

New Light on the Twelve Nidānas

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Paṭicca samuppāda (dependent arising) is the central philosophical principle of Buddhism, and is most commonly exemplified in the suttas in terms of the twelve nidānas. The ubiquitous interpretation of the twelve nidānas of paṭicca samuppāda as taking place over three lives, a religious doctrine explaining the rebirth process, is a commentarial development, not found in the suttas. Recent Theravādin exegetes Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa and Ñāṇavīra Thera argue for an interpretation of the twelve nidānas of paṭicca samuppāda as taking place in the present moment, but Bhikkhu Bodhi disputes the claim that their interpretation is the Buddha's original meaning. Recent work by Vedic scholar Joanna Jurewicz, however, suggests that originally the twelve nidānas were a parody of Vedic cosmogony. This scholarship opens the way for renewed exegesis of paṭicca samuppāda liberated from Indian Buddhist metaphysics.

Introduction

The Buddha is recorded as telling Ananda that it was through not understanding and not penetrating *paṭicca samuppāda* (dependent arising) that humanity 'has become like a tangle of string covered in mould and matted like grass', and so does not go beyond the miseries of conditioned existence (D 15 PTS ii 55, S 12:60 PTS ii 92). It is said that just before his enlightenment the *bodhisatta* reflected on how *dukkha* (unhappiness) arose dependent on conditions—how ageing and death (*jarāmaraṇa*) arose on condition of birth (*jāti*), birth on existence (*bhava*), existence on clinging (*upādāna*), clinging on craving (*taṇhā*), craving on feeling (*vedanā*), feeling on contact (*phassa*), contact on the six sense-bases (*saḷāyatana*), the sense-bases on name and form (*nāmarūpa*), name and form on consciousness (*viññāna*), consciousness on formations (*saṅkhārā*), and formations on ignorance (*avijjā*). It was just through the ceasing of these twelve *nidānas* that the Buddha, like Buddhas before him, attained the path to awakening, that overgrown road to the ancient city of enlightenment (S 12:65 PTS ii 104). To investigate these twelve linked conditions of *saṃsāra* is to understand the 'noble method' of the Dharma (A 10:92 PTS v 182); and the cessation of just these twelve *nidānas* is the end of *dukkha*.

From the paramount importance given to the teaching of the twelve *nidānas* in the Pali canon, one might expect the formula to be clearly explained.

But not so. Although each *nidāna* or link is expounded to some extent, ‘the earliest texts give very little explanation of how the formula is to be understood’ (Gethin 1998, 149). Later Buddhist tradition interpreted the twelve-fold formula as an explanation of the rebirth process over three lives, but there is no evidence that this is what the Buddha originally meant.

In this article I will explore the interpretations of the twelve *nidānas* of *paṭicca samuppāda* offered by two recent Theravādin thinkers, Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa and Bhikkhu Ñāṇavīra, who in different ways criticise the three-life interpretation and, reading the suttas afresh, offer accounts of how the links of *paṭicca samuppāda* can be understood as working in the present moment. I will also indicate the criticism of this present moment interpretation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, a defender of Buddhist tradition. I will then present a completely different approach to the problem, starting from the idea that the arrangement of the *nidānas* begins to make sense when one takes into account the brahminical religious context in which the Buddha was teaching. In this context, the various links in different ways turn upside down the assumptions about Self (*attā*), reality (*brahman*) and the supposed purpose of brahminical rituals current in the Buddha’s time. This suggests that the arrangement of the twelve *nidānas* was originally intended as a parody of brahminical beliefs as well as a statement of what the Buddha taught.

Conditionality and *paṭicca samuppāda*

Before discussing the traditional three-life interpretation, I will clarify some terms. *Paṭicca sammuppāda* can be translated as ‘dependent arising’, ‘dependent origination’ or ‘conditioned co-production’, and the term is often used for the principle of conditionality: ‘when this is, that becomes; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist; with the cessation of this, that ceases’. This philosophical principle explains explaining without reference to a creator God, while at the same time avoiding any recourse to chance and meaninglessness; insight into this principle is the aim of Buddhist contemplation—‘who sees *paṭicca samuppāda* sees the Dharma’ (M 28 PTS I 191) and leads to liberation.

However, in the Pali suttas, the statement of the principle of *paṭicca samuppāda* is often followed by a statement of the twelve *nidānas* (for instance, in the *Udāna* 1.1–3), as if they are the fundamental exemplification of the principle. These twelve links are often simply listed, in order of arising and order of ceasing, without explanation; in other places the Buddha discusses and analyses the links; and in several suttas there are lists of nine, ten, or more, or less, links instead of twelve. But the twelve links are the basic list. Here I will not be discussing the general principle of conditionality, but specifically the selection and arrangement of the twelve *nidānas*, and the meaning of that selection.

The three-life interpretation

Early Buddhist thinkers, seeking to understand and systematise the Buddha's teaching as it had been passed down to them, came to see in the twelve links an explanation of *saṃsāra*, of how the individual human being passes through lifetimes according to karma. This process of reflection reached its culmination with the fifth-century C.E. commentator Buddhaghosa, who devotes Chapter 17 of his *Visuddhimagga* to how the twelve links apply over three lifetimes. The approach can be summarised as Table 1, which shows the commentarial interpretation of each *nidāna* alongside the sutta version.

