

A Critical Examination of Ñāṇavīra Thera's "A Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda"

1. INTRODUCTION

Ñāṇavīra Thera's *Notes on Dhamma* was first published in 1963, during the author's lifetime, in a small cyclostyled edition distributed to a select list of recipients. During the following two years the author made a number of corrections and substantial additions to his original text, leaving behind at his death an enlarged typescript entitled *Notes on Dhamma (1960–1965)*. For twenty-two years this version circulated from hand to hand among a small circle of readers in the form of typed copies, photocopies, and handwritten manuscripts. Only in 1987 did *Notes on Dhamma* appear in print, when it was issued along with a collection of the author's letters under the title *Clearing the Path: Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera (1960–1965)*.²³

Even this edition, a print run of 1,000 copies, turned out to be ephemeral. Barely nine months after the book was released, the editor-publisher (who had invested at least five years preparing the material for publication) died under tragic circumstances. Path Press effectively closed down, and the question whether the book will ever be reprinted still hangs in the air. But in spite of its limited availability, *Clearing the Path* has had an impact on its readers that has been nothing short of electric. Promoted solely by word of mouth, the book has spawned an international network of

22. SN 22:122/S III 168–69: *Arahatāpi kho, āvuso koṭṭhita, ime pañcupādānakkhandhe aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato parato palokato suññato anattato yoniso manasi kātabbā. Natthi, khvāvuso, arahato uttari karanīyaṃ katassa vā paticayo; api ca ime dhammā bhāvītā bahulikatā dīṭṭhadhammasukhavihārā ceva saṃvattanti satisampajaññā ca.* See too SN 22:123/S III 169.

23. *Notes on Dhamma* is available on www.nanavira.org and *Clearing the Path* on www.buddhanet.net.

admirers—a Theravāda Buddhist underground—united in their conviction that *Notes on Dhamma* is the sole key to unlock the inner meaning of the Buddha’s Teaching. Some of its admirers have called it the most important book written in this century, others have hailed it as the most outstanding work on the Dhamma to appear since the Nikāyas were first written down on palm leaves at the Aluvihāra. For the book’s enthusiasts no effort is too much in struggling through its dense pages of tightly compressed arguments and copious Pāli quotations in order to fulfill its author’s invitation “to come and share his point of view.”

Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s purpose in writing the *Notes* was, in his own words, “to indicate the proper interpretation of the Suttas,” the key to which he believed he had discovered through an experience that he identified as the arising of the Eye of Dhamma (*dhammacakkhu*), that is, the attainment of stream-entry. His proposition sounds innocuous enough as it stands, until one discovers that the author sees this task as entailing nothing less than a radical reevaluation of the entire Theravāda exegetical tradition. Few of the standard interpretative principles upheld by Theravāda orthodoxy are spared the slashing of his pen. The most time-honored explanatory tools for interpreting the Suttas, along with the venerated books from which they stem, he dismisses as “a mass of dead matter choking the Suttas.” The *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, the *Milindapañha*, the *Visuddhimagga*, the Pāli Commentaries—all come in for criticism, and the author says that ignorance of them “may be counted a positive advantage as leaving less to be unlearned.”

Strangely, although *Notes on Dhamma* makes such a sharp frontal attack on Theravāda orthodoxy, to date no proponent of the mainstream Theravāda tradition has risen to the occasion and attempted to counter its arguments. The few traditionalists who have read the book have either disregarded it entirely or merely branded it as a thicket of errors. But to my knowledge, none has tried to point out exactly what these errors are and to meet its criticisms with reasoned argumentation based directly on the texts.

The present essay is an attempt to fill that gap. I will be concerned here with only one note in Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s collection, his “A Note on *Paṭiccasamuppāda*.” This note, however, is the main

pillar of Ven. Ñāṇavīra's distinctive approach to the Suttas; it is the first and longest note in the book and the most consistently radical. The Note sounds a bold challenge to the prevailing "three-life interpretation" of the twelve-factored formula of dependent arising. The traditional interpretation of this formula, expounded in full detail in the *Visuddhimagga* (Chapter XVII), has guided followers of mainstream Theravāda Buddhism for centuries in their understanding of this most profound and difficult principle of the Dhamma. Hence a criticism of it that claims to be validated by the Suttas themselves strikes from within at the very core of the orthodox Theravāda commentarial tradition.

At the beginning of his Note, Ven. Ñāṇavīra states that he assumes his reader is acquainted with this traditional interpretation and is dissatisfied with it (§2). Such dissatisfaction, he asserts, is not unjustified, and he proposes to provide in its place what he modestly claims "may perhaps be found to be a more satisfactory approach." I too will assume that the reader is already acquainted with the three-life interpretation, and hence I will not recapitulate that interpretation here. While the reader who has personal access to Ven. Ñāṇavīra's Note and can refer to it in the course of this discussion may be able to follow my arguments here more easily, for the benefit of readers who are not so situated I will recount below those contentions of his with which I take issue.

My purpose in writing this examination is to vindicate the traditional three-life interpretation against Ven. Ñāṇavīra's critique of it. I propose to show that the approach which he considers to be "more satisfactory" not only cannot be justified by reference to the discourses of the Buddha, but is in fact flatly contradicted by those discourses. I also intend to establish that, contrary to Ven. Ñāṇavīra's allegations, the three-life interpretation, though not explicitly stated in such terms, is fully in accord with the Buddha's teachings. In my view, this interpretation, far from deviating from the Suttas, simply makes explicit the Buddha's intention in expounding dependent arising.

In making this assertion, I am not saying that the detailed exposition of *paṭicca-samuppāda* (PS) as found in the Pāli Commentaries can in all particulars be traced back to the Suttas. The aim of the Commentaries, in their treatment of PS, is to

correlate the Suttanta teaching of PS with the systematic analysis of phenomena and their conditional relations as found in the Abhidhamma. This results in an explanation of PS that is far more complex and technical than anything that can be drawn out from the Sutta texts themselves. I do not think that acceptance of the basic dynamics of the “three-life” approach entails acceptance of all the details of the commentarial explanation, and I also believe that the Commentaries take unnecessary risks when they try to read back into the Suttas ideas deriving from tools of interpretation that appeared perhaps centuries after the Suttas were compiled. All that I wish to maintain is that the essential vision underlying the commentarial interpretation is correct: namely, that the twelvefold formula of PS extends over three lives and as such describes the generative structure of *samsāra*, the round of repeated births.

Like Ven. Ñāṇavīra, I take as the sole ultimate authority for interpretation of the Dhamma the Buddha’s discourses as found in the four main Nikāyas and in the older strata of the Khuddaka Nikāya. I share with Ven. Ñāṇavīra the view that these books can be considered the most trustworthy record of the Buddha’s teachings, and hence should be turned to as the final court of appeal for resolving questions about the correct interpretation of the Dhamma. Unlike Ven. Ñāṇavīra, however, I do not hold that all later works, such as the Abhidhamma-piṭaka and the Commentaries, should be rejected point blank as miasmas of error and decay. We must certainly accept the findings of scientific scholarship regarding the dating of the canonical and post-canonical texts, and should recognize that Theravāda doctrine has evolved in several strata through the Abhidhamma, the Commentaries, and the later exegetical works. In my view, however, this does not mean that every text that was composed after the age of the Nikāyas must be regarded with distrust or disdain.

2. FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDES

Before I turn to examine specific points in Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s Note I wish to focus on one discomfiting consequence entailed by his insistence that his view of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is exclusively and

absolutely correct. The three-life interpretation of *paṭicca-samuppāda* has been maintained by the Theravāda tradition virtually from the time that tradition emerged as a distinct school. It goes back long before the time of Buddhaghosa's commentaries and can be found already in near-definitive form in the Vibhaṅga of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka and the Paṭisambhidāmagga of the Sutta-piṭaka, works dating from around the 3rd century BC. Further, this interpretation, in its essential outlines, is by no means peculiar to the Theravāda school. It was also shared, with minor differences in details, by the early rivals of the Theravāda, the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṃghika, which suggests that at least in outline this way of explaining *paṭicca-samuppāda* already preceded the first schisms. The same three-life division can be found in the works of the great Mādhyamika philosopher Nāgārjuna (e.g. in his *Mūla-mādhyamika-kārikā*, chapter 26), and is also held in the present day by the Mahāyāna schools that have inherited the exegetical methodology of ancient Indian Buddhism.

In contrast, Ven. Ñāṇavīra's view of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, as pertaining solely to a single life, appears to be without a precedent in the tenet systems of early Buddhism. Thus, when Ven. Ñāṇavīra holds that he has correctly grasped the Buddha's intention in expounding PS, this implicitly commits him to the thesis that the entire mainstream Buddhist philosophical tradition has utterly misinterpreted this most fundamental Buddhist doctrine, and had already done so within two centuries after the Master's demise. While it is not altogether impossible that this had occurred, it would seem a lapse of an astonishing magnitude on the part of the early Buddhist community.

Of course, the above argument is not in itself compelling, for one might still be prepared to stand behind Ven. Ñāṇavīra's claim no matter how audacious it may be. So let us now turn to the Note itself and examine his views on *paṭicca-samuppāda*. For the present we will pass over his opening salvos against the three-life interpretation. Instead, let us move directly into the sections of the Note in which he reveals his own "more satisfactory approach." We will return to the criticisms later and see if they truly require us to abandon the traditional understanding of the doctrine.

