

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

Ajahn Brahm
Bodhinyana Monastery, October 2002*

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMĀ-SAMBUDDHASSA



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INTRODUCTION

The Buddha's teaching called *paṭicca-samuppāda*, usually translated as **dependent origination**, is fundamental to the Dhamma (Truth) awakened to by the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. The Buddha is recorded to have said:

“One who sees dependent origination, sees the Dhamma. One who sees the Dhamma, sees dependent origination.”¹

Furthermore, the understanding of dependent origination is an integral part of the delusion-shattering insight that brings one to the state of ‘one who has entered the stream’ (*sotapanna*), destined for full enlightenment within a maximum of seven more lives. It is stated by the Buddha that one who has entered the stream may be considered as possessing five attributes:²

1. Unshakeable faith in the Buddha, as opposed to other religious leaders.
2. Unshakeable faith in the Dhamma, as opposed to other religious beliefs.
3. Unshakeable faith in the Sangha, the enlightened members of the monastic community.
4. Very high standard of morality, “dear to the enlightened ones”.
5. Accurate understanding of dependent origination, and its corollary *idappaccayata* (causality).

Therefore it is fair to say that the correct understanding of dependent origination can only be known by the enlightened ones, that is by the streamwinners, once returners, non returners and arahants. This goes a long way to answering the question why there is so much difference of opinion on the meaning of dependent origination.

In this essay I will discuss the meaning of the twelve factors that make up the standard description of dependent origination. Then I will analyse the nature of the causes linking each pair of neighbouring factors, using a Western model of causality. Having explained what the Buddha meant by dependent origination, I will then examine perhaps the most interesting question “Why did the Buddha place such importance on dependent origination? What is its purpose?”. In this final section, I will propose that the function of dependent origination is threefold:

1. To explain how there can be rebirth without a soul.
2. To answer the question “What is life?”.
3. To understand why there is suffering, and where suffering comes to an end.

So let us begin by seeing what the Buddha meant by dependent origination.

1. DEPENDENT ORIGINATION—STANDARD DESCRIPTION

Avijjāpaccayā, bhikkhave, saṅkhāra; saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ; viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ; nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanāṃ; saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso; phassapaccayā vedanā; vedanāpaccayā taṇhā; taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ; upādānapaccayā bhavo; bhavapaccayā jāti; jātipaccayā jarāmaṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti. Evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti. Ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, paṭiccasamuppādo.

Avijjāya tveva asesavirāganirodhā saṅkhāranirodho; saṅkhāranirodhā viññāṇanirodho; viññāṇanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho; nāmarūpanirodhā saḷāyatananirodho; saḷāyatananirodhā phassanirodho; phassanirodhā vedanānirodho; vedanānirodhā taṇhānirodho; taṇhānirodhā upādānanirodho; upādānanirodhā bhavanirodho; bhavanirodhā jātinirodho; jātinirodhā jarāmaṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā nirujjhanti. Evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti.

“From delusion as condition, volitional formations (come to be); from volitional formations as condition, consciousness; from consciousness as condition, name-and-form; from name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; from the six sense bases as condition, contact; from contact as condition, feeling; from feeling as condition craving; from craving as condition, clinging; from clinging as condition, existence; from existence as condition, birth; from birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

But from the remainderless fading away and cessation of delusion comes cessation of volitional formations; from the cessation of volitional formations, cessation of consciousness; from the cessation of consciousness, cessation of name-and-form; from the cessation of name-and form, cessation of the six sense bases; from the cessation of the six sense bases, cessation of contact; from cessation of contact, cessation of feeling; from the cessation of feeling, cessation of craving; from the cessation of craving, cessation of clinging; from the cessation of clinging, cessation of existence; from the cessation of existence, cessation of birth; from the cessation birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”³

1.1. The meaning of the twelve factors, as defined by the Buddha

It is important for us to understand exactly what the Buddha meant by these twelve terms. Fortunately, when the Buddha taught the Dhamma, he also explained in great detail what he meant by what he said. Admittedly, some terms would be used in slightly different contexts in different suttas. The *Nidāna Saṃyutta*,⁴ however, is a collection of suttas that are completely concerned with *paṭicca-samuppāda*. The second sutta in this collection is called the *Vibhanga Sutta*.

Vibhanga means the explanation of the terms used. As far as dependent origination is concerned, in this sutta the Buddha gives the clearest explanation of what each of these terms mean.

Using Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the *Vibhanga Sutta*,⁵ the meaning of these twelve terms will now be explained. Also, with the aid of some other suttas, the meaning of two of the most controversial terms will be clarified.

First of all, the Buddha said:

“What, bhikkhus, is aging-and-death? The aging of the various beings in the various orders of beings, their growing old, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of vitality, degeneration of the faculties: this is called aging. The passing away of the various beings from the various orders of beings, their perishing, their break up, disappearance, mortality, death, completion of time, the break up of the aggregates, the laying down of the carcass: this is called death. Thus this aging and this death are together called aging-and-death.”

It is quite clear here that the Buddha was talking about death in the usual meaning of the term, not a death in a moment (which is a term that some people mistakenly use). It means the death that you call an undertaker to settle.

“And what, bhikkhus, is birth? The birth of the various beings into the various orders of beings, their being born, descent [into the womb], production [*abhinibbatti* = rebirth], the manifestation of the aggregates, the obtaining of the sense bases. This is called birth.”

The meaning of the term “various orders of beings”, is fully brought out by a passage in another sutta specifically dealing with dependent origination, the *Mahānidāna Sutta*:⁶

“With birth as condition there is aging and death. How that is so, Ananda, should be understood in this way. If there were absolutely and utterly no birth of any kind anywhere—that is, of gods into the state of gods, of celestials into the state of celestials, of spirits, demons, human beings, quadrupeds, winged creatures, reptiles, each into their own state—if there were no birth of beings, of any sort into any state, then, in the complete absence of birth, with the cessation of birth, would aging and death be discerned?”