The three-life interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* is the mainstream Buddhist exegesis, found in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* as well as in Theravādin tradition. However, nowhere in the suttas is the Buddha recorded as saying that the twelve *nidānas* should be understood over three lifetimes, or that *paṭicca samuppāda* is meant to explain an individual's continual re-arising according to karma and its result. The division of the twelve links into karma-process and result-process is a later commentarial interpretation. The scholar Paul Williams comments:

This twelvefold formula for dependent origination as it stands is strange. In one way it makes sense spread over three lives, yet this explanation looks like an attempt to make sense of what may well be a compilation from originally different sources. Why, for example, explain the first of the three lives only in terms of the first two links, and explain the tenth link, 'becoming', as essentially the same as the second link, 'formations'? Why introduce explanations in terms of *karman* where none of the links obviously mentions *karman*? (Williams 2000, 71–72)

TABLE 1
Sutta version and commentarial interpretation of each *nidāna*

<i>Nidāna</i>	Sutta	Commentary	
<i>Avijjā</i> <i>Saṅkhārā</i>	Ignorance Formations	Ignorance in the last life Volitional formations in the last life	Karma-process
<i>Viññāna</i>	Consciousness	Re-linking (<i>paṭisandhi</i>) consciousness between lives	Result (<i>vipāka</i>)- process
<i>Nāma-rūpa</i>	Name and form	Mind and body arising at conception in this life	
<i>Saḷāyatanā</i>	The six sense realms	The six sense organs in the child	
<i>Phassa</i> <i>Vedanā</i> <i>Taṇhā</i>	Contact Feeling 'Thirst', craving	Contact Feeling Craving	Karma-process
<i>Upādāna</i> <i>Bhava</i>	'Fuel', grasping Becoming	Grasping Becoming in <i>saṃsāra</i>	
<i>Jāti</i> <i>Jarā-maraṇam</i>	Birth Old age and death	Birth in the next life Old age and death in the next life	Result-process

I will not here address how the twelve-fold *paṭicca samuppāda* might be compiled from different sources;¹ but if it is, there are few traces left in the canon of how the compilation came about. It would appear that whatever the Buddha originally meant by the twelve links must have been as difficult to understand for the early Buddhists as it is for us, which is why they developed the three-life interpretation to make some sense of it. However, in doing so they had to make some changes to what the Buddha is recorded as saying about what some of the links referred to.

First, the early Buddhists interpreted *saṅkhārā* specifically as the past volitional formations—that is, past karma—on the basis of which the present individual arose. The suttas, however, describe *saṅkhārā* very generally as bodily, verbal and mental formations, with no reference to time or karma. Next, the commentators interpreted *viññāna* specifically as the re-linking (*paṭisandhi*) consciousness that passes over from death to conception in the next life, the ‘seed’ consciousness that starts off the new existence. The suttas, however, although they describe a ‘descent of consciousness’ into the womb, generally explain the *viññāna* of the twelve *nidānas* simply as consciousness associated with each of the six senses. Similarly, the name-and-form of the three-life interpretation is defined as that which develops in the womb on condition of the re-linking consciousness, whereas in the suttas the *nāma* of *nāma-rūpa* is generally defined as ‘feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention’, clearly the complex mental concomitants of the adult mind. While the commentators give the six sense bases the specific meaning of the senses of the newly-arisen being, in the suttas they are not so specified. By interpreting the feeling or *vedanā* of *paṭicca samuppāda* as a karma-result, the commentators appear to have limited their conception of feeling merely to the feeling that arises due to past karma, whereas the suttas describe all feeling, whether as a result of karma or not, as dependently arisen. Finally, we should note that while the commentators take birth and old age and death to refer specifically to the next life, the suttas appear simply to define these *nidānas* quite generally as being born, ageing and dying.

In short, it would appear that the commentators, by assigning specific, literal meanings to each of the twelve *nidānas*, created out of *paṭicca samuppāda* a religious and metaphysical doctrine describing the rebirth process according to karma. In the suttas, however, the *nidānas* are defined in more general and suggestive ways, and the twelve-fold formula does not mention karma. This is not to say that the Buddha did not teach karma and rebirth, which he clearly did; only that *paṭicca samuppāda* is not presented in the canon as explaining it. Indeed, the Buddha does not appear to have explained the mechanism of the rebirth process or the exact workings of karma. Perhaps this is why the later Buddhists utilised *paṭicca samuppāda* to render into definite religious doctrine what the Buddha had left unexplained.

***Paṭicca samuppāda* in the present moment**

The commentators, then, took the twelve links of *paṭicca samuppāda* to be referring to a linear causal process occurring through time, on the scale of lifetimes. This enabled the early Buddhists to conceptualise the rebirth process that the Buddha taught and which they believed in, and eventually this sophisticated interpretation of the suttas must have settled into a generally accepted part of Buddhist doctrine. The traditional images for the twelve links stretched around the outside of the 'wheel of life' suggest that by the time this symbol was devised the doctrine had become embedded into the religious imagination, along with the Buddhist cosmology of which *paṭicca samuppāda* is the guiding principle.

Evidence within the Pali canon shows the gradual development of the exegetical principles behind the three-life interpretation (*Paṭi*s PTS 50–53; Warder 1997, 50–53); however, in the Theravādin Abhidhamma texts there is also evidence of a different kind of interpretation. In the *Vibhaṅga* there is an analysis of *paṭicca samuppāda* in which the twelve links are presented as occurring together in the present moment (PTS 144; Thitṭhila 1969, 189). This example of *paṭicca samuppāda* in the present moment was not supposed to be an account of what the Buddha had taught in the suttas, since the Abhidhammikas clearly distinguished between this approach and the method by which they interpreted the discourses. But it illustrates another early interpretation. More recently, two Theravādin thinkers, Buddhadāsa and Ñāṇavīra, have each specifically criticised the commentarial interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* and proposed their own interpretations that they claim are nearer to the Buddha's original meaning.

Buddhadāsa: *paṭicca samuppāda* in daily life

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–93) was a highly respected Thai meditation master, as well as an outspoken critic of some of the popular beliefs of Thai Buddhists. In a lecture on *paṭicca samuppāda* given in 1971 at his monastery, Suan Mokh ('Garden of Enlightenment'), he criticised the three-life interpretation and set out an interpretation of the twelve *nidānas* as occurring in the present moment (Buddhadāsa 1986; condensed in Buddhadāsa 1989; discussed in Seeger 2005). This was not supposed to be a version of the Abhidhamma interpretation, which Buddhadāsa regarded as 'superfluous, inflated Abhidhammic knowledge', a merely intellectual analysis (Buddhadāsa 1986, 55), and 'totally useless' (Buddhadāsa 1989, 122).

