



EVAM ME SUTTAM

This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week five: Cetanā

Introduction

Consciousness has *depth*, in terms of both emergence and time. Last week we examined the depth of consciousness in terms of time; this week, we will examine the depth of consciousness in terms of emergence. In both instances we are examining questions arising from the issue of causation over time - rebirth, moral responsibility and spiritual growth. In all of these, consciousness is central. This is not surprising, given that the Buddha's teachings are a first person discourse. The Buddha is always concerned with experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject; what it *feels like* to be undergoing (this) experience. "Feeling like" implies consciousness, the knowing of the experience. So this week we will continue our examination of the nature and role of consciousness.

Viññāṇa, saññā and paññā

Why does one say "consciousness" (*viññāṇa*)? It knows (*vijānāti*), therefore one says "consciousness." (S 3.87)

We have said that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the knowing of the phenomenon, and it manifests as the presence of the phenomenon. This knowing is an active process - it is something the mind *does* - so we could say consciousness is consciousness-ing, making something known, or making present the phenomenon. Ñāṇavīra Thera comments:

Viññāṇa, being the *presence* of the phenomenon, of what is present, is negative as regards essence. Other things can be described directly by way of their positive essence as this or that, but not consciousness. Consciousness, however, is necessary before any other thing can be described; for if something is to be described it must first be present in experience (real or imaginary), and its presence is consciousness.¹

Consciousness is a knowing-of, because consciousness always has an object, what it knows, and it is defined and discerned in terms of its object. As the Buddha says in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta, "Consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; ... " Once we see consciousness as the making-present-of-*x*, where *x* is any one of an infinite variety of possible objects, then we can see how the nature of *x* conditions the nature of consciousness. Consciousness has a protean quality, always changing along with its object. This implies that consciousness is capable of development.

¹ Ñāṇavīra, Thera. *Clearing the path: writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera*. Colombo: Path Press, 1987. p 32

Consciousness is the central focus of the person, what directs the formation of the person. The Buddha describes a border town with six gates, with its lord sitting at the centre, at the junction of the four roads that divide the town. In this metaphor, the town is the sentient body, the six gates are the six sense fields, and the lord of the town is consciousness (*viññāṇa*). (S 4.195-95) And of course, this “lord” is not a person but *a point of perspective*, the central perspective from which self and world are known, and constructed. So when we speak of the transformation of the person, we imply a transformation of consciousness. And finally, consciousness is a stream (*viññāṇa-sota*), a flow, which gives a sense of continuity to the person, without which we would not have a sense of being someone who endures over time.

“Consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) is one of a number of terms that are based on the root *ñā*, “to know.” Other common terms based on the same root are *paññā* (*pa + ñā*), understanding or wisdom, and *saññā* (*sañ + ñā*) perception or recognition. Each of these is a different aspect of the complex process of knowing an object. Mahāvedalla Sutta (M43) examines the relationship between these three - *viññāṇa*, *paññā*, and *saññā* - in a dialogue between Sāriputta and Mahā Koṭṭhita. Sāriputta explains that perception and consciousness are associated, not separated, for “what one perceives, one knows.” Perception is the recognition of a object as being “this” or “that;” a knowing-*as*. Consciousness is the pure presence of the object; a knowing-*of*. Perception involves a class of things; consciousness involves the uniqueness of this specific object as distinct from the uniqueness of that specific object.

For example, I see two small animals, each with four legs and a tail, one chasing another. Perception *recognises* the animal in front as a cat, and the one behind as a dog. It does this by seeing the commonalities between this individual cat and all the other cats I have experienced, and the commonalities between this individual dog and all the other dogs I have experienced. Consciousness *discriminates* between the animal in front as a cat, and the one behind as a dog. It does this by seeing the differences between the animal in front and the animal behind.

