to making a simple choice in composing that intention. It should be noted that formations, like *kamma*, are also classified to be of body, speech or mind:

> And what, *bhikkhus*, are the formations? There are these three kinds of formations: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation. (SN 12.2)

Moreover, formations, like *kamma*, are also classified as meritorious (*puñña*)

or demeritorious (*apuñña*) – roughly skillful and unskillful – as well as neutral (*āneñja* 'imperturbable'). Moreover, these qualities carry over to the cognizance they produce:

> *Bhikkhus*, if a person immersed in ignorance generates a meritorious formation, cognizance arrives at the meritorious; if he generates a demeritorious formation, cognizance arrives at the demeritorious; if he generates an imperturbable formation, cognizance arrives at the imperturbable. (SN 12.51, see also DN 33 i217)

Furthermore, *kamma* tends to be dispositional. Repeated hateful deeds make one a hateful person, trending toward more hateful deeds. Repeated kindnesses trend toward more kindness. To the extent they are dispositional, *kamma* is appropriately classified as formations rather than as intentions, since intentions are typically compounded, one-time-only occurrences, not easily habituated. In summary, *kamma* seems to be identified ambiguously with either intention, formations, or cognizance, but it is in formations that their critical dispositional quality resides.

Where *kamma* is *not* found is in the link of craving.[11] One might expect that craving gives immediate rise to unskillful *kamma*. For instance, sensual lust might give rise to the unskillful intention to steal someone's wallet. Indeed, craving is a conditioning factor for almost all unskillful/demeritorious *kamma*, just not a *direct* conditioning factor. Craving is conceptually a need, a gap between the world and what we would like the world to be, along with associated discomfort. Although it is not in itself an intention, an intention typically arises as seeking to close the gap with the descent of cognizance that is then nourished by that craving (section 5.4). The intention is always unskillful to the extent it is motivated by, or *rooted* in, greed or aversion, the two forms of craving:

> There are these three roots of what is unskillful. Which three? *Greed* as a root of what is unskillful, *aversion* as a root of what is unskillful,

11 Johannason (1979, 103) notes that *taṇhā* rarely is said to motivate action, rather it motivates sentiment or interest and dependence.

> *delusion* as a root of what is unskillful. These are the three roots of what is unskillful. (Iti 3.1)

Delusion itself has diverse conditioning factors, discussed as ignorance in the next chapter, but which include craving:

> Greed, aversion and delusion, friend, make one blind, unseeing and ignorant; they destroy wisdom, are bound up with distress, and do not lead to *nibbāna*. (AN 3.71)

… and again …

> Greed leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from *nibbāna*. [as for greed, so for aversion, delusion] (MN 19)

Suppose that, out of greed a scoundrel formulates the wicked plan to steal shoes from hobos, repackage them and market them to teenagers. This is a one-off karmically unskillful intention, creative and clever, and composed of habituated unskillful karmic formations, which support theft, falsification and swindle, deeply rutted dispositions in this particular scoundrel's mental landscape. This allows us to make sense of the term 'old *kamma*.' *Old kamma* (*purāṇa kamma*) is a disposition toward karmic formations. It is a rut in our mental landscape that, in the case of old *unskillful kamma*, bends toward greed, aversion or delusion, a disposition that manifests in the context of greed, aversion or delusion. Theft, falsification and swindle are old *kamma* in the case of our scoundrel. Watch out.

A relevant question is: "Can we call *all* formations *kamma*?" Or, are all dispositions *old kamma*? Since *kamma* can be of body, speech or *mind*, and there are meritorious, demeritorious and imperturbable formations as determinants of rebirth, it seems an affirmative answer to these questions is in the offing. However, I know of no clear statement about this in the early texts.[12] The Buddha's statement, "The eye is old *kamma*," that we encountered

12 Ñāṇānanda (2015, S10), for one, states that it is incorrect to limit *saṅkhārā* to *kamma* as such.

in section 8.2 indicates that this term is used for dispositions in general, whether or not they have immediate ethical consequences, since the function of the eye is more closely related to perception than to intention.

Recall the simile used to describe growth produced through cognizance: that cognizance is the seed, the (four other) aggregates are the field and craving is the moisture. Given that formations constitute the aggregates, the field might just as well be formations. Significantly, *kamma* is found as the field in lieu of the aggregates in this passage:

> Thus, Ānanda, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, *kamma* is the field, cognizance the seed and craving the moisture for their cognizance to be established in an inferior realm. [As for inferior, so for middling, superior] (AN 3.76)

On the other hand, the reference to realms of rebirth in this passage suggests that formations specifically of ethical significance might be intended.

In any case, understanding the dispositional aspect of formations gives us a psychological explanation of why our *kamma* comes back to bite us, independent of any cosmological mechanisms that we might imagine are at work. The Buddha summarized this principle as follows:

> I will be the heir of whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that I do. (AN 5.57)

Well intentioned deeds work to our own benefit as well as to the benefit of others. Poorly intentioned deeds work against our own future benefit as well as against the benefit of others. The effect of one's own action accrued for oneself is called its *kammic result* (*vipāka*) or alternatively its *kammic fruit* (*phala*). Likewise, we can talk about the results or fruits of practice, for without producing future results, what would be the point of practice? So if I purposefully harm someone, it will be to my future detriment, and if I give generously to the benefit of another, it will be to my own future wellbeing.

Now, unskillful formations are rooted in greed, aversion and delusion, which

are directly tied up with craving, which is in turn tied up in suffering. Therefore, the arising of unskillful formations in the production of unskillful intentions is painful. Moreover, formations tend to repeat themselves and easily become dispositions. As we continue to behave in unskillful ways, these same dispositions and the kinds of intentions they produce are ever more likely to manifest over and over, scoring deeper and deeper ruts in our mental landscape, and becoming more definitive of our character, and of our future behavior and of our future wellbeing. Each time we fall into one of these ruts we experience the pain of the demeritorious all over again. Whereas at one point we had been a person who responded out of anger, now we suffer as an angry person. In this sense we are heir to our own deeds. We even begin to experience the health problems of an angry person. After a lifetime steered by unskillful dispositions we die in anguish and with remorse.

The opposite occurs in the case of skillful kamma. We enjoy the supra-mundane joy of a generous deed right away, and at the same time strengthen those dispositions involved in that generous act, increasing the likelihood that we will revisit that joy and strengthen that disposition even further. After a lifetime of generosity we die peacefully and without regret. Even physical beauty adheres to ethical character: kind people often exhibit a kind of angelic glow where hateful people seem perpetually under a cloud with furrowed brow. Through our *kamma* we are quite capable of creating a personal hell right here on earth … or a heaven.

5. The cessation of formations

Formations entail small presumptions as they are applied by cognizance and other cognitive factors to construct the entirety of the experienced world, but generally arise under the strong cross-entangled influence of craving and appropriation, tainted by self-serving views and actions, and by mindless proliferation. They become habituated as dispositions as they are repeated.

However, not all formations are created equal. Since we make use of formations to presume the world that we find so painful, if we select formations more skillfully, we should be able to limit the undesirable

consequences of formations. Much of this is through ethical practices that result in karmically wholesome formations:

> *Bhikkhus*, there are these four kinds of *kamma* proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What four? There is dark *kamma* with dark result; there is bright *kamma* with bright result; there is dark-and-bright *kamma* with dark-and-bright result; and there is *kamma* that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, *kamma* that leads to the destruction of *kamma*.
>
> And what, *bhikkhus*, is dark *kamma* with dark result? Here, someone performs an afflictive bodily volitional activity, an afflictive verbal volitional activity, an afflictive mental volitional activity. As a consequence, he is reborn in an afflictive world. … And what is bright *kamma* with bright result? Here, someone performs a non-afflictive bodily volitional activity, a non-afflictive verbal volitional activity, a non-afflictive mental volitional activity. As a consequence he is reborn in a non-afflictive world. … (AN 4.233)

Dark-and-bright *kamma* with dark-and-bright result is then described as a mixture of the first two, and lands us in a world that is both afflictive and non-afflictive. We aim for bright kamma through ethical practices and particularly through developing purity of mind, in consequence of which we become less under the influence of dispositions rooted in greed, aversion and delusion. We also take control of where cognizance descends through appropriate attention, providing a basis for developing virtue and insight, and avoiding proliferation or the taint of craving.

The above limits the unfortunate consequences of formations. Their cessation is the end of presumption and leads thereby to awakening:

> … And what is *kamma* that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, *kamma* that leads to the destruction of *kamma*? The volition for abandoning the kind of *kamma* that is dark with dark result, the volition for abandoning the kind of *kamma* that is bright with bright result, and the volition for abandoning the kind of *kamma*

> that is dark and bright with dark-and-bright result: this is called *kamma* that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, *kamma* that leads to the destruction of *kamma*. (AN 4.233)

The *kamma* that ends *kamma* is based primarily in contemplative practice in which we learn to see through the illusory nature of concepts and views and behold a world without presumption. To end formations is to see all conceptualizations as empty and misleading.

