

Some Remarks on
PATICCA-SAMUPPADA
- DEPENDENT ORIGNATION

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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

1. THE MEANING OF THE TERMS IN PATICCA-SAMUPPADA

The *Paticca-samuppada* is explained in detail at two places in the *Sutta-Pitaka*: in the *Mahanidana - Sutta*, No 15 of the *Digha Nikaya*; and in the *Nidana - Samyutta*, *Samyutta*No XII of the *Samyutta Nikaya*.

The *Nidana -Samyutta* begins with a simple expression of the 12 links in forward and reverse order. The following *Sutta*, *Vibhanga*, No 2 of the *Nidana -Samyutta*, explains the meaning of each of the 12 terms.

I recommend that you read this *Sutta* carefully so that you will see for yourself what the Buddha meant by each term. In particular, you will see that *Jati* can only mean birth, the sort of birth which for a human occurs in a mother's womb:

'Katama ca bhikkave jati? Ya tesam tesam sattanam, tamhi tamhi satta-nikaye, jati, sanjati, okkanti, abhinibbatti, khandhanam patubhavo, ayatananam patilabho, ayam vuccati bhikkave jati (Samyutta XII-2)

'What monks is *Jati*? With regard to these and those beings, among the various classes of beings, that which is *Jati*, *Sanjati*(a synonym of *Jati*), descent (into the womb, *Okkanti* as at *Digha Nikaya*, *Sutta* 15 verse 21 "*Vinnanam...matu-kucchim, okkamitva*' = 'the consciousness ... having descended into the mother's womb'), birth (*Abhinibbatti*), the appearance of the (five) *Khandhas*, the acquiring of the sense-faculties (*Ayatananam patilabho*), that monks is called *Jati*'

- Elsewhere, perhaps, *Jati* may mean different things, but here, in the *Sutta* defining the meanings of the terms in the *Paticca-samuppada*, *Jati* unmistakably means the appearance of a being in a particular class of beings, or "birth" as is generally understood for a human being.

The meaning of *Bhava* can be found at *Anguttara Nikaya*, Book Of The Threes, *Sutta*76. Look this up in Pali and you will relish its deeper meaning.

The meaning of *Vinnana* cannot readily be discerned from the *Nidana -Samyutta's Sutta* No 2, but if you look at the *Mahanidana - Sutta*, No 15 of the *Digha Nikaya*, you will find the following at verse 21:

"It was said: 'With consciousness as condition there is mentality-materiality'. How that is so, Ananda, should be understood in this way. If consciousness (*Vinnana*) were not to descend into the mother's womb, would mentality-materiality (*Nama-rupa*) take shape in the womb?"

"Certainly not venerable Sir" From the BPS edition 'The Great Discourse on Causation' by Bhikkhu Bodhi page 5.

So, the way the Buddha said *Vinnana*, in the context of *Paticca-samuppada*, should be understood is clearly as the *Vinnana* which descends into a mother's womb at conception, what the Commentaries call Rebirth-Linking-Consciousness.

The meaning of *Sankhara* as something which produces rebirth can easily be discerned in the *Sankhara -uppatti- Sutta*, No 120 *Majjhima Nikaya*. *Uppatti* is usually translated as rebirth and if you look at the context this meaning is obvious. A typical passage in this *Sutta* is analysed in Rune E A Johansson's 'Pali Buddhist Texts - explained to the beginner'. I recommend that you find this book, look up the passage on pages 66 and 67 and see how the word *Sankhara* is used in the meaning of a willed activity of body, speech or mind which causes rebirth.

It is essential to know precisely what the Buddha meant when he used each of the 12 terms in the *Paticca-samuppada*. There is no need to go to the Commentary to find these meanings. They are clearly evident in the *Suttas* themselves, as I hope I have indicated. Only when one accurately understands the meaning of each of the 12 links is there a hope that one will understand the profundity of the whole *Paticca-samuppada* as the Buddha meant it to be understood.