Ven. Ñāṇavīra maintains that *paṭicca-samuppāda*, in its twelve-factored formulation, applies solely and entirely to our existential situation in this present life, without any reference to temporal divisions. It is, in his view, an ever-present existential structure of the unenlightened mind describing the mode of being of the “uninstructed common person” (*assutavā puthujjana*). Ven. Ñāṇavīra insists that this interpretation of PS alone offers us a way to resolve the immediate problem of existence in the present itself: “It is a matter of one’s fundamental attitude to one’s own existence—is there, or is there not, a present problem, or rather, anxiety that can only be resolved in the present?” (§7).

I fully agree with Ven. Ñāṇavīra that our interpretation of *paṭicca-samuppāda* must flow from our “fundamental attitude to (our) own existence.” It is also clear from the Suttas that the Buddha’s motive in teaching PS is to lead us to a present resolution of the existential problem of suffering. Repeatedly in the Suttas we see the Buddha teaching PS in order to lay bare the structure of conditions that underlies the origination and cessation of dukkha. However, in order to understand how *paṭicca-samuppāda* fulfils this function, we should focus on the question: What is the meaning of the dukkha that the Buddha’s Teaching is designed to liberate us from? Ven. Ñāṇavīra contends that this dukkha is the anxiety and stress that pervades our present existence, and hence he interprets all the terms of the standard PS formula in a way that lends support to this contention. But if we read the Suttas on their own terms, in their totality, we would find that Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s understanding of dukkha falls far short of the vision of the first noble truth that the Buddha wishes to impart to us. Of course, dukkha does include “existential anxiety,” and there are several suttas which define the conditions for the arising and removal of such dukkha. An unbiased and complete survey of the Nikāyas, however, would reveal that the problem of dukkha to which the Buddha’s Teaching is addressed is not primarily existential anxiety, nor even the distorted sense of self of which such anxiety may be symptomatic. The primary problem of dukkha with which the Buddha is concerned, in its most comprehensive and fundamental dimensions, is the problem of our bondage to *saṃsāra*—the round of repeated birth, aging, and death. And, as I

following the Dhamma is to gain release from existential anxiety, then the three-life interpretation of PS may seem unsatisfactory and one may turn to Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s version as more adequate. But the task which the Buddha sets before his disciples is of a different nature: namely, to gain liberation from the recurrent cycle of birth, old age, and death, that is, from bondage to *saṃsāra*. Once one accepts this task as one’s own, one will then see that PS must be looked upon as a disclosure of the conditional structure of *saṃsāra*, showing us how our ignorance, craving, and volitional activity keep us chained to the round of existence and drive us from one life to the next.

3. BIRTH, AGING AND DEATH

I now intend to take up for scrutiny what might be regarded as the two main planks of Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation. The two planks to which I am referring are his attempts to explain the relationships between those conditions which, in the traditional interpretation, are held to extend over different lifetimes. These are: (i) the nexus of *bhava*, *jāti*, and *jarāmaraṇa*—becoming (‘being’, in Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s translation), birth, and aging-and-death; and (ii) the nexus of *avijjā*, *saṅkhārā*, and *viññāṇa*—ignorance, formations (‘determinations’), and consciousness. I will show that Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s explanations of both these groups of factors fail to draw support from the source that he himself regards as the supreme authority in interpretation of the Dhamma, namely, the Pāli Suttas. I will also show that, contra Ven. Ñāṇavīra, on both points the Suttas confirm the traditional interpretation, which regards these connections as involving a succession of lives.

Let us first turn to Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s treatment of the former nexus (§10 of his Note):

The fundamental *upādāna* or ‘holding’ is *attavāda*, which is holding a belief in ‘self’. The *puṭhujjana* 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 those of others like him). This is *bhava* or ‘being’. The *puṭhujjana* 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.

Before we go any further, we should point out that Ven. Ñāṇavīra does not cite any suttas to support his understanding of *bhava*, *jāti*, and *jarāmaṇa*, and in fact there are no suttas to be found in the Pāli Canon that explain the above terms in this way. Moreover, on Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation it may not even be quite correct to say ‘*jātipaccayā jarāmaṇam*’. On his view, it seems, one would be obliged to say instead, ‘*bhavapaccayā jāti, bhavapaccayā jarāmaṇam*’. Since he regards the *puthujjana*’s taking himself to be a self as the basis for his notions “my self was born” and “my self will die,” it would follow that ‘being’ would be the condition for both ‘birth’ and ‘aging-and-death’. But that is not what the Buddha himself asserts.

In many suttas dealing with PS the Buddha defines the above terms of the formula, and if we look at these texts we will see that they are starkly different from Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s explanation of them. The definitions are standardized and can be found at DN 22/D II 305; MN 9/M I 49–50; SN 12:2/S II 2–3, etc.:

“And what, monks, 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. So this aging and this death are (together) called aging-and-death.

“And what, monks, is birth? The birth of beings into the various orders of beings, their coming to birth, descent (into a womb), production, manifestation of the aggregates, obtaining the bases for contact—this is called birth.”

The above definitions, with their strings of synonyms and concrete imagery, clearly indicate that ‘birth’ refers to biological birth and ‘aging-and-death’ to biological aging and biological death—not to the *puthujjana*’s notions “I was born; I will age and

die,” or “My self was born; my self ages and dies.” The textual definitions are perfectly straightforward and unambiguous in meaning, and give no hint that the Buddha had some other idea to convey about the significance of these terms.

4. *BHAVA* AND REBIRTH

The definition of *bhava* or becoming (Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s ‘being’) offered in the Suttas dealing expressly with PS is nowhere near as transparent as the former definitions, the reason being that the definition of this term is set against the particular cosmology that underlies the Buddha’s Teaching. Nevertheless, the Suttas provide no basis for Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s claim that *bhava* means the *puṭhujjana*’s taking himself to be a self.

In the suttas on PS, when the Buddha defines *bhava*, he does so merely by enumerating the three types of becoming:

“And what, monks, is becoming? There are these three types of becoming: sense-sphere becoming; fine-material-sphere becoming; immaterial-sphere becoming.”

This definition refers to the three planes of existence in the Buddhist cosmos, and the term ‘*bhava*’ thus would signify concrete individual existence in one or another of these three planes. For illumination as to how *bhava* functions in the PS series, our most helpful resource is the *Bhava-sutta*, a short exchange between the Buddha and the Venerable Ānanda (AN 3:76/A I 223–24):

“It is said, lord, ‘becoming, becoming.’ In what way, lord, is there becoming?”

“If, Ānanda, there were no *kamma* ripening in the sense realm, would sense-sphere becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, Ānanda, *kamma* is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving the moisture; for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered to craving, consciousness becomes grounded in a low realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is the production of re-becoming in the future. It is thus, Ānanda, that there is becoming.

“If, Ānanda, there were no *kamma* ripening in the fine-material realm, would fine-material becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, Ānanda, *kamma* is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving the moisture; for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered to craving, consciousness becomes grounded in a middling realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is the production of re-becoming in the future. It is thus, Ānanda, that there is becoming.

“If, Ānanda, there were no *kamma* ripening in the immaterial realm, would immaterial becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, Ānanda, *kamma* is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving the moisture; for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered to craving, consciousness becomes grounded in a superior realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is the production of re-becoming in the future. It is thus, Ānanda, that there is becoming.”

Clearly, this sutta is offering a succinct statement of the same basic process described more extensively in the usual twelve-factored formula of *paṭicca-samuppāda*: When there is *avijjā* and *taṇhā*, ignorance and craving, then *kamma*—the volitional action of a being—effects the production of a new existence or ‘re-becoming in the future’ (*āyatiṃ punabbhava*) in a realm that corresponds to the qualitative potential of that *kamma*. It is for this reason that the Commentaries interpret *bhava* in the usual PS formula as having two aspects that pertain to two different lives: one aspect called *kammabhava*, ‘kammically active existence’, which refers to the *kamma* with the potential of generating rebirth in one or another of the three realms; the other aspect called *upapattibhava*, ‘rebirth existence’, which refers to existence produced in one or another of the three realms. Although such a distinction is not explicitly drawn in the old Suttas, it seems to be implied by such passages as the one just quoted above.

Ven. Nāṇavīra claims that *jāti* does not mean rebirth (§ 9), and he is correct in so far as the word ‘*jāti*’ does not by itself convey the sense of ‘re-birth’. Nevertheless, within the context of PS (and elsewhere in the Buddha’s Teaching), *jāti* must be understood as

implying rebirth. In so far as *jāti*, “the manifestation of the aggregates,” etc., results from the formation of a new *bhava* “in the future” by the *avijjā*, *taṇhā*, and *kamma* of the preceding existence, any instance of *jāti* is invariably a rebirth of the same continuum of consciousness: the stream of consciousness of the preceding life, “grounded” in a particular realm by reason of its *kamma*, springs up in that realm and comes to growth and full manifestation there.

Contrary to Ven. Ñāṇavīra, throughout the suttas we often find the word ‘*jāti*’ used in conjunction with the terms ‘*saṃsāra*’ and ‘*punabbhava*’ to underscore the fact that rebirth is intended. Take for instance the Buddha’s famous “Hymn of Victory” from the Dhammapada (v. 153):

“I wandered on pointlessly in this cycle
(*saṃsāra*) of many births
Seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth again and again.”

*Anekajātisaṃsāraṃ sandhāvissaṃ anibbisaṃ
Gahakārakaṃ gavesanto dukkhā jāti punappunaṃ.*

Or: “A bhikkhu has abandoned the cycle of births with its re-becoming” (*bhikkhuno ponobhaviko jātisaṃsāro pahīno*; MN 22/M I 139). Or the verse of Udāna 4:9:

“For the monk with a peaceful mind,
When he has cut off craving for becoming,
The wandering on in births is destroyed:
For him there is no re-becoming.”