As with cognizance, we might question why we would want to do this. Concepts seem so helpful is many ways – they help you read this text, for instance. Once again, the Buddha, in teaching dependent coarising, is focused rather single-mindedly on spiritual concerns, on what gets us into trouble and leads to the human dilemma. Formations and *kamma* certainly are major contributors to this. We will take up in the next chapter what it is for the *arahant* to experience the end of concepts, *kamma*, cognizance and the rest.

12. Ignorance

Avijjā·paccayā saṅkhārā,

Because of ignorance, formations.

The *Dhammapada* begins:

> All experience is preceded by mind,
> led by mind, made by mind.
> Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
> And suffering follows,
> As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of an ox.
>
> All experience is preceded by mind,
> led by mind, made by mind.
> Speak or act with a peaceful mind,
> And happiness follows,
> Like a never-departing shadow. (Dpd 1-2)

Most of us experience the world at face value, as external to ourselves, but on which our wellbeing depends. The world is in fact mind-constructed: in our ignorance, we presume it to be one way, but we can presume it to be otherwise, … or not presume at all. Mind is malleable, and how we live our lives of practice makes it either corrupted or peaceful. With a corrupted mind the world is painful. With peaceful mind it is agreeable.

Ignorance is the deepest root of our conceptual cognition, and thereby of the human pathology. It is what gives us license to presume:

> In presuming, one is bound by Māra. By not presuming, one is freed from the evil one. (S35.248)

Ignorance is often summarized as not understanding the four noble truths.

> *Bhikkhu*, not knowing suffering, not knowing the origin of suffering, not knowing the cessation of suffering, not knowing the way leading to the cessation of suffering: this is called ignorance, *bhikkhu*, and it is in this way that one is immersed in ignorance. (SN 56.17)

Naturally, we can extend this to not understanding dependent coarising, for which the four noble truths are a first draft. But we have to be careful, for *Dhamma* teachings like this are themselves presented conceptually, are communicated in words, are composed of formations, are presumed by cognizance and are therefore conditioned by ignorance, the very ignorance of not knowing these teachings. The simile of the raft addresses this paradox.

> A raft, well-made, has been lashed together. Having crossed over, gone to the far shore, I've subdued the flood. No need for a raft is to be found. (Sn 1.2)

The far shore is liberation, *nibbāna*. Buddhism has what has been called a *deflationary soteriology*,[1] and the raft simile is an expression of that. We progress in our practice to eliminate this mass of suffering and to end *saṃsāra* by letting go, relinquishing and renouncing, not by taking up, gaining or appropriating. A conceptual understanding plays a necessary, but provisional, role in support of practice, which then fares on to spiritual development and leads to relinquishment of that conceptual understanding.

Recall that fully internalizing the four noble truths entails *understanding* our suffering, *abandoning* our craving, *realizing* the cessation of suffering and *developing* the noble eightfold path. Once these results are achieved, we can abandon the raft of the four noble truths, which are there not for their own philosophical sake, but only in support of the practice that leads to liberation. Through our practice we limit or bring to cessation the various links of

1 Ronkin (2005).

dependent coarising: craving and appropriation, feeling and becoming. We let go of what is too hot to handle when we clearly see that what it is we are handling is painful. In the end, we stop presuming our world.

Avijjā, Pali for ignorance, is composed of *a* 'not' + *vijjā* 'what is known,' 'knowledge of a skill or art,' 'science,' 'lore.' *Vijjā* and is related to the word *Veda*, 'the Brahmanical canon' (and also to *vedana*, 'experience,' 'feeling'). However, in practice, *avijjā* is commonly assumed more squarely to be the opposite of *ñāṇa*, 'knowlege,' a knowledge that can be refined beyond the conceptual, much like English (from Greek) 'gnosis,' with which *ñāṇa* is actually a cognate.

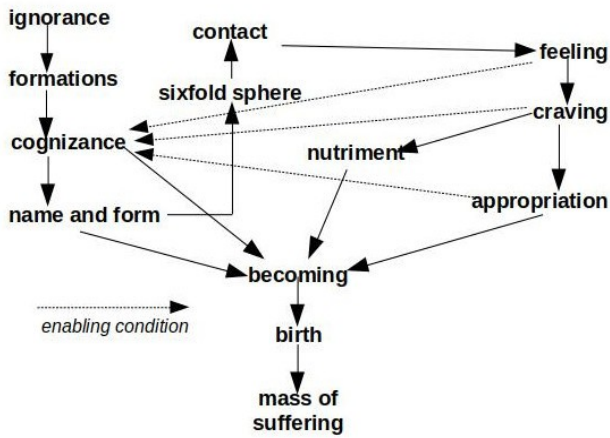
1. Ignorance as the origin of formations

All that we presume is made of formations, the building blocks of conceptualization. The dispelling of ignorance is achieved through gaining insight into what is going on in the downstream links of dependent coarising. We then let go of the associated presumptions, link by link, in the many ways described in the previous chapters, as we fully realize how they get us into trouble. Empty of what we once presumed, our whole world as we experience it – a product of formations in the cycle of cognizance and name and form – ceases and with that the whole *saṃsāric* condition.

> But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance that body does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally; that speech does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally; that mind does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally. That field does not exist, that site does not exist, that sphere does not exist, that foundation does not exist conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally. (SN 12.25)

Ignorance is the source of the entire chain, in that it fuels the cycle of cognizance and name and form from which the chain and our world unfolds. Let's review the chain with this in mind. I've included in the figure on the

following page not only the twelve-link chain, but also the most significant (there are many more) cross-entanglements that we've encountered in previous chapters. Recall that the standard chain – which the reader can easily trace snaking through this snarl – is a heuristic artifice that intentionally obscures the full complexity of the entangled nature of the human cognitive architecture. Many cross-entanglements are full-fledged conditions often equally consequential as the standard links, but happen to have been omitted to produce the linearity of the standard chain. The dotted arrows in this figure, all of which converge on cognizance, represent weaker, non-necessary conditions, which we have called *encouragements* , at least one of which is normally present where cognizance arises, that is unless they are displaced by appropriate attention.



It should be noted that the various factors fall into three groups: (1) conceptual, (2) emotive and (3) existential. Those left of center, beginning with ignorance and ending with contact, are *conceptual*: they define how we think we know what we think we know. Notice that there is a short cut to becoming, **cognizance → name and form → becoming**, that, through a cross-entanglement, accounts for the growth of our experience of the world independent of what we choose to crave and appropriate, and explains why many passages descriptive of the cycle are followed directly by implications for becoming and rebirth with no mention of craving and appropriation.

The factors right of center represent emotive responses. The emotive factors drive human behavior; in particular they manage to undermine virtue. The emotive factors also exercise a continual strong influence over the conceptual factors at cognizance itself, encouraging its growth in certain directions, twisting it around human desire. Feeling encourages the proliferation (the fishing expedition) of cognizance. Craving provides moisture for flourishing of cognizance in terms of self-interest (the hunting expedition). Appropriation encourages the presence of cognizance to guard the personal footprint. Finally, nutriment – an extension of craving for becoming – provides a continual hunger for cognitive experience for its own sake. Under these emotive influences, cognizance grows the world from formations.

The factors centered at the bottom are *existential* in that they define personal continuity; in particular they manage to keep us locked, life after life, in *saṃsāra*. A curiosity is that rebirth and *saṃsāra* are ultimately conceptual mistakes.

Formations are the small habituated and presumptive decisions that enable the entire human dilemma. They are a necessary condition for every other factor, and dispositions habituated by formation-creation are learned with respect to every other factor. Because formations are conditioned by ignorance, we tend to be rather clueless about what we are accruing at each link. We generally do not see what goes into presuming objects that we think are substantial and really existent, we really do not see how we presume a self that eludes us in direct experience, we really do not see how our craving for self-advantage and building up a footprint for personal security cause us and others suffering, we really do not see how generating intentions for security and self-advantage causes enormous harm. Yet we remain perpetually engaged in these pursuits, all the while training dispositions that keep us locked into the deep ruts of past thinking and behavior. All of this is a manifestation of ignorance. But, as we engage the knots of this snarl, recognize the emptiness of our presumptions, and recognize how our presumptions get us into trouble, we relinquish these presumptions, ignorance retreats from our lives and the links of dependent coarising and the cognitive architecture they entail dissolve. We become liberated.

In at least one sutta, ignorance itself has a condition: the *fermentations*.

> With the arising of the fermentations, there is the arising of ignorance. With the cessation of the fermentations, there is the cessation of ignorance. (MN 9 i54)

'Fermentation' is *āsava* in Pali, sometimes translated as 'in/out-flows' or 'taints' or 'cankers,' something that corrupts or oozes out as if from a sore. The fermentations are (1) desire for sensuality, (2) desire for becoming and (3) desire for ignorance (*kāmāsava* , *bhavāsava* , *avijjāsava*). They are sometimes regarded as the most deeply rooted habit patterns underlying the human dilemma, such that 'destruction of the fermentations' (*āsavakhaya*) is regarded as a synonym for liberation,[2] and 'fermentations destroyed' (*khīṇāsava*) for the *arahant.*

I don't know that it has been noticed, but the fermentations correspond closely to the cognitive architecture represented by the chain, and might well be understood as its underlying impulse: The fermentation of ignorance underlies the conceptual factors beginning with ignorance. The fermentation of becoming underlies the *existential* factors beginning with becoming. The fermentation of sensuality underlies the *emotive* factors beginning with feeling. 'Sensuality,' unlike the other two fermentations, does not correspond to the name of the instigating link in a group, but is rather the dominant theme among the emotive group, with *views* supplementing sensuality only at appropriation. Significantly, view (*diṭṭhi*) often shows up as a fourth fermentation, *diṭṭhāsava,* in many *suttas.* The fermentations therefore seem to outline the common dependently arisen human cognitive architecture that keeps us ensnarled in *saṃsāra*, with ignorance in the lead.