Note that *both* perception and consciousness are required in this single act of knowing. Perception *recognises* the similarities between all the various examples of *x* and all the various examples of *y*. Consciousness *discriminates* between *x* and *y*, seeing that *x* is different to *y*, and *y* is different to *x*. So perception and consciousness are two distinct but complementary perspectives contained in a single act-of-knowing.

Knowing an object involves a complex process. Consciousness is an action, that of making-present the phenomenon. It manifests as a quality, the quality of presence. This quality can change and develop. For example, two people listen to the same performance of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D major. One hardly listens to classical music at all; the other is a long-time connoisseur of classical music, and of Beethoven in particular. The sounds which are the concerto are present to both - “When consciousness arises dependent on ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness” - but the sounds that are present to the connoisseur have a depth, subtlety and nuance that does not exist for his more casual colleague. Consciousness has *depth*. But one can develop one’s understanding of consciousness in its relationship to an object, gradually penetrating its depth. One can, over time, become a connoisseur of the Violin Concerto in D major.

And so Sāriputta explains that understanding (*paññā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are associated, not separated, the difference between them being that understanding is to be developed (*bhāvetabbhā*), while consciousness is to be fully understood (*pariññeyyaṃ*). We can develop and deepen consciousness, our making-present of phenomena, by means of meditative development (*bhāvanā*). Expressed in terms of the classical tradition, when our mind is untrained we see phenomena as permanent, satisfactory and self. As our knowing-of phenomena develops, deepens, we penetrate the characteristics of phenomena and know them to be impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, and in the process our knowing matures from consciousness (*viññāṇa*) to understanding (*paññā*).

Consciousness is to be fully known, because it is already here; we are already knowing-of, but because of our delusion - because consciousness arises dependent upon ignorance - we don't know clearly or in depth. Understanding is to be developed, because it is not already here - or at least, not strongly enough to be of any influence. As consciousness is investigated in terms of its contingency, its arising and ceasing in dependence upon conditions, it clarifies, develops and deepens into understanding. Consciousness fully known becomes understanding fully developed. So consciousness and understanding are associated, not separate, because they are different aspects of the same process of knowing an object. Of course, as consciousness (*viññāṇa*) develops, perception (*saññā*) also changes, and when the tradition speaks of developing insight (*vipassanā*) into the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, it speaks of developing the *perception* of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha-saññā*) and not-self (*anattā-saññā*), the ability to *recognise* these characteristics when they present themselves.

It follows that the task of the meditator is the development of consciousness. As consciousness develops, the object of consciousness changes; and as the object of consciousness changes, consciousness develops. Consciousness is "stationed," "established," "supported," "based" (*ṭhiti*, or some variation like *paṭiṭṭhita*) in this life (on the body, and in different levels of meditation) and in future lives (in various realms). Mahānidāna Sutta refers to seven stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-(ṭ)ṭhiti*), ranging from "beings who are diverse in body and diverse in perception, such as human beings, some gods, and some beings in the lower realms," up to "beings who, having completely surmounted the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, (contemplating) 'There is nothing,' arrive at the sphere of nothingness." These stations of consciousness indicate *both* the various categories of existence within *samsāra*, particular worlds (*lokas*), (human beings, some gods, etc.) *and* different habitual states of mind (such as the meditative attainment of the sphere of nothingness). And so we come to our first text, Cetanā, Choice, which shows us how this protean quality of consciousness, its capacity to change and develop according to its object, is described and analysed.

Cetanā

At Sāvathī. "What one chooses (*ceteti*) what one plans (*pakappeti*), what one has a tendency towards (*anuseti*), becomes an object (*ārammaṇa*) for the maintenance (*ṭhitiyā*) of consciousness. When there is an object, there is a support (*paṭiṭṭhā*) for consciousness. When consciousness is supported and growing, there is production of further becoming in the future (*āyatim punabbhava*). When there is production of further becoming in the future, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.

"If one does not choose, does not plan, and yet one still has a tendency towards something, this becomes an object for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is an object, there is a support for consciousness. When consciousness is supported and growing, there is production of further becoming in the future. When there is production of further becoming in the future, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.

