
# THE INTEGRATION OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION AND GESTALT PERCEPTION

**VENERABLE PANDIT CITTASAṂVARO**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
(Buddhist Studies)

Graduate School
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
B.E. 2561 (C.E. 2018)


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The Graduate School, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University has approved my thesis as a part of education according to its curriculum of Master of Arts in Buddhist Studies.

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## Abstract

There are three main purposes of this research; (1) to investigate the teaching of Paticcasamuppāda (PS) as found in Theravada Buddhism, (2) to understand the principle of gestalt perception, and (3) to see how they can be integrated in a useful way.

The Theravada tradition consolidates PS into a couple of key models covering different time spans, usually consisting of 12 links. Emphasis here will be given here to the definitions of links and concepts individually, as found in the suttas. On the basis of this the meanings of each term of PS will be mapped out as they occur in general suttas, and tabulate the various full length models. Then we will review the mechanics of early Gestalt perception. Finally we will map each of the PS interpretations with the Gestalt perception process, and see where they correlate.

The Gestalt psychologists showed that objects of perception are presented to consciousness complete in discreet composite wholes. This occurs as a foreground 'figure' is separated from the background 'ground'. Consciousness is then observed to 'snap' from one concrete perceptual form to another.

This relates to the technical Buddhist understanding of consciousness, where the mind is observed to jump between objects of attention; how the eye meets a form (and so on for other senses), together with consciousness, to produce object awareness. But Buddhism goes further than Gestalt - outlining a whole chain of emotional reaction and attachment, in a habitual process that propels beings into rebirth, and the relentless voyaging through *samsāra*, and ending finally in *nibbāna*, where the whole chain reaction of 'becoming' is brought to a complete halt.

By comparing these two models of the process of consciousness, we will look at what the Buddhist model has to offer the modern field of research into attention and cognition. We also hope that by considering the insights of the Gestalt psychologists we will gain a sharper understanding of Buddhism, and how the Buddhist model of perception actually functions.

# Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University for the opportunity to undertake Buddhist Studies, and to conduct this research under the University's guidance. My Thesis advisors have advised, corrected, and importantly, encouraged me in this research – namely Assoc. Professor Dr. Phra Rajaparipattimuni, and Dr. Georges Dreyfus.

# List of Abbreviations

References to Pali texts follow the internationally recognised abbreviation system of the Pali Text Society. In the case of discussing a particular translation, reference will be made to that specific text.

| | |
|---|---|
| PS | Paṭiccasamuppāda (Dependent Origination) |
| PTS | Pali Text Society |
| M | Majjhima Nikāya |
| D | Dīgha Nikāya |
| S | Saṃyutta Nikāya |
| A | Anguttara Nikāya |
| PED | Pali-English Dictionary |
| Vsm | Visuddhimagga |
| p. | page |
| etc. | et cetera |
| i.e. | that is to say |
| tr. | translated by |
| ed. | edited by |
| Ibid. | ibidem |
| op. cit. | opere citato |
| vol. | volume |

**Note on the usage of the Abbreviations**

In reference Pali sources, the references are given according to the name of the book, the volume (if indicated by a Roman numeral), and the page number of the PTS edition, except for the Dhammapada, where the verse number is given instead of the page number. For example:
A III 43: The Anguttara Nikāya, Volume 3, Page 43

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# Chapter I

# Introduction

## 1.1 The Background and Significance of the Problem

The topic of consciousness, or cognitive sciences, is at the very forefront of modern research into the human condition. For a long time it was considered to be too difficult a topic to study scientifically, but that changed around the time of the new millennium, and in recent years many new ideas have been postulated.

Buddhists have been studying the conundrum of consciousness through both meditation, and with Sutta and Abhidhamma studies, for over 2500 years. Mahayana Buddhism in particular has made many later contributions to the field with some very involved theories. But there has not been much attempt to link or compare the Theravada Buddhist models of consciousness with modern research and thinking.

The model offered in Theravada Buddhism most relevant to the modern study of consciousness and perception is that of Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda), which will hereafter be abbreviated as 'PS'. This thesis will provide a clear map of the relationship between the Buddhist model of consciousness and that of Gestalt perception.

A limitation in this comparison exists however. PS was never designed to be complete description of how a human being perceives and is conscious of the perception, but rather was an analytical tool to be used in the pursuit of nibbāna, or

liberation[1]. Thus to some extent we can expect modern research the process of perception to go much further in depth than the Buddhist model. This is particularly true for the key component of perception (saññā) the exact nature of which in Theravada Buddhism is not discussed in detail other than it being impermanent, suffering and non-self.

Dependent Origination is usually described as having 12 links[2]. In fact there are a number of variations on this, with 9[3], 10[4], 11[5] and 24[6] link versions. Further, there are different interpretations of the key terms and their application, prompting Bruce Evans, translator of a seminal work by P.A. Payutto on the topic, to comment:

> The subject of Dependent Origination … does require a good deal of reflection, and because so many of its teachings are open to interpretation, it is easy to go off on a tangent[7]

There are two main Theravada interpretations of PS. The most common is a model spanning three lifetimes, based upon very specific interpretations of key

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[1] M I 260 - 'If you do not adhere to [Right View of dependent origination], cherish it, treasure it, and treat it as a possession, [you would] then understand it as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping'.

[2] The typical 12 link formula in brief occurs countless times throughout the suttas. A good example is the Bahudhātuka Sutta.

[3] One example is the Cūḷasīhanāda Sutta.

[4] One example is the Mahāpadāna Sutta.

[5] Such as S II 15- where avijjā is omitted.

[6] S II 29.

[7] Bruce Evans Foreword: P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality** (Bangkok: Buddha Dhamma Foundation 1994), p. viii.

elements, especially 'Consciousness' (viññāṇa) and 'Name-Form' (nāma rūpa)[8]. The other model is where the entire process of the 12 links is spanned in just an instant[9].

The three lifetime model was propagated by Buddhagosa in the Visuddhimagga[10], and due to the high regard for this book, it is the most common explanation of PS, thus becoming the de-facto default Theravāda view. However a number of problems exist within this interpretation, such as 'descent into the womb' being given as the definition for two distinct terms: name-form (nāmarūpa) and also becoming (bhava). Further, 'consciousness' is defined as 'relinking consciousness' (paṭisandhi), despite the usual sutta definition of consciousness being based on only one of the 6 sense bases (āyatana) at a time.

For the momentary interpretation, the whole chain of PS occurs in the blink of an eye, in a moment of consciousness. All 12 links are crashed through, in the simile used by Ajahn Chah, like a person falling from a tree[11]. This model, which also makes an appearance in the Visuddhimagga, is based more upon Abhidhamma models than the suttas[12]. Still many aspects are left unexplained, such as how name-and-form come about *after* consciousness, or how to understand the cessation of consciousness as the process is brought to a halt in concentration or enlightenment. Most problematic is how to understand birth (jāti) as something that arises each instant, when the sutta definitions clearly describe jāti as being born into a new lifetime. The chief advantage of the instantaneous interpretation, however, is that it is supposed to be experienced in completion by the meditator, without leaving sections of it to be experienced in a future or past life. As will be demonstrated, Gestalt perception in this model, would begin with viññāṇa, opening up possibilities for a very colourful and interesting comparison.

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[8] Ibid., p.26 ff.

[9] Ibid., p.43 ff.

[10] Vism XVII.

[11] Ajahn Chah, **A Taste of Freedom**, (Bangkok: Liberty Press, 1994), p.24.

[12] Vbh. 145, 159, 191.

In all these interpretations, a fundamental tenet of the process is the way that perception develops from sense contact, and how this leads to feeling (vedanā), clinging (upadāna) and so on to birth (jāti), ageing and death (jarā-maraṇa). This process proceeds further than Gestalt perception – where a being, having had one of the senses activated by attention, will carve out of the general experience a foreground image (a Gestalt), and consign everything else to the background, showing how the process itself, independent of what is perceived, impacts the human being as a whole, and consigns him to Saṃsāra.

Gestalt is a methodology that came from a small number of German psychologists around 1920. Other notable psychologists of the time were measuring physical sensation, or piecing together philosophical theories of mind, while the gestalt psychologists looked at the nature of experience itself. In this they shared a lot of ground with Husserl and the phenomenology branch of philosophy – indeed the gestalt psychologists and the phenomenologists can trace their lineage back to a common source, Franz Brentano. Husserl, Freud, and the gestalt psychologists visited him, and his works greatly influenced William James and Wilhelm Wundt also.[13] Brentano wanted to elicit descriptions of actual experience, rather than the reporters interpretation of it, in what he called 'descriptive psychology'.[14]

By the time the Congress of the German Society for Experimental Psychology met in Leipzig in 1923 the Gestalt school of psychology had become the dominant paradigm. But the field was cut short when the three main figures of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler all left Germany for the US upon the

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[13] Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, **The Phenomenological Mind**, (London: Routledge, 2008), p.53.

[14] Franz Brentano, (trans. Benito Müller), **Descriptive Psychology**, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.137-8.

rise of the Nazi regime.[15] After this the gestalt perspective was subsumed by other forms of cognitive psychology. Behaviorism had become the dominant approach of American psychology – the limits of which Köhler devotes an entire chapter to.[16] Gestalt perception never regained the prominence that it had in pre-war Germany, although some later psychologists did eventually pursue similar lines.[17]

Thus it seems a thorough investigation into the common and divergent ground between these two disciplines is called for. Gestalt psychology, similarly to Buddhism, focuses on the object formation aspect of consciousness[18]. Gestalt breaks down some of the rules and processes in perceiving objects in a straightforward manner.[19] The investigation is limited to early gestalt theory, as it is sufficient to examine where and how object formation is presented to consciousness, without wandering into the divergent modern psychological perceptual and cognitive theories. Stemming from this we can use gestalt theory to examine where exactly in the process of PS an object arises in consciousness.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

1.2.1 To study the meaning of PS as found in the Theravada Buddhism.

1.2.2 To study the principle of Gestalt perception

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[15] Wertheimer, Koffka and Kőhler all participated in the original gestalt experiments on perceived motions of forms in 1910, and formed the 'leading triumvirate' of Gestalt psychology over the next decades. Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.146.

[16] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.3-33.

[17] For example George Kelly and his Personal Construct Theory, and Kurt Lewin and his Principles of Topological Psychology.

[18] Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.5.

[19] See section 3.5 below

1.2.3 To study the points of integration between PS and Gestalt perception.

## 1.3 Statements of the Problems

1.3.1 What are the different interpretations of PS in Theravada Buddhism?

1.3.2 What is the principle of Gestalt perception?

1.3.3 How are PS and Gestalt perception related?

## 1.4 Scope of the Study

1.4.1 While recognising that there are many interesting and relevant contributions to this field of study in Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism, this thesis will focus on PS as it is found in the Theravada suttas, looking at the two typical interpretations of PS that are commonly followed; namely the momentary model and the three lifetime model.

1.4.2 The scope of the psychological comparison with PS to Gestalt perception which should provide a very relevant and interesting starting point for bringing the teaching of PS into the manifold of modern cognitive sciences.

## 1.5 Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 "PS" refers to Paṭiccasamuppāda, also known as 'Dependent Origination', and 'Dependent Genesis' in Theravada Buddhism.

1.5.2 "Gestalt" refers to the principle of Gestalt perception, where a being identifies and relates to a field of foreground perception. We will be staying close to the simple Gestalt principle as taught by Max Wertheimer (1880 –1943), Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967) and Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) rather than the many later extensions of the research into attention, perception and cognitive studies. (Note we

are not referring to the Gestalt school of psychology, which is an entirely different idea.)

1.5.3 “Sutta” refers to various of the Buddhist teachings relating to PS as found in the Pāli Tipitaka.

1.5.4 "Integration" refers to the placing of PS and Gestalt side by side in diagrammatic form to demonstrate their relationship, and points of divergence and convergence.

## 1.6 Review of Literature

The Primary source for defining terms of PS, their meanings and relations is the Sutta Pitaka in the Theravada Tipitaka. Emphasis will be given to those suttas that deal specifically with PS, but also included will be other suttas that deal with the particular terms and concepts of PS in other contexts.

**Buddhagosa Bhadantācariya (trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli), Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification, Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka 1991.**[20] Though this commentary is far removed in time from the original Pali Tipitaka, it remains one of the most authoritative texts, especially the 75 pages on PS in Chapter XVII. Much of the current Theravada view on this topic (and others) in fact stems from Buddhagosa. He seems to straddle the two main interpretations of the 3-life and instantaneous models in one go, as evidenced by his treatment of the key term consciousness (viññāna):

> Now this resultant consciousness occurs in two ways, namely, (a) in the course of an individual existence (or continuity) and (b) at the rebirth-linking (moment)[21]

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[20] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans. Steve Schmidt) **Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination,** (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992).

[21] Buddhagosa, **Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification**, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1956), p.558.

Much of Buddhagosa's focus is on technical definitions of terms etymologically and according to more general meaning and interpretation of the commentarial tradition which he represents. Buddhagosa gives a detailed account of the common 12 links of PS, but no mention of the many variations on this standard that we find in many suttas.

**P.A. Payutto (trans. Bruce Evans), "Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Conditionality", Buddhadhamma Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand 1994.**[22] This book outlines the two majour interpretations of PS of the three lifetime model, and the instantaneous model. It can well be looked at as a definitive work on the topic according to the standard Theravāda view from the modern era. While this book is published as a singular entity in English, it is in fact a chapter of his epic treatise 'Buddhadhamma', published in Thai under the same foundation. Payutto tries to balance the two different interpretations, and back them up with references to the Theravada Canon. He also furnishes real life examples to make the principle of PS more easily understandable by the general public. Further he gives some mention to the variant forms of PS (that do not have 12 links), particularly the Mahānidāna Sutta as it relates to causality in society.[23]

**Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans. Steve Schmidt), "Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination", Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992**.[24] No study of classical Theravada teachings in Thailand is complete without including a work by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. As the title suggests, he is always entirely practical, supporting the instantaneous model of PS in a way that is directly of use to the ardent meditator, rather than a scholarly work for the academic. He claims that all the 12 links are

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[22] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality**, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994).

[23] Ibid., p.71-75.

[24] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans. Steve Schmidt) **Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination,** (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992).

immediately observable in the present moment, rather than referring to past or future rebirths. Thus observing and understanding all of the links in action is the means to wisdom and enlightenment. He goes further however, and claims that the standard three lifetime model is "incorrectly explained so that it cannot be practised" while the instantaneous model "can be practised here and now."[25] The instantaneous model of PS in his interpretation will be of great use when comparing to Gestalt perception – which also is something that arises and ceases in the present instant. Buddhadasa spends three whole chapters criticising the three lifetime model, while he calls his own view, that enables PS to be a practise for liberation, 'The Radiant Wheel of Liberation'.[26]

**Mahasi Sayadaw (trans. U Aya Maung), "A Discourse on Paticcasamuppada: The Doctrine of Dependent Origination", U Min Swe Buddhasasana Nuggaha Organization Rangoon, Burma.**[27] Sayadaw's treatise on PS is as confusing as it is helpful. It is helpful in showing the difficulties of regular interpretations. All the same, this book does show some of the practical sides to PS, and how to apply in the present moment; most particularly how the present perception (Gestalt) leads through the other steps of PS ultimately locking one in Samsāra. He goes through each of the classic twelve links of PS in detail, providing many stories to illustrate each link. Importantly he also examines the link between Consciousness and manovara[28], the understanding of which is vital to ones interpretation of PS as covering three lifetimes or otherwise.

**Sue Hamilton, "Identity and Experience", 1996[29].** This academic work studies the fice khandha and argues that they relate directly to experience, and not to

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[25] Ibid., p.7-8.

[26] Ibid., Chapter 12.

[27] Mahasi Sayadaw (trans. U Aye Maung) **A Discourse on Paticcasamuppada,** (Rangoon: U Min Swe Buddhasasana Nuggaha Organization).

[28] Ibid., p.35.

[29] Sue Hamilton, **Identity and Experience,** (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996).

an ontological explanation of the world. It attempts to marry the idea of the aggregates with dependent arising, saying that the question is not 'what is man' but 'how is man'.While the emphasis is on the khandhas, the central theme of the book takes a phenomenological stance that relates to the process of human experience. The discussion on nāmarūpa in particular, echoes that found in the present work.[30]

**U Than Daing, "Paticcasamuppāda (The Law of Dependent Origination)", Society for the Propogation of Vipassana, Yangoon, 1966.**[31] In typical Burmese style, this text makes sweeping statements and generalisations, together with declarative interpretation. The most interesting aspect in regards this thesis, is the insistence that the understanding of PS rides on the watching of name-and-form arising and ceasing in the present moment. So here again we have the process of PS being described as beginning with perceptions (dhamma) that arise and cease. This provides a good launching point for the discussion of consciousness in modern sciences if the link between a Gestalt perception, that necessarily includes both external realities, and the mental corollaries of such, can be shown. However, Daing also does not dismiss the 3 lifetime model:

> It will be obvious to the reader that the Present becomes the Past of the future which again becomes the Present. Thus the ceaseless process of Samsara goes on indefinitely.[32]

**Steven Lehar, "The World in Your Head: A Gestalt View of the Mechanism of Conscious Experience", 2002.**[33] Lehar opens with a revelation he had with himself – that one does not see the world around oneself directly, but sees a

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[30] Ibid., p.121-138.

[31] U Than Daing, **Paticcasamuppāda,** (Yangoon: Society for the Propagation of Vipassana, 1966).

[32] Ibid., p. 23.

[33] Mahasi Sayadaw (trans. U Aye Maung) **A Discourse on Paticcasamuppada,** (Rangoon: U Min Swe Buddhasasana Nuggaha Organization).

representation of it from within the brain. This is, as he went on to discover, a natural corollary of Gestalt perception. His examination of how our mental image of an object precedes its perception is very relevant to our thesis, and he shows how this builds up our world. If Gestalt perception and PS are to have any common ground, then Lehar's work will show how Samsara is built directly on the basis of perception, just as the instantaneous model of PS presumes. Lehar's radical view of perception however, is not representative of the general direction of modern cognitive research. However, at the same time, he draws on many current lines of thought to justify his very precise model of conscious perception.

**Max Wertheimer, "Gestalt Theory" 1924.**[34] This is one of the original paper's on Gestalt perception by the father of the discipline. He was a reactionist to the Atomist[35] approach of the time that broke the world and self down into finer and finer details. Wertheimer saw that instead of seeing details and building them up to be a picture, we in fact see the whole of something before we see the parts. This means that our 'world' is neither 'outside' nor is it purely 'inside' but a meeting of the two as we move attention from gestalt object to object. Wertheimer did not know about Buddhism, or he would surely have seen the striking similarity with the Buddha's view, and been interested to examine how this process creates Samsāra.

**Kurt Koffka, "Perception: An introduction to the *Gestalt-theorie*", 1922.**[36] Koffka was one of the three founding fathers of Gestalt perception. In this classic paper for 50+ pages Koffka argues the case for the anti-atomist stance. Particularly relevant to our discussion here is his insistence on the importance of

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[34] Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950).

[35] The Atomist view is the idea that we process large amounts of details, and draw from that our perception.

[36] Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the *Gestalt-theorie*** (1922) (First published in *Psychological Bulletin*, *19).*

'attention', which as manasikāra in Pāli is one of the four mental aspects of nāma-rūpa. He also looks at the consequences of any perception, as they brighten the mind or otherwise – in striking similarity to the Buddha's teaching on Kusala/Akusala.

> It is evident what judgments will follow from each of these experiences: (1) Judgment of equality; (2) left darker (or right brighter); (3) left brighter (right darker), and (4) uncertain.[37]

In a later work, in 1928, writing on the nature of the Unconscious, Koffka also brilliantly works into the theory the element that we know in Buddhism as Saṅkhāra (in the meaning as 'mind states') – the current state of the mind that affects ones reaction to a particular Gestalt:

> The internal conditions may be processes themselves. [48] My reaction to music, e.g., will be different when I am writing an important letter from what it would be, if I were dancing. Thus the processes of writing and dancing are conditions of my reactions.[38]

**Howard Robinson, "Perception" 1994.**[39] In the 'Problems of Philosophy' series of publications this book argues for another essential element of PS – Sense Input. While Gestalt looks at the whole picture, including the mental structures of perceiving, Robinson makes a good case for the importance of the naked information coming through the sense doors themselves. He examines the main lines of opinion on perception from the realist, idealist and phenomenologist points of view. His book is a thorough summary of the philosophical understanding of perception over the last two hundred years.

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[37] Ibid., p. 542.

[38] Kurt Koffka, **On the Structure of the Unconscious**, (Originally published in: *The Unconscious. A Symposium,* (1928), New York: Alfred A. Knopf), p.48.

[39] Howard Robinson, **Perception** (London: Routledge, 1994).

## 1.7 Research Methodology

1.7.1 Gather information on PS and definitions of terms of PS using the primary sources of the Sutta Pitaka.

1.7.2 Collect information from classical secondary sources that aid the interpretation of PS.

1.7.3 Map clearly the relationship between PS and Gestalt perception.

1.7.4 Conclude with what Gestalt perception theory has to contribute to the understanding of PS. Similarly we will be able to show what PS has to contribute to Gestalt perception and the wider field of modern cognitive studies.

## 1.8 Expected Findings and Advantages of the Study

The following outcomes and advantages should be obtained:

1.8.1 Understanding what PS is according to the definitions found in the suttas.

1.8.2 Understanding the principle of Gestalt perception.

1.8.3 Understanding the common and divergent ground between Gestalt perception and PS.

# Chapter II

# Examination of Paṭiccasamuppāda in the Suttas

The teaching of PS in Theravada Buddhism is inconsistent due to there being several interpretations, which are very different, and rely on varying definitions of the terms. Additionally there are many suttas that do not adhere to the standard twelve link outline, and which seem to give very different impressions of the real meaning behind PS. Nonetheless, this doctrine is not just one of many in Buddhism, but one central to the essence of the dhamma; insight into which reveals the Four Noble Truths and the path to enlightenment.[1]

## 2.1 The Difficult Teaching

There is a classic teaching given to Ananda by the Buddha that shows, even for him, the Buddha's own assistant, that the teaching on PS is difficult to understand fully.

> Wonderful, Lord, marvellous, is the depth of this Causal Law[2] and how deep it appears. And yet it appears so clear to me.
> Say not so Ananda, say not so! This principle of Causal Law is a profound teaching, hard to see. It is through not knowing, understanding or penetrating this teaching that beings are confused like a tangled thread,

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[1] Bhikkhu Bodhi**, The Great Discourse on Causation – The Mahanidāna Sutta and its Commentaries**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1984), p. 9-10.

[2] Paṭiccasamuppāda has been translated many different ways: Causal Law, Dependent Origination, Dependent Genesis, Conditioned Arising, and more.

> thrown together like bundles of threads, caught as in a net, and cannot escape hell, the nether worlds and the wheel of Samsara.[3]

Ananda, at the time of this sutta, is said to have been a Stream-Enterer (Sotapanna), and one well known for his wisdom. Yet even he was not able to understand the full meaning and importance of the teaching. The commentary to the Mahanidāna version of this event in the fifteenth sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya remarks that the 'Say not so!' comment above intimates both praise and reproach; praise that he is able to gain a clear understanding of the teaching, and reproach that there yet are levels to its ramifications that he is not able to grasp.[4]

Adding further to the Buddha's declaration of the subtlety of this teaching, after his Enlightenment, the Buddha famously declared that this teaching was too difficult for anyone to understand:

> This Dhamma, won to by me is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond dialectic, subtle, intelligible to the learned. But this is a generation delighting in sensual pleasure, delighted by sensual pleasure, rejoicing in sensual pleasure. So that for a generation delighting thusly this is a matter difficult to see, namely the Causal Arising. This too is a matter difficult to see, namely the calming of all sankhāra, the casting off of all attachment, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna. And so if I were to teach Dhamma and others were not to understand me, this would be wearysome and a vexation to me.[5]

The 'depth of teaching' (desanāgambhīratā) given as an attribute of PS in the commentary to the Mahānidāna Sutta is attributed in Bhikkhu Bodhi's book on the

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[3] S II 91, D II 55

[4] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Great Discourse on Causation – The Mahanidāna Sutta and its Commentaries**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1984), p.12.

[5] Vin. IV 6.

sutta as being twofold: First "by the complexity of the subject itself, which only reveals its multiple facets when illuminated from various angles" and then also on an individual level – "by the persons being taught, who can only understand the teaching when its presentation is adapted to their needs and capacities."[6]

Yet despite it being labelled as difficult to understand, it is nonetheless, almost synonymous with Dhamma itself:

> Whoever sees Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma; whosoever sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Origination.[7]

Despite the variances in interpretation, both original sutta versions and later interpretations and explanations, PS always refers specifically to experience as a *process*, rather than a Cartesian split between experience and an experiencer (a self). Richard Gombrich discusses this over the course of several pages[8], noting that:

> Certainly, if one thing is clear about the doctrine of conditioned origination it is that even in the Pali Canon it has several interpretations. What they have in common is that the doctrine explains processes, and how they occur in a non-random manner. [9]

As a description of *process* PS can be summarised into a simple statement of causation, which occurs many times[10] throughout the suttas:

> Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti – imasuppāda idaṃ upajjati

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[6] Bhikkhu Bodhi 1984, op. cit., p.12.

[7] M I 191.

[8] Richard F. Gombrich, **How Buddhism Began – The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings**, (London & New York: Routledge 1996), p. 45-48.

[9] Ibid p.47.

[10] Bhikkhu Bodhi 1984, op. cit., p.10.

> Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti – Imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati
> Where there is this, that is – with the arising of this, that arises
> When this is not, neither is that – with the cessation of this, that ceases[11]

This process seems to be applicable to Dhamma as a whole, rather than to one particular aspect. That is to say that the principle of one thing being the foundation for another is a deep principle of Dhamma that is fairly ubiquitous in the teachings. Thus it might well be possible to apply the teaching of PS as a process in a variety of ways, including as a process occurring over many lifetimes, or in one instant; as a way of describing society's ills (as we will examine later) or as a causal process leading to cessation and *nibbāna*. On this Rupert Gethin notes:

> ... we can attempt to distinguish the stages within a stage, the processes that make up the process. Now what the early ābhidhammikas tell us they saw when they did precisely this is more of the same. The more one focuses in on a process and tries to observe the processes operating within a process, the more one comes to see that all small scale processes are essentially reflections of large scale processes. This, it seems, is the kind of thinking that underlies the view of Paṭiccasamuppāda (which is found in the early Abhidhamma) as extending over a period of time or as being descriptive of a single arising of consciousness. The processes that operate in the microcosm are the same as the processes that operate in the macrocosm - dhammas are only Dhamma. In fact there is only one process-wherever one looks and however closely one looks there is only Dhamma.[12]

The many different applications and variations of PS that this work will look at would indeed suggest that one takes PS to be a generalised process that can be applied to many situations and dhammas. The difficulty of the terms may not, in that

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[11] S II 28 – this is one of many instances of this key phrase.

