

Burning Yourself: *Paṭicca Samuppāda* as a Description of the Arising of a False Sense of Self Modeled on Vedic Rituals

Linda Blanchard

lindaqpublic@nowheat.com

The teaching known as Dependent Arising is central to understanding what the Buddha taught. Current theories about its structure revolve around re-birth, or moment to moment experience in this life. This paper presents an entirely new theory for the structure underlying the lesson. This structure supports the deepest teachings on the causes of our suffering – that whatever we relate to self is suffering – and its cure – that when we recognize this truth, and understand that what gets built as a result is impermanent, it is then within our control to change the conditions. Recognizing the structure also improves understanding of the finer points made within the *suttas* about Dependent Arising.

Purpose of this Paper

This paper offers a fresh interpretation of “dependent arising” (*paṭicca samuppāda*) as a description of how and why we humans create many of our own problems (experienced as *dukkha*) through a false sense of “self” (*attā*). That description was originally modeled on a worldview popular during the Buddha’s lifetime, namely, the practice of rituals designed to create and perfect one’s “self” (*attā*) in a way that would give the best results both in this life and after death.

This new view of the teaching offers a description that would have been quite clear to the people of the day. By seeing how obvious the setting would have been to the contemporary audience, we can better understand why the steps have seemed so obscure to us: the context, so clear at the time that it needed no further

explanation, has been lost to us. Being both shorn of its context in real life, and devoid of detailed explanations of that context, has resulted in the loss of some of the finer points of the lesson.

In addition, the way the Buddha's culture used multileveled meanings has not been given enough weight, so that attempts to straighten the teaching into one linear description of events have run afoul of the multivariance of the message. I hope to show that explaining the context and structures brings what is being said into sharp focus, revealing an insight into human nature that is consistent with the rest of the Buddha's teaching, and is as valid and useful now as it was more than two millennia ago.

Supporting evidence for this theory will be provided primarily from *suttas* in the Pali canon, with some substantial help from certain modern texts that provide background information and current theories on the history of the culture in and around the Buddha's time. I will first present my overall theory, and then discuss the meaning of each of the classic twelve conditions and show, using evidence drawn from the *suttas*, how this new view makes sense of the data.

Conventions and Assumptions

No one knows with certainty whether most of the texts we find in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pali canon were composed (or at least approved) by the Buddha himself, or were put together shortly after he died, or a long time after. Nor do we know whether they are somewhat modified from their original structures and wording, or greatly modified. In my reading of the *suttas*, I find, as many have before me, a consistent voice and personality. Whether that voice belonged to a real teacher or was created as part of a fictional story line has small impact: someone came up with this insight, and we might as well call him the Buddha. In the end it may make little difference when the teaching was put together or by whom, as long as the result is something we can understand and recognize as fitting well into the history of thought at that period. If the final structure turns out to have insights that are still useful to us in our time, all credit to the originator, whoever that may have been. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the person who came up with both the insight and its structure as "the Buddha" and not concern myself about who or when, since that is not the point of this paper.

When attempting to understand a text, starting from the assumption that it is an indecipherable mashup of ideas, and maybe corrupt to boot, is logically unsound. It is best to begin by assuming the text is a coherent and well reasoned

whole, unless research proves otherwise. My starting assumption, then, is that dependent arising has a uniform structure and a consistent message.

This does not mean that every piece of the Pali canon will necessarily fit into this understanding of what is being said. I acknowledge that there are likely to be corruptions introduced by later voices. Nonetheless, it seems safe to assume that if a large proportion of *suttas* dealing with the *paṭicca samuppāda* fit this theory, it may be no less accurate, and perhaps more accurate, than some earlier interpretations.

For the most part I will try to confine the language used in this paper to ordinary English. I supply some Pali terms for reference, and the commonest among them I use in rotation with their English translations, just for the sake of variety; but there are a few terms that I will use in preference to their usual English counterparts because they make more sense when the reader is not left to draw on the established connotations of the terms commonly used in translation.

Foremost among these is *dukkha*, the full understanding of which should bring the awakening the Buddha hoped we could find through his words: the meaning of *dukkha* is precisely what the Buddha taught. In Pali *dukkha* has its opposite in *sukha*, often translated as “happiness”; so *dukkha* could be translated as “unhappiness”, but is usually (inadequately) translated as “suffering”. What it is, very roughly, is all that we experience through our own doing that takes us away from joy and especially from equanimity. Trying to give *dukkha* one English definition, or even many, confines it in unsuitable ways.

Another useful word is *dhamma*; its Sanskrit equivalent, *dharma*, has become widely used. The word was used to refer to various teachers’ systems of helping others to see “what is” or “the way things work”, and those are the primary senses of the word: as a truth, or a teaching about the truth, or a reality, that which “is”. By default, most of the Buddha’s uses of the word seem to indicate his own *dhamma*, the “truth of the way things are” that he describes.

Karma (*kamma* in Pali) has already entered into popular vocabulary, so to use its Sanskrit-derived popular form *karma* seems the simplest course.

The words *ātman* (*attā*) and *anatta* represent particular concepts. *Ātman* describes the Vedic understanding that there is an identifiable and lasting “self”; *anatta* is the Buddha’s denial that any such thing can be found, a denial that points to what we mistakenly identify as *ātman*. Because these two words refer to ideas that have no exact equivalent in English, and are critical to an understanding of dependent arising, I will use the Pali more often than their longer definitions in

English. Though in the *suttas* *anatta* is defined by what it is not – the Buddha seems at great pains to keep from giving it concreteness – in my own understanding, there is “something” there. What that “something” is, is “an ongoing process”.

In the same way that we identify “the process by which things burn” as “fire” and treat “fire” as if it were a thing, the Vedic people identified *attā* as a thing, while the Buddha indicated that it was not a thing, and pointed out that it was like fire. Most people seem to have assumed that the self was a fixed and identifiable entity within each sentient being.

One term seems to have been a challenge for all translators: *saṃkhārā*. In its place as the second step of the *paṭicca samuppāda* it is a key term. It has often been translated in recent times as “volitional formations” and one dictionary defines it as an “essential condition; a thing conditioned, mental coefficients”.¹ It may be all those things, but it is above all the key to unlocking the meaning of dependent arising. I will therefore leave its definitions until later, and will frequently use the Pali form rather than translations, just as I leave *dukkha* untranslated.

Its Place in the Buddha’s *Dhamma*

“Now this has been said by the Blessed One: ‘One who sees dependent origination sees the *dhamma*; one who sees the *dhamma* sees dependent origination.’”²

As evidenced by Sāriputta’s quote of the Buddha, the teaching known in Pali as *paṭicca samuppāda* (“dependent origination” in the above) is central to the Buddha’s *dhamma* (his teaching, his truth, his view of what is important). The two could even be said to be one and the same: dependent arising is the *dhamma*, the *dhamma* is dependent arising. The term as shown here, or in its other form as *paṭicca samuppanna*, is used in about three dozen *suttas*; its formulation in the classical twelve steps is repeated in several more *suttas*, and shorter varieties are also offered: nine links are the dominant form in the Dīgha Nikāya’s *suttas*, and much shorter variants occur throughout the Sutta Piṭaka. Many explanations have been suggested for these differences, including the possibility that they represent

¹ Pali-English Dictionary Version 1.0, created by a group of monks in Sri Lanka, an electronic, public-domain edition based primarily on A.P. Buddhadatta Mahathera’s Concise-Pali-English and English-Pali Dictionary, expanded with a series of corrections and additions.

² Sāriputta quoting the Buddha in MN 28.38 [PTS M i 191] as translated by Bhikkhus Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (1995).

corruptions (or that additional steps, bringing it up to twelve, are corruptions), or that they reflect the development of the Buddha's teaching methods as he practiced describing his insight to more people over the course of a lifetime. Any of these are possible, and I would add the possibility that he used the pieces he felt were most helpful in reaching his particular audience, so that on any given day he might only discuss the three or four steps he felt were critical to his message at that moment. He often introduced alternative directions that his chain of events could go in – for example, the one that leads to possessiveness and the taking up of sticks³ – but whatever the number of steps used and whatever terms he chose, the lesson always has the same underlying structure.

The most frequently cited description of the chain has twelve links, and it is this standardized list that makes the underlying structure of the teaching and its point clearest.

Classical Twelve Links and Their Usual Translations

1. *avijjā* – “ignorance”
2. *saṃkhārā* – “volitional formations”
3. *viññāṇa* – “consciousness”
4. *nāmarūpa* – “name-and-form”
5. *saḷāyatana* – “six senses”
6. *phassa* – “contact”
7. *vedanā* – “feeling”
8. *taṇhā* – “craving”
9. *upādāna* – “clinging”
10. *bhava* – “existence”
11. *jāti* – “birth”
12. *jarāmaraṇa* – “aging and death”

Interpretations of Dependent Arising

The *paṭicca samuppāda* has been interpreted in different ways over the course of history. The most popular interpretations have the twelve links describing the chain of events that keep us in *saṃsāra*, the wheel of a life filled with *dukkha*. There is the three-lives model championed by Buddhaghosa, with the early links representing a past life, in which actions create *karma* which has to be dealt with in

³DN 15 [PTS D ii 58]

the present life (in this model, the term *saṃkhārā* is effectively identical to *karma*); the middle portion describes behavior in the present life that is generating *karma*; and the final portion, beginning with birth (*jāti*), describes the next life that will deal with the consequences of this life's *karma*, which goes on to aging and death, only to continue the rounds.

In another view, the twelve steps are seen as describing one life, or at least all events as happening over the course of one life. In this understanding the steps are not perceived as completely linear, but birth is still literal birth, and death is of the body.

In both of the above interpretations, the final steps of dependent arising are conceived of as being about a literal birth and death, and its lessons are all about how we can break the cycle of *saṃsāra* to escape rebirth so that there will be no more aging and death.

Another popular view is that what is being described here is the moment by moment arising of our sense of self, so that dependent arising becomes a model of how consciousness is triggered by events, and we engage with them in a way that causes problems, and then we suffer for it. In this system, birth and death are interpreted as metaphors for the birth and death of a fleeting and reappearing sense of self.

This paper will suggest that all three systems are partially correct: dependent arising is about three lives and cycles of birth and death; it is describing one life in non-linear fashion; and it is showing us how fleeting moments give birth to an impermanent self that causes *dukkha*.

Problems With the above Interpretations

There are, however, problems with these interpretations.

The models that assume that what is being described is literal cycles of rebirth find no support in the *suttas*, where the twelve links in the chain never go around again from the last link to the first. “Aging and death” is never described as the forerunner of “ignorance”. Although dependent arising is often shown as part of Buddhist “Wheel of Life” imagery, the *paṭicca samuppāda* is not described as a wheel or a cycle in any text. If it describes cycles of rebirth, it is odd that it never gets portrayed as a cycle; instead it goes from link one to twelve and stops.⁴ It is

⁴However, there is the extended liberative formula (found in the Upanisa Sutta SN 12.23 [PTS S ii 30]), in which the last step is renamed *dukkha*, and that *dukkha* is shown as the inspiration to

also odd that if it is about the way *karma* from a past life brings about the present life, and the way our actions in this life create *karma* leading us into the next, the word for *karma* is not used in it, in its sense as intentional actions that carry future consequences.