"And if one does not choose, does not plan, and does *not* have a tendency towards something, there is no object for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is no object, there is no support for consciousness. When consciousness is not supported and growing, there is no production of further becoming in the future. When there is no production of further becoming in the future, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair cease. Thus is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering."

Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Volume One. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 576.

Consciousness must have an object, and is based upon its object. But whatever something is based on, constrains it. If I rest my glass on a table, the glass is a support (*patitṭhā*) for the glass, just as the object of consciousness is a support for consciousness. But this means that the glass is constrained by the table. If it moves away from it, it is no longer supported by it. In the same way, consciousness is constrained by whatever object it lies upon, what supports it. To be supported is to be stuck. This problem of support and constraint is one that follows a practitioner throughout his practice. Buddha explains that even in deep equanimity, a practitioner might become attached to that equanimity - "He relishes that equanimity, welcomes it, remains fastened to it. As he does so, his consciousness is dependent on it, sustained by it. With sustenance (*āhāra*), Ānanda, a monk is not totally liberated." (M 106)

Consciousness is maintained and supported by "what one chooses (*ceteti*), what one plans (*pakappeti*), what one has a tendency towards (*anuseti*)." *Cetanā* is normally translated as "intention," but here I translate it as "choice." For the Buddha, "intention" or "choice" is central to moral responsibility, and therefore to *kamma* (Skt.: *karma*), "action." He goes so far as to say, "Choice (*cetanā*) is action (*kamma*): after choosing, one performs actions of body, speech or mind." (A 3.415)

Cetanā has a stronger meaning in Pāli than "intention" in English. We have the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," meaning we can act contrary to our stated (even to ourselves) intentions. In English, it makes sense to say "I didn't mean to say that," meaning "I spoke contrary to my intentions." One may not believe someone who makes this defence, but the sentence itself is coherent. In Pāli, the sentence is incoherent. Speech is conditioned by *cetanā*; there can be no speech without *cetanā*, and if there is the *cetanā* to speak some particular words, those words will follow.

Actions of speech and mind include thoughts, the verbal stream flowing through our heads. From the Buddha's perspective, every thought we think arises because of a choice to think. This is evidenced by the fact that in meditation we can choose to not think, and turn off the tap of thought. Every thought we think, every movement we make, every word we speak - all these arise from choice. Of course, every choice is conditioned by something other than itself - most obviously, the same choice made many times before, and so now habitual. For example, the addict reaches for his substance. From his perspective he has no choice in the matter, and it is exactly his absence of choice - his compulsion - that defines his addiction. From the Buddha's perspective, he chooses, now, to reach for that substance - but that choice is conditioned by thousands of similar choices made in the past, and so making any alternative choice is extremely difficult. The addict is stuck in his habitual choices. But no matter how habitual, a choice is still a choice, so the addict has the potential to get off his substance, and he does so when he makes the choice to do so.

The Buddha's teaching is often concerned with issues of freedom and identity. We are free to the degree that we are able to make a range of choices concerning how we respond to *this, now*. And of course, each one of those potential choices are conditioned by phenomena other than themselves. Identity emerges from our habitual choices - "I am" an addict; "I am" one who has got off addiction and now practises *dhamma*. But in any case, "I am" is the pattern of my habitual choices, the pattern of action, of *kamma*, in which I am stuck. So "what one chooses ... becomes an object for the maintenance of consciousness." We are what we do.

One is a farmer by action, a craftsman by action,
A merchant by action, a servant by action.

One is a thief by action, a soldier by action,
A priest by action, a king by action.