He described the three-life interpretation as a 'cancer, an incurable tumour of Buddhist scholarship' (Seeger 2005, 111). He pointed out that in the suttas the Dharma is described as 'self-evident' (*sandiṭṭhika*), 'timeless' (*akālika*) and 'to be experienced individually by the wise' (*paccatam veditabbo viññūhi*), and that *paṭicca samuppāda* was said by the Buddha to be identical to the Dharma (M 38 PTS i 265). By spreading the links of *paṭicca samuppāda* over three lifetimes, such

that ignorance and formations refer to the past life, and birth, old age and death to the next, the *nidānas* are no longer self-evident, timeless and able to be directly experienced. Therefore the three-lifetime interpretation is ‘completely useless’ (Seeger 2005, 112) and ‘makes it impossible to practice *paṭicca samuppāda*’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 16). Worse, by interpreting *viññāna* as the re-linking consciousness that goes over to the next life, the commentators have smuggled some eternalism into the Dharma, in the form of a self-identical consciousness that is supposedly reborn. Buddhadāsa notes that Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* contains the oldest version of the three-life interpretation that has come down us, although Buddhaghosa himself says it was already accepted. Buddhadāsa speculates that eternalistic brahminical views about a transmigrating self had begun creeping into Buddhism from an early stage.

According to Buddhadāsa, the problem started with the commentators taking *jāti*, birth, to refer to literal, physical birth. But, he says, *paṭicca samuppāda* is a teaching in the language of ultimate truth, and in this language, birth refers to the ‘birth of the “I”-concept which is only a feeling, and not the physical birth from a mother’s womb’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 44). The commentators interpreted *paṭicca samuppāda* literally, in the language of everyday life, to refer to a person who dies and is reborn. But in the language of ultimate truth, there is no person; there is only *nāma-rūpa* (name and form). The ‘person’ then arises when the I-concept attaches to a feeling, and comes into existence again and again because of attachment and because of the feeling that ‘I am someone or other. Buddhadāsa takes each of the *nidānas* exactly as they are explained in the suttas, but interprets them from the standpoint of ultimate truth as pertaining to the arising, death and re-arising of the ultimately non-existent ‘self’. In this sense, ‘one round of *paṭicca samuppāda* is nothing more than a manifestation of stupidity’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 44).

Buddhadāsa therefore interprets *paṭicca samuppāda* psychologically rather than literally. ‘Dependent origination is defined only within the boundaries set by grasping. It doesn’t refer to simply being alive and having thoughts and feelings. Therefore, the law of Dependent Origination does not affect a child in the womb’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 72). A single round of *paṭicca samuppāda*—that is, the birth and death of the I-feeling based on ignorance and grasping—may happen in a flash, so fast we may not be aware of it. But the teaching of the twelve *nidānas* enables us to understand that the sense of self arises on conditions and to begin to observe this arising. When there is no sense of self, which is quite an ordinary part of experience, one abides in a passive, non-grasping original state; but this state is primed for the arising of the delusion of the ‘I’ concept when sense-experience occurs. Buddhadāsa emphasises that *paṭicca samuppāda* is a teaching that should be practised. ‘If you ask how it can be practised the only answer is to have mindfulness when there is sense-contact . . . See that you remain in your original state’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 86).

Buddhadāsa does not make this point, but this emphasis on practice returns us to the sutta teaching of *paṭicca samuppāda* as ‘noble method’. His point would appear to be that it is hard to imagine how the three-life interpretation could be

practised in any way, since it is more of a theoretical model for the working of *samsāra* than a practical account of how *dukkha* comes about in experience. Buddhadāsa's practice-oriented interpretation allows him to speak of the 'radiant wheel of dependent origination' (Buddhadāsa 1986, 86) that begins with ignorance and ends with knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas* via the arising of faith dependent on *dukkha*—a reference to the 23 *nidānas*, including those of the path, of the Upanisa Sutta (S 12:23 PTS ii 29).²

In conclusion, Buddhadāsa's interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* is sutta-based, empirical, sceptical as regards rebirth, and oriented towards meditation. However, Buddhadāsa's attempted refutation of the three-life interpretation may not fit what the suttas actually say about the twelve *nidānas*, and some of Bhikkhu Bodhi's objections to Ñāṇavīra's criticisms of the commentarial tradition, which I will discuss later, apply also to Buddhadāsa. We might especially note that the distinction of the language of ultimate truth from that of conventional truth, upon which his interpretation of the suttas depends, is itself post-canonical, being found first in the *Milindapañhā*.

Ñāṇavīra: *paṭicca samuppāda* as the structure of existence

In 1963, a few years before Buddhadāsa's lecture, an English Bhikkhu named Ñāṇavīra published his *Notes on Dhamma*, also concerned with an interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* in present experience as against over three lives. Ñāṇavīra was born Harold Musson in 1920 and, due to his knowledge of European languages, served during the Second World War in the intelligence corps as an interrogator. While in Italy he translated Evola's *Doctrine of Awakening* to brush up his Italian, and this was his first contact with the Dhamma (although he later expressed reservations about Evola's book, with its elitist conception of the Aryans). After the war, he and his friend Osbert Moore went to Sri Lanka to ordain as Bhikkhus, and in 1949, at the Island Hermitage, they became Ñāṇavīra and Ñāṇamoli, respectively, the latter becoming a prolific translator best known for his translation of the *Visuddhimagga* as *The Path of Purification*. While Ñāṇamoli remained at the Island Hermitage until his untimely death in 1960, Ñāṇavīra moved to a more solitary *kuṭi* near Būndala on the mainland. In 1959 he claimed privately (although the news leaked out) to have attained stream-entry. However, he began to suffer stomach pains so severe that he was unable to meditate, and then, apparently in response to the drugs administered for the stomach complaint, developed an equally debilitating psycho-sexual illness. He committed 'spiritual suicide' in 1965 because he could not meditate but did not want to go back to lay life. In the years before his death, unable to meditate but able to study, he wrote *Notes on Dhamma*, and many letters in which he shared his outlook. In 1987 his notes and letters were published as *Clearing the Path*, and Ñāṇavīra's thinking has subsequently attracted something of a cult following. His 'existential' re-interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* is more radical and better argued than that of Buddhadāsa, and starts from the fundamental issue of the relationship of dependent arising to time.