*Ucchinnabhavataṇhassa santacittassa bhikkhuno
Vikkhīṇo jātisaṃsāro natthi tassa punabbhavo.*

Again, consider the declaration of final knowledge uttered by the arahants: “This is my last birth; now there is no re-becoming” (*ayam antimā jāti, natthi dāni punabbhavo*; MN 26/M I 167, 173).

The above passages will show us, moreover, that the wedge that Ven. Ñāṇavīra tries to drive between *jāti* and *punabbhavā-bhinibbatti* (in § 10) is a spurious one. While in some passages the two are set in a conditional relationship to one another (the latter

being a condition for the former—see S II 65), they are so closely connected that their meanings almost overlap. In fact, the word ‘*abhinibbatti*’ is used as one of the synonyms of *jāti* in the standard definition of the latter. Apparently, when *abhinibbatti* is included in *jāti* we should understand *jāti* as comprising both conception and physical birth, while when they are differentiated, *abhinibbatti* means conception and *jāti* is restricted to full emergence from the womb.

Now that we have adduced textual definitions of the terms ‘aging and death’, ‘birth’, and ‘becoming’, let us see how they link up in the formula of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, as explained by the Buddha himself. The text which elucidates this matter most succinctly is the Mahānidāna-sutta (DN 15/D II 57–58). To bring out the meaning I quote the relevant passage slightly simplified, without the catechistic format, and with the sequence of conditions stated in direct order rather than in reverse order:

“If there were absolutely no clinging of any kind—no clinging to sense pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, clinging to a doctrine of self—then, in the complete absence of clinging, becoming would not be discerned: thus clinging is the condition for becoming.

“If there were absolutely no becoming of any kind—no sense-sphere becoming, fine-material becoming, immaterial becoming—then, in the complete absence of becoming, birth would not be discerned: thus becoming is the condition for birth.

“If there were absolutely no birth of any kind—that is, of gods into the state of gods, of celestials into the state of celestials, of spirits, demons, humans, animals, birds, and reptiles each into their own state—then, in the complete absence of birth, aging and death would not be discerned: thus birth is the condition for aging and death.”

Ven. Ñāṇavīra would read this passage to mean: Because the *puthujjana* clings to a belief in self, he goes on being a self (of one or another of the three types); and because he assumes that he is such a self, he thinks “my self was born” and “my self will grow old and die” (see Note, § 10). If, however, we read this passage in

the light of the definitions of birth, aging, and death found in the Suttas, and in the light of the Bhava-sutta (AN 3:76), a very different meaning would emerge, which might be formulated thus: Because of clinging of any kind (not only clinging to a doctrine of self), one engages in actions that have the potential to ripen in one or another of the three realms of becoming. These actions dispose consciousness towards these realms. At death, if clinging persists, the predominant *kamma* steers consciousness towards the appropriate realm, i.e. it grounds the “seed” of consciousness in that realm, and thereby generates a new existence. This “production of re-becoming” comes to fulfillment in birth—that is, birth into one of the numerous classes of beings distributed among the three realms of becoming—and once birth occurs, it is inevitably followed by aging and death.

5. THREE TYPES OF *SAṆKHĀRĀ*

Now let us turn to the other major “plank” in Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s *Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda*, his treatment of the interconnections between *avijjā*, *saṅkhārā*, and *viññāṇa* (§§5–6, 11–16). In §5 Ven. Ñāṇavīra cites the threefold enumeration of *saṅkhārā* commonly employed by the Suttas when they analyze the individual factors of the PS formula:

“And what, monks, are the *saṅkhārā*? There are these three *saṅkhārā*: body-*saṅkhāra*, speech-*saṅkhāra*, mind-*saṅkhāra*. These are called the *saṅkhārā*.”

I will leave the word ‘*saṅkhārā*’ untranslated here in order not to prejudice the discussion. Immediately after citing this passage, in order to supply definitions of the three types of *saṅkhārā*, Ven. Ñāṇavīra quotes the Cūḷavedalla-sutta (MN 44/M I 301). This sutta—a discussion between the lay devotee Visākha and his former wife, the arahant bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā—defines three types of *saṅkhārā* bearing exactly the same names as those mentioned in the texts on *paṭicca-samuppāda*:

“And which, lady, is body-*saṅkhāra*, which is speech-*saṅkhāra*, which is mind-*saṅkhāra*?”

“The in-&-out breaths are body-*saṅkhāra*, thinking-&-pondering are speech-*saṅkhāra*, perception and feeling are mind-*saṅkhāra*.”

Having juxtaposed the two quotations, Ven. Ñāṇavīra then criticizes the traditional interpretation for maintaining that *saṅkhāra* in the PS formula must always be understood as *cetanā* or volition. To make this claim, he asserts, is to wind up holding that the in-&-out breaths, thinking-&-pondering, and perception and feeling, are respectively bodily, verbal, and mental volition—a position that is clearly untenable.

Now both quotations cited above, taken in isolation, are perfectly legitimate. This, however, does not establish that the latter quotation is providing a definition of the same terms intended by the former quotation. While the two triads are expressed in Pāli by the same three compounds—*kāyasaṅkhāra*, *vacīsaṅkhāra*, *cittasaṅkhāra*—Ven. Ñāṇavīra overlooks a fact of prime importance for determining their meaning: namely, that in the Suttas the contexts in which the two triads appear are always kept rigorously separate. The definition of the three *saṅkhāra* found in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, and elsewhere in the Canon (at S IV 293), does not occur in the context of PS nor in a context that even touches on PS. This particular definition of the three types of *saṅkhāra*—*kāyasaṅkhāra*, *vacīsaṅkhāra*, *cittasaṅkhāra*—always occurs in the course of a discussion on the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*). It is intended to prepare the way for an explanation of the order in which the three types of *saṅkhāra* cease when a monk enters the attainment of cessation.

But that is not all. Not only are the three *saṅkhāra* of the Cūḷavedalla-sutta always rigorously excluded from discussions of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, but among all the suttas in which the Buddha exemplifies the expressions ‘*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*’ (“with ignorance as condition, formations”) and ‘*saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇam*’ (“with formations as condition, consciousness”), there is not a single text in which he explains *saṅkhāra* in a way that has

any relevance to the three kinds of *saṅkhārā* of the Cūḷavedalla Sutta. The two types of discussions of *saṅkhārā*—the threefold enumeration of the Cūḷavedalla-sutta and the threefold enumeration in the PS context—though employing the same terms, are assigned to completely separate compartments. Nowhere in the Sutta-piṭaka does the one triad extend beyond its own context and bear any explicit relationship to the other context. If the Buddha had intended the *saṅkhārā* that are conditioned by ignorance and that condition consciousness to signify the in-&-out breaths, thinking-&-pondering, and perception and feeling, then one could reasonably expect to find at least one sutta on *paṭicca-samuppāda* where he exemplifies *saṅkhārā* by way of the Cūḷavedalla triad. But not a single sutta of such a nature can be found anywhere in the entire Pāli Canon.

Lack of textual corroboration is only one problem with Ven. Ñāṇavīra's proposal to read the Cūḷavedalla triad of *saṅkhārā* into the interpretation of the PS formula. Another objection, even more formidable, can be brought against this suggestion, namely, that it leads to incoherence. For the *saṅkhārā* of the PS formula must be dependent upon ignorance as their necessary condition and must cease with the cessation of ignorance, but the three *saṅkhārā* of the Cūḷavedalla-sutta do not meet this requirement. These *saṅkhārā* are not necessarily dependent upon ignorance and do not cease with the ceasing of ignorance. Though the arahant has completely eradicated ignorance, he continues to breathe in and out (except when in the fourth *jhāna* and higher attainments), to think and ponder (except when in the second and higher *jhānas*), and to perceive and feel (except when in the cessation of perception and feeling). But what does cease for the arahant with the cessation of ignorance are volitional formations—*saṅkhārā* understood as *sañcetanā*. Whereas the non-arahant's bodily, verbal, and mental activities are constructive forces conditioned by ignorance that sustain the round of rebirths, the arahant's activities are kammically extinct. They no longer sustain the continuation of the round, no longer project consciousness into any new mode of becoming.

In analyzing the teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, the texts use the two terms *cittasaṅkhārā* and *manosaṅkhārā* as though they were

interchangeable. This is not typical of the Suttas, which usually reserve *citta* and *mano* for separate contexts. When the texts define *saṅkhārā* in the PS formula, they do so by enumerating the three types of *saṅkhārā*: *kāyasaṅkhāra*, *vacīsaṅkhāra*, *cittasaṅkhāra*; yet they do not take the further step of defining these terms as such. Then, when they exemplify the function of *saṅkhārā* in PS, they employ the triad of *kāyasaṅkhāra*, *vacīsaṅkhāra*, *manosaṅkhāra*. The Pāli Commentaries identify the two triads, taking them as alternative expressions for the same thing; both are understood to refer to bodily volition, verbal volition, and mental volition (*kāyasañcetanā*, *vacīsañcetanā*, *manosañcetanā*). Ven. Ñāṇavīra takes issue with this identification, holding that the two triads must be distinguished. He admits that the second triad is to be identified with *cetanā*, but he insists that the terms used in the first triad have to be understood by way of the explanation given in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta.

This assertion, as we have seen, does not receive confirmation from the Suttas, the original source on which the Pāli Commentaries base their identification of the two triads is the Vibhaṅga of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka. In that work, in the Suttanta-bhājanīya (Sutta Analysis) section of its Paṭicca-samuppāda-vibhaṅga (Vibh 135), we read:

What are the *saṅkhārā* that are conditioned by ignorance? Meritorious *saṅkhāra*, demeritorious *saṅkhāra*, imperturbable *saṅkhāra*; body-*saṅkhāra*, speech-*saṅkhāra*, mind-*saṅkhāra*....

