



Consciousness and Dependent Arising

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Based on an exploration of the five factors of ‘name’ in the previous issue of the Insight Journal, the present article proceeds to take a closer look at consciousness in the same context of dependent arising.

Reciprocal Conditioning

In the context of dependent arising, the relationship between consciousness and name-and-form differs from other links, as these two are shown to condition each other reciprocally.

According to the standard depiction of dependent arising by way of twelve links, formations serve as the condition for consciousness, just as consciousness does for name-and-form. So far so good, but then several discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Samyutta-nikāya* (DN 14, DN 15, SN 12.65, and SN 12.67) provide additional depth to the latter relationship by indicating that name-and-form can also serve as a condition for consciousness. In other words, these two links condition each other.

This presentation offers a significant indication for understanding the early Buddhist conception of continuity of subjective experience during life, and from one life to another, in the absence of a permanent self. The positing of

such continuity can rely on this reciprocal conditioning between consciousness (as basically that which knows) on the one side and the five mental factors of name (together with the experience of form) on the other side.

The conceptual and material properties of an object require consciousness in order to be experienced. In turn, consciousness depends on name-and-form as that which provides the content of what consciousness is aware of. Together, these present a basic matrix of experience, a continuous interplay between consciousness on the one hand and name-and-form on the other that builds up the world we experience.

Two Bundles of Reeds

Both consciousness and name-and-form require the other, a situation illustrated in one of the two *Samyutta-nikāya* discourses already cited with the example of two bundles of reeds that stand leaning on each other (SN 12.67). The actual delivery of this illustration, attributed to the Buddha's chief disciple Sāriputta, takes the following form:¹

Friend, it is just like two bundles of reeds that would stand up in dependence upon each other. Friend, in the same way name-and-form is the condition for consciousness, and consciousness is the condition for name-and-form.

The discourse continues to illustrate the cessation mode of dependent arising in relation to consciousness and name-and-form with the example of removing one of the two bundles:²

Friend, if one were to remove one of the bundles of reeds, the [other] one would fall down.

Similarly, neither consciousness nor name-and-form can stand on their own. Each requires the support provided by the other for the continuity of experience.

A complementary perspective on this matter can be found in the *Pañcattaya-sutta* (MN 102), which indicates that it is impossible for consciousness to manifest apart from the five aggregates:³

Monastics, whatever recluse or brahmin were to proclaim this: “Apart from material form, apart from feeling tone, apart from perception, and apart from volitional formations, I shall describe the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and its rearing, its growth, its increase, and its maturation”; that is impossible.

A similar statement occurs in another discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 22.54), confirming the impossibility of envisaging that consciousness exists on its own, apart from the other aggregates or else, as a way expressing the same in a different manner, apart from its conditional inter-relationship with name-and-form.

Unestablished Consciousness

The *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse just mentioned (SN 22.54) continues, after its clarification that consciousness cannot exist on its own, by referring to a type of consciousness that is “unestablished” (*appatiṭṭhita*).⁴ The remainder of the discourse makes it clear that this intends the consciousness of an arahant. The same expression occurs with the same implications in the preceding and the ensuing discourses (SN 22.53 and SN 22.55).

Another *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse (SN 12.64) provides further information that helps to relate the unestablished consciousness to the topic of name-and-form. The discourse explains that consciousness will be estab-

lished when there is lust for any of the four nutriments (which are edible food, contact, volition, and consciousness itself). Such a situation compares to a painter who draws the image of a woman or a man. However, when there is no longer such lust, the following happens:⁵

Where consciousness is unestablished and not coming to growth, there is no descent of name-and-form ... there is no production of future re-becoming.

The discourse compares this to a beam of sunlight that enters a house with windows on its sides. The sunlight would become established on the opposite wall, failing which it would become established on the ground. Without any opposite wall or ground to alight on, however, the sunlight would become unestablished.