[12] R.M.L. Gethin, **The Buddhist Path to Awakening**, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications 2001), p.350-1.

case, be an impediment to the understanding of PS in understanding Dhamma and engaging in meditation practise.

## 2.2 The Meaning of the Term Paṭiccasamuppāda

The Pali Text Society's dictionary has a lengthy entry for the term Paṭiccasamuppāda, presented here in shortened form outlining the key concepts :

> Paṭicca -- samuppāda ... "arising on the grounds of (a preceding cause)" happening by way of cause, working of cause & effect, causal chain of causation; causal genesis, dependent origination, theory of the twelve causes. -- ... The term usually occurs applied to dukkha in a famous formula which expresses the Buddhist doctrine of evolution, the respective stages of which are conditioned by a preceding cause & constitute themselves the cause of resulting effect, ... The Paṭicca -- samuppāda is also called the Nidāna ("basis," or "ground," i.e. cause) doctrine, or the Paccay' ākāra ("related -- condition"), and is referred to in the Suttas as Ariya -- ñāya ("the noble method or system").[13]

The Visuddhimagga gives a slightly different connotation, rather typical of the commentarial tradition, suggesting that PS implies an unambiguous link between causes and effects:

> Because particular states are produced by particular conditions, neither less not more, it is called *reality* (suchness). Because one of the conditions have been met in combination there is no non-producing, even for an instant, of the states they generate, it is called *not unreality* (not unsuchness). Because there is no arising of one state with another state's conditions, it is called *not otherness*. Because there is a condition, or because there is a total

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[13] Pali Text Society**, The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary** (London: PTS, 1921-1925), p.394.

> of conditions, for these states beginning with ageing and death as already stated, it is called *specific conditionality*.[14]

The term 'paṭicca' itself has the meaning of 'supporting', rather than the idea of 'cause' as is commonly understood. The PTS has the following entry:

> Paṭicca [ger. of pacceti, paṭi+i; cp. BSk. pratītya] grounded on, on account of, concerning, because (with acc.) M I 265 (etaṇ on these grounds)[15]

This has wider meaning than 'cause' alone. With a cause the presence of one thing will lead to the presence of another phenomenon. For example the presence of gravity will cause apples to fall to the ground, rather than sending them up into the air. But with PS we see that one factor does not necessitate the following factors. So for instance, the apple *tree* is a supporting factor of the apple falling to the ground, but is not usually seen as the *cause* of the apple falling. And the flow from cause to effect is not inevitable either - as we will see later, some of the suttas on PS will allow for the yogi to interrupt the process, so that birth and dukkha do not eventuate. If this were not so it would be impossible for enlightenment to occur.

An example of a dependent condition, as opposed to a causal condition, might be a University teacher, who relies on a bus to get him to University, where he teaches a class. The bus is a supporting condition, but in no way is it a 'cause' of his teaching the class.

However looking at things in reverse causation (paṭilomaṃ), we can see that for one thing to occur, there may be dependent conditions that are inescapable. For example, for a car crash to occur, there must be a moving car. The moving car is a

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[14] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.), **The Path of Purification**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1991), p.527.

[15] Ibid., p.394.

necessary condition for the car crash to happen, but is not the cause – the cause might be another car, or an inconveniently situated tree.

The samuppāda part of PS carries a similar connotation, suggesting the point where something can arise, rather than a strict cause (hetu):

> Samuppāda [saŋ+uppāda] origin, arising, genesis, coming to be, production [16]

Thus it seems most appropriate at this juncture to stay with the most common translation of PS : 'Dependent Origination', even though there are many viable alternative translations. The Dictionary of Buddhism has the following translations for the term:

> Paṭiccasamuppāda : Dependent Origination; the Law of Causation; the Chain of Causation; the Law of Dependent Arising; the Chain of Phenomenal Cause and Effect; the Conditional Arising and Cessation of All Phenomena.[17]

For one last translation of the term paṭiccasamuppāda, a final note from Bhikkhu Bodhi's presentation of the Mahā Nidāna Sutta gives a good case for the rendering of PS as 'supporting states':

> Specific conditionality is a relationship of indispensability and dependency: the indispensability of the condition (e.g. birth) to the arisen state (e.g. ageing and death), the dependency of the arisen state upon its condition...[The Sutta] shows conditionality determined negatively, as the impossibility of the dependent state appearing in the absence of its

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[16] Ibid., p.688.

[17] P.A. Payutto, **Dictionary of Buddhism,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 2008), p.335.

condition. Other suttas characterize conditionality in more positive terms, as a contributory influence passing from the condition to the dependent state. ... Elsewhere more is added. The condition originates (samudaya) the dependent state, provides it with a source (nidāna), generates it (ṅitika), gives it being (padhāna), nourishes it (āhāra), acts as its foundation (upanisā), causes it to surge (upayāpeti).[18]

## 2.3 The Standard Twelve Link Paṭiccasamuppāda

The teaching of the Buddha was initially passed on primarily in the oral tradition. Whilst the Western academic tradition tends to value something only when it has been written down, we can speculate that the oral tradition of record keeping has a number of advantages over the written form of record.

- Being recited together rather than scratched on leaves or parchment, the teaching is not susceptible to fire, water, rot or insect damage
- When a monk or nun makes a mistake, they hear themselves out of synchronisation with the other chanters, and so can make the necessary correction. If a mistake is made in writing, it is copied into all subsequent copies.
- The recitation both brings the teaching more fully to the chanter's mind and memory, and beings the community together to perform the group recitation.
- The teachings are more accessible to a population that was generally illiterate.

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[18] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Great Discourse on Causation – The Mahanidāna Sutta and its Commentaries**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1984), p.12.

Indeed, the scriptures were only written down in completion by Buddhagosa when there were too few monks to perform the recitations. The way the suttas are divided into Vagga, or recitation sections, enabled the Bhikkhus to memorise various sections for chanting, that were shared with other monks. This lead to the formulation of 'stock phrases' where certain definitions and formulas were given identical renderings across many suttas, as a mnemonic device. PS is no different, and the standard formula that we find across countless suttas is in twelve links. Gethin comments on this tradition of making stock phrases:

> ...This research has drawn attention to the way in which an oral literature is built up around and by means of stock formulaic phrases and passages. Certainly this feature is much in evidence in the Pali canon ... The lists can perhaps be seen as a counterpart in a prose oral literature to the metrical formulas in a verse literature. Both provide a vehicle for the reciter and inform the literature with a structure and, in the case of the lists, what is almost a system of cross-referencing that prevents the reciter from losing his way[19]

The stock formula of the twelve links runs as follows[20]:

**Chart (i)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ignorance (avijjā) | With ignorance as condition, Volitional impulses [come to be] |
| 2 | Volitional Impulses (saṅkhāra) | With Volitional Impulses as condition, Consciousness |
| 3 | Consciousness (viññāṇa) | With Consciousness as condition, Name-form |
| 4 | Name-form (nāmarūpa) | With Name-form as condition, the Six Senses |

[19] R.M.L. Gethin, op.cit., p.13.

[20] Passim Theravada Tipitaka. Usually the formula is given in the simple stock formula. However, as we will see there are many suttas that discuss PS in special ways, with many variations on this stock sequence. The four cycles outlined below can be found together in M I 261.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | Six Senses (salāyatana) | With the Six Sense as condition, Contact |
| 6 | Contact (phassa) | With Contact as condition, Feeling |
| 7 | Feeling (vedanā) | With Feeling as condition, Craving |
| 8 | Craving (taṇhā) | With Craving as condition, Clinging |
| 9 | Clinging (upādāna) | With Clinging as condition, Being |
| 10 | Being (bhava) | With Being as condition, Birth |
| 11 | Birth (jāti) | With Birth as condition, Ageing and Death |
| 12 | Ageing and Death (jarāmaraṇa) | Expanded to : ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair |

The above formula shows how Dukkha of the Four Noble Truths comes to be. There is no 'self' or atman involved. The human condition arises from ignorance, and from ignorance it can cease, as in the reverse cycle shown below:

**Chart (ii)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | | Age/Death |
| 2 | Does Ageing and Death have a [requisite] condition? | Birth |
| 3 | Does Birth have a condition? | Being |
| 4 | Does Being have a condition? | Clinging |
| 5 | Does Clinging have a condition? | Craving |
| 6 | Does Craving have a condition? | Feeling |
| 7 | Does Feeling have a condition? | Contact |
| 8 | Does Contact have a condition? | Six Senses |
| 9 | Does the Six Senses have a condition? | Name-form |
| 10 | Does Name-form have a condition? | Consciousness |
| 11 | Does Consciousness have a condition? | Volitional Impulses |
| 12 | Does Volitional Impulses have a condition? | Ignorance |

[21]

[21] M I 262.

This reverse cycle is important in one special way that distinguishes it from the first cycle outlined above. For Ageing and Death to occur, there must be birth, and so on. When we apply this to some of the links however we see a direct causal link, that is not so definite in the first cycle. For example, for taṇhā to arise, there must be vedanā; but the reverse of this is not necessarily true – if there is vedanā there need not necessarily be taṇhā.

Now we come to the stock phrasal form of the cessation cycle. We will see later that a number of suttas offer very different formulas for how to break the cycle and attain to nibbāna. But the stock phrase is as follows:

**Chart (iii)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | | Ignorance |
| 2 | With the fading and cessation of Ignorance comes the cessation of Volitional Impulses | Volitional Impulses |
| 3 | With the fading and cessation of Volitional Impulses comes the cessation of Name-form | Name-form |
| 4 | With the fading and cessation of Name-form comes the cessation of Consciousness | Consciousness |
| 5 | With the fading and cessation of Consciousness comes the cessation of the Six Senses | Six Senses |
| 6 | With the fading and cessation of the Six Senses comes the cessation of Contact | Contact |
| 7 | With the fading and cessation of Contact comes the cessation of Feeling | Feeling |
| 8 | With the fading and cessation of Feeling comes the cessation of Craving | Craving |
| 9 | With the fading and cessation of Craving comes the cessation of Clinging | Clinging |
| 10 | With the fading and cessation of Clinging comes the cessation of Being | Being |
| 11 | With the fading and cessation of Being comes the cessation | Birth |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | of Birth | |
| 12 | With the fading and cessation of Birth comes the cessation of Ageing and Death | Ageing and Death |

[22]

And for a sense of completion, there is similarly a cessation mode cycle in reverse:

**Chart (iv)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Do Ageing and Death cease with the cessation of Birth? | Ageing and Death |
| 2 | Does Birth cease with the cessation of Being? | Birth |
| 3 | Does Being cease with the cessation of Clinging? | Being |
| 4 | Does Clinging cease with the cessation of Craving? | Clinging |
| 5 | Does Craving cease with the cessation of Feeling? | Craving |
| 6 | Does Feeling cease with the cessation of Contact? | Feeling |
| 7 | Does Contact cease with the cessation of the Six Senses? | Contact |
| 8 | Do the Six Senses cease with the cessation of Name-form? | Six Senses |
| 9 | Does Name-form cease with the cessation of Consciousness? | Name-form |
| 10 | Does Consciousness cease with the cessation of Volitional Impulses? | Consciousness |
| 11 | Do Volitional Impulses cease with the cessation of Ignorance? | Volitional Impulses |
| 12 | | Ignorance |

[23]

There are a number of translations for the terms above. Below are the most common translations, as used by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Thanissaro Bhikkhu (whole online translations are available at www.accesstoinsight.org) and Mrs Rhys Davids who is one of the original PTS translators.

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[22] M I 264.

[23] M I 264.

**Chart (v)**

| | Bodhi | Thanissaro | Davids |
|---|---|---|---|
| avijjā | Ignorance | Ignorance | Ignorance |
| saṅkhāra | Formations | Fabrications | Activities |
| viññāṇa | Consciousness | Consciousness | Consciousness |
| nāmarūpa | Mentality-materiality | Name-&-Form | Name-and-shape |
| salāyatana | Sixfold Base | Six Sense Media | Sixfold Sense |
| phassa | Contact | Contact | Contact |
| vedanā | Feeling | Feeling | Feeling |
| taṇhā | Craving | Craving | Craving |
| upādāna | Clinging | Clinging | Grasping |
| bhava | Being | Becoming | Becoming |
| jāti | Birth | Birth | Birth |
| jarāmaraṇa | Ageing and Death[24] | Aging and Death | Age-and-death |

A few notes on other renderings:

- Nāradha Mahā Thera follows the Davids rendering saṇkhara as 'Activities'.
- Maurice Walshe (a translator of the Dīgha Nikāya) renders nāmarūpa as 'Mind-and-body'.
- Saṇkhāra can also be rendered as 'Volitional Impulses'

For reasons that will become plain in this thesis, I have used my own renderings of the terms. Firstly I use Name-form for nāmarūpa, as it connotes a single gestalt, rather than a Cartesian split between body and mind. I shall also use 'Contacting' for phassa, since it connotes a more active participation in the experience than simply 'contact'; which is a point vital to a gestalt interpretation of PS. Similarly for saṇkhāra I will use the term 'Volitional Impulses' as it connotes a determined

[24] Note that the last clause can be spelled 'ageing' or 'aging' – both versions are correct.

activity initiated from the mind - which again, is a key concept when we come to compare with gestalt perception.

## 2.4 The Three Lifetime Interpretation (Commentarial)

Since there are so many different usages and applications of PS throughout the suttas, and because some of the key terms are not well defined, there have arisen a number of interpretations. The most common of these portrays PS as covering a time span of three lifetimes, and is taken from the account of PS given in the commentary Visuddhimagga.[25] Payutto calls this "The Standard Model", which is an apt description considering its widespread acceptance.[26]

The interpretation of the key terms in this interpretation is paramount to the understanding as spanning three lifetimes. These key terms are as follows:

**Chart (vi)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| avijjā | Ignorance in past lives | Past life<br>(Past cause) |
| saṅkhāra | Actions in Past lives | Past life<br>(Past cause) |
| viññāṇa | Relinking consciousness that enters the womb | Present life<br>(Present result) |
| nāmarūpa | Formation of body and mind as an embryo | Present life<br>(Present result) |
| salāyatana | Development and enjoyment of the six senses | Present life<br>(Present result) |
| phassa | Contact with the world through the | Present life |

[25] Vism XVII, 287-298.

[26] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.26.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | six senses | (Present result) |
| vedanā | Liking, disliking or neutral feeling arising on contact | Present life (Present result) |
| taṇhā | Craving arising due to liking and disliking | Present life (Present cause) |
| upādāna | Clinging, especially to sense desires | Present life (Present cause) |
| bhava | Entry into the womb in the next life | Future life (Future cause) |
| jāti | Birth in the next life | Future life (Future result) |
| jarāmaraṇa | Ageing, sickness and death of the future life | Future life (Future result) |

[27]

There are several salient points governing this interpretation. First, is the term saṅkhāra, which is given a special meaning here that is different from its use in other teachings such as the five khandha or as the term in the Pali phrase 'sabbe saṅkhāra anicca' (all formations are impermanent). Here saṅkhāra the same meaning as 'kamma', which is to say 'past actions'– but nowhere else in the Pali texts does saṅkhāra refer specifically to the past.

Secondly, viññāṇa is redefined to mean relinking consciousness (patisandhi), rather than the six fields of consciousness that arise in the present moment.

Third, nāma-rūpa is taken to mean an embryo as it develops a physical body and a mind in the womb (giving it essentially the same meaning as bhava). As we will see below, this definition of nāma-rūpa is highly unlikely to be accurate.

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[27] Ibid., p.39.

Given the above schematic, the cycle can only be broken at the point of ignorance, which would prevent the whole chain from occurring, or at craving, thus preventing the rebirth in the next life. As we will see later, these are not the only ways in which the sutta descriptions of PS allow for the transcendence of suffering.

Further, although this process is referred to as a cycle by Venerable Payutto, as is common, there is little effort to describe exactly how death would lead to ignorance – death would either lead to bhava or to relinking consciousness, which two links have essentially the same meaning in this interpretation.

On this topic Venerable Payutto says,

> The last factor becomes a crucial link in the further continuation of the cycle. Specifically, sorrow, lamentation and so on are all manifestations of the outflows [āsava]. These outflows are four in number, namely: the concern with the gratification of the desires of the five senses (kāmāsava); attachment to views or beliefs, for example that the body is the self of belonging to the self (diṭṭhāsava); desire for various states of being and the aspiration to attain and maintain them (bhavāsava); and ignorance of the way things are (avijjāsava).[28]

Taking the first āsava (outflow of the five senses) to be a cause for ignorance, which will in turn facilitate the six senses (step 5 in the 12 links) seems to be cyclical reasoning, and not in the good way. "Sorrow and suffering," he continues on the same page, means "the mind becomes confused and muddled." Such effort to connect the 12th link suffering, back with the first link ignorance, is admirable, but has very little basis in the suttas. The presentation of PS as a 'cycle' therefore, appears feeble, compared to a more linear interpretation where continual ignorance leads to continual suffering.

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[28] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.32.

A further limitation with this three lifetime model is that most of the suttas that deal with PS in anything other than the stock formula, do not include all the above 12 links. The Māgandiyasutta is a good example as the Buddha gives an alternative version of PS to the wanderer Māgandiya, after the Simile of the Cloth[29]. In this case the opening link is in fact the five khandha, which are clung to, followed by:

> ... with my clinging as condition, being [comes to be]; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation pain, grief and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.[30]

Here, as in many other instances we see the principle of PS as occurring in the present moment, without reference to past or future lives.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu argues vociferously against the three lifetime model of PS in his book on the topic – saying in clear terms how such a view is incorrect, and that PS should be interpreted purely according to a momentary model.

> We can say that there may be two kinds of Paticcasamuppada. The first kind is inflated or incorrectly explained so that it cannot be practiced. Such an incorrectly explained theory has been taught for a thousand years. The second or correctly explained kind of Paticcasamuppada is explained according to the Buddha's intentions. It can be practised here and now.[31]

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[29] In this famous simile the Buddha compares a man who enjoys the senses as being like a blind man who is sold a dirty cloth and told it is a clean white cloth. Later, regaining his eyesight, the man realises his mistaken judgement.

[30] M I 252.

[31] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans.Steve Schmidt) **Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination** (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992), p.7-8.

Buddhadasa places the blame for what he considers the 'incorrect' explanation of PS firmly at the foot of the commentarial tradition.

> In studying Dependent Origination, it is necessary to take the original Pali Scriptures as a foundation. Don't surrender to the commentaries with your eyes and ears closed. Don't submit yourself one hundred percent to later works, such as the Visuddhimagga. ... [we must follow scripture] in a way consistent with the advice given by the Buddha in the Kalama Sutta, and according to the principle of mahapadesa as given in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. According to this principle of mahapadesa, anything which is not in accord with the major part of the Dhamma-Vinaya (the teaching and the discipline) should be regarded as heard incorrectly, remembered incorrectly, explained incorrectly or taught incorrectly, as the case may be.

Buddhadasa continues at length his refutation of the three lifetime model, including questioning the translation of viññāṇa as 'relinking consciousness', which he says is tantamount to being an eternalist in view by considering that one has a self that will travel from lifetime to lifetime.[32]

We can summarise Buddhadasa's view of the three lifetime model (which Payutto calls 'the Standard Model') in his own words:

> If we take all the discourses that deal with Dependent Origination and examine them together, it will be clearly seen that it is not at all necessary for Dependent Origination to cover three lifetimes (according to the language of relative truth).

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[32] Ibid., p.12.

> Paticcasamuppada is a momentary and sudden (khanika-vassa) matter, not an eternal matter.[33]

Bhikkhu Bodhi is less critical of the three lifetime model, taking it as an example of the *principle* of dependent conditions, rather than a purposeful description of rebirth. In this he follows the Visuddhimagga which also allows for interpretation of key terms as consistent with both a three lifetime and a momentary model[34]. Here the three lifetime model in fact only appears as a distinct explanation after a lengthy treatment of all twelve terms in a general sense, not in a lifetime specific sense. He summarises:

> To prevent misunderstanding it has to be stressed that the distribution of the twelve factors into three lives is an expository device employed for the purpose of exhibiting the inner dynamics of the round. It should not be read as implying hard and fast divisions, for in lived experience the factors are always intertwined. The past causes include craving, clinging, and existence, the present ones ignorance and volitional formations; the present resultants begin with birth and end in death, and future birth and death will be incurred by the same resultants.[35]

In summary we can see that the Standard Model seems to be a later explanation of the twelve links of PS. As we find PS in the suttas to be of many varieties and forms it was presumably a very flexible teaching showing the principle of how a sense of self arises without there being a permanent atman on which to rely. Critics of the Standard Model interpretation feel that Dhamma should be 'apparent here and now', rather than something pertaining to many lifetimes.

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[33] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans.Steve Schmidt) **Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination,** (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992), p. 14.

[34] Vism XVII 58-272.

[35] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Great Discourse on Causation – The Mahanidāna Sutta and its Commentaries**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1984), p. 11.

There are several other ways to categorise the standard 12 links of PS:

**Chart (vii)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 3 periods (addhā) | 1. past (avijjā, saṅkhāra)<br>2. present (viññāṇa, nāmarūpa, salāyatana, phassa, vedanā, taṇhā, upādāna, bhava)<br>3. (jāti, jarāmaraṇa) |
| 4 sections (saṇkhepa) | 1. past cause (avijjā, saṅkhāra)<br>2. past effect (viññāṇa, nāmarūpa, salāyatana, phassa, vedanā,)<br>3. present cause (taṇhā, upādāna, bhava)<br>4. future effect (jāti, jarāmaraṇa) |
| 3 links (sandhi) | 1. between past cause and present effect<br>2. between present effect and present cause<br>3. present cause and future effect |
| 3 cycles (vaṭṭa) | 1. round of defilements (kilesa)<br>2. round of kamma<br>3. round of results (vipāka) |
| 20 modes (ākāra) | 1-5 past cause (avijjā, saṅkhāra, taṇhā, upādāna, bhava)<br>6-10 present effects (viññāṇa, nāmarūpa, salāyatana, phassa, vedanā)<br>11-15 present cause (avijjā, saṅkhāra, taṇhā, upādāna, bhava)<br>16-20 future effects (viññāṇa, nāmarūpa, salāyatana, phassa, vedanā) |
| 2 roots (mūla) | 1. ignorance - cause from the past to present (avijjā)<br>2. craving - cause from present to future (taṇhā) |

[36]

## 2.5 The Momentary Model

[36] P. A. Payutto, **Dictionary of Buddhism,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.340.

In this interpretation of PS the whole process, all twelve links, happen in one instant rather than being spread over lifetimes. In this way it is supposed to be more relevant to the meditator, as one can observe the process happening in the present moment. Payutto comments in the opening chapter of his work on PS:

> [the instantaneous model is]...demonstrating a process which is continually occurring ... this interpretation gives a more profound and practical definition of the terms with emphasis on the present moment, which is considered to be the real objective of the teaching. This kind of interpretation is supported by teachings in numerous Suttas, and in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka there are passages which describe the entire Dependent Origination process in one mind moment.[37]

Later in the same book Payutto introduces the momentary model thus:

> Those who do not agree with this [three lifetime] interpretation, or who would prefer something more immediate, can find alternatives not only in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, where the principle of Dependent Origination is shown occurring in its entirety in one mind moment, but can also interpret the very same words of the Buddha used to support the standard model in a different light, giving a very different picture of the principle of Dependent Origination, one which is supported by teachings and scriptural references from other sources.[38]

Payutto cites the Visuddhimagga verses 517-586, and the Vibhanga Attakathha 130-213 for the canonical description of this process as occurring in one instant. The latter is not available in English translation as of 2017. The Visudhimagga however, Payutto suggests, in the passages cited, does not

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[37] P.A. Payutto (B. Evans translation), **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.10.

[38] Ibid., p.41.

categorically specify a momentary interpretation as being correct, but instead leaves the definitions of the terms open to interpretation. For instance, the term saṅkhāra is important as to whether it pertains to actions in past lives or in the present moment; but the Visudhimagga leaves options open by giving a definition of saṅkhāra merely as *volitional action of various categories*.[39] A good example of this is:

> As regards the [saṅkhāra] ... three, the bodily formation is bodily volition, the verbal formation is verbal volitions, and the mental formation is mental volition. This triad is mentioned in order to show that at the moment of the accumulation of the kamma the formations of merit, etc., occur in these three kamma doors.[40]

Here we can see that the meaning of saṅkhāra can be viewed as being in the instant, or across variable spans of time – it is not specified.

With the term jāti, the Visuddhimagga passages cited by Payutto tends to favour the three lifetime model.

> The two things, ignorance and craving, should be understood as the root of this Wheel of Becoming. Of the derivation from the past, ignorance is the root and feeling the end. And of the continuation into the future, craving is the root and ageing-and-death the end.... The past, the present and the future are its three times. Of these it should be understood that, according to what is given as such in the texts, the two factors ignorance and 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.[41]

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[39] Vism 530-545.

[40] Vism 530.

[41] Visuddhimagga, Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (trans.), **Path of Purification**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 2011), p.600.

Other sections of the Visuddhimagga favour the three lifetime model too. It lists various kinds of dependency, one of which is called 'presence condition'. Here it mentions "at the time of descent into the womb mentality and materiality [are a condition, as presence condition] for each other." [42] This is drawing a clear correlation to name-form and jāti as rebirth.

Payutto notes there are some good supporting reasons to favour the momentary model, such as the "immediacy of the end of suffering and the sorrowless state of the Arahant are states which can arise in this present life."[43] Indeed, this point is very pertinent to our later examination of Gestalt, since according to PS all twelve links (or variant versions) of PS have to be seen to cease here and now, in order for enlightenment to occur.

As we have seen above, the term saṅkhāra can be interpreted as either pertaining to past life actions (standard model), or to current actions (momentary model). But the term jāti is more difficult to see in terms of the momentary model, as we will see later in this chapter. Let it suffice for the present to give Payutto's "preliminary definition"[44] of what is meant by birth at this point:

> Birth – clear recognition of emergence in a state of existence; identification with the states of life of modes of conduct, and the resulting sense of one who enjoys, occupies or experiences them.[45]

On this issue of birth, Ajahn Brahmvamso in his paper on Dependent Origination, points out that a large part of the argument for viewing PS in the

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[42] Ibid., p.557.