“Certainly not, venerable sir.”

Again, it is quite clear here that birth means what we would normally consider it to be: the arising in the human realm of a being in the womb.

“And what, bhikkhus, is existence [*bhava*]? There are these three kinds of existence: sense-sphere existence, form-sphere existence, formless-sphere existence. This is called existence.”

Because this term, *bhava*, is often misunderstood I will explain its meaning in further detail.

The above classification of existence into three realms is sometimes called the *tiloka*, the three worlds. The *kāmaloka* are the worlds dominated by the five senses. They are the human realm, the animal realm, the realm of ghosts, the hell realms and the deva realms up to, but not including the *brahmaloka*. The *rūpaloka* are the silent worlds wherein one exists in the jhana attainments. They begin with the *brahmaloka* and include several other realms based on higher jhanas. The *arūpaloka* are the worlds of pure mind, wherein one exists in one of the four immaterial attainments. The *rūpaloka* and *arūpaloka* are the jhana experience attained at the moment of death that continues for vast periods of time, transcending cataclysms of universes and counted in, sometimes, thousands of aeons.

To understand the full meaning of *bhava* one has to go to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*,⁷ where Venerable Ananda asks the Buddha, “What is *bhava*?” The Buddha responds by questioning Ananda: “If there was no kamma ripening in the *kamaloka*, would there be existence in the realm dominated by the five senses?” He then asks the same about the other two realms: “If there was no kamma ripening in the *rūpaloka*, would there be existence in the *rūpaloka*? If there was no kamma ripening in the *arūpaloka*, would there be existence in the *arūpaloka*?” Accordingly, Ananda replies “certainly not” to each question. The Buddha then further explains: “So, Ananda, you can regard kamma (the actions of body, speech and mind) as the field, you can regard consciousness as the seed, and you can regard craving as the moisture. Thus, for beings who are blinded by ignorance and fettered by craving, there is the establishment of the consciousness in this lower realm, in the *hīnadhātu* (ie. the realms dominated by the five senses), (and so forth for the two higher realms of existence). Thus there is in the future more existence (*punabbhava*), rebirth (*abhinibbatti*)”. Here the Buddha was giving the simile of plants growing, with kamma as the field, and consciousness as the seed, which is fed by the moisture of craving to explain how *bhava* is a cause for rebirth (*jāti*).

“And what, bhikkhus, is clinging [sometimes translated as ‘fuel’]? There are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to [wrong] views, clinging to rules and vows, clinging to a doctrine of self. This is called clinging.

And what, bhikkhus, is craving? There are these six classes of craving: craving for forms [sights], craving for sounds, craving for odours, craving for tastes, craving for tactile objects, craving for mental phenomena. This is called craving.

And what, bhikkhus, is feeling [*vedanā*]⁸? There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, feeling born of tongue-contact, feeling born of body-contact, feeling born of mind-contact. This is called feeling.

And what, bhikkhus, is contact? There are these six classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, mind-contact. This is called contact.

And what, bhikkhus, are the six sense bases? The eye base, the ear base, the nose base, the tongue base, the body base, the mind base. These are called the six sense bases.

And what, bhikkhus, is name-and-form [*nāma-rūpa*]? Feeling, perception, volition [*cetana*], contact [*phassa*], and attention [*manasikāra*]: this is called name. The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. Thus this name and this form are together called name-and-form.

And what, bhikkhus, is consciousness? There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. This is called consciousness.

And what, bhikkhus, are the volitional formations [*saṅkhāra*]? There are these three kinds of volitional formations: the bodily volitional formation, the verbal volitional formation, the mental volitional formation. These are called the volitional formations.”

The meaning of *saṅkhāra* is sometimes debated because this is a word that does have many meanings in different places. If one wishes to see the word *saṅkhāra* used as a cause for rebirth, one can go to the *Saṅkhārupapatti Sutta*.⁹ *Saṅkhārupapatti* means ‘rebirth according to *saṅkhāra*’. Here, the Buddha talks about how certain beings arise in different realms according to their planned actions of body, speech or mind. These are actions of body, speech and mind, which are accompanied by will (*cetana*); and it is this kamma which gives rise to future rebirth. This is called *saṅkhāra*.

In another sutta¹⁰ the Buddha talks about how, if a person who has ignorance (*avijjāgato*, who has gone to ignorance) plans a meritorious *saṅkhāra* (*puñṇaṃ saṅkhāraṃ abhisankaroti*), his consciousness goes to a meritorious place. If he plans a demeritorious *saṅkhāra* (*a-puñṇaṃ saṅkhāraṃ abhisankharoti*), his consciousness goes to an *apuñṇa* place, a demeritorious place. If he plans an *āneñja saṅkhāra* (*āneñja* being something in-between), then his consciousness goes to that place accordingly. Again, this shows that there are three types of *saṅkhāra*—meritorious, demeritorious and in-between—and that *saṅkhāra* is the working of kamma. In much the same way that kamma can be made by body, speech and mind, so too there are three types of *saṅkhāra*—body, speech and mind *saṅkhāra*.

“And what, bhikkhus, is ignorance [*avijjā*]? 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.”

1.2. Causality and the twelve factors

Alongside dependent origination, the Buddha also taught *idappaccayata*, causality. The standard formula of causality is as follows:

“When this is, that is. From the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, that is not. From the ceasing of this, that ceases.”¹¹

*Iti imasmim̐ sati idam̐ hoti, imassuppādā idam̐ uppajjati.
Imasmim̐ asati idam̐ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idam̐ nirujjhati.*

The first feature of such causality that must be emphasized is that there can be a substantial time interval between a cause and its effect. It is a mistake to assume that the effect follows one moment after its cause, or that it appears simultaneously with its cause. In Buddhist causality, the cause and its effect can be separated by any length of time.