The moment to moment interpretation of dependent arising finds some support in the *sutta* in which the Buddha describes the arising of consciousness with a metaphor of a monkey swinging from one branch of a tree to the next,⁵ but this model seems to me to have a problem in application: although my consciousness of what is happening in the moment does arise swiftly and can pass away just as fast, I do not perceive my sense of self vanishing and reappearing moment by moment. The idea of a fleeting self being born, suffering, and dying in rapid cycles belies our experience and the stubborn, persistent nature of the issues we deal with on a daily basis, as well as the fact that *dukkha* doesn't always come around that quickly in response to the sense of self that gives birth to it.

The concept of momentary consciousness is a good match for what modern science has recently been making clear to us, and it may be that the Buddha's description of how our minds work describes that process, yet – though the rapid arising and passing away of consciousness seems to be part of what is being pointed out in *paṭicca samuppāda* – thinking of it in terms of the “birth and death” of consciousness seems a bit of a stretch; that would seem to suggest that it is that very consciousness that experiences the suffering of aging and death.

For explanations of dependent arising to be satisfying, they need to describe what is readily visible to us when it is pointed out, since the Buddha suggests (in the quote above and elsewhere) that we can see it for ourselves, and his explanation is designed to help us see what goes wrong and why, to give us the power to fix the problem of *dukkha*. This is another problem with the models that see the *paṭicca samuppāda* as describing cycles of rebirth: past and future lives related by *karma* are not actually visible to us, yet we should be able to see for ourselves what these twelve steps are modeling. (This paper does not argue that the Buddha didn't teach rebirth, though it does argue that rebirth was not the lesson the Buddha was conveying by teaching dependent arising.)

practice the Buddha's methods and break the chain; the step following *dukkha* is *saddha* (faith) and then the following steps describe the course of practice.

⁵SN 12.61 [PTS S ii 95]

Professor Jurewicz’s Playing With Fire

Many attempts have been made to decipher the structure of the *paṭicca samuppāda*, with the hope of better clarifying what its point is, and many suggestions have been made in attempts to shed light on pieces or the whole. In a paper published in 2000, Joanna Jurewicz proposed that many of the terms used in dependent arising were referring to Vedic myths of creation. Her detailed analysis found correspondences between the Buddhist terms for the links and a variety of similar or related terms in the *Vedas*, the *Brāhmānas*, and the *Upaniṣads*. These works are thought to predate or be contemporaneous with the Buddha, so she reasoned that dependent arising may have been a refutation of many of the Vedic ideas discussed in the texts she worked on. The particular focus of her article was on the Vedic myth of creation, most famously associated with the deity Prajāpati (whose persona was later co-opted by Brahmā), whose role was that of First Man.

Professor Jurewicz’s paper takes a look at both the *paṭicca samuppāda* and the Vedic creation myth from the perspective of subject-object cognition, which (I would note) is central to much of Buddhism’s consideration of duality – the perceived separation between self and other. She sets out to show that the Buddha “formulated the *pratītyasamutpāda* as a polemic against Vedic thought” and argues that “Through the identification of the creative process with the process that leads only to suffering, he rejected the Brāhmaṇic way of thinking in a truly spectacular way.”⁶ I have come to agree with her that this is indeed what he did; but this is not all that he did, as we shall see.

Starting with dependent arising’s first step, “ignorance” (*avijjā*), she describes the beginning of the origin myth in which the ṚgVeda tells us that at first there was neither existence nor non-existence, and that it was not possible to know anything beyond that. The unknowableness of the pre-creative state is precisely the point, because what the Vedas are all about, by definition, is knowledge. What is defined here from the Vedic point of view is not simply ignorance of what is, but the total inability to know anything – for there isn’t anything to know. Jurewicz also points out that the term *avijjā* is not used for the matching part of the myth.

Next comes “the manifestation of the creative power of the Absolute” which, still in darkness, is unable to cognize anything. This state is not the same as the previous, unknowable “neither existence, nor non-existence”, because something – the creative power – exists now, but a power is apparently all that it is. Something

⁶ *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Volume 26 (2000), p. 78.

exists, so knowledge is now possible, but it is still ignorant, being in darkness, and because there is nothing else there. Jurewicz describes a later rendition of the same basic story in which “the Creator (*ātman*) in the form of man (*puruṣavidha*) realizes his own singularity”. He is all that there is, and so the only potential subject for him to examine is his own self – he cannot be cognizant of anything else, for there is nothing else. In either version we can imagine that the First Man cannot have perceived himself to have form, because there was no space around him, and there were no active sense organs to be sensing anything; we are talking of pure awareness with nothing to be aware of except that it is aware, and that it is seeking something to be aware of.

Moving on to *saṃkhārā*, Jurewicz continues the creation story, describing the Creator as wishing for a second, so that he would have something to know. This second would be *ātman* as well, the Creator-*ātman*, but, effectively, divided. Jurewicz tells us that *saṃkhārā* derives from the root *saṃskṛ*, which in the relevant Vedic text is used to express the wish that will be fulfilled through building himself (*ātmānam*) “in the form of a fire altar, which is his body and the cosmos at the same time.” The term *saṃkhārā*, then, would seem to represent both the desire for existence and the act that begins the process of bringing *ātman* into existence (though *ātman* is not actually completed until a later step).

The fire altar comes into the story through Prajāpati’s “son” Agni, the fire deity/principle. Prajāpati’s wish to duplicate himself through the creation of the fire altar makes Agni a sort of equivalent of the Creator, and at the same time Agni is the Creator’s progeny, and the altar, and the world; all of these are equivalents of each other. Because Agni is fire, he is a hungry thing, which results in some drama. The main point to understand here is that just as Prajāpati was hungry to be able to know himself, though he had no means to do so, Agni/fire/the second self/*ātman* is also hungry. As Jurewicz points out,⁷ this is still the not-knowing – the “ignorance” (*avijjā*) – driving “the desire for *ātman*” (*saṃkhārā*).

In the instant of the creation of the second, there arises the subject-object split. The *ātman* remains hungry for knowledge, and what is doing the seeking is consciousness (*viññāṇa* in the Pali, *viññāna* in Sanskrit); this is hungry to know itself, but it is having trouble doing so because it has no eyes or ears, in fact no senses, through which to know itself.

⁷ibid, p 85. “It is worth noticing that in the very image of hunger the ideas of *avidyā* and of *saṃskārā* are present: hunger is both the lack of food and the desire to have it.” And hunger is driven by (is a form and result of) the desire for existence.

When Jurewicz brings us to *nāmarūpa* she notes that “the act of giving a name and form marks the final creation of the Creator’s *ātman*.” She relates *nāmarūpa* to naming ceremonies in which a father “confirmed his own identity” with his son and “by giving him a name he took him out of the unnamed, unshaped chaos and finally created him.” This is what Prajāpati does in the final act of creation, when he shatters himself (his *ātman*) into a myriad of pieces to create the world and all its inhabitants. In this way the Creator, the Absolute, also known as Prajāpati (and later known as Brahmā), is in every one of us as *ātman*. Through this explosive act of creation, the world of the senses is gained: finally Prajāpati has the tools through which he can come to know himself. The only problem is that he has tucked *ātman* into so many different names-and-forms, that it is no longer recognizable; from the Vedic point of view this is why none of us initially sees *ātman* in ourselves, and we have to work so hard to come to know the truth of things.

In the remainder of the article Jurewicz touches on many other possible links between the terms of the Buddha’s *paṭicca samuppāda* and Vedic cosmology, but the above is enough to have laid the groundwork for pushing her work a little farther. I will refer to the same article later, when I draw attention to the number of ways in which the element of fire is referred to.

The Prajāpati Myth as How We Come To Be The Way We Are

It seems clear from the foregoing that the elements of the Vedic creation myth are a close fit for the first five links in the chain of dependent arising. We start from neither existence nor non-existence (“ignorance”; *avijjā*); the desire for existence (“volitional formations”; *saṃkhārā*); hungry awareness (“consciousness”; *viññāṇa*); splitting up into pieces (“name-and-form”; *nāmarūpa*); which provides the medium/tools through which we come to know ourselves (“the six senses”; *saḷāyatana*). This alone should give us more insight into what the Buddha was describing with the *paṭicca samuppāda*.

Working with just the myth of All Creation arising from The First Man, we can guess that the Buddha was showing an audience familiar with the myth’s conventions that this also describes who we are, and how we come to be. This description is being addressed on several levels simultaneously.

Ignorance

We come into the world ignorant of what came before us because, on a purely physical and personal level, we arrive ignorant of whether there was existence before us or not. This is likely to be the direct parallel the Prajāpati myth was originally addressing: that we are born ignorant of what came before is true in everyone's experience. In the Buddha's system we are also ignorant of what brings into being that which we mistake for *attā*. This is the ignorance that is at the heart of all our problems: we have this initial condition as part of our nature and we are not even aware of it. "Ignorance" (*avijjā*), then, has three levels: one addresses our actual state of ignorance at birth; on a second level, the physical is paralleled by the Prajāpati myth's state of unknowableness; and on a third level the Buddha is saying that we are born unaware of how we operate or why; in particular, we are ignorant of what brings our sense of self into being, ignorant of how we come to behave as we do.

Desire For The Self's Existence

Samkhārā also operates on three levels.

At the most basic, physical level, *saṃkhārā* seems to be talking about sex. As Richard Gombrich has pointed out,⁸ the word *kāma* (desire) is used in some texts to describe the volitional impulse.

The original myth may well have been making a complex play on our need for procreation. It is well known that the ancient authors of the Vedas were making parallels to how any individual comes into being when they described the explosion of Prajāpati into the multitude of forms: this is a reference to procreative ejaculation. In the Vedic way of seeing things, the desire for sons is tied into the desire for personal existence, both through the modeling of the creation of Agni out of his father, Prajāpati (only through this act does their shared *ātman* become complete), and through the necessity, in the current life, of having a son who will provide for his aging father, and continue to offer oblations that support him after death. All this makes the lust that leads to pregnancy a requirement for the "desire for existence" in the long term, and that lust ultimately turns nothingness into something.

⁸"The Vedic 'Hymn of Creation' goes on to recount that somehow - inexplicably - a volitional impulse initiates the process of creation or evolution. This volitional impulse is there called *kāma*, the commonest word for 'desire.'" Richard Gombrich, *What The Buddha Thought*, (2009) p 134.

The term *saṃkhārā* also suggests a pun, since its components could literally mean “making together”, which is indeed how parents create a child.

The myth seems to be modeled on an understanding of how each of us comes to be: out of an unknowable state, through lust, born because of and into a continuum of the desire for existence. This gives us the first two levels of *saṃkhārā*. The third is the Buddha’s point that the desire we have for a certain kind of existence (a desire that continues due to our ignorance of the depths of our desire for existence) drives us to the process of creating a self.

Consciousness

Because we are born wanting to exist, and the only way to satisfy that desire is, first, to come to exist, and then, second, to come to know that we exist through knowledge, the particular knowledge we need is of ourselves. It is the “wanting” that brings *ātman* (in the myth) or the sense that we have a self (in the Buddha’s version) into existence. This is why *viññāṇa* is so hungry that it is always seeking, always craving something: it seeks to know itself; it needs the food of knowledge to survive. It started with desire for existence, so in order to be satisfied it must know itself, i.e., know that it exists.

Hungry consciousness is the source of the individuality of name-and-form because it divides the world up in order to know itself; and name-and-form feeds *viññāṇa*, consciousness, the food it seeks in order to continue existing/knowing that it exists.

To frame this in mundane terms, name-and-form does represent our tendency to split the world up into a dualistic view in which each of us is an individual (subject) and we see individual elements as outside us (objects); but more important than that is the way in which we tend to see some aspect of ourselves in everything we encounter: we sort things in terms of how they relate to us (are they useful; are they dangerous; are they like us in some way; are they too dissimilar). That tendency in our consciousness causes us to see the world not just in terms of subject-object dualities (“there is me, and there is what is outside of me”) but to sort the world into what is mine, and what is antithetical to me (“there is what is helpful and I need that, and there is what is harmful and I should avoid that”).