[43] P.A. Payutto (B. Evans translation), **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.42.

[44] Ibid., p.43.

[45] Ibid., p.44.

momentary model is down to the two words 'sanditthika' and 'akalika' which mean 'seen here and now' and 'immediate' respectively.[46] Ajahn Brahm goes on in the section on this topic, to cite examples where these two terms apply to spans of time the length of a human life, rather than purely the present instant; thus taking the two terms to mean 'in this very life.'

This leads him to conclude that jāti (birth) carries the meaning of the regular English term. He does not equate the first three links of PS to birth however, hence leaving us open to what we might call a two lifetime model – where the first links are here and now in this life and experience.

> Again, it is quite clear here that birth means what we would normally consider to it to be: the arising in the human realm of a being in the womb. [47]

On a last point from Ven. Payutto's book on PS, he cites as support for the momentary model of interpretation the Abhidhamma account as found in the Vibhanga, verses 225-354. This section deals extensively with PS in typical Abhidhamma fashion – with long repetitive lists. But it does so frequently dropping links, or changing links to alternative terms and meanings.[48]

By far the most vociferous proponent of the momentary model is Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, as outlined in a book of his (based on his talks on the topic) called Practical Dependent Origination.[49] His primary criticism of the three lifetime model is that is suggests there is some kind of self that transmigrates across

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[46]Ajahn Brahmvamso, **Paticca-samuppada – Dependent Origination**, (Thailand: Wat Pah Nanachat, 2005), Ch. 4.

[47] Ibid., section: The Meaning of the Twelve Factors, as Defined by the Buddha.

[48] U. Thittila, **The Book of Analysis**, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1988), p.180-250.

[49] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, **Paticcasamuppada – Practical Dependent Origination**, (Bangkok: Thammasapa 1992).

lifetimes.[50] He states that if one looks at the suttas directly "it is not at all necessary for Dependent Origination to cover three lifetimes," since Dhamma is 'sanditthiko', or 'apparent here and now'[51] Consciousness, in PS, Buddhadasa goes on to argue, cannot mean a transmigatory self of any kind; it must mean simply sense consciousness that arises with sense contact:

> The kind of rebirth consciousness (patisandhi viññāṇa) which is a self does not appear in the language of Paticccasamuppada. Therefore, the word "consciousness" (viññāṇa) in Dependent Origination is taken to refer to the six kinds of consciousness which arise with sense contact.[52]

His point is valid, in that sutta versions of PS omit any mention of 'relinking'. He continues on the same page to explain, that if we introduce the term 'relinking' at all, it should mean simply relinking from the previous moment, not from the previous rebirth.

The other crucial term in the momentary model Buddhadasa teaches, is 'birth', which in his opinion means birth in the present moment, in the way that Payutto described above:

> *Paticcasamuppada* is a momentary and sudden (*khanika-vassa*) matter, not an eternal matter. Therefore, the word jāti, to be born, must refer to the birth in the moment of one revolution of Dependent Origination in the daily life of ordinary people, which is today when mindfulness is absent and when there is sense contact as explained ... it's easy to know: when greed , anger or delusion arise, then the self is born in on "life" already.[53]

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[50] Ibid., p.8.

[51] Ibid., p.14.

[52] Ibid., p.12.

[53] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, **Paticcasamuppada – Practical Dependent Origination**, (Bangkok: Thammasapa 199), p.14.

Once there is a defilement, he continues, there will be one turn of the wheel of Dependent Origination. He lays much of the blame for the wrong interpretation of the standard model of PS at the feet of Buddhagosa, since "there are no works older than the *Visuddhimagga* which offer such an explanation."[54]

In summary we can see that the momentary model of PS has its strong and weak points, just as the three lifetime model does. In terms of object perception, both versions include the arising of a figure in ground, and the cascade of reactions that follow (feeling, craving, thinking etc..). The juncture where the object arises, however, is different for each model, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 4.

## 2.6 Analysis of the Terms

Following is an analysis of the key twelve terms of PS, as they appear in the suttas. The justification for going back to the suttas for definitions and context for this teaching follows Buddhadasa's note quoted above, that before Buddhagosa and the Visuddhimagga, there is no explicit mention of a three lifetime model interpretation of PS. We take then, that the Pali suttas are the closest we can get to the original teachings of the Buddha, and hence the place we can find the most original definitions of terms.

It should be clearly noted however, that even in the suttas there are many, many different formulations of PS. The key twelve terms are not the only ones used, and they do appear in a variety of contexts and sequences, with correspondingly adjusted definitions.

For standard definitions of terms we will look to the Majjhimanikāya sutta 9: Sammādiṭṭhisutta as the building block for the sutta definition independent of the

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[54] Ibid., p.21.

model of interpretation[55]. This sutta, ascribed to venerable Sariputta, curiously, does not mention PS by name, but in fact goes through each of the standard twelve links in turn, giving a definition for all of the terms. Understanding each of these terms according to this definition is considered to be 'right view' in the sutta.[56] On this basis we can understand that the definitions given in this sutta, if not the exclusive definition, can be considered to be correct in terms of right view. Then we will look at further definitions that can be found in various other suttas where they deviate from the Sammādiṭṭhisutta standard either in the context of PS or in other contexts if they are relevant, to build up an accurate sutta model for PS.

### 2.6.1 Ignorance (avijjā)

The first clause in the standard model of PS is avijjā, which is universally translated as 'ignorance'. The definition includes: not knowing truth, not knowing the four noble truths, and not knowing the way leading to the end of suffering.[57] Hence it is not ignorance in the general English sense that is connoted by this term, but specifically ignorance of knowing what causes suffering, and how that suffering comes to an end.

The Sammādiṭṭhisutta gives the definition for ignorance as follows:

> And what is ignorance, what is the origin of ignorance, what is the cessation of ignorance, what is the way leading to the cessation of ignorance? Not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the origin of suffering, not knowing about the cessation of suffering, not knowing about the way

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[55]M I 46-55.

[56]M I 46

[57] P.A. Payutto, **Buddhist Dictionary,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.509.

> leading to the cessation of suffering – this is called ignorance. With the cessation of the taints, there is the cessation of ignorance.[58]

Interestingly, in the context of this sutta, the links are not necessarily to be understood in a sequence or as process, but holographicly; simply understanding any one of them is enough, providing the taints (āsava) have been brought to an end.

> When a noble disciples has thus understood ignorance, the origin of ignorance, the cessation of ignorance and the way leading to the cessation of ignorance ... he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view ... and has arrived at this true Dhamma. [59]

A congruent definition can be found in the Saṃyuttanikāya, in the Khandhā section, where ignorance is of the rising and ceasing of the five khandha:

> Pray Lord, what is ignorance, and now far is one ignorant?
>
> Herein brother, the untaught manyfolk know not form, [... feeling, volitional impulses, perception and consciousness...], know not the arising of form, know not the ceasing of form, know not the ceasing of form, know not the way going to the cessation of form.
>
> This brother, is called ignorance, and thus far is one ignorant.[60]

In another formulaic response to this question, in the same saṃyutta, we find the definition of ignorance given as failing to see the khandhas as impermanent.

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[58] M I 55.

[59] M I 55.

[60] S III 161.

> Herein bother, the untaught many folk know not as it really is that "the nature of form [etc. for the other four khandha] is to come to pass!" ... and thus far is one ignorant.

Here I use the term 'form' for rūpa since it is congruent with gestalt theory which as we will demonstrate later, must have some kind of form, shape, sound or feeling in order to be considered an arisen gestalt percept.

In another stock definition for ignorance we again see it broken down regarding the five khandha as follows:

> Herein friend, the untaught manyfolk know not as it really is the satisfaction in, the misery of, the escape from form [etc. for the other khandha].[61]

Ignorance is "spread about" by desire, lust and ill-will, thus perpetuating the round of saṃsāra:

> Craving has been called an arrow by the Recluse; the poisonous humour of ignorance is spread about by desire, lust, and ill will.[62]

Payutto relates ignorance directly to the four āsava (generally translated as 'taints' or 'outflows'), which are the tendency of the 'untaught manyfolk' to direct attention away from themselves, 'out' into the world around them.[63] He quotes a Pali verse translated as "ignorance arises with the arising of the outflows, and ceases with their cessation." This association of ignorance with the āsava appears also in our primary resource for PS definitions, the Sammādiṭṭhisutta:

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[61] S III 175.

[62] M II 256.

[63] P.A. Payutto (B. Evans translation), **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994), p.7.

> When, friends, a noble disciple understands the taints, the origin of the taints, the cessation of the taints, and the way leading to the cessation of the taints, in that way he is one of right view ... And what are these taints? ... There are these three taints: the taint of sensual desire, the taint of being, and the taint of ignorance. With the arising of ignorance there is the arising of the taints. With the cessation of ignorance, there is the cessation of the taints ... When a noble disciple has thus understood ... he entirely abandons the underlying tendency to lust ... aversion ... he extirpates the underlying tendency to the view and conceit 'I am', and by abandoning ignorance and arousing true knowledge he here and now makes and end of suffering. [64]

Ignorance 'leads the way' causing one to reach for unprofitable states of mind, leading to shamelessness and recklessness.[65] This sutta goes on to say "in one who is swayed by ignorance, and is void of sense, wrong view has scope". Thus the opposite of ignorance is 'true knowledge', as reported by the Buddha in his account of the night of Enlightenment when he said "ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose".[66] In this instance 'true knowledge' is the recollection of past lives, the arising and passing away of beings in heaven and hell according to their kamma, and the ending of the āsava.

There is little more to say on the topic of ignorance at this juncture; since the meaning is quite clear. But it should be noted that in all of the above definitions, there is no mention of ignorance as something coming from past lives as the three lifetime model of PS would suggest. Rather, ignorance is something that is 'banished' in the present moment. Thus we can conclude, that since you cannot banish ignorance from a past life, if ignorance was there, but can only banish it in the present moment, that the momentary interpretation is supported by sutta definitions of ignorance.

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[64] M I 55.

[65] S V 1.

[66] M I 249-250.

However, as Payutto points out, echoing the Visuddhimagga[67] analogy of the creeper which can be grasped from the top, the root, or the middle, PS is not necessarily to be interpreted in a strictly linear fashion, and ignorance is not to be thought of as a 'first cause'[68] It's cessation can be considered the 'end cause' though, as in the Vekhanassasutta (M80):

> Let a wise man come, one who is honest and sincere, a man of rectitude. I instruct him, I teach him the Dhamma in such a way that by practising as instructed, he will soon know and see for himself: "Thus indeed there rightly comes to be liberation from the bond, that is, from the bond of ignorance.[69]

It is worth noting that although ignorance is one of the standard list of twelve links, there are many suttas concerning PS where it does not occur. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these called 'Recluses and Brahmins' in the Nidāna Saṃyutta where all eleven standard links are present with the singular exception of ignorance.[70]

### 2.6.2 Volitional Impulses (saṅkhāra)

Saṅkhāra is probably the most difficult term in the teaching of PS to understand, as it is used throughout the scriptures in a variety of ways, in different contexts – for instance as one of the five khandha, as fifty of the cetasikā[71] in the Abhidhamma, as a link in PS, and in the stock phrase 'sabbe saṅkhāra anicca' (all

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[67] Vism. 523.

[68] P.A. Payutto (B. Evans translation), **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.6.

[69] M II 45.

[70] S II 13. A similar format with the omission of ignorance occurs at S II 53

[71] Nārada Mahā Thera, **A Manual of Abhidhamma – being Abhidhammattha Sangaha**, (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society 1979) p.77-79.

saṅkhāra are impermanent and suffering).[72] Bhikkhu Bodhi notes in his introduction to the Majjhima Nikaya:

> Although this word as used in the suttas has different specific references in different contexts, unlike *dhamma* it retains enough unity of meaning to permit, with rare exceptions, a uniform rendering. The problem, however, is to decide which of the many proposed renderings is the most adequate, or, if none are found fitting, to coin a new one that is:
>
> The root idea suggested by the word saṅkhāra is "making together".[73]

First let us look at the definition in our baseline sammādiṭṭhisutta:

> And what are formations? ... There are three kinds of formation: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation.[74]

The Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā expands on this in the Cūḷavedallasutta (M 44), defining the bodily formation (saṅkhāra) as the in-breathing and out-breathing; the verbal formation as applied and sustained thought (vitakka vicāra), and the mental formation as perception and feeling.[75] All these definitions do little to consolidate a systematic understanding of PS. Dhammadinnā's inclusion of feeling (vedanā) is particularly awkward because feeling appears twice more in the standard PS links, as will be shown.

With which model of PS does this concord? Regarding the three lifetime model, certainly, actions of body, speech and mind have occurred in the past, just as

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[72] Dhp 277, 278 and 279, M I 228.

[73] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1995), p.55.

[74] M II 54, A II 3.

[75] M I 301.

they occur in the present, and will occur in the future. But if this is the meaning of the term, how then can we justify the cessation of saṅkhāra which must occur for enlightenment to be realized?[76] Cessation of action in the past cannot occur. Only something in the present moment can cease.

Justification for considering saṅkhāra as cause of rebirth, can be found in the Sankhārupapattisutta (M 120) which title means 'rebirth according to saṅkhāra', where is described how a person with faith, virtue, learning, wisdom, generosity, and wisdom can determine a rebirth destination by means of a concentrated wish.[77] We can though, just as easily, consider saṅkhāra here to mean simply 'mind state' as a collection of cetasikā, as in the Abhidhammattha Sangaha understanding of the term. Having formed that mind state, with intention, and the other supporting factors, that Bhikkhu may then be reborn in that particular realm (or realise the liberation of mind that is free of āsava).[78]

Another instance of saṅkhāra occurs in the same Nidāna book (sutta 51 *Pondering*) in a different format; it refers to a planned act of merit, demerit or a neutral (stationary) act.[79] Again here, saṅkhāra is referring to 'action', which gives credence to the Pali Text Society translation of the term as 'activities', along with justification for the inclusion of the term 'volitional' in the alternative translation of saṅkhāra as 'volitional impulses'.

Noteworthy in this sutta is that, having listed these three kinds of volitional (planned) action, the Buddha goes on immediately to show how "if ignorance is banished and wisdom has arisen", because of this "he does not make an intentional act of merit, demerit or neutral-merit", and thusly, "not planning, not willing, he grasps at nothing whatever in the world", making him unperturbed, and entered into nibbāna

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[76] M I 264 and many other stock passages show the cessation of all the links – this topic will be discussed in detail below.

[77] M II 100.

[78] M III 103.

[79] S II 80, M I 389.

(parinibbāyati). Here it is plain that saṅkhāra is not referring to actions in the past, let alone past lives, but is referring to directed (intentional) action in the present moment. Likewise, this action can be abandoned in the present moment. This would then seem to be supporting the momentary model, at least in so far as its treatment of ignorance and volitional activity. If we are to interpret this via the three lifetime model, we must, as Ajahn Brahm does in his paper on PS[80], suppose a gap of time between the stopping of saṅkhāra, and the resulting enlightenment, which would be parinibbāna after the passing away of the body.

Saṅkhāra as 'action', as far as Gestalt is concerned, fits perfectly with the primary Gestalt supposition that one's perception is not so much a case of receiving sensory input and processing it, but one of making an 'inside outward' projection on to the environment through activity. Past events and experience are projected in the present moment. This we will explore in Chapter Three and Four.

In the Khandhāsaṃyutta we find another sutta that elaborates on the term saṅkhāra as intentional action. The PTS version says

> And why brethren, do ye say " the activities-compound"?
>
> Because they compose a compound ...and what compound do they compose?
>
> It is body that they compose into a compound of a body. It is feeling that they compose into a feeling compound. It is perception that they compose into a perception-compound; the activities into an activities-compound; consciousness into a consciousness-compound. They compose a compound brethren. Therefore the word (activities)-compound is used.[81]

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[80] Ajahn Brahmvamso, **Paticca-samuppada – Dependent Origination**, (Thailand: Wat Pah Nanachat, 2005), Ch.3. (Causality and the Twelve Factors).

[81] S III 86.

Since this passage is a little ambiguous we can look at an alternative translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, viz.

> And why do you call them 'fabrications'? Because they fabricate fabricated things, thus they are called 'fabrications.' What do they fabricate as a fabricated thing? For the sake of form-ness, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling-ness, they fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing. For the sake of perception-hood... For the sake of fabrication-hood... For the sake of consciousness-hood, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing. Because they fabricate fabricated things, they are called fabrications[82]

Here we can see the function of saṅkhāra as an activity that purposefully organises perception into a kind of 'outflow' wherein what we experience is projected from the inside out, rather than being an atomist passive reception of sensory data that is organised and understood. This is crucial to the whole concept of a Gestalt that the Gestalt psychologists were pointing to – that a human does not see, hear, touch... what it 'out there', but in fact projects an internal image onto the outside world in an organisation of intentionality and sense data. This we will explore in detail in Chapter Three.

As a last reference on this interpretation of saṅkhāra being an intentionally driven activity, we can look at the Cetanāsutta, where the Buddha uses synonyms for saṅkhāra that should help elucidate its meaning:

> What one intends, what one arranges, and what one obsesses about: This is a support for the stationing of consciousness. There being a support, there is a landing [or: an establishing] of consciousness. When that consciousness lands and grows, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future.

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[82] "Khajjaniya Sutta: Chewed Up" (SN 22.79), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 5/10/12.

> When there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. Such is the origination of this entire mass of suffering & suffering. [83]

Again – there is a clear intentionality in this sutta, that saṅkhāra is a form of directed activity that is shaping consciousness, rather than consciousness arising dependent on sensory input or stimulus, which is followed by a behavioural response.

A further connotation of saṅkhāra is as 'mental factors' in the five khandha. This appears to render a different meaning for saṅkhāra in the five khandha teaching and PS. Yet there are no suttas that explicitly support this idea. Differentiating saṅkhāra in the five khandha from saṅkhāra in the three characteristics, Ven. Payutto offers the following discussion:

> Saṅkhāra as the fourth component of the five aggregates refers to mental factors which shape the mind as wholesome, unwholesome or neutral. They are the mental qualities, led by intention (cetanā), that mould and influence thoughts and consequent physical action. They are the agents behind action (kamma), the 'fashioners' of the mind, for example: Faith (saddhā), mindfulness (sati), moral shame (hiri), fear of wrongdoing (ottappa), loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karunā), wisdom (paññā), delusion (moha), greed (lobha) and hatred (dosa). They are the mental qualities (nāma-dhamma), existing in the mind along with feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā) and consciousness (viññāna).[84]

If we use this definition with PS, we would end up with the idea of saṅkhāra being the background mental states that are present when the fields of perception give rise to specific data via the six senses, six forms of contacting and

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[83] S II 65.

[84] P.A. Payutto, **The Three Signs**, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 2007), p.9.

feeling etc.. This is the idea that the Visudhimagga follows in its breakdown of the links in PS where it defines saṅkhāra as fifty of the fifty-two cetasikā. [85] The Abhidhammattha Sangaha – Manual to the Abhidhamma by Anuruddha Thera also defines saṅkhāra in this way.[86] This manual mentions, on the same page, four qualities of such mental concomitants:

(i) they arise together with consciousness
(ii) they perish together with consciousness
(iii) they have an identical object with consciousness
(iv) they have a common basis with consciousness

While the Visuddhimagga listing of the fifty cetasikā (vedanā and saññā are the other two) as the definition of saṅkhāra leaves room for interpreting with either the momentary model, or the three lifetime model (presuming that as Ajahn Brahm argued above, there can be a delay between cause and effect), the Abhidhammattha Sangaha model leaves no such room for saṅkhāra to refer to something in a previous lifetime – they arise and cease together with consciousness here and now. This is in line with the general Abhidhamma understanding of Dhamma as mind moments (dhamma) that arise and cease rapidly.

A further interpretation of saṅkhāra is a relatively rare definition in the Sattatthanasutta, referring again to the five khandha model rather than PS specifically, as the "six seats of intention" (cetanā).[87] This refers to the intention with regard to form (seeing form), smell and so on for the complement of six senses. The sutta continues "from the origination of contact comes the origination of saṅkhāra", which would seem to place contact as coming before saṅkhāra, rather than after it as with the common sequence in PS. This swapping position of the terms occurs persistently

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[85] Vism. 530.

[86] Nārada Mahā Thera, **A Manual of Abhidhamma – being Abhidhammattha Sangaha**, (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society 1979), p.76-79

[87] S II 63.

throughout the suttas. The next line of the Sattatthanasutta mentions a key characteristic of saṅkhāra in PS "From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of saṅkhāra"[88] While the sequence again does not follow the PS model where saṅkhāra precedes contact (phassa), it does show that saṅkhāra must cease; "The subduing of the desire & passion for saṅkhāra, the abandoning of desire and passion for saṅkhāra: that is the escape from saṅkhāra".

Because saṅkhāra can be seen to cease, it suggests that they are something that, as the Abhidhamma model above stated, arises with the present moment of consciousness, and ceases with it also. This will be an important point when we map Gestalt perception on to PS, as gestalt requires a direction of determined intention (both as will, and as in 'intentionality' of object seeking consciousness).

We have already mentioned that all the links in PS have to cease in order for there to be nibbāna – in a cycle we can call 'dependent cessation'; a perfect instance being the Mahātaṇhāsankhayasutta (M 38), which presents PS in each of its classic formulas, including the 'forward exposition on cessation' where each of the twelve standard links ceases, beginning with ignorance, and all the way through to age-and-death.[89] The same sutta does, interestingly, offer an alternative version of the cessation cycle that begins with "seeing a form with the eye, he does not lust after it if it is pleasing" and so on with mindfulness, immeasurable mind, deliverance of mind, abandoning favouring and opposing, abandoning delighting, cessation of clinging and being, cessation of birth and age-and-death.[90]

Nonetheless, the main thrust of the sutta is the present moment cessation of the twelve links in their standard sequence – something that is hard to understand using the three lifetime model. It is also hard to understand using the momentary

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[88] S II 63.

[89] M I 264.

[90] M I 270.

model, since we ostensibly cannot end age-and-death in the present either, other than by dying. We will look at these elements of PS later.

Another instance of the cessation of saṅkhāra is at the Alagaddūpamasutta (M 22) where the 'stilling of saṅkhāra' is made evident thus:

> He hears the .. Dhamma spoken for the elimination of all standpoints, decisions, obsessions, adherences, and underlying tendencies, for the stilling of all saṅkhāra, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the destruction of craving.[91]

In the above paragraph it seems quite logical and progressive that saṅkhāra is closely related to activity such as obsessing, deciding, adhering etc.. These are all actions in the present moment, and more importantly, actions that can be brought to an end when one gives up volitional activity. This brings about nibbāna. Such was key to the Buddha's own enlightenment, as we find in the Airyapariyesanāsutta (M 26) where the Buddha describes his own insight on the night of enlightenment, being brought about by the cessation of saṇkhāra:

> 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, takes delight and rejoices in worldliness. It is hard for such a generation to see this truth, namely, the **stilling of all saṅkhāra**, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.[92]

Again here, saṅkhāra are presented as an action occurring in the present moment (since past action is already stilled), that is brought to a halt. There are many such instances of the stilling of saṅkhāra throughout the suttas – a final example

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[91] M I 137.

[92] M I 168.

should suffice to show the importance here. The Nidānasamyutta has a sutta where saṅkhāra are mentioned as being meritorious, demeritorious or neutral, the response to which is "not planning, not willing, he grasps at nothing whatever in the world, and by not grasping he is unperturbed, and reaches nibbbāna"[93] Similarly for one in whom the āsava are extinguished, they cannot plan an act of merit, demerit, or neutral act, and thereby consciousness cannot become manifested.[94]

The sutta goes on to ask if all activity were absent, would there be any consciousness manifested? However, this is asked after first describing the enlightened being as having feeling (liking, disliking) as a result of past actions, while not manifesting any new action. The remaining 'term' is the time the arahant will be manifesting in a body, just like a heated jar that is put out to cool. This could be interpreted according to both the three lifetime and the momentary model, since the implication is the process of PS continues for the remainder of an arahant's life, and only truly comes to a halt after the final parinibbāna.

In summary then, for saṅkhāra we can say there are several ways to understand the term: a) as willed action of body, speech and mind, meritorious or otherwise, in the past, b) the same, but referring to the very present moment c) as mental concomitants affecting the current sensory input. Similarly, the cessation of saṅkhāra is clearly something that can be aimed at and achieved in the present moment, notwithstanding there is a case to suggest that saṅkhāra is past action that will cease after the physical body manifestation of an arahant has 'cooled' and passed away. And saṅkhāra do cease for an arahant "...but there is the cessation of saṅkhāra. Having understood 'there is this', seeing the escape from that, the Tathāgata has gone beyond that."[95]

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[93] S II 80.

[94] S II 83.

[95] M II 238.

Regarding our mapping of Gestalt perception, we can take any of these interpretations, although b) seems to fit most appropriately, since a gestalt relies on an internal intentionality that is projected outwards in an organisation of sensory data, as we will see in the next chapter.

### 2.6.3 Consciousness (viññāna)

Having examined the rather tricky term of saṅkhāra we now come to the term viññāna, which is almost universally translated as 'consciousness' – a translation that might not be the best choice, but is the one we are stuck with. Our baseline sammādiṭṭhisutta for a definition of what viññāna is:

> There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness-mind-consciousness ... with the arising of saṅkhāra there is the arising of viññāna, with the cessation of saṅkhāra there is the cessation of viññāna.[96]

If we understand this comment by the three lifetime model, it would mean that after the passing away of the body, no more actions are made, and consciousness cannot be established in a new body. The difficulty with this idea is that consciousness is described as 'relinking' consciousness of some kind of spirit looking to inhabit a new body, but is specifically consciousness of a sense. Could it mean that the newly enwombed consciousness develops these 6 kinds of sensory ability, which then last its lifetime, albeit with declining clarity? The most obvious interpretation here is that the sutta refers to simple sense consciousness that arises with each particular sense, and passes away there with rapid impermanence; thus supporting the momentary model of interpretation of PS.

The English word 'consciousness' has two implications. First is that we gain consciousness sometime in the womb, lasts with us through our whole life, and

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[96] M I 53.

then ceases when we die. If we take rebirth to be a fact, then presumably that same consciousness is reborn into a new form[97]. A more psychological approach might outline different levels of consciousness – such as during excitement, during a dull activity, sleepiness, sleep and fully unconscious. In this view of the word, we have a 'field' of consciousness that ebbs and flows, but is always identified with the life-force of the person.