Therein, bodily volition is body-*saṅkhāra*; verbal volition is speech-*saṅkhāra*, mental volition is mind-*saṅkhāra* (*cittasaṅkhāra*). These are called the *saṅkhārā* conditioned by ignorance.

Ven. Ñāṇavīra may refuse to acknowledge the authority of the Vibhaṅga and insist that he will not relinquish his view unless a sutta can be brought forward confirming this definition. This attitude, however, would appear to be an unreasonable one. Even though the more elaborate conceptions of Abhidhamma thought may be products of a later age than the Suttas, the Suttanta Bhājanīya sections of the Vibhaṅga can make a cogent claim to antiquity. Evidence suggests that this portion of the Vibhaṅga

is extremely old, dating from perhaps the third century BC, and thus represents the understanding of the Buddhist community from a period not long after the Buddha’s Parinibbāna. It would even be plausible to maintain that this body of material was originally an old commentary on basic Suttanta terminology going back to the very first generation of the Buddha’s disciples; it is not specifically Abhidhammic in character and may have been absorbed into the Abhidhamma-piṭaka owing to the lack of any other suitable repository for it.

In any case, in the absence of direct clarification of the issue in the Suttas themselves, the Vibhaṅga becomes the most ancient source to which we can turn for help in clarifying PS terminology. There we find the triad of *kāyasāṅkhāra*, *vacīsāṅkhāra*, and *cittasāṅkhāra* explained in a way that confirms the exclusive identification of the *saṅkhārā* factor in the PS formula with *cetanā*. This lends weight to the view that this second link should be taken as *kamma* and its relation to *viññāṇa* as that of the kammic cause from the preceding existence.

6. THE MEANING OF ‘SĀṆKHĀRĀ’

I intend to examine very briefly all the suttas that help shed light on the *saṅkhārā* factor in PS formulation, as found in the Nidāna-saṃyutta, the Buddha’s collected short discourses on dependent arising. But first a few words should be said about Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s general understanding of the word ‘*saṅkhārā*’. Ven. Ñāṇavīra maintains that this word has a univocal meaning relevant to all the contexts in which it occurs. The meaning he assigns to it is that of “something upon which something else depends” (§ 11); hence his rendering ‘determinations’. The Suttas themselves do not offer a single etymological derivation of the word with unrestricted application. The well-known derivation—*saṅkhataṃ abhisāṅkharontī ti tasmā saṅkhārā ti vuccanti* (in Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s terminology, “They determine the determined, therefore they are called determinations”)—applies specifically to *saṅkhārā* as the fourth of the five aggregates, not to *saṅkhārā* in all usages. In this context they obviously signify *cetanā*, volition, understood as a constructive force, and thus an active derivation is appropriate.

The Pāli Commentaries offer two derivations of the word ‘*saṅkhārā*’. One is active (as given above), the other passive (*saṅkharīyantī ti saṅkhārā*). Thus the Commentaries hold that the word can signify either things that actively produce other things, or things that are produced by other things. Which meaning is relevant depends on the context. In the two contexts of *paṭicca-samuppāda* and the fourth aggregate, the active sense is relevant, as in both cases the *saṅkhārā* are volitions. But in such statements as ‘*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*’, etc., the Commentaries explain that *saṅkhārā* should be understood as *saṅkhata-saṅkhārā*, that is, as conditioned things.

According to the Majjhima-nikāya Commentary, the passive sense also pertains to two of the three *saṅkhārā* of the Cūḷavedalla-sutta: (i) the in-&-out breaths are body-*saṅkhāra* because they are determined by the body, made by the body, produced by the body; (iii) perception and feeling are mind-*saṅkhāra* because they are determined by the mind, made by the mind, produced by the mind. In contrast, (ii) thinking-&-pondering, as speech-*saṅkhāra*, play an active role: they are determinants of speech.

The commentarial recognition of a twofold derivation of the term ‘*saṅkhārā*’ seems to be confirmed by the texts. For instance, the Cūḷavedalla-sutta explains:

“In-&-out breaths, friend Visākha, are bodily, these things are dependent upon the body; that is why the in-&-out breaths are the body-*saṅkhāra*.... Perception and feeling are mental, these things are dependent upon the mind; that is why perception and feeling are mind-*saṅkhāra*.”

In contrast, Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s insistence on assigning an exclusively active sense to *saṅkhārā* compels him to apply the old Procrustean bed of exegesis to several passages that do not easily submit to his interpretation. For example, in his separate note on *Saṅkhāra*, he attempts to explain how the reference to *saṅkhārā* in the Mahāsudassana Suttanta (DN 17/D II 169ff.) can be interpreted in line with his view of *saṅkhārā* as active determinations. In this sutta the Buddha, after describing all the rich endowments and possessions of King Mahāsudassana, a king of the distant past, concludes with a homily on impermanence: “See, Ānanda,

how all those *saṅkhārā* have passed, ceased, altered. So impermanent, Ānanda, are *saṅkhārā* ... this is enough for weariness with all *saṅkhārā*, enough for dispassion, enough for release.” Ven. Ñāṇavīra discerns a cryptic message concealed in this passage thus: “Those things [the possessions, etc.] were *saṅkhārā*; they were things on which King Mahāsudassana depended for his very identity; they determined his person as ‘King Mahāsudassana’, and with their cessation the thought ‘I am King Mahāsudassana’ came to an end.” There is nothing in the sutta itself to support this interpretation, and the text (as well as others of a similar character) reads so much more naturally if we take *saṅkhārā* simply to mean the conditioned things of the world. Moreover, other suttas can be found which include the same final exhortation on dispassion, yet which provide absolutely no ground for seeing the term *saṅkhārā* there as determinants of anyone’s personal identity (see e.g. the Anamatagga-saṃyutta, SN 15/S II 178ff.).

7. SAṅKHĀRĀ IN THE PS FORMULA

Let us now turn directly to the Nidāna-saṃyutta to see how the suttas on *paṭicca-samuppāda* treat the term ‘*saṅkhārā*’ in relation to *avijjā* and *viññāṇa*. As the suttas in this collection that expand upon the stock formula are conveniently few in number, we can take a brief look at each in turn. Of these texts, two establish the two major paradigms for the interpretation of *saṅkhārā*, namely, that formulated in terms of the three doors of volitional action and that formulated in terms of three kammically graded types of volition. Besides these, three additional texts can be found that shed light on the problem. I should stress at once that the Nidāna-saṃyutta incorporates virtually all the shorter discourses of the Buddha dealing with *paṭicca-samuppāda*, and hence should be taken as definitive in its presentation of the meaning and function of the constituent items in the formula.

We will begin with the Bhūmija Sutta, the paradigmatic text for distinguishing *saṅkhārā* by way of the doors of action:

“When there is the body, Ānanda, because of bodily volition there arises internally pleasure and pain. When there is speech, because of verbal volition there arises internally pleasure and pain. When there is the mind, because of mental volition there arises internally pleasure and pain.

“With ignorance as condition, either by oneself, Ānanda, one forms that body-*saṅkhāra* (speech-*saṅkhāra*, mind-*saṅkhāra*) on account of which that pleasure and pain arises internally; or because of others one forms that body-*saṅkhāra* (speech-*saṅkhāra*, mind-*saṅkhāra*) on account of which that pleasure and pain arises internally...

“Ignorance is included among these things. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance that body does not exist (that speech does not exist, that mind does not exist) on account of which that pleasure and pain arises internally.”

Here the three *saṅkhārā* that are said to be conditioned by ignorance are explicitly identified with the three types of volition. The sutta employs the term ‘*manosāṅkhāra*’ rather than ‘*cittasaṅkhāra*’, but in the absence of any other exemplification of *cittasaṅkhāra* in the PS context, we can take the terms as interchangeable; though such usage is not common, it is not totally foreign to the Nikāyas and other instances can be cited of the synonymous use of *citta* and *mano*.

According to the commentary, this volition is to be understood as *kamma*, and the pleasure and pain that arise internally as *vipākavedanā*, as feelings resulting from that *kamma*. A temporal separation between the volition and the resulting pleasure and pain may not be explicitly mentioned in the text, but if we read the above passage against the broader background of the Suttas, we can readily infer that an implicit temporal gap is intended. One sutta in the Aṅguttara-nikāya, on the correlations between *kamma* and its fruit, helps us to understand the process by which *saṅkhārā* function as conditions for the arising of pleasant and painful feeling:

Here, monks, someone forms an afflictive body-*saṅkhāra*, speech-*saṅkhāra*, mind-*saṅkhāra*. Having done so, he is reborn

into an afflictive world. When he is reborn there afflictive contacts contact him, and he experiences feelings that are extremely painful.... Someone forms a non-afflictive body-*saṅkhāra*, (etc.) ... he is reborn into a non-afflictive world.... Non-afflictive contacts contact him, and he experiences feelings that are extremely pleasant.... Someone forms both an afflictive and a non-afflictive body-*saṅkhāra*, (etc.) ... he is reborn into a world that is both afflictive and non-afflictive. Afflictive and non-afflictive contacts contact him, and he experiences feelings that are both painful and pleasant.”

Here the term used is again ‘*manosaṅkhāra*’, and it is clear that the three *saṅkhārā* are primarily of interest because they determine a person’s plane of rebirth and the quality of affective experience prevailing in his life. The sutta is not manifestly concerned with PS, but if we examine the sequence of events being described we would find, embedded in it, a segment of the standard PS formula. These events can be represented thus: *saṅkhārā* > rebirth into a world > contact > feeling. From the Mahānidāna-sutta (DN 15/D II 63) we know that rebirth into any world involves the co-arising of consciousness and name-and-form, and from the latter we can elicit the six sense bases as the condition for contact. This suffices to establish that the above text and the PS formula are defining the same situation, and here it is evident that the *saṅkhārā* serve as condition for the arising of pleasure and pain across the gap of lifetimes.