The above two Pali phrases *imasmim̐ sati, idam̐ hoti*, and *imasmim̐ asati, idam̐ na hoti* are grammatical constructions called in Pali ‘locative absolutes’. In Professor A.K. Warder's *Introduction to Pali*,¹² the author states categorically that, in such a grammatical construction, the subordinate action (the cause) can precede or be simultaneous with the main action (the effect). As far as the Pali is concerned, the grammar allows the cause to precede the effect by any length of time interval.

For example, in the *Nidāna Saṃyutta*¹³ the Buddha states:

“When birth is, death is. From the arising of birth, death arises.”

It has been shown already that in the *Nidāna Saṃyutta* ‘birth’ and ‘death’ are to be understood in their common meanings. It is clear that birth and death do not happen simultaneously. Nor does birth precede death by just one moment. Birth can sometimes precede death by many years—80, 90, 100, even 120 years.

I have emphasized this point because of the misunderstandings about dependent origination presented by some modern authors on the subject. The fact remains that there can be a substantial time interval between a cause and its effect.

2. ON THE MEANING OF SANDIṬṬHIKA AND AKĀLIKA

Some modern writers have suggested that the effect must arise simultaneously with its cause, or arise just one moment after, for this to qualify as a Dhamma which can be ‘seen here and now’ and be ‘immediate’. They argue that since the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*, and dependent origination is one of the central features of the Dhamma, therefore dependent origination must be *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*. But does *sandiṭṭhika* mean ‘seen here and now’? Does *akālika* mean ‘immediate’? As I will now show, these translations can be misleading.

The passage in the suttas which gives the clearest indication of the meaning of *sandiṭṭhika* is in the *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*.¹⁴ In this sutta, the dangers of sensual pleasures are described by seven examples of consequences to be experienced in this life, and all seven are described as *sandiṭṭhika*. This is in contrast to the consequence of sensual pleasures described in the sutta's next paragraph that are to be experienced after death and are called *samparāyika*. Clearly, *sandiṭṭhika* and *samparāyika* are antonyms (words with opposite meanings). In this context, *sandiṭṭhika* must mean ‘visible in this life’. Although some Pali words carry slightly different meanings in different contexts, this is rare and it seems reasonable to assume that *sandiṭṭhika* means ‘visible in this life’ in all other contexts as well.

Sandiṭṭhika and *kālika* (the opposite of *akālika*) are used together in a revealing phrase which occurs three times in the suttas.¹⁵ The phrase, with minor variations in each sutta is as follows:

“I don't run after what is *kālika*, having abandoned what is *sandiṭṭhika*.
I run after what is *sandiṭṭhika*, having abandoned what is *kālika*.”

N'ahaṃ sandiṭṭhikaṃ hitvā, kālikam anudhāvāmi.
Kālikaṃ hitvā, sandiṭṭhikaṃ anudhāvāmi.

In these three contexts, *sandiṭṭhika* and *kālika* are clearly direct opposites, antonyms again. Thus it is reasonable to assume that the opposite of *kālika*, *akālika*, must be synonymous with *sandiṭṭhika*. That is, *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* have essentially the same meaning. They both refer to that which is ‘visible in this life’.

For example, the Buddha encouraged such practices as *marāṇassati*, the meditation on death, and many monks, nuns and lay Buddhists practise this method of meditation with liberating results. *Marāṇasati* is certainly a part of the Dhamma that is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*. So, if these two Pali words really did mean ‘here and now’ and ‘immediate’, *marāṇasati* would be next to impossible—one would need to be dead to be able to contemplate death in the ‘here and now’, ‘immediately’! Obviously, *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* do not have such a meaning. They both refer to something visible in this life, as opposed to what may only be known after one has died.

It is because each one of the twelve factors of dependent origination can be seen in

this life, and their causal relationship can also be seen in this life, that dependent origination spanning more than one life qualifies as a Dhamma that is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*.

You may not be able to directly see your own death, but you can see death occurring every day in the hospitals, on the television or in the newspapers. You don't have to wait until some afterlife to understand the truth of death. You have also seen birth, maybe not your own, but that of many others. You can verify the truth of birth in this very life. Then by seeing human beings in their various stages from birth to death, you can verify in this life that birth is the cause of death. This is why the part of dependent origination 'with birth as a condition, aging and death' is a Dhamma that is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*, to be seen in this life.

You cannot see all the twelve factors in this moment, because they do not occur all in one moment. But you can see a manifestation of each factor in this very life. That, also is why dependent origination is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*.

You can also see in this life the causality that links each pair of neighbouring factors. Through the development of penetrating insight empowered by tranquil meditation, you can see in this life how feeling (*vedanā*) gives rise to craving (*taṇha*). You can similarly witness how craving gives rise to clinging/fuel (*upādāna*). And you can likewise understand in this life how craving and clinging/fuel produces existence (*bhava*) and birth (*jāti*) in the next life.

The way that one sees such causality stretching beyond death may be explained by paraphrasing the Buddha's simile in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*.¹⁶ One can know from data seen in this life that a person's conduct will lead them to an unpleasant rebirth in just the same way that one can know that a person walking along a path with no fork must fall into a pit of coals further along that path. Thus, even the causality that links connected factors on either side of death also qualifies as a Dhamma which is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika*, to be seen in this life.

I have discussed this issue at length here only because the misunderstandings over the meaning of *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* have resulted in a misconceived rejection of the Buddha's clear intention to let his dependent origination span more than one life.

3. CAUSALITY AND THE NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS

I have already introduced the Buddha's formula for causality, *idappaccayata*, earlier on in this essay. Here I will show how *idappaccayata* relates to what in Western logic we call a 'necessary condition' and a 'sufficient condition'. This modern analysis of causes throws much light on *idappaccayata* and dependent origination.

A necessary condition is a cause without which there would be no effect. For example, fuel is a necessary condition for a fire. Without fuel there can be no fire. The necessary condition is expressed by the second half of *idappaccayata*:

“When this is not, that is not. From the ceasing of this, that ceases.”

A sufficient condition is a cause that must always produce the effect. For example, a fire is a sufficient condition for heat. A fire must cause heat. The sufficient condition is expressed by the first half of *idappaccayata*:

“When this is, that is. From the arising of this, that arises.”