But in the passage quoted above viññāna refers to the current sensory input that arises and ceases on our tongue, our ear, our body etc.. The translation of this as 'consciousness' is vague at best. A better translation would be 'cognition', since this connotes a particular state of sensory consciousness as we observe it in the changing present moment. Support for this interpretation can be found in many suttas, such as the Mahātaṇhāsankhayasutta (M 38) where a particularly pernicious view had arisen in Sāti, the son of a fisherman. He postulated that "it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another".[98] Sāti says that this consciousness "is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions."

The Buddha calls Sāti 'misguided' and asks his monks "has this ... son of a fisherman even a spark of wisdom in this Dhammavinaya?"

The Buddha then gives a key analogy for the nature of consciousness in PS:

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[97] Bhikkhu Bodhi sums up this stock wrong view as "the conception of the self as the agent of action; the self as feeler, the conception of the self as the passive subject. "Here and there" suggests the self as a transmigrating entity that retains its identity through a succession of different incarnations". Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**, (Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995), p.1171.

[98] M I 258.

> Consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on nose ... tongue ... body ... on mind and mind objects it is reckoned as mind consciousness.
>
> Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns – when fire burns dependent on logs, it is reckoned as a log fire, when dependent on faggots it is reckoned as a faggot fire ... grass ... cowdung ...chaff ... rubbish ... so too, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it arises.[99]

Here unequivocally we find viññāna to be referring to the momentary cognition based on one of the senses, rather than a lifelong 'field' of consciousness. To make the matter more plain, we have the simile of the monkey swinging in the forest, as found in the Nidānasamyutta. In this sutta the Buddha points out that it is easy to see the body as impermanent because it is seen to be young, grow old, and die in due course. But it is more difficult to see the mind as impermanent, as something that arises and ceases, because the arising and ceasing is too fast and continuous:

> This that we call thought, that we call mind, that we call consciousness; that arises as one thing, ceases as another, whether by night or by day. Just as a monkey faring through the woods, through the great forest catches hold of a bough, letting it go seizes another, even so that which we call thought, mind, consciousness, that arises as one thing, ceases as another, both by night and by day.[100]

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[99] M I 259.

[100] S II 94.

We find some support for the three lifetime interpretation of viññāna in the Mahātaṇhāsankhayasutta quoted earlier; in its final section the Buddha offers an non-standard model of dependent cessation. This cessation cycle starts with 'seeing a form with the eye, he does not lust after it if it is pleasing", leading to mindfulness, immeasurable mind, deliverance of mind, abandoning favouring and opposing, abandoning delighting, cessation of clinging and being, cessation of birth and age-and-death.[101] In this version of PS consciousness does not cease, at least until the cessation of birth, ageing and death. This would allow for the possibility that consciousness is established in a body for the duration of a life span. The same sutta a few verses earlier in fact describes a process that seems very much like the three lifetime model, where a being is conceived into a womb, is born, learns to interact with the world and get caught with the five cords of sense pleasure – due to which he is attracted or repelled, dwells with mindfulness unestablished and a limited mind, delighting in feeling, clinging and so on to age-and-death.[102] However, it should be pointed out that at no point in this sutta, is the descent into the womb labelled as nāmarūpa, nor is consciousness mentioned as growing in the embryo.

Perhaps the strongest foundation for understanding consciousness to be something that arises in the womb (and presumably last the entire lifespan) is the Mahānidānasutta (D 15) where such is stated unequivocally:

> I have said: "consciousness conditions mind-body [nāmarūpa]." If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, would mind-body develop there? 'No Lord.'
>
> Or if consciousness having entered the mother's womb were to be deflected, would mind-body come to birth in this life? ... and if the consciousness of such a tender young being, boy or girl, were thus cut off, would mind-body grow, develop and mature? ... Mind-body condition consciousness – if

[101] M I 270.

[102] M I 266.

> consciousness did not find a resting-place in mind-body, would there subsequently be an arising and coming to be of birth, ageing, death and suffering?[103]

We might note with this sutta that it is somewhat unusual from the outset. First, viññāna and nāmarūpa are said to condition each other, without recourse to saṅkhāra or avijjā – making for ten inks in this version of PS, not twelve. Further, the sequence of PS changes in the above description to viññāna, nāmarūpa, jāti, jarāmarana – which is hardly a standard format for PS. There are, in fact, a large number of suttas describing non-standard formulas of PS. But in this case, we have to ask if the non-standard description above should be taken as a stock definition for viññāna and nāmarūpa. Indeed, if we follow this Mahānidānasutta back to a prior passage, we find yet another variation from the norm:

> Birth conditions age-and-death ... becoming conditions birth ... clinging conditions becoming ... craving conditions clinging ... feeling conditions craving ... and so feeling conditions craving, craving conditions seeking ... conditions acquisition, decision making, lustful desire, attachment, appropriation, avarice, guarding of possessions ... and because of this there arise the taking up of stick and sword, quarrels, disputes ... and other evil unskilful states.[104]

We can find further support for consciousness being closely connected with birth in a body in the Nidānasamyutta where one Moliay-Phagguna ask the Buddha who it is that feeds on consciousness nutriment (note that consciousness as nutriment is not necessarily the same as consciousness in PS). The Buddha answers

> Not a fit question ... I do not say someone feeds on [consciousness] ... if you were to ask me ‘of what is consciousness the sustenance?’ this would be a fit

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[103] D II 66.

[104] D II 59.

> question. And the fit answer to this is: consciousness sustenance is the cause of renewed being, of rebirth in the future.[105]

While the link between consciousness and rebirth is clear in this sutta, it is far from clear how this is to be interpreted. If one holds to a view of consciousness momentarily changing as it arises and disappears based on the senses, then consciousness is a 'fuel' or nutriment that feeds the process of rebirth. It is not a relinking consciousness that somehow finds its way into a new body. In this context we should look at consciousness properly as understood in the system of 'nutriment', an example of which can be found in the 'sustenance' suttas in the second section of the Nidānasamyutta:

> There are these four nutriments, for the maintenance of beings that have come to birth or for the forwarding of them that seek to become ... [1] material food ... [2] contacting ... [3] volition ... [4] consciousness. These are the four kinds of nutriment for the maintenance of beings that have come to birth or for the forwarding of those that seek to become.[106]

These four have craving for the base, are conditioned by feeling, conditioned by contacting, name-form, consciousness, and volitional activity. Note the cyclical reasoning where consciousness is its own nutriment, and how the teaching of nutriment is put together with a more standard PS, albeit sans the six senses link. Also note that nutriment has to be cut off, bringing us to the tricky topic of cessation of consciousness.

If consciousness is to cease in the cessation cycle of PS, how can that be possible for one who is still living – after all, the Buddha was still alive after the night of enlightenment, and apparently conscious. One answer might be that consciousness does not cease until physical death. But at no point is PS presented as something that

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[105] S II 11.

[106] S II 11.

will happen after one has died – to the contrary enlightenment is something that happens in the here and now. Looking at the Attiragasutta (S 12.64) we find an answer to this question:

> Where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of physical food [contact, intention, consciousness], consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the **alighting of name-&-form**. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications [[107]]. Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging, & death, together, I tell you, with sorrow, affliction, & despair.
>
> ... Where there is no passion for the nutriment of consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where [material food, contacting, volition and] consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.[108]

This sutta goes on to give a metaphor for 'consciousness that is not established anywhere' as being like light that comes through a window – if there is no wall, and no floor for the light to land on, then it "does not land."

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[107] Note that in this instance, saṅkhāra come *after* name-form, rather than before it as in the standard model of PS.

[108] S II 101.

Reading according to the three lifetime model this can only mean that after death, then consciousness does not land in a new birth. Reading according to the momentary model it is something that is experienced in the present – a form of consciousness that is not fixed to anything.

We find this very kind of consciousness in the Kevaddhasutta (D 11) where the question is asked of the Buddha, where do the four great elements cease without remainder. The question is rephrased and then answered by the Buddha"

> Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul, where does name-form cease without remainder?
>
> Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all luminous; that is where earth, water, fire and air find no footing, there both long and short, small and great, fair and foul – there name-form is wholly destroyed. With the cessation of consciousness is all destroyed.[109]
>
> There monks, I declare is no coming, no going, no stopping, no arising or passing away. It is not established, it does not go on, it has no subject. This indeed is the end of suffering. [110]

Consciousness is indeed something that is to be escaped from; the following example relates to consciousness in the five khandha:

> That impermanence, that suffering, that instability which is consciousness, that is the misery of consciousness. That restraint of desire and lust, that

[109] D I 223.

[110] Ud 80.

> renouncing of desire and lust which are in consciousness that is the way of escape from consciousness.[111]
>
> Therefore renounce it [consciousness] so that consciousness becomes rejected, cut down at the root, made like the stump of a palm tree, made something that has ceased to be, so that it cannot grow up again in the future.[112]

While we talk about the cessation of consciousness, it is important to realise this does not mean a physical or psychic death. Indeed, the suttas show many arahants, including the Buddha, who continue to live and interact with people after their enlightenment. From the outside, we do not see the arahant drop dead lifeless to the ground, but contrarily, to flourish and proclaim the perfection of nibbāna to those who would hear. The Bijasutta makes this clear:

> If a monk abandons passion for the property of form... feeling... perception... volitional activity...If a monk abandons passion for the property of consciousness, then owing to the abandonment of passion, the support is cut off, and there is no base for consciousness. Consciousness, thus unestablished, not proliferating, not performing any function, is released. Owing to its release, it is steady. Owing to its steadiness, it is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, he is totally liberated within. He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'[113]

In summary we can see there is cause for considering consciousness to be rebirth consciousness, that will then stay for the duration of a lifetime. There is also much greater support for the momentary model of PS of viññāna being something that

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[111] S III 26.

[112] S III 26.

[113] S III 54.

arises with a particular sense door, and ceases with it also. This kind of momentary consciousness is something that can be seen and understood, and if put away, will give rise to anidassana (lustrous) consciousness that has no object (anarammana), which attainment is liberation. We have also seen that viññāna has a special relationship with nāmarūpa as will be shown in the following section.

> Even so monks would a man smitten by one hundred darts suffer therefrom pain and sorrow? ... even so do I declare that the food called 'consciousness' should be regarded. When consciousness is well understood, name-form is well understood ... and then I declare there is nothing further that the Ariyan disciple has to do.[114]

### 2.6.4 Name-form (nāmarūpa)

Nāmarūpa is generally translated as name-and-form, though occasionally it can be translated as 'body-and-mind', and is often used to denote *everything*, that is compounded[115]; in this sense it is almost synonymous with the five khandha or saṅkhāra (in the three characteristics interpretation of the term). Our baseline Sammādiṭṭhisutta however lists the stock sutta definition of the term thus:

> And what is name and form? Feeling, perception, intention, attention and contact – these are called 'name'. The four great elements and the material form derived from them – these are called 'form'.[116]

These terms in the Pāli are, saññā, cetanā, vedanā, manasikāra, phassa and rūpa.

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[114] S II 100.

[115] P.A. Payutto (B. Evans translation), **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.28.

[116] M I 53.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his introduction to the Majjhimanikaya (Bodhi renders the term nāmarūpa as 'materiality-mentality'), notes that 'name-and-form', which is the favoured translation of Ven. Ñānamoli, originally carried the connotation of 'name' rather than strictly *mentality*, 'Form' can carry several meanings too, including form as the object of eye-consciousness, and as strictly material form as in the 5 khandha. Rūpa can also mean the form of something in the mind, rather than purely external material.[117] The interpretation of a physical body arising in dependence on past action, as nāmarūpa is understood to mean in the three lifetime model, is to be found in the suttas, such as the Nidānasaṃyutta where we find the line "Body should be regarded as brought about by past action, planning, volition and feeling", but in this circumstance, 'body' is the translation of the word 'kāya' rather than rūpa.[118]

Buddhist scholars tend to separate mentality (name) and materiality (form) and analyse them individually, but according to the suttas, the two are not separable fields, but arise as a whole dependent on each other, and cease as a whole. The Mahānidānasutta notes this (here using 'mind' and 'name', and also 'body' and 'form' synonymously):

> 'Mind-and-form conditions contact.' By whatever properties, features, signs or indications the name factor is conceived of, would there, in the absence of such properties ... pertaining to the mind factor be manifest any grasping at the idea of the body-factor? 'No Lord.'
>
> By whatever properties the mind-factor and the body-factor are designated – in their absence is there manifested any grasping at the idea, or at sensory reaction?' 'No Lord'

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[117] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), p.56.

[118] S II 62.

> By whatever properties, features, signs or indications the mind-factor is conceived of, in the absence of these is there any contact to be found? 'No Lord.'
>
> Thus Ānanda, just this, namely mind and body, is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition for all contact.[119]

By this passage we can see clearly that despite the temptation to make a very typical Cartesian split of the term nāmarūpa into separate body and mind components (here used synonymously with 'name and form'), but in fact such a split is not necessary. The terms are for categorisation purposes only, and do not denote in any way that these are to be considered as separate entities. No form can arise without a 'name' counterpart, and no mental qualities arise without some kind of form on which they are based. This makes nāmarūpa in fact, an almost perfect term for a gestalt (as we shall see in the next chapter). Any moment of experience, must comprise both concrete and abstract factors. One might interpret this as meaning one has a body, mind, senses, and objects perceived, but we could also apply the gestalt methodology instead - that means that a moment of phenomenological experience is actually a constellation of conditions, both mental and physical, internal and external.

To restate the above sutta: Without the *name* qualities, there is no *form* that can be grasped. Without the *form* factor there is no name factor that can be grasped. Without the *name* and *form* factors, there is no idea or sensory reaction that can be grasped. This raises some interesting questions, but first note that the five khandha carries a similar mutuality:

> Should consciousness, when taking a stance, stand attached to form, supported by form (as its object), established on form, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.

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[119] D II 59.

> Should consciousness, when taking a stance, stand attached to feeling, supported by feeling (as its object), established on feeling, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.
>
> Should consciousness, when taking a stance, stand attached to perception, supported by perception (as its object), established on perception, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.
>
> Should consciousness, when taking a stance, stand attached to fabrications, supported by fabrications (as its object), established on fabrications, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.
>
> Were someone to say, 'I will describe a coming, a going, a passing away, an arising, a growth, an increase, or a proliferation of consciousness apart from form, from feeling, from perception, from fabrications,' that would be impossible."[120]

Should we contemplate nāmarūpa as being a physical body, and a mind that inhabits or runs it, which is suggested by the discussion on consciousness where we saw nāmarūpa as being an embryo that develops in the womb, then we would also have to explain how there can be ārūpa deva, who occupy the ārūpa relams, supposedly without a body of any kind. Further, there is clearly body, even without mind, as in the case of a corpse, or a rock – these are form, but without any 'name' or mental factors. This suggests that rūpa does not refer to material form so much as the perception of the material aspect in a moment of perception, along with the mental qualities. Analytical methods that advise the meditator to determine, split, and consider separately what is nāma and what is rūpa seem to miss the point of the suttas above – that nāma and rūpa arise and cease together in a moment of experience, and cannot be separated.

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[120] S II 54.

Following this line of thinking then, we can make a few thought experiments. Take a rose – we do not see a brown long, textured bit, with some shaped petals, and perhaps an associated smell. We see a rose, complete with our perceptions, memories, symbolic identifications etc., as a single thing.

In this example there are the four parts of nāma present in the experience of a rose, as in the definition provided by the Sammādiṭṭhisutta above. We cannot have a rose, either seen externally or internally in the imagination, arise without (1) the perception (or historicity) of what a rose is, and how we relate to it, depending on our past experience with roses (saññā). (2)We have an intention, towards or away from the rose (cetanā), (3) a willingness to engage with it, rather than some other object (manasikāra). Finally we have a feeling of liking, disliking or neutral (vedanā). All this arises together in a single nāmarūpa, which as will be argued later, is similar to a gestalt.

The role of attention (manasikāra) is reinforced in the Mahāhatthipadopamasutta (M 28) where we find the term 'conscious engagement' used synonymously with 'attention', according to the commentaries.[121]

> If internally the eye is intact and external forms come into its range, but there is no corresponding [conscious] engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding class of consciousness.[122]

This role of attention is vital in the formation of a gestalt, so it is worth making a special mention of it at this point, where it is part of nāmarūpa. Nārada says of manasikāra:

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[121] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1995), note 339.

[122] M I 190.

> Turning the mind towards the object is the chief characteristic of manasikāra. It is like the rudder of the ship, which is indispensible to take her directly to her destination. Mind without manasikāra is like a rudderless ship.
>
> Manasikāra is also compared to a charioteer that sits with close attention on two well trained horses, (mind and object) as regards their rhythmical movements. Manasikāra should be distinguished from Vitakka which is to *follow*. The former directs its concomitants to the object, while the latter applies or throws (pakkhipanto viya) them on to the object. [123]

Thus any moment (or object) of experience depends on directed attention before it can become conscious. This should be fairly clear when we take a concrete object for consideration, such as a rose. But even if we take the most abstract object for contemplation, such as the concept of 'democracy', even then, for this to be present in the mind, we must find a way to attend to it, for it to arise in consciousness. In this case the 'form' aspect is the word 'democracy' itself, which is based on sound. One cannot bring 'democracy' into consciousness without a word (or a picture) associated with it – that word or picture is the 'form' end of the nāmarūpa.

This intimate relation between nāmarūpa and viññāna can be presented in different ways. In the standard PS cycle viññāna leads to nāmarūpa, but in other suttas viññāna and nāmarūpa both depend on each other[124], or nāmarūpa can appear without consciousness being mentioned[125]. In one instance, consciousness can appear in the middle of the nāma and rūpa aspects:

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[123] Nārada (tr.), **A Manual of Abhidhamma – Abhidhammattha Sangaha**, (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society 1979), p.89.

[124] D II 58, D II 22.

[125] S II 88.

> Name is at one end, form is at the other, consciousness lies in the middle, craving is the seamstress[126]

Such variation is not complicated if we keep in mind the general Abhidhamma interpretation of Dhamma as mind-moments; then nāmarūpa and viññāna can be considered to be a single mind moment event of perception. The nāmarūpa is what arises as experience, and the awareness of it is consciousness, hence the Sattatthanasutta says

> And what is consciousness? These six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, intellect-consciousness. This is called consciousness. From the origination of name-&-form comes the origination of consciousness. From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of consciousness.[127]

As we will see in the next chapter, this description of the consciousness process has much in common with the gestalt approach. Justification for interpreting form in this way appears in many suttas, for instance the same Sattatthanasutta quoted above, defines form (in the five khandha formula) as "The four great elements and the form derived from them: this is called form. From the origination of nutriment comes the origination of form. From the cessation of nutriment comes the cessation of form." Again, we can see that form ceases without the nutriment of contact and consciousness; which only makes sense if we consider form to be the directly sensed part of eye-cognition, ear-cognition etc.. External form as a solid, for example a boulder, does not cease when we have no contact or consciousness of it. Thus nāmarūpa and viññāna are intricately linked together, as they are with saṅkhāra: "Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications.

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[126] A III 400.

[127] S III 61.

Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future."[128]

In this way nāmarūpa, together with consciousness should be regarded as suffering, like a man being "smitten during the day and night with one hundred darts", so that "when consciousness is well understood, name-form is well understood, and when name-form is understood, so is consciousness. Then there is nothing further the Ariyan Disciple has to do"[129] This line also emphasises that the process of PS starting with nāmarūpa and viññāna amounts to the arising of objects in conscious perception.

The non-linear relation of the key links in PS can be seen in the following example, where saṅkhāra come after name-form and consciousness, instead of the usual position as the second link:

> If there is passion, if there is delighting in, if there be craving as to nutriment, it is there that consciousness if firmly placed and becomes fruitful. Where consciousness is firmly placed and fruitful, there is descent of nāmarūpa. Where there is descent of nāmarūpa there is growth of activity [saṅkhāra]. Where there is growth of activity there is renewed becoming and rebirth ... decay and death ... affliction grief and despair.[130]

In this example of one of the many variations on the theme of PS, where the links are in an order different from the usual twelve link model, viz.

-passion-delighting-craving-consciousness-name-form-activity becoming-birth-death-suffering.

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[128] S II 101.

[129] S II 100.

[130] S II 71.

Lastly, we might look briefly at the important cessation of nāmarūpa, which occurs with enlightenment, if not before. If we take the three lifetime model interpretation of nāmarūpa as the growth of a body and mind in the womb, then it is hard to describe how such can be said to cease with enlightenment. The only way to understand such is to presume that it means that nāmarūpa will not arise again in the future. Yet the suttas clearly say that nāmarūpa ceases with the cessation of ignorance. The Kevaddhasutta is a good example:

> Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous.
> That's where earth, water, fire and air find not footing.
> There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul;
> there nāmarūpa is wholly destroyed.
> With the cessation of consciousness, this is all destroyed.[131]

> Behold this world with all its Gods
> Supposing a self where none exists
> Entering into nāmarūpa
> It builds the conceit 'this is the truth'[132]

### 2.6.5 Six Senses (saḷāyatana)

The six senses in Buddhism are the usual five senses of seeing, searing, smelling, tasting, and touching, plus the mind sense. If mind were not a sense, we could not report what we have been thinking; but since we can report such, it means we could 'sense' thought. With modern science we know that there are in fact more senses than these, such as the kinaesthetic sense, which is the 'body map' that knows where our limbs are in relation to each other, or the vestibular sense which registers bumps and sudden movements of the body. Despite this, the six senses remains a good summary of direct human experience.

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[131] D I 223.

[132] Sn 756.

Our baseline Sammādiṭṭhisutta gives the following definition for the six senses:

> And what is the sixfold sense base? There are these six senses – the eye sense, the ear sense, the nose sense, the tongue sense, the body sense, and the mind sense.[133]

This term is quite straightforward, and very consistent in definition through the suttas, in that there are no great variations on this stock definition. The only question is whether what is meant is the body complete with its senses, or each sensory experience as it arises in present moment consciousness. The former would belong purely to the three lifetime model, where the latter interpretation would imply the momentary model. The Saḷāyatanavibhangasutta expands the six senses into six internal bases, six external, six bases for consciousness, six classes of contact, and eighteen classes of sense exploration (pleasure, pain or neutral for each sense).[134] Note that consciousness is considered to come *after* the sense bases in this example, while in PS it is prior to the six senses.

Standard PS lists consciousness as coming first, then name-form, followed by the sensory activation. This is very close to the gestalt mechanism where consciousness operates from the inside projected out, rather than the atomist model of building conscious models out of our sensory experience.

The six sense model is very applicable to meditation, so we can look to practical experience to give an indication of the meaning; in the Uddesavighangasutta (M 138) we find:

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[133] M I 53.

[134] M III 216.

> How friends, is consciousness called 'distracted and scattered externally'? Here, when a bhikkhu has seen a form with the eye, if his consciousness follows after the sign of form, is tied and shackled by gratification in the sign of the form, is fettered by the gratification in the sign of the form, then his consciousness is called 'distracted and scattered externally'.
>
> ... how friends is consciousness not 'distracted and scattered externally'? Here when a bhikkhu has seen a form with the eye, if his consciousness does not follow after the sign of the form, ... it is called 'not distracted and scattered externally'.[135]

In the above passage we can see that each sense arises and ceases – it is not talking about having a human body with the senses, but a dynamic, present moment practice, as would seem most suited to the momentary model. Importantly, note that the consciousness '*follows after*' through the sense. This is what happens with gestalt. Once a gestalt nāmarūpa) has come to be perceived, consciousness follows after it by engaging and becoming involved with it – this is a process we will look at in the next chapter.

The same point is illustrated in the Chappanasutta where we find the powerful metaphor of six animals being tied together with rope by the neck; each animal tries to get to its own domain, and whichever is the stronger in the moment, wins, and drags the others in that direction.[136] This represents the six senses. Attention follows after whichever sense has the strongest impression in the moment.

Thus we can make a thought experiment of a person reading a book. The eye and the mind sense are firmly engaged, and the reader does not pay attention to the sounds going on around them. If someone calls their name however, their attention turns to that sound. Note that the sound has been processed by the brain

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[135] M III 225-226.

[136] S IV 198.

before the subject 'hears' it. Consciousness of the sound follows afterwards, as the subject changes their focus. This process of attention has been well researched in many experiments.

The model of the six senses appears repeatedly throughout the suttas, and the understanding of them, their arising, ceasing, satisfaction, misery and release from them is said to show how versed in Dhamma the practitioner is.[137]

Regarding the cessation of the six senses, there are various passages where we see the practise as merely putting aside the craving and desire for the senses, rather than their outright cessation. One good example of this is the Māgandiyasutta where the Buddha claims that in his former life in the palaces, he had every sense pleasure there could be;[138] He continued:

> On a later occasion, having understood as they actually are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of sensual pleasures, I abandoned craving for sensual pleasures, I removed fever for sense pleasures and I abide without thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace ... there is a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses divine bliss. Since I delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior, nor do I delight therein.[139]

Later in the same sutta the Buddha gives the analogy of the Oily Rag, which a blind man is sold – he, having regained his sight, finds out that he was duped into thinking the cloth was pure and white. In the same way is Māgandiya advised to view the pleasures of the senses and the health of the body – as inferior.[140] We also find in this sutta one of many variations on the PS theme, where the five khandha

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[137] S IV 83.

[138] M I 505.

[139] M I 505.

[140] M I 508.

(referred to as disease, tumour, and darts) cease without remainder, leading to cessation of clinging, being, birth, age-and-death, and thus the cessation of suffering – a 6 part variant of PS.

Mahamogallāna echoes the same idea in the Saḷayatanasaṃyutta, where on seeing a form with the eye one is not attached to objects that charm or averse from those that don't. "He abides with attention to body settled, and his thought is boundless", leading to emancipation of the heart by wisdom.[141]

The senses arising and ceasing are also a synonym for 'the world'[142], which also arises and ceases[143], and so long as one has not seen the end of the world, one has not yet known nibbāna[144]. Similarly the arising and ceasing of the world is equated with the origination and cessation of PS.[145]

> In the six [senses] the world arose
> In the six, it makes its way
> On the six, themselves depending
> In the six it has its woes[146]

### 2.6.6 Contact (phassa)

Phassa is generally translated as 'contact', although 'contacting' is probably a better term as it implies a more interactive engagement between sense and sense object. First, we should go to our baseline Sammādiṭṭhisutta for a stock definition:

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[141] S IV 184.
[142] S IV 52.
[143] S II 15.
[144] A II 47.
[145] S II 77.
[146] S I 39.

> And what is contact? There are six classes of contact: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind contact.[147]

A more graphic description is given in the Nidānasamyutta where the Buddha describes a cow, coming into contact with various surfaces:

> ... a cow with a sore hide should stand leaning against a wall, and the creatures that live on the wall would bite her; if she stood leaning against a tree, the creatures that live on the tree would bite her; yes, whatever she stood leaning against, whatever creatures lived thereon would bite her. If she stood buoyed up by water, the creatures that live in the water would bite her; if she stood buoyed up by the air, the creatures that live in the air would bite her ... even so should the nutriment that is contact be regarded. [148]

But as we noted earlier, and as stated in the Mahāhatthipadopamasutta (M28) there is more required for contacting to arise, than merely a physical sense and a sense object. Consciousness needs to be turned to the object with attention; without the appropriate attention, there is no conscious engagement that makes for contact.[149]. Nārada notes this in his version of the Abhidhammattha Sangaha after first giving a short definition of contact:

> For any sense-impression to occur, three things are essential – namely, consciousness, respective sense, and the object. For instance, one sees an object with the consciousness through the eye as its instrument.[150]

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[147] M I 53.

[148] S II 98.

[149] M I 189.

[150] Nārada (tr.), **A Manual of Abhidhamma – Abhidhammattha Sangaha**, (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society 1979), p82

He continues by quoting the Atthasālinī as saying "it should not be understood that mere collision is contact".

In the Nidānasaṃyutta the Buddha declares that suffering arises from a cause, and that cause is contacting rather than just karma.[151] The same sutta talks of the utter fading out of the six senses, as the way to the ceasing of the entire mass of suffering. This is rather unusual in that it begins the cessation cycle at the links of six senses and contacting.

Similarly in the Anguttara book of sixes we find the six senses at the start of the cycle of PS, and contacting at the start of the cycle of dependent cessation.[152] This implies that perhaps a being is subjected to the six senses regardless, but has choice in so far as they can restrict or eliminate contacting: "and what is sense-desire's ending? Contact's ending is the ending of senses desires".

The Koṭṭhitasutta in the Book of Fours, draws special attention to the realm of contacting, demonstrating that it can come to cessation in the here and now, and that this is enlightenment:

> ...does anything at all exist after the passionless ending without remainder of the six spheres of contact? ... so long as there is going to the six spheres of contact, for just so long is there a going to difficulty. But bhikkhus, by the passionless ending without remainder of the six spheres of contact there is a calming of all difficulty.[153]

### 2.6.7 Feeling (vedanā)

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[151] S II 33.

[152] A III 407.

[153] A II 161.

This term, which is also quite clear in the suttas and in PS in particular, is almost universally translated as 'feeling', even though what is meant is not feelings as in emotions, but the quality of feeling as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The Sammādiṭṭhisutta separates feeling into six kinds:

> And what is feeling? ... there are six classes of feeling – feeling born of eye contact, of ear contact, of nose, tongue, of body and feeling born of mind contact[154]

The Saḷāyatanavibhangasutta expands on this theme by listing the eighteen kinds of 'mental exploration' which include exploring a form [sound, taste etc.] productive of joy, of grief, or of equanimity.[155] It goes on to differentiate however the equanimity that is experienced by a lay follower who is untrained in dhamma, and the equanimity of one who is advanced in dhamma:

> ... the six kinds of equanimity based on the household life for a foolish untaught infatuated ordinary person: on seeing a form with the eye, equanimity arises ... such equanimity as this does not transcend the form; that is why it is called equanimity based on the household life.
>
> Here in what are the six kinds of equanimity based on renunciation? When by knowing the impermanence, change, fading away, and cessation of forms one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that forms both formerly and now are all impermanent, suffering and subject to change, equanimity that transcends the form arises. It is called equanimity that is based on renunciation.[156]

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[154] M I 52.

[155] M III 216.

[156] M III 220.

The Buddha continues in the sutta to drive home this point, saying that there is "equanimity that is diversified" and "equanimity that is unified". The former is the diversified realm of the six senses, where the latter is the attainment of the four arūpa jhānas.[157]

Feeling depends on contacting, so if you do not engage with an object it is difficult to be attracted to it, or to suffer over it. When the contact with the object is terminated, the suffering that was arising is also terminated:

> Just as from putting together and rubbing together of two sticks warmth is born and heat is produced: as from the changing and parting of those two sticks the warmth so born ceases and is quenched – just so, do these three feelings born of contact, rooted in contact, related and conditioned by contact, owing to appropriate contact so born – those feelings so born come to cease.[158]

Unpleasant feelings, especially born of the body, are to be tolerated and endured, even if they "rack the body, drain the life", and so doing one "has come forth from the abyss and reached solid ground".[159] Feelings can also be categorised into five kinds – pleasant, painful, and equanimous of the body, and grief and happiness of the mind; in this case the painful feelings that are born, are only of the body, and not of the mind. The Buddha's famous 'second arrow' metaphor illustrates this very well.[160]

A final note about the cessation of feeling, which must come about in the dependent cessation cycle; it does not mean that the arahant does not experience bliss,

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[157] M III 220.

[158] S IV 213.

[159] S IV 206.

[160] S IV 207.

but only that bliss is not a pleasant feeling reaction to a sensory input. This question was put to Sāriputta:

> This nibbāna is bliss, this nibbāna is bliss!
> Then the Venerable Udayin said to Sāriputta:
> But what herein is bliss, when there is no feeling?
>
> This itself is the bliss, the fact there is no liking or disliking ... when thoughts and perceptions accompanied by sense desire beset one, it is indeed for him a disease. Just sir, as some ill, amounting to a disease, might arise in a happy person, even so these thoughts and perceptions accompanied by sense desire beset him. And indeed it is for him a disease .. it is in just this way that nibbāna out to be understood as happiness.[161]

### 2.6.8 Craving (taṇhā)

The Sammādiṭṭhisutta classifies taṇhā according to the six senses, as in earlier key terms:

> And what is craving? ... There are these six classes of craving: craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for odours, flavours, tangibles and craving for mind-objects.[162]

Just for clarification, 'mind-objects' refers to thoughts, ideas and emotions – anything that is not one of the other senses. Where earlier we found feelings led to consciousness becoming interested and 'exploring'[163] the sense, we now find that feelings of liking or disliking lead to craving, or thirsting after what one likes and

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[161] A IV 414

[162] M I 52.

[163] M III 239.

being repelled by what one dislikes. In the Chachakkasutta (M149) this desire arises due to not knowing and understanding the six senses as they really are.

> ... inflamed by lust, fettered infatuated, contemplating gratification ... then one's craving ... which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delighting in this and that, increases. One's bodily and mental troubles, torments and fevers increase, and one experiences bodily and mental suffering.[164]

Sense desires as we saw earlier in the Māgandhiyasutta are inferior to the spiritual delights of concentration meditation and the stages of enlightenment; a topic which is outlined throughout the suttas, with metaphor's such as the butcher's bone which, shorn of all meat, when given to a hungry dog would provide little satisfaction.[165] "So too," continues the Buddha in this Potaliyasutta, "sense desires have been compared to a bone by the Blessed One, they provide little gratification and much suffering, much despair, and the danger in them is great".[166]

Craving has a special relationship to the rest of PS, and to suffering in particular, since it is the second noble truth – a format wherein, in the Dhammacakkasutta, it is expounded as being threefold in nature, viz. sense desire (kāmataṇhā), becoming desire (bhava taṇhā) and non-becoming.[167] The way to enlightenment is often described in terms of putting an end to this craving, such as in the Mūlapriyāyasutta:

> The Tathāgatha is accomplished and fully enlightened ... because he has understood that delight is the root of suffering, and that with being as condition there is birth, and for anything born there will be aging-and-death.

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[164] M III 287.

[165] M I 34.

[166] M I 35.

[167] S IV 420.

> Therefore Bhikkhus, through the complete destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up and relinquishing of cravings, the Tathāgatha has awakened to supreme full enlightenment.[168]

Payutto describes the cessation cycle of PS as a 'process', as distinguished from a 'way' which "is a technique, a method and a tool."[169] The way can encompass many methods and types of practise which are adapted to the time and place, whereas with PS, especially in the dependent cessation cycle, it is shown to be a cascade effect removing causes and results. Thus, according to him, we are not necessarily supposed to use the teaching of PS for practise, so much as for understanding.

According to the three lifetime interpretation of PS, all the links up to this point are irreversible (despite relentless evidence to the contrary), and it is only at craving that the cycle can be broken as follows: Payutto summarises :

**Chart (viii)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Past cause | Ignorance, volitional impulses |
| Present result | Consciousness, name-form, six sense base, contact, and feeling |
| Present Cause | Craving, clinging, becoming |
| Future result | Birth, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation etc. |

[170]

Given that there are a large number of variations on the twelve link model, we do in fact find that sometimes the method for bringing the cycle to a halt occurs at different links of the cycle. In the above table, the cycle occurs in causal mode as usual until a certain point, whereupon the process is interrupted and switched into cessation mode. In the Mahānidānasutta (D15) we find several alternatives given within the sutta itself. The initiation of the cessation cycle occurs after contact, after

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[168] M I 6.

[169] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.89.

[170] Ibid., p34.

feeling, or by not clinging.[171] For instance, seeing all feeling as conditioned, dependently arisen etc. and understanding that if the feeling is one's self, then on the cessation of that feeling one must assume that one's self has also disappeared, one gains the insight that 'feeling is not my self'. The sutta continues:

> From the time when a monk no longer regards feeling as the self, or the self as impercipient or of a nature to feel, by not so regarding he clings to nothing in the world. Not clinging he is not excited, and by being not excited he gains personal liberation.[172]

By not clinging, do we assume that all the other prior links have ceased too, or do we assume that the links from ignorance are still occurring naturally, but we have stopped the process at feeling-tone, by not allowing craving and clinging to arise? The suttas are not clear on this point. Possibly, while practising mindfulness it is helpful to work at the link of feeling, by not allowing craving to arise in reaction, but when we are liberated the whole PS process has come to cessation.

It is worth pointing out that the same sutta also outlines the cessation cycle as starting at consciousness[173], having omitted ignorance and saṅkhāra from the list. It also gives an alternative version of the arising of suffering, where we find in sequence craving-seeking-acquisition-ascertainment-attachment-desire and passion-possessiveness-stinginess-defensiveness-unskillful acts-taking up of knives, conflicts, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive speech and lies.[174] Certainly in the above examples the juncture of feeling and craving plays a special role in both the arising and the cessation of suffering.

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[171] D II 66.

[172] D II 69.

[173] D II 66.

[174] D II 62.

There are other suttas however which describe the cessation mode in other ways, such as the Cūḷasīhanādasutta (M11) where it is from the understanding and cessation of clinging to views that is the spark for the cessation mode.[175] The Mahāhatthipadopamasutta (M28) puts the point of intercession at the six senses,[176] as does the Phaggunasutta in the Nidāna book where the cessation cycle begins "from the utter fading away and cessation of the sixfold sphere of sense-contact ... comes cessation of contact ... feeling ... craving ... grasping ...becoming ... birth etc."[177] In another sutta, we find the crucial cessation cycle to begin with grasping; suffering arises for one who contemplates the enjoyment that there is in all that can be grasped, and will cease if one "contemplates the misery that there is in all that makes for grasping, craving ceases. When craving ceases, grasping ceases," and so on for the rest of the links.[178]

In summary the standard elaboration of craving is being of six kinds – one for each sense. We can also breakdown craving as three kinds, as we find in the Dhammacakkasutta and many other places. Craving has a special significance in that in many places we find that it is giving up craving that leads to enlightenment, making a case for the three lifetime model where craving is the point of practise, from which the cessation mode of PS proceeds. However, we also find many suttas where it is other links that we find at the start of the cessation mode. Further, we do not find explained whether, before the end of craving can be brought about, the former links of ignorance etc. must cease first, or if they can proceed as usual, simply not developing into craving after the link of feeling.

### 2.6.9 Clinging (upādāna)

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[175] M I 65.

[176] M I 189.

[177] S II 13.

[178] S II 83, 86, 88, 91.

The Sammādiṭṭhisutta defines craving in the following manner:

> And what is clinging? ... there are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rites and ritual, clinging to the doctrine of a self.[179]

There is a marked difference here with this link in that each of the above four clauses, with the possible exception of the first, are longer term than the previous links which were, in the momentary model, all very much instantaneous, and in the three lifetime model, instantaneous from the six senses onwards. Clinging is longer term, in that one holds to views rites and rituals that are built and maintained over years and decades, rather than just as reaction to present moment sensory impact.

Views give a false sense of solidity to the world, from which we build up a sense of 'self', that becomes a 'doctrine' in so far as we identify with it. This seems to be the meaning of the description below:

> Suppose there is a dyer or a painter. Having some dye or lac, (yellow) turmeric, (blue) indigo or crimson, he would depict, on a well-smoothed wooden tablet, on a wall or a piece of cloth, the figure of a woman or a man, with all the major and minor features (of the body). Similarly if there is lust for the nutriments of edible food, sense-impression, volitional thought and consciousness ... then consciousness takes a hold therein and grows. Where consciousness takes a hold and grows, there is occurrence of mind-and-body. Where there is occurrence of mind-and-body, there is growth of kamma-formations. Where there is growth of kamma-formations, there is a future arising of renewed existence, there is future birth, decay and death.

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[179] M I 51.

> This, I say, O monks, is laden with sorrow, burdened with anguish and despair.[180]

Just as the painter creates a false image out of a few ingredients, so does lust for the nutriments of food, sense impression, volitional thought and consciousness create a sense of self that then is propelled through rebirth. The analogy above is interesting in that we can interpret the painting to be the formation of this real physical body, or as a mental construct of the body and self. However, insofar as a painting is not reality, but only a representation of such, weight is added to the latter interpretation.

This clinging does not arise inevitably however, and it can cease in the present moment, as pointed out in the Mahānidānasutta:

> If there were absolutely no craving for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, mind objects ... could clinging appear?[181]

Note that clinging to *all* views is a hindrance, even if that view is 'right view'

> Bhikkhus, purified and bright as this right view is, if you adhere to it, cherish it, treasure it and treat it as a possession would you then understand the Dhamma that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping?[182]

Craving and grasping, like consciousness and name-form have a special reciprocal relationship.

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[180] S II 101.See also Dhp 147 "Behold this body — a painted image, a mass of heaped up sores, infirm, full of hankering — of which nothing is lasting or stable!"

[181] D II 59.

[182] M I 261.

> In him brethren, who contemplates the enjoyment that there is in all that makes for grasping, craving grows. Grasping is conditioned by craving... it is just as if there should be a blazing bonfire of ten or twenty or thirty or forty loads of faggots; thereon a man should throw from time to time dry grasses, should throw dry cow-dung, should throw dry faggots. Verily such a great bonfire so fed, so supplied with fuel would burn for a long while.
>
> Even so in him who contemplates the enjoyment that there is in all that makes for grasping, craving grows and is the condition of grasping, becoming, birth, decay and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, sorrow, despair. Such is the arising of this entire mass of ill.[183]

This quote gives credence to the idea previously discussed that the cessation cycle of PS can start at craving, rather than at ignorance. In this case, the three life-cycle interpretation gains traction.

Clinging to the idea of a self is also a common theme in the suttas. In the Mahānidānasutta (D15) one of the cessation cycles outlines starts with feeling, and how it gives rise to a false sense of self. Understanding that self is not feeling, nor connected to feeling, the yogi does not cling to anything in the world. Thus not clinging he is not agitated; and thus not agitated he attains to nibbāna.[184]

A final poignant quote, from the Mārasaṃyutta, regarding rites and rituals is a fitting place to end this section on clinging:

> I understood full well how any rites
> Austere, aimed at the overthrow of death,
> Belonging to matters useless for our good.

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[183] S II 84.

[184] D II 68.

Yea nothing good they bring along with them,
Like and oar and rudder in a ship on land.[185]

## 2.6.10 Becoming (bhava)

The Sammādiṭṭhisutta defines becoming in the following manner:

There are, friends, three types of becoming: sensual becoming, material becoming and immaterial becoming.[186]

These three states relate to the three way categorisation of the different realms viz: Sense desire realm, form realm and formless realm.[187] [188] Due to this one often sees this link depicted in Buddhist Art as a pregnant woman; showing that a being descends into the womb. If this was the meaning however, it would be indistinguishable from nāmarūpa in the three lifetime model. Another problem with this interpretation is that in higher and lower realms, beings are opapātika - spontaneously born, meaning they do not enter into the womb before rebirth.

Payutto deals with this in a later chapter titled 'Other Interpretations' where he describes bhava more as a sense of being, a sense of an experiencer.

Becoming as a determinant for birth: Given a life state to be occupied and possessed, a being arises to fill it as enjoyer or experiencer. This is the distinct feeling of occupation or possession of that life state. There is a

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[185] S I 103.

[186] M I 52.

[187] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.29.

[188] Mahasi Sayadaw, **A Discourse on Paticcasamuppada or The Doctrine of Dependent Origination**, (Rangoon: Buddhasasana Huggha Organization), p.131.

> perception of one who acts and one who reaps the fruits of actions, one who succeeds and one who fails, one who gains and one who loses.[189]

Bhava though seems to denote something much more immediate, ongoing and experiential than entering the womb (or unspecified mechanism or relinking consciousness). The Mahāvedallasutta defines bhava as a result of delighting in this and that:

> Friend, renewal of being in the future is generated through the delighting in this and that on the part of beings who are hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.[190]

In a discourse with Ananda, the Buddha is asked directly what bhava is. He is told that it is the establishment of consciousness in the worlds, based on action, consciousness and craving:

> ... in this way Ananda, action is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture. For beings hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving, consciousness is established in the world.[191]

Explanations of bhava cited so far conform to both interpretations of the three lifetime model and the momentary model of PS. But it is not likely that bhava refers just to the moment of entering the womb, because it is described as based on continual change.

> The world delights in becoming because it is based on change, because it is entangled in becoming.[192]

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[189] Ibid. p.47.

[190] M I 294.

[191] A III 230.

[192] S IV 23.

In this sutta one delights in becoming by taking possession of each sense as 'me, mine, myself' - suggesting that bhava is a form of conscious engagement arising after attention has been placed upon a sense. This is emphasised in the term 'kammabhava' which links bhava specifically to action. Mahasi Sayadaw notes this in his two definitions of kammabhava in his Discourse on Dependent Origination:

> Kammabhava means the kamma that leads to rebirth. The Buddha describes it as the punnabhi, apunnabhi and anenjabhi sankharas that lead to lower sensual world or the higher material and immaterial worlds. He also identifies kammabhava with all kammas that give rise to new existence. [193]

We can note that the cessation of bhava is in the present moment, and that such cessation makes one an arahant. Again, it can be argued that such cessation refers to the future - that there will be no more taking birth. But the contact in each case suggests that bhava ceases immediately.

> Having seen fear in every mode of being and in being seeing for non-being I did not affirm any mode of being. Nor did I cling to any delight [194]

It was in such a state of non-affirming any state of being that the Buddha was able to vanish from the sight of Baka the Brahma god. It was not a state of non-arising at a future rebirth. Such a state is equated with nibbāna.

> Cessation of bhava is nibbāna ... cessation of bhava is nibbāna[195]

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[193] Mahasi Sayadaw, A Discourse on Paticcasamuppada or The Doctrine of Dependent Origination, (Rangoon: Buddhasasana Huggha Organization), p.130.

[194] M I 330.

[195] A V 7.

This insight arose in Sāriputta while he was attained to concentration in which he was unaware of everything, yet still perceiving. The Buddha discusses the two views that there can be an and to bhava, and that there cannot. He initially refuses to take either side as "that would not be fitting for me"[196], but continues to state that if it is true that there definitely can be a cessation of bhava then "it is possible that I might here and now attain final nibbāna".[197] This is not saying that nibbāna will prevent a future womb-taking, but that an end to bhava *now*, is nibbāna now.

> [the view] 'there definitely is cessation of being' is close to non-lust, close to non-bondage, close to non-delighting, close to non-holding, close to non-clinging. After reflecting thus, he practices the way to dispassion towards being [bhava], to the fading away and cessation of being.[198]

This point that the end of bhava is in the present rather than the future, is reinforced by the term 'fading away', which suggests a present moment tendency, that weakens and wears out[199], rather than it simply not arising in the future.

In conclusion we can acknowledge that the term bhava can be read in three ways - as the process of entering into a new body, as the continuation of a 'being' through consciousness being stationed in a particular realm, or as a process of conscious engagement that occurs due to clinging or delighting, that is worn down, fades, and ceases in the present.

### 2.6.11 Birth (jāti)

Birth is a straightforward topic in PS. The three lifetime model defines birth as being born in a particular realm, and the momentary model maintains that it is

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[196] M I 411.

[197] M I 411.

[198] M I 411.

[199] The 'wearing out' of bhava occurs at A I 211.

being 'born' into a particular state of mind in the present moment. The Sammādiṭṭhisutta defines birth in the following manner:

> The birth of beings in the various orders of beings, their coming to birth, precipitation [in a womb], generation, manifestation of the aggregates, obtaining the bases for contact - this is called birth.[200]

It is difficult to understand this in any way other than reincarnation into a body in a particular realm. The Buddha describes the insight into the process of jāti in a clear and direct manner, as one of the three insights during his night of enlightenment, in the Bhayabheravasutta.

> I saw beings passing away and reappearing; inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions ... Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human .. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.[201]

Similarly he recollects his own past lives as clearly referring to individual lives, and not just as states of being that come and go in the present moment experience.

> I recollected my manifold past lives ... there I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere and there too I was so named ... This with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.[202]

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[200] M I 50.

[201] M I 19.

[202] M I 19.

In a more graphic way the Buddha describes taking birth as being like a stick thrown up into the air and landing this way or that. It is unequivocal in that it refers to birth in the usual sense of being born into a new body and life-term.

> Just as a stick, brothers, thrown up into the air, falls now on the butt-end, now on it's side, now on its tip, even so do beings, cloaked in ignorance, tied by craving, running on, faring on, go now from this world to the other world, now from the other world to this.[203]

Jāti is specifically referred to as occurring in the future, rather than the present moment. In this interesting shortened form of PS we find nāmarūpa representing the descent into the womb, but jāti as being in the future.

> If there be passion, brothers, if there be delight, if there be craving as to solid food, it is there that consciousness is firmly placed and becomes fruitful. Where consciousness is firmly placed and fruitful there is descent of name-and-form, there is growth of activities. Where there is growth of activities there in the future is renewed becoming and rebirth.[204]

Cessation of birth then, can only mean that after the passing of this body, one is not born again into any kind of body in any of the realms.

### 2.6.12 Old Age and Death (jarāmaraṇa)

The Sammādiṭṭhisutta defines age and death in the following manner:

> The ageing of beings in the various orders of beings, their old age, brokeness of teeth, wrinkling of skin, decline of life, weakness of faculties - this is

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[203] S II 124.

[204] S II 71.

> called ageing. The passing of beings out of the various orders of beings, their passing away, laying down of the body - this is called death[205]

The meaning here is unequivocal; that it is ageing and dying in the conventional sense, and not simply from experience to experience as the momentary model would presume. Ageing for example, is an insight that one has, which awakens urgency in the practice - insight into the normal decline in health and strength of a being born into the world. One should understand the pleasure and attraction of the beautiful body, but also contemplate it in its decline as follows:

> One might see that same [formerly beautiful] woman here at eighty, ninety, or a hundred years, aged, as crooked as a roof rafter, doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, grey-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy.[206]

As for death, we find many examples supporting the definition from the Sammādiṭṭhisutta given above. Each time it represents something that will happen in the future on the breaking up of the body, rather than a dying of experience in the present. The graphic description is given of huge mountains from all sides crushing in and crushing everything, where "none can evade or play truant". It is an impending doom from which no being can escape.[207]

> How short indeed is life!
> within a hundred years one dies;
> who longer lives dies surely of decay [208]

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[205] M I 250

[206] M I 11.

[207] S I 127.

[208] Sn 804.

Buddhadasa in his classic work on PS acknowledges the above descriptions, but posits a problem with them.

> As far as birth from a mother's womb is concerned, we are born only once and that's the end of it. After that there are many, many more births; many births in one day, even. This means being born because of attachment - the feeling that I am something or other. This is called one birth. [209]

In the next chapter Buddhadasa states his view even more clearly:

> The words bhava and jāti, which mean becoming and birth, in the case of Dependent origination do not mean birth from a mother's womb. Rather they mean a non-material kind of birth, a birth from attachment which brews up the feeling of being an "I". That is what is born [and dies].[210]

Buddhadasa cites the Mahataṇhasangkayasutta for this view. In this sutta we find that when there is sense contact and feeling, then there is amusement or delight in that feeling. However no supporting evidence is given for equating the word nandi (delighting in) with attachment, or how it links to becoming or birth. Buddhadasa offers no other scriptural support for interpreting becoming, birth and death in a momentary sense.

Therefore we can conclude that, using original sutta sources ageing and death refer to exactly that, as we would understand by the English translations. It is noteworthy however to point out that one can overcome age and death in the present moment, by enlightenment. Once one is an arahant there is no more becoming, birth or aging and death, by definition.

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[209] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (trans.Steve Schmidt) **Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination** (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992), p.56.

[210] Ibid., p.56.

In conclusion we can summarize in the following manner:

| Link | Traditional Int. | Alternative Int. | Explanation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **avijjā** | ignorance | ignorance (past) | not knowing the right way to act or method to apply. |
| **saṅkhāra** | volitional Impulses | kamma (past) | actions in the past affect kamma (or 52 cetasikā factors) |
| **viññāṇa** | consciousness | relinking consciousness | new birth affected by the last citta state |
| **nāmarūpa** | name-form | enter the womb | entering the womb or a gestalt perception forming |
| **salāyatana** | six Senses | born with body | activation of the senses |
| **phassa** | contact | contact with the world | contact between object and consciousness |
| **vedanā** | feeling | sensation pleasant & not | pleasant and unpleasant judgement of the perception |
| **taṇhā** | craving | sense craving | wanting to get or be separated from the object |
| **upādāna** | clinging | 4 kinds of attachment | attachment forms as habit |
| **bhava** | being | 3 kinds of becoming | level of action leading to birth in the 3 realms |
| **jāti** | birth | birth in a new realm | taking a new birth after passing from the previous one |
| **jarāmaraṇa** | ageing & death | the end of one life | the inescapable consequence of birth |

# Chapter III

# Examination of Gestalt Perception

## 3.1 Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt perception is a theory which came from a small number of early psychologists in Germany from around 1920. Their approach to investigation of the psyche was a marked departure from accepted psychological methods of the time. While other notable psychologists were measuring physical sensation, or piecing together philosophical theories of mind, the gestalt psychologists were focussing on the nature of experience itself. In this they shared a lot of ground with Husserl and the phenomenology branch of philosophy – indeed the gestalt psychologists and the phenomenologists can trace their lineage back to a common source, Franz Brentano. Husserl, Freud, and the gestalt psychologists visited him, and his works greatly influenced William James and Wilhelm Wundt also.[1] Brentano attempted to lay out a methodology for describing direct, subjective phenomenological experience, in what he called 'descriptive psychology'.[2]

This principle of investigating experience itself, rather than the physical sensations, or indeed the psychology of personality theories (such as Freud) sparked the gestalt method. By the time the Congress of the German Society for Experimental Psychology met in Leipzig in 1923 the Gestalt school of psychology had become the dominant paradigm. But the field was cut short when the three main figures of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler all left Germany for the US upon the

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[1] Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, **The Phenomenological Mind**, (London: Routledge, 2008), p.53.

[2] Franz Brentano, (trans. Benito Müller), **Descriptive Psychology**, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.137-8.

rise of the Nazi regime.[3] This interruption to their work, and the different approach of American psychology, meant that their gestalt perspective fell by the wayside. Behaviorism had become the dominant approach of American psychology – the limits of which Köhler devotes an entire chapter to.[4] Gestalt perception never regained the prominence that it had in pre-war Germany, although some later psychologists did eventually pursue similar lines.[5]

In this section we will look first at what gestalt perception is, how it works, and then at related models from Buddhism. Finally we will examine how gestalt perception informs the process of dependent origination. The simplicity of gestalt, and its stark phenomenological stance relates directly to nāmarūpa in the momentary interpretation of PS, and to sālāyatana or passa in the three lifetime interpretation. It is hoped that such a comparison will lend itself to a clear understanding of PS.

## 3.2 Background to Gestalt

Psychology was slow getting started in the late 19th century. Physics, especially chemical science, had progressed rapidly, but it was thought to be impossible to turn the scientific method, which was purely objective, to the nature of the psyche, or consciousness, which by definition, is subjective. Kant had stated that

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[3] Wertheimer, Koffka and Kőhler all participated in the original gestalt experiments on perceived motions of forms in 1910, and formed the 'leading triumvirate' of Gestalt psychology over the next decades. Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.146.

[4] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.3-33.

[5] For example George Kelly and his Personal Construct Theory, and Kurt Lewin and his Principles of Topological Psychology.

that psychology could never become a science since it was not possible to measure the soul as one might the physical world.[6]

Two of the grandfathers of psychology began to tackle this problem in very different ways. William James in the US favoured introspection and reporting of experience as a means of investigation. Wilhelm Wundt in Europe, sought to find ways to measure psychological effects empirically, in order to build a picture of the psyche. He believed that "the phenomena of consciousness are composite products of the unconscious psyche".[7] Experimentation was vital though, if one was to tackle the problem scientifically.

> The importance which experimentation will eventually have in psychology can hardly be visualized to its full extent as yet. We do have, surely, many noteworthy beginnings in the field of psychological investigations, but as a coherent science, experimental psychology still awaits its foundations. These beginnings relate predominantly to the borderline areas where physiology and psychology touch each other, in the area of sensation and perception. It has often been held that the area of sensation and perception is the only one wherein the application of the experimental method remains a possibility, because this is the very area where physiological factors always play a role; whereas—so holds this view—it is a futile attempt to try to penetrate into the realm of the higher psychic activities by experimental methods. Surely, this is a prejudice. As soon as the psyche is viewed as a natural phenomenon, and psychology as a natural science, the experimental methods must also be capable of full application to this science.[8]

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[6] Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.48.

[7] Wilhelm Wundt, **Contributions to the Theory of Sensory Perception Classics in Psychology**, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1862), p.54.

[8] Ibid., p.70.

Into this area of investigation between sensation and perception entered a psychologist, Edgar Rubin, crucial to the gestalt school.

## 3.3 Edgar Rubin: Early Contributions

The early investigations into psychology in Europe thus focussed on physiological aspects such as how the mind interprets weight, colours, and sounds.[9] One of the centres for this research was the University of Göttingen, where a young researcher named Edgar Rubin travelled in 1911, to join the psychological laboratory of the renowned experimenter George Elias Müller.[10] Müller gave Rubin a task to work on: to investigate the recognition of figures, seen from various angles and sizes. Rubin accepted and this line of research would lead to a detailed description of figures as they are directly experienced. Rubin's biographer Jőrgen L. Pind would later point out that

> The Gestalt psychologists ... have often been considered pioneers in such a ‘‘look and see’’ approach within psychology to scientific discourse, but in this respect, Rubin preceded them by almost a decade.[11]

In 1914 Rubin presented his initial finding; an idea he called ‘figure and ground distinction’.[12] This simple observation which had eluded science up to this point, brought Brentano’s 'descriptive psychology' into the field of experimental psychology. Although Rubin never mentions the term 'gestalt', this principle of visual forms is an excellent demonstration of gestalt principles. Figure and ground still presents the easiest approach into understanding gestalt perception.

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[9] Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.44-88

[10] Ibid., p.83.

[11] Ibid., p.94.

[12] Ibid., p.89.

‘Figure and ground’ was Rubin’s terminology for the way the conscious mind coalesces around something from the environment that arranges itself into conscious experience at that moment, and relegates all other perception to the background. He was using shapes cut from cardboard at the time, when he saw that sometimes the background seemed to form the most conscious image, and sometimes the foreground. The most famous example of such figure and ground is the face/vase illusion.[13]

The foreground perception can easily switch between the black and white, face and vase, however, so the term 'figure' is used to represent the conscious image, and 'ground' to represent the background environment. It is important to note that the ground still informs the figure, and is not simply unconscious. For instance, we see the movement of a person waving their hand as the same even if that person is on a moving train.[14] This dependence of the figure on the background context is echoed in the closely related observations of phenomenology:

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[13] By John Smithson 2007 - Transferred from en.wikipedia to Commons by P. Hansen., Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13901986

[14] Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.160.

we perceive each point within a gestalt, against a background – 'the perceptual "something" is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a "field".[15]

It is difficult to see both the vase and the faces at the same time. Either the faces or the vase will jump into consciousness at a time, at the expense of the other image. What does not happen, is that the eye moves around the image, with the conscious mind figuring out what it is seeing. Rubin henceforth created thousands of experiments to find out what the laws were that governed what became figure and what became ground.

Some of Rubin's key observations:

● The first fundamental principle he found was that figures seen before, were easier to spot in repeat trials. Further investigation by the gestalt psychologists later showed this effect was in fact minimal, but nonetheless was still the foundation for the gestalt theory of memory and recall. [16]

● Rubin named the boundary of the figure 'the contour' and figures thus defined have greater 'firmness' and 'reality' than the ground.

● The figure is not necessarily singular, but the ground almost always is (for example you might see numerous chairs on a lawn as the figure).

● The ground is nearly always perceived to extend behind the figure and the figure is nearly always perceived as being closer to the observer.

● Colour, contour, surface all aid the extraction of figure from ground.

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[15] Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, **The Phenomenological Mind**, (London: Routledge, 2008), p.95.

[16] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.279-319.

● Figure is more memorable than ground [17]

Important for our comparison with PS, Rubin also noted that the figure has an affective dimension - one can feel ascetic feelings such as beauty or harmony, and their opposites. This is more pronounced when contours and colours less clearly defined. Rubin points out that William James had made the same observation, that tints and shading become more pronounced in a painting that has been turned upside down.[18]

Rubin was never considered to be a gestalt psychologist, but his research and conclusions followed almost identical lines. He contributed a paper titled 'On Gestalt Perception' to a symposium on gestalt theory in 1926, along with many of the distinguished gestalt psychologists, including Kurt Koffka.[19] He had associated with many of them regularly at meetings of the German Society for Psychology, and was particularly admired and quoted by Koffka.[20]

## 3.4 Gestalt and the Atomist Approach

The next stage in the Gestalt story is the findings of Max Wertheimer, the leader of the trio of original gestalt psychologists we will be studying in this paper. But in order to understand exactly how gestalt psychology developed, it is necessary to consider the prevailing trend of psychology of the time (and indeed since). This is a view we shall term 'atomist', but each of the original researchers called it by different names.

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[17] Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.97-100.

[18] Jörgen L. Pind, **Edgar Rubin and Psychology in Denmark,** (London: Springer, 2004), p.101.

[19] Ibid., p.183.

[20] Ibid., p.150.

In the atomist view, psychology is researched by breaking down different elements of behaviour and perception and trying to formulate general rules governing them. For instance, one might research memory, learning, colour perception etc.. Or one might try to formulate broad psychological models and then hope they will inform or predict behaviour and experience, as Freud was doing at about the same time. (Rubin for instance, was not impressed by Freud's models, calling that approach "dishonest and unsober").[21]

> the central point of the present gestalt controversy, viz. the cleavage between the atomistic standpoint of the refuted theory and the characteristic closure, wholeness which the phenomena of form-perception manifest. The "atomistic" psychology, characteristically dependent as it was upon the natural sciences for its method of thinking, tried to conceive the reality of psychic life as built up of Sensations and Feelings, of conscious elements, and set itself the task of carrying through a construction of this sort on the basis of a study of these very elements with reference to their elementary properties and the laws of their synthesis.[22]

This atomist approach, of building up a picture of the whole, by studying the elements, overlooks the experiential whole. Einstein in fact, who knew Max Wertheimer personally, agreed with Wertheimer's phenomenological stance, saying “beware of trying to understand a whole by arbitrary isolation of separate components, or by hazy, or by forced abstractions".[23]

The atomist tendency, to view the world as discreet objects with certain properties, is quite natural. Kőhler notes:

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[21] Ibid., p.198-9. (Rubin also had a dislike for Husserl and phenomenology).

[22] Bruno Petermann, **The Gestalt Theory and the Problem of Configuration**, (Kiel: University of Kiel, 1932), p.3-4.

[23] D. Brett King, and Michael Wertheimer **Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Theory**, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 298.

> Our naive experience consists first of all of objects, their properties and changes, which appear to exist and to happen quite independently of us ... when we are not present or are occupied with other matters, they apparently remain just as they were when we gave them our full attention.[24]

Science, Kőhler continues, in studying a world of such objects, has to construct an objective and independent world of physical things, space, time and movement, and maintain that this world appears at no point in direct experience of any being.[25]

As a natural consequence, one then understands that sensations "colors, noises and smells, etc., were merely products of influences exerted on him by his surroundings"[26] impinging upon the senses of a separate individual being. The concept of our own body becomes part of the constructed world of things, barely related to the world of actual experience. In this way, we can see Kőhler is coming very close to a Buddhist perspective - that there is experience is not denied; but the sense of identity or owner of such experience is a constructed idea, that is not ultimately real. In the pursuit of knowledge, science looks to its constructed world (which Kőhler acknowledges is a valid and productive endeavour) but forgets to investigate what actual experience is like.

Rubin was very clear that the atomist approach is severely limited, and does not explain experience.

> Earlier attempts were made to construct wholes out of presumed mental elements, simultaneously admitting to their failure with statements to the

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[24] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.6.

[25] Ibid., p.6.

[26] Ibid., p.6.

> effect that the elements, by being combined into wholes, changed character (mental chemistry) and that the wholes were more than the sum of their parts (creative synthesis). Now it has become clear that the attempt to construct the wholes from elements was an unhappy one. One now proceeds more humbly from the wholes themselves as specific entities, trying neither to construct them nor take them apart but to gradually investigate the different aspects which they present.[27]

Kőhler devotes an entire chapter to refuting the atomist approach to psychology - his name for 'atomist' is 'Machine Theory'. He maintains the gestalt position that wholes are not constructed by parts.[28] Instead, an experience arises as a complete unit - a unit that informs the parts, rather than the parts informing the whole. One of his statements laying out this approach, is in fact, a good definition for what gestalt perception[29] is about.

> Our view will be that, instead of reacting to local stimuli by local and mutually independent events, the organism responds to the *pattern* of stimuli to which it is exposed; and that this answer is a unitary process, a functional whole, which gives, in experience, a sensory scene rather than a mosaic of local sensations.[30]

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[27] Edgar Rubin, **Psykologi**. (Copenhagen: Salmonsens Konversationsleksikon Copenhagen: 1925), p. 683.

[28] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.100-135.

[29] The gestalt psychologists did not look kindly on the term 'perception', which they felt was part of the atomist approach. But I use the term occasionally in order to differentiate from Gestalt Therapy, which has nothing to do with the gestalt psychology presented in this thesis.

[30] Kőhler op. chit., p. 103.

Wertheimer hammered home the same point continually - that gestalt psychology starts from direct experience, and not from an analysis of the parts and properties of a constructed, scientifically investigated world.

> There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole.[31]

Thus the gestalt angle is to investigate how the wholes inform the parts, how things are spontaneously organised, and from that basis how memory, learning and association operate. Wertheimer's own investigations into the organisation of visual forms marked the beginning of the gestalt movement proper, and it is to that we turn next.

## 3.5 Wertheimer and the Organization of Perceptual Forms

Max Wertheimer is considered to be the founder of the gestalt school of psychology that became popular in Germany in before world war II. Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler were his close assistants at the time and were also considered to be founders of the lineage.[32] Wertheimer, in 1912 "stated for the first time the principles of a Gestalt-Theorie, which has served as the starting point of a small number of German pscyhologists".[33] Wertheimer set out the Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms in 1923. [34] He concentrated on the spontaneous organization of visual forms,

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[31] Max Wertheimer, **The General Theoretical Situation**, in W. D. Ellis, **A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology**, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938), p.12.

[32] Lothar Spillmann (Ed.) **Max Wertheimer: On Perceived Motion and Figural Configuration** , (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), p.262.

[33] Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,** (Washington: Psychological Bulletin Vol 19, 1922), p.531.

[34] Max Wertheimer, ed w. Ellis, in **A Source book of Gestalt Psychology,** (London: Routledge, 1923), p.71-72.

but as Koffka pointed out, "Gestalt-Theorie is more than a theory of perception; it is even more than a mere psychological theory".[35] The gestalt psychologists did not dismiss the popular theories of psychology of the day outright, but they did demonstrate a radical change of approach. They focussed on how sensations arrange into certain 'wholes', or gestalts, as they appear directly in experience.

Wertheimer's research began with experiments around the perception of moving forms, from flashing lights and changing images (motion pictures were in their infancy still), and progressed to spontaneously configuring visual forms, presented mostly in dots and lines. [36] These dots do not appear in experience as dots, but as discreet groups. It takes no effort on the part of the observer to arrange them - indeed it is very difficult to see them as variously spaced dots rather than the arrangement which pop out in the way that Rubin described as 'figure'. Where Rubin had focussed on complete images however, Wertheimer researched arrangements of multiple dots and lines - as a way of showing that the gestalt wholes are substantially more than just the component parts. The principle is that the wholes inform the parts, rather than the parts informing the whole. But it must be born in mind that the research into visual organization is only a clear demonstration of the principles, and that gestalts apply to all the senses, not just vision.

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[35] Koffka, Op. Chit., p.531.

[36] Max Wertheimer, **Experimental Studies on Seeing Motion,** (Göttingen, Germany: Hogrefe Publishing, Zeitschrift für Psychologie Vol 61), p. 161–265.

Wertheimer's research covered hundreds of configurations, but it is only necessary here to present a few of them in order to get the idea. In the figure below the dots configure themselves along the a/b/c axis, and not easily along the a/d/g/j/m

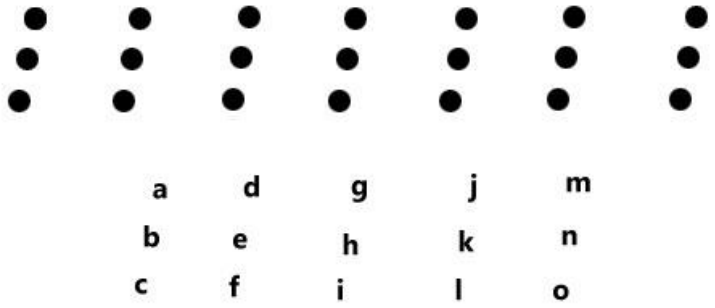


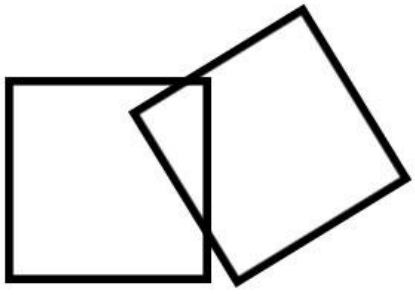

Figure (i)

axis[37]

[38]

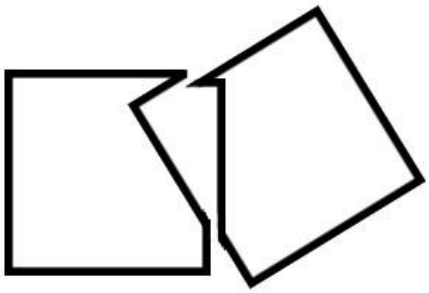
Figure (ii) organizes itself into 2 squares, even though figure (iii) is just as possible a configuration. Wertheimer concentrates on the figure, rather than the ground, but many of the figures do in fact include some of the ground to complete them - for instance the a/b/c figure in figure (i) seems to form a single line, despite part of the 'line' being formed from the 'ground' (white space). Indeed, if you pay attention to the a/b/c lines, you will notice the mind trying to 'fill in' the spaces giving

Figure (ii)



two squares are easily seen overlapping

Figure (iii)



these equally possible shapes are not easily spotted unless separated

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[37] Reproduced from: Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950), p.72.

[38] Ibid. p. 84 (figure 26).

a dynamic appearance to them, in a way that is not observed when attending to the a/d/g/j/m configuration.

figure (iv)

In figure (iv) every viewer should quickly be able to spot an 'E', even though it is missing many visual clues. The mind fills in the missing pieces, and one can observe that the ground (white) seems to be defined in the areas where it would incorporate the '**E**'. Köhler noted this effect too in figure (v) where the spaces between a/a, b/b, c/c and d/d appear more defined than the space (ground) between a/b, b/c and c/d. Köhler continues on the same page to note that figure and ground exist in the auditory field, just as much as the visual one. An audible ground might be street-noises, stillness, countryside sounds etc. It is also possible to listen to music and create a figure of a particular instrument (drums, bass or whatever) while the rest of the music becomes the 'ground'.

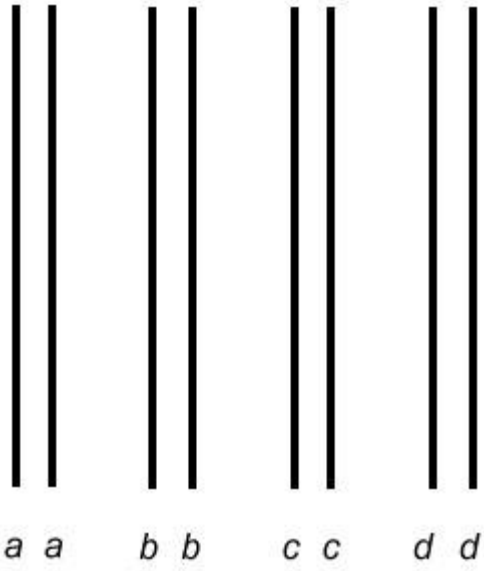


figure (v)

[39]

figure (vi)

[40]

Wertheimer's experiments revealed a number of properties of gestalts including but not exclusive to:

1) The factor of proximity - dots, lines, physical sensations or even audible taps tend to organise according to proximity, such as a/b/c in figure (i). This factor can be overpowered by other factors however.

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[39] Reproduced from Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,** (Washington: Psychological Bulletin Vol. 19, 1922), p.554.

[40] Reproduced from Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950), p.74.

2) The factor of similarity - dots and dashes (or other stimuli) arrange themselves in groups (figure (vi)

3) The factor of direction - uniform lines and curves tend to form easily (think of star constellations).

4) The factor of the good curve - even if the curve is not consistent or perfect, the observer will tend to see as such.

5) The factor of closure - gestalts tend to form easily where there is a clear contour or surface.

6) The factor of habit - depending on learning and experience some things organise better than others, eg. a/b is a stronger gestalt than a/f.



When a figure emerges, Wertheimer says it "triumphs" and will be stable according to its "inner coherence" which makes it a "good gestalt".[42] It can also be said to "spring forward".[43] Koffka adds that a gestalt has a certain level of "goodness" in that the parts conform to the gestalt whole - so one might recognize a staircase even if the steps are several meters high, or only millimetres; but there is nonetheless a certain range where the dimensions conform best to the structure.[44] Further gestalts are not just static forms, but can include what Koffka called 'process' gestalts too.[45] That means a gestalt can include movement, such as a clock hand moving, or even quite complex activities.

For the purposes of this thesis this brief summary of the gestalt understanding and methodology is sufficient. Suffice it to say that the gestalt literature spans thousands of pages, and is meticulously backed up by careful experimentation.

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[41] Wertheimer op. chit., p.74-85.

[42] Wertheimer op. chit., p.83

[43] Bruno Petermann, **The Gestalt Theory and the Problem of Configuration**, (Kiel: University of Kiel, 1932), p.46.

[44] Koffka op. chit., p.545.

[45] Koffka op. chit., p.546.

The main features of this approach to bear in mind is that wholes are experienced first, and parts of things only appear as secondary experiences after the initial gestalt. This is in direct opposition to the prevailing view of the day (and perhaps the modern day too) that we build up our experience from various elements in an atomist fashion. Bruno Peterson, summarising the gestalt position in 1932, sums up thus:

> There can be no doubt that in what is offered here, further precision is given to what the gestalt concept connotes in the gestalt theory. Henceforth the extremely far-reaching idea that the "whole" determines the "parts" retroactively, or to put it in a better way, that the "parts" are dependent upon the " whole " in their "so-being", is explicitly given the central position.
> ... The whole is prior to the parts.[46]

While examples given, and indeed the experiments made by the original gestalt psychologists, focus on very specific, and artificial visual, tactile and auditory sensations, these do only serve to illustrate the general principles. In real life, gestalts are not so artificial. Koffka opens his introduction using the examples of the desk at which he is writing, the taste of the tobacco in his pipe and the noise of street traffic he can hear from his seat.[47] Wertheimer opens his 1923 paper giving examples of looking at a house, tree and sky, looking at a picture or hearing a melody.[48] Köhler similarly opens his book with examples in his immediate experience, of a hard grey rock he is using as a seat, blue lake, or the faint noise of the wind.[49] Heidegger, showing his phenomenological roots, which as discussed earlier, are shared with the gestalt psychologists, also observed the same kind of experiential consciousness:

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[46] Bruno Petermann, op. chit., p.46-47.

[47] Koffka op. chit., p.532.

[48] Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950), p.71.

[49] Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.3.

> We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g. tones and noises, in the appearance of things . . .rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations of even mere sounds.[50]

We can note that one gestalt arises at a time, as an immediate experience, complete with feelings, intentions, and actions. If the gestalt changes in any part, the entire system changes.[51] This is neatly summed up by Wertheimer:

> When we are presented with a number of stimuli we do not as a rule experience "a number" of individual things, this one and that and that. Instead larger wholes separated from and related to one another are given in experience; their arrangement and division are concrete and definite.[52]

## 3.6 Divergent Methodology of Gestalt and Buddhism

Both Buddhism and Gestalt use extensive discussions on the relationship of 'wholes' to 'parts', but with different goals in mind. Gestalt theory can be summarized as promoting understanding things according to the complete whole first, rather than by consideration of the parts that make up that whole. Wertheimer says that "science means breaking up complexes into their component elements", even though 'the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the

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[50] Martin Heidegger, **The Origin of the Work of Art**, **in Philosophies of Art and Beauty** ed. A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), p.656.

[51] Bruno Petermann, op. chit., p.38.

[52] Wertheimer op. chit., p.72.

whole".[53] He continues "there are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements", and that humans relate to a world of objects, and "not a summation of sense data", otherwise "children, primitive peoples and animals experience would be nothing but piece-sensations".[54]

But this does not apply only to direct perception only. Wertheimer gives the example of children playing a game together. If one were to try and understand their behaviour only in terms of individual egos, and the wants, fears etc. It would be difficult to explain the behaviour necessitated by the game. But if one understands the group as a whole, and the rules of the game being played, then it is quite easy to understand and predict the behaviour displayed.[55] This gestalt view, of looking at the wholes first, was furthered by one of Wertheimer's students Kurt Lewin, who is credited with starting the field of social psychology.[56]

If we use the example of a chariot, according to Gestalt, one would perceive a 'chariot' first as a 'whole' complete object, rather than registering the parts of the chariot first. Note, this is not only relating to visual contact with a chariot, but can also apply to hearing it, or merely conceptualising it mentally. As seen earlier in this chapter, the fundamental nature of gestalt is that, with suitable arrangement of parts, new wholes emerge, that include properties not present in the parts (such as the arrangement of the dots and circles in figure (iv) produced emergent patterns). A 'chariot' in this sense, has a use (travel), load bearing capacity, passenger limit and countless other features that are not present in simple wheels, bed, axel etc.. That is, the 'chariot' is much greater than the parts that comprise it. The methodology of

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[53] Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950), p.2.

[54] Ibid., p.6.

[55] Ibid., p.6-7.

[56] Alfred J. Marrow, **The Practical Theorist: Life and Work of Kurt Lewin**, (London: Basic Books Inc., 1996), p.8.

gestalt *psychology* (which is concerned with perception, rather than the broader approach of general gestalt theory), is how the sense field organises into discrete objects, as outlined in the previous section of this chapter.

Buddhism also features discussion of the relationship of parts to wholes, but with a different methodology. The goal of relating parts to wholes is rooted in abandoning the whole process whereby things become manifest. For example, the perceptual breaking down of the body into constituent parts of hair, skin, teeth, nails, blood etc.. or the view of the body as a "bag of skin with an opening at both ends filled with unpleasant things".[57] This methodology is breaking the 'whole' self down into lower order parts. This is part of the reflection on foulness that is designed to make the practitioner abandon the mistaken sense of a self.