The last paragraph of the above quotation from the Bhūmija-sutta expresses obliquely the converse side of the relationship. Here, when the Buddha states that with the cessation of ignorance, body, speech, and mind no longer serve as conditions for pleasure and pain to arise internally, what is meant is that these doors of action cease to be instruments for generating *saṅkhārā*, actions with the power to produce re-becoming. When ignorance is eliminated, volition no longer functions as *saṅkhārā*, as a constructive power that builds up new edifices of personal existence in future lives. The actions of the arahant, whether performed by body, speech, or mind, are *khīṇabīja*, “with seed destroyed” (Ratana-sutta, Sn 235); they are incapable of ripening

in the future, and hence no longer serve as conditions for pleasure and pain to arise.

The second major paradigm for understanding the *saṅkhārā* factor in PS, and its relations to *avijjā* and *viññāṇa*, grades the *saṅkhārā* according to their ethical quality, which in turn indicates the type of rebirth they produce. This paradigm is delineated in the following passage:

“Bhikkhus, if a person immersed in ignorance forms a meritorious *saṅkhāra*, consciousness goes on towards merit. If he forms a demeritorious *saṅkhāra*, consciousness goes on towards demerit. If he forms an imperturbable *saṅkhāra*, consciousness goes on towards the imperturbable.”

Once again it is obvious that we must understand *saṅkhārā* as volition (*cetanā*). And once again it is not so obvious that the relationship between *saṅkhārā* and consciousness may be a causal one operating across different lives. The commentary to the sutta explains that the phrase “consciousness goes on towards merit” can be understood in two complementary ways: (i) the kammically active consciousness associated with the volition “goes on towards” meritorious *kamma*, i.e. it accumulates merit; and (ii) the consciousness resulting from the merit “goes on towards” the result of merit, i.e. it reaps the fruits of that merit. The same principle of interpretation applies to the other two cases—the demeritorious and the imperturbable. Thus the point of the passage, as understood from the traditional perspective, may be paraphrased thus: A meritorious volition infuses consciousness with a meritorious quality and thereby steers consciousness towards rebirth in a realm resulting from merit; a demeritorious volition infuses consciousness with a demeritorious quality and thereby steers consciousness towards rebirth in a realm resulting from demerit; an imperturbable volition infuses consciousness with an imperturbable quality (*āneñja*) and thereby steers consciousness towards rebirth in an imperturbable realm, i.e. a realm corresponding to the fourth *jhāna* or the formless meditative attainments.

Ven. Ñāṇavīra himself rejects this interpretation of the passage. He writes (§ 15):

... Nothing in the Sutta suggests that *puññūpagaviññāṇa* is anything other than the meritorious consciousness of one who is determining or intending merit. (When merit is intended by an individual he is conscious of his world as ‘world-for-doing-merit-in’, and consciousness has thus ‘arrived at merit’.)

My reading of the passage disagrees with that of Ven. Ñāṇavīra. Even if we disregard the commentarial explanation sketched above and focus solely on the text, we would find that the structure of the sutta itself suggests that a *kamma-vipāka* relationship is intended by the link between *saṅkhārā* and *viññāṇa*. For the sutta continues: When a bhikkhu has abandoned ignorance and aroused knowledge, he does not form any of the three types of *saṅkhārā*. Thereby he reaches arahantship, and when his body breaks up with the ending of his life, he attains Parinibbāna. Thus “all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here, and bodily elements only will remain.” Hence, in its structure, the sutta establishes a contrast between the ignorant worldling and the arahant. The worldling, by fashioning meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable volitions, projects his consciousness into a new existence, setting in motion once again the entire cycle of birth and death. The arahant cuts off ignorance and stops forming *saṅkhārā*, thus ending the grounding of consciousness and the consequent renewal of the cycle.

This conclusion can draw further support from a study of how the word ‘*upaga*’ is used in the Suttas. Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s rendering “has arrived at” is actually an error: the word functions not as a past participle (that would be *upagata*) but as a suffix signifying present action. Hence I render it “goes on towards.” In contexts similar to the one cited above (though perhaps not in all contexts) ‘*upaga*’ most commonly denotes movement towards the fruition of one’s past *kamma*—movement fulfilled by the process of rebirth. Consider the stock passage on the exercise of the divine eye:

“With the divine eye, which is purified and superhuman, he sees beings passing away and being reborn, inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and

he understands how beings go on in accordance with their *kamma*.”

Then consider the Āneñjasappāya-sutta, on a bhikkhu who practises the “imperturbable meditations” without reaching arahantship: “With the breakup of the body, after death, it is possible that his consciousness, evolving on, may go on towards the imperturbable.” Note that the last expression (*viññāṇaṃ āneñjūpaṇaṃ*), in the Pāli, is identical with the expression found in the Nidāna-saṃyutta sutta cited above, and here, clearly, a transition from one life to another is involved.

We thus see that in the two main models for the *saṅkhārā* factor of PS presented by the Nidāna-saṃyutta, the term signifies volitional activity, and its bearing on consciousness and feeling is that of kammic cause for a fruit generally maturing in a subsequent life. We should further stress that these two models are neither mutually exclusive nor do they concern different material. Rather, they structure the same material—kammically potent volitions—along different lines, depending on the perspective adopted, whether the perspective of door of action or that of ethical quality.

Besides these two major models, the Nidāna-saṃyutta contains two short suttas that help illuminate the role of *saṅkhārā* in the PS formula. We may begin with the following:

“Bhikkhus, if there is lust, delight, craving for solid food (or any of the other three types of nutriment), consciousness becomes grounded in that and comes to growth. When consciousness is grounded and comes to growth, there is a descent of name-and-form. When there is a descent of name-and-form, there is the growth of *saṅkhārā*. When there is the growth of *saṅkhārā*, there is the production of re-becoming in the future. When there is the production of re-becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging and death.”

Here we can see that *saṅkhārā* are responsible for bringing about “re-becoming in the future,” that is, for generating rebirth. The structure of the sutta is similar to that of the Bhava-sutta quoted above (AN 3:76), but here three existences are implied. The first is the existence in which there is craving for food. This

craving, accompanied by ignorance, grounds consciousness in its attachment to nutriment. Consciousness—here the kammically active consciousness—is the seed arisen in the old existence that sprouts forth as a new existence, causing a “descent” of name-and-form into the womb. Within that second existence the new being, on reaching maturity, engages in volitional activity, which brings on “the growth of *saṅkhārā*.” These *saṅkhārā* in turn, enveloped by ignorance and craving, initiate the production of still another existence, the third of the series. This existence (like all others) commences with birth and terminates in aging and death.

Next, let us look at one short sutta in the Nidāna-saṃyutta which explicitly mentions neither *avijjā* nor *saṅkhārā* but refers to them obliquely:

“What one wills, and what one plans, and what lies latent within—this is a support for the continuance of consciousness. When there is a support, there is a grounding of consciousness. When consciousness is grounded and comes to growth, there is the production of re-becoming in the future. When there is the production of re-becoming in the future, future birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair arise. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.”

In this sutta, *saṅkhārā* are referred to elliptically by the expressions ‘*yaṃ ceteti*’, “what one wills,” and ‘*yaṃ pakappeti*’, “what one plans” (‘*pakappeti*’ is a rare term, apparently synonymous with ‘*ceteti*’). The expression ‘*yaṃ anuseti*’, “what lies latent within,” points to the *anusaya*, the latent tendencies, which other texts tell us include the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjānusaya*) and the latent tendency of lust or craving (*rāgānusaya*). Thus the sutta is stating that when one forms volitions on the basis of ignorance and craving, these volitions become a support which grounds consciousness and establishes it in a new existence. Once consciousness becomes so established, it sets in motion the entire production of the new existence, beginning with birth and ending with death, accompanied by all its attendant suffering.

The text which immediately follows the afore mentioned sutta in the Nidāna-saṃyutta (SN 12:39), begins identically as far as

“and comes to growth,” then it continues with “there is a descent of name-and-form” and the rest of the standard series. This shows that in the PS context “the descent of name-and-form” (*nāmarūpassa avakkanti*) is effectively synonymous with “the production of re-becoming in the future” (*āyatiṃ punabbhavābhiniḅbatti*). Both signify the unfolding of the rebirth process once consciousness has gained a foothold in the new existence.

The above analysis should be sufficient to establish with reasonable certainty that the term ‘*saṅkhārā*’ in the PS formula denotes nothing other than volition (*cetanā*), and that volition enters into the formula because it is the factor primarily responsible for “grounding” consciousness in the round of repeated becoming and for driving it into a new form of existence in the future. When this much is recognized, it becomes unnecessary for me to say anything about the continuation of Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s Note on PS from § 18 to the end. This convoluted discussion rests upon Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s assumption that the term ‘*saṅkhārā*’ in the PS formula comprises all the varieties of *saṅkhārā* spoken of in the Suttas, that is, all things that other things depend on. By adopting this thesis Ven. Ñāṇavīra finds himself obliged to explain how such things as the in-&-out breaths, etc., can be said to be conditioned by ignorance and to be conditions for consciousness. The explanation he devises may be ingenious, but as it receives no confirmation from the Suttas themselves, we can conclude that his account does not correctly represent the Buddha’s intention in expounding the teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda*.