Ñāṇavīra, like Buddhadāsa, notes that the Buddha described the Dharma as *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* (self-evident and timeless), and seeing *paṭicca samuppāda* as seeing the Dharma. The general principle of conditionality—‘this being, that becomes’ and so on—should therefore be taken as referring to the dependence of one thing on another thing already existing, rather than as a temporal (causal) process by which one thing happens after another thing. He writes:

For as long as *paṭiccasamuppāda* is thought to involve temporal succession (as it is, notably in the traditional ‘three-life’ interpretation), so long is it liable to be regarded as some kind of hypothesis (that there is rebirth and that it is *caused* by *avijjā*). (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 84)

By contrast, Ñāṇavīra notes, the dependence of *vipāka* upon karma is *not* a matter of a simple dependence, since *vipāka* usually arises after the karma has ceased, and for this reason the karmic process, along with the process of rebirth, cannot be considered a manifestation of *paṭicca samuppāda*.

If *paṭiccasamuppāda* is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* then it is clear that it can have nothing to do with *kamma* and *kammavipāka* ... for the ripening of *kamma* as *vipāka* takes time – *vipāka* always follows *kamma* after an interval and is never simultaneous with it. (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 22)

Since the three-life interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* divides the *nidānas* into karma-process and result-process, he believes this interpretation to be fundamentally wrong.

In Ñāṇavīra’s view, the twelve *nidānas* are not a causally related sequence of temporally successive phenomena. Instead, they are the structurally related phenomena that make up the lived experience of being an ordinary human being, meaning, the experience of being a self, a ‘someone’, an ‘I’. This experience, characterised as *dukkha*, is ultimately a mistake since it finds a self, a sense of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ where, according to the Buddha, no such self can really be found. Direct seeing of *paṭicca samuppāda* means seeing that experience is thus structured, thereby enabling the process of cessation, by which there is liberation from *dukkha*. An analogy for what Ñāṇavīra means by the twelve *nidānas* as the structure of experience is that of a building. Just as a house cannot have a roof without walls, so there can be no subjective existence as a self (*bhava*) without craving (*taṇhā*) and grasping (*upādāna*); similarly, just as there can be no lower walls without foundations, there can be no consciousness of being a self (*viññāna*) and the name and form of that experience (*nāma-rūpa*) without ignorant unawareness (*avijjā*). The roof does not arise after the walls but depends on those walls for its existence; conversely, without a foundation, the whole building ceases to stand. However, whereas a building is a static entity, human experience is dynamic. The sense of self, of being a ‘someone’, is constantly attempted and renewed through the processes of feeling, craving and appropriation by which personal life is sustained.

Notes on Dhamma consists mainly of detailed discussion of particular sutta passages concerning individual *nidānas*, and how they are to be interpreted satisfactorily, which Ñāṇavīra does with the help of the method and vocabulary of modern European philosophers, especially Kierkegaard. As with Buddhadāsa's interpretation, a crux of Ñāṇavīra's dispute with the three-life interpretation is whether the eleventh *nidāna*—*jāti* or birth—is to be understood literally, as physical birth, or in some other way. Ñāṇavīra's answer is to distinguish the *jāti* of *paṭicca samuppāda* from the *punabbhava*, the re-birth that the Buddha is recorded as teaching in a quite literal sense. Ñāṇavīra does not doubt that the Buddha taught rebirth (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 23), only that *paṭicca samuppāda* is supposed to explain it. *Jāti* refers not to rebirth but to the individual person's belief that they are a 'someone', a self who has been born:

The *puthujjana* [ordinary person] takes what appears to be his 'self' at its face value; and so long as this goes on he continues to *be* a 'self', at least in his own eyes (and in the eyes of others like him). This is *bhava* or 'being'. The *puthujjana* knows that people are born and die; and since he thinks 'my self exists' so he also thinks 'my self was born' and 'my self will die'. The *puthujjana* sees a 'self' to whom the words *birth* and *death* apply. In contrast ... the *arahat* ... has altogether got rid of *asmimāna* [the conceit 'I am'], and does not even think 'I am' ... since he does not think 'I am' he also does not think 'I was born' or 'I shall die'. In other words, he sees no 'self' or even 'I' for the words *birth* and *death* to apply to. (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 23–24)

Ñāṇavīra's conception of *jāti* is therefore psychological, like Buddhadāsa's, referring to the birth in subjective experience of a sense of self through ignorance, craving and the other *nidānas*.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: in defence of tradition

Ñāṇavīra wrote that 'the views expressed in [*Notes on Dhamma*] will perhaps be regarded in one quarter or another as doubtful or definitely wrong' (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 14). Since he regarded the traditional three-life version of *paṭicca samuppāda* as wrong, it is not surprising that a representative of the tradition, in this case Bhikkhu Bodhi, should rise to its defence against a detractor, and indeed try to show that Ñāṇavīra was wrong. Bhikkhu Bodhi, born in New York in 1944, was ordained in Sri Lanka in 1972, and is well known through his translations of Pali texts. In two articles (Bodhi 1998a, 1998b), he analyses Ñāṇavīra's interpretations of *bhava* (becoming), *jāti* (birth), and *saṅkhārā* (formations) in order to show that they are wrong, and that the three-life interpretation is more adequately consistent with the suttas.