In order to demonstrate the difference between these two types of causes I will use the example just given. Fuel is a necessary condition for fire, because with the ceasing of fuel, the fire ceases. But fuel is not a sufficient condition for fire, because fuel doesn't always produce fire—some fuel remains unlit. Fire is a sufficient condition for heat, because fire must cause heat. But fire is not a necessary condition for heat, because without fire there can still be heat—heat can be generated from other sources.

So a necessary condition is a cause without which there would be no effect, and it is expressed by the second half of *idappaccayata*. A sufficient condition is a cause that must produce the effect, and it is expressed by the first half of *idappaccayata*. Together they make up Buddhist causality.

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The 'forward' order of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, when analysed, shows that only some of the first eleven factors are a sufficient condition for the factor following. Those factors linked by a sufficient condition, meaning that the following factor must come about sooner or later as a consequence of the preceding factor, are as follows:

- *avijjā* - *saṅkhāra*
- *viññāṇa* - *nāmarūpa*
- *nāmarūpa* - *saḷāyatana*
- *saḷāyatana* - *phassa*
- *phassa* - *vedanā*
- *taṇha* - *upādāna*
- *bhava* - *jāti*
- *jāti* - *dukkha*

Thus, when there is *avijjā*, there will inevitably occur some kamma formations inclining to rebirth. When there is *viññāṇa*, there must be *nāmarūpa*, *saḷāyatana*, *phassa* and *vedanā*. When there is *taṇha*, there will be *upādāna*. Also, *bhava* is sufficient to produce birth (see AN3.76). Then, most importantly, *jāti* must produce *dukkha*. Having been born one must suffer *dukkha*. Therefore, the only escape from suffering is to cease being reborn. As Venerable Sariputta said:

“In brief, to be reborn is *dukkha*, not to be reborn is *sukha* (happiness).”¹⁷

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It is of interest now to look at the links that are not sufficient conditions.

Saṅkhāra is not a sufficient condition for rebirth linking consciousness and the stream of consciousness that follows. This is because, having produced many rebirth-inclining kamma formations early on in one's life, it is possible to make them all null and void (called ‘*ahosi kamma*’) with the attainment of arahant, which attainment eliminates the stream of consciousness that would otherwise begin at rebirth.

The fact that *upādāna* is not a sufficient condition for *bhava* is similar to *saṅkhāra* not being a sufficient condition for *viññāṇa*. Through the development of the noble eightfold path as far as full enlightenment, no new *upādāna* are generated and all previous *upādāna* becomes ineffective in producing a ground for a new existence or *bhava*. The *upādāna* previous to full enlightenment becomes, as it were, ‘*ahosi upādāna*’.

Even more obvious, *vedanā* is not a sufficient condition for *taṇha*. *Vedana* are certainly experienced by arahants, but they never generate *taṇha*. Moreover, for ordinary people, not every *vedanā* produces craving.

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Some Western Buddhists have proposed that the ‘forward’ order of *paṭicca-samuppāda* can be halted by ‘cutting’ the process between *vedanā* and *taṇha*. Often I have heard some suggest that rebirth can be avoided through using *sati* (mindfulness) on *vedanā* to stop it generating *taṇha* and the following factors of *paṭicca-samuppāda*. This is, in my understanding, misconceived on two grounds.

First, the ‘forward’ order of *paṭicca-samuppāda* was never intended to demonstrate how the process should be ‘cut’. The ‘forward’ order is only meant to show how the process continues. The teaching on how the process is ‘cut’, or rather ceases, is the purpose reserved for the ‘reverse’ order of *paṭicca-samuppāda* or ‘dependent cessation’.

Secondly, even though *vedanā* does not inevitably produce *taṇha*, because it is not a sufficient condition, it is well stated by the Buddha that only when *avijjā* ceases once and for all does *vedanā* never generate *taṇha* ! This means that one doesn't ‘cut’ the process using *sati* on *vedanā*. *Sati* is not enough. The process stops from the cessation of *avijjā*, as dependent cessation makes abundantly clear. The cessation of *avijjā* is much more than the practice of *sati*.

4. MISREADING THE SUTTAS

There is a sutta in the *Āṅguttara* collection that is often presented as evidence that dependent origination does not span more than one life. This sutta is called ‘Tenets’ in the Pali Text Society’s translation.¹⁸ Some interpret this sutta as stating that *vedanā* is not caused by kamma formations (*saṅkhāra*) done in a past life. Therefore the link called *saṅkhāra* in dependent origination (which does cause *vedanā*) cannot mean kamma formations of a previous life. I will show below that this conclusion is wrong, as it comes from a misreading of the suttas.

The relevant part of this sutta presents three theories to explain why one feels pleasant, unpleasant or neutral *vedanā*. The first theory states that everything one feels is due to what one did in the past (*sabbaṃ taṃ pubbe katahetū*). The other two theories state that everything one feels is either caused by God or by chance. The Buddha categorically states in this sutta that all three theories are wrong.

The first theory, the one pertinent to this discussion, that everything that one feels now is due to what one did in the past, is repeated in the *Devadaha Sutta*¹⁹ where it is said to be a belief of the Jains. The Jains held that all the suffering one experienced in this life was due to bad kamma from a previous life. Indeed, this sutta clarifies this first theory as meaning everything that one feels now is due to what one did in a past life. The *Devadaha Sutta* disproves this theory.

So it is true that the Buddha denied that everything that one feels, happiness or suffering or neutral feeling, is due to what one did in a past life (i.e. due to kamma formations of a past life). This should be obvious. Some of what one feels is caused by kamma formations from a past life, some caused by past kamma formations earlier in this life, and some caused by kamma formations being performed now. What the Buddha was denying was that all happiness or suffering or neutral feelings are caused by kamma from a previous life.