2. The scourge of the self

The greatest accomplishment of ignorance is the establishment "me" as a manifestation. The inception of the self is in cognizance, which by its very nature bifurcates into inner awareness and substantial outer content, the

2 MN 9 i55.

awareness event itself and something “out there” beyond cognition, inviting objectification of seer and seen. This bifurcation produces contact within name and form, in which the “seer” becomes the agent of intention as well, and in which subject and object are even more clearly distinguished. At feeling the self assumes personal interest and what is presumed to be “out there” matters as potential resources for, and potential dangers to, “me.” The self thereby becomes the basis of craving, which drives self-centered intention based in greed for self-advantage and aversion for self-preservation.

At appropriation we stake out our realm of personal self-interest and form views about how the world works, views in which “me” plays the starring role in the middle of a web of conditionality. Craving for becoming oversees this personal footprint, as a personality to be guarded and preserved at all costs. At becoming, the personality is imprinted on the broader world, already grown and shaped in terms of personal interest through the encouragements that feeling, craving and appropriation have exerted on the arising of cognizance.

Entirely presumed, the more established the self or personality becomes, the greater the personal footprint and the greater our craving, suffering and harm to others, as our self-centeredness undermines our virtue. We know something is wrong, but in our ignorance we don’t know what. It has been pointed out that all reflective traditions – philosophy, science, psychoanalysis, religion, meditation – acquire the wisdom to challenge the naive self.[3] I think this is why maturely religious people trend so strongly toward humility. But the Buddha had a unique insight into the origin of the self in human cognition, and the promotion of a practice to untangle the scourge of the self knot by knot.

3. The scourge of concepts and views

It should be noted that, although the Buddha points out painstakingly how our presumptions cause problems for us, he also scrupulously avoids making direct statements about what natural reality might stand behind such presumptions. For instance, although the teaching of non-self cautions against

3 Varela, et al (2016 , 59).

the presumption of a self, he never explicitly asserts of natural reality, "there is no self out there."[4] For the Buddha, we never know if something is "really" true or false:

> There are five things, Bhāradvāja, that may turn out in two different ways here and now. What five? Faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view. These five things may turn out in two different ways here and now.
>
> Now something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken. [as for faith, so for approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view] (MN 95 ii170)

No matter what our evidence for a view is, it is still speculation. We do well to withhold or bracket our judgments about veracity. Nonetheless, the Buddha distinguished right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) from wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi*). Right view has been described not as a correction of wrong views but as a *detached* order of seeing, to be put into practice, not to be believed in,[5] or as something to be taken seriously, but held loosely.[6]

Most views are wrong views. Recall that views are fermentations. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes views as tangles, knots and matting in the works that prevent living beings from passing beyond *samsāra*.[7] They are not to be taken seriously. Recall also that views depend on contact, entailing the self/other duality. If one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, then "wrong view is abandoned," "identity view is abandoned," and "the view of the self is abandoned."[8] A wise one has abandoned all views, because he has gotten rid of the illusion of self, and with that a point of view.[9] With the elimination of wrong views, or at least *not* taking them seriously, we eradicate mental rigidity

4 Fuller (2015, 37-8).
5 Fuller (2015, 1)
6 Cintita (2019d).
7 Bodhi (1995, 29).
8 SN 35.165-167.
9 Ñāṇānanda (2012, 37).

and cognitive attachment.[10] Nonetheless, detached, we might discern contexts in which views and concepts provide some benefit. For instance, even an *arahant* will find a concept of a self very useful to cross a busy intersection in one piece. Ñāṇānanda states, one can make use of conceptual tools, but one must continue to sharpen them until they are worn out.[11]

Alongside views, we presume objects of contact endowed with many substantial qualities. Just as we learn to hold views loosely and withhold judgments of veracity, we also practice to hold objects loosely and not take them seriously. Their fault is not that we know them to be fake, but that they get us into trouble. The effect of letting go of the conviction placed in naive contact weakens all of the downstream links: feeling, craving, appropriation, becoming, birth and this mass of suffering. What is not substantial cannot be ours, and abandoning these leads to "welfare and happiness."[12]

We can train to let go of the presumption of objects by cultivating a particular mode of perception or attention in which we view concepts or experience as *empty* (*suñña*). We saw an example of this with regard to the five aggregates: Recall from section 4.6 that as the mind stills in *samādhi*, the experienced world begins progressively to retreat from the more cognitively complex modes of awareness: from cognizance, then from formations, then from perception, then from feeling, finally leaving the bare awareness of form. With this, content shifts and the world becomes more sparse conceptually. This is a progressive process of letting go of cognitive content and finally seeing no cognizable objects at all. We presume progressively less.

The Buddha claimed that he often dwelt in emptiness and explained what that meant:[13] If we are sitting in a village we are aware of many people. But if we shift our attention to the forest, our awareness can become empty of the people. If we shift our attention to the ground, our awareness can become empty of the forest. If we shift our attention to space our awareness can

10 Fuller (2015, 7).
11 Ñāṇānanda (2012, 37).
12 SN 35.101, SN 35.138.
13 MN 121.

become empty of the ground, and so on. Effectively, at each step, what was previously in awareness retreats into the background. Ultimately, one can dwell in "pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness." Thanissaro describes emptiness:

> Emptiness is a mode of perception, a way of looking at experience. It adds nothing to and takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events. You look at events in the mind and the senses with no thought of whether there's anything lying behind them.[14]

This is to dwell without presumption, without formation and particularly without the natural attitude. Ñāṇānanda defines presumption as a stage in sense perception when one egotistically fancies a perceived "thing" to be out there in its own right, which results in the subject/object duality, and perpetuates conceit "I " and "mine."[15] We might be aware of our conceptualizations in the absence of presumptions, seeing them as empty of what we otherwise would presume to be behind the conceptualizations. In this way we fully comprehend the mentally constructed nature of the world, which is to say, its dependent coarising. As Hamilton describes it, this is to acquire insight into the very nature of cognition, into how our experience operates.[16] She equates this to *knowledge and vision of how things are*, in Pali *yathābhūtañāṇadassana*, 'such' *yathā* + 'being' *bhūta* + 'knowledge' *ñāṇa* + 'vision' *dassana*. This is an extremely important achievement in the Buddha's teaching, that brings us oh so close to awakening. She notes that this is not insight into *ontology*, or what we are calling natural reality, but into *epistemology*, how we come to experience things.[17] To see the world in this way renders our experiential world groundless, we lose the relatively fixed coordinates that we presume are there in the outer world.[18]

14 Thanissaro (2011b).
15 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 10).
16 Hamilton (2000 , 41-2).
17 Shulman (2014, 62) points out that almost all scholars miss that the Buddha's interest was psychological and soteriological. His interest was not in what is going on "out there" in natural reality.
18 The Buddha's espousal of the insubstantiality of concepts and the unreliability of views strikes us modern people as quite radical. However, Hamilton (2000, 38) points out that this claim in Buddha's India might not have been such a hard sell,

4. The cessation of ignorance

Once, in response to a question from a deity named Rohitassa, who in a former life had had the paranormal ability to travel to distant places like greased lightning, about whether one can travel to the end of the world in order to overcome *saṃsāra*, the Buddha replied:

> I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by traveling to know or see or reach a far end of the world where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear. But at the same time, I tell you that there is no making an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception and mind, that I declare that there is the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

That path of practice is, of course, the noble eightfold path, the universal elixir. Taking the path to the end of the world is to up-root all presumptions, to give up whatever we think is real, for …

> Presumption is a disease, presumption is a tumor, presumption is a dart. By overcoming all presumptions, *bhikkhu*, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die; he is not shaken and does not yearn. For there is nothing present in him by which he might be born. (MN 140 iii246)

In the endeavor to give up presumptions, the contemplative practices come to the fore, in particular the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, observation of phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*), and the *jhānas*. To end ignorance, we contemplate the teachings particularly with regard to the upstream links of dependent coarising.

> *Bhikkhus*, I will teach you the way that is suitable for uprooting all presumptions. … And what, *bhikkhus*, is the way that is suitable for

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for as its been pointed out that the Indian worldview more generally presupposed that everday percepts did *not* correspond to natural reality.