These articles go about their critical business with academic detachment, but Ven. Bodhi's traditionalist temper is evident in comments he makes elsewhere. Justifying his method of translation of the *Nidāna Saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, concerned with *paṭicca samuppāda*, he writes:

Because the texts lack a clearcut explanation of the [twelve-fold] formula [of *paṭicca samuppāda*], modern interpreters of early Buddhism have sometimes devised capricious theories about its original meaning, theories which assume that the Buddhist tradition itself has muddled up the interpretation of this most basic doctrine. To avoid the arbitrariness and wilfulness of personal opinion, it seems more prudent to rely on the method of explanation found in the Buddhist exegetical tradition, which despite minor differences in details is largely the same across the spectrum of early Buddhist schools. (Bodhi 2000, 518)

The unnamed ‘modern interpreters’ are doubtless Buddhādāsa and Ñāṇavīra, whose interpretations of *paṭicca samuppāda* he therefore regards as capricious, arbitrary, wilful, and matters merely of personal opinion. By contrast Bhikkhu Bodhi is convinced of and satisfied by the traditional three-life interpretation as what the Buddha meant.

It does not take Ven. Bodhi very much effort to show that what is meant by *jāti* in the suttas appears to be just physical, biological birth, not the metaphorical ‘birth’ of the *puthujjana*’s sense of self; moreover, ‘Ñāṇavīra does not cite any suttas to support his understanding of *bhava*, *jāti* and *jarāmaraṇa*, and in fact there are no suttas to be found in the Pāli canon that explain the above terms in this way’ (Bodhi 1998a, 51–52). Bhikkhu Bodhi goes on to demonstrate suttas which show that, *contra* Ñāṇavīra, the *jāti* of *paṭicca samuppāda* is more or less synonymous with *punnabhava* or rebirth. Similarly, Ven. Bodhi cites suttas in which the *bhava* (becoming) of *paṭicca samuppāda* clearly refers to objective existence in one of the three realms of becoming, the sensual realm, the realm of form or the formless realm. *Bhava* in these suttas cannot therefore mean the *puthujjana*’s sense of being a self.

Bhikkhu Bodhi similarly takes to task Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation of *saṅkhārā* as ‘determinations’ in the widest sense as ‘things that other things depend upon’ (Ñāṇavīra 1987, 24). Ñāṇavīra wished to give this word, *saṅkhārā*, the widest possible meaning so as to indicate the structural condition by which *dukkha* arises from ignorance—that the *puthujjana*’s sense of self takes for granted (as permanent and as ‘self’) things that are composite, impermanent, and therefore unable to support a lasting, satisfactory experience of self-identity. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s repudiation of Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation consists of showing that when the word *saṅkhārā* is used in connection with *paṭicca samuppāda*, it always refers either to a threefold division of *saṅkhārā* as being of body, speech or mind, or to a threefold division of *saṅkhārā* as meritorious, demeritorious or imperturbable (Bodhi 1998b, 157–160). This usage can be best understood in relation to *cetanā* (‘intention’), giving the traditional meaning of *saṅkhārā* as ‘volitional formations’, equivalent to karma. The word *saṅkhārā* is also used in the suttas in a general, non-karmic sense, which Ñāṇavīra takes as primary—such as when in-and-out breathing is said to be a *saṅkhāra* or ‘determination’ of the body—but Bhikkhu Bodhi shows that this sense is clearly distinct from the meaning of *saṅkhārā* in relation to *paṭicca samuppāda*.

Such literal interpretations of *saṅkhārā*, *bhava* and *jāti* also count against Buddhadāsa's metaphorical reading of these terms. Ven. Bodhi also explains, against both Buddhadāsa and Ñāṇavīra, how the traditional three-life model can be understood as timeless, *akālika*:

the word qualifies, not the factors such as birth and death themselves, but the principle (*dhamma*) that is seen and understood. The point made by calling the principle *akālika* is that this principle is known and seen *immediately*, that is, that the conditional relationship between any two terms is known directly with perceptual certainty. (Bodhi 1998b, 178)

Contra both Ñāṇavīra and Buddhadāsa, *paṭicca samuppāda* is self-evident, timeless and to be experienced directly because the principle of conditionality underlying the dependent arising of the *nidānas* is so, not because the twelve *nidānas* themselves do not occur over three lives.

With these arguments and more, Bhikkhu Bodhi purposes to 'vindicate the traditional three-life interpretation against Ñāṇavīra's critique' (Bodhi 1998a, 45). However, Bhikkhu Bodhi does not empathise with either Buddhadāsa's interest in *paṭicca samuppāda* as something to be *practised* in meditation, independent of religious beliefs, or with Ñāṇavīra's interest in how the Buddha's teaching of *paṭicca samuppāda* addresses the present existential suffering of the existing individual. Ven. Bodhi is convinced that in the twelve links of *paṭicca samuppāda* the Buddha taught a religious-metaphysical doctrine concerning the objective structure of *samsāra* extending through lifetimes, rolling on according to karma and its result. Further, Bhikkhu Bodhi can only admit, and in no way alter the fact, that the traditional interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* in terms of karma, and extending over three lives is not explicit in the suttas, and can only be read back into the suttas with the help of exegetical tools developed centuries later.

Indeed, Ven. Bodhi believes that the three-life interpretation, 'far from deviating from the Suttas, simply makes explicit the Buddha's intention in expounding dependent arising' (Bodhi, 1998a, 45). He draws attention to a particular sutta that, in his opinion, 'confirms the three-life interpretation of PS [*paṭicca samuppāda*] almost as explicitly as one might wish' (Bodhi 1998b, 165). The Bālapaṇḍita Sutta (S 12:19) opens:

Bhikkhus, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has thereby originated. So there is this body and external name-and-form: thus this dyad. Dependent on the dyad there is contact. There are just six sense bases, contacted through which—or through a certain one among them—the fool experiences pleasure and pain.