It should be pointed out that the Buddha is here referring to the type of feeling, rather than to feeling itself. It is true that whichever one of the three types of feeling that one experiences, happiness or suffering or neutral, is not always due to kamma from a past life. But it is also true that the situation whereby one can experience feeling at all, the fact that *vedanā* exists, is due to kamma from a past life.

A simile might make this clearer. The situation that you possess a TV on a public holiday is due to you having purchased it on some previous day. Its presence, as it were, is due to kamma from a past day. But whichever one of the three available channels that appears on the screen, Channel Happiness or Channel Suffering or Channel Neutral, is not always due to what you did on some previous day. The content is not all due to kamma from the past.

In the same way, the Buddha states that the existence of *vedanā* in this life is due to kamma formations done in the previous life. But the particular type of feeling, happiness or suffering or neutral is not always due to kamma from a previous life.

Once the distinction is made between *vedanā* and the contents of *vedanā* (happiness

or suffering or neutral), it is clear that the ‘Tenets’ sutta doesn't state that *vedanā* is not caused by kamma formations from a previous life. It does not disprove the orthodox understanding of dependent origination as spanning three lives.

Indeed, the latter part of the ‘Tenets’ sutta introduces dependent origination from a unique starting point:

“Depending on the six elements (earth, air, fire, water, space and consciousness) there is the descent of the being to be born into the womb; when there is descent, there is name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling.”

Channaṃ, bhikkhave, dhātūnaṃ upādāya gabbhass’āvakkanti hoti; okkantiyā sati nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpa-paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatana-paccayā phasso, phassa-paccayā vedanā.

Thus the Buddha is clearly showing the origin of *vedanā* as due to the descent of the being to be born into the womb. This can now be compared to the *Mahānidāna Sutta*²⁰ and its definition of *nāmarūpa*:

“It was said ‘with consciousness as condition there is name-and-form’. How this is so, Ananda, should be understood in this way. If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“*Viññāṇa-paccayā nāmarūpaṃ’ti iti kho paṇ’etaṃ vuttaṃ, tadānanda, imināpetam pariyaṇena veditabbam, yathā viññāṇa-paccayā nāmarūpaṃ. Viññāṇaṅca hi, ānanda, mātukucchimiṃ na okkamissatha, api nu kho nāmarūpaṃ mātukucchimiṃ samuccissathā”ti?*

“*No hetam, bhante*”.

This clearly equates the descent of the being to be born into the womb of ‘Tenets’ with the descent of (rebirth linking) consciousness into the womb of the *Mahānidāna Sutta*. Thus *vedanā* is said in ‘Tenets’ to be caused by the first consciousness arising in this life, whose own cause can only be found in a previous life.

Thus the sutta in the *Aṅguttara* collection which is often presented as evidence that dependent origination does not span more than one life, when read accurately and completely, actually clearly proves the opposite. The situation that *vedanā* exists at all is due to *avijjā* and kamma formations from the previous life, and dependent origination, as taught by the Buddha, does indeed span more than a single life.

5. THE PURPOSE OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

So far, I have described what dependent origination means. I have shown, by quoting from the original texts, that the factor *viññāṇa* refers to the stream of consciousness beginning in a life after the *avijjā* and kamma formations that caused the rebirth. I have shown how causality, the link between one factor and the next can involve a substantial interval of time, even extending beyond this life into a future life. In summary, I have shown that *paṭicca-samuppāda*, as taught by the Buddha in the suttas, can only mean a process that spans three lives. To believe that *paṭicca-samuppāda* must be restricted to a single life, or even to a few moments, is simply untenable in light of reason and facts.

It is now time to consider the purpose of dependent origination. One can gain understanding of a thing, not only by finding out what it is made of, but also by investigating what it does. Now I am going to discuss the function of *paṭicca-samuppāda*. I will discuss three purposes of *paṭicca-samuppāda*:

1. To explain how there can be rebirth without a soul.
2. To answer the question “What is life?”
3. To understand why there is suffering, and where suffering comes to an end.

5.1. Rebirth without a soul

One of the most common questions that I am asked is how can there be rebirth when there is no soul to be reborn. The answer to that question is dependent origination. *Paṭicca-samuppāda* shows the empty process, empty of a soul that is, which flows within a life and overflows into another life. It also shows the forces at work in the process, which drive it this way and that, even exercising sway in a subsequent life. Dependent origination also reveals the answer to how kamma done in a previous life can affect a person in this life.

Dependent origination presents two sequences that generate rebirth:

1. Delusion (*avijjā*) + kamma → the stream of consciousness beginning at rebirth (*viññāṇa*).
2. Craving (*taṇha*) + fuel (*upādāna*) → existence (*bhava*) + rebirth into that existence (*jāti*).

These are parallel processes. They describe the same operation viewed from two different angles. I will now combine them:

Deluded kamma and craving produce the fuel which generates existence and rebirth (into that existence), thereby giving rise to the start of the stream of consciousness that is at the heart of the new life.

It is kamma and craving, both under the sway of delusion, that is the force propelling the stream of consciousness into a new life.

I will now offer some similes to illustrate this operation. These similes are only approximations and, therefore, will never perfectly match *paṭicca-samuppāda*. This is because dependent origination is mainly a process describing the flow of the mental consciousness, whilst the similes at my disposal are from the more well known material world. Still, they should help to clarify one's understanding.

Someone goes to an airport to fly to another country. If they have enough money for the fare and they have a desire to go to a new country, then they may arrive in that land. If they have the fare but not the desire, or the desire but not the fare, or they lack both, then they will not arrive in the new country.

In this simile the person stands for the stream of consciousness; the airport stands for death; the new country stands for the next life; the fare stands for the person's accumulated kamma; and their desire to go there stands for craving. With much good kamma and a craving for happiness, or just the craving to be, the stream of consciousness that one thinks of as 'me' is propelled into one's chosen next life. With much bad kamma and a craving for happiness, one cannot reach the happiness one wants, and thus one is propelled into an unsatisfactory next life. With much bad kamma and a craving for punishment, what we recognize in this life as the guilt complex, one falls into a next life of suffering. Then with much good kamma and no craving at all, one goes nowhere. Like the traveller at the airport, they have enough money to go wherever they want first-class, but the delusion has been shattered and the desire that generated all this coming-and-going is no more. They cease at the airport.