2. THE FALLACY OF THE "ONE LIFE" INTERPRETATION OF *Paticca-samuppada*

Once one sees what the Buddha meant by *Jati* in the context of *Paticca-samuppada* (see *Samyutta Nikaya* XII.2 and *Mahanidana - Sutta* Verse 4) then wriggle as one might, one will have to accept that the Buddha meant *Paticca-samuppada* to span more than one life. What becomes before *Jati*, eg *Bhava*, *Upadana*, *Tanha* ..., must refer to something occurring before birth (a cause is simultaneous with, or more often precedes, its effect), ie in what is called a previous existence. To maintain otherwise is merely to ignore the facts and throw away all reason.

Having seen the process that is described by *Paticca-samuppada* moving from one life to another around *Jati*, having broken the fixation on a wrong idea, it is easy to accept the meaning of *Vinnana* as the first consciousness which arises in the new life as implied by the *Mahanidana - Sutta*, Verse 21: "If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would mentality-materiality (*Nama-rupa*) take shape in the womb? (Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation in "The Great Discourse on Causation", BPS edition, page 59). That *Vinnana* as the starting point of a new life is the meaning in the context of *Paticca-samuppada* is also made clear at *Anguttara Nikaya*, Book of the Threes, *Sutta* No 61 Verse IX: "*Channam bhikkave dhatunam upadaya gabbhasam- avakkanti hoti, okkantiya sati namarupam, namarupapaccaya salayatanam, salayatanapaccaya phasso, phassapaccaya vedana.*" "Monks, based on the 6 elements, there is descent into the womb. This descent taking place, name and shape come to pass. Conditioned by name-and-shape is the six-fold sphere (of

sense). Conditioned by the six-fold sphere is contact. Conditioned by contact is feeling" (Gradual Sayings, Vol 1 page 160, Woodward's translation). A similar formula can be seen in the *Nidana-Samyutta, Sutta No 39*.

Lastly, it becomes obvious that the full *Paticca-samuppada* cannot be interpreted as existing in one life when one looks at the first 3 links in reverse order: When *Avijja* ceases so does *Sankhara* and, consequently, so does *Vinnanam*. In other words the ending of *Avijja* causes the ending of *Vinnanam*. Now what type of *Vinnanam* can possibly cease as a result of a person eradicating *Avijja*, the ignorance of the full meaning of the Four Noble Truths? We all know that an *Arahat*, one who has eradicated *Avijja*, remains fully conscious, retaining *Vinnanam*, after his attainment. He does not become unconscious at the moment of his attainment, ever more to be comatose until he dies! So *Vinnanam* cannot mean the ordinary, arising in every moment, type of consciousness. However, we all know that sometime after the attainment of *Arahat*, after a period of days or years after *Avijja* is ended, the *Arahat's* life span ends, the 5 *Khandhas* dissolve and they never arise again. In particular, the 5th *Khandha*, the binding *Vinnanam*, ceases after the life span of an *Arahat* ends. Thus, it is very clear that the *Vinnanam* which is caused to cease by the ending of *Avijja* is the first arising of consciousness in a new life, or in other words the rebirth linking consciousness of the Commentary. Nothing else makes sense. No advocate of the "one-life" interpretation of *Paticca-samuppada* has ever been able to explain how *Vinnanam* can be something existing in this life and yet ceases in this life for an *Arahat*!