References to an unestablished consciousness as a condition of freedom from rebirth occur also in three other discourses (SN 12.38, SN 12.39, and SN 12.40) which provide a relationship to the absence of intentions, plans, and underlying tendencies. Another two discourses employ the same expression in reports of how someone passed away as an arahant (SN 4.23 and SN 22.87).⁶

Another relevant reference in a discourse from the *Dīgha-nikāya* speaks of the stream of consciousness that is neither established in this world nor established in the other world (DN 28).⁷

In sum, then, the notion of an unestablished consciousness appears to refer in particular to an arahant's freedom from being reborn in any way.⁸

The Twelve Links

Another relevant discourse is the *Mahānidāna-sutta* (DN 15), which provides a rather detailed examination of dependent arising. In the context of its examination of the reci-

procal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form, the discourse points out that there will be no future birth and death if consciousness does not gain being “established” in name-and form.⁹ This confirms that the unestablished consciousness discussed above concerns freedom from rebirth.

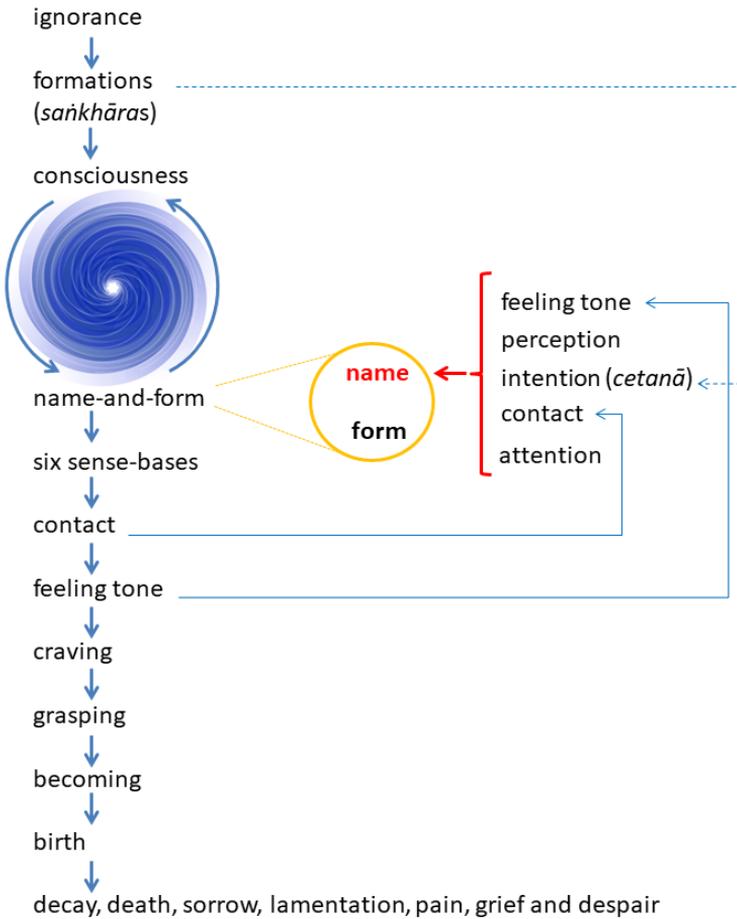
The previous discourse in the *Dīgha-nikāya* depicts the predicament that obtains as long as total liberation has not yet been achieved (DN 14). The indication given here is that consciousness turns back from name-and-form and does not go beyond it.¹⁰

Needless to say, this presentation does not conflict with the preceding and ensuing links in the standard presentation of twelve links.¹¹ The reciprocal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form depends precisely on the existence of ignorance, as it is only with the eradication of ignorance that consciousness can ever become unestablished. Moreover, the link that immediately precedes consciousness is part of name, as are several of those that ensue. The overall situation that results in this way can best be appreciated with the help of a chart (see next page).

The chart reflects the reciprocal conditioning with a blue circle and shows how, alongside the linear sequence of links, these interrelate, as contact (link 5) and feeling tone (link 6) are comprised in name (link 4), and formations (link 2) have a close counterpart in volition as part of the same name.

This recurrence of several links, just as the reciprocal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form, relates to points made in earlier articles, in that dependent arising is not just about a linear sequence of items in time. Moreover, each of the twelve links requires all five aggregates to be in existence concurrently, as none of these links exists apart from them.¹² There is therefore no need to problematize the fact that some links form part of “name” and recur elsewhere individually.¹³

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How to View Consciousness

What emerges from the above is the early Buddhist perspective on the conditioned nature of consciousness (which is therefore impermanent and *dukkha*), being in this respect similar to the other four aggregates of clinging or the other links in dependent arising.