How does one seed produce a new seed? Suppose a seed is planted in a good field, it is fed by moisture carrying essential nutrients, and it grows to maturity producing another seed at its death. There is no soul or self in the seed, yet one seed has evolved into another seed following a process of cause and effect. The original seed and the new seed are completely different. Almost certainly, there isn't even one molecule of the original seed to be found in the new seed. Even the DNA, though similar, is not the same. It is an example of a well known process which spans a life, but with nothing that one can identify as an essence passing unaltered from the original seed to the new seed. Rebirth, as it were, has happened with no 'seed-soul' going across. I mention this example because it is similar to a metaphor of the Buddha:

“Kamma is like the field, craving like the moisture, and the stream of consciousness like the seed. When beings are blinded by delusion and fettered with craving, the stream of consciousness becomes established, and rebirth of a new seed (consciousness) takes place in the future.”
(paraphrased from AN3.76)

It is interesting to describe how a recent, real instance of kamma and craving worked together to change *bhava*, the kind of one's existence. In the late 1970's in Britain, many uneconomical coalmines were permanently closed. One particular disused mine was close to a heavily populated area in South Wales. When some of the poor of that area had unwanted kittens, they would cheaply dispose of them by cruelly throwing them down into the abandoned mineshaft. Several years later, some engineers entered that mine to check on its safety. They found a remarkable

discovery. Some of the kittens had survived the fall and, in the space of only a few generations, had evolved into a completely new species of cat, blind in their eyes but with enormous ears. Craving and behavioural conditioning (kamma) had been the obvious driving forces that produced the mutation.

The above examples only begin to give an indication of the process that is *paṭicca-samuppāda*. Dependent origination, after all, is mainly a process that describes the flow of mental consciousness, and this is fundamentally different from material processes. If one can imagine a beach of white sand, then the stretch looks continuous. On closer examination, though, one finds that the beach is made up of an uncountable number of small grains, each close to the next. If one looks even closer, one discovers that the grains aren't even touching, that each grain is alone. Similarly, when one's mindfulness has been empowered by jhana meditation, one may see the stream of consciousness in much the same way. Before, it looked like a continuous stretch of unbroken cognition. But now it is revealed as granular, tiny moments of consciousness, uncountable in number, close together but not touching, and each one alone. Having seen the true nature of consciousness, only then can one see how one moment of consciousness influences what follows. Kamma, like a discrete particle of behavioural conditioning, together with craving combine to make the impersonal forces that steer the journey of consciousness, like an aircraft on an automatic super-pilot. Furthermore, when the insight comes, based uniquely on the data of jhana, that the mental consciousness is independent of the body and must clearly survive the death of the body, then one sees with absolute certainty that the forces of kamma and craving that drive mental consciousness now, will continue to drive the mind through and beyond death. Rebirth and its process are seen. *Paṭicca-samuppāda* is understood.

The Buddha said to Venerable Ananda at the opening of the *Mahānidāna Sutta*:²¹

“This dependent origination, Ananda, is deep and it appears deep.”

In my opinion, one needs the experience of jhana to see it clearly. Nevertheless, I hope that the explanation and similes that I have given will help throw some light onto the true nature and purpose of this impersonal process that drives the mind from life to life. At least you can know that when *paṭicca-samuppāda* is fully understood, it is also clearly seen how rebirth happens without any soul.

5.2. What is life?

One of the major difficulties that Buddhists find with the teaching of *anatta* is that if there is no soul or self, then what is this? What is it that thinks, wills, feels or knows? What is it that is reading this? In summary, what is life?

In one of the most profound of all suttas in the Buddhist scriptures, the *Kaccanagotta Sutta*,²² which was to play a major role in later Buddhist history, the Buddha stated that, for the most part, people's views on the nature of life fall into one of two extremes. Either they maintain that there is a soul, or they hold that there is nothing at all. Unfortunately, too many Buddhists confuse the teaching of *anatta* and side with the view that there is nothing at all.

The Buddha condemned both extremes with a devastating argument based on experience. It is untenable to maintain that there is a soul because anything that can be meaningfully considered as a soul or self—the body, will, love, consciousness or mind—can all be seen as impermanent. As the Buddha put it “One cannot say that there is (a soul), because a cessation (of all that can be a soul) is seen”. On the other hand, it is untenable to maintain that there is nothing at all, because it is obvious that life is! As the Buddha put it “One cannot say that there is nothing, because an arising (of all phenomena) is seen”. Thus, as the Buddhist philosopher-monk Nāgārjuna (2nd century CE) was to remind everyone, the Buddha clearly denied the doctrine of absolute emptiness.

Even today, most people fall into one of these two extremes. Either that there is nothing at all and the mind, love, life is complete illusion, or that there is an eternal soul with God as the corollary. Both are wrong.

The *Kaccanagotta Sutta* continues with the Buddha pointing out that there is a middle that has been excluded in this dichotomy of views. There is a third option that avoids both extremes. So what is this ‘middle’ between the extremes of a soul and nothingness? That middle, said the Buddha, is *paṭicca-samuppāda*.

When the Buddha stated that it is untenable to hold that there is a soul or self (or a God) because a cessation is seen, he explained what he meant as:

“From the cessation of delusion, kamma formations cease; from the cessation of kamma formations consciousness ceases ... from the cessation of birth, *dukkha*²³ ceases”.

He was referring to the passing away process called dependent cessation. This impersonal process is the very thing that we identify as life. Moreover, it includes all the ‘usual suspects’ that masquerade as a soul: the body (part of *nāmarūpa*), will (part of the kamma formations, sometimes *taṇha*), love (part of the kamma formations and mostly part of *upādāna*, clinging), consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and mind (part of *saḷāyatana* and often equivalent to *viññāṇa*). These usual suspects are clearly seen in the light of dependent cessation as transient, insubstantial, granular and fading away soon after they arise. They are all conditioned. They exist only as long as they are supported by their external causes, which are themselves unstable. When the external supporting causes disappear, so do each of the usual suspects. Because these things do not persist, since they do not continue in being, it is untenable to hold that there is a soul, a self or a God.

When the Buddha stated that it is also untenable to maintain that all is pure emptiness, void, nothing, because an arising is seen, He explained what he meant as:

“From the arising of delusion, kamma formations arise, from kamma formations arises the stream of consciousness in the next life ... from birth arises *dukkha*!”

He was referring to the arising process called dependent origination. Again, this impersonal process includes all that we can know as ‘life’. Because this arising is

seen, one cannot say they are not. It is not an illusion. These phenomena are real.

A simile might help here. In mathematics a point is a concept drawn from the science of life. It describes aspects of real phenomena. Yet a point has no size. It is smaller than any measure that you can suggest, yet it is bigger than nothing. In a sense, one cannot say a point is, because it does not persist, it does not continue in space. Yet one cannot say it is not, as it is clearly different from nothing. The point is similar to the momentary nature of conscious experience. Nothing continues in being therefore it cannot be something. Something arises therefore it cannot be nothing. The solution to this paradox, the excluded middle, is the impersonal process.

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In Advaita Vedanta, one common method is to pursue the enquiry “Who am I?”. That is a loaded question. It carries an implicit premise that has yet to be agreed on. The question “Who am I?” assumes that ‘I am’, only one doesn't know what. In the *Sabbāsava Sutta*²⁴ the Buddha called such enquiries ‘attending unwisely’ (*ayonisa-manasikra*), and in the *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta*²⁵ the Buddha described this as remaining ‘inwardly perplexed’ (*kathamkathā*). In other words, it doesn't lead to anything penetrating. This enquiry of Advaita Vedanta is said to end with an experience of ultimate reality described as ‘You are that’, or ‘Tat tvam asi’ in Sanskrit. But such an end-doctrine is plainly begging the question. What is this ‘That’ that you are? The Buddha never circled around the issue in such a fruitless way. For The Buddha would say:

“*Paṭicca-samuppādo tvaṃ asi*”

“You are dependent origination”

—

What was once assumed to be ‘me’, a self or a soul, or assumed to be an illusion or complete emptiness, is now clearly seen as the impersonal process of dependent origination, a causal sequence rolling on from life to life, containing all and anything that can meaningfully be a soul, the ‘usual suspects’ as I call them, but nothing continuing in being.

So, if you wanted to find out who you are, now you have the answer: dependent origination! And if you wanted to find out what is life, now you also have the answer: dependent origination!

Paṭicca-samuppāda—That's life!

5.3. Why suffering?

The main purpose of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is to establish the reason why we suffer, and to find a way of eliminating suffering once and for all. To understand this point, we must now take a look at the Buddha's discovery of dependent origination in the context of the story of the Buddha's life.

The Bodhisatta (an unenlightened being soon to become Enlightened) sat under the Bodhi Tree on the night of his enlightenment for the sole purpose of finding a solution to suffering. As a young man, He had been deeply moved by the tragic sights of an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. Realizing that the suffering of old age, sickness and death was the certain destiny of himself as well, he left home in order to find a way out of all suffering. Under the Bodhi Tree, the Bodhisatta entered the jhanas for the first time since he was a small boy. Having thus empowered his mind, he then pursued a method of enquiry called 'yonisamanasikra', which literally means 'work of the mind which goes back to the source'. The problem was suffering, in particular the seemingly inescapable suffering associated with old age, sickness and death. Tracing the problem back to the source, the source was seen as birth.

Jāti-paccayā dukkha, 'Suffering is caused by birth'.

As shown above, birth is a sufficient cause for suffering, that is, birth must give rise to dukkha. Every being that is born will get old, get sick and die, and experience the inescapable *dukkha* associated with that process. Thus birth is the problem.

This first link of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is rarely given the attention it deserves. It has enormous implications. Before the great insight into dependent origination under the Bodhi Tree, the Bodhisatta, like most people, had lived in hope that somehow he could attain perfect happiness in this existence or some future existence. Now he saw that all existence (*bhava*) is inextricably involved with suffering. There is no perfect happiness to be found in any form of existence. As the Buddha said in the *Āṅguttara* collection:

“Just as a tiny bit of faeces has a bad smell, so I do not recommend even a tiny bit of existence, not even for so long as a fingersnap.”²⁶

A simile might help. A person born in a harsh prison, raised in that prison, who has spent all their time in the prison, can only know prison life. They don't even suspect that anything beyond their prison can exist. So they make the best of prison. Those who think positively, because they have gone to prison seminars, begin to think that the harsh prison is instead a wonderful place. They even compose songs like “All jails bright and beautiful ... the good Lord made them all”! Others get involved with social service, compassionately decorating the prison cells of others. When someone gets tortured or otherwise punished in jail, they think something has gone wrong and look for someone to blame. If someone suggests that it is the very nature of jail to be suffering, then they are dismissed as a pessimist and told to “Get a life!”. One full moon night, a prisoner discovers a door leading out of the jail and goes through. Only then does he realize that jail was inherently suffering and you can't make it otherwise. He goes back to tell his fellow prisoners. Most don't believe him. They can't even imagine anything other than their jail. When he says that the jail is suffering and the cessation of imprisonment is happiness, he is accused by one and all of escapism.

Sometimes people rebuke me saying “You monks are just trying to escape from the real world!”. I reply “Well done! At last someone else has understood Buddhism!” What's wrong with escapism, especially when one realises that the real world is the

harsh prison

The enlightenment experience of the Buddha began with the experience of jhanas. These 'stages of letting go' are also stages of increasing bliss. After jhana, one can reflect on the reason why these jhanas are by far the most pure and powerful happiness of one's life. What is the cause of such happiness? Ajahn Chah used to say that it is like having had a tight rope around one's neck for as long as one can remember. Then one day the rope is suddenly released. The bliss and ease that is felt is because a huge burden of suffering has gone. The ecstasy of jhana is because one has escaped, albeit temporarily, from what people mean by 'the real world'. When the Buddha reflected on jhana, He realized that the real world is suffering, it is a jail, and release from it is bliss. He could only know this once He had stepped out beyond jail. That is one of the purposes of jhana. Jhana is also called *vimokkha*, which means 'release'.

Even arahants, enlightened monks and nuns, experience suffering. They are not released from suffering, they are still in the world, in jail. The main difference between an ordinary 'prisoner' and an arahant is that the latter is certain to leave soon. Using the simile from the Theragatha,²⁷ an arahant is like a workman having completed the job and now calmly waiting for his wages. In the sutta called 'The Dart'²⁸ suffering is compared to being stabbed with two darts. An arahant is only stabbed with one dart. The two 'darts' refer to bodily suffering and mental suffering. The arahant, alone of this world, only experiences bodily suffering. But it is still enough to say that an arahant in this life still experiences suffering. As the enlightened nun Vajirā explained,²⁹ what it feels like to be an arahant is just experiencing suffering arising and suffering passing away, and this was confirmed by the Buddha in the *Kaccanagotta Sutta*,³⁰ already mentioned above. Arahants experience suffering because all existence (*bhava*) or birth (*jāti*) is suffering. Only when they pass away, or '*parinibbāna*', when existence ceases, does suffering end once and for all.

Bhava-nirodho nibbānam, "Nibbāna is the cessation of existence." ³¹

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Having discovered that existence (*bhava*) and birth (*jāti*) are a sufficient cause of suffering (*dukkha*), that they must create suffering, the problem became how to put an end to more existence (*puna-bhava*) and rebirth. As it became popularly and accurately known, the goal of Buddhist practice (for those who realize that the real world's a jail and are not in denial of this truth) is to make an end of samsara, the incredibly long journey through countless lives, and get off the crushing wheel of rebirth.

Thus, the Bodhisatta continued to pursue *yonisamanasikara*, work of the mind that goes back to the source, to find the causes of *bhava* and *jāti*. He traced the sequence of causes, now known as dependent origination, through craving (*taṇha*) back to delusion (*avijjā*). It was delusion that was seen as the basic culprit.

What is this delusion? *Avijjā* is consistently explained as not fully understanding the four noble truths. In other word, one doesn't realize that one is in jail. It is amazing how so many people are in such profound denial of life's suffering that

they show severe signs of maladjustment to old age, sickness and death. Some people are even surprised that these things even happen, and exhibit such derangements as anger and grief when they do! Our delusion is that life can be fixed.

As every Buddhist would know, the way to get out of jail, to put an end to rebirth and the inevitable suffering that follows, is to develop the noble eightfold path culminating in jhana (*samma-samādhī*). But that is a subject for another essay.

Here I want to add that dependent origination is often cited as an alternative definition of the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. And dependent cessation is an alternative definition of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.³² Thus the main purpose of dependent origination, equivalent to the Second Noble Truth, is to answer the question “Why suffering?”. And the main purpose of dependent cessation, equivalent to the third noble truth, is to answer the question “How can suffering be stopped?”.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to describe what *paṭicca-samuppāda* is all about. I began by presenting the standard sequence of the twelve factors, and then their meaning as defined by the Buddha himself. It should have been clear from these definitions that *paṭicca-samuppāda*, as the Buddha meant it to be understood, spans more than one life.

I then went on to discuss a Western model of causality, the necessary and sufficient conditions, and how these slotted so neatly into *idappaccayata*, the Buddha's model of causality. I later used the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' model to throw more light on the different forms of causal relationships between each pair of factors.

A digression on the meaning of *sandiṭṭhika-akālika*, and a section called 'Misreading the Suttas', were meant to address some objections (misconceived, as I hope that I have proved) to the fact that *paṭicca-samuppāda* in the suttas does span more than one life. Although the argument here was somewhat technical, it highlighted the importance of kamma and rebirth to the Buddha's Dhamma. Kamma and rebirth are obviously not a mere cultural accretion, as some modern misinformed authors would have us believe, but are essential to the central teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda*.

Lastly, I introduced a section rarely mentioned in essays about *paṭicca-samuppāda*: what is its purpose? I have shown that the purpose of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is much more than mere food for intellectual debate. Indeed, *paṭicca-samuppāda* demonstrates how there can be rebirth without a soul, it reveals what life is, and it explains why there is suffering together with the way suffering is totally ended. *Paṭicca-samuppāda* answers the big questions.

It is no exaggeration to state that *paṭicca-samuppāda* is at the very heart of the Dhamma. As the Buddha stated, one who understands *paṭicca-samuppāda* accurately, also sees the Dhamma. And the one who sees the Dhamma fully, is one who has entered the stream and will soon put an end to all suffering. May that be you!

FOOTNOTES

1. MN28
2. SN12.27, AN5.25
3. SN12.1
4. SN12
5. *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 2000, p534f.
6. DN15. Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi in *The Great Discourse on Causation*, published by BPS, Kandy 1984, p54.
7. AN3.76
8. *Vedanā*, usually translated as ‘feeling’, denotes that aspect of sensory experience which is taken to be either pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*) or neutral (*adukkhamasukha*).
9. MN120
10. SN12.51
11. SN12.21
12. page 103
13. SN12.10
14. MN13
15. SN1.20, SN4.21, and MN70
16. MN12
17. AN10.65
18. AN3.61
19. MN101
20. DN15
21. DN15
22. SN12.15
23. *Dukkha* (suffering) here stands for the full term *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsa*.
24. MN2
25. MN38
26. AN1.328
27. Thag17.2
28. SN36.6
29. SN5.10
30. SN12.15
31. SN12.68
32. SN12.43

[*This 2017 version of the essay is adopted from *What-Buddha-Taught.net* with minor updates in punctuation and references. — Ed.]