Thus the wise see action as it is,
Seeing dependent arising, understanding action and its result. (Sn 651-653)

“What one has a tendency towards (*anuseti*) becomes an object (*ārammaṇa*) for the maintenance (*ṭhitiyā*) of consciousness.” The verb *anuseti* means “to lie along,” and from this we get the noun *anusaya*, “tendency,” “predisposition,” or in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation, “underlying tendency.” In Mahāmālunkya Sutta (M64), the Buddha addresses the question of whether “a young tender infant lying prone” has attachment and aversion. He says, “A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion ‘beings,’ so how could ill will towards beings arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to ill will lies within him.” *Anusaya* refers to potential or latent reactions to conditions that *will*, in the future, arise given the arising of an appropriate combination of conditions. The infant sleeping in his cot has neither love nor hatred, but love and hatred *will* arise in the future, given the appropriate conditions. I may ordain, live in a peaceful forest monastery and meditate intensively for many years, my mind becoming purified and peaceful, but given the appropriate conditions, suddenly I am ambushed by the anger and passion that afflicted me many years before. I still have “a tendency towards” (*anuseti*) attraction and aversion.

The tradition speaks of three levels of “*kilesa*,” a word usually translated as “defilement.” “*Kilesa*” comes from the verb *kilissati*, “to stick,” “to adhere.” If mud is thrown onto a white cloth, it sticks to the cloth; the cloth is stained, “defiled.” *Kilesa* refers to our being *stuck*, on anything, anywhere, like the addict is *stuck* on his substance, or the virtuous practitioner is *stuck* on her self-image as the noble one. From the perspective of *kilesa*, where or on what we are stuck is secondary; what is primary is the fact that we are stuck, and so not free. The tradition refers to three levels of *kilesa*: *anusaya*, or latent predisposition; *pariyuṭṭhāna*, or obsessive thoughts/emotions; and *vītikkaṃma*, or acting out. If someone presses my buttons and I react angrily to them, this is active defilement (*vītikkaṃma kilesa*); if I swallow my anger, and don’t react externally while seething internally, this is obsessive defilement (*pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa*); and if I don’t react either externally or internally, but still have the potential to react in some other circumstance, this is latent defilement (*anusaya kilesa*). If I am virtuous and restrained, I may refrain from active defilement; if I am a strong and dedicated meditator, I may refrain from obsessive defilement; but as long as consciousness is based, established, and therefore stuck, somewhere, the latent defilements remain as a predisposition, a possibility of arising given the appropriate conditions.

“What one chooses (*ceteti*) what one plans (*pakappeti*), what one has a tendency towards (*anuseti*),” are all formative activities: they are formations (*saṅkhāras*). And in the twelvefold formula, *ignorance conditions formations; formations condition consciousness*. Our text is an expansion of this formula. Rising up from our ignorance (*avijjā*), our confusion and delusion - our “not (*a*) knowing (*viññā*)” - come our impulses, desires, plans, reactions, responses, and so on. These manifest as our obsessive thoughts, our habitual desires and fears, our ambitions, dreams and ideals, our habits of body, speech and mind. They enter into and dominant our consciousness - we think about them, see them as real possibilities and direct our actions accordingly, act them out, and so on. And as we do this over time they become particular patterns of habits and create a particular person, not another. “When consciousness is supported and growing, there is production of further becoming in the future (*āyatim punabbhava*). When there is production of further becoming in the future, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.” We form or construct ourselves into a specific person living in a particular world, and the limitations inherent within this situation is suffering (*dukkha*).

If one does not choose, if one does not plan, and yet one still has a tendency towards something, this becomes an object for the maintenance of consciousness.

Our first paragraph shows the condition of the ordinary untrained person. This second paragraph shows the mature meditator. Here, the practitioner has her mind under control, perhaps because

of continuous mindfulness practice, but as soon as her control drops, the tendencies can re-emerge.

And if one does not choose, if one does not plan, and does *not* have a tendency towards something, there is no object for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is no object, there is no support for consciousness.

This refers to the *arahant*, the one who is entirely free, whose consciousness is not supported by anything. To examine the meaning of this, we shall look at part of Parivimamsana, Thorough Investigation, which first expands on the process of being stuck on the support of consciousness, and then illustrates the nature of an unsupported consciousness.