The potentially deluding nature of consciousness in particular comes up in a simile, which illustrates the nature

of each of the five aggregates (SN 22.95). Bodily form is like a lump of foam, feeling tones like bubbles on the surface of water during rain, perception like a mirage, and volitional formations are like a plantain tree, being devoid of essence. In this discourse, consciousness compares to a display of magic performed by an illusionist. The simile chosen is presumably meant to illustrate the thoroughly deluding nature of consciousness.

In view of this deluding potential, it becomes all the more important to contemplate consciousness as conditioned, impermanent, *dukkha*, and not self. An encouragement in this direction can be taken from the *Dvayatānupassanā-sutta*, which succinctly presents the matter in the following manner:¹⁴

Whatever *dukkha* manifests,
It all depends on consciousness;
With the cessation of consciousness
There is no [more] manifestation of *dukkha*.

In conclusion, at least from an early Buddhist perspective, consciousness is an integral part of the human predicament. For this reason, it cannot be the solution to the problem thematized in the teaching on the dependent arising of *dukkha*.¹⁵

Abbreviations:

DN: *Dīgha-nikāya*
MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*
SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*
Sn: *Suttanipāta*
Ud: *Udāna*

References:

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Bucknell, Roderick S. 1999: “Conditioned Arising Evolves: Variation and Change in Textual Accounts of the Paṭicca-samuppāda Doctrine,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 22.2: 311–342.

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Notes:

¹ SN II 114: *seyyathā pi, āvuso, dve naḷakalāpiyo aññam aññaṃ nissāya tiṭṭheyyuṃ. evam eva kho, āvuso, nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇaṃ; viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ.*

² SN II 114: *tāsaṃ ce, āvuso, naḷakalāpīnaṃ ekaṃ ākaḍḍheyya, ekā papateyya.*

³ MN II 230: *yo hi koci, bhikkhave, samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā evaṃ vadeyya: aham aññatra rūpā, aññatra vedanāya, aññatra saññāya, aññatra saṅkhārehi, viññāṇassa āgatiṃ vā gatiṃ vā cutiṃ vā uppattiṃ vā vuddhiṃ vā virūhiṃ vā vepullaṃ vā paññapessāmī ti, n’ etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati.*

⁴ On the *anidassana viññāṇa*, often translated as “non-manifestative consciousness,” see Anālayo (2017: 17–20).

⁵ SN II 103: *yattha appatīṭṭhitam viññāṇam avirūlham, n' atthi tattha nāmarūpassa avakkanti ... n' atthi tattha āyatiṃ punabbhavābhiniḃbatti.*

⁶ SN I 122 and SN III 124: *appatīṭṭhitena ca, bhikkhave, viññāṇena ... kulaputto parinibbuto ti.*

⁷ DN III 105: *purisassa ca viññāṇasotaṃ pajānāti ubhayato abbocchinnaṃ idhaloke appatīṭṭhitañ ca paraloke appatīṭṭhitañ ca.*

⁸ See also the reference in Ud 80 to a sphere of experience (*āyatana*) that corresponds to the ending of *dukkha* and the transcendence of rebirth, and which among others is qualified as “unestablished,” *appatīṭṭham.*

⁹ DN II 63: *viññāṇañ va hi, ānanda, nāmarūpe patīṭṭham nālabhissatha, api nu kho āyatiṃ jātijarāmarānadukkhassamudayasambhavo paññāyethā ti? no h' etaṃ, bhante.*

¹⁰ DN II 32: *paccudāvattati kho idaṃ viññāṇam nāmarūpamhā, nāparaṃ gacchati.*

¹¹ This has been assumed by Bucknell (1999: 317).

¹² Anālayo (2019: 17f) and (2020: 7).

¹³ Bucknell (1999: 322) considers this to be problematic.

¹⁴ Sn 734: *yaṃ kiñci dukkhaṃ sambhoti, sabbam viññāṇapaccayā; viññāṇassa nirodhena, n' atthi dukkhassa sambhavo.*

¹⁵ This would hold even for consciousness conceived of as universal in some way. Olendzki (2010: 107) observes: “The quandary of the human condition is not that we are connected to too small an object and need to connect instead to a larger object. Rather it is that the very mechanism of connectivity—attachment—is inherently a cause of suffering.”