



# EVAM ME SUTTAM

## This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

### Week two: The oral tradition

#### Lists, lists of lists, and lists within lists

When we read the *suttas* we are struck by the number of lists and the prevalence of repetition. Why do the *suttas* have this quality? The *suttas* are the product of an oral tradition. They are performances, not texts. The *dhamma* is not a written teaching contained on a library shelf, but something which has no material structure. It is contained within the mind, structured of mind, but experienced sensually, in chanting and hearing. The lists which are recited and memorised are the scaffolding which frame this invisible structure of *dhamma*.

Lists refer to other lists. Each time we come to a list in the texts, we have come to an individual table in the relational database which is the complete *dhamma*. No list exists in isolation, but each connects with some other list. For example, the four noble truths is a foundational list. Within this, *dukkha* is listed as five aggregates, another foundational list; and each aggregate is further listed. (See Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta below.) The fourth truth, the path, is listed into eight factors; each factor is expanded into another list, and each of these lists sends the reciter on a trajectory elsewhere into the *dhamma*. For example, the factor of *sati* (attention or mindfulness) is listed as the four domains of attention (*satipaṭṭhāna*), of which the first is the body. The domain of the body (*kāya satipaṭṭhāna*) is further listed as a number of meditations - as in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M10).

Further, items within lists refer to other items in other lists. We often find specific terms denoting particular mental or material phenomena defined in terms of a list of synonyms. For example, a definition of "sorrow" is given as: "The sorrow, sorrowing, sorrowfulness, inner sorrow, inner sorriness, of one who has encountered some misfortune or is affected by some painful state - this is called sorrow." (M141) Craving (*taṇhā*), the cause of *dukkha*, is referred to in Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta below with the synonyms desire (*chanda*), indulgence (*ālaya*), inclination (*anunaya*), and holding (*ajjhosāna*). The use of synonyms indicates that the assumed audience of this performance are listeners who have already memorised a body of *suttas*, and for them each term in the list would resonate with other occasions and contexts within which these same terms were used. So the *suttas* function as a kind of oral hypertext, where any given term leads the reciter and audience to other terms, which in turn evoke other teachings, other occasions, other contexts. Each term has a trajectory, and each list evokes an ever widening context which exists in the mind of the performers and audience, and this context is the *dhamma*.

When we become familiar with the lists we can begin to trace paths through them. Of course, in an oral tradition, to "become familiar" with a body of material means to memorise it. Each list functions as a matrix for a series of further lists, so each list provides one of many possible pathways through the *dhamma*, and these pathways may turn and intersect with each other in ever larger possible combinations. These combinations form a pattern which reveals the structure of the *dhamma*. Learning the lists is not simply a matter of rote learning - "parrot fashion" - a body of material, but learning how the different lists fit, how they interconnect to form the structure and

pattern of the *dhamma*. In other words, it is not just a matter of learning lists, but learning what to do with these lists.

Given this structure, the performer can improvise within the limits provided by the underlying patterns of interconnected lists. A performer chanting to an audience may come to the four domains of attention as a bare item in a list; then detour into another list that gives a brief definition of each domain; then detour into another list that gives a full exposition of each; and then return to the original list. Which route the performer will take would depend on his individual interests and the audience, the context within which the performance takes place.

So we are not dealing simply with lists, but with an underlying structure suggested and formed by an interconnected network of memorised lists. The contents of this network, being unfixed because unwritten, are inherently fluid, and can legitimately take on different forms in different circumstances. Once written, however, the structure becomes fixed for all time as a “text,” and improvisation gives way to commentary. (Commentary, of course, still retains a creative aspect. A text which is the subject of commentary is never finished, but always open to addition and interpretation.) Historical readers of the *suttas* will look for the “original” teaching, but if freedom to create within the network was a part of the oral tradition then seeking an original teaching becomes problematic, since this original invariably takes the form of a fixed set of contents - but the point is not the content, but the underlying structure. So when we read the *suttas*, we need to be alert to this underlying structure, pattern or network. And, of course, this underlying structure is always some or other aspect of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