> uprooting all presumptions? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* does not presume the eye, does not presume in the eye, does not presume from the eye, does not presume, "The eye is mine." He does not presume forms … eye-cognizance … eye-contact … and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition – whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant – he does not presume that, does not presume in that, does not presume from that, does not presume, "That is mine." For, *bhikkhus*, whatever one presumes, whatever one presumes in, whatever one presumes from, whatever one presumes as "mine" – that is otherwise. The world, becoming otherwise, attached to becoming, seeks delight only in becoming. "He does not presume the ear … He does not presume the mind … and as to whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition … he does not presume that, does not presume in that, does not presume from that, does not presume, "That is mine." For, *bhikkhus*, whatever one presumes, whatever one presumes in, whatever one presumes from, whatever one presumes as "mine" – that is otherwise. The world, becoming otherwise, attached to becoming, seeks delight only in becoming. "Whatever, *bhikkhus*, is the extent of the aggregates, the elements, and the sense spheres, he does not presume that, does not presume in that, does not presume from that, does not presume, "That is mine." Since he does not presume anything thus, he does not appropriate anything in the world. Not appropriating, he is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains *nibbāna*. He understands: "Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being." This, *bhikkhus*, is the way that is suitable for uprooting all presumptions. (SN 35.31)

Not presuming, we learn not to look *at* the things we formerly presumed, but to look *through* them. We understand that concepts or formations are modes in which mental and material life has been arrested and split up in realm of ideation.[19] We recognize that our concepts cannot reliably get behind anything but themselves, that they are *empty* of real content.

19 Ñāṇānanda (2012, 84).

As we develop in this direction our cognitive architecture has undergone a radical restructuring and this entails certain profound experiences, sometimes interpreted as religious or mystical experiences: seeing the non-duality of subject and object, seeing emptiness in all things, moving and speaking without intention, no longer accruing *kamma*.[20] The Buddha had little to say about the content of such experiences, but many claim they are more veridical than ordinary experience.[21]

5. How to be an arahant

The question naturally arises, "Is the cessation of conceptualizing and cognizing really a good idea?" There might be an enterprising reader out there who, until reading this book, had been entertaining a plan to travel abroad to seek out, phrase book in hand, one of those rare *arahants* living in seclusion deep in the forest among the tigers and pythons, hoping to bask in the radiance of his wisdom and to receive final instructions for reproducing that *arahant's* achievement. Now, however, that enterprising reader might already be reconsidering that this *arahant*, with the cessation of formations, of conceptualization, of thought, and of cognizance, might be incapable of functioning in any conventional way, beyond perhaps sitting under a tree and drooling into his alms bowl. Certainly he would be incapable of the delusive formations needed to discern this enterprising reader as more than the arising of a mirage or a bubble out of the emptiness all around, and would lack, in any case, the wherewithal to assemble the concepts necessary for conducting a conversation, much less for imparting a single sentence of *Dhammic* wisdom. Does an *arahant* really have no cognizance? Was the Buddha like that for over half of his life?

Recall from section 3.6 that an *arahant* has attained, while he still lives, what is called *nibbāna with fuel remaining* (*sa-upādisesā nibbāna*), which has been likened to a fire that has been extinguished, but in which the embers are still

20 Loy (2019) offers a thorough discussion of pushing the limits of conceptualization, and particularly of nonduality, particularly in Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Taoism.

21 Loy (2019, xv).

warm, like a ghost fire. He experiences this world with joy no matter how it unfolds, yet also with kindness and compassion toward the suffering of the beings that live there. In fact he *appears* quite active on behalf of others, appears decisive, responding immediately and fluidly to the needs of others, because the slightest hint of a self or of self-interest that might stand in the way is absent. He does this even though he no longer believes in the concept of a "being," and his activities are likewise beyond *kamma*.

Nibbāna with fuel remaining is an intermediate stage before *nibbāna* with no fuel remaining (*anupādisesā nibbāna*) or final *nibbāna* (*parinibbāna*) at physical death. A living *arahant* has not yet reached *parinibbāna*, and so the enterprising reader's conclusions might well be mistaken. Here is what I suspect it is like for this *arahant*: An *arahant* is the person with good eyesight who uncovers the magician's tricks. She experiences what the magician manifests but without conviction, without appropriation – or rather with the barest residual appropriation – as something like a ghost world. She has not, however, forgotten what it is like to be deluded by the magician's tricks. Similarly, the *arahant* remembers houses, but they have become like children's sandcastles: pretend. Although she no longer believes in "I," nor in "you," nor in "that other guy," the arahant does remember what all these concepts used to represent. *Arahants* use worldly language much as parents use child's language, without entanglement or presumption.[22] The world *we* take to be real is unreal to the *arahant*; it is experienced by the *arahant* through residual formations, residual feelings, residual cravings and residual appropriations that the *arahant* remembers as *once* being real in her own experience, but which she no longer takes as real. She now sees right through them. Most importantly, she understands that some concepts serve a degree of usefulness in interacting with the world, while others are noise and distractions or worse: perversions. She is astute in her judgment.

I imaging that the world that *we* are convinced is really real, is as unreal to the *arahant* as a movie world is to us. Notice that we generally make a distinction between a movie or fictional word and the real word, in that, although we experience either in remarkably similar ways, we do enjoy a high degree of

22 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 12).

detachment in the case of a movie world: we know it's not really *really* real. Our skin can crawl through a horror movie and our eyes can drench our popcorn in tears as drama unfolds on the screen. We may experience deadly fear, loss of a loved one, anxiety and tension, remorse and rage, and yet we honestly report at movie's end, "I really *enjoyed* that movie." We would be traumatized if the same things were to happen in the "really real world." What happens when we see the "really real" world as also make-believe? The "real world" is for the *arahant* like the movie world is for us. In the meantime, the wordling's attitude is quite different toward the world that the rest of us presume is really real, in which we do *not* enjoy the horrifying tear-jerker in which most of us actually live.

Closing Verse

Yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā;
Ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa,
Ath'assa kaṅkhā vapayanti sabbā;
Yato pajānāti sahetudhammaṃ.

When indeed things become manifest,
To the ardent, the meditator, the brahmin,
Then all his doubts disappear,
Since he knows each causal factor.

Yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā;
Ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa,
Ath'assa kaṅkhā vapayanti sabbā;
Yato ato khayaṁ paccayānaṁ avedi.

When indeed things become manifest,
To the ardent, the meditator, the brahmin,
Then all his doubts disappear,
Since he has seen the eradication of conditions.

Yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā;
Ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa;
Vidhūpayaṁ tiṭṭhati mārasenaṁ;
Sūriyo va obhāsayam antalikkhaṁ.

When indeed truths become manifest,
To the ardent, the meditator, the brahmin,
Having smoked out Mara's army he stands,
Like the sun shining in the sky. (Ud 1-3)

B. Alternative interpretations

The *present account* of dependent coarising, which I will call the epistemic interpretation presented in this book, is in the company of a number of alternative interpretations of this teaching, both recent and ancient, but in fact one of which has been dominant for most of the life of the *Sāsana*. I would like to consider the relative merits of these alternatives. The present account brings a set of important criteria to bear, which can also serve also as criteria in assessing alternative interpretations: (1) consistency with what the Buddha actually says, particularly what he repeatedly says in the discourses, (2) consistency with the Buddha's method, also communicated in the discourses but worth highlighting, (3) cognitive and philosophical coherency, (4) comprehensiveness (important since the chain is identified with the *Dhamma* itself), and (5) conceptual and terminological relatedness to the thought world of the Buddha's time.

My task in the first section will be simply to catalog the alternatives and offer a very brief assessment of each. Space prohibits going into detail about each. But following this section I will devote the remainder of the chapter to a more detailed discussion of the most formidable alternative to the present account, what is commonly called the *three-lives interpretation*. The three-lives interpretation is dominant throughout most of the Buddhist world, and has been for almost the entire history of Buddhism. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate that it is also deeply flawed as a reflection of the Buddha's intent, for it fails to catch almost every criterion for assessing these alternatives that we throw at it.

1. Overview of alternative interpretations

Three lives. Let's begin by entering the three-lives interpretation into our catalog. This interpretation is found, for instance, in the Theravāda school in the commentary on the *Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga* as well as in chapter seventeen of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. Likewise, it is found in the early Sarvastivādin and Mahāsanghika Abhidhammas and even in chapter twenty-six of Nāgārjuna's great second-century work on emptiness, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. It lives on to this day, unquestioned by many practitioners and scholars alike.

It is known as *the three-lives interpretation* because it distributes the arising of the twelve links over two births and three lives, attributing a significantly different role to most of the upstream half of the chain than found in the present account. The three lives are broken up as follows:

(1) **ignorance → formations →**

(2) **cognizance → name and form → sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving → appropriation → becoming →**

(3) **birth → this mass of suffering**

The specific role given to cognizance at the initiation of the second life is particularly striking, for cognizance travels into the womb carrying the yet-to-be-realized fruits of *kammic* activity (formations) from the previous life, there to unite with the fetus (name and form) and in this way to give rise a viable psycho-physical organism. The five physical sense faculties – eye, ear, etc. – then grow in the fetus to produce a capacity for contact with the things of the world (sixfold sphere) in the second life. The remaining links, **contact → feeling → craving → appropriation → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering**, proceed more or less as in the present account, and therefore with a *second* birth in the penultimate of the twelve links to produce a third life of suffering. We will return to the popular three-lives interpretation below in more detail to assess its relative merits.