The Buddha says the same regarding a wise man, then asks the bhikkhus what therefore the difference between a wise man and a fool might be. The bhikkhus defer to the Buddha, who says:

Bhikkhus, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has originated. For the fool that ignorance has not been abandoned and that craving has not been utterly destroyed. For what reason? Because the fool has not lived the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering. Therefore, with the breakup of the body, the fool fares on to [another] body. Faring on to [another] body, he is not freed from birth, from aging and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair; not freed from suffering, I say. (Bodhi 2000, 549–550)

The wise man, by contrast, has abandoned ignorance and destroyed craving, and thereby does not fare on to another body. Ven. Bodhi reads into this sutta the past causes (ignorance and craving) of present existence, the present results of those causes (the body, the sense bases, contact and feeling), the present causes of future existence (unabandoned ignorance and craving), and future results (birth, ageing and death in a future existence). He notes that:

in this brief sutta we find clearly adumbrated the later exegetical scheme of 'the four groups' (*catusaṅkhepa*) and 'twenty modes' (*visatākāra*) . . . This should also help establish the validity of the 'three-life' interpretation of *paṭicca-samuppāda* and demonstrate that such an interpretation is not a commentarial innovation. (Bodhi 2000, 741)

With all respect to Ven. Bodhi's powers as a translator, however, his exegesis here shows only that this particular sutta is especially amenable to the later three-life interpretation with its associated exegetical methods. There is nothing in it to prove that it was intended to be understood in the terms of later religious metaphysics. Indeed, it can be read in Nāṇavīra's existential sense. The ordinary person, unaware of reality and caught up with craving, identifies himself or herself with 'this body'; having done so, he or she assumes a perceptual situation of self and world in which experience is possible, and therefore continues in existence as a self, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Without spiritual effort and insight, this situation will roll on, an existential structure of experience that destines the *puthujjana* to unsatisfactoriness as long as it continues. It is hard on strictly linguistic grounds to know why this should be an impossible interpretation of the sutta.³

***Paṭicca samuppāda* in historical context**

The traditional three-life interpretation turns the twelve *nidānas* into the terms of a religious doctrine about the workings of *saṃsāra*, but Buddhadaśa's and Nāṇavīra's criticisms lead us to question whether the Buddha meant to teach religious metaphysics. Bhikkhu Bodhi has tried to show that Nāṇavīra's interpretation does not square with the suttas, while the three-life interpretation is consistent and coherent. However, if Bodhi's positive defence of the three-life interpretation is as inconclusive, as I have indicated, then we return to the

situation indicated at the outset of this discussion: that we do not really know what the terms of *paṭicca samuppāda* were originally supposed to mean. The interpretations of Buddhadhāsa and Nāṇavīra, while they cannot be taken to have rediscovered the original meaning, raise the question of that meaning by drawing attention to the inadequacies of the three-life interpretation.

New light has been shed on this matter, however. In a recent paper, the Vedic scholar Joanna Jurewicz has shown how the twelve *nidānas* can be related to the terms and concepts of Vedic cosmogony, as these are preserved in the *Rg Veda*, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and some early *Upaniṣads*. Richard Gombrich has said of Prof. Jurewicz's research into how the *nidānas* are responses to Vedic cosmogony that: 'Given the centrality to Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, I think this may rank as one of the most important discoveries ever made in Buddhology' (Gombrich 2005, 154).

The details are difficult, but the gist is that the twelve *nidānas* parody Vedic ideas while presenting conditioned existence as just *dukkha*. The Buddha, not being a brahmin, would not himself have been versed in Vedic scriptures, but the ideas they contain were presumably the common currency of religious belief among many whom he taught. The Buddha clearly enjoyed satirising Vedic religion. In the Kevaddha Sutta, he is represented as parodying Brahmā as a pompous and arrogant pretender to omniscient divinity (D 11 PTS i 211–223). In the Brahmajāla Sutta, the Buddha parodies Vedic stories about the evolution of the world (D 1 PTS i 18–19).⁴ In parodying Vedic cosmogony in the twelve *nidānas*, the Buddha might have been giving expression to his own teaching of *dukkha* and its ending in terms that would have had startling significance to his hearers. It would appear, however, that the early Buddhists, having no interest in Vedic ideas, soon forgot about them, and went about preserving the Buddha's teachings without understanding the religious beliefs in relation to which some of these teachings were formulated. Hence we find very little explicit discussion of the terms of *paṭicca samuppāda* in relation to Vedic thought in the Pali canon; what is there is clearly regarded as centrally important but is not explained.

According to Jurewicz, the twelve *nidānas* of *paṭicca samuppāda* represent a parody of Brahminical ideas about creation. These ideas concern an *ātman*, an absolute Self, which is at once the subject of experience, the experiencer, and the ultimate object of experience. The Buddha, however, used the same ideas in a simplified form (the twelve *nidānas*) to show that, because in reality there is no *ātman*, all that comes into being is impermanent and therefore *dukkha*. A creation hymn in the *Rg Veda*, the Nāsadiya (RV 10.129), is the *locus classicus* for ideas about origins. It begins:

1. There was neither existence [*sa*] nor non-existence [*asa*] then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

2. There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one [*tad ekam*] breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
3. Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one [*tad ekam*] arose through the power of heat [*tapas*].
4. Desire [*kāmā*] came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets [*kavi*] seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. (Doniger 1981, 25)

The hymn is full of questions, and it goes on to end with questions. This is no Book of Genesis, but a poetic cosmogony, more about the origin of cognition in an eternal mind than about the origin of the cosmos in an objective sense.

In the beginning was neither existence nor knowledge, for *sat* has both ontological and epistemological import; there was a state of total inexpressibility. Stepping ahead of the argument, it is this state that the Buddha described as *avijjā*, the ignorance upon which depend the rest of the links of *paṭicca samuppāda*. But *avijjā* is a mockery of this Vedic pre-creative inexpressibility, since the Buddhist term means only ignorance of *dukkha* and the origin of *dukkha* in *taṇhā* (craving), whereas in the Vedic myth this pre-creative state will give rise to the *ātman* through *kāmā* (desire).