It is because we are seeking to know ourselves through everything we encounter that we see everything in terms of *nāmarūpa*; and it is because we are able to perceive, through *nāmarūpa*, that everything somehow relates to us, that *viññāṇa* continues. If we never saw anything in things around us that seemed

to confirm that our theory that “we have a self” is true, hungry consciousness would starve to death. But because we do perceive that everything relates to us, *nāmarūpa* feeds *viññāṇa*.

Consciousness tucks itself into everything that captures its awareness; it sorts everything out with reference to itself; it creates an entire world (worldview) that revolves around – or “is” – its own self. The Vedic view would see the world and self as one and the same because that’s just the way things are, but in the Buddha’s system, one could say, we create our own world because we define the world in terms of ourselves. The world we create and the self we create are both constructs and complement each other.

Let me again summarize the multileveled references being made: the consciousness described here has its physical parallel in gestation, whether we think of it as “consciousness descending from a past life”, as did those who believed in traditional rebirth in those days, or, in modern terms, of development of the abilities of the fetus. Its place in the origin myth is the spark of life resulting from a desire for existence that moves on to satisfy the original desire through knowledge. In the Buddha’s system it represents the way our minds seek evidence of who we are (of our existence) through our senses, of the way we sort everything out with reference to how it relates to us.

Identification

Nāmarūpa, seen through the structure of the Prajāpati myth, represents both the existence which was created in the first steps finally taking on individuality, and the individual identities (to which we give names and which we perceive through their forms) of all the things that the created one encounters. In the myth, the creator can’t identify anything until he splits himself up. *Nāmarūpa* is, therefore both the individual (*ātman*, or what we mistake for *ātman*), and every individual thing in the world, because in the myth they are both one and the same thing. This is why *nāmarūpa* represents both the “birth” of that *ātman* as an individual, and all of the individuals he encounters in the world, which he will interpret as being (i.e., having reference to) himself. In the Buddha’s lesson, *nāmarūpa* is addressing both the birth of our individuality, and the way we just naturally perceive everything “out there” to be part of us, to have reference to us.

Though we were, in a sense, born in the transition from the first step to the second, we are born again, into our sense of self, in *nāmarūpa*. This would be two births – which takes us back to Prof. Jurewicz’s supposition that *nāmarūpa* also

reflects a naming ceremony, in which the father gives the son his “final form”, thus creating his *ātman* in the way Prajāpati completed his *ātman* with Agni. This presumably draws on the “twice-born” concept of Vedism – once from the mother’s womb, and once again at an initiation rite. Real world: birth, then naming ceremony. Myth: existence, then splitting into name-and-form. Buddha: desire for that sense of self, followed by the way we identify the world as having to do with self, because it is out of that identification of our self with what we see around us that we create our sense of self, our second birth.

Direction of the Senses

In the Prajāpati myth, after “hungry desire for existence/knowledge” has split itself into individuals, it gains the senses, and uses those senses to seek to know itself. This is why the six senses and their objects (*saḥāyatana*) follow name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*): the six senses and their objects were created in one step; in the myth they are really one and the same thing, because Prajāpati’s senses are gained through all those objects. The Buddha is describing for us the way in which our desire for self has us directing our senses in search of ourselves in everything around us. Thus we define everything in terms of the way it relates to us. Physical: ability to use the senses after we are born, so that we can encounter the world. Myth: Prajāpati’s creations providing him with senses so he can know himself. Buddha: that we use our senses to meet hungry consciousness’s desire for knowledge of the self. We actually direct our senses to identify that which supports our sense of self.

Bonds and Equivalences

The Vedic world view was built on an assumption of bonds (*bandhu*) “relationships” softens what’s being said too much between things: between us here on earth and the cosmic powers beyond this world, and between things in this world, for example between father and son. Another way of putting this was that it was all about equivalences; as in the Prajāpati myth, father and son were one and the same: they were equivalents of each other.

The Prajāpati myth in its place in Vedic ritual depends on these equivalences: our human lives are seen as being what they are because that’s how things were set up when the First Man came into being, and the rituals modeled on those myths

are a reenactment of them, not simply confirming them, but strengthening and keeping the connections in place.

The early steps of dependent arising define the conditions we start from, describe human nature as seen through the Vedic creation myth, and also describe what the Buddha sees: that we come into this world ignorant of any other way of being, or even of how we are; that we crave that sense of self, and so we create it; that our minds seek to know ourselves; and that in doing so we create ourselves through the way we identify with everything we encounter, which we do via our senses.

Samkhārā As Rituals

But this is not all that the Buddha had to say. With Professor Jurewicz’s brilliant insights,⁹ we are led to understand the origin myth, and to see how it helped the Buddha to describe how we come to be the way we are. She provides a clue to a deeper understanding of what *paṭicca samuppāda* describes when she ties the Buddha’s term *saṃkhārā* to its Vedic roots, to Prajāpati’s wish for a second, which would be acted upon through building his *ātman* as a fire altar. In the myth, *saṃkhāra* was a ritual that gave form to the wish for creation of the *ātman*, by creating an altar that was the equivalent of Prajāpati, of the world (for Prajāpati comprised the whole world at that point), and also of fire, Agni. The word *saṃkhāra*, in addition to perhaps being a pun on procreation (the “making together” of a child), here seems to reflect the perception that a real life event has the effect of “putting together” the *ātman*. That event is a social event, something people do together in communal rituals.

The *saṃkhāra* is a fire ritual; its tamer cousins are still enacted today in transformative *samskāra* rituals prescribed to mark moments of transition in the lives of high caste Hindus. Though not classed as a *samskāra* ritual, the biggest fire ritual of all, the Agnicayana, marked the completion of the transformation of *ātman*, the passage from this life grounded in the senses, to a world beyond. Both the *samskāra* rituals and the Agnicayana are rituals that have as a purpose the creation and/or perfection of the self to improve personal outcome after death.

In the life of a modern Hindu, the options seem to be either to be reborn (hopefully as a human, but that depends on one’s *karma*), or, through the perfec-

⁹I am most indebted to her for giving me the grounding in the myth and language needed to see the underlying structure.

tion of one's knowledge of *ātman* to become one with (as Jurewicz puts it) “the Absolute”, also known as *brahman*.

Around the time when the Buddha lived, fire rituals were a central part of daily life. From the brahminical point of view, the highest class of people were the brahmins themselves. Some were officiating priests who performed rituals for others, and some were householders, but all would have a household fire and daily rituals. The warrior class and merchant classes also had household fires and small daily rituals, but the big, transformative rituals were conducted by specialist brahmin priests. In the brahminical texts as well as in the Buddhist *suttas*, these rituals are described as sacrifices. Sometimes animals were sacrificed, sometimes vegetable matter, or animal byproducts like clarified butter, but in the transformative rituals, like the Agnicayana, the thing sacrificed is considered to be the equivalent of the person who sponsors the ritual – *bandhu* again – and for this reason he is called the Sacrificer, because he sacrifices himself (his *ātman*) on that pyre, whether in the form of a goat during sacrifices in the normal course of his life, or with his own flesh and bones after death.

It is unlikely that anyone living in the Buddha's society would have been unaware of the spectacular and time-consuming Agnicayana ritual, or the funeral ritual that marked the transition from death to whatever “other world” the Sacrificer had been aiming at with rituals his whole life long, whether that be a world of ancestors, of particular gods, or union with *brahman*. The Vedic system was built on the assumption that the rites practiced throughout a lifetime, as well as keeping the gods, ancestors, and the universe nourished, enabled the Sacrificer to nourish his self, his *ātman*, in the same way – constantly building and perfecting himself and his world, in both the present world and the world he would inhabit after death. The concept was that during the ritual the Sacrificer died (he/his equivalent was what was being sacrificed), he made his way up to his world, and returned to earth a new man – literally (but, to our point of view, figuratively). Over the course of a lifetime of such rituals in which the *ātman* was perfected, he would “die” and “be reborn” many times.

The rituals that revolved around the perfection of the self seem to have been the model the Buddha used for dependent arising. This makes sense for many reasons.

First, the rituals will have been so well-known throughout society that, when using them as a model, there would have been no need to explain what was being referenced. It would make as little sense for the Buddha to stop and point out that

rituals were his model as it would make sense for a modern manual on scheduling to stop to explain the days of the week and hours in the day. That the model was so familiar explains why we find no explicit references to its being the structure underlying the lessons. That there are no explanations of what metaphor the Buddha was using explains a lot of our confusion in interpreting the terms.

Second, in case anyone missed the point that he was modeling the teaching on a ritual, he named his second step with a word that may have been in long use as meaning “ritual” (*saṃkhāra*).

Third, these rituals were like workshops in which one created and perfected the *ātman* over the course of time. The Buddha, as we know, denies that there is any *ātman* to be found. What he is telling us all throughout his lectures is that we create that which we mistake for the self. So he agrees with the Vedic view to the extent that we are creating something, but he denies that what we create is what we think it is, or that it lasts. That’s why he can use the model of the *saṃkhāra* rituals effectively to say, “Yes, it goes more or less the way you say it does, but with a few small differences...” What better way to both refute what is thought to be going on and to show that something else is happening, than to do it all in one structure?

Finally, the embedding of the Prajāpati Creation myth at the beginning also points to the chain of events being modeled, at least in part, on the Agnicayana ritual, because the Prajāpati myth was what was being modeled in the ritual itself. The fire altar that is built for the Sacrificer is constructed in the way Prajāpati built his – in the shape of a bird – and the altar is conceived as the equivalent of the Sacrificer, and of the world. Prajāpati is also known as the First Sacrificer, because he sacrificed himself by shattering himself into all of creation, into the individuality of name-and-form, as his act of creation. The Sacrificer, through this ritual, is re-enacting Prajāpati’s act of sacrifice, and creation of the world, and union with it, himself taking the role of Prajāpati.

Performance of the Ritual

If the links in the chain of dependent arising are modeled on the Agnicayana ritual and the *saṃkhāra* rituals of self-perfection, with the Prajāpati Creation myth built into the early steps, the next question is: what is the structure underlying what follows *saṃyātana*’s acquisition, i.e., the use of the senses?

What I suggest comes from our knowledge of what the portions from “contact” (*phassa*) through “clinging” (*upādāna*) describe. This is the portion of the

chain which seems to be best understood and is certainly most widely agreed on: it describes how, upon contact with the world, we react to it. It describes what we do day in, day out, over and over again: we engage with something, we experience it as good/bad/indifferent, we react to that experience, then we make assumptions about it in terms of how it relates to us. This is us doing what our senses direct us to do: naming-and-forming, identifying everything that happens to us in terms of how it relates to us, how it serves us, how it helps build up and stabilize our sense of self. It is all the things we do hundreds of times each day. It is our rituals.

I would suggest that the use of the word *vedanā* here, derived from a root shared with the name the Vedic people gave to their vast corpus of secret knowledge – the Vedas – is no coincidence. The Vedas represent the knowledge and ritual lore most precious to those orchestrating the sacrifices that create and perfect the *ātman*, while *vedanā* describes what we “know” about what we experience: how it feels. The Vedas lay out the performance of rituals in microscopic detail, and in this portion of dependent arising, we have our rituals laid out in just that way: tiny step by tiny step: “Here is how we do it: we start with our knowledge of an experience, and we build on that.” In addition, the altar that is at the center of the ritual fires is called the *vedi* – so this term might also be referring to that altar. Starting with the ritual tools of our senses, in the ritual arena of the sensual world, we perform these rituals over and over throughout our lives, building up *ātman* – or rather, what we mistake for *ātman*.