At this point we can pull together the main threads of our discussion. We have seen that the alternative, “more satisfactory approach” to *paṭicca-samuppāda* that Ven. Ñāṇavīra proposes rests on two planks: one is his interpretation of the nexus of *bhava*, *jāti*, and *jarāmaraṇa*, the other his interpretation of the nexus of *avijjā*, *saṅkhārā*, and *viññāṇa*. The first hinges on ascribing to all three terms meanings that cannot be substantiated by the texts. The second involves a merging of two contexts that the texts rigorously keep separate, namely, the PS context and the definition of the three *saṅkhārā* stated in connection with the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling (found in the Cūḷavedalla-sutta). This error leads Ven. Ñāṇavīra to assign to the term

‘*saṅkhārā*’ in the PS context a much wider meaning than the texts allow. It also induces him to overlook the various passages from the Suttas that clearly show that *saṅkhārā* in the PS formula must always be understood as volitional activities, considered principally by way of their role in projecting consciousness into a new existence in the future.

To round off this portion of my critique, I would like to take a quick look at a short sutta in the Nidāna-saṃyutta—a terse and syntactically tricky text—that confirms the three-life interpretation of PS almost as explicitly as one might wish. Our text—the Bālapaṇḍita-sutta (SN 12:19/S II 23–24)—opens thus:

“Bhikkhus, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has thereby been obtained. Hence 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 of them—the fool experiences pleasure and pain.”

Exactly the same thing is said regarding the wise man. The Buddha then asks the monks to state the difference between the two, and when the monks defer, the Master continues:

“For the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has been obtained. But for the fool that ignorance has not been abandoned and that craving has not been eliminated. Why not? Because the fool has not lived the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering. Therefore, with the breakup of the body, the fool is one who goes on to (another) body. Being one who goes onto (another) body, he is not freed from birth, from aging and death, not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.”

The wise man, in contrast, having lived the holy life to the full, has abandoned ignorance and eliminated craving. Thus with the breakup of the body, he is not one who goes on to another body, and thus he is freed from birth, aging, death, etc.; he is freed from all kinds of suffering.

Having been included in the Nidāna-saṃyutta, this sutta must be an exemplification of PS; otherwise it would have no place in that collection. And we can detect, with minor variants and elisions, the main factors of the classical formula. Yet not only are three lifetimes explicitly depicted, but we also find two other basic exegetical tools of the Commentaries already well adumbrated: the three links (*tisandhi*) and the four groups (*catusaṅkhepa*). The first group—the causal factors of the past life—are the ignorance and craving that brought both the fool and the wise man into the present existence; though *saṅkhārā* are not mentioned, they are implied by the mention of ignorance. The first link—that between past causes and present results—connects past ignorance and craving with “this body.” This, obviously, is a conscious body (*saviññāṇaka kāya*), implying *viññāṇa*. The text mentions the remaining factors of the present resultant group: *nāmarūpa*, *saḷāyatana*, *phassa*, *vedanā*. Then, in the case of the fool, a link takes place between the present resultant group—epitomized by the experience of pleasure and pain—and the present causal group productive of a future life. This group is represented by the present *avijjā* and *taṇhā* that the fool has not discarded. We also know, despite the elision, that *taṇhā* will lead to *upādāna* and a fresh surge of volitional activity motivated by clinging (the *kammabhava* of the Commentaries).

Because of his *avijjā* and *taṇhā* the fool “goes on to another body” (*kāyūpago hoti*)—note that here we meet once again the word *upaga* which I discussed above (§ 15), again in connection with the rebirth process. The “going on to (another) body” can be seen as loosely corresponding to *punabbhavābhiniḅbatti*, which is followed by birth, aging, and death, etc. These last factors are the fourth group, future effects, linked to the third group, the present-life causes. Thus in this short sutta, which fills out the bare-bones standard formula with some strips of flesh, however lean, we can discern the exegetical tools of the Commentaries already starting to take shape.

8. IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION

Now we can return to the opening sections of Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s *Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda* and examine his criticisms of the traditional interpretation.

In § 3 Ven. Ñāṇavīra argues against the commentarial view that *vedanā* in the standard PS formula must be restricted to *kammavipāka*. For proof to the contrary he appeals to the *Sīvaka-sutta* (SN 36:21/S IV 230–31), in which the Buddha mentions eight causes of bodily pain, of which only the last is *kammavipāka*. On the traditional interpretation, Ven. Ñāṇavīra says, this would limit the application of *paṭicca-samuppāda* to certain bodily feelings but would exclude other types of feeling. Such a view, he holds, is contradicted by the Buddha’s unrestricted declaration that pleasure and pain are dependently arisen (*paṭicca-samuppannaṃ kho āvuso sukhadukkhaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā*; S II 38).

This objection in no way overturns the traditional view of dependent arising. It should first be pointed out that the notion of *paṭicca-samuppāda* has a twofold significance, as Ven. Ñāṇavīra himself recognizes in his Note (§ 18). The notion refers both to a structural principle, i.e. the principle that things arise in dependence on conditions, and it refers to various exemplifications of that structural principle, the most common being the twelvefold formula. Once we call attention to this distinction, the traditional interpretation is easily vindicated: All feelings are dependently arisen in so far as they arise from conditions, principally from contact along with such conditions as sense faculty, object, consciousness, etc. This, however, does not require that all feelings be included in the *vedanā* factor of the standard PS formula. Without violating the structural principle that all feeling is dependently arisen, the Commentaries can consistently confine this factor to the feelings that result from previous *kamma*.

While recognizing that the Pāli Commentaries do restrict *vedanā* in the standard PS formula to *vipākavedanā*, we might suggest another line of interpretation different from the commentarial one, a line which is less narrow yet still respects the view that the PS formula describes a process extending over successive lives. On this view, rather than insist that the *vedanā* link

be understood literally and exclusively as specific resultant feelings born of specific past *kamma*, we might instead hold that the *vedanā* link should be understood as the result of past *kamma* only in the more general sense that the capacity for experiencing feeling is a consequence of obtaining a sentient organism through the force of past *kamma*. That is, it is past *kamma*, accompanied by ignorance and craving, that brought into being the present sentient organism equipped with its six sense bases through which feeling is experienced. If this view is adopted, we can hold that the capacity for experiencing feeling—the obtaining of a psycho-physical organism (*nāmarūpa*) with its six sense bases (*salāyatana*)—is the product of past *kamma*, but we need not hold that every feeling comprised in the *vedanā* link is the fruit of a particular past *kamma*. The predominant feeling-tone of a given existence will be a direct result of specific *kamma*, but it would not necessarily follow that every passively experienced feeling is actual *vipāka*. This would allow us to include all feeling within the standard PS formula without deviating from the governing principle of the traditional interpretation that the five links, from consciousness through feeling, are fruits of past *kamma*. Although the Commentaries do take the hard line that feeling in the PS formula is *kammavipāka* in the strict sense, this “softer” interpretation is in no way contradicted by the Suttas. Both approaches, however, concur in holding that the five above-mentioned factors in any given life result from the ignorance, craving, and volitional activity of the preceding life.

In the next section (§ 4) Ven. Ñāṇavīra warns us that “there is a more serious difficulty regarding feeling” posed by the traditional interpretation. He refers to a sutta (AN 3:61/A I 176) in which, he says, three types of feeling—*somanassa* (joy), *domanassa* (sadness), and *upekkhā* (equanimity)—“are included in *vedanā*, in the specific context of the PS formulation.” These three feelings, he continues, necessarily involve *cetanā*, intention or volition, as intrinsic to their structure, and therefore the Commentary must either exclude them from *vedanā* in the PS formulation or else must regard them as *vipāka*. Both horns of this dilemma, Ven. Ñāṇavīra contends, are untenable: the former, because it contradicts the sutta (which, he says, includes them under *vedanā* in the

PS context); the latter, because reflection establishes that these feelings involve *cetanā* and thus cannot be *vipāka*.

The Pāli Commentaries, which adopt the Abhidhamma classification of feeling, hold that *somanassa*, *domanassa*, and *upekkhā*—in the present context—are kammically active rather than resultant feelings. This would exclude them from the *vedanā* factor of the PS formulation, which Ven. Nāṇavīra claims contradicts the sutta under discussion. But if we turn to the sutta itself, as Ven. Nāṇavīra himself urges, we will find that the section dealing with these three types of feeling does not have any discoverable connection with *paṭicca-samuppāda*, and it is perplexing why Ven. Nāṇavīra should assert that it does. *Paṭicca-samuppāda* is introduced later in the sutta, but the section where these three types of feeling are mentioned is not related to any formulation of *paṭicca-samuppāda* at all. The entire passage reads as follows:

“These eighteen mental examinations, monks, are the Dhamma taught by me ... not to be denied by wise recluses and brahmins.’ Such has been said. And with reference to what was this said? Having seen a form with the eye, one examines a form that is a basis for joy, one examines a form that is a basis for sadness, one examines a form that is a basis for equanimity. (The same is repeated for the other five senses.) It was with reference to this that it was said: ‘These eighteen mental examinations, monks, are the Dhamma taught by me ... not to be denied by wise recluses and brahmins.’”

And that is it. Thus “the more serious difficulty regarding feeling” that Ven. Nāṇavīra sees in the commentarial interpretation turns out to be no difficulty at all, but only his own strangely careless misreading of the passage.

In the same paragraph Ven. Nāṇavīra derides the commentarial notion that *nāmarūpa* in the PS formulation is *vipāka*. He points out that *nāma* includes *cetanā*, volition or intention, and this leads the Commentary to speak of *vipākacetanā*: “But the Buddha has said (AN 6:63/A III 415) that *kamma* is *cetanā* (action is intention), and the notion of *vipākacetanā*, consequently, is a plain self-contradiction.”