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the myth of creation is taken up from the point of this emergence, in relation to the *ātman*:

In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, 'Here I am!' and from that the name 'I' came into being . . . That first being received the name 'man' (*puruṣa*) . . . (BU 1.4.1 translated by Olivelle 1996, 13)

What comes into being is the possibility of cognition, the knowing subject, the 'I', who is as yet alone. In Vedic thought this happens through a process that is described through metaphors of fire. In the Nāsadiya 'that one' (*tad ekam*) emerges from the solitude of creative darkness through the arising of *tapas* (the heat of ascetic ardour) and through *kāma* (the fire of desire). The Vedic poets recreate this ardour and desire. The Vedic fire rituals similarly recreate the conditions of creation. The *saṅkhārā* or 'formations' of the *paṭicca samuppāda*, which arise on condition of *avijjā*, parody a version of the creation myth in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* in which Prajāpati (the creator) forms (*abhisamkaroti*) himself (*ātman*) in the form of the fire-altar (Jurewicz 2000, 83).

These Vedic ideas about creation are not philosophical; they are poetic and metaphorical, linked with ancient ritual and belief. The image of fire is a central metaphor in Vedic thought: the fire of desire (*kāma*) and ascetic ardour (*tapas*) bring the manifest world into being; the Vedic fire-rituals continue to sustain the universe and bring about desired ends in human life. Consciousness is imagined as fiery; it is appetitive, an eater, it exists through a desire that eats its objects. The *ātman*

evolves from the primal inexpressibility into a cognising being, a consciousness, when it enters into the manifest world of *nāma-rūpa*, name and form:

Penetrating this body up to the very nailtips, he remains there like a razor within a case or a termite within a termite-hill. People do not see him, for he is incomplete as he comes to be called breath when he is breathing, speech when he is speaking, sight when he is seeing, hearing when he is hearing, and mind when he is thinking. These are only the names of his various activities. A man who considers him to be any one of these does not understand him, for he is incomplete within any one of these. One should consider them as simply his self (*ātman*), for in it all these become one. The same self (*ātman*) is the trail to this entire world, for by following it one comes to know this entire world, just as by following their tracks one finds [the cattle]. Whoever knows this finds fame and glory. (BU 1.4.7 translated by Olivelle 1996, 14–15)

In the Buddha's parody, *viññāna* and *nāma-rūpa* arise dependent on *saṅkhārā* (the formations)—but, without an *ātman*, this arising is just the arising of appetitive consciousness into the manifest world, a fire of desire without anyone who could be satisfied.

It is no secret that the Buddha took Vedic ideas about fire and turned them on their head. In the Fire Sermon (the *Adittapariyāya Sutta*: 'the discourse concerning what is metaphorically on fire') we find the Buddha saying that 'all is burning'—the senses, sense-consciousness, sense-contact and sense-objects—'burning with the fires of greed, hate and delusion' (S 35:28 PTS iv 19). The word for the *summum bonum* of the Buddha's teaching—*nibbāna*—means literally the 'blowing out' of a fire. In the *Mahātaṇhāsankhāya Sutta* we find an explicit discussion of consciousness and fire (M 38 PTS i 259–260). A monk called Sati comes to the Buddha's attention as someone who believes that the same *viññāna* transmigrates; that is, he believes in the *ātman*. The Buddha reproves the monk, and compares consciousness and its dependence on the senses with a fire that depends on various kinds of fuel. Present and future existence, the Buddha goes on to say, depends on four kinds of nutriment, consciousness being the fourth, themselves dependent on *taṇhā*, the great 'thirst' that gives the *sutta* its title.

The terms *taṇha* and *upādāna* in the twelve *nidānas* also participate in this extended parody of fiery Vedic metaphor. *Taṇhā*—'thirst'—is usually understood as 'craving' in the context of *paṭicca samuppāda*, but this is the more abstract side of its meaning. More concretely it means the state of someone who is hot and sweating. Moreover, it is word that in the Vedic context refers to the creative activity both of fire and of the Vedic seers:

It may be assumed that in formulating the *tr̥ṣṇā* [*taṇhā*] link, the Buddha was referring to the fiery activity of the poets burning the world in the cosmogonic act of cognition. In his chain, their activity is deprived of its positive dimension

and is identified only with the negative aspect of fire, which in its insatiability digests, and thus destroys, itself and the world around it. (Jurewicz 2000, 96)

On condition of *tanhā* is *upādāna*, which means ‘clinging’ in the abstract, but also means the sustenance or fuel for a fire. In relation to Vedic thought it refers to the activity of Agni, the god of fire, who requires constant feeding in order that he can continue to cognise and sustain the world.

On condition of this sustenance arises *bhava*, *jāti* and *jarāmaraṇa*, existence, birth and old age and death. In the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (2.1) we find a discussion of birth:

At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. That is the radiance gathered from all the bodily parts; so he bears himself (*ātman*) in himself (*ātman*). And when a man deposits the semen in a woman, he gives birth to it. (Olivelle 1996, 197)

This new *ātman* becomes part of the mother, and she nourishes (*bhāvayati*) the new being: Jurewicz thinks that the Buddha’s use of *bhava* may relate to this Vedic image of nourishing. Once the new being is born, it becomes old and dies, and is then born again. The Buddha describes the reproductive process in similar terms in the Mahātanhāsankhaya Sutta (M 38.26–27 PTS i 265–266), suggesting that he was choosing to echo Vedic religio-biological thinking. The difference of course is that for the Buddha there is no *ātman* undergoing birth; there is just the fire of *tanhā* and the continuation of *dukkha*.