It is almost as if the Buddha were saying, “Yes, we build a self that is like fire through our rituals, but these are the details of the actual rituals that make it happen. This is the knowledge that is important, not what is in your Vedas.”

In her paper, Joanna Jurewicz notes that some of the terms in this section also relate to fire, for example *taṇhā*, which is *tr̥ṣṇā* in Sanskrit:

“The Buddha in his descriptions of *tr̥ṣṇā* very often refers to the image of fire. I think that the reason why he does so is not only because the metaphor of fire is particularly expressive, but also because something more lies behind it: here he is referring to the Vedic image of creation as performed by human subjects.”¹⁰

The reference to fire here would be two-fold: it is touching on the creation of *ātman*/second self/Agni, and also on fire being central to Vedic rituals (the Agnicayana in particular). Jurewicz notes that *tr̥ṣṇā* also makes particular reference

¹⁰p. 95

to fire's activity – to the insatiable nature of fire. This makes *taṇhā* not only fit the model of the Agnicayana, but the perfect word to describe what is happening in reality, the way our very natures burn for more of what we perceive as nourishing us, for the fuel of our experiences matching up what happens with how it relates to us.

Given that *upādāna* can mean fuel (as well as, according to Jurewicz, a cognitive activity comparable to burning fuel) we seem to have been given all the instructions needed to see the performance of the ritual: the tools of our senses, the arena of the world of the senses, the activities of contact, our Vedas via knowledge of how the experience feels, the fire that wants to burn, and the fuel for that fire, the fuel of our attachment to these very rituals.

Results of the Rituals

The links after *upādāna* are “existence” (*bhava*), “birth” (*jāti*), and “aging and death” (*jarāmaraṇa*). They can be interpreted in the rebirth models as literal descriptions of a being coming into existence from a past life, where *bhava* is seen as the arrival of something like “unresolved past *karma*” into the womb; some interpretations express this as consciousness descending into the womb. This is easy to understand, since the descriptions given in the suttas of birth and aging and death all sound fairly literal.

But given the number of layers of meaning in all that has gone before, and given that the Buddha is denying that what ritualists believe is happening is what is actually happening, it would be quite odd for this last part to mean exactly what was believed to be the result of an actual ritual: rebirth of some sort. All along, the Buddha has been denying the obvious interpretation, and showing that the truth is something else entirely.

To help us see this, here's a quick recap of the pattern of layering: the opening makes references to the Prajāpati myth, and rituals based on it, and points out how we arrive in the world (ignorant) and what drives us to do what we do. It simultaneously describes the creation of *ātman* and denies that what we conceive as *ātman* is exactly as normally described. Instead of a being born out of a craving for knowledge of the self, this is a notion born out of ignorance about the self; it is not *ātman* but that which we mistake for *ātman*. The middle portion has references to familiar rituals well known to society; it uses terms which evoke the texts (Vedas/*vedanā*), and the fire (*taṇhā/upādāna*), but all the while is describing an entirely different set of rituals; it does not say “Here's your ritual” overtly, but

obliquely. Why, then, would the final portion be the only part meant to be taken literally?

But if the last links are not actually about gestation, birth, aging, and death, what do they describe? The answer should lie in the direction of the whole: if dependent arising is, indeed, modeled on transformative fire rituals, ending with the funeral pyre, rites that (when they mark the end of an ideal life) work as transformative events in which the *ātman* reaches final perfection so that it can be born into its blissful next world, or rejoin the creative force, the Absolute, *brahman* and go to eternal bliss, then this final portion too must be modeled on that transformation. We've done the rituals, we've built the pyre, we've fed it fuel; will the *ātman* now be perfected, be transformed through *bhava* (which also means "becoming" – a translation more suited to transition), and then go to bliss? No, says the Buddha, in this step, what we perceive as the *ātman* that has been created and built up all along is perfected and born, but instead of going to bliss, it goes on to age and die, just as we are all born, age, and die; not to bliss, but to *dukkha*.

Reading The Suttas With This Interpretation

The language in the suttas – perhaps in part because of the layering of meaning that seems to have been a common practice in that culture¹¹ – can be interpreted in several ways. Historically, a case has been made that the Buddha frequently talked about literal rebirth as a fact of existence into which he had direct insight and which he even experienced for himself; there is a lot of evidence that can be offered to support that conclusion.

But if dependent arising was actually designed to refute current ideas about rituals, and the *ātman*, and the afterlife, and instead to point out what we can see for ourselves when we closely examine our own rituals (performed in ignorance), it seems unlikely that literal rebirth was the focal point of the teaching.

Questions concerning rebirth are not the only unresolved issues about dependent arising in the suttas. There have also been questions about how unusual sequences in various suttas fit with its classical order. Besides, there are related portions of the texts that remain downright inscrutable. If this interpretation is completely misguided, it should become obvious as we examine the suttas that we have a hard time making our theory fit the texts; the theory would make the

¹¹See Joanna Jurewicz' *Fire and Cognition in the Rgveda*, ISBN 978-83-7151-893-5 pub. Dom Wydawniczy ELIPSA

suttas make less sense if it is mistaken. If, on the other hand, our theory can be shown to be consistent with most suttas on the subject, and answer some of the unresolved questions, perhaps it will be approved. Only time – and many people willing to put in the effort to study and debate the issue – will really tell.

The classic definition of each of the twelve steps in the Sutta Piṭaka is in MN 9. Sāriputta there expounds each link in answer to the question “What is right view?”¹² The wording is repeated again in SN 12.2 (without crediting a speaker), and portions of it recur in various other suttas (for example birth, aging, and death are described, with more detail on sorrow, lamentation, despair and grief, in DN 22). Because it is the most detailed description of all twelve in one place, we can use it as an index to the whole set, and see how Sāriputta’s explanations fit the theory, adding other suttas as needed. He starts his discourse at the end of the chain of events, with aging and death: this is a logical starting place because it is what each of us does when looking for a cause: we spot an effect, and look back for the components that were required to bring it about.¹³

SUTTA SUPPORT

Death (*marañā*)

“And what is aging and death?... The aging of beings in the various orders of beings, their old age, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of life, weakness of faculties – this is called aging. The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings, their passing away, dissolution, disappearance, dying, completion of time, dissolution of the aggregates, laying down of the body – this is called death.”¹⁴

¹²Sāriputta starts the sutta with wholesomeness, nutriment, and the four noble truths, does all twelve links, and ends with the taints. The sutta can be found beginning at PTS M i 46. All translations of MN 9 cited here are by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, from Wisdom Publication’s *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (1995), unless otherwise stated.

¹³Richard Gombrich points out that in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* it is the discovery of the *paṭicca samup-pāda* that is the Buddha’s awakening. Gombrich then shares an insight provided by his friend: “...Hwang Soon-Il has very plausibly suggested that this may be the origin of the common Pali expression *yoniso manasa-kāra*. The dictionary translates this with such terms as ‘proper attention’. But literally it means ‘making in the mind according to origin’, and that is just how the Buddha made his breakthrough.” p. 132 of *What the Buddha Thought*

¹⁴MN 9.22 [PTS M i 49]

A conversation the Buddha once had with Baka the Brahmā shows that the last link in the chain of dependent arising is not about literal aging and death, despite the way the above makes it look at first glance. Here is Baka speaking, followed by the Buddha's answer:¹⁵

“...Now, good sir, this is permanent, this is everlasting, this is eternal, this is total, this is not subject to pass away; for this is where one is neither born nor ages nor dies nor passes away nor reappears (*upapajjati*) , and beyond this there is no other escape.”

When this was said, I told Baka the Brahmā: “The worthy Baka the Brahmā has lapsed into ignorance... in that he says of the impermanent that it is permanent, of the transient that it is everlasting, of the non-eternal that it is eternal, of the incomplete that it is total, of what is subject to pass away that it is not subject to pass away, of where one is born, ages, dies, passes away, and reappears, that here one is neither born nor ages nor dies nor passes away nor reappears; and when there is another escape beyond this, he says there is no other escape beyond this.”

I would first note that I can find no sense in the Pali of Brahmā or the Buddha talking about a place – there is no “where” there – so this piece could be describing the perception that abiding with Brahmā was a permanent, eternal state (not a place), endless, no next state: no more rebirths. With his contention that within this state one still ages and dies, the Buddha seems to be saying that what is usually perceived as “abiding in the Brahmā-state” is actually a state of existence still in this world where aging and death continue.

The passage can certainly be interpreted as the Buddha saying that the Vedic highest goal of “abiding with Brahmā” instead puts one in a “place” (Brahmā's world, taking on a life which goes on for a long while) where one ages and dies and is reborn again, but having (perhaps purposefully) made no mention of place, the Pali doesn't seem to be denying a place and a life spent in it. Instead it seems to be discussing a state, which is presumably a happy one, since followers of this system are working hard to get there and stay there eternally; we can call it “a state of eternal bliss”. Brahmā says it is without the usual pains of aging and death and being reborn again, probably because what Brahmā is describing is not literal life

¹⁵MN 49.3-.4 translation by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 326]

with him in a world, but the state of eternal bliss “in union with brahman”. It is “total” and everlasting because it is the final rejoining with the Absolute that is being described here.

The reference to “reappearing” is usually seen as literal rebirth, but in the context of this new view that dependent arising is above all about *ātman* going through changes as a result of all our rituals, the reappearance referred to should be that which results from our frequent rituals. In those rituals the Sacrificer dies a **virtual** death each time, visits his other world, and returns to reappear (*upapaj-jati*) again. The last birth – following the final (actual) death – through the *bhava* of the death ritual, would not be thought of as *upapajjati* (which is why Baka says there will be no more of that). *Upapajjati* is what happens repeatedly in this life: we are born, grow up (age), join in the rituals, die, and reappear after the normal rituals; but not so after that last death marked by the rite of cremation.

Brahmā wants us to believe that at some point *ātman* gets to rest in eternal bliss, but the Buddha is saying *ātman* just returns to doing what we have always seen him doing, being modified by our rituals – not the Vedic rituals, but our rituals. It is not really *ātman* the Buddha is discussing here, it is whatever we mistake for *ātman*.

We keep changing as a result of our rituals (the ones that begin with *vedanā*) and when we get through the transition of *bhava* and come out the other side, as long as we are still creating that sense of *ātman*, it is still going to experience aging, sickness, and death, and go around again with the next change caused by our rituals. It is what passes for *ātman* that goes on the rounds, and it is that which the Buddha is identifying here as “impermanent, transient, non-eternal, incomplete, subject to pass away, born, aging, dying, passing away and reappearing.”

In MN 1¹⁶ the Buddha can be seen to address the way that the events described in dependent arising create something that “comes to be”, and that it is this which ages and dies:

...the Tathagata, too, accomplished and fully enlightened, directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself] as earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine’, he does not delight (*abhinandati*) in earth. Why is that? Because he has understood that delight is the root of

¹⁶MN 1.171 translated by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 6].

suffering, and that with being (*bhava*) [as condition] there is birth, and that for whatever has come to be there is ageing and death.