Another well known example of breaking wholes down into parts comes from the bhikkhuni saṃyutta, where Vajirā is tempted by Māra, in order to distract her from concentration. Māra asks her:

> By whom has this being been created?
> Where is the maker of the being?
> Where has the being arisen?
> Where does the being cease?[58]

Vajirā is not deluded by Māra, and replies how this whole (self) is a mere assembly of parts:

> 'Being' Why dost thou harp upon that word?
> Among false opinions Māra, hast you strayed
> Mere bundle of conditioned factors this!
> No 'being' can be here discerned to be

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[57] M I 57.

[58] S I 135

> For just as, when the parts are rightly set
> the word 'chariot' ariseth [in our minds],
> So, doth our usage covenant to say:
> 'Being' when the aggregates are there.[59]

Clearly here the methodology of Buddhism varies from gestalt methodology, in that it is focussed on breaking down the idea of a self, with a view to liberation from the process of PS.

The relationship of this methodology as it relates directly to PS can be seen most clearly in the Mulāhatthipadopama sutta, where, after a descriptive treatment of the nature of the four great elements, the Buddha continues:

> Just as when a space is enclosed by timber and creepers, grass and clay, it comes to be termed 'house,' so too, when a space is enclosed by bones and sinews, flesh and skin, it comes to be termed 'material form.'[60]

This passage shows how a 'house' is gathered together from the parts that comprise it, just as by analogy, the sutta says, there is the "gathering, and amassing of things into the five aggregates".[61]

Immediately following the description of how a 'house' arises from the organisation of the parts, the Buddha outlines how such things arise dependently on three factors of a sense, sense object, and attention. Here 'attention' is tajjo

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[59] S I 135

[60] M I 191.

[61] M I 191.

samannāhāro, Bhikkhu Bodhi says "is identified with the five-door adverting consciousness" which directs the flow of experience.[62]

Together with this form and consciousness, the sutta continues, is saṅkhāra, vedanā and saññā. These are "included," "gathered" and "amassed". Since the preceding paragraph described a process of perceiving, this gathering of factors applies to the present moment manifestation of corresponding consciousness, rather than to a generalisation of things that can be included in the five khandha.

If the sense, sense object and attention do not combine, the sutta continues, then there is no arising of that class of consciousness, showing how the khandhas come to be gathered together in the moment with phenomenologically perceived objects. This the sutta continues, is how the five khandhas are dependently arising.[63]

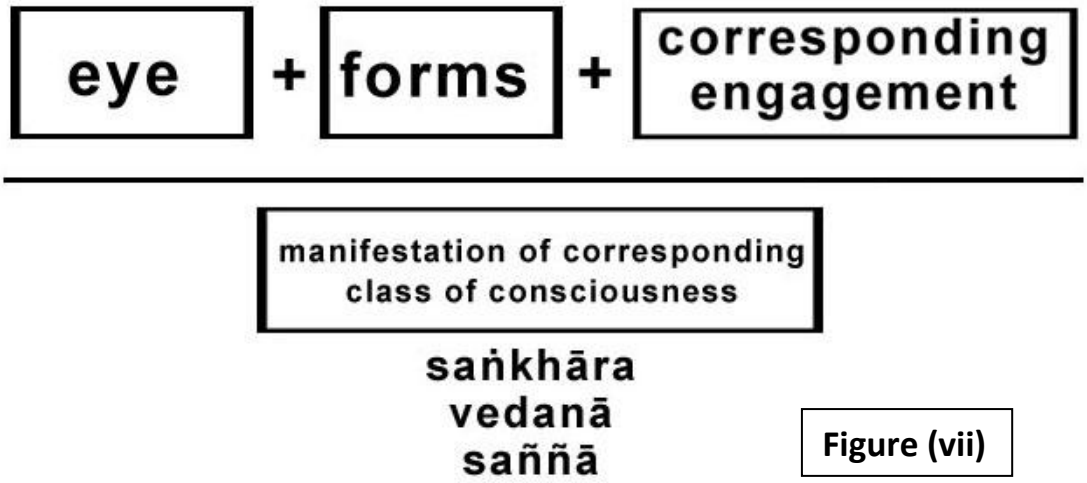


**Figure (vii)**

This phenomenological understanding is vital to the idea of consciousness (viññāṇa) in Buddhism. Consciousness is not something that lasts a lifetime, or even the waking hours, but is something that arises and ceases continually with the present sensory contact. This is clear in the mahātaṇhāsankhaya sutta, where the Buddha

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[62] Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Majjhima Nikāya: Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), p. 1221 (note 339).

[63] M I 191.

describes the idea that it is the same consciousness that runs through this and other lifetimes, as a pernicious view:

> Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness.
>
> ...
>
> Just as a fire is reckoned by the particular condition upon which it burns - when fire burns dependent on logs, it is reckoned as a log fire.[64]

The same formula is given for faggot fire, grass, dung, chaff, and rubbish. The consciousness arises dependent on a particular sense. With that as nutriment, it comes to be, and with the removal of that nutriment, it ceases to be.[65] If you do not get this point, says the Buddha, you are 'misguided'!

> Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arises, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness.[66]

Thus consciousness arises and ceases continually, sparking the process of PS in the present moment, dependent on each gestalt. These cause the identification of self. The Buddha describes how it would be easy to see the body as self, as it lasts for a number of years; but it is difficult to see consciousness as not self, even though it arises and ceases continually just like a monkey swings from branch to bough in the forest.

> But this, brethren, that we call thought, that we call mind, that we call consciousness, that arises as one think, ceases as another, whether by night

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[64] M I 260.

[65] M I 260.

[66] M I 258.

> or by day. Just as a monkey, brethren, faring through the woods, through the great forest, catches hold of a bough, letting it go, seizes another.[67]

The sutta continues to say that one thing arises, and then another, all dependently. It proceeds to give the standard 12 part formula of PS. It finishes with being repelled by the five khandha, and being set free. What can the experience be when one is wholly set free from forming objects by attention? Theravada suttas do not describe such states except in terms of how to arrive at them:

> Men who have conceptions (saññā) of manifoldness of some kind go on separating things when apperceiving; but [eventually] he drives out everything that is constructed by the mind and to do with the mundane life and proceeds to a life of renunciation.[68]

In summary then, gestalt methodology focusses on dealing with wholes rather than breaking things down to parts in ever deeper intricacy. When it comes to the gestalt form of psychology, it is interested in the laws which govern how objects (figures) arise, and relate to each other. Buddhism on the other hand, encourages breaking things, especially the self, down into parts, with an end view of abandoning the whole PS process of constructing objects with the mind.

## 3.7 Gestalt as Nāmarūpa

There is a key question in philosophy, Buddhism, and in gestalt psychology of whether objects have a discreet ontological existence or not. It is beyond the scope of the current paper to go into this question in depth, but we can note that gestalt generally frames this question differently. A gestalt can arise dependent on a real object in the world, such as a chariot, or with a representation of an object, such as the thought, memory or image of a chariot. The fact that a 'chariot'

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[67] S II 95

[68] S IV 71

gestalt is treated purely as conscious experience, does not offer any argument as to whether the chariot is physically existing in the world or not. Similarly Buddhism (most schools) does not take a strong idealist stance - but acknowledges that there is physical form, and it can be experienced. Indeed PS is directly posited as a solution to this problem; in answer to the question which is correct 'everything is' or 'nothing is', the Buddha "not approaching either of these extremes, teaches a doctrine of the middle way", proceeds to use the standard 12 link PS to show that things, physically existing or not, are instead, dependently arisen.[69] What we are interested in here though, is how that experience arises, and what happens to it once it has become established.

For that let us return to the passage quoted in section 2.6.4, where we define nāmarūpa:

> And what is name and form? Feeling, perception, intention, attention and contact – these are called ‘name’. The four great elements and the material form derived from them – these are called ‘form’.[70]

Here we see the sutta explicitly states that the nāma group cannot arise without the rūpa group, and rūpa cannot arise without the nāma group. The same idea is expressed in the Mahānidāna sutta.[71] This means that a moment of experiencing something, must include both the form factors and the mental. As we have seen in gestalt, a gestalt whole includes the spontaneous organisation of form, together with the memory, liking, and other mental factors. A good example of this comes from Koffka where he notes that a beam of wood lying on the ground, when it becomes a figure, is understood to have load bearing properties (i.e. strength) even if it is even on the ground and not bearing any weight. This shows that we do not just see physical forms, but also mentally attributed properties also. Such properties Koffka calls "so-

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[69] S II 76.

[70] M I 53

[71] D II 54

functioning".[72] William James noted the same thing, leading to him formulating a theory that emotions arise with gestalts (though he did not use the term 'gestalt'):

> My theory... is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. Common-sense says we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble.[73]

Phenomenology observes that experience arises in gestalts too; though phenomenology differs in methodology of investigation. The following description uses nearly the same terms as quoted above for nāma:

> the emergence of any cognitive act requires the rapid coordination of many different capacities (attention, perception, memory, motivation, and so on) and the widely distributed neural systems subserving them. [74]

Thompson's choice of the words "attention, perception, memory and motivation" are very close to the four aspects of nāma, viz, saññā, cetanā, vedanā, manasikāra.

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[72] Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,** (Washington: Psychological Bulletin Vol 19, 1922), p.558.

[73] William James, **The Principles of Psychology**, (New York: Dover, 1950), p.247-8.

[74] Evan Thompson, **Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind**, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p.331.

So rather than thinking in terms of subject and object, or of varieties of perceptions and mental processes all operating independently, gestalt (and phenomenology too) treats experience directly - a moment of experiencing includes both mental and physical aspects combined into a single whole, that is extremely similar to nāmarūpa. The only thing missing in nāmarūpa, that we find in gestalt, is consciousness itself. But even this we find immediately tied to nāmarūpa in a close relationship.

> Name, friends, is one end; form is the second end; consciousness is in the middle; and craving is the seamstress[75]

Here we see the close relationship of nāma, rūpa, consciousness and contact between them. We can represent this view diagrammatically as follows:

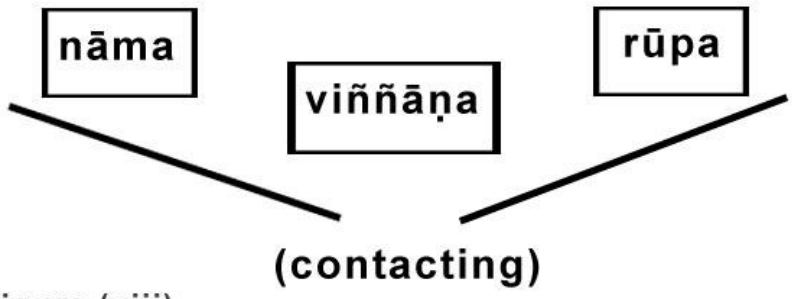

figure (viii)

The special relationship between nāmarūpa and viññāṇa relates directly to a version of PS alternative to the standard 12 link model. In this version consciousness is conditioned by nāmarūpa, and nāmarūpa is conditioned by consciousness - just like "two sheaves of reeds leaning against one another".[76] If one were to pull either one of those sheaves, the other would fall. The links of ignorance and of saṇkhāra are absent in this model. In the mahāpadāna sutta we find the same

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[75] M III 91

[76] S II 113.

formula, where nāmarūpa and consciousness condition each other - "this consciousness turns back at mind-and-body, it does not go any further."[77] This does not mean however, that there are not further alternate versions of PS which look past consciousness and nāmarūpa: for example where intentional action and being occupied with something "becomes the object for the persistence of consciousness" - with the object being there, a "station of consciousness" follows.[78] In another variation we find the order of PS links to be consciousness-nāmarūpa-saṇkhāra (in the typical 12 link formula saṇkhāra precede consciousness and nāmarūpa) with a turn of phrase that strongly supports the hypothesis that nāmarūpa is the experience of an object arising in the sensory field.

> Where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of physical food, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-&-form. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications [saṇkhāra].[79]

If there is no 'alighting of nāmarūpa', then there is no consciousness formed with that object. We have seen in the standard PS formula that every link must cease for there to be enlightenment. Nāmarūpa must cease, and so consciousness, being dependent on an object, would then similarly cease:

> With the arising of name-and-form there is the arising of consciousness. With the cessation of name-and-form there is the cessation of consciousness.[80]

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[77] D II 30.

[78] S II 66.

[79] S III 101 - this particular translation from the Pali is by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. ***Access to Insight*** *(BCBS Edition)*, retrieved 30/11/2013, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.064.than.html

[80] S III p.61.

The cessation of nāmarūpa raises an interesting question - what is the nature of the enlightened mind, if there are no more gestalts arising. While this question is not systematically answered in Theravada Buddhism, we do find that the cessation of nāmarūpa is equated with cutting the 'tangle' in which samsaric beings find themselves.

> Tangle within, without, lo! In the toils
> Entangled is the race of sentient things.
> Hence would I ask thee, Gotama, of this:
> Who is't can from this tangle disembroil?
>
> ... They that have lust and hate and nescience spurned,
> The Arahants immune from deadly Drugs [āsava],
> For them the tangle all unravelled lies.
> Where mind and body wholly cease to be,
> And earthly sense and sense celestial:-
> Here is the tangle riven utterly.[81]

"Entering" into nāmarūpa is to create a false self, followed by conceit - so we can assume that not entering into any gestalt moment of perception (if only for a moment), would not lead into a wrong idea of having a self or other conceit:

> Behold this world with all its Gods
> Supposing a self where none exists
> Entering into name and form
> It builds the conceit 'This is the truth' [82]

Again, enlightenment is for one who is not "trammelled" by nāmarūpa, and thereby does not enter into any kind of "possession":

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[81] S I 13.

[82] Sn 756.

Let one put hate away, abandon conceit
Passing beyond all fetters as well
That one - by name and form untrammeledd
And possessionless - no pains befall [83]

This should prove sufficient to show that becoming absorbed in nāmarūpa is one of the definitions of being caught and deluded in samsāra, and extricating oneself from the same, leads to enlightenment. This makes sense in the momentary model of PS much more than the three lifetime model, since enlightenment is here and now, and not simply the absense of a future event (taking a rebirth).

When consciousness is well understood,
Mane-and-shape is well understood.
When name-and-shape is well understood,
I declare there is nothing further
that the Ariyan disciple has to do [84]

## 3.8 Conclusions Drawn from Gestalt

In this chapter the basics of gestalt theory have been presented, showing how the original gestalt theorists were interested in exactly how the human being forms experience. They examined how the mind 'presents' certain objects to awareness as a 'figure' on 'ground'. Gestalt had no conception of nibbāna however, and no inkling that this process might stop, thereby revealing something greater, which is enlightenment in Buddhism. This experience of a discrete object would necessarily induce liking/disliking, craving and attachment, as outlined in PS.

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[83] Dhp 221.

[84] S II 100.

In this way gestalt provides a very useful starting point for understanding the process of perception of objects in Buddhism; a process that can seem overly complicated when trying to figure out the twelve links of PS, let alone the many other formats that PS appears in the suttas. As gestalt theory proposes, one is only really able to understand something when approaching it from the 'whole', rather than trying to piece understanding together from examining the 'parts'.

> The fundamental formula of Gestalt theory might be expressed this way: there are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes.[85]

In this vein then, we can look at PS without trying to piece together the meaning link by link, in all their varieties, but from the perspective of the 'whole', which is how the process of becoming comes about based on the presentation of objects in conscious awareness.

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[85] Max Wertheimer (ed. Willis D. Ellis), **Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms**, in **A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul ltd., 1950), p.2.

# Chapter IV

# Mapping of Gestalt and Dependent Origination

## 4.1 Standard PS, Three Lifetime Model

We are now ready to show where gestalt perception might integrate in the different interpretations and versions of PS. This is based primarily on a phenomenological approach. Sue Hamilton in her book identity and experience brought a similar approach to the teaching on the 5 khandha, showing that Buddhism is concerned not with ontological descriptions of the world, but directly with human experience, that is, "the 'how' of human saṃsāric existence, not the 'what' of the world as a whole". [1]

She summarises that,

> All discursive thoughts, ideas and knowledge arise because of the simultaneous presence of a sense, its corresponding sense object and consciousness: from this threefold event, known as 'contact' (*phassa*), all cognitive activity, of whatever nature, arises; and, conversely, without such an event no cognitive activity takes place.[2]

Gestalt, as has been shown, is the arising of a moment of perception bases on a sense door, where a figure appears in a ground, though it stops there, and does not link this process to future existence, or offer any alternative to this process such as

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[1] Sue Hamilton, **Identity and Experience,** (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996), p. 69 and p.79.

[2] Ibid., p.14.

*nibbāna*. PS, similarly, is a process where a being senses something, and is then caught in desire and rebirth. Therefore we can identify clearly where this moment of perception in PS appears as a figure on a ground.

### 4.1.1 Integrating Gestalt with the Three Life Model of PS

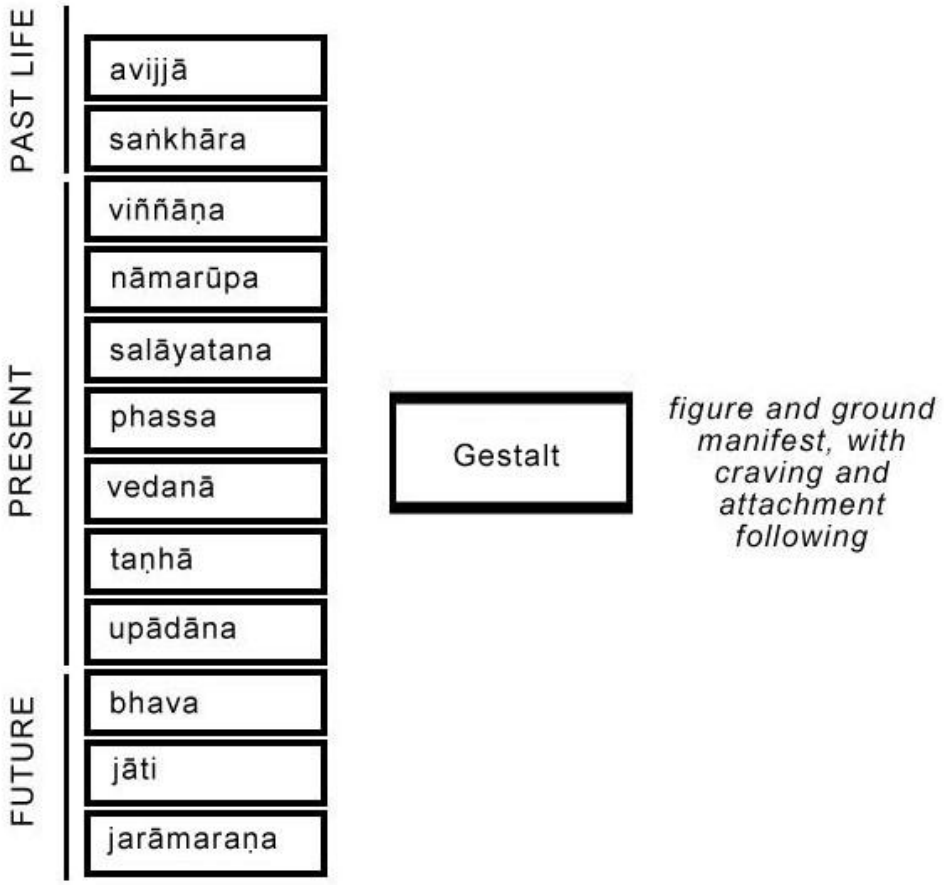


figure ix

We can apply this methodology to the standard three life model, where sensory experience arises with phassa - contact of the senses with an object. This is the moment when a figure appears on a ground - although the concept of ground is not explicitly present in Pali Buddhist texts. For this reason we can suggest that gestalt theory has something to add to the simple Buddhist notion of sensory experience - namely that any experience will be a unitary gestalt, influenced by the ground on which it appears. Such a unit might well persist over time and changing experience; this is reflected in some of Wertheimer's early research on the phi phenomenon where a line of flashing lights gives rise to the gestalt experience of a single object moving across a ground. This 'object' does not actually exist as pure sensory experience, but does exist phenomenologically as a gestalt.

A gestalt includes the whole of the body and mind however, including the affective element of the experience - namely liking or disliking. Thus we can minimally include vedanā in the gestalt, while allowing for craving to be an after effect. This is important from the Buddhist perspective because one of the ways to break the cycle of PS is at the point after vedanā.

> On seeing a form with the eye, he lusts after it if it is pleasing; he dislikes it if it is unpleasing. He abides with mindfulness of the body unestablished ... Engaged as he is in favouring and opposing.[3]

This sutta offers the point after vedanā as the point to break the cycle of PS. An untaught person is caught in 'delighting' in the feeling, 'welcoming it' and 'holding to it'. A practised yogi is not so caught.[4]

### 4.1.2 The Gestalt Application to the Three Life Model

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[3] M I 267.

[4] M I 267

Above we looked at how a Buddhist might interpret a gestalt experience arising in the chain of PS. But we might consider the same diagrams from a gestalt perspective. Craving, clinging and becoming would all be part of a single gestalt, together with the senses. If one were to withdraw the mind from the process of PS, it would mean establishing a new gestalt, where craving, clinging and attachment are now neutral in aspect. But the gestalt would always include the mental aspects in completion.

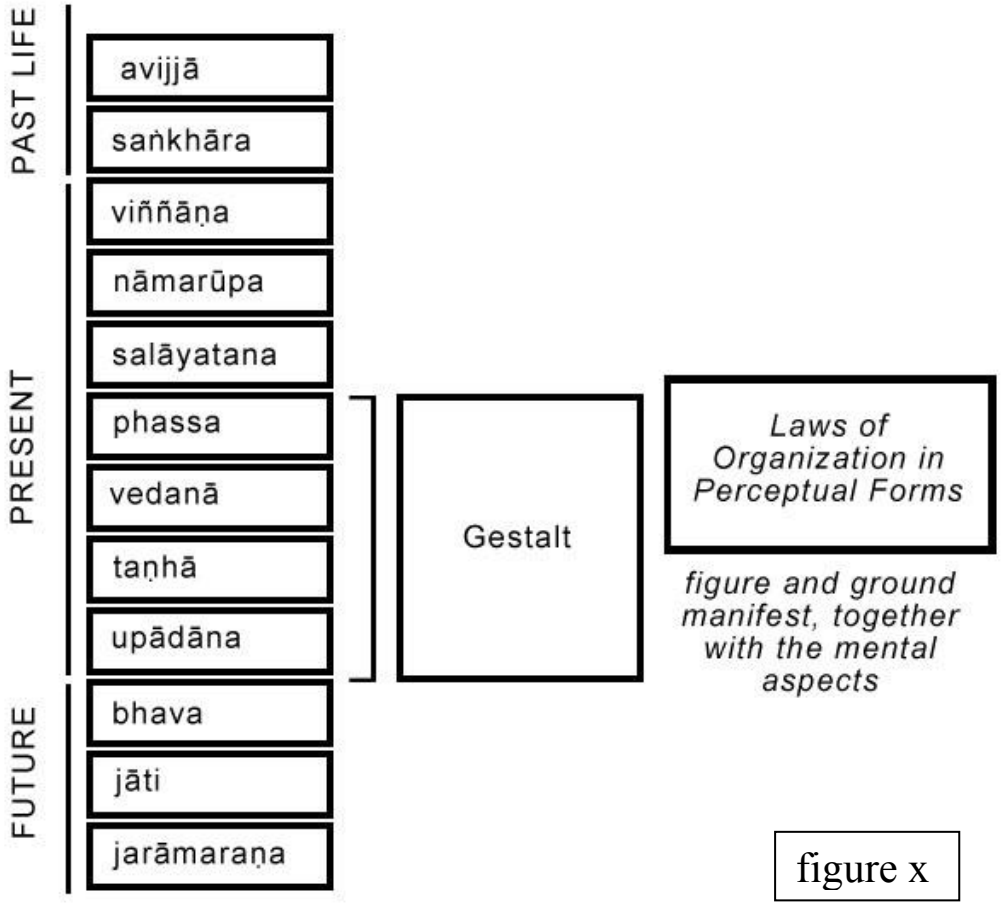


figure x

In this aspect the gestalt would include all the links from phassa to upādana, arising as a single phenomenological experience. It might be argued that salāyatana be included here. Venerable Payutto glosses salāyatana as a being's "means

to communicate with its environment in order to function".[5] However the terminology is vague, and does not distinguish between an embryo (nāmarūpa in the three life model) gaining sense doors, as a one off event in the development in the womb, and a dynamic set of senses which are operating and changing all the time. So we can leave it open as to whether salāyatana is part of the gestalt or not.

We should also include on the gestalt side Wertheimer's laws of organisation of perceptual forms, since these laws give some indication of just how the gestalt arises. There are some different ways to represent these laws - primarily whether they occur before a gestalt arises, or part and parcel of it.[6] For our purpose here, it is enough to note that organization laws play a part in any gestalt, and thus should be represented in our diagram. Wertheimer's laws are by no means complete however, and Koffka, Köhler and later gestalt psychologists have all contributed ideas to the understanding of the formation process of a gestalt.

## 4.2 Integrating Gestalt with the Momentary Model of PS

In the momentary model of PS, all the links arise and cease in a moment, including old age and death. This gives us two possible places in PS for a gestalt. The first are the key elements of consciousness and nāmarūpa. As discussed in section 2.6.3, consciousness in Buddhism, relates to the experience of the moment. A key quotation we made earlier bears repeating here:

> Consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when consciousness

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[5] P.A. Payutto, **Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 1994), p.30.

[6] Bruno Petermann, **The Gestalt Theory and the Problem of Configuration**, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932), p.15-40.

arises dependent on nose ... tongue ... body ... on mind and mind objects it is reckoned as mind consciousness.

Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns – when fire burns dependent on logs, it is reckoned as a log fire, when dependent on faggots it is reckoned as a faggot fire ... grass ... cowdung ...chaff ... rubbish ... so too, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it arises.[7]

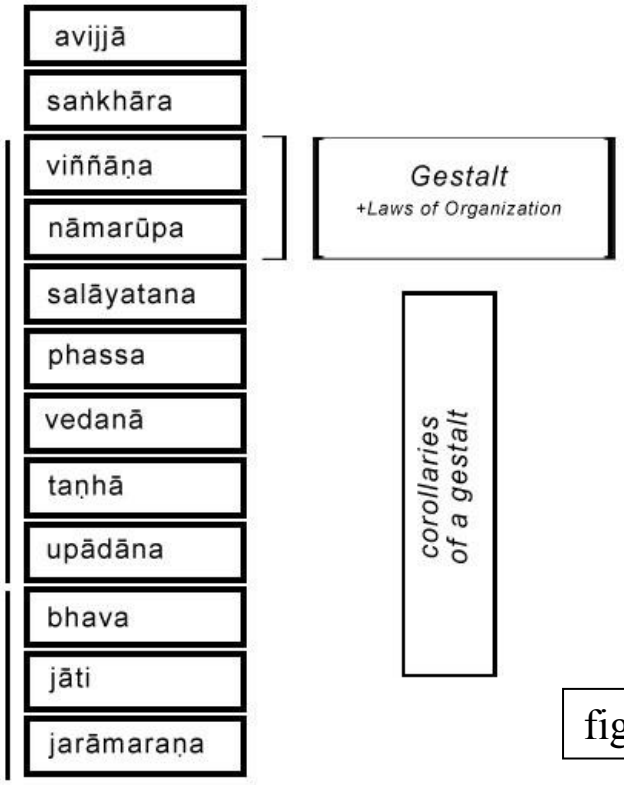


figure xi

When we add the idea of nāmarūpa as consisting of both form, and the four key elements of attention, intention, feeling, and perception (see section 2.6.4) we find a moment fully conscious of a gestalt.

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[7] M I 259.

The links of PS following nāmarūpa can be considered as corollaries of the gestalt experience - in PS the links are *dependent* on each other, rather than linearly causal. This is explains why the order of the links is so fluid, and are rearranged frequently in different suttas. Still, in the standard format there seems to be a logical procession of the PS links.

## 4.3 Wide Scale Gestalt and the Momentary Model of PS

While nāmarūpa and viññāṇa form the basis for a moment of phenomenological experience, the momentary model of PS does say the entire chain arises and ceases in a single instant. Therefore, we'd have to acknowledge that the entirety of PS, under this assumption, could actually a single gestalt arising and ceasing.

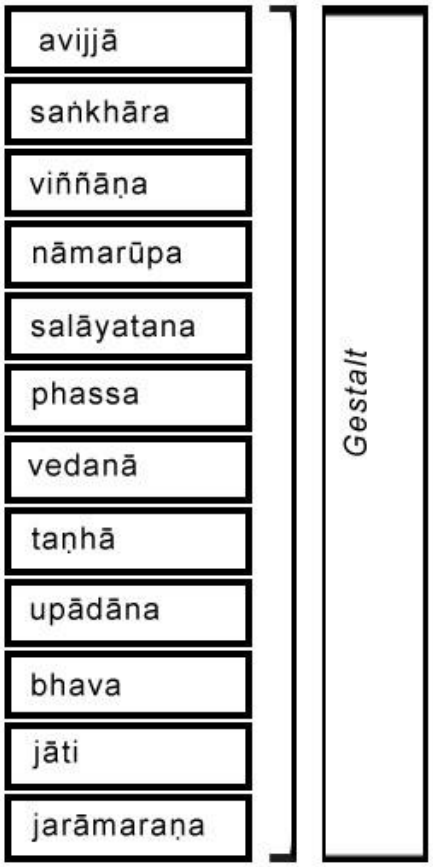


figure xii

There is a sutta discussed earlier however, that seems to delineate avijjā and saṅkhāra from the rest of the chain, returning the emphasis of phenomenological experience to nāmarūpa and viññāṇa. The teaching comes from the Bodhisatta Vipassī when reflecting on the dependent nature of things. All the standard links are in their regular places, but both avijjā and saṅkhāra are missing.

> Then, monks, the Bodhisatta Vipassī thought: "this consciousness turns back at mind-and-body, it does not go any further.[8]

Vipassī then follows PS in its cessation cycle from age and death, all the way to the cessation of consciousness, without the first 2 links of the standard PS formula. This blueprint is by no means unique or unnusual. The sutta immediately following in the Dīgha Nikāya also omits avijjā and saṅkhāra.

> Mind-and-body conditions consciousness, and consciousness conditions mind-and-body, mind-and-body conditions contact ...[9]

From that point on the standard links of PS are given sequentially, and then in reverse to the link of feeling. Then the sutta branches into alternative renditions of causality, linking feeling to 'seeking', 'acquisition', 'decision-making', 'lustful desire', 'attachment', 'appropriation', 'avarice', 'guarding of possessions', and 'taking up the stick and sword'. This shows again the very flexible notion of different states that are dependent on each other, rather than being linearly causal.[10]

Further suttas emphasise nāmarūpa and viññāṇa as being paramount. In Saṃyutta XII we find,

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[8] D II 30.

[9] D II 56

[10] D II 58

> When consciousness, brethren, is well understood, name-and-shape is well understood. When name-and-shape is well understood, I declare there is nothing further that the Ariyan disciple has to do.[11]

Another rendering of PS also puts nāmarūpa and viññāṇa at the head position, omitting avijjā and saṅkhāra; this time by Sāriputta. He describes nāmarūpa and viññāṇa as being like two sheaths of reeds stood leaning against each other - if one were pulled away the other would fall.[12]

## 4.4 Gestalt Model of PS Including Saṅkhāra

So far we did not pay much attention to the place of saṅkhāra as it relates to gestalt. Saṅkhāra, as we discussed in section 2.6.2, is a notoriously difficult term to translate. For our purposes here however, we can narrow the interpretation of the term to two differentiated formulas. First, saṅkhāra as action of body, speech or mind, and second as the 52 cetasikā. Before getting to that however, we should note that saṅkhāra also occupies a somewhat fluid position in PS. We find one version where saṅkhāra come after the links of nāmarūpa and viññāṇa, rather than before.

> Where there is passion ... it is there that consciousness is firmly place and becomes fruitful ... there is descent of name-and-shape. Where there is descent of name-and-shape, there is growth of activities [saṅkhāra][13]

Here, clearly, the usual sequence of PS is again disrupted, with an alternative, and unusual rendering. One definition that would fit saṅkhāra both before and after nāmarūpa and viññāṇa is that found in our baseline Sammādiṭṭhisutta where we find the following definition:

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[11] S II 100 .

[12] S II 113-4.

[13] S II 100.

> And what are formations? ... There are three kinds of formation: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation.[14]

The gestalt psychologists theory, put a strong emphasis on activity, rather than simple perception. Köhler for instance opens his majour work with a description of the phenomenological experience of sitting at his desk writing[15], and later gives the example of gestalts arising with the activity of playing chess.[16] Acting in the world provides an intentionality of consciousness; giving it an object or station. The Buddha describes this process quite well, albeit without using the term

> Bhikkhus, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever one has a tendency towards: this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is a basis, there is a support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has come to growth, there is a descent of name-and-form[17]

This sutta then continues with the standard links of PS. When we compare this description to gestalt we find a close parallel in that both acknowledge an activity that establishes consciousness with some activity, from which certain perceptions can arise. We can thus represent this as follows:

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[14] M II 54, A II 3.

[15] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.3-4.

[16] Ibid., p.248.

[17] S II 66.

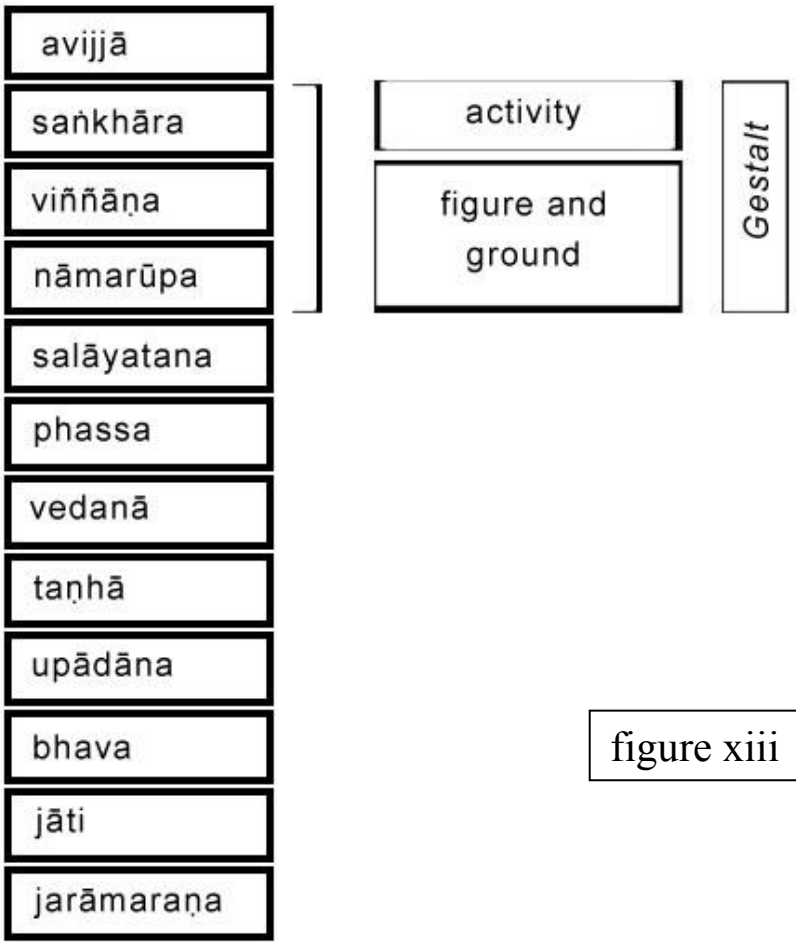


figure xiii

As previously, one might consider all the links following from the six senses onwards to be part of the gestalt form, if one adopts the momentary model of PS. But here we want to isolate the role of saṅkhāra - in this instance taking a rather simple definition of it.

There is another definition of saṅkhāra however, which is interesting from the standpoint of gestalt. And that is as 50 of the 52 cetasikā.[18] These fifty qualities can be combined in different ways to for all the different kinds of mind states. The most important however, is considered to be cetanā, intention.[19]

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[18] Nārada, **A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha Sangaha**, (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1979), p.77-79.

[19] Ibid., p.77.

This is very close to a particular development of gestalt theory and learning, which Köhler takes a lot of trouble to explain in his chapter on 'association'[20], and which Koffka calls 'attitude'.[21] In short, they posit that a certain attitude in the mind will stimulate state(gestalts) that are 'close' to them in form. In modern psychology we could call this 'priming'. A simple example might be looking for ones glasses in a room. The intentionality of the activity will make it more likely for the glasses to form a gestalt in experience. Both Köhler and Koffka proffer this process as a form of learning in gestalt theory. This is in large part due to the popularity of behaviorism in the US where they had fled after the Nazi domination of Germany. Köhler in fact performed many famous experiments on monkeys, which were designed to highlight the gestalt paradigm, but which in fact ended being absorbed into behaviorist theory as insight learning.

We can integrate this form of saṅkhāra as follows:

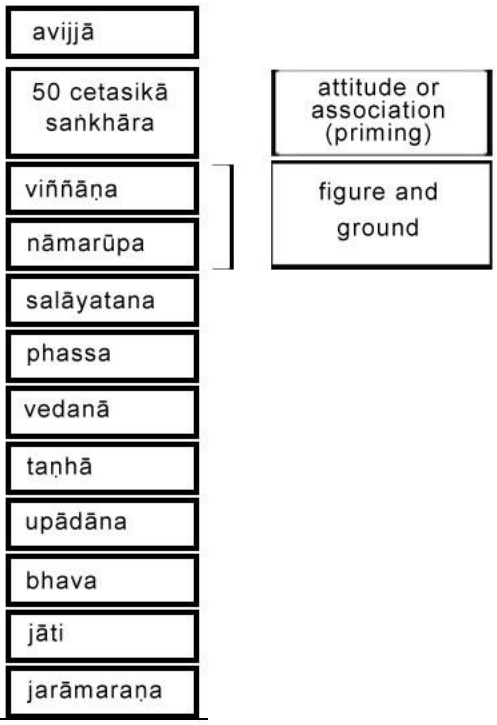


Figure xiv

[20] Wolfgang Köhler**, Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.248-278.

[21] Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,** (Washington: Psychological Bulletin Vol 19, 1922), p.547 ff.

## 4.5 Proposed Integration of PS and Gestalt

Drawing on all the information thus far presented, we can put the insights from gestalt together with the definitions of terms of PS together into a systematic whole. As discussed we can see that the Buddha placed a great emphasis on the process of the senses, where experience arises. For example when the eye meets a form and there is corresponding engagement, the corresponding class of consciousness arises.[22] This by any account is a moment of gestalt experience - that of experiencing a 'whole' as a single phenomenological experience. Further to our discussions of saṅkhāra, viññāṇa and nāmarūpa, we propose that the interpretation for these terms follows the momentary model of PS, and thereby fall in line very neatly with gestalt theory. Saṅkhāra can be seen as the background mental states that are implicit in any moment of experiencing, or else as an intentionality of consciousness that is engaged with the environment. Either way is quite concordant with a gestalt interpretation.

As we get to jāti however, as discussed in section 2.6.11 there seems to be very little reason to view it as anything other than actual rebirth, in a body. Bhava in this case, is defined as the state of being; whether it is in the kāma sphere, rūpa sphere (jhāna), or the formless sphere (arūpa shpere), as discussed in section 2.6.10. Such a definition fits with sutta accounts, and there is no need to redefine bhava as becoming born into a womb as the three lifetime account would state. This avoids the problem of the three life model of PS where it defines both nāma-rūpa and bhava as taking birth in a body.

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[22] The inclusion of the 'corresponding engagement' occurs in the mahāhatthipadopamasutta. Other suttas omit this clause, but otherwise follow the same process of the senses and consciousness.

So our account of PS, understood via gestalt theory we can demonstrate as follows:

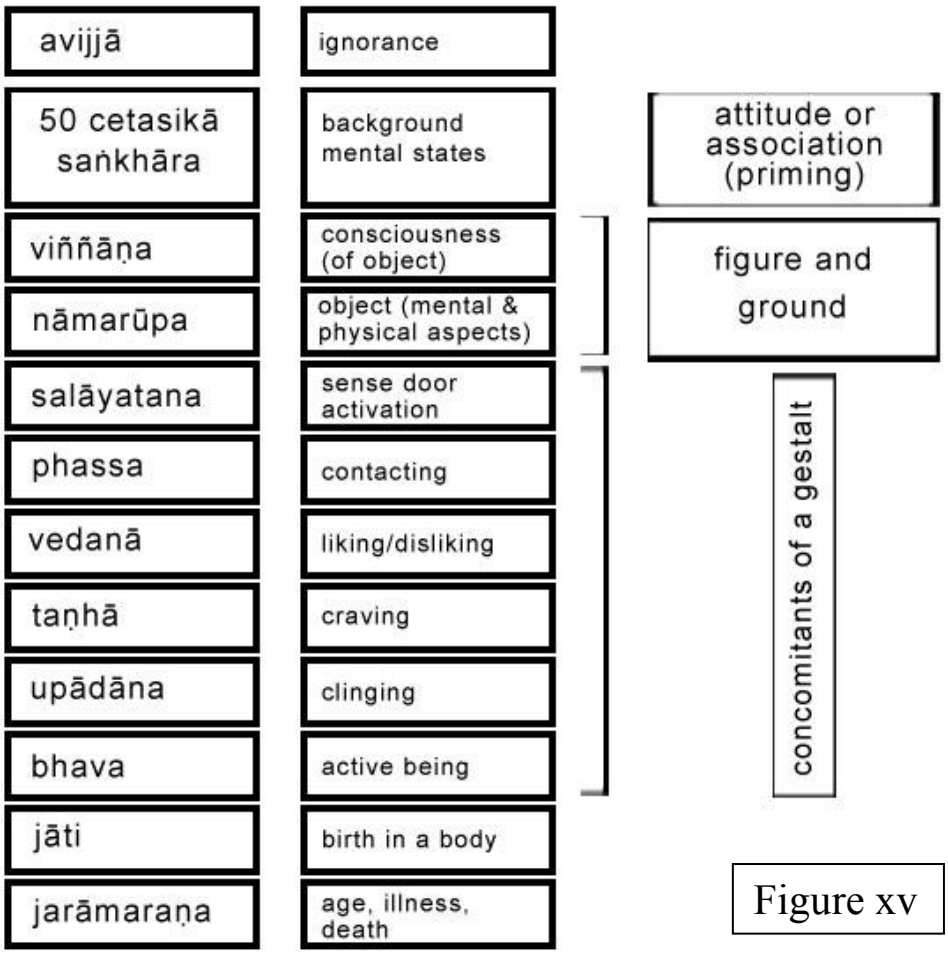


Figure xv

We might exemplify the model as follows: if a person is reading a book, and is absorbed in this activity (bhava), but someone in the room mentions the person's name. At that point, the mind has a certain set of conditions of alertness, mood, and wholesome or unwholesome intentions as a background state. A new gestalt forms, replacing the absorption with the forms of the eye (the letters on the page), focussing instead on the sound of one's name. This arising of a new object is the spontaneous 'organization' of forms, that is the basis of gestalt theory. There is now consciousness arising of the person's name. The name that is heard is the nāmarūpa - it has form (in this case sound) and mental aspects (associations, attention, intention and initial liking/disliking). Thus there is a new figure (person's name) arising on ground (background noise). Attention 'follows after', by which is meant 'chasing after', the sense as discussed in section 2.6.5, and is tied up with that

particular sense door, and the nāmarūpa is 'contacted',[23] and felt (vedanā). Craving and clinging are part of the process, and one can ask if they are part of the gestalt, or a result of it. Since the process of PS can be broken at various different points in different suttas, the answer to this must remain open. Either way, craving and clinging are concomitants of the gestalt. Now the person is bound up with that object - looking at who has said one's name, and what they are saying about you! This process of continually being bound up with experience is what drives the process of rebirth, and leads to suffering.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to discuss in any detail about what the state of enlightenment might be, if it is either without any gestalts arising (how then are things experienced), or else certain of the links are absent (different versions of PS break the cycle at different links). But there is one interesting sutta that describes such a gestalt (object experience free) state. It describes the four nutriments of food, contact, intention and consciousness; for each of these if there is passion, delighting, craving - then consciousness becomes established there, and there is a descent of nāmarūpa and saṅkhāra. This leads to future bhava and jāti, which entail decay and death, grief, affliction and despair.[24]

The sutta continues to posit the non-arising of this process, where there is no passion, delight or craving to any of the four nutriments. Then consciousness is 'not stationed' anywhere, just like a sunbeam that does not fall upon any wall.

> When a sunbeam enters by a window, where does it fall?
> On the West wall lord.

---

[23] This process of is particular importance to the gestalt psychologists who did not like the term 'attention', because, in our example, at what point does the person 'attend' to their name? Before the gestalt (then how did they know to turn attention to it), or after the gestalt (one had to be aware of the name before attending to it). However, a detailed discussion of attention is outside the scope of this thesis.

[24] S II 100.

If there be no west wall, where does it alight?[25]

If all four walls are absent, "there consciousness is not stationed or fruitful", and nāmarūpa does not descend, and saṅkhāra do not grow. There is no future becoming or rebirth.

[25] S II 103.

# Chapter V

# Conclusion & Suggestions

## 5.1 Conclusion

PS is found to envelope countless different versions, where the individual links are switched around or omitted, and other terms added in. Due to this we can interpret PS as more of a general principle that a precise linear mechanism. The principle is that suffering arises due to the process of sensory perception, and the way that consciousness becomes bound up with it. Ignorance (or misunderstanding) this process leads to one being caught in an endless cycle of experience and suffering. It is well beyond the scope of the present work to look at all these different versions, so we have focussed on defining the twelve links of the standard PS model. Even here we find a myriad of different definitions, which leads to two highly divergent interpretations of PS, as occurring either over three lifetimes or in a single moment.

It is clear however, that whatever interpretation of PS one favours, the process of sensory experience is paramount. It is also clear that although the object sensed is the spark of the whole process of PS, there are many factors, mental and physical, that arise together with it. This in short, is exactly what the gestalt psychologists were observing and attempting to model. Naturally, psychology has no concept of enlightenment, so we cannot expect the gestalt psychologists to deal with what the experience might be if there is no gestalt in attention, nor to examine how sensory experience leads to existential suffering.

When a gestalt arises, the chief characteristic is the 'figure', which is the object of attention. This figure arises influenced by it's 'ground', which, while poorly sensed, does still exert a sizable influence on how the figure is perceived. Together

with this figure and ground is the organisation of all the other factors of consciousness - the affective element (liking and disliking), associations, learning, body, action, intention etc. In fact the point of a gestalt is not that attention becomes limited to a particular object, but that the organism is spontaneously organised as a complete whole, rather than a lineal chain of events happening sequentially. As William James put it, "I see a bear, I run, I am afraid."[1] One does not see a bear first, and then peruse the memory, or a list of responses.

When we understand that sensory experience is a gestalt, complete with an organisation of the full body and mind, it becomes clear that different elements that we can examine are not fixed in a linear sequence. Thus craving, liking/disliking, perceptions etc. all arise and cease together with the sensory object. They can be modelled therefore in different orders - the links can swap places without affecting the coherence of the whole. This gives rise to the myriad of different ways that we find PS depicted in the suttas, even while the principle remains consistent. It is simply focussing on different aspects of a gestalt experience.

When we apply this understanding of gestalt to PS we find that the three life model is not well supported. Especially the twin aspects of consciousness of an object, and nāmarūpa seem to depict a moment of object awareness of a particular figure on a ground. Jāti however, seems to unequivocally signal rebirth in a new body, rather than something that arises and ceases with a particular sensory experience. Therefore we find that a two lifetime model of PS is suggested by gestalt theory.

Nonetheless, we have shown amply that whatever interpretation of PS is considered, the sensory process and object formation is paramount, and is thereby fleshed out by the considerations of gestalt.

## 5.2 Suggestions for Further Study

[1] William James, **What is an Emotion?**, (Oxford: Mind, Issue 9, 1884), p.188-205.

In this study we have considered only the early gestalt theory. When the original gestalt psychologists arrived in the US, they found psychology to be dominated by the behaviourist school, and their gestalt approach found little favour. Nonetheless, together with good research in phenomenology, gestalt did not die off entirely.[2] The gestalt principle has been subsumed in the extensive work in cognitive science, as one part of the story in how things are perceived. Artificial intelligence driven cars, for example, have led to much research into how to perceive and navigate objects in the environment.[3] Object formation is key in gestalt, as a being operates according to a 'behavioural field' of recognized objects, rather than a field of simple sensory perception - this interpretation was put forward and extensively explained by Koffka in Chapter III - VII of his largest work.[4]More comparison with modern research of object formation could improve our understanding of PS, especially dividing the arising of conscious from unconscious objects.

As we have shown, central to PS is the object formation process, but we now understand that beings can navigate objects that they are not conscious of - for example you will successfully navigate curbs, paving stones, water hydrants etc. while you are walking along a street, without necessarily paying conscious attention to each obstacle. PS on the other hand seems to imply a very conscious process; suggesting it is only the fully conscious objects that initiate the PS process. A more clear definition of what is conscious or subconscious in the perceptive field would enable us to explore this further.

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[2] For example: Wolfgang Köhler published his article Gestalt Psychology Today, in American Psychologist in 1959 (issue 14, p. 727-734).

[3] Agnès Desolneux, Lionel Moisan, Jean-Michel Morel, **From Gestalt Theory to Image Analysis: A Probabalistic Approach,** (New York: Springer, 2008).

[4] Kurt Koffka**, Principles of Gestalt Psychology**, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1936), p. 69-265.

We might then be able to explore the question of how an arahant who has fully put an end to the PS process is still able to perceive and navigate objects. If object formation and navigation can operate sub-consciously, then perhaps the arahant only puts an end to fully conscious gestalts that affect craving and attachment. Or does PS still occur in an arahant, but without ignorance driving the process, and thus no result of becoming, birth aging and death.

Gestalt psychologists paid no attention to the question of experience without any kind of gestalt arising. After all, they had no concept of enlightenment. Such a line of questioning though, would necessarily remain speculative, until such a time as a body of arahants can be convinced to subject themselves to rigorous scientific testing.

A further line of research might include the psychology of attention. Koffka disliked the term 'attention', saying that where an effect cannot be clearly explained by sensation and association, the concept of attention is added ad hoc, as a "scapegoat" which interferes with an otherwise understood process.[5] He points out on the same page that attention would have to be influenced by perception, but also influence it - a dualism that did not sit well with him. He instead, carefully introduces the term "attitude" as an alternative term, outlining how experience can be primed by certain perceptions to favour certain gestalts over others.[6] Most especially when gestalts are at a similar threshold, will attitude come into play.

Köhler too did not favour the term attention, which he considered to "appear in its purest form when, while fixating at a given point, we concentrate on one object after another".[7] Fixation is holding the attention in a certain attitude through

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[5] Kurt Koffka, **Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-theorie,** (Washington: Psychological Bulletin Vol 19, 1922), p.535.

[6] Ibid., p.546-554.

[7] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.299.

many gestalts, such as, we might say, playing a computer game. Köhler says in the same paragraph that the self "is virtually always directed toward something or away from it". He also uses the term "attitude" in the sense of directing what experiences arise, pointing out that "in certain other instances events in the environment are felt to follow from my attitudes".[8]

However, since the time Köhler and Koffka were trying to promote gestalt psychology in the US, there have been many advancements in the psychology of attention. These we might also attempt to map into PS as we have done for gestalt, with particular emphasis on comparison with the term manasikāra, which appears as part of nāmarūpa, and is generally translated as attention. Indeed attention, or attitude, is key to Buddhist practice as a yogi is supposed to pay attention to what is wholesome, and abandon what is unwholesome. [9]

Finally, we have noted the close development of phenomenology and gestalt psychology. Both stemmed from the introspective approach of Franz Brentano[10] and shared this methodology. Phenomenology has continued to be a part of cognitive science, and repeatedly calls on modern neurology in its research. This too should provide some insights into how a moment of experiencing is formed, as depicted in PS.

Hopefully, armed with these ingihts from gestalt, psychology, cognitive science and phenomenology, we can clarify that PS primarily refers to a moment of experience, which arises as a complete, discreet unit. This might prevent some confusion that arises in Buddhists regarding the meaning and application of this

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[8] Wolfgang Köhler, **Gestalt Psychology, An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology**, (New York: Liveright, 1947), p.328.

[9] P.A. Payutto, **Dictionary of Buddhism,** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation 2008), p.157.

[10] Franz Brentano, (trans. Benito Müller), **Descriptive Psychology**, (London: Routledge, 1995).

teaching, and narrow down the myriad of interpretations that we find in modern Buddhist texts.

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# Biography


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**Academic achievement**

**Research**

Pandit Cittasamvaro. Mahachulalonkornrajavidyalaya University, 2019

"**The Integration of Dependent Origination and Gestalt Perception**"

**Articles**

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