Whether *jāti* in the twelve *nidānas* refers literally to future (re-)birth, or metaphorically to the ‘birth’ of the sense of being a ‘self’, is an issue that clearly distinguishes the traditional three-life interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* from that of Buddhādāsa and Nānavīra. This discussion of the historical context of *paṭicca samuppāda* suggests that *jāti* does mean future birth, but in a particular sense. In the Vedic context, which the Buddha might be parodying, existence is something desirable; it means the continued existence of the *ātman*, its continued possibility of enjoyment. Birth is obviously the result of pleasure; sexual pleasure is just one example of the creative heat by which the *ātman* continues in its desiring fire. What is meant by *jāti* as a *nidāna*, therefore, is the outcome of desire, which leads to old age and death, more *dukkha*. The Buddha takes up Vedic belief in rebirth and gives it an ironic twist: since there is no *ātman*, only *dukkha* is reborn. This is made explicit in some old verses in the *Pārāyana* section of the *Sutta Nipāta*. In response to Puṇṇaka’s questions the Buddha says:

‘These many seers (and) men, Puṇṇaka,’ said the Blessed One, ‘khattiyas (and) brahmans who offered sacrifices to deities here in the world, offered sacrifices, Puṇṇaka, hoping for existence [*bhāva*] here, (being) subject to old age [*jarā*] . . . They hoped, praised, longed for and sacrificed, Puṇṇaka,’ said the Blessed One. ‘They longed for sensual pleasures [*kāma*], dependent upon gain. I say that they, given over to sacrifice and affected by passion for existence [*bhava*], did not cross over birth and old age.’ (Sn 1044 and 1046 translated by Norman 2001, 132)

Although these verses do not relate directly to the twelve *nidānas* as a formulation of *paṭicca samuppāda*, they support the contention that the Buddha was parodying Vedic ideas. The various Vedic religious practitioners mentioned in these verses seek continued existence, with its pleasures, through sacrificing to the gods. But, as the Buddha points out, for all their sacrificing, pleasure and gain they did not go beyond the travails of being born and dying—they did not find what transcends all this *dukkha*. *Jāti* in the twelve *nidānas* therefore refers to the general inevitability of birth for those who, believing in the reality of the self, continue to seek for existence. In this sense, the traditional literal interpretation of *jāti* as future birth although correct lacks the irony originally attached to the arising of birth from *bhava*. It might be said that, in defence of Buddhādāsa and Ñāṇavīra, their interpretation of *jāti* as the metaphorical ‘birth’ of the sense of a self is a de-mythologised psychological version of what the Buddha perhaps originally meant.

Some conclusions

In the light of these discoveries about the historical context of *paṭicca samuppāda*, it would appear that the Buddha’s original intention in teaching the twelve *nidānas* was to parody Brahminical religious beliefs of his day. While he uses some of the terms and ideas of Vedic cosmogony, he does so ironically, since without an *ātman* there is only *dukkha* arising. The three-life interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda*, by contrast, creates a non-ironic religious doctrine out of the teachings preserved in the early suttas; the *nidānas* are taken to refer literally and objectively to stages in the individual’s journey through *samsāra*. However, if the *nidānas* were originally supposed to parody existing beliefs while at the same time showing poetically how *dukkha* arises, it would follow that the Buddha did not mean to assign single, objective meanings to any of the links. Instead, the terms of *paṭicca samuppāda* signify Vedic ideas at the same time as they simplify and re-interpret their religious values. This might explain how the terms of the *nidānas* occur in many different contexts in the suttas, and how their definitions overlap and interconnect without being easily reducible to a single systematic meaning.

Placing the *nidānas* in a historical context suggests that the interpretation of *paṭicca samuppāda* as occurring in the present moment (Buddhādāsa) or non-temporally as the structure of existence (Ñāṇavīra) cannot be understood as revealing the Buddha’s original meaning, since they too are unaware of the Buddha’s method. However, these modern interpreters were at least trying to make *paṭicca samuppāda* relevant to those seeking release from *dukkha*: their demythologised and anti-metaphysical interpretations might be closer to the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching than the three-life interpretation even if the latter is, by dint of traditional exegetical effort, more consistent with the letter. But with the discovery of the historical context for the twelve *nidānas* comes the possibility of a contemporary exegesis in the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching rather than in the terms of the traditional three-life interpretation.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A = *Anguttara Nikāya*
 BU = *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*
 D = *Dīgha Nikāya*
 M = *Majjhima Nikāya*
Patis = *Patisambhidāmagga*
 RV = *Ṛg Veda*
 S = *Samyutta Nikāya*
 Sn = *Sutta Nipāta*

NOTES

1. For more details see Frauwallner (1973, 150–169) and Bucknell (1999).
2. In Buddhadāsa (1989, 122) he describes this complete *paṭicca samuppāda* as a ‘diamond crowned toad’. The *dukkha* side of *paṭicca samuppāda* is a ‘despicable toad’, ‘absolutely loathsome’, but it is crowned with *saddhā*, or faith, from which arises the ending of *dukkha*.
3. Bhikkhu Bodhi would like to convince the reader that *kāyūpago hoti* (here translated ‘fares on to [another] body’) ‘denotes movement towards the fruition of past *kamma*—movement fulfilled by the process of rebirth’ (Bodhi 1998b, 161). But *upaga* (lit., ‘going on to’) cannot be made to mean ‘according to karma’, and he admits that ‘fare on to [another] body’ only loosely corresponds to *punnabbhavābhiniḥḥatti*, ‘productive of future re-becoming’, a phrase that is more easily glossed in terms of karma (Bodhi 1998b, 167). I would venture to observe that Bhikkhu Bodhi prefers to interpret the meanings of words concerned with *paṭicca samuppāda* in terms of the later commentarial exegesis, which is not a historical form of translation, and begs the question of the original meaning of the suttas in question.
4. Also at D 24 PTS iii 29–30. Gombrich (1990, 13) points out that this is a satirical retelling of the creation myth in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1–3.

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