3. THE MEANING OF THE *PATICCA-SAMUPPADA* ACCORDING TO THE BUDDHA

It becomes quite clear that *Paticca-samuppada* explains the process of rebirth. It gives the answer to the often asked question. "How can there be rebirth when there is no-self?" In explaining the process of rebirth it uncovers the causes of rebirth. So, one can eliminate rebirth by eliminating the causes. Remember that the point of this exercise is to stop being reborn, to get off the "wheel of rebirth", *Samsara*, or as Ven.Sariputta once answered to a Brahmin who asked what is the true difference between *Sukha* and *Dukkha*, "To be reborn (*Abhinibbatti*) friend is *Dukkha*. Not to be reborn is *Sukha*?", *Anguttara*, book of the Tens, *Sutta 65*. The *Paticca-samuppada* explains the process of rebirth in 2 ways starting at 2 causes:

Avijja ® *Sankhara* ® birth® *Vinnanam* ® *Namarupam* ® *Salayatana*® *Phassa*® *Vedana* and, *Tanha* ® *Upadana* ® *Bhava* ® birth® *Jati* ® *Jara-maranam-soka-parideva- dukkha -domanassa-upayasa*. The cause of *Dukkha*, and rebirth, can be said to be *Avijja* or can be said to be *Tanha*. When one stops the other stops immediately. Thus it gives two ways of explaining the process of rebirth, first through willed actions (*Sankhara*) of body speech and mind originated through *Avijja*, and second through *Tanha* giving rise to clinging (*Upadana*) giving rise to existence (*Bhava* - see the explanation of *Bhava* at *Anguttara*, Book of the Three's, *Sutta 76*) producing rebirth (*Jati*). The first sequence can be seen in the *Suttas* at *Anguttara*, Book of the Three's *Sutta 61* Verse IX. The second sequence can be found in the *Mahanidana- Sutta*, No 15 of the *Digha Nikaya* Verses 9 - 18.

4. THE ARGUMENTS GIVEN AGAINST *PATICCA-SAMUPPADA* DESCRIBING REBIRTH

- a. Words have different meanings in different contexts and so, for example, can't *Jati* mean a metaphorical birth. However the Incomparable Teacher, the Buddha, foresaw possible confusion by giving precise definitions of the terms. He used them when He used them. Thus at the beginning of the *Nidana-Samyutta*, in *Sutta No 2*, the Buddha explained methodically the meaning of each term. Even in the *Mahanidana - Sutta* He made certain that no uncertainty as to meanings could remain:

"How that is so, Ananda, should be understood in this way. If there were absolutely and utterly no birth of any kind anywhere - that is, of gods into the state of gods, of celestials into the state of celestials, of spirits, demons, human beings, quadrupeds, winged creatures, and reptiles, each into their own state - if there were no birth of beings of any sort into any state ... "
(The Great Discourse on Causation, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, BPS edition page 54).

How more clear can one make it?! If one actually looks at the *Mahanidana - Sutta*, or at the second *Sutta* of the *Nidana-Samyutta*, the meaning ascribed to these words in the context of *Paticca-samuppada* by the Buddha become obvious. In particular, *Jati* is clearly not intended to be used metaphorically. It is meant by the Buddha to refer to the beginning of life in the various classes of existence, the birth of a living being.

- b. All *dhammas*, at least useful ones any way, are supposed to be *Sanditthiko* and *Akaliko*. How does this apply to the *Paticca-samuppada* if it spans more than one life?

I am confident that no-one will argue that *Marana-sati* is a useful *Dhamma*, and yet *Marana-sati* is described by the Buddha as contemplation one's physical death, which is something which has not happened yet! The same can be said of recollection of one's past liberality. *Caganussati*, one of the 40 *Kammattana*, it is something which happened in the past. How can these be *Sanditthiko* and *Akaliko*?

The point is that *Sanditthiko* does not mean, cannot mean, something existing in the present moment experienced in the present moment! It means something which can be understood in the present moment. Understanding (*Panna*) is different to experience (*Vinnana*), see the beginning of the *Mahavedella - Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No 43*). One can understand each step, each link, of the *Paticca-samuppada* here and now. Old age (*Jara*) and death (*Maranam*) one can see in others, just as the Bodhisatta Gotama saw them as two of the "*Devadhuta*". They are *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma* even though one may not be personally experiencing them now! they can be clearly understood without doubt, for oneself, here and now, that is what makes them *Sanditthika* and *Akalika*. Similarly one can understand *Jati*, the birth of a human being here and now.