A traditional interpretation might suggest that “whatever has come to be” describes “every single thing that has come into existence” in which case the above is simply a statement about impermanence. Yes, it is about impermanence; but given the context of the paragraph, it also has to do with conceptions of the self. It is not about the impermanence of any old “whatever” but is, instead, about the impermanence of that sense of self. If we look closely at the above we can see a mini-*paṭicca samuppāda* which goes from “delight” (a frequent synonym for *upādāna*), to *bhava* to birth to aging-and-death. This means that if dependent arising is using a ritual that was thought to create and perfect *ātman* to describe the birth of something we mistake for *ātman*, then it is that false *ātman* which is what arises, and aging and death await it. In the example above, it is that sense of the self as to do with earth which arises from delight in earth, but MN 1 shows that in any way¹⁷ we conceive that self, it is from that conception that the mistaken sense of self comes to be (is born), ages and dies.

This is why, when the Buddha was talking to Baka the Brahmā, he said that there was an escape beyond, and why he also repeatedly says that there is an unborn, unaging, undying, “beyond birth, aging, suffering, death”. It is the false sense of self that he is describing as being born, aging, suffering, dying; so naturally, when he tells us we can rid ourselves of it, we would then be beyond that birth, aging, suffering and dying: we would no longer experience the *dukkha* that arises from our sense that we have a lasting self. And, I contend, that is the only *dukkha* the Buddha is ever talking about.

Aging (*jarā*)

As for the aging portion of *jarāmaraṇa*, MN 26¹⁸ has this example of what is meant:

“And what may be said to be subject to aging? Wife and children are subject to aging . . . sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants . . . gold and

¹⁷I say that the sutta talks about “any way we conceive that self” by giving us what appears to be a comprehensive list of every way the self was conceived, in the Buddha’s time, and denying all of them.

¹⁸Translation by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 162].

silver are subject to aging. These acquisitions (*upadhayo*) are subject to aging; and one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them . . . being himself subject to aging, seeks what is also subject to aging.”

Here it is clear the Buddha is not really talking about an individual’s own aging as the problem, and perhaps not even the aging of wives and children, sheep and fowl, our possessions, since “gold and silver” are described as aging, too, when, in the reality that concerns us, their aging is of no great importance, though they can of course be stolen from us. This means that in the piece above, “aging” is presented as a metaphor for impermanence, so we can interpret the section this way:

“One who is himself impermanent is tied to these impermanent things, infatuated with them. Being himself subject to impermanence, he seeks what is also subject to impermanence.”

The way it was phrased by the Buddha is far more poetic than my version, but either way it can be seen to say that we feel drawn to what is **similar** to us: we see our impermanent selves reflected in the impermanence of everything around us. This repeats the message of *nāmarūpa*, that we look for ourselves in things and find aspects of ourselves there, and we make those things part of ourselves. The use of the word “acquisitions” (*upadhayo*) seems likely to be wordplay relating the way we own things (*upadhi*) to the way we cling to them and make them part of ourselves (*upādānakkhandhā*).

When the Buddha talks about the problem with gold and silver’s aging, we can see that the real concern is not with an escape from aging, but with escaping from the *dukkha* that can result from aging. This makes aging a euphemism for all impermanent things. It is our infatuation with acquisitions (of things related to us in some way, of self) that are impermanent that is the problem, not the impermanence itself or even the things which are subject to impermanence. It is not aging that is the problem, it is the way we relate to things that age by making them part of our concept of self.

Both Aging And Death (*jarāmaraṇa*)

Sāriputta’s classic description of *jarāmaraṇa*, quoted above, gets offered as proof that the Buddha was speaking about literal rebirth because this seems to be a literal description of aging and death – which of course it is:

“And what is aging and death?... The aging of beings in the various orders of beings, their old age, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of life, weakness of faculties – this is called aging. The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings, their passing away, dissolution, disappearance, dying, completion of time, dissolution of the aggregates, laying down of the body – this is called death.”

The Buddha is again making a point with this last step: that when what we think of as *ātman* goes through a transformation (*bhava*), it just reappears in the same old world in which it suffers through aging, sickness, and death; so, yes, the text is describing this step literally because that is literally what that which we mistake for self experiences. But what it experiences is not simply aging and death, it is the *dukkha* that, through conceptions of self, comes to overlay them.

Because with this last step the Buddha is talking about the opposite of bliss, and because the end product of the whole process of dependent arising is *dukkha*, aging-and-death can best be interpreted as a metonym for (or the equivalent of) *dukkha*.

In the extended, liberative *paṭicca samuppāda* found in SN 12.23 (the *Upanisa Sutta*), the usual chain is extended into the path to liberation, and the liberative part of the path there starts with “faith” (*saddha*), which has *dukkha* as its condition; but *dukkha* has “birth” (*jāti*) as its condition, and the whole chain regresses from there back to “ignorance” (*avijjā*) in the normal way. Missing from this chain is “aging and death” and *dukkha* stands in its place, so *jarāmarāṇa* is being given there as the precise equivalent of *dukkha*. If we see *paṭicca samuppāda* as modeled on rituals, “aging and death” really is, coming at the end of dependent arising, is the Buddha’s way of saying that the results of all those repeated rituals is not bliss, but just “more of the same”:¹⁹ it is *dukkha*, the opposite of bliss.

That what is meant by *jarāmarāṇa* is precisely *dukkha* is also clear in the description of one of the questions the Buddha asked himself that led him to his insight:²⁰

¹⁹When I say that “more of the same” is *dukkha*, I am not saying that the Buddha says that “life is *dukkha*”, or even that the unenlightened life is *dukkha*. It is not all *dukkha*. The issue is just with the things we do with those rituals – when we are not doing “the usual stuff” life always has the potential to be wonderful. Our lives are a mix of doing things without quite understanding why we do them, things that are based on the desire for self the Buddha is describing, and doing things that aren’t in that category – selfless things, for example, or simple, joyful things.

²⁰SN 12.10(i) translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi [PTS S ii 10].

pubbeva me, bhikkhave, sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattasseva sato etad ahoṣi – ‘kicchaṃ vatāyaṃ loko āpanno jāyati ca jīyati ca miyati ca cavati ca upapajjati ca. atha ca paṇimassa dukkhassa nissaraṇaṃ nappajānāti jarāmaraṇassā.

“Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisatta, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: ‘Alas, this world²¹ has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this suffering [headed by] aging-and-death...’

Although “headed by” has been inserted into the translation, the Pali actually presents the two terms *dukkha* and *jarāmaraṇa* as equivalents: “The many diverse kinds of suffering that are aging and death arise in the world...” or perhaps “The many diverse kinds of suffering that we call aging and death arise in the world...” It is possible that the phrase “aging and death” was a known metonym for all kinds of *dukkha*,²² but at any rate, we can see here again that “aging and death” is just another way of saying *dukkha*.

In SN 12.35²³ the Buddha is specifically asked who it is that ages and dies, and his answer is dependent arising. By giving that answer he specifically points to that which is “born” through that process as being what experiences aging and death:

“Venerable sir, what now is aging-and-death, and for whom is there aging-and-death?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said. “If one were to ask, ‘Which aging & death? And whose is this aging & death?’ and if one were to ask, ‘Is aging & death one thing, and is this the aging & death of someone/something else?’ both of them would have the same meaning, even though their words would differ... From birth as a requisite condition comes aging & death.”

²¹ Also note the (to us) odd use of “the world” as something that can suffer – this seems to be a reflection of the Prajāpati myth, where self-is-world and world-is-self and since they are equivalents they can be used interchangeably.

²² If “aging and death” was a known metonym for *dukkha*, this might help make sense of the question, in the quote from SN 12.35 below, which mentions the question “Which ‘aging and death?’”

²³ Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi [PTS S ii 61].

The reason why the answer seems so obscure is that it cannot be made in terms of a person who is the result of a rebirth experiencing aging and death, because that is not what dependent arising is talking about. Through the lens of this interpretation, this is simply saying that “that which arises/is born” is that which experiences “aging and death” – which is just a metonym for *dukkha*.

Birth (*jāti*)

In MN 9, Sāriputta gives a detailed exposition on each of the links in the chain of events, and his description of “birth” (*jāti*) has long been held up as a very strong piece of evidence that the Buddha was making it clear that there was rebirth and we were bound to its cycles, because it seemed that this piece could not be interpreted any other way:

“And what is birth?... Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of aggregates, & acquisition of [sense] spheres of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth.”²⁴

As translated, this is usually interpreted as literal birth (or, more accurately, as a rebirth). However, when viewed within the context of a dependent arising modeled on transformative rituals, it cannot be meant quite so literally. First of all, in the ritual setting, this “birth” would not generally be referring to a birth into an actual body at all, but into the world of one’s ancestors, or perhaps bliss with Brahmā. Within the lesson it is offering, though, it should be addressing the same point as the conversation with Baka the Brahmā: not eternal bliss, just more of the same *dukkha*. The Buddha is simply saying that the rituals we perform do not cause *ātman* to go to bliss in another world, they cause what we mistake for *ātman* to keep reappearing in this one.

It is interesting that the “appearance of the aggregates” is mentioned as part of birth, since there is every indication that the Buddha perceived the troubles that we have through the creation of our problematic sense of self to start up at about the same time as does sexual lust,²⁵ so those aggregates that fuel our mis-

²⁴Translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu [http:// www.accesstosight.org/ tipitaka/ mn/ mn.009.than.html](http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.009.than.html)

²⁵For example in MN 38.28-29 [PTS M i 266] ,where he describes a boy’s life from conception to maturity, and the clinging is not introduced until after he’s gotten past the stage of playing tipcat and with toy ploughs; only when the strands of sensual pleasure kick in does the trouble begin.

taken sense that we have a self would not appear at birth, but long after. Those aggregates, however, would appear with each fresh rebirth of our false sense of self, so I would suggest that this is actually what is being described here: the birth and reappearance of that which is not self, here labeled as “a being”.

Another way of looking at this particular definition – and, in fact, all of Sāriputta’s descriptions in MN 9 – is to see that he is not really defining what is happening as part of the process, so much as talking about a specific requirement for this moment to happen.

A Note On Nutriment

In the Vedic cosmology there is a great deal of concern with food, with “nutriment”. This is such a strong influence in the culture that the gods are described as being fed by our little selves there in their world, and the sacrifice offered in rituals is seen as ascending in the smoke to sustain the gods or forefathers, and the sacrificer is understood to be banking nutriment to make his stay up there in bliss last long.²⁶ Not surprisingly, given that the society was heavily involved in settling new lands and developing the science of agriculture, another popular analogy was to the growing of food. If each of these steps is looked at in terms of nutriment – as the very most basic “ground” of things needed for this step to happen – Sāriputta’s descriptions not only make sense, they become a way of pointing out exactly what we need to look at to see the step occurring.

As we go through the remaining links in the chain of events, we can examine how this makes what’s going on easier to spot, but for the moment let us keep the focus on “birth”. It is clear that if there were no birth, ever, of any being anywhere, there could never arise any false-self or any *dukkha* resulting from the appearance of that mistaken sense of self. That makes “birth” the necessary “field” for that sense of self to grow in.²⁷ At the same time, we are also being asked to pay attention to how a particular sort of birth – the one that comes with the appearance of the aggregates – causes *dukkha*.

Literal birth is not the primary cause of *dukkha*. It is one of many component causes that are required for anything at all to happen, true, but it is just a field. Lots of good things come from the same field; there would be no life at all were it not for birth. But the acquisition of the aggregates is also pointed out as something

²⁶Which is probably why the terms for merit and its rewards have their roots in the ripening of crops.