The network is revealed by the *mātikās*. The term *mātikā* occurs in the Nikāyas as part of a description of an accomplished monk in the sequence “learned in the *dhamma*, learned in the *vinaya*, learned in the *mātikās* (*dhamma-dhara vinaya-dhara mātikā-dhara*).” (A1.117) Cognate with the English “matrix,” *mātikā* is derived from *mātar* (“mother”). A *mātikā*, in other words, is not just a list, but something creative - something out of which other things emerge. The *mātikās* are the building blocks for constructing an exposition, the nodes that create a network, and when combined in various ways they create a network that is larger than the sum of its nodes. Further, a *mātikā-dhara*, one who is learned in the lists, knows both the *mātikās* and what to do with them. There is a skill involved in one’s understanding of the lists. One learned in the lists can use them to improvise and create. The *mātikās* are not simply texts, but a practice, applying a method of working with texts which is based on memorisation and the creative use of chanting. This method creates the structure of the *dhamma*, which is not contained in any text because any given text is an expression of an already existing *dhamma* structured by the *mātikā*. And this method includes an element of creativity or play: a *mātikā-dhara* is not restricted to any specific list or list of lists, but can move between the various lists so long as they are used in a way that is consonant with the already-given underlying structure of *dhamma*.

## Creativity, meditation and the list

There is room for individual creativity within the lists. We find *peyyāla* (“repetition”) sections in the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas especially. *Peyyāla* is shortened as *pe*, which could be translated as “etc.” These “et cetera” sections are made up of abbreviated lists which could be expanded and linked in various ways. These sections are guidelines for oral recitation and composition rather than a fixed literary text. In other words, a purely oral tradition may contain more scope for creativity than one in which words are fixed and frozen on paper.

The lists are more than mnemonic devices; they are also a technique for creative oral composition. They are born from *vibhaṅga*, “analysis” or “breaking up.” This is the essence of *vipassanā*, which could be literally translated as “seeing (*passanā*) separately (*vi*).” *Vipassanā* meditation takes that which we perceive as solid and fixed, and generates a perception of it as fluid, changing, and part

of a broader network of conditioned and conditioning process. The focus of interest within this broader pattern is not any one given experienced event, but the network itself, of which any one experienced event is simply an instantiation. So often in a text the important thing is not the specific items being listed, but the fact that things when examined break up into their parts and emerge as interrelated phenomena. Ultimately "things" *are* phenomena, and phenomena are relationships. The lists reveal patterns of causal relationships; what route the chanter takes through the lists will vary according to his specific starting point and desired end point. The starting point varies depending on the circumstances of the individual; the end point is always liberation. In this way, the structure of the *dhamma* which is the doctrine revealed in the texts parallels the structure of the *dhamma* which is the experience of reality by the practitioner. Both are trajectories leaning towards liberation. Hence, in the world of the Nikāyas, scholarship and practice are much more of a single piece than is scholarship in our culture.

Now we will examine a brief *sutta* which illustrates the performance and networking aspect of the *suttas*.

## Samaṇas and brāhmaṇas

At Sāvatti. “Bhikkhus, those *samaṇas* or *brāhmaṇas* who do not understand (*na pajānati*) *ageing-&death*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *birth*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *becoming*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *clinging*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *craving*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation; who do not understand *feeling*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *contact*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation; who do not understand the *six sense fields*, their arising, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation;  
 who do not understand *name-&form*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *consciousness*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do not understand *formations*, their arising, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation: these I do not consider to be *samaṇas* among *samaṇas* or *brāhmaṇas* among *brāhmaṇas*, and these venerable ones do not, by realising it for themselves with direct knowledge (*abhiññā*), in this very life enter and dwell in the goal of the *samaṇa*'s or *brāhmaṇa*'s life.

“But, bhikkhus, those *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* who do understand *ageing-&death*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *birth*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *becoming*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *clinging*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *craving*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *feeling*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *contact*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand the *six sense fields*, their arising, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation;  
 who do understand *name-&form*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *consciousness*, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation;  
 who do understand *formations*, their arising, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation: these I do consider to be *samaṇas* among *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* among *brāhmaṇas*, and these venerable ones do, by realising it for themselves with direct knowledge, in this very life enter and dwell in the goal of the *samaṇa*'s or the *brāhmaṇa*'s life.”