The process of rebirth. The three-lives interpretation gives more weight to

the process of rebirth than the present account. However, an alternative interpretation sees the chain as *entirely* about a single rebirth. The tenth or eleventh century *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra* provides an interpretation whereby the segment **ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form → sixfold sphere** relates to a period of "dwelling in solitude." **Contact → …** then begins the process of turning away from solitude to the recognition of other beings, in which **craving** has to do with the desire or aversion toward each future parent, according to which gender is determined. Further development leads to finding a birthplace at **becoming**. **Birth** and **this mass of suffering** round out the process.[1] Mazard argues for what seems to be a related interpretation, but provides few details.[2] From the perspective of the present account this interpretation implicates highly speculative, unverifiable underlying mechanisms that overstep the practicality and subjectivity of the Buddha's method, and seems uninterested in insubstantiality.

A single moment. A striking alternative to the three-lives interpretation that appeared in the very early history of Buddhism saw the entire chain of dependent coarising as playing out in every moment. This *momentary* interpretation is listed in Vasubandhu's Sarvastivadin *Abhidharmakośa* – alongside the "*prolonged*" interpretations[3] (of which the three-lives interpretation would be an example) – and in Buddhaghosa's commentary to the *Vibhanga* chapter of the Theravāda *Abhidhamma.* It is clearly a product of the *Abhidharma* tradition, which gave a lot of consideration to *momentariness*, and had a tendency to reduce even complex phenomenological events to single *mind-moments*.

A serial process. Rather than a momentary process, the *serial interpretation* describes a process by which each link gives rise to its immediate downstream link in short order before ceasing, a process that ripples over and over down the chain. It is mentioned in Vasubandhu's Sarvāstivādin *Abhidharmakośa,* and in recent times it has been promoted by the great Thai scholar-monks

1 Wayman (1971, 193-4).
2 Mazard (2011).
3 Hirakawa and Groner (1990, 178).

Ajahn Payutta and Ajahn Buddhadāsa.[4]

Characteristically the serial interpretation makes no reference to the physical rebirths found in the three-lives interpretation, neither at **cognizance → name and form** nor at **becoming → birth**. For Buddhadāsa name and form is the psycho-physical organism, much as in three-lives, but the role of cognizance is to help mind and body to change in preparation for action. The sixfold sphere is then primed to experience suffering.[5] For Payutto, name and form are described as readied to assume qualities harmonious with that cognizance.[6] The six senses are similarly primed.

It should be noted that, in either of these accounts, **cognizance → name and form** cannot give rise to what we understand as the psycho-physical organism per se, which presumably persists as cognizance arise and ceases, nor to its cumulation or growth. Rather, what arises with cognizance is **→ priming** or **→ preparation**, relatively minor psycho-physical processes. Similar comments apply to **name and form → sixfold sphere**.

For Buddhadāsa, **→ becoming** is the arising of the "I" concept, birth the full-blown birth of the "I" concept and decay and death (what the present account calls 'this mass of suffering') is the arising and passing away of the "I" concept.[7]

In the present account the direction of conditionality does not correspond entirely to a serial flow, for conditionality is a technique of analysis not a relation assumed to have uniform properties. For instance, in **formations → cognizance**, **cognizance** is embedded in a complex of cross-entangled triggering and triggered factors, in which formations are a kind of resource cognizance draws on to perform its function. In **cognizance → name and form**, both factors dance around each other like painter and painting-in-progress, as name and form accumulates the products of cognizance. **Name and form → sixfold sphere → contact** represents three alternative ways of

4 Payutta (1994), Buddhadāsa (1992).
5 Buddhadāsa (1992, 33).
6 Payutto (1994, 50).
7 Buddhadāsa (1992, 23, 33, 44).

conceptualizing the same thing, so these factors are co-temporal. In **appropriation → becoming**, becoming accumulates the products of repeated **appropriation**, like adding rice to a heap of rice. In **birth → this mass of suffering**, **this mass of suffering** similarly accumulates the products of repeated birth. However, **contact → feeling → craving** might well exhibit the suggested ripple.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu interprets dependent coarising in a unique manner that resembles the serial account to a degree, but then admits of a far more complex dynamics.[8] Much like Buddhadāsa and Payutto, **cognizance → name and form** describes the triggering of a response from within the psycho-physical organism, rather than the arising of the whole organism, **appropriation → birth** takes on a particular role or identity in the present situation, and **birth → old age and death** (for us, = **this mass of suffering**) is a matter of dropping that identity. However, he points out the presence of many *feedback loops* (indicated, for instance, by the presence of **contact** and **feeling** both as links, and as factors within the structure of **name and form**) that produce a complex interplay and unexpected behaviors, much as a complex nonlinear system. Feedback loops seem largely equivalent to cross entanglements in the present account. The resulting system also scales up temporally, that is, it might take moments to ripple through all of the factors, or it might take years or many lifetimes. At the scale of lifetimes, **appropriation → birth** is actually rebirth.

A theory of causation. The term ‘dependent coarising’ is most commonly used in the early texts to refer to the twelve-link chain and its variants, and possibly to similar chains, for instance that of “transcendent dependent coarising,” or of the chain that splits off from the standard chain at feeling to spin out into proliferation. In contrast, the term is used, particularly within the Mahāyāna school, much more generally as a theory of causation or as a metaphysical universal that applies to natural reality as well as to the experiential world.

A composite of lists. Early twentieth century scholar Erich Frauwallner seems

8 Thanissaro (2008p).

to have been the first to suggest that the twelve-link chain is a kind of historical patching together of two or more serial lists from different sources, that fail adequately to cohere.[9] The existence of these composite interpretations certainly reflects a wide-spread modern dissatisfaction with the dominant three-lives interpretation of the chain, and the temptation – in the absence of a visible alternative – to throw up one's hands and attribute the perplexity of the twelve links to a cruel mistake of history.

Bucknell (1999) works out the most detailed hypothesis about how this composite might have arisen. He notes that cognizance arises in two different ways and attributes these to two separate original sources.

(1) **ignorance → formations → cognizance.**

(2) **sixfold sphere + name and form → cognizance.**

(1) is the upstream segment of the chain and (2) is equivalent to the definition of sense contact within the sixfold sphere as **eye + form → eye-cognizance**. Indeed, he argues that **name and form** refers to the objects of **cognizance** (much as in the present account, but not as in the three-lives interpretation). He then suggests that in an historical attempt to integrate these two chains into a single chain, the composite emerged:

ignorance → formations → cognizance →
name and form → sixfold sphere → …

Bucknell views the result as incoherent, since **cognizance → name and form** requires that cognizance must exist *before* the object of cognizance arises. Note, however, that this result is the only coherent one from the epistemic perspective, or in accord with the parameter of subjectivity, by which objects arise in the experiential world only as a component of awareness events. Bucknell, along with others, also seems also to be confused by the cross-entanglements inherent in the snarl of dependent coarising.

A parody of Brahminical teachings. A variant of the composite of lists interpretation proposes that source for the initial segment of the chain is the

9 Collins (1990, 108).

Brahmanical Vedic or Upanaṣadic tradition. Wayman suggested half a century ago that the sequence **ignorance → formations → cognizance → name and form** reflects the account of the origin of the experiential world as presented in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.[10] Wayman actually does not maintain that that dependent coarising is a composite, only that a fragment of it may have been influenced from another source. Jurewicz discovered a similar correlation with the origin story of the *Ṛgveda*, regarding the early links as a kind of parody of Brahmanical teachings.[11] The correlations with non-Buddhist sources noted by Wayman and Jurewicz may simply be due to overlapping content, since the early links in the present account do tell a kind of origin story, the origin of the conceptual world as we experience it. Its subjective perspective is also at play in the tradition of the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*. The correlation may or may not have been deliberate on the Buddha's part, but I cannot see that it in any way detracts from the critical role of these upstream links in the meaning construction of the present account.

Epistemic interpretations. What is strikingly absent in the interpretations discussed so far, especially given that dependent coarising is intended as a comprehensive account of the *Buddhavacana*, are the teachings that are "deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness," the ones the Buddha predicted would disappear.[12] The epistemic interpretations see the links **ignorance → … → contact** as primarily concerned with understanding the mentally constructed nature of the outer world. The parameters of subjectivity and insubstantiality in the Buddha's method direct us away from taking the outer world at face value. This prioritizes the epistemically oriented investigation of how it is that we presume the world "out there" to be the way we presume it is.

The present account is an epistemic interpretation, very much influenced by the epistemic perspective of Katakurunde Ñāṇānanda (1940-2018),[13] without whose groundbreaking insights the present account would not have come to

10 Wayman (1971, 194, 198).
11 Jurewicz (2005).
12 SN 20.7.
13 Ñāṇānanda (1997, 2008, 2015).

be. The epistemic interpretation overlaps in a substantial number of links with alternative interpretations, but provides a deeper and more comprehensive account of cognition, and is also consistent with all four parameters of the Buddha's method. I claim that the epistemic interpretation best reflects the Buddha's intent. It remains to persuade the skeptical, who may be unconvinced by the arguments presented in the previous chapters.