²⁷It does not mean that what we need is to stop birth.

for us to look at – so that we can see what is born from those ways in which we conceive of a self.²⁸ It is true that if we stop literal birth, *dukkha* stops, but so does all the good stuff that comes from the same field, so what is being addressed here is, as usual, multileveled: without birth, no birth of the mistaken sense of self; the same is true without the appearance of the aggregates. The thing that is the proximate cause, the thing that goes to the heart of the trouble and gives us no goodness at all, that is the part that needs to be stopped, not the furthest cause, the one that also gives good stuff.

Becoming (*bhava*)

The word *bhava* has long been a problem for translators. It often gets translated as “existence” or “being”, which represents a steady state (except in phrases like “coming into existence”). Translating it as a state one is in and stays in may be causing confusion.

As part of a process like dependent arising, it is clearly a process itself, and since it marks the transition from one state (less pure *ātman*) to a different state (purer *ātman*), the other common translation of “becoming” suits it better. In its place before “birth” it can be seen as a sort of gestation, a moment or a period of change from one state to another.

The classic definition of “becoming” is found at MN 9.28.²⁹ When Sāriputta is asked “What is becoming?” his answer is:

tayome, āvuso, bhavā – kāmabhavo, rūpabhavo, arūpabhavo.

“There are these three kinds of being: sense-sphere being, fine-material being, and immaterial being.”

²⁸We can also look at Sāriputta’s analysis of aging and death in the same way: if there were no infirmity, no aging, no one ever died, there would be no food – no nutriment, no field – in which *dukkha* could grow. That there is such a thing as loss of abilities, and the things we are attached to do sicken and die and pass away – literally or metaphorically, as with silver and gold – that provides the field, the nutriment, a ground for us to grow *dukkha*. The literal is just the ground – we have to plant the seeds for something to grow.

²⁹[PTS M i 50]

Kāmabhava should not be too hard to understand. It is usually translated in terms of sensual pleasures, and though I tend to think it means more than that,³⁰ the usual translation should be sufficient in this quote. The other two terms, *rūpa* and *arūpa*, have been variously translated over the years but “form” (here “fine-material”) and “formless” (“immaterial”) are currently popular. How these words are interpreted by modern translators seems to vary, but the context is dependent arising’s discussion of how we create our sense of self, – and we are not simply talking about the self we have in this moment, but also about mistaken views of what an eternal, ongoing “self” (*ātman*) would consist of and would be after death. So the point here may concern one’s habitual attitude: whether one thinks little about where or whether one will be reborn and just lives for the moment through the senses (*kāma*); or one believes in being reborn into the world of the ancestors, where one takes “form” (*rūpa*) and hangs out munching on meritorious supplies; or one becomes one with *brahman* “with no form” (*arūpa*) at all. This interpretation remains speculative, and deserves a paper of its own, but the present paper will continue noting the ways it fits into the detailed descriptions of *paṭicca samuppāda*.

Sāriputta’s description again appears to point to a field, in this case the field in which *bhava* takes its nourishment: how we conceive of the self (i.e., the most popular ways in those days). If we were not busy perceiving our self as one of those sorts of being, we would not be creating the sense of self that gets born in the next step. In other words, without our conviction that we are in a world in which [pick your worldview] is the cosmic order and the consequent belief that we will become [pick the outcome of that worldview] after death, a sense of self that conforms to that view could not possibly be born in the next step.

If *bhava* is taken as “becoming” – that is, as a transition from an old sense of self to a newly upgraded version of a false self – the following translation stops being about ending rebirth/a final end to any existence at all:

“Friend, though I have clearly seen as it really is with correct wisdom,
Nibbana is the cessation of existence, I am not an arahant, one whose
taints are destroyed.”³¹

³⁰ I suggest that it is all sense information that we cling to as relating to self, not just the “sensual pleasures”; it represents all the problematic things we do even when we don’t have a philosophy we cling to, because even non-conceptual impressions that we have a self begin with incoming sensual information.

³¹ SN 12.68 translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi [PTS ii 118].

It would instead be about simply ending that sense of having a lasting self, so it becomes “Nibbana is the cessation of becoming” – where “becoming” represents a renewed sense of self, “becoming a fresh set of the aggregates” caused by clinging (*upādānakkhandhā*). Nibbana could not have been the cessation of plain old existence at any rate, or it would be annihilation, and would indeed have been instantaneous upon awakening; so it has to be the cessation of the existence of something we’ve been trying to get rid of, and that would be our conceptions of a lasting self.

The view that the three “becomings” are the possible conceptions of *ātman*’s place in the universe is also supported by MN 9’s³² explanation of the origin of *dukkha*:

And what is the origin of suffering? It is craving (*taṇhā*), which brings renewal of being (*ponobbhavikā*), is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; it is craving for sensual pleasures (*kāmatāṇhā*), craving for being (*bhavataṇhā*), and craving for non-being (*vibhavataṇhā*). This is called the origin of suffering.

Here we have craving as three types, *kāma* again, and *bhava*, as well as *vibhava*. If my hypothesis is right, “regular old *bhava*-type *taṇhā*” could match the *rūpabhava* mentioned above, where it would be the culture’s majority understanding of *karma* and birth into an “other world” of form after death; and *vibhava* would correspond to *arūpabhava*, where *vibhava* would mean something “beyond becoming” or “beyond form” or “other than form” (i.e. “formless”).

Fuel (*upādāna*)

Upādāna’s succinct definition (as found in MN 9) has it as concerned with four things in particular: *kāmupādānaṃ*, *diṭṭhupādānaṃ*, *sīlabbatupādānaṃ*, and *attavādupādānaṃ*. As with *bhava*, above, the list starts with *kāma*, then seems to head off in a different direction, since there are four items listed here rather than three. The first new entry is *diṭṭhi*, which is views of/about things. *Diṭṭhi* is views which have an effect, as opposed to detached opinions. The next two items, *sīlabbatupādānaṃ* and *attavādupādānaṃ*, on examination, turn out to be views as well, the former being how people cling to their “rites and rituals” (which is what the whole of dependent arising is discussing!) and the latter views about the

³²MN 9.16 [PTS M i 48].

self (ditto!). In a sense, *ditṭhi* seems to be central to this link: – the views we have about what makes us what we are – and the other three are simply the commonest examples of the things that people held strong opinions about, the ones that get them the most *dukkha*: sensuality, ritualism, and views of the self.

When Dhammadinna answers a question about whether *upādāna* is equivalent to the *khandhā* in *upādānakkhandhā*, or is separate from it, the nun's answer is “neither”. She then explains what *upādāna* is:

“It is the desire and lust in regard to the five aggregates affected by clinging that is the clinging there.”³³

This means that *upādāna* is the desire and lust that form around the sense of self, the sense of what constitutes the self, including all the important issues that that brings up in Vedic society (i.e. where one goes after the breakup of the body). It is the desire and lust for whatever sense of self we have at the moment, whether it is about *kāma*, or *silabbata*, or *attavāda*, or some other *ditṭhi* (view). The aggregates are those points we cling to that are specifically generated by (affected by) *upādāna*, the fuel for our sense of self, the fuel of opinions.

Sāriputta's description again points out the field that causes or allows the clinging to grow: It is views, views about right behaviour and about rituals, views about our sensual needs, views about the self. Without these views, there would be no fuel for the ritual fires in which we create our sense of self, so they are what we need to understand and discard.

Thirst (*taṇhā*)

Craving (thirst) we have already mentioned, when covering *bhava*, as being about *kāma*, *bhava*, and *vibhava*. So it also relates to *saṃkhārā*, because *saṃkhārā* are, in the original sense, craving for existence, for coming into existence (which would be *bhava*) as well as for continuing to exist (*bhava* as ongoing process). Here the Buddha could be talking about the ways we conceive of ourselves: as simple, sensual creatures (the ones to whom things just happen, with no particular cause); or as creatures who pass through “becoming” into the world of form (*rūpa*); or through *vibhava*'s “beyond becoming” into the formless (*arūpa*).

In the world that created the model for dependent arising, the Sacrificer performed rituals to gain and perfect knowledge of the self that makes these preferred

³³MN 44.7 translated by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 300].

outcomes happen; meanwhile, in the parallel lesson the Buddha is providing us with, we tend to confirm our preconceptions through our daily rituals, by relating them to our sense of self.

This is why in MN 9³⁴ craving also gets described in terms of craving for the objects of the senses.

“There are these six classes of craving: craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for odours, craving for flavours, craving for tangibles, craving for mind-objects.”

It is through the senses that we build up the experiences we base our views (*upādāna*) on. The views then act as fuel for the fire of transition to our sense of self. When Sāriputta explains *taṇhā* in terms of the senses, he is not really explaining what *taṇhā* is or does, so much as pointing out the field in which it operates. When we are looking for that thirst for our sense of self in operation, we need to look specifically at the senses as they react to good feeling, bad feeling and neutral feeling; so Sāriputta is asking us to attend to that feeling of “I want more” or “I want to get away from it” that arises in response to sensory information.

Feeling (*vedanā*)

“And what is feeling, what is the origin of feeling, what is the cessation of feeling, what is the way leading to the cessation of feeling? There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact... feeling born of mind-contact.”³⁵

Sāriputta’s explanation of feeling in MN 9 is a simple one: feeling derives from the senses. His formulation is modeled on the classic description of the noble truths: what it is, its origin, cessation, and the way to its cessation.³⁶ Describing

³⁴MN 9.38 [PTS M i 510]

³⁵MN 9.42 [PTS M i 51]

³⁶In fact, all the descriptions in MN 9 are framed in terms of that same formula for the Four Noble Truths. In this way we can see that in some sense every step of dependent arising is actually *dukkha*, and that is because its end-product is *dukkha*: what dependent arising describes is *dukkha* and its origin. Or it can be seen as describing the arising of a false sense of self and its origin (the two are the same). Or really, given the conversation with Baka the Brahṃā, it describes impermanence, for which we should be grateful: because of impermanence, dependent arising also describes the end of *dukkha* and the way to end it.

feeling as originating in the senses is entirely logical, though on the surface this tells us little about the part it plays in the process being described. Contact with a sense is the most fundamental nutriment for feeling to arise; it has to be there for us to see what is being pointed out. We need to pay attention to those senses when they make contact.

Dhammadinna, on the other hand,³⁷ talks of feeling in terms of pleasant, painful, and neither of those. What is most useful in her discussion is that she then describes what underlying tendencies relate to these three kinds of feeling: lust (*rāga*) underlies pleasant feeling, aversion (*paṭigha*) underlies the unpleasant, and ignorance (*avijjā*) underlies the things we feel as neither pleasant nor unpleasant; we seem to dismiss the things we have no particular feeling about as if they did not matter at all because, of course, “they have nothing to do with me”. So we can easily see that the type of feeling determines the reaction to it (which is a form of *taṇhā*).

Contact (*phassa*)

Contact’s origin, as described by Sāriputta in MN 9,³⁸ is also simply located in the senses, because he is still describing where we look, in this case for contact.

“There are six classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-... nose-... tongue-... body-... mind-contact.”

Once again, what he describes is the food that sustains the process, and where to look to see it for ourselves.

When Mahā Kaccāna explains some cryptic remarks the Buddha has made about the source of perceptions, he begins by describing what makes up contact:

“Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives.”³⁹

Kaccāna’s explanation, like Sāriputta’s, is anchored in the senses, which is natural, since the senses themselves are the step just before this one. The senses and

³⁷In MN 44 [PTS M i 302]

³⁸MN 9.46 [PTS M i 52]

³⁹MN 18.16 translated by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 111]

their objects – i.e., the activation of the senses – are required for contact, and the object of the senses is actually found in the step one further back, in *nāmarūpa*, where *rūpa* not only means “form”, but is the individuation of things in such a way that each thing relates to us, so that we find ourselves in it. We are not just talking about any contact, but contact of a specific type, contact that satisfies the particular desire for confirmation of the self.