**Nidānasam̐yutta, Nidānavagga, Saṃyutta Nikāya**  
 (Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*  
 Volume 1. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 542-43.) (Translation modified.)

## Commentary

### Intersecting lists

This discourse relates two foundational lists to each other. One list is the twelvefold formula of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*); and the other is the four noble truths. Each list is foundational to the *dhamma*, and this instance of linking the lists, in a pattern of chanted repetition, prepares the mind of the *bhāṇaka* (reciter) for *vipassanā* meditation.

The doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is central to the Buddha's teaching. Dependent arising reveals the relationships between things, the network of conditional relationships which is reality, *dhamma*. We suffer because we are ignorant of the natural laws that govern our existence. These laws condition the arising and cessation of phenomena. As we discover these laws, the relationships between things, we learn to let go of those things which arise and cease, and finally of arising and cessation itself. In this way we ensure the cessation of that which causes us suffering and the arising of that which liberates us. The full understanding of these laws constitutes our final goal, awakening. Dependent arising is often presented in the following formula. Often called the "standard" formula, this is one way the tradition summarises the entirety of the *dhamma*, in terms of the arising and cessation of *dukkha*.

What is *paṭiccasamuppāda*?

Depending on ignorance (*avijjā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*);  
 Depending on formations, consciousness (*viññāna*);  
 Depending on consciousness, name-&-form (*nāma-rūpa*);  
 Depending on name-&-form, six sense fields (*salāyatana*);  
 Depending on six sense fields, contact (*phassa*);  
 Depending on contact, feeling (*vedanā*);  
 Depending on feeling, craving (*taṇhā*);  
 Depending on craving, clinging (*upādāna*);  
 Depending on clinging, becoming (*bhava*);  
 Depending on becoming, birth (*jāti*);  
 Depending on birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Such is the arising of this entire mass of suffering (*dukkha*). This is called arising.

But from the complete fading away and cessation of ignorance, formations cease;  
 From the cessation of formations, consciousness ceases;  
 From the cessation of consciousness, name-&-form ceases;  
 From the cessation of name-&-form, six sense fields cease;  
 From the cessation of six sense fields, contact ceases;  
 From the cessation of contact, feeling ceases;  
 From the cessation of feeling, craving ceases;  
 From the cessation of craving, clinging ceases;  
 From the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases;  
 From the cessation of becoming, birth ceases;  
 From the cessation of birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair dissolve. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering. (S 2.1-2)

The four noble truths are central to the Buddha's teaching, and they define Buddhism in the sense that any teaching that fits into the structure provided by these four truths is Buddhist, and any teaching that does not fit into the structure provided by these four truths is not Buddhist. The four truths are: *dukkha*; the arising of *dukkha*; the cessation of *dukkha*; and the path leading to the

cessation of *dukkha*. They both *describe* our problem and *prescribe* the solution to our problem. The problem is *dukkha*, “suffering,” “unsatisfactoriness.” *Dukkha* is the gap between what is happening now and what we want to be happening now. And *dukkha* is not permanent, it comes into existence because of a condition (*taṇhā*, “thirst” or craving) and ceases because of the cessation of that condition. *Dukkha* is a dependently arisen phenomena (*paṭiccasamuppanna dhamma*), and an instance of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). And because *dukkha* arises and ceases due to conditions, we can do something about it; our situation is workable. The truths prescribe the solution to our problem in that they are a programme of action. The first truth, *dukkha*, is what we must understand; the second truth, the arising of *dukkha*, is what we must abandon; the third, the cessation of *dukkha*, is what we must realise; and the fourth, the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*, is what we must cultivate. In brief, the four noble truths both describe the fundamental structures of reality, and constitute a programme which is meant to be put into action.

The *Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas Sutta* goes through the list of *nidānas* (“cause,” “condition”) that make up the twelvefold formula and applies the four noble truths to each, ending with a statement that the goal of a *samaṇa*’s or *brāhmaṇa*’s life (and remember that the Buddha and his students were *samaṇas*) comes about through the understanding of the *dhamma* which arises out of the matrix of these two lists. Note that the verb “to understand” is *pajānati*, which is derived from the root *ñā*, and from which is derived the noun *paññā* (“wisdom,” “understanding”), and *abhiññā* (“direct knowledge”). So the goal of the practitioners life is the cultivation of wisdom or understanding, and this wisdom comes about through an understanding of the interrelationships between dependent arising and the four noble truths.

## Patterning experience

Remember that this is a chant. If we were memorising or listening to this chant, going through it again and again, what would we derive from it? What would be imprinted on our memory banks? We would *know* that to perform the duty of a *samaṇa* or *brāhmaṇa* we are expected to: first, identify any given experience *x* as “this;” secondly, see its arising (and what conditions its arising); third, see its cessation; and fourth, see what conditions its cessation. What do we do in *vipassanā* meditation? First, identify the meditation object; second, see its arising; third, see its cessation; and fourth, see what conditions its cessation (and the arising of the next phenomenon). So the discourse reveals the underlying pattern of experience - that all experienced events arise and cease - and prescribes what to do about it - understand the patterns of arising and cessation of phenomena as they present themselves. This discourse is dealing with more than the phenomena listed. These particular phenomena are illustrative of all phenomena, in that all phenomena (except *nibbāna*) arise and cease dependent upon conditions. This universal aspect is emphasised in the following *sutta*, where the same teaching is repeated, but this time with an addition:

“Bhikkhus, those *samaṇas* or *brāhmaṇas* who do not understand (*na pajānati*) these phenomena (*ime dhamme*), the arising of these phenomena, the cessation of these phenomena, and the way leading to the cessation of these phenomena, these I do not consider to be *samaṇas* among *samaṇas* or *brāhmaṇas* among *brāhmaṇas* ... ”

“These phenomena” are shorthand for all dependently arisen phenomena (*paṭiccasamuppanna dhammas*), which are all experienced events in the universe except for *nibbāna*. In another discourse, the same teaching is given to *Soṇa*, but there the phenomena are the five aggregates (*khandhas*) which make up the psycho-physical person.

Finally, in the twelvefold formula of dependent arising, there are twelve *nidānas*; but in this discourse only eleven is mentioned, ignorance (*avijja*) being left out. Why is this?

## ***Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*** **Large Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint (M28)**

Here is how I heard it (*evaṃ me suttaṃ*). Once the Blessed One was living at Savatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anathapiṇḍika's Park. There Venerable Sāriputta addressed the bhikkhus: "Friends, bhikkhus." "Friend," they replied. Venerable Sāriputta said:

"Friends, just as the footprint of any living being that walks can be placed within an elephant's footprint, and so the elephant's footprint is declared their chief because of its great size; so too, all wholesome states (*kusala dhammas*) can be included in the four noble truths. In what four? In the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*), in the noble truth of the arising of suffering, in the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and in the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

"What is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging (*pañc' upādāna-(k)khandhas*) are suffering.

"What are the five aggregates affected by clinging? They are: the material form (*rūpa*) aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling (*vedanā*) aggregate affected by clinging, the perception (*saññā*) aggregate affected by clinging, the formations (*saṅkhārā*) aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) aggregate affected by clinging.

"What is the material form aggregate affected by clinging? It is the four great elements (*mahābhūta*) and the material form derived from the four great elements. And what are the four great elements? They are the earth element (*paṭhavī dhātu*), the water element (*āpo dhātu*), the fire element (*tejo dhātu*), and the air element (*vāyo dhātu*).

### **Earth element**

"What, friends, is the *earth element*? The earth element may be either internal or external. What is the internal earth element? Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified, and clung-to; that is, head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, stomach contents, faeces, or whatever else internally, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified, and clung-to: this is called the internal earth element. Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply earth element, and should be seen with perfect understanding (*sammappaññā*), as it is (*yathā-bhūtaṃ*), in this way: 'This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.' Seeing it with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the earth element, and the mind's passion for the earth element fades.

"Now there comes a time when the water element is disturbed and then the external earth element vanishes. When even this external earth element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance and change, what of this body, which is clung to (*taṇhā*) by craving (*upādhi*) and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.'

"So then, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu he understands (*pajānāti*) thus: 'This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. That is dependent (*paṭicca*), not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.' Then he sees that contact is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, formations are impermanent, and consciousness is impermanent. And his mind enters into that element as its object, becoming confident, settled and clear.