Parivimamsana

[...] “If an ignorant person forms a meritorious formation (*puññaṃ saṅkhāram abhisankharoti*), consciousness approaches the meritorious. If he forms a demeritorious formation, consciousness approaches the demeritorious. If he forms an imperturbable formation, consciousness approaches the imperturbable.

“When a bhikkhu’s ignorance is abandoned, knowledge (*vijjā*) arises. Because of the fading of ignorance and arising of knowledge, he does not form a meritorious formation, he does not form a demeritorious formation, he does not form an imperturbable formation. Not forming (*anabhisankharonto*), not choosing (*anabhisāñcetayanto*), he does not cling to anything in the world. Not clinging, he is not agitated; not being agitated, he is completely cooled within himself (*paccattaññeva parinibbāyati*). He understands (*pajānāti*): birth is destroyed, the spiritual life is fulfilled, what had to be done is done, there is no more of this state of being.

“If an ignorant person forms an *x* formation, consciousness approaches *x*.” This text is another expansion of *ignorance conditions formations; formations conditions consciousness*. An ignorant person forms an intention, of any ethical nature (ignorance conditions formations). Consciousness is necessarily attached to or coloured by that ethical quality (formations condition consciousness). Note how it doesn’t matter what the ethical quality of the formed intention is; what matters is the presence of ignorance, and so the approach of consciousness *to something*, and being defined by, limited by, stuck on, that something.

“When a bhikkhu’s ignorance is abandoned, knowledge arises.” Here we have a situation where consciousness (*viññāṇa*) develops into understanding (*paññā*). Just as the arising of ignorance sets off dependent arising (“Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering”), so the cessation of ignorance sets off dependent cessation (“Thus is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.”) Dependent cessation begins: “But from the complete fading away and cessation of ignorance, formations cease; from the cessation of formations, consciousness ceases.” In the absence of ignorance there are no formations, which means there is no consciousness. Does this mean that the person is now unconscious? What has happened is that his ordinary consciousness (*viññāṇa*), arising dependent on ignorance, has been replaced by understanding (*paññā*), arising dependent on the cessation of ignorance. Because of understanding, there is no clinging, and so the experience of *nibbāna* arises. The passage ends with the “declaration of knowledge” that shows the attainment of the *arahant*: “He understands (*pajānāti*): birth is destroyed, the spiritual life is fulfilled, what had to be done is done, there is no more of this state of being.” Note the verb here - “he understands” - *pajānāti*, from which we get the noun *paññā*, understanding or wisdom. Consciousness has ceased, and has been replaced by understanding.

“If he experiences a pleasant feeling he understands (*pajānāti*) ‘This is impermanent;’ he understands ‘This is not held to;’ he understands ‘This is not delighted in.’ If he experiences a painful feeling he understands ‘This is impermanent;’ he understands ‘This is not held to;’ he understands ‘This is not

delighted in.’ If he experiences a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling he understands ‘This is impermanent;’ he understands ‘This is not held to;’ he understands ‘This is not delighted in.’

“If he experiences a pleasant feeling, he experiences that pleasant feeling with detachment. If he experiences an painful feeling ... If he experiences a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling, he experiences that feeling with detachment.

Consciousness develops into an understanding of the impermanence, and therefore unsatisfactoriness, of the object. Here the object is feeling, and as we know from the twelvefold formula, *feeling conditions craving, craving conditions clinging*. But seeing how feeling, the hedonic aspect of experience, is always changing, unstable, unreliable, the practitioner does not hold on to it, thinking it can be prolonged and identified with. It is “not held to,” or abandoned.

Notice how even painful feeling is “not delighted in.” We learned how delight (*nandi*) is an ingredient of craving (“Craving ... is bound up with passion and delight” - Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) and of clinging (“Now delight in feelings is clinging” - Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta). We “delight” in our pain when we are obsessed by it, and this obsession is accompanied by agitation, excitement or even subtle panic. When I hate the obsessive thoughts and emotions that make my life a misery, I am delighting and holding onto these thoughts and emotions. The practitioