

# The Essential Buddhism Course

## Session 5 – Kamma, Rebirth & Conditionality

<b>Materials required for this Session</b>	
<i>Books:</i>	Rahula ( pp 32 – 33, 29, 53 – 55), Gethin (pp 141-142, 149 – 159, 112 – 126) ), Chah, ( The ‘Middle Way Within‘ Chapter.
<i>Photocopies:</i>	
<i>Website:</i>	<a href="http://www.childpastlives.org/stevenson.htm">http://www.childpastlives.org/stevenson.htm</a> Interesting information on examples of children with past life memories
<i>Further Study:</i>	Harvey (pp 32 – 46, 54 – 60)

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5. Concluding Remarks

### **1. Introduction**

In this session we will examine three large and significant areas of Buddhist teachings which could easily be major sessions in their own right. Kamma and rebirth are central to traditional Buddhism but have been viewed as a little controversial by some western Buddhists.

Conditioned genesis, (also known as dependent origination), is a core teaching which runs throughout all schools of Buddhism and underpins the description of Buddhism as the ‘middle way’. It is, however, complex, especially in the 12 links which expand upon the second and third noble truths.

(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/bps/misc/waytoend.html>)

### **2. The Buddhist Cosmos**

The 31 realms described in the Pali Canon (systemised in the Abhidhamma), and shown overleaf, are viewed as both psychological and physical realms. This ambiguity is not a recent invention, but exists in the earliest texts and can be seen as a subtle and useful quality which both renders the teachings of wide applicability and also discourages undue attachment to them as dogmatic statements. Psychological, symbolic and literal interpretations coexist within the same framework.

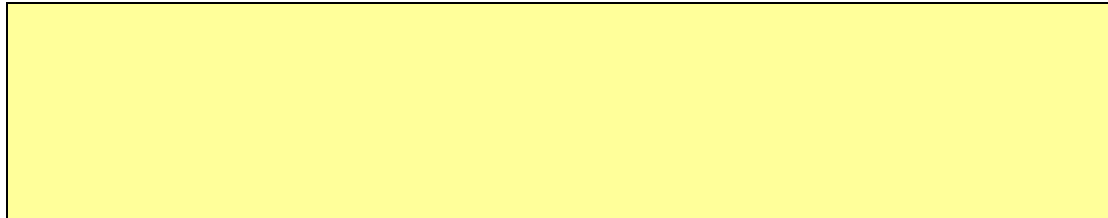
## The Thirty One Realms of Existence according to the Pali Sources

All of these realms constitute *Samsāra*

World ( <i>dhātu</i> )	Realm ( <i>bhūmi</i> )	Life Span		
<b>FORMLESS WORLD</b>	Neither Consciousness nor unconsciousness	84000 aeons	FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS	
	Nothingness	60000 aeons		
	Infinite Consciousness	40000 aeons		
	Infinite Space	20000 aeons		
<b>WORLD OF PURE FORM</b>	The Supreme	16000 aeons	FOURTH <i>JHĀNA</i>	
	The Clear-sighted	8000 aeons		
	The Lovely	4000 aeons		
	The Serene	2000 aeons		
	The Durable	1000 aeons		
	Unconscious Beings	500 aeons		
	Great Reward	500 aeons		
	<b>Pure Abodes</b>	Complete Beauty	64 aeons	THIRD <i>JHĀNA</i>
		Boundless Beauty	32 aeons	
		Limited Beauty	16 aeons	
	Streaming Radiance	Boundless Radiance	8 aeons	SECOND <i>JHĀNA</i>
		Boundless Radiance	4 aeons	
		Limited Radiance	2 aeons	
	Great Brahma Brahmā's Ministers Brahmā's Retinue		1 aeon	FIRST <i>JHĀNA</i>
		1/2 aeon		
		1/3 aeon		
<b>WORLDS OF THE SENSES</b>	The Masters of the Creation of Others	128000 divine years	10 COURSES OF WHOLESOME KAMMA	
	Those who Delight in Creation	64000 divine years		
	The Contented	16000 divine years		
	The Yama Gods	8000 divine years		
	The Thirty-Three Gods	2000 divine years		
	The Gods of the Four Kings	500 divine years		
	<b>HUMAN BEINGS</b>		variable	
	Jealous Gods Hungry Ghosts Animals Hell Beings		unspecified	10 COURSES OF UNWHOLESOME KAMMA
			unspecified	
			unspecified	
		unspecified		
	<b>Descents</b>			

Human beings are born into a fortunate realm with the greatest possibility of enlightenment. The other realms are either too hellish or too pleasant to prompt the questioning attitude that leads to liberation. We move between realms at death on the basis of our *kamma* and also transiently occupy them in various meditational and other psychological states. Rebirth may be to or from physically distant world systems, and to different realms. The realisation of *nibbāna* frees us from *kamma* and rebirth, although what happens to an enlightened being is not described in the Pali Suttas.

Are you a believer (or do you have trustful confidence) in rebirth, or are you an agnostic, or perhaps a disbeliever?

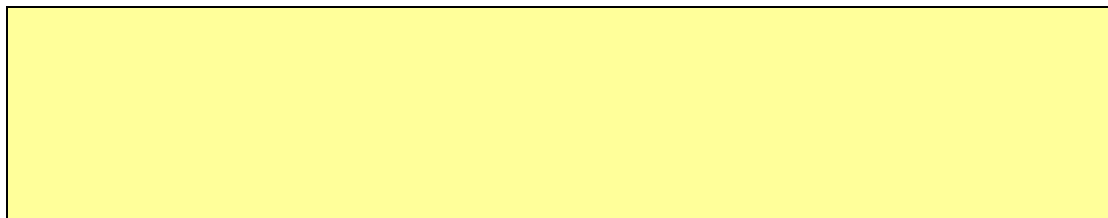


Buddhist ideas on rebirth might be considered as a ‘conservation of life force’ theory with parallels to the conservation of energy and mass in physics. The Buddha maintained that his teaching was the middle way between annihilationism and eternalism, and between the view that ‘all was one’ and ‘all is many’. Modern materialism / hedonism is mainly an annihilationist belief.

These conditioned realms are not regarded as having some common beginning, but as endlessly existing although going through expansive and contracting phases over vast timescales. The scope of space and time described in early Buddhism is vast and quite akin to some ideas in modern physics and astronomy (for example galaxies and galaxy clusters).

We have been wandering in *samsāra* for aeons, where an aeon is longer than the time it would take to wear away a 7 mile high granite mountain with a fine cloth brushed against the mountain once every hundred years. There is not considered to be any spatial limit to the number of world systems—the figure of 1,000,000,000,000 such systems is mentioned by Buddhaghosa—a respected scholar monk who lived around 500 CE.

Are you comfortable with Buddhist realms, or do you consider them unhelpful?



### 3. **Kamma**

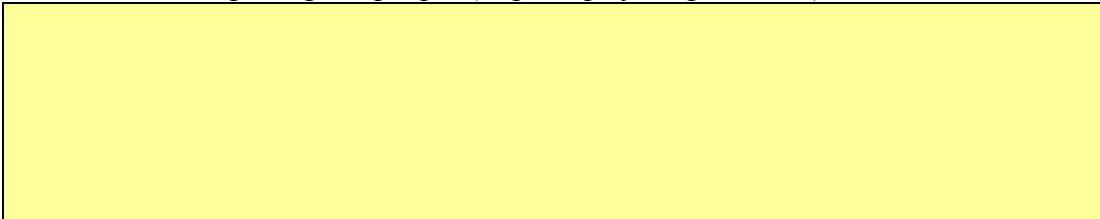
A basic belief in *kamma* is regarded as part of Right View. The motive and intention behind our actions governs the quality of wholesome or unwholesome results. We may for example be intent on killing someone from the motive of hatred. We might be intent on giving our time to an organisation from the motive of generosity. Sometimes our motives are mixed, with

mixed results. The law of *kamma* asserts that there is some order and causal patterns in the sphere of human action. All is not random or chaotic. Motives of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion lead to beneficial outcomes; acting from the reverse motives causes harmful results.

Kamma can be complex and generates both immediate and longer-term results. Some results of actions are considered only to come to fruition after more than one life-time.

But kamma is not a deterministic doctrine; we still have a choice of how to respond to good or bad fortune, some of which may be caused by the maturing of past actions.

How can we explain good people (or perhaps young children) who suffer severe misfortune?



#### 4. Conditionality

Any newcomer to Buddhism sooner or later encounters the Buddhist Doctrine of Causality. Most who glance at the lists of conditions associated with the arising and cessation of *dukkha*, find that although they might get the gist of what is being taught, gaining an understanding of the detail is more challenging.

Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) or Conditioned Arising, as well as being a core doctrine, is also widely regarded as the most complex teaching in the Pali Canon.

Amongst many suttas which include discourses on Conditioned Arising are the *Nidāna Saṃyutta* the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (Walshe, 1987: 223) and the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* (Bodhi, 1995: 132).

The Buddha is described as realizing the principle of conditionality during his enlightenment by his observation and deep insight into the way that events interact. When reflecting upon whether or not to teach the truth that he had realized, the Buddha hesitated:

*'I considered: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see, and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in worldliness, rejoices in worldliness. It is hard for such a generation to see this truth, namely specific conditionality, dependent origination.'*  
(Bodhi, 1995: 260)

The profundity of Dependent Origination can be appreciated from the observation by Sariputta, the Buddha's senior disciple that:

*‘One who sees Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Origination’*  
(Bodhi, 1995: 283 and quoted in Harvey, 1990: 54).

## **The General Principle**

Conditioned Arising can be summarized as the general principle:

*‘When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that.  
When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that’.* (Thanissaro, 1996: 300)

What this simple yet somewhat enigmatic principle declares is that all of the events that we experience are in fact not isolated and random, but are caused by or dependent upon other conditions and events in a more or less complex web of interactions. Some of the supporting conditions are contemporaneous with the experienced event, whilst others occur in an earlier time frame. All processes, events, mind states, and physical objects are considered to be subject to Conditioned Arising.

Causality, in Western thinking proposes that actions generate reliable or predictable results. In the contemporary scientific enterprise, the cause and effect model is used to attempt a precise understanding of the behaviour of specific physical components of the world.

Full insight into Conditioned Arising falls within Ennobling Right View (or understanding) - *sammā-diṭṭhi* – the first factor in the Ennobling Eightfold Path, which itself is the fourth Ennobling Truth.

This is the Right Understanding that directly sees how the world arises according to conditions - so that it cannot be regarded as not existing; and how the world ceases from the cessation of conditions, - so that it cannot be said to exist eternally.

*‘All exists’, Kaccāna, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’ this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: With ignorance as condition....’*

(Kaccānagotta, Saṃyutta Nikaya, II 15, Bodhi, 2000: 544)

## **The Standard Formula and the Four Ennobling Truths**

Although Conditioned Arising is applicable to all of the reality that we experience, the emphasis in the Pali Canon is on the arising and cessation of *dukkha*.

Conditioned arising is commonly applied in the form of variants of twelve links or *nidānas* which focus upon the cause and cessation of *dukkha*. The most commonly presented set of links (as in Walshe, 1987: 35-35) is:

*Conditioned by ignorance (spiritual) are the volitional impulses; conditioned by the volitional impulses is consciousness; conditioned by consciousness is mind and body; conditioned by mind and body are the six sense bases; conditioned by the six sense bases is contact; conditioned by contact is feeling; conditioned by feeling is craving; conditioned by*

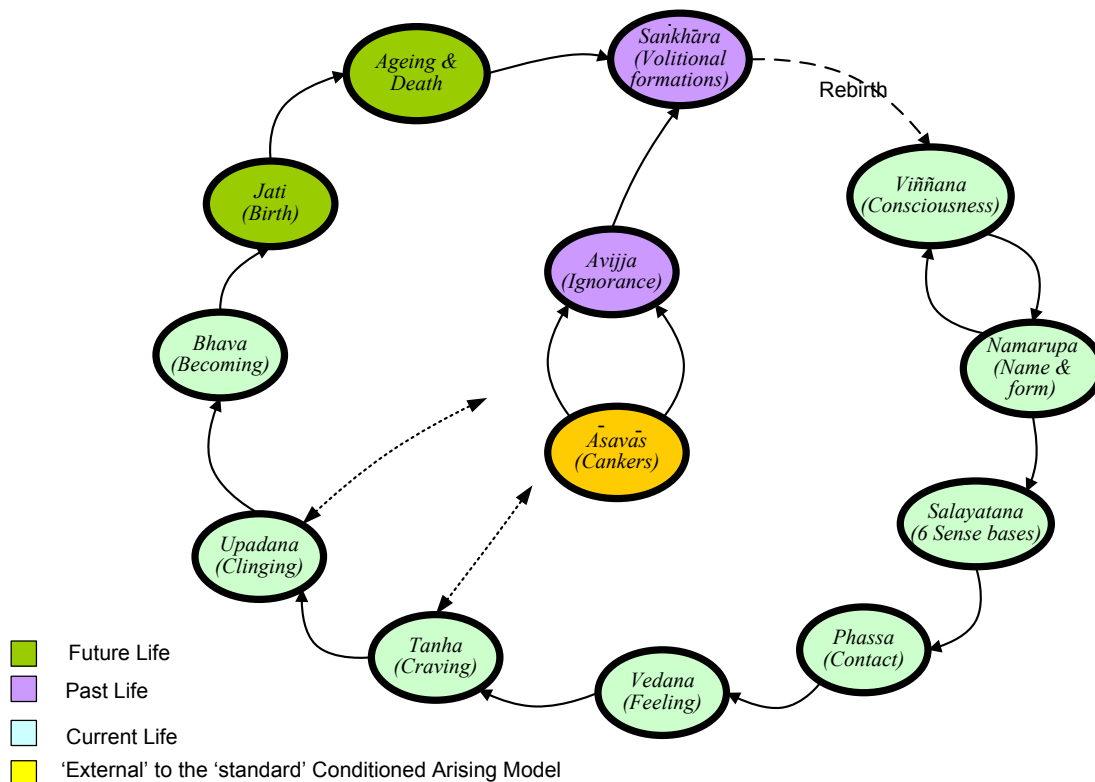
*craving is clinging; conditioned by clinging is becoming; conditioned by becoming is birth; conditioned by birth is ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.*

This standard application is then complemented by presenting the twelve links in reverse:

*With the cessation of ignorance, volitional impulses cease; with the cessation of volitional impulses, consciousness ceases; with the cessation of consciousness, body and mind cease; with the cessation of body and mind, the six sense bases cease; with the cessation of the six sense bases, contact ceases; with the cessation of contact, feeling ceases; with the cessation of feeling, craving ceases; with the cessation of craving, clinging ceases; with the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases; with the cessation of becoming, - birth, ageing and death cease; with the cessation of birth, ageing and death - sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair cease. Thus, there is a cessation of this whole mass of suffering.*

The standard presentation describes the arising and cessation of *dukkha* from a web of conditions and causes and thus greatly amplifies the second and third Ennobling Truths, ‘that suffering has a cause’ and ‘that suffering has an end’.

When considering this model we must appreciate that ‘dependent’ (*paccayā*) does not just mean simple physical dependency, but includes more subtle interactions such as, for example, ‘ice is dependent upon water’ or the ‘view is dependent upon the non-appearance of intervening objects’ (Sumedho, 1991: 9).



**Fig. 1. Conditioned Arising - The Standard Model as applied to the Second Ennobling Truth**

(Note that the above diagram is not a strictly accurate depiction of the 3 lives view)

## The Three Lives Interpretation, Rebirth and Not-Self

Although the suttas in the Pali Canon do not explicitly split the twelve *nidānas* across three lives, there are a number of texts in which it is clear that a three life interpretation is being referred to (Bodhi, 2000: 541).

We also find that Buddhagosa in the Visuddhi Magga devotes a lengthy commentary to the three life interpretation, suggesting that at the time he wrote (5<sup>th</sup> CE) this was the most common interpretation, or perhaps the one that he felt most able to describe.

*'The past, the present and the future are it's three times. Of these, it should be understood that, according to what is given as such in the texts, the two factors ignorance and (kammic) formations belong to the past time, the eight beginning with consciousness belong to the present time, and the two, birth and ageing-and-death, belong to the future time.'*  
(Ñāṇamoli, 1979: 669)

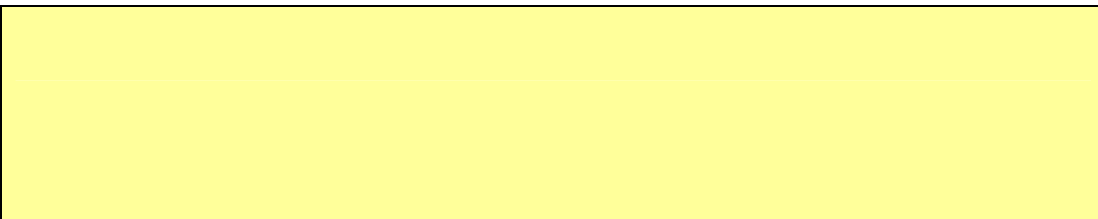
This might be understood as - starting from our past failure to eradicate ignorance which led us to act from mixed intentions, and led to complex positive and negative kammic results. These kammic formations governed the nature of our present rebirth and determined many of the conditions that we experience in our current life.

During this current life, our discriminative consciousness interacts with name and form (the sentient body) in complex patterns, and conditions the six sense-bases which make contact with external (and internal – the mind sense) stimuli. Contact gives rise to feeling, craving and clinging. 'We' are then identified with the 'habitual worlds' that this creates leading to becoming, and future birth. Future birth then leads to subsequent ageing and death - provided that we have not broken this chain by realizing *nibbāna*. (Note that it is clear from the texts that the complete cessation of these *nidānas* equates to *nibbāna*).

There is no unchanging 'person' who somehow traverses this sequence. Conditioned Arising fully complements and supports not-self (*anatta*). A 'being' passes from one life to the next based upon kammic forces, and the reborn being is neither the same as, nor different, from the one who dies (Harvey, 1990: 58).

Conditioned arising, thus, supports the 'middle way' between the extremes of 'eternalism' (an unchanging essential self passing between lives), and annihilationism (that there is no self or essence, only a material world exists and nothing survives at death. Annihilationism contradicts with Conditioned Arising and would tend to encourage a materialistic hedonism). Conditioned Arising does not support the idea of a permanent self or personality, but demonstrates how the illusion of this can arise from complex causal processes interacting with the *khandas*.

Do you have any questions on Conditioned Arising ?



## **Concluding Remarks**

We have covered a large area of Buddhism in a short time. My apologies for the amount of material in these notes. There is no need to believe in these ideas – they are presented to stimulate reflection and encourage further investigation. Dependent origination in particular is quite a difficult subject. We can be comforted though that the Buddha himself said that it was profound and hard to appreciate.

## **Further References**

Bodhi Bhikkhu and Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu, 1995, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, London

Bodhi Bhikkhu <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/bps/wheels/wheel277.html> -  
'*Transcendental Dependent Arising A Translation and Exposition of the Upanisa Sutta*', The Wheel Publication No. 277/278

Sumedho, A., 1991, *The Way it is*, Amaravati Publications, Great Gaddesden (Note that this wonderful book is largely based upon teachings on dependent origination)