“Now, if others attack that bhikkhu in ways that are unwished for, undesired, and disagreeable, by contact with fists, stones, sticks, or knives, he understands thus: ‘This body is of such a nature that contact with fists, stones, sticks, and knives assail it. But this has been said by the Blessed One in his advice on the simile of the saw: “Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching.” So tireless energy shall be aroused in me and unremitting attention (*sati*) established, my body shall be peaceful and untroubled, my mind concentrated and unified. And now let contact with fists, stones, sticks, and knives assail this body; for this is just how the Buddha’s teaching is practised.’

“When that bhikkhu thus recollects the Buddha, the *dhamma* and *saṅgha*, if equanimity supported by the wholesome does not become established in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency in this way: ‘It is a loss for me, it is no gain for me, it is bad for me, it is no good for me, that when I thus recollect the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*, equanimity supported by the wholesome does not become established in me.’ Just as when a daughter-in-law sees her father-in-law, she arouses a sense of urgency (to please him), so too, when that bhikkhu thus recollects the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *saṅgha*, if equanimity supported by the wholesome does not become established in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency. But if, when he recollects the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *saṅgha*, equanimity supported by the wholesome becomes established in him, then he is satisfied with it. At that point, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

## Water element

“What, friends, is the water element? The water element may be either internal or external. What is the internal water element? Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is water, watery, and clung-to; that is, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil-of-the-joints, urine, or whatever else internally, belonging to oneself, is water, watery, and clung-to: this is called the internal water element. Now both the internal water element and the external water element are simply water element, and should be seen with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way: ‘This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.’ Seeing it with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the water element, and the mind’s passion for the water element fades.

“Now there comes a time when the external water element is disturbed. It carries away villages, towns, cities, districts, and countries. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean sink down a hundred leagues, two hundred leagues, three hundred leagues, four hundred leagues, five hundred leagues, six hundred leagues, seven hundred leagues. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean stand seven palms deep, six palms deep ... two palms deep, only a palm deep. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean stand seven fathoms deep, six fathoms deep ... two fathoms deep, only a fathom deep. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean stand half a fathom deep, only waist deep, only knee deep, only ankle deep. There comes a time when the waters in the great ocean are not enough to wet even the joint of a finger. When even this external water element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am.’

“So then, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu he understands thus: ‘This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

## Fire element

“What, friends, is the fire element? The fire element may be either internal or external. What is the internal fire element? Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is fire, fiery, and clung-to; that is, that by which one is warmed, ages, and is consumed, and that by which what is eaten, drunk, consumed, and tasted gets completely digested, or whatever else internally, belonging to oneself, is fire, fiery, and clung-to: this is called the internal fire element. Now both the internal fire element and the external fire element are simply fire element, and should be seen with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way: ‘This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.’ Seeing it with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the fire element, and the mind’s passion for the fire element fades.

“Now there comes a time when the external fire element is disturbed. It burns up villages, towns, cities, districts, and countries. It goes out due to lack of fuel only when it comes to green grass, or to a road, or to a rock, or to water, or to a fair open space. There comes a time when they seek to make a fire even with cocks’ feathers and hide-parings. When even this external fire element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am.’

“So then, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu he understands thus: ‘This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

## Air element

“What, friends, is the air element? The air element may be either internal or external. What is the internal air element? Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is air, airy, and clung-to; that is, up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds in the bowels, winds that course through the limbs, in-breath and out-breath, or whatever else internally belonging to oneself, is air, airy, and clung-to: this is called the internal air element. Now both the internal air element and the external air element are simply air element, and should be seen with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way: ‘This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.’ Seeing it with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the air element, and the mind’s passion for the air element fades.

“Now there comes a time when the external air element is disturbed. It sweeps away villages, towns, cities, districts, and countries. There comes a time in the last month of the hot season when they seek wind by means of a fan or bellows and even the strands of straw in the drip-fringe of the thatch do not stir. When even this external air element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am.’

“So then, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu he understands thus: ‘This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

## Space

“Friends, 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.’



## Dependent arising through six sense fields and five aggregates

“If, friends, internally the *eye* is intact but no external forms come into its range, and there is no corresponding engagement (*sammanāhāra*), then there is no manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness. If internally the eye is intact and external forms come into its range, but there is no corresponding engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness. But when internally the eye is intact and external forms come into its range and there is the corresponding engagement, then there is the manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness.