2. Critique of the three-lives interpretation

Space prohibits a detailed critique of all of these alternative interpretations. I will therefore devote the remainder of this chapter to the most formidable among them. Much of what I write here carries over to other alternatives. The defining characteristic of the three-lives interpretation is an upstream rebirth. The most cited passage in the discourses in support of this is found in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*: (*Great Discourse on Origination*):

> "If cognizance were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name and form take shape in the womb?" "No, Lord." …
>
> "If the cognizance of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name and form reach growth, expansion and flourishing?" "No, Lord." (DN 15, ii62)

The three-lives interpretation provides a simple biological interpretation of the passage above that refers to cognizance and name and form, but is also carried downstream to a biological interpretation of a third link: the sixfold sphere. However, three issues should give us pause, which arise in light of a broader understanding of *Buddhavacana*.

(1) cognizance in this interpretation, which is called *rebirth-linking cognizance* in the commentarial literature, seems to have little to do with how cognizance is described virtually everywhere in the *Suttas*.

(2) what goes on in the womb seems to be theoretical speculation about an underlying mechanism with little direct relevance to daily experience or practice, and therefore oversteps the Buddha's method with regard to practicality and subjectivity. Moreover, the theory is certainly not original to the Buddha and is not particularly insightful or clever. Below I will give an alternative explanation of what might be going on in the mother's womb.

(3) Biology occupies a significant segment of the chain, which is elsewhere said to represent a comprehensive account of *Buddhavacana*, thereby leaving a lot of explaining to do in the few remaining links. Where does the explanation of what is "deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness" fit into these remaining links?

3. What is cognizance?

The first of the three complaints about this three-lives account is that it attributes to cognizance properties that are dissimilar from any description of cognizance found in the *Suttas*. The formations, which represent karmic activities from the previous life, are carried as a bundle by cognizance, which then descends into the womb to consummate the conception of the psycho-physical organism. Cognizance as presented in the *Suttas*, in contrast, *invariably* arises and disappears contingent on the arising and falling of other phenomenal factors. No mention is made of any capacity for large-scale *kammic* storage, nor for the endurance or spatial presence necessary to travel to and to enter a womb. Each instance of cognizance in the *Suttas* is what we can call "*lightweight*," descending contingently in an instant within one of the sense spheres, producing growth of the experiential world at the site of descent and disappearing.

Accordingly, later traditions, are compelled to distinguish a special kind of "*heavyweight*" cognizance, named in Pali *paṭisandhi viññāṇa*, '(rebirth-) connecting cognizance,' a term unknown in the *Suttas*. This naturally raises the question, in view of the passage above, "Does this heavyweight cognizance appear only once, at the moment of conception, or is it carried along throughout life?" The second part of the passage, about the young boy or girl, would indicate that it is carried far beyond conception, unless at this point we have reverted to referring to lightweight cognizance. The impression we easily get from a biological perspective is rather that a persistent heavyweight cognizance serves as something like a life-force necessary to sustain the viability of the psycho-physical organism throughout life.

Now, here is where things get particularly puzzling: In a well-known passage

in the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta* the Buddha chastises a monk, Sāti, in no uncertain terms for holding a "pernicious" view very similar to the biological interpretation just described above. His view is:

> "As I understand the *Dhamma* taught by the Blessed One, it is the very same cognizance which transmigrates, and not another." (MN38 i258)

This view is roundly condemned by the other monks and by the Buddha. The Buddha asks Sāti to explain what he thinks this transmigrating cognizance is, to which he replies:

> "It is that which speaks, feels and experiences the result of good and bad kamma, here and there." (MN38, i258)

Cognizance had become objectified into a self for Sāti, much like the metaphysical presumption of a persistent heavyweight cognizance, or the metaphysical presumption of a psycho-physical organism. The Buddha accordingly clarifies that he has only taught a cognizance that is contingent, is dependently arisen, and arises in one or another of the sense spheres, that is, the Buddha has only taught lightweight cognizance.

The *sutta* about the wayward monk Sāti is quite long and complex, showing evidence of compilation from various sources,[14] but further on it presents a surprising, more detailed and more obviously biological discussion of conception in the womb:

> Monks, the descent of the embryo occurs with the union of three things. … when there is a union of the mother and father, the mother is in her season, and a *gandhabba* is present, then with this union of three things the descent of the embryo occurs. (MN 38, i265-6)

Some scholars seem to think that this passage *endorses* the already dismissed role of cognizance in transmigration. My view is the opposite, that, rather than speculating anew on biological processes, it acknowledges that such

14 Wynne (2018).

speculation exists outside of the *Buddhavacana*, outside of the parameters of the Buddha's method. This passage is simply presented as an example a simpleminded metaphysical folk theory, that may or may not be true, but is not *Buddhavacana*. Notice that this passage shares none of the significant vocabulary of the "descent of cognizance" passage: there is no mention here of cognizance nor of name and form, so we can infer it is not about these. The non-Buddhist term *gandhabba* is obscure in this context, but was presumably known in the folk culture of the Buddha's time, maybe as a life force, and apparently involved in birth. This relationship of the *gandhabba* passage to the earlier account of Sāti is not explained, and its purpose seems obscured by the intervening material in this long *sutta*. But it seems to carry the clear message, "We are talking *Buddhavacana* here, forget about your folk presuppositions."

4. Why would the Buddha teach three lives?

The second complaint with regard to the biological account of the "descent of cognizance" passage is that it serves no practical purpose, but that instead it represents natural-philosophical speculation about underlying mechanisms not verifiable in direct experience. In short, it oversteps the Buddha's method in terms of both practicality and subjectivity.

A lesson in biology provides no material for contemplative practice, that is, no teachings about what can be observed in moment-to-moment examination of experiential phenomena, nor therefore related to the development of knowledge and vision of things as they really are. It may indeed be useful for the practitioner to adopt the perspective of life-to-life continuity as a motivational framework for practice, but that function is already fulfilled in the birth, the link described in chapter two.[15]

The third complaint with regard to the biological account is that it fails to teach us anything about the constructedness of our experiential world, that is, the Buddha's teachings related to emptiness and non-self. The twelve links of

15 Buddhadāsa finds it hard to imagine how the three-lives interpretation could be practiced in any way, since it is a purely theoretical interpretation. (Jones, 2009, 247).

dependent coarising are said to be comprehensive, equated with the entirety of the *Dhamma* itself,[16] and alleged to be profound and difficult to understand.[17] In the present account these most profound teachings are the main focus of the upstream half of the chain and serve to demonstrate the presumptive nature of contact, which otherwise causes horrendous problems. In the alternative three-lives interpretation these teachings are displaced by a rather useless lesson in biology. Worse than that, it may actually *encourage* the objectification of a person, a psycho-physical organism fully equipped with sense faculties, persisting for the duration of this life, ready to fulfill its role in contact. The three-lives interpretation to a significant degree *trivializes* dependent coarising, by displacing some of the Buddha's most profound teachings with a rather naive lesson in biology.

5. What is going on in the mother's womb?

In short, it is hard to fathom why the Buddha would teach the mechanism for conception in the womb, and the interpretation under which he allegedly does this is difficult to reconcile with the Buddha's method that characterizes the rest of *Buddhavacana*. So, what did the Buddha mean in this passage?:

> "If cognizance were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name and form take shape in the womb?" "No, Lord." …
>
> "If the cognizance of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name and form grow up, develop and reach maturity?" "No, Lord." (DN 15, ii62)

The context of this passage is not one in which we would expect an exposition on biology or conception. It is rather in the midst of a walk through the links of dependent coarising in reverse order. For each adjacent pair in the chain the Buddha has been arguing for the necessity of the condition,

$$\mathbf{link}^{x} \rightarrow \mathbf{link}^{y},$$

by establishing that in any situation, the following holds,

16 MN28 i191.
17 DN15 ii55.

if there were no link^{x}, no link^{y} would appear,

and keeping the following formula in reserve,

if link^{x} ceases, link^{y} will cease.

This is consistent throughout the text and these two formulas are for demonstrationg a conditional relation. For instance, **birth → sickness, old age and death** because in any situation "if there were no birth, then sickness, old age and death would not arise," and **contact → feeling** because in any situation "if contact were to cease, then feeling would cease."

The more immediate context in which the passage above occurs is that in which the causal relation,

cognizance → name and form

has just come up for examination. Now, as we have seen in chapter ten, teasing apart cognizance and name and form is challenging, because cognizance and name and form are so intimately intertwined, caught in a cycle of *mutual* conditioning:

cognizance ↔ name and form

This is much like the mutual conditioning in an internal combustion engine between the ignition of fuel and the turning-over of the engine (or properly, crankshaft), whose conditioning structure is much like the above:

ignition ↔ turn-over

The Buddha's challenge is to establish,

If there were no cognizance, no name and form would appear.