Kaccāna’s statement goes back further still, for it relates to consciousness. Why would that be? Because it is hungry consciousness that is doing the seeking, that is directing the senses to look for nourishment, and it is that particular instance of consciousness that will cling to, or avoid, or ignore what it finds, depending on the feeling that arises from the contact. It is only when contact has encountered a suitable object that the sense’s awareness is fed, nourished, and arises – the tiny cycle of seeking for self and finding self has been completed.

We can see it this way: consciousness is not fulfilled – does not become complete – until it has something to be conscious of, and that “something” must be specifically what it is looking for; nothing else will satisfy it and make it complete. Driven by *saṃkhārā*, consciousness seeks the self. It is hungry but it is not real (not active, not sustained) until it has been fed. So when the eye meets a form, if that form confirms self, eye-consciousness now exists, because it has been nourished. That is what contact consists of: a moment when all the conditions of the drive to find the self have been met. Then feeling arises; feeling, which is knowledge of the experience (*vedanā*, our version of the ritual Vedas) comes to be, and then one can perceive both the self and the confirmation of the self in the world.

In Kaccāna’s statement, there is implied the whole cycle of dependent arising up to the moment when the sense of self is about to be conceived: the eye-consciousness, finding satisfaction in contact through the eye with forms, has been driven to do this by the desire for existence that is *saṃkhārā*, and that is operating only because of ignorance. It is seeking confirmation of the self in the world because of the perception of name-and-form – the expectation that aspects of self will be found in the world around us, so the senses are directed to look for confirmation, and when contact of the right sort is made, the feeling that results feeds our perception of self.

Direction of the Senses (*saḷāyatana*)

The word *saḷāyatana* breaks down into six (*saḷ*) *āyatana*, and is usually translated as “the six sense bases”. This is certainly what’s being addressed, as in Sāriputta’s⁴⁰ explanation of what it is:

“And what is the sixfold base...? There are these six bases: the eye-base, ear-... nose-... tongue-... body-... mind-base.”

But, as usual, what is missing here is any sense of how the “base” fits into the process, what it does, what its function is. When *āyatana* is simply translated as “base” or “sphere” or “world of” we understand that it represents a cause (base) and is part of a creation (sphere/world), but there is no clear sense of why it is there beyond providing fodder for contact.

Other definitions of *āyatana*, found in PED, may make more sense:

1. stretch, extent, reach... 2. exertion, doing, working, practice performance...

If the word is seen in an active sense, rather than as a passive recipient, it is a sense that is stretching out, extending, reaching, exerting itself. Then it becomes clearer that this refers to our senses driven to seek what *saṃkhārā* and consciousness are demanding we look for: ourselves and aspects of ourselves, through contact with the world.

The field for what is happening is the hungry senses, and that is therefore what we need to pay attention to. If we watch those senses we will notice how they are seeking something. They are the base from which the process of seeking for the self is able to act at this point in the chain.

Identification (*nāmarūpa*)

The most concise description of what “name-and-form” (*nāmarūpa*) is, as a link in dependent arising, comes again from Sāriputta⁴¹

“And what is mentality-materiality? ... Feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention – these are called mentality. The four great

⁴⁰MN 9.50 [PTS M i 52].

⁴¹In MN 9.54 [PTS M i 53].

elements and the material form derived from the four great elements – these are called materiality. So this mentality and this materiality are what is called mentality-materiality.”

Again we have a description that appears to be straightforward and literal. If we take *nāma* (“name” or “mentality”) to mean “mental processing” and *rūpa* (“form” or “materiality”) to be just the physical, then what’s being described is the body-mind duality. Doesn’t it seem odd for the Buddha to say that this is what is real, what is happening? That there is this split – a mind and a body? This possible misinterpretation may come from the assumption that these descriptions say all that there is to say about each item and that they should be interpreted as absolutely literal descriptions of the link. However, that is apparently not all that is going on here. The pattern of his descriptions indicates that Sāriputta’s definitions may not be fully delineating what part each link in the chain plays in quite the way we would.

For name-and-form to do its identifying, there does have to be a mind that is doing the processing: feeling, perceiving, intending, making contact, and paying attention; and there does have to be a material body functioning for this step to occur. Just as in the next step, active senses are required, and in the next, those active senses have to make contact, and so on, right up to the way in which, for a sense of self to come into existence, there has to be a literal birth, and for *dukkha* to happen, there has to be food for it, too: aging, sorrow, despair, broken teeth, and death, because those are the things we make *dukkha* out of. Just so, the activities of *nāmarūpa* (feeling, perceiving, choosing, making contact, attending to the objects of our senses) require that we have name-and-form ourselves, and the things we encounter in the world have it too.

Sāriputta seems to be asking us to pay attention to these to see what is going on in this step: notice the mental processing we do: notice how we see something (perceive it) through its form (*rūpa*) and we define it verbally (name it, *nāma*).

Given the background of the term *nāmarūpa* in the Prajāpati myth, and given this step’s place in the ritual reenactment of that myth, it should go without saying that the defining we are doing in this step is finding ourselves in the myriad names and forms around us. This is why, in so many suttas, the Buddha points out that sometimes when we see something outside us, we say of it, “This is me, this is mine, this I am.”

This interpretation is consistent with what we find in the Dīgha Nikāya’s full treatment of *paṭicca samuppāda*, a text that has been a little bit muddy in inter-

pretation in the past. A look at it through the lens of this theory of dependent arising makes it a little bit clearer.

Here is its description of *nāmarūpa*:⁴²

“From name-&-form as a requisite condition comes contact. Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how, from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes contact. If the qualities, traits, themes, & indicators by which there is a description of name-group (mental activity) (*nāmakāye*) were all absent, would designation-contact (*adhivacana samphasso*) with regard to the form-group (the physical properties) (*rūpakāye*) be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

It seems we are talking about how we define things based on their form. Here’s my grammatically less accurate but I hope more intelligible translation of the same thing:

“If the qualities, attributes, signs, and indicators by which we categorize things were not recalled when we make contact with something, would assigning special terms based on physical grouping be possible?”

In other words, if we had no definitions by which we categorize things based on the forms they take, would we know what they were by their forms? We couldn’t.

Note that the word translated above as “designation” (*adhivacana*) carries a connotation of connections made between one sense of something and another. For example, in MN 5.9⁴³ it is used to express that when the term “blemish” is used, what is actually meant is “unskillful wishes”, and in MN 19.26⁴⁴ it gets repeated use in matching metaphors to their real meanings.

With that in mind, the sentence above can be interpreted to say that because we already have in mind that certain physical characteristics of things connect to a particular meaning, when we see those characteristics, we categorize them that way; in the absence of those preconceived notions, we would not connect to forms

⁴²Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, [http:// www.accesstosight.org/ tipitaka/ dn/ dn.15.o.than.html](http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.o.than.html) [PTS D ii 62]

⁴³Translated by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 27]

⁴⁴Translated by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi [PTS M i 118]

in that way. That this is the point being made becomes clearer when we look at the next portion's reversal of the above, reflecting the pattern the first sentence established:

“If the permutations, signs, themes, and indicators by which there is a description of form-group (*rūpakāye*) were all absent, would resistance-contact (*paṭighasamphasso*) with regard to the name-group (*nāmakāye*) be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

The above reverses what's being considered. Here the question seems to be: If we perceived a physical object as indistinguishable from every other object – if all the signs were missing – would we reject it? The unspoken part of this question – unspoken because knowledge of the mythology of the day is assumed – makes the sentence end: “...would we reject it as being too different from us?”

These considerations are part of the Prajāpati myth, which has two particular variations. In one of them the division of the Creator (so that he can seek himself) results in many diverse forms. This was the more popular version, in which the sense of self is lost in diversity. In the reverse variant of the tale, what is created is so uniform that there is no way to distinguish self from other. When seen through the lens of the Prajāpati myths, in the first question Ananda is being asked: if the first case were true, if there were a zillion individuals and no two apparently alike, but we didn't have categories into which to sort things, would we be able to feel kinship with them, would we mistake them for self? And the second question is: if we could not distinguish between one form and another, including between ourselves and everything around us, would we reject things as alien?

Recognizing the two questions as having the Prajāpati myth as their unspoken, underlying source, makes the point clear: It is because we have already decided that the world has meaning that we behave as we do: accepting kinship with what is like us – and deeming those things necessary – and rejecting what is too different from us – and avoiding it.

“If the permutations, signs, themes, and indicators by which there is a description of name-group and form-group were all absent, would designation-contact or resistance-contact be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for contact, i.e., name-and-form.”

Contact, in DN 15’s formulation of dependent arising, quoted above, follows from name-and-form, (the senses are skipped in this version) and it seems the outcome of that contact is being shaded into this definition: We come to know ourselves through contact, and we already have a tendency toward seeing ourselves as similar to or different from whatever we encounter. It is because we put things into categories, and because things have distinguishable forms, that we are able to do this. This means that *nāmarūpa*’s field is not simply that we must have a mind and body capable of making distinctions, but that there must be individuals with distinctly separate forms which we can use as the basis of our definitions. Both of these are the fields in which what we are doing in this step can flourish. We are being asked to notice the ways in which we relate to things through their names and forms.

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*)

“From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.’ ... If consciousness were not to descend into the mother’s womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?”

“No, lord.”

“If, after descending into the womb, consciousness were to depart, would name-and-form be produced for this world?”

“No, lord.”

“If the consciousness of the young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form ripen, grow, and reach maturity?”⁴⁵

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for name-and-form, i.e., consciousness.”⁴⁶

Here is another description that seems just too literal to interpret as meaning anything other than “the consciousness we are talking about is the one that arrives because of conception.” Yet if we look at it as speaking to the requirement

⁴⁵Note that a young boy or girl does not have fully mature name-and-form – this matches with *nāmarūpa* being a reference to the point in their lives when youths are given the rites of passage to enter society as fully responsible members, and is also a reminder that, in the Buddha’s system, the process being described doesn’t begin before a certain level of maturity. For brahmin males, this point came long before puberty.

⁴⁶DN 15 Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.o.than.html> [PTS D ii 63]

for this step to happen – in the same way that Sāriputta’s descriptions of all that we’ve covered before stipulate what is necessary for each step to occur, rather than describe the process itself – it makes sense. The consciousness that arises due to our need to know that we exist, the consciousness that brings what we think is *ātman* into existence, does indeed require what we usually call consciousness, the mental-processing ability that was nurtured in a womb, had the chance to survive childhood, and matured (ripened) into the separate individuality designated by *nāmarūpa*. That general consciousness – our ability to think at all – is necessary for this step to happen. Meanwhile, there is ignorance-consciousness, *saṃkhārā*-consciousness, the self-seeking consciousness which is the thing we need to really take notice of.

The Prajāpati myth tells us that our desire for existence, our hungry consciousness, causes the birth of name-and-form; and the Buddha tells us the same: that we divide up the world with reference to ourselves, just as Prajāpati did in the myth. Both kinds of consciousness are needed and described, just as both kinds of birth are needed and described.