“The material *form* in what has thus come to be (*tathā-bhūta*) is included in the material form aggregate affected by clinging. The *feeling* in what has thus come to be is included in the feeling aggregate affected by clinging. The *perception* in what has thus come to be is included in the perception aggregate affected by clinging. The *formations* in what has thus come to be are included in the formations aggregate affected by clinging. The *consciousness* in what has thus come to be is included in the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging. He understands thus: ‘This, indeed, is how there comes to be the inclusion, gathering, and amassing into these five aggregates affected by clinging. Now this has been said by the Blessed One: “One who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*; one who sees *dhamma* sees dependent arising.” And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen. The desire (*chanda*), indulgence (*ālaya*), inclination (*anunaya*), and holding (*ajjhosāna*) based on these five aggregates affected by clinging is the arising of suffering. The removal of desire and passion (*rāga*), the abandonment of desire and passion for these five aggregates affected by clinging is the cessation of suffering.’ At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

“If, friends, internally the *ear* is intact but no external sounds come into its range, ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

“If, friends, internally the *nose* is intact but no external smells come into its range, ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

“If, friends, internally the *tongue* is intact but no external flavours come into its range ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

“If, friends, internally the *body* is intact but no external tangible objects come into its range ... At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

“If, friends, internally the *mind* is intact but no external mind-objects come into its range, and there is no corresponding engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness. If internally the mind is intact and external mind-objects come into its range, but there is no corresponding engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness. But when internally the mind is intact and external mind-objects come into its range and there is the corresponding engagement, then there is the manifestation of the corresponding aspect of consciousness.

“The material *form* in what has thus come to be (*tathābhūta*) is included in the material form aggregate affected by clinging. The *feeling* in what has thus come to be is included in the feeling aggregate affected by clinging. The *perception* in what has thus come to be is included in the perception aggregate affected by clinging. The *formations* in what has thus come to be are included in the formations aggregate affected by clinging. The *consciousness* in what has thus come to be is included in the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging. He understands thus: ‘This, indeed, is how there comes to be the inclusion, gathering, and amassing into these five aggregates affected by clinging. Now this has been said by the Blessed One: “One who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*; one who sees *dhamma* sees dependent arising.” And these five aggregates affected by

clinging are dependently arisen. The desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding based on these five aggregates affected by clinging is the arising of suffering. The removal of desire and passion, the abandonment of desire and passion for these five aggregates affected by clinging is the cessation of suffering.’ At that point too, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.”

This is what the venerable Sāriputta said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the venerable Sāriputta’s words.

### Tatīyavagga, Majjhima Nikāya

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995: 278-285. (Translation modified.)

## Commentary

### Introduction

In this *sutta* we can see how patterns of repetitions can create a path through the network which is the *dhamma*. Here the speaker is Venerable Sāriputta, who was praised by the Buddha as foremost in understanding (*paññā*) among his students. As a teacher Sāriputta specialised in bringing students to the first level of awakening, that of stream entry (*sotapatti*), where one has the “vision of *dhamma*” (*dhamma cakkhu*) and becomes independent within the teaching. He also specialised in teaching both right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) and the four noble truths, and there is a clear link between these. This discourse, like the Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas Sutta, links the four noble truths with dependent arising, but does so in more detail and by utilising more lists. For in this discourse, we find lists, and the pathways that lists create.

### Pathways

The structure of the discourse is provided by lists and the links between lists. Sāriputta wants to explain the four noble truths, and these are a list. He focuses on the first truth, that of *dukkha*, and expands it into a list. The last item of this list is the five aggregates affected by clinging, yet another list. Sāriputta then focuses on the first item of this list, which is form, and reveals yet another list. Then he begins to explain each member of this list. So we have a list (four great elements) within a list (five aggregates) within a list (*dukkha*) within a list (four noble truths), and each element within the list of the four great elements provides the jumping off point for the discourse, and the trajectory for the process of liberation.

But any point could have done. Sāriputta could have picked any other item in the list of the four truths, subdivided that into another list, and so on. The way he has chosen to travel is only one way among the many available.