But this requires a context in which name and form has not already appeared as a condition for, and result of, cognizance. HIn order to do this, he sets up a thought experiment: he asks us to imagine a point at which nothing is going on, but in which the cycle needs to be effectively kick-started, at which time

there is no prior cognizance nor prior name and form – and raises the question, "Could name and form arise?" This corresponds in our analogy to the question, "Could turn-over arise without ignition?" Now, the individuated experiential world in a particular person's life indeed needs to be kick-started in just this way exactly once, presumably at the point sentience first arises, which would presumably find the person in the womb. The answer (in either case) is "no." That alone suffices to establish conditionality. But the Buddha does not stop there: he also chooses to establish the second formula,

> If cognizance ceases, name and form will cease.

To do this he asks us to consider a later point, long after the engine has been kick started and is running (by which time this particular person is a boy or girl), and asks, "If cognizance were to cease, would name and form reach growth, increase and flourishing?"[18] Since name and form is cumulative, the language here specifies that no new name and form is created. The answer is again "no"; if we don't cognize name and form, it will not grow new name and form, as explained already in the course of this book. His argument is complete.

This is the simple logic of the Buddha's argument. It says nothing interesting about biology, other than to set up the thought experiment with the presupposition that sentience first arises during the period of gestation in the womb (not necessarily, it will be noticed, at biological conception, since sentience might arise later). Exactly how the kick-start occurs is not clarified: we know how it works for an internal combustion engine, but for in the Buddha's method that would be useless speculation beyond the parameter of subjectivity.

The three-life interpretation oversteps the Buddha's method in terms of practicality and subjectivity. It also fails to investigate the constructedness of objects of contact that insubstantiality addresses. We therefore can conclude that it does not reflect the Buddha's intent, but rather must have arisen in an

18 Name and form reaching growth, increase and flourishing (*vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullaṃ*) is precisely the language used to describe the growth phase of cognizance in section 3.4 and section 10.1.

historical setting in which the Buddha's method had degraded, and in which the Buddha's teachings on insubstantiality had become obscured.

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Glossary

Terms in ‘single quotes’ are alternative translations of a Pali word. Underlined terms refer to entries in this glossary. Chapter and sections given in **bold** (e.g., **4.5.**) lead to further reading withing this book. The twelve entries marked with £ are links in the chain.

Abhidhamma, ***Abhidharma***, elaboration of the *Dhamma* in various early sects, tending toward philosophical speculation and reification.

Aggregates, ‘five aggregates,’ *khaṅdha*, categorizes range of experience (aka the world) in terms of five modes of awareness: form, feeling, perception, formations, cognizance. **1.2, 3.4, 4.1, 4.6, 9.1**.

Aggregates of appropriation, *upādānakkandha,* what has been appropriated in the world as “me” or “mine.” = personality. **1.2, 5.1**.

Annihilationism, *ucchedavāda*, the view that the soul or self ceases to exist at the time of physical death. Contrasts with eternalism, middle way. **2.5**.

Anusaya, see habit pattern.

Appropriate attention, *yoniso manasikāra*, skill in attention. **9.3**.

Appropriation,£ *upādāna*, ‘attachment,’ ‘clinging,’ identification as “me” or “mine.” See aggregates of appropriation. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **4.**

Arahant, fully awakened person.

Assessment, see seeking.

Attention, *manasikāra*, objective center of cognitive activity. Factor of name. See also life cycle (of cognizance), appropriate attention. **9.3**.

Awareness, mental or cognitive event that carries content or meaning, that is, refers to something outside of itself. **3.3.**

Becoming,£ *bhava*, 'existence,' growth of the experiential world and the consolidation of a personality within that world. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **3**.

Birth,£ projection of what we have become into *saṃsāra*, that is, rebirth. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **2**.

Buddha's method, a set of methodological parameters underlying the *Buddhavacana*. Parameters: practicality, subjectivity, insubstantiality, conditionality. **A**.

Buddhavacana, the words of the Buddha or more generally any teachings expressive of the Buddha's intent. The early Buddhist texts are widely regarded as close to *Buddhavacana*, most later schools less reliably so, whether through innovation, assimilation or misunderstanding.

Carnal, *sāmisa*, 'of the flesh,' particularly attributed to feelings leading to craving, appropriation, etc., contrasts with non-carnal, *nirāmisa*. **6.2**.

Chain, see twelvefold chain.

Cognition, the process, primarily mental, by which we experience the world conceptually or plan actions in the world. **3.3**.

Cognizance,£ *viññāṇa*, comprehensive presumptive awareness event. See life cycle. Factor in aggregates, factor in twelvefold chain. **3.4, 10**.

Condition, *paccaya*, 'dependency,' 'conditional relation,' an observable pattern of co-occurence between two experiential factors. **A.4, 1.1.**

Conditionality, a parameter of Buddha's method which represents the primary tool for discovering consistencies and structure as dependent co-occurances. **A.4, 1.3.**

Constructedness, see meaning construction.

Contact,£ encounter between "me" and an object of the world. See naive contact, sense contact. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **7.**

Content, see awareness. = meaning.

Craving,£ the neediness triggered by what is contacted and felt. Types: sensuality, becoming, and unbecoming. Factor in twelve-fold chain. See also nutriment. **5.**

Cross-entanglement, a conditional relation, particularly involving at least one link in the twelvefold chain, that is not included among the eleven conditional relations that define the chain. **3.5**.

Cycle, vatta, 'whirlpool,' dynamics of mutual dependence involving name and form and cognizance

Dependent co-arising, *paṭicca samuppāda*, 'dependent origination,' 'conditioned genesis,' the network of conditionality, particularly the twelvefold chain of dependent co-arising. **1.3.**

Descent (of cognizance), *okkanti*, 'appearance.' See life cycle.

Discourse, *sutta*, a Dhamma talk or sermon of the Buddha or of an early disciple of the Buddha. See early Buddhist texts, *Buddhavacana*.

Downstream, forward order, following factors in sequence from conditioning to conditioned in the twelvefold chain, in the direction toward this mass of suffering. **1.3**.

Dukkha, suffering, pain, painful. See feeling. **1.**

Early Buddhist texts, the earliest identifiable stratum in modern scholarship often attributed to the Buddha or to his very early disciples regarded as including the first four Pali discourse collections (DN, MN, AN and SN), substantial parts of fifth (KN), substantial parts of the *Vinaya* and equivalent texts the Chinese canon, but largely excluding Abhidhamma works. See Sujato and Brahmali (2014)

Empty, *suñña*, absence of a particular feature, most commonly pertaining to absence of self, absence of substantial objects. **12.4.**

Encouragement, a non-necessary but enabling or suggestive condition. **3.4**.

Entanglement, a simile for the disorderly network of conditional relations that characterize cognition. Also = snarl, tangle. See condition, cross-entanglement. **3.5.**

Epistemic perspective, seen with regard to how we come to know or presume what we know or presume, particularly the cognitive basis of experience of the outer world; the perspective of meaning construction in contrast to the objective perspective, which takes meaning at face value. **A.3.**

Eternalism, *sassatavāda*, the view that the soul or self is constant and

endures indefinitely. Contrasts with annihilationism, middle way. **2.5.**

Eye, a sense faculty, used in this book to illustrate the common properties of all sense faculties.

Factors of awakening, *bojjhanga*, unfolding of a series of meditative states that begins with mindful investigation and results in *samādhi* and equanimity. **A.4.**

Feeling,£ *vedanā*, 'sensation,' 'hedonic tone,' affective tone associated with aspect of the experiential world along a preference scale: pleasurable (*sukha*), painful/suffering (*dukkha*) and neither painful nor pleasurable/ neutral (*adukkham-asukha*). A factor within the twelvefold chain, within name and within the aggregates. **6.**

Fermentation, *āsava* 'in/out-flows,' 'taints,' 'cankers,' the most deeply rooted habit patterns underlying the *saṃsāric* condition. Factors: desire for sensuality, for becoming, for ignorance and often for view. **12.1.**

Fire, a common simile for becoming. *Nibbāna* is literally the extinguishing as a fire. *Upādāna* ('appropriation) also means 'fuel.' **3.6, 4.1**.

Form, *rūpa*, undifferentiated, pre-conceptual awareness, sometimes specifically by the eye, at the level of bare awareness, or raw data. A factor within name and form, within the sixfold sphere, and within the aggregates. **9.3.**

Formations,£ *saṅkhārā*, 'volitional formations,' 'dispositions,' 'preparations,' 'activities,' 'choices,' conceptual choices, generally following established habit patterns, including volition or *kamma*. Factor in twelve-fold chain, in the aggregates. **11.**

Four noble truths, *cattāri ariya-saccāni*, a foundational teaching that relates suffering and craving as the problem and the noble eightfold path as the resolution. **1.1.**

Growth (of cognizance), also 'growth, increase and flourishing,' *vuddhiṃ virūlhiṃ vepullaṃ*. See life cycle.

Habit pattern, *anusaya*, 'obsession,' 'tendency' or 'predispositions,' habituated patterns of cognitive behavior. **1.6, 11.3.**

Ignorance,£ *avijjā*, failure to see the delusive nature of the world as almost all of us experience it. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **12.**

Impermanence, *anicca*. See perversions.

Inner –, *ajjhatta*, mental or cognitive. Contrasts with outer –.

Inner sphere, the sense faculties, eye, ear, and so on. **8.0.**

Inner world, the realm of experienced mental events. **7.0.**

Insubstantiality, a parameter of Buddha's method which acknowledges that experiencing things as real does not entail experiencing real things. **A.3.**

Intention, *cetanā*, 'active thought,' 'intention,' 'purpose,' 'will,' plans, aspiration or thought underlying action. **9.3**.

Jhāna, any of four levels of *samādhi*.

Kamma, Sanskrit: *karma*, volitional or intentional action of body speech or mind, or simply volition itself. Classified as ethically wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*). See old *kamma*. **11.4.**

Khaṅdha, see aggregates.

Knowledge and vision of how things are, *yathābhūtañāṇadassana*, advanced state of insight, brings us close to awakening. **12.3.**

Life cycle (of cognizance), two successive phases of the event of cognizance: descent and growth. Descent determines a site of cognizance (*viññāṇaṭṭhita*) in the world. Descent is controlled by attention. Growth produces additional content in the world relevant to that site. **3.4.**

Link, any factor in the twelvefold chain.

Maññati, ***maññatā***, see presumption.

Mass of suffering, *dukkhakkhandha*, amassing of suffering over many lives, *saṃsāra*. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **1.**

Meaning, see awareness. = content.

Meaning construction, derivation of the content of cognitive events. **3.3.**

Middle way, *majjhimā paṭipadā*, an alternative between two seemingly irreconcilable positions, particularly the noble eightfold path (between the pursuit of mortification of the body and the pursuit of hedonism), dependent co-arising (between eternalism and annihilationism), and between being and non-being. **2.5**.

Mindful observation, *satipaṭṭhāna*, literally 'attendance with mindfulness,' most often 'foundations of mindfulness,' refined method of meditative contemplation, often equated with *vipassanā*.

Naive contact, contact as experienced in the link contact, and distinguished from sense contact. Naive contact is in accord with the natural attitude. **8.0.**

Name, *nāma*, conceptual awareness, as process and content. Factor in name and form. Component factors: feeling, perception, intention, attention, contact. **9.**

Name and form,[£] *nāmarūpa*, cognitive factors that, together with cognizance, produce the world of experience, or alternatively the content of that world. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **9.**

Natural attitude, set of presumptions associated with naive contact, that natural reality is roughly how it appears to us in experience and consists of substantial objects, and includes a self. **7.2**.

Natural reality, whatever exists or is true "out there" independent of awareness. **A.2, A.3, 7.2.**

Nibbāna, awakening, end of suffering, end of *samsāra*. See fire.

***Nibbāna* with fuel remaining**,*saupādisesā*, stage before physical death in which some links are residually active. **3.6, 12.5.**

***Nibbāna* with no fuel remaining**, *anupādisesā*, also *parinibbāna*), after physical death chain has ceased altogether. **3.6, 12.5.**

Noble eightfold path, **the path**, an outline of advanced Buddhist practice. Factors: right understanding, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right *samādhi*. **1.1.**

Non-fashioning, *atammayatā*, not appropriating personal assets or talents. **4.6.**

Non-self, *anatta*. See perversions.

Nutriment, *āhāra*, hunger for experience leading to becoming. Factors are edible food, contact, mental activity, and cognizance. **5.5.**

Objective perspective, seen with regard to what is taken as true or existent "out there" in natural reality, in contrast to the epistemic perspective, which asks how we know. **A.3.**

Old kamma, learned dispositions influencing new *kammic* choices. Result or fruit of kamma, See *kamma*. **11.4.**

Outer –, *bahiddhā* or *bāhira*, what is experienced as belonging to natural reality.

Outer sphere, the sense fields: form, sound, odor, and so on. **8.0.**

Outer world, the realm of experience presumed to be true or to exist independent of any awareness of it, how natural reality appears to us. **7.0.**

Outlook, assumptions that motivate one's actual behavior, whether one believes them to be actually true or not. Contrasts with viewpoint. **2.4.**

Pain, **painful**, suffering, *dukkha* 'dissatisfaction,' 'stress.'

Papañca*. See* **proliferation**,

Parameter, see Buddha's method.

Parinibbāna , see *nibbāna*.

Paṭicca samuppāda, see dependent co-arising.

Personal footprint, = personality, = aggregates of appropriation, what we have a personal stake it, what we have appropriated as "me" and "mine."

Personality, *sakkāya*, 'personal identity,' 'embodiment,' 'identity,' 'sense of self.' Personal footprint accrued through appropriation. Factor alongside growth in becoming.

Perception, *saññā*, conceptualization or naming on the basis of familiarity. Factor within name and within the aggregates. **9.3**.

Perversions, ways of misperceiving of four kinds: permanence in what is impermanent, pleasure in what is suffering, self in what is non-self, beauty in what is loathsome. **7.3.**

Planning, see seeking.

Pleasure, **pleasurable**, *sukha*.

Practicality, a parameter of Buddha's method which states that the *Buddhadhamma* is limited to that which supports practice and produces benefit. **A.1.**

Presumption, *maññatā*, imagination, conception, particularly in accord with

the natural attitude, 'presume,' *mañña*ti. **3.3.**

Principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology, the noted tendency for cosmology to reflect Buddhist psychology. **2.2.**

Projection, attribution of inner factors of the inner world to the outer world. **7.4**.

Proliferation, *papañca*, mind running wild, sometimes translated as 'obsession.' **6.3.**

Samādhi, meditative stillness, 'concentration,' 'absorption,' I prefer 'mental composure.' *Jhānas* are levels of *samādhi*.

Saṃsāra, 'faring on,' 'circulation' or 'returning again and again,' in reference to suffering one life after another, or more generally, being stuck in a cycle of suffering. **2.0.**

Satipaṭṭhāna, see mindful observation,

Seeking, goal-directed cognition, in the presence of craving, including assessment of the situation and planning of action. **5.4.**

Sense contact, contact as defined within the sixfold sphere, and distinguished from naive contact. It is a probe by sense faculty of a sense field to produce cognizance of meaningful content, e.g., eye + visual form → eye-cognizance [similarly for ear, nose, tongue, body and mind]. **8.0**.

Sense faculty, Probe that achieves sense contact. Factors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. In this text 'eye' is used generally to stand for any of the sense faculties. **8.0**.

Sense impression, front-line impingement of the world. Factors: form, sound, odor, taste, tactile sensation, phenomenon. **8.0**.

Sense sphere, see sixfold sphere.

Sensuality, *kāma*, what we presume will provide a support for pleasure or gratification for us in a very broad sense. **5.3.**

Site (for descent of cognizance), *viññāṇaṭṭhita*, see growth.

Sixfold sphere,£ *saḷāyatana*, '(six) sense bases,' arrays experience in terms of sense channels, provides basis for sense contact, process of awareness from the viewpoint of the senses. Six sense spheres: eye sphere, ear sphere, nose sphere, tongue sphere, body sphere, mind

sphere. Factor in twelve-fold chain. **8.**

Snarl, = entanglement.

Subjectivity, a parameter of Buddha's method which states that the scope of *Buddhadhamma*, its practice and its benefit is limited to the world as we experience it. **A.2.**

Suffering, **pain**, *dukkha*, 'stress,' 'dissatisfaction,' 'unpleasantness,' 'dis-ease.' Opposite: *sukha*, pleasantness, happy. **1., 6.**

Sutta, = discourse.

Tangle, = entanglement.

Three-lives interpretation, the dominant alternative interpretation of the twelvefold chain of dependent co-arising. **B.**

Transcendental dependent coarising, extension of the standard twelvefold chain that traces how we transcend *saṃsāra*. **1.4**.

Twelve links, = twelvefold chain.

Twelvefold chain (of dependent co-arising): ignorance → cognizance → name and form → sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving → appropriation → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering. See dependent coarising. **1.3.**

Unbecoming, *vibhava*, removal of factor from personality, cessation of existence. **5.6.**

Upaniṣads, a set of Brahmanical texts composed before and after the time of the Buddha.

Upstream, reverse order, following factors in sequence from conditioned to conditioning in the twelvefold chain, in the direction toward ignorance. **1.3**.

Viewpoint, assumptions one actually believes to be true. Contrasts with outlook. **2.4.**

Vipassanā, 'insight,' process of *Dhamma*-informed meditative investigation, often identified with mindful observation.

Volition, *sañcetanā*, conceptual or behavioral choices at a building-block level. Contrasts with intention, as a more complex level. See formations, intention. **11.0.**

World, *loka*, phenomenal world or the world as we experience it. = the

aggregates, = the sixfold sphere. Contrasts with natural reality. See inner and outer. A.2.

Worldling, *puthujjana*, common person, one who has not heard nor practiced the *Dhamma*.

Yoniso manasikāra, see appropriate attention.

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Bhikkhu Cintita is an American-born Burmese-ordained Buddhist monk. He enjoyed an academic career in theoretical linguists, cognitive science and artificial intelligence, before devoting himself full-time to Buddhist understanding and praxis. He studies, meditates, teaches and writes in Austin, TX and Chisago City, MN USA.

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A Culture of Awakening: the life and times of the Buddha-Sasana. (2014, also in Italian translation).

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