“‘From name-and-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness.’ ... If consciousness were not to gain a foothold in name-and-form, would a coming-into-play of the origination of birth, aging, death, and stress in the future be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

It is easy to read the above on the fundamental, physical level as saying that if we did not have consciousness, we could not become individuals recognizable by our names and forms, and so we would not be born, age, die, or ever suffer stress; that is both clear and true. But it is also saying that if, in our desire to know ourselves, we did not divide the world up with our definitions, in ways that sort it out with reference to ourselves, we would not feed the consciousness that gives birth to that which we mistake for *ātman*, nor would that which arises suffer from aging and death, because it would not, in the future, come to exist. Both are true, and the condition defined by the former meaning is also necessary for the condition defined by the latter meaning to arise: we must have general consciousness existing in our individual form for the specific consciousness to seek and find itself in the things we identify as having to do with self.

“This is the extent to which there is birth, aging, death, passing away, and re-arising. This is the extent to which there are means of desig-

nation, expression, and delineation. This is the extent to which the sphere of discernment extends, the extent to which the cycle revolves for the manifesting (discernibility) of this world – i.e., name-and-form together with consciousness.”

To the extent that we use our definitions to delineate the world, to that extent will what we mistake for *ātman* be born, age, die, pass away, and re-arise, and to that extent will the world as we know it, as we define it, continue, because name-and-form and consciousness feed each other.

In the final analysis, name-and-form is the field that feeds consciousness.

Samkhārā (saṃkhārā)

Sāriputta once again gives us directions what to pay attention to in order to see *saṃkhārā* and what they do:

“And what are formations? ...There are these three kinds of formations: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation.”⁴⁷

This translation might be easier to understand if we see “formations” as “rituals”. Look at the rituals we perform with our bodies, with our words and with our minds. What are our habits, what unexamined tendencies do we have, what things do we do without thinking much about them? These things are the fodder for our sense of self, they are the field in which it all happens.

“And how, bhikkhus, should one know, how should one see, for the immediate destruction of the taints to occur? Here, bhikkhus, the uninstructed worldling,... regards form as self. That regarding, bhikkhus, is a formation (*saṃkhāro*). That formation – what is its source, what is its origin, from what is it born and produced? When the uninstructed worldling is contacted by a feeling born of ignorance-contact, craving (*taṇhā*) arises; thence that formation is born.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ MN 9.62 [PTS M ii 54]

⁴⁸ SN 22.81 translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (2000), [PTS S iii 96]

The sort of contact that causes trouble for the worldling is that particular form of contact that has a particular sort of ignorance as its first cause. Ignorance-contact isn't about just any kind of contact; it has nothing to do with contact that doesn't make reference to our sense of self. It is the contact generated by the set of "givens" that is covered by the origin myth's portion at the beginning of *paṭicca samuppāda*.

This sutta is saying that *saṃkhārā* have as their source the kind of ignorance-contact that results in feelings that we relate to self. *Samkhārā*, as the things we do, represent our craving for existence being fed what it hungers for: contact with what the senses are directed to look for. And this results in actions (habits, rituals) that bring that sense of self into visible existence.

Three things meet to make contact: the senses, their objects, and sense-consciousness. The moment of contact brings hungry sense-consciousness to completion by feeding it what it needs, making sense-consciousness seem to arise out of sequence. In the same way, *saṃkhārā*'s circuit is completed only when an experience feeds it what it seeks.

The *saṃkhārā* in the above can be understood as the equivalent of "that which arises", of our mistaken sense of a lasting self, because it is "the desire for existence" given support by events. It is, one could say, that desire taking form as action. It then stands in for all that follows, which is why the rest of the quote above reads:

"Thus, bhikkhus, that formation (*saṃkhāro*) is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen; that craving is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen... that feeling, that contact, that ignorance... When one knows and sees thus the immediate destruction of the taints occurs."

This piece works through *paṭicca samuppāda* in reverse order: craving, back to feeling, to contact, and then leaping back to ignorance. Presumably the links between are "assumed" and not needed in order to make the point.. But the *saṃkhārā*, coming as they do after craving (so it's *saṃkhārā*, craving, feeling, contact, ignorance) are the sense of self forming; they take shape because they have been fed the experience they need to confirm the theory that self exists.

Ignorance (*avijjā*)

"And what is ignorance? Not knowing about suffering (*dukkha*), not knowing about the origin of suffering, not knowing about the cessa-

tion of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of suffering – this is called ignorance. With the arising of the taints there is the arising of ignorance.”⁴⁹

Sāriputta’s definition of ignorance is easy enough to understand: the problem is that we are ignorant of what exactly *dukkha* is, and what causes it, and so of course we can’t know that it can end, or how end it. On the surface this seems to bear little relation to all that follows, but it is, again, the field, the fodder for the first source of our problems, and it can also be seen as telling us what will follow, because dependent arising is the cure for ignorance. It is the cure because it defines *dukkha*, it shows us its origin, enables us to see that *dukkha* can be ended, and shows us the way to end it.

In the portion of the sutta that immediately follows this, the final section, Sāriputta defines the taints, because he has (above) said that the taints are the cause of ignorance.

“There are these three taints: the taint of sensual desire (*kāmāsavo*), the taint of being (*bhavāsavo*), and the taint of ignorance (*avijjāsavo*).”⁵⁰

We encountered two out of three of these back at *taṇhā*’s craving, where it was *kāmatanḥā*, *bhavaṭanḥā*, and *vibhavaṭanḥā* that were being discussed. These lists always seem to start with *kāma*,⁵¹ perhaps because even when people hold no strong views about what makes us who we are, or who we will be after death, they still have strong views about things that come to us through our senses: we need this, and don’t want that, need even more of this, feel we need a monopoly in it, will go to war over ensuring we have enough of it, whatever it is. All this starts with the senses, as is made clear by the number of times our senses are referred to in the detailed “ritual” portion of dependent arising.

Bhava is about becoming whatever we conceive ourselves to be – in *taṇhā* it was about craving for becoming, which is another way of saying *saṃkhārā*, craving for existence. The forms that this craving for and clinging to existence takes may come in a variety of flavors (*bhava* or *vibhava*; *diṭṭhi* or *sīlabbata* or *attavāda*) but they all seem to revolve around that simple desire to be whatever it is we think we are or should be, and to look for confirmation in the world around us.

⁴⁹ MN 9.66 [PTS M i 54]

⁵⁰ MN 9.70 [PTS M i 55]

⁵¹ At *upādāna* it was *kāmupādānaṃ*, *diṭṭhupādānaṃ*, *sīlabbatupādānaṃ*, and *attavādupādānaṃ*. In *bhava* it was *kāmaabhavo*, *rūpabhavo*, *arūpabhavo*.

If the taints that are the field in which ignorance grows are simply the ways we act, just naturally, in response to our senses (*kāmāsavo*), and our unquestioned desire to prove ourselves to be who we think we are (*bhavāsavo*), perhaps the third taint (*avijjāsavo*) is named ignorance because that's what the other two are, also: all three are how people behave when they don't know any better. Ignorance really needs no first cause: it is just the way we arrive in the world.

Conclusions

With the groundwork laid by Joanna Jurewicz in her 2000 article “Playing With Fire” it became clear that many of the terms in the *paṭicca samuppāda* made reference to Vedic mythology, and in particular to creation myths about Prajāpati.

Linking those terms to the structure of the great fire ritual, the Agnicayana, in which Prajāpati's creation myth is the metaphor for the creation, perfection, and transformation of the *ātman*, reveals ritual as the structure that is likely to have originally supported the teaching of dependent arising, a structure that was so obvious in its time that it went without overt mention – leaving later generations puzzled.

The confusion of interpretations offered in the past is easily understood through looking at the many layers of meaning incorporated into each link in the chain of events being described.

The overall structure first draws on the model of the conception of the first man from his desire for existence, and the completion of this process in the individuality of name-and-form; next come the details of a life of rituals – the things done over and over again throughout one life; and finally there is a fairly literal description of conception, birth, aging, and death. That structure is modeled on the way a life was viewed in those days: there was the birth out of the mother's womb (first birth), but that didn't really make one a man; there was an initiation ceremony which was seen as the more important “second birth” that gave the upper classes their name of “Twice Born”; and finally, at death, there was the last big ritual which completed the cycle, giving *ātman* the birth that really counted, into a life beyond death (third birth). This Vedic system had the Sacrificer born three times in one life cycle – so it is no wonder that later thinkers, having lost the original context, caught echoes of those three lives and felt that what was being described was the previous life, the present life, and the next life.

On the other hand, the actual model really described only one life – from conception to death and the transition to life beyond death – so those who felt that *paṭicca samuppāda* described one life were right too.

The third popular interpretation of dependent arising has been that it describes the moment by moment appearance and fading of the sense of self. With the very detailed description of how sense information comes to us, is experienced, reacted to, and built upon, which description is followed by birth, aging, and death, this is quite understandable. Because aging and death are equated in the suttas with *dukkha*, it made sense to see what was being described as a birth of that sense of self which results in its suffering, dying, and going around again. Suttas that talk about the rapid arising and passing away of consciousness would seem to support that view too. Unfortunately that view would appear to mean that each moment's arising of that sense of self results in a rapid response of *dukkha*, resulting in the death of that sense of self before the whole thing starts again; but in the suttas the fruits of our actions are not described as consistently arriving so fast, so there was clearly something wrong with that model.

What had been missing is the recollection of how, in the days in which the Buddha lived, individuals participated throughout their lives in rituals which were believed to modify their *ātman* – correct problems, bring into being as yet untapped resources, and so on. The process might be seen as similar to building, all throughout a life, a retirement home in some beautiful, distant setting. You go there and work on it a little more each time, perhaps taking out something that didn't work so well, adding some new feature, and when the time comes, it will be perfect and you'll spend the rest of your days there. The *ātman* was not destroyed with each ritual, but was transformed, and arose better than before.

The Buddha preached against such rituals, in part because of the waste of lives of the animals slaughtered in some, like the Agnicayana, and he, along with the Jains, who were also against the sacrifices, seem to have had an effect, because it was not long before the sorts of rituals that were the model, here described as underlying dependent arising, were largely eliminated from brahminical culture. It may well be that the Buddha's use of ritual in dependent arising also played a part, by ridiculing the basis for those rituals, in making them unpopular. What an irony, then, that the strength of his argument eventually made its framework so obscure that the teaching it carried became confused by the terms and the relationships between the pieces.

Seeing the complexity of the structures underlying the *paṭicca samuppāda* in

this new way not only makes sense, but also makes sense of the ways it was interpreted in the past.

Buddhists have long known that their original teacher denied the existence of the *ātman*, so it comes as no surprise that this interpretation shows him using the popular model of *ātman*'s creation through a life-long series of rituals as the model of how our life-long rituals (aka “habits”) lead us to create that which can be mistaken for *ātman*, that aggregate of senses of self. This alternative view of dependent arising's structure reveals a lesson that is entirely consistent with what is said throughout the suttas: that there is no eternal self that moves on after death, and that it is the way we react to sensory information that is the key to seeing what it is we are mistaking for that eternal self. This new interpretation of the teaching brings into sharp focus the way in which we invest a bit of ourselves in our definitions of everything we encounter; how we seek and find in the world around us confirmation of our sense of who we are. We do so because we believe that confirmation to be there, and therefore put ourselves into everything, just as Prajāpati did.

All citations for the Pali suttas are given first with reference to Wisdom Publications volumes, when available, followed by their location in the Pali Text Society editions, as follows:

PTS Pali Text Society

A letter designation for the volume:

- M Majjhima Nikāya
- D Dīgha Nikāya
- S Saṃyutta Nikāya
- A Aṅguttara Nikāya
- Sn Sutta Nipāta
- I Itivuttakka
- U Udāna

A roman numeral for the book within the volume

an Arabic numeral for the PTS page number in that book