### Repetition and its themes

We now come to the centrality of repetition in this discourse. Working with the list of the four great elements, each receives exactly the same treatment. We are being given a discourse on not-self (*anattā*), through the contemplation of the elements. This contemplation is given in the words:

Now both the internal  $x$  element and the external  $x$  element are simply  $x$  element, and should be seen with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way: ‘This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.’ Seeing it with perfect understanding, as it is, in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the  $x$  element, and the mind’s passion for the  $x$  element fades.

Here we have a basic contemplation formula found throughout the Nikāyas, but applied here to the elements. The experience  $x$  is simply the experience  $x$  (this echoes the fundamental theme of Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta); thus understood,  $x$  is not mine, not me, not my self (echoing Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and others); and in failing to identify with  $x$ , disenchantment develops and passion fades (echoing numerous suttas). The entry into not-self is provided by the perception of impermanence (“When even this external  $x$  element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent ...”), and this leads to the contemplation of radical contingency provided by dependent arising, grounded in the mind being “confident, settled and clear” on that one specific element as its object.

Then we come to a practice that weaves together formulas regarding *vipassanā* (seeing dependent arising), the cultivation of *mettā*, the perfection of patience, and the recollection of the three treasures. This section shows how different aspects of the practice - both serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) - are intimately related, and the repetition of this section, for each element, shows that it doesn't matter which aspect of the body is being contemplated, the same insights and practices unfold. Sāriputta is showing how the practitioner can enter into a fabric of related practices and insights *from any aspect of experience*. The repetition, in other words, brings out the universality of the themes he is talking about. Through the repetition passages, the hearer is learning the same investigation, faith, energy, urgency and equanimity, as developed by and expressed in different practices. And notice how these practices vary from a direct seeing into the nature of the immediately experienced physical process (the impermanence of the element) to reflecting on the Buddha and the ideals of his teaching (the practice of patience). Further, the theme of patiently enduring attacks from others creates a loop back to the first noble truth, *dukkha*.

Recapping the journey Sāriputta has taken us, the hearers, we have travelled from the four noble truths, to an analysis of *dukkha*, to the five aggregates, to the body, to the four great elements, to themes of not-self, dependent arising, meditation on patience and the three treasures, and equanimity. With these themes introduced, Sāriputta has arrived at a number of intersections in his discourse. He could now take off in any direction provided by these themes. In fact, he chooses dependent arising, and in a way that both loops back to where he began, and encompasses all four truths.

## Six sense fields and five aggregates

Sāriputta chooses to follow the trajectory indicated by dependent arising; but in which direction? The Nidāna Vagga of Saṃyutta Nikāya alone provides approximately sixty versions of the dependent arising formula, not to mention the others found scattered throughout the Nikāyas. (Versions close to the one chosen here by Sāriputta can be found in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *Connected discourses*, vol. 1 pp 580-83.)

Here Sāriputta examines each of the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), examines the contingent or dependently-arisen nature of their functioning, and how the functioning of the sense fields creates the inner and outer world, the person and the world within which the person operates. In this way he sees the creation of the five aggregates as they occur - “the inclusion, gathering, and amassing into these five aggregates affected by clinging.” Here the discourse has looped back to the first noble truth, for the amassing of the five aggregates affected by clinging *is* the first truth, the arising of *dukkha*. But in seeing the arising of *dukkha*, the practitioner sees also *dukkha's* contingent or dependent (*paṭicca*) nature; and as the Buddha says, “One who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*; one who sees *dhamma* sees dependent arising.” Seeing *dhamma*, the practitioner sees the arising and cessation of desire and passion, responding to this by abandoning desire and passion, and attaining the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

## Conclusion

Sāriputta has taken us on a journey deep into the four noble truths, by focusing on a single aspect of one truth and bringing out the implications of that single aspect. His trajectory is provided by lists, lists of lists, and lists within lists. As long as he stays on the paths provided by these lists, he knows he remains within the structure of *dhamma*, and that his journey will illuminate this structure. And of course, he could have chosen to focus on any aspect of any of the four truths. Any one of these would open up another list, which would open into another list, and so on, and the journey would arrive at the same conclusion - the liberation of the practitioner, which embraces all four of the truths.