Here again the commentarial position can easily be defended. The Buddha's full statement should be considered first:

"It is volition, monks, that I call *kamma*. Having willed (or intended), one does *kamma* by body, speech, or mind."

The Buddha's utterance does not establish a mathematical equivalence between *cetanā* and *kamma*, such that every instance of volition must be considered *kamma*. As the second part of his statement shows, his words mean that *cetanā* is the decisive factor in action, that which motivates action and confers upon action the ethical significance intrinsic to the idea of *kamma*. This implies that the ethical evaluation of a deed is to be based on the *cetanā* from which it springs, so that a deed has no kammic efficacy apart from the *cetanā* to which it gives expression. The statement does not imply that *cetanā* (in the non-arahant) is always and invariably *kamma*.

In order to see that the notion of *vipākacetanā* is not self-contradictory nor even unintelligible, we need only consider the statements occasionally found in the Suttas about *nāmarūpa* descending into the womb or taking shape in the womb (e.g. DN 15/II 63; also § 17 above). It is undeniable that the *nāmarūpa* that "descends" into the womb is the result of past *kamma*, hence *vipāka*. Yet this *nāma* includes *cetanā*, and hence that *cetanā* too must be *vipāka*. Further, the Suttas establish that *cetanā*, as the chief factor in the fourth aggregate (the *saṅkhārakkhandha*), is present on every occasion of experience. A significant portion of experience is *vipāka*, and thus the *cetanā* intrinsic to this experience must be *vipāka*. When one experiences feeling as the result of past *kamma*, the *cetanā* coexisting with that feeling must be *vipāka* too. The Commentaries squarely confront the problem of *cetanā* in resultant states of consciousness and explain how this *cetanā* can perform the distinct function of *cetanā* without constituting *kamma* in the common sense of that word. (See *Atthasālinī*, pp. 87–88; *The Expositor* (PTS trans.), pp. 116–17.)

9. THE PROBLEM OF TIME

The main reason for Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s dissatisfaction with the traditional interpretation of *paṭicca-samuppāda* emerges in § 7 of his Note. The traditional view regards the PS formula as describing a sequence spread out over three lives, hence as involving succession in time. For Ven. Ñāṇavīra this view closes off the prospect of an immediate ascertainment that one has reached the end of suffering. He argues that since I cannot see my past life or my future life, the three-life interpretation of PS removes a significant part of the formula from my immediate sphere of vision. Thus *paṭicca-samuppāda* becomes “something that, in part at least, must be taken on trust.” But because PS is designed to show the prospect for a present solution to the present problem of existential anxiety, it must describe a situation that pertains entirely to the present. Hence Ven. Ñāṇavīra rejects the view of PS as a description of the rebirth process and instead takes it to define an ever-present existential structure of the unenlightened consciousness.

The examination of the suttas on *paṭicca-samuppāda* that we have undertaken above has confirmed that the usual twelve-term formula applies to a succession of lives. This conclusion must take priority over all deductive arguments against temporal succession in *paṭicca-samuppāda*. The Buddha’s Teaching certainly does show us the way to release from existential anxiety. Since such anxiety, or agitation (*paritassanā*), depends upon clinging, and clinging involves the taking of things to be ‘mine’, ‘what I am’, and ‘my self’, the elimination of clinging will bring the eradication of anxiety. The Buddha offers a method of contemplation that focuses on things as *anattā*, as ‘not mine’, ‘not I’, ‘not my self’. Realization of the characteristic of *anattā* removes clinging, and with the elimination of clinging anxiety is removed, including existential anxiety over our inevitable aging and death. This, however, is not the situation being described by the PS formula, and to read the one in terms of the other is to engage in an unjustifiable confounding of distinct frames of reference.

From his criticism of the three-life interpretation of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, it appears that Ven. Ñāṇavīra entertains a mistaken conception of what it would mean to see PS within the framework of three lives. He writes (§ 7):

Now it is evident that the twelve items, *avijjā* to *jarāmaraṇa*, cannot, if the traditional interpretation is correct, all be seen at once; for they are spread over three successive existences. I may, for example, see present *viññāṇa* to *vedanā*, but I cannot now see the *kamma* of the past existence—*avijjā* and *saṅkhāra*—that (according to the traditional interpretation) was the cause of these present things. Or I may see *taṇhā* and so on, but I cannot now see the *jāti* and *jarāmaraṇa* that will result from these things in the next existence.

In Ven. Ñāṇavīra's view, on the traditional interpretation, in order to see PS properly, I would have to be able to see the *avijjā* and *saṅkhāra* of my past life that brought about this present existence, and I would also have to be able to see the birth, aging, and death I will undergo in a future existence as a result of my present craving. Since such direct perception of the past and future is not, according to the Suttas, an integral part of every noble disciple's range of knowledge, he concludes that the traditional interpretation is unacceptable.

Reflection would show that the consequences that Ven. Ñāṇavīra draws do not necessarily follow from the three-life interpretation. To meet Ven. Ñāṇavīra's argument, let us first remember that the Commentaries do not treat the twelvefold formula of PS as a rigid series whose factors are assigned to tightly segregated time-frames. The formula is regarded, rather, as an expository device spread out over three lives in order to demonstrate the self-sustaining internal dynamics of saṃsāric becoming. The situation defined by the formula is in actuality not a simple linear sequence, but a more complex process by which ignorance, craving, and clinging in unison generate renewed becoming in a direction determined by the *saṅkhāra*, the kammically potent volitional activity. Any new existence begins with the simultaneous arising of *viññāṇa* and *nāmarūpa*, culminating in birth, the full manifestation of the five aggregates. With these

aggregates as the basis, ignorance, craving, and clinging, again working in unison, generate a fresh store of *kamma* productive of still another becoming, and so the process goes on until ignorance and craving are eliminated.

Hence to see and understand PS within the framework of the three-life interpretation is not a matter of running back mentally into the past to recollect the specific causes in the past life that brought about present existence, nor of running ahead mentally into the next life to see the future effects of the present causal factors. To see PS effectively is, rather, to see that ignorance, craving, and clinging have the inherent power to generate renewed becoming, and then to understand, on this basis, that present existence must have been brought to pass through the ignorance, craving, and clinging of the past existence, while any uneradicated ignorance, craving, and clinging will bring to pass a new existence in the future. Although the application of the PS formula involves temporal extension over a succession of lives, what one sees with immediate vision is not the connection between particular events in the past, present, and future, but conditional relationships obtaining between types of phenomena: that phenomena of a given type B arise in necessary dependence on phenomena of type A, that phenomena of a given type C arise in necessary dependence on phenomena of type B.

Of these relationships, the most important is the connection between craving and re-becoming. Craving, underlaid by ignorance and fortified by clinging, is the force that originates new existence and thereby keeps the wheel of *saṃsāra* in motion. This is already implied by the stock formula of the second noble truth: “And what, monks, is the origin of suffering? It is craving, which produces re-becoming (*taṇhā ponobhavikā*)....” The essential insight disclosed by the PS formula is that any given state of existence has come to be through prior craving, and that uneradicated craving has the inherent power to generate new becoming. Once this single principle is penetrated, the entire twelfefold series follows as a matter of course.

Ven. Ñāṇavīra implicitly attempts to marshal support for his non-temporal interpretation of PS by quoting as the epigraph to his *Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda* the following excerpt from the

Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta:

“But, Udāyi, let be the past, let be the future, I shall set you forth the Teaching: ‘When there is this, that is; with arising of this, that arises; when there is not this, that is not; with cessation of this, that ceases.’”

Here, apparently, the Buddha proposes the abstract principle of conditionality as an alternative to teachings about temporal matters relating to the past and future. Since in other suttas the statement of the abstract principle is immediately followed by the entire twelve-term formula, the conclusion seems to follow that any application of temporal distinctions to PS, particularly the attempt to see it as extending to the past and future, would be a violation of the Buddha’s intention.

This conclusion, however, would be premature, and if we turn to the sutta from which the quotation has been extracted we would see that the conclusion is actually unwarranted. In the sutta the non-Buddhist wanderer Sakuludāyi tells the Buddha that recently one famous teacher had been claiming omniscience, but when he approached this teacher—who turns out to have been the Jain leader Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta—and asked him a question about the past, the teacher had tried to evade the question, to turn the discussion aside, and became angry and resentful. He expresses the trust that the Buddha is skilled in such matters. The Buddha then says: “One who can recollect his previous births back for many aeons might engage with me in a fruitful discussion about matters pertaining to the past, while one who has the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings might engage with me in a fruitful discussion about matters pertaining to the future.” Then, since Udāyi has neither such knowledge, at this point the Buddha states: “But, Udāyi, let be the past, let be the future,” and he cites the abstract principle of conditionality. Thus the purport of the Buddha’s statement, read as a whole, is that without such super-knowledges of the past and the future, there is no point discussing specific empirical factual matters concerning the past and the future. The Buddha’s dismissal of these issues by no means implies that the twelvefold formula of PS should not be understood as defining

the conditional structure of *saṃsāra* throughout successive lives. It must also be remembered that this discussion takes place with a non-Buddhist ascetic who has not yet gained confidence in the Buddha. It would thus not have been appropriate for the Buddha to reveal to him profound matters that could be penetrated only by one of mature wisdom.

Ven. Ñāṇavīra tries to buttress his non-temporal interpretation of PS with a brief quotation from the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta. In that sutta, at the end of a long catechism that explores the twelfefold series of PS in both the order of origination and the order of cessation, the Buddha says to the monks:

“I have presented you, monks, with this Dhamma that is visible (*sandiṭṭhika*), immediate (*akālika*), inviting one to come and see, accessible, to be personally realized by the wise.”

Ven. Ñāṇavīra supposes that “this Dhamma” refers to *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and that the description of it as *akālika* must mean that the entire formula defines a non-temporal configuration of factors.

If we turn to the sutta from which the quotation comes, we would find that Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s supposition is directly contradicted by the sequel to the statement on which he bases his thesis. In that sequel (M I 265–70), the Buddha proceeds to illustrate the abstract terms of the PS formula, first with an account of the life process of the blind worldling who is swept up in the forward cycle of origination, and then with an account of the noble disciple, who brings the cycle to a stop. Here temporal succession is in evidence throughout the exposition. The life process begins with conception in the womb (elsewhere expressed as “the descent of consciousness” into the womb and the “taking shape of name-and-form” in the womb—DN 15/D II 63). After the period of gestation comes birth, emergence from the mother’s womb, followed in turn by: the gradual maturation of the sense faculties (= the six sense bases), exposure to the five cords of sensual pleasure (= contact), intoxication with pleasant feelings (= feeling), seeking delight in feelings (= craving). Then come clinging, becoming, birth, and aging and death. Here a sequence of two lives is explicitly defined, while the past life is implied by

the *gandhabba*, cited as one of the conditions for conception of the embryo to occur. The *gandhabba* or “spirit,” other texts indicate (see M II 157), is the stream of consciousness of a deceased person coming from the preceding life, and this factor is just as essential to conception as the sexual union of the parents, which it must utilize as its vehicle for entering the womb.

In the contrasting passage on the wise disciple, we see how an individual who has taken birth through the same past causes goes forth as a monk in the Buddha’s dispensation, undertakes the training, and breaks the link between feeling and craving. Thereby he puts an end to the future renewal of the cycle of becoming. By extinguishing “delight in feelings,” a manifestation of craving, he terminates clinging, becoming, birth, aging, and death, and thereby arrives at the cessation of the entire mass of suffering. Thus here, in the very sutta from which the description of PS as “timeless” is drawn, we see the sequence of PS factors illustrated in a way that indubitably involves temporal succession.

In order to determine what the word *akālika* means in relation to PS, we must carefully examine its contextual usage in the suttas on PS. Such suttas are rare, but in the Nidāna-saṃyutta we find one text that can help resolve this problem. In this sutta (SN 12:33/S II 56–59), the Buddha enumerates forty-four “cases of knowledge” (*ñāṇavatthu*) arranged into eleven tetrads. There is knowledge of each factor of PS from *jarāmaraṇa* back to *saṅkhārā*, each defined according to the standard definitions; then there is knowledge of its origination through its condition, of its cessation through the cessation of its condition, and of the Noble Eightfold Path as the way to cessation. With respect to each tetrad, the Buddha says (taking the first as an example):

“When the noble disciple understands thus aging and death, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation, this is his knowledge of the principle (or law: *dhamme ñāṇa*). By means of this principle which is seen, understood, *akālika*, attained, fathomed, he applies the method to the past and the future. When he does so, he knows: ‘Whatever recluses and brahmins in the past understood aging and death (etc.),

all understood them as I do now; whatever recluses and brahmins in the future will understand aging and death (etc.), all will understand them as I do now.’ This is his knowledge of the consequence (*anvaye nāṇa*).”

If we consider the word *akālika* as employed here, the meaning cannot be “non-temporal” in the sense either that the items conjoined by the conditioning relationship occur simultaneously or that they altogether transcend temporal differentiation. For the same sutta defines birth and death with the stock formulas—‘birth’ as birth into any of the orders of beings, etc., ‘death’ as the passing away from any of the orders of beings, etc. (see § 7 above). Surely these events, birth and death, cannot be either simultaneous or extra-temporal. But the word *akālika* is here set in correlation with a series of words signifying knowledge, and this gives us the key to its meaning. Taken in context, 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. Such immediate knowledge is contrasted with knowledge of the consequence, or inferential knowledge (*anvaye nāṇa*), by which the disciple does not grasp a principle by immediate insight but by reflection on what the principle entails.

Exactly the same conclusion regarding the meaning of *akālika* would follow if we return to the passage from M I 265 quoted above (§ 25) and examine it more closely in context. We would then see that the Buddha does not link the statement that the Dhamma is *sanditṭhiko akāliko* to the formulation of PS in any way that suggests the factors or their relationships are non-temporal. The statement does not even follow immediately upon the catechism on PS. Rather, after questioning the monks in detail about the PS formula, the Buddha asks them whether they would speak as they do (i.e. affirming the connections established by the formula) merely out of respect for him as their Teacher; the monks answer in the negative. He then asks, “Isn’t it the case that

you speak only of what you have known for yourselves, seen for yourselves, understood for yourselves?” To this the monks reply, “Yes, venerable sir.” At this point the Buddha says: “I have presented you, monks, with this Dhamma that is visible, immediate....” Each of the terms in this stock formula conveys, from a slightly different angle, the same essential point: that the Dhamma is something that can be seen (*sandiṭṭhiko*); that it is to be known immediately (*akālika*); that it calls out for personal verification (*ehi-passiko*); that it is accessible (*opānāyiko*); that it is to be personally realized by the wise (*paccattaṃ veditaḥko viññūhi*). The terms all highlight, not the intrinsic nature of the Dhamma, but its relation to human knowledge and understanding. They are all epistemological in import, not ontological; they are concerned with how the Dhamma is to be known, not with the temporal status of the known.

Again, the conclusion is established: The Dhamma (inclusive of *paṭicca-samuppāda*) is *akālika* because it is to be known immediately by direct inspection, not by inference or by faith in the word of another. Thus, although birth and death may be separated by 70 or 80 years, one ascertains immediately that death occurs in dependence on birth and cannot occur if there is no birth. Similarly, although the ignorance and *saṅkhārā* that bring about the descent of consciousness into the womb are separated from consciousness by a gap of lifetimes, one ascertains immediately that the descent of consciousness into the womb has come about through ignorance and *saṅkhārā*. And again, although future becoming, birth, and aging and death are separated from present craving and clinging by a gap of lifetimes, one ascertains immediately that if craving and clinging persist until the end of the lifespan, they will bring about re-conception, and hence engender a future cycle of becoming. It is in this sense that the Buddha declares *paṭicca-samuppāda* to be *sandiṭṭhika*, *akālika*—“directly visible, immediate”—not in the sense that the terms of the formula have nothing to do with time or temporal succession.

10. THE KNOWLEDGE OF FINAL DELIVERANCE

I will conclude this critique by highlighting one particularly disquieting consequence entailed by Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s assertion that *paṭicca-samuppāda* has nothing to do with rebirth, with temporal succession, or with *kamma* and its fruit. Now the Suttas indicate that the arahants know that they have terminated the succession of births; this is their knowledge and vision of final deliverance (*vimuttiñāṇadassana*). Everywhere in the texts we see that when they attain liberation, they exclaim: “Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more (coming back) to this world,” or: “This is my last birth; now there is no more re-becoming.” These statements, found throughout the Canon, indicate that the arahants know for themselves that they are liberated from the round of rebirths.

Investigation of the texts will also show that the ground for the arahant’s assurance regarding his liberation is his knowledge of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, particularly in the sequence of cessation. By seeing in himself the destruction of the āsavas, the “cankers” of sensual craving, craving for becoming, and ignorance, the arahant knows that the entire series of factors mentioned in PS has come to an end: ignorance, craving, clinging, and kammically potent volitional activities have ended in this present life, and no more compound of the five aggregates, subject to birth and death, will arise in the future. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the Kaḷāra-sutta (SN 12:32/S II 51–53). When the Buddha asks Venerable Sāriputta how he can declare “Destroyed is birth,” he replies in terms of the destruction of its cause, *bhava*, and the Buddha’s questioning leads him back along the chain of conditions to *vedanā*, for which he no longer has any craving.

Since knowledge of *paṭicca-samuppāda* in its aspect of cessation is the basis for the arahant’s knowledge that he has destroyed birth and faces no more re-becoming in the future, if this formula does not describe the conditional structure of *saṃsāra* it is difficult to see how the arahant could have definite knowledge that he has reached the end of *saṃsāra*. If arahants have to accept it on trust from the Buddha that *saṃsāra* exists and can be terminated (as Ven. Ñāṇavīra would hold of those

arahants who lack direct knowledge of past births), then those arahants would also have to accept it on trust from the Buddha that they have attained release from *saṃsāra*. Such a denouement to the entire quest for the Deathless would be far from satisfactory indeed.

It seems that Ven. Ñāṇavīra, in his eagerness to guarantee an immediate solution to the present problem of existential anxiety, has arrived at that solution by closing off the door to a direct ascertainment that one has solved the existential problem that the Suttas regard as paramount, namely, the beginningless problem of our beginningless bondage to *saṃsāra*. Fortunately, however, the Suttas confirm that the noble disciple does have direct knowledge that all beings bound by ignorance and craving dwell within beginningless *saṃsāra*, and that the destruction of ignorance brings cessation of becoming, Nibbāna. Consider how Venerable Sāriputta explains the faculty of understanding (and I stress that this is the faculty of understanding (*paññindriya*), not the faculty of faith):

“When, lord, a noble disciple has faith, is energetic, has set up mindfulness, and has a concentrated mind, it can be expected that he will understand thus: ‘This *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning; no first point can be discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving. But with the remainderless fading away and ceasing of ignorance, a mass of darkness, this is the peaceful state, this is the sublime state: the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna.’ That understanding, lord, is his faculty of understanding.”

The Buddha not only applauds this statement with the words “Sādhu, sādhu!” but to certify its truth he repeats Ven. Sāriputta’s words in full.