Personally, I have never witnessed a human birth but I have not the slightest doubt that we all come into this present life through the same way, by birth! The possibility of full understanding (*Panna*) here and now regard to birth, *Jati*, makes it a *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma*. *Bhava* can be understood here and now and, if one has a very clear mind, can be

experienced as the very same process described at *Anguttara*, Book of the Three's, *Sutta* 76. The same can be said of *Upadana*, *Tanha*, *Vedana*, *Phassa*, *Salayatana* and *Namarupam*. The *Vinnanam* as the first consciousness arising in a life can only be understood here and now in the same way that death (*Marana*) can be understood. Thus if the death of a being, *Maranam* qualifies as *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma* so does the *Patisandhi-Vinnana* (rebirth consciousness). *Sankhara*, the willed *Kamma* done by body speech and mind which gives rise to rebirth can be experienced as well as understood here and now. In fact, the only link of the *Paticca-samuppada* which, strictly speaking, can never be experienced even when it is happening but it can be understood is *Avijja*. Only the *Arahat* properly understands *Avijja* and by then it is no more. Of course, no one would argue that *Avijja* is not part of the Buddha's Teaching because it cannot be experienced! All agree that even *Avijja* is *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma*, because it can be understood here and now!

The causal relationship between the 12 links can be harder to understand. Indeed, only the *Sotapanna* and higher *Ariyas* will fully understand these causal relationships. It must be borne in mind that in such causal relationships, the cause may precede the effect by a lengthy interval. For example, in the causal relationship between birth (*Jati*) and *Maranam* (death); the cause, birth, may precede the effect, death, by 100 or more years. A cause which produces an effect after an interval of time is called *Purejatapaccayo*, pre-nascence condition, the 10th of the 24 *Paccayawhich* we chant at funerals. Because the cause may have ceased before the effect arises, much of causality can both be experienced "in the moment". Instead, causal relations are discerned using *Yoniso Manasikara*, the work of the mind which goes back to the source (*Yoni*). Indeed, *Yoniso Manasikara* is the main cause for the arising *Sammaditthi* (eg at *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Sutta* 43) and *Sammaditthi* includes understanding *Paticca-samuppada* (eg at *Anguttara*, Book of the Tens, *Sutta* 92). Thus *Paticca-samuppada* is understood, here and now, by applying *Yoniso Manasikara*. It is in this way that the causal relations between the 12 links become discerned by *Panna* and, having been understood here and now, become *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma*.

It is misleading of anyone to claim that one needs *Pubbenivasanusatti*, memory of previous lives, to be able to understand the process of rebirth described in the *Paticca-samuppada*! One understands *Paticca-samuppada* using *Yoniso Manasikara* in the way described above. And, whatever can be understood here and now becomes *Sanditthika* and *Akalika Dhamma*.

A *Sutta* in the *Anguttara Nikaya* has been understood by some to imply that "Vedana is not always the karmic result of a previous life" and therefore none of the links in the *Paticca-samuppada* can refer to a previous life.

The *Sutta* in question is *Anguttara Nikaya* Book of the Three's, *Sutta* 61 verses I-IV. Interestingly, those who quote this part of the *Sutta* fail to notice verse IX in the same *Sutta* which I have quoted twice in this letter to support *Paticca-samuppada* being an explanation of the rebirth process!

The part of the *Sutta* which is relevant here is verses I-IV which three tenets are put forward and roundly reflected by the Buddha as wrong. The first is "Yam kinci purisapuggalo patisamvedeti sukham va dukkham va adukkham"

sukham va, sabbam tam pubbe katahetu ... "Whatsoever weal or wore or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action" (Woodward's translation in the PTS's Gradual Sayings Vol 1 page 157). The other two tenets are that ... all that is due to the creation of a Supreme Deity ... (and) all that are uncaused and unconditioned.

It is instructive to notice that this first tenet is repeated verbatim in the *Devadaha - Sutta*, No 101 of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, where it is attributed to the Jains. In that *Sutta* it is clear that the tenet in full is holding that "Whatever *Sukha*, *Dukkha* or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action in a past life." This is obviously wrong, as the Buddha pointed out in both *Suttas*, for everyone should know that some *Sukha*, some *Dukkha* and some neutral feelings that are experienced are due to some previous action in this life!

But something else needs to be pointed out about this tenet. If you look at the Pali carefully you may notice that it is referring to the types of feeling that one experiences not to the faculty of feeling (*Vedana*) in general. It should be understood that the fact that one has *Vedana*, the faculty of feeling, at all is due to craving and ignorance in a previous life; but the particular type of feeling, the content of *Vedana* if you like, does not necessarily depend on kamma of a previous life. Let me offer a simile. A man buys a TV, a year later he moves to a new house and there he sometimes watches channel 1, sometimes channel 2 and sometimes channel 3. the fact that in his present house he has a TV, the fact that he can experience television at all, is because of an act performed while in his previous house - but the programme he chooses to experience are not all conditioned by some preference or other he built up while in his previous house. In this rough simile, the TV corresponds to *Vedana*, the programme channels appearing on that TV, channels 1, 2 and 3, correspond to *Sukha*, *Dukkha* and *Adukkhama Sukha*. Again, the fact that one has *Vedana* of some sort is due to craving and ignorance in a previous life, but the content of that *Vedana* or rather the particular type of feeling which is experienced is not necessarily caused by an action in a previous life. When one understands this one understands that the tenet being discussed, which originates in *Anguttara Nikaya* Book of the Three's *Sutta* No 61 Verses I-IV, that is has no bearing on *Paticca-samuppada*.

But in case someone is still not convinced that *Vedana* has a cause originating in a previous life, I cite the *Bhumija Sutta*, No 25 of the *Nidana Samyutta*. "*Sant'avuso Eke Samanabrahmana Kammavada*:

- i. *Sayam-katam sukhadukkham pannapenti*
- ii. *Paramkatam sukhadukkham pannapenti*
- iii. *Sayamkatanca paramkatanca sukhadukkham pannapenti*
- iv. *Asayam-karam aparam-karam adicca-samuppannam sukhadukkham pannapenti*" ..There are, friend, certain recluses and brahmins, believer in karma,
 - a. who declare that happiness and ill have been wrought by oneself,

- b. who declare that happiness and ill have been wrought by another,
- c. who declare that happiness and ill have been wrought by oneself as well as by others,
- d. who declare that happiness and ill is neither wrought by oneself nor by another but arises by chance" (see Kindred Saying Vol 2 page 30)

Ven Sariputta replies when asked by Ven Bhumija which of the four is correct, "*Paticca- samuppannam kho avuso sukhadukkham vuttam Bhagavata kim paticca? Phassam paticca! Iti vadam vuttavadi ceva Bhagavato assa, na ca Bhagavatam abhutena abbhacikkheyya...*" "The Exalted One has said that happiness and ill (*Sukha Dukkha*) come to pass through a cause (*Paticca*). What cause? The cause is contact (*Phassa*)! Saying thus you would be repeating the words of the Exalted One correctly and not misrepresenting him" (compare Kindred Sayings Vol 12 page 31, which is heavily abbreviated). (The rest of the *Bhumija - Sutta* is also of interest for it indicates the role of *Sankhara* in the performance of Kamma. What Woodward translates as "plan those planned deeds conditioned by ignorance" is in Pali "*Avijja paccaya. Kaya or Vaci or Mano - Sankharam abhisankharoti...*" which shows *Sankhara* in the context of *Paticca-samuppada* means "Karmic actions of body, speech or mind conditioned by ignorance").

Thus *Vedana* is always caused by *Phassa*. Furthermore we all know that *Phassa* is caused by *Nama-rupa* and *Nama-rupa* is caused by *Vinnana*. These mind and bodily processed are caused by ignorance and craving in a previous life. Any Buddhist monk who does not agree with this, who does not accept the teaching of rebirth should look at *Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta 117*: there are 2 forms of *Sammaditthi*, one for those who still have *Asava*(*Sammaditthi sasava punnabhagiya upadhi-vepakka*) and one for the *Ariya's* without *Asava* (*Sammaditthi ariya anasava ...*) The type of right view which concerns most monks is the former and it is "the view that alms and offerings are not useless, that there is fruit and result, both of good and bad actions, *that there are such things as this life and the next life ...*". Thus belief in rebirth is clearly stated to be *Sammaditthi*, its rejection would thus be *Micchaditthi*.

This completes the refutation of the 3 arguments given against *Paticca-samuppada* being a description of the process of rebirth. They should be compared with the arguments against the "one-life" interpretation given on page 2-3 of this PS and held alongside the positive arguments for *Paticca-samuppada* (expressed on pages 1-2 and on pages 3) being a process spanning more than one life. Then you can make your own decision based on the *Suttas*.

5. **A LAST WORD ON THE QUESTION OF HOW ONE "USES" PATICCA-SAMUPPADAIN "DAILY LIFE"**

On any journey one needs a map. An accurate map. The true understanding of *Paticca-samuppada* as describing the process of rebirth and exposing its causes is a large part of that map, if not the whole. That map is acquired at *Sotapanna - phala*. Before one has that attainment, one doesn't really get very far at all. That is why only after the attainment of *Sotapanna - phala* until one completes one's work is one called *Sekha* "in training". Before *Sotapanna*, without the map, one is

neither *Sekha* nor *Asekha*. Without *Sammaditthi*, without the map, one wanders in circles. With the arising of *Sammaditthi*, when the Path becomes clear (*Maggo Sanjayati* see *Anguttara Nikaya, Four's, Sutta 170*) One can start walking that Path, one can start training. The *Ariyan* Eightfold Path is the eightfold Path walked by the *Ariyan*. The *Putthujjana* walks another Eightfold Path which is not yet deserving of the adjective *Ariyan*.

So it is vitally important to obtain that map, to gain *Sammaditthi* of the *Ariyan* kind. *Suttas* such as the *Mahavedella - Sutta*, No 43 of the *Majjhima Nikaya* show that this sort of *Sammaditthi* arises due to 2 causes: *Yoniso Manasikara* and listening/understanding the words of another (*Parato Ghoso*) (see Middle Length Sayings Vol 12 page 355) and is supported by 5 factors: *Sila, Suta* (equivalent to what we would call "book-knowledge), *Sakaccha* (discussing the *Dhamma*), *Samatha* and *Vipassana*. Thus if one aspires to become a *Sotapanna* look to either one (or both) of the 2 causes and support them with the 5 factors. That is how one should be practising in daily life.

After *Sotapanna*, one practises according to the *Ariyan* Eightfold Path which is then abundantly clear to one.

The point is, *Paticca- samuppada*, or rather its true realisation, is the heart of *Sammaditthi* of the *Ariyan*. It forms the foundation for further practise of the *Ariyan*, for the *putthujjana*, one practises in order to realise the *Paticca-samuppada*, especially by *Yoniso Manasikara* supported by the Five factors. The *putthujjana* practices aspiring to uncover the *Paticca- samuppada*, not assuming he knows it!

"*Gambhiro c'ayam Ananda Paticca -samuppado gambhir'avabhaso ca!*"
(*Digha Nikaya, Sutta 15, Mahanidana - Sutta, Verse 1*)

"This Dependent Arising, Ananda, is deep and appears deep!"

Source: <http://www.metta.lk/english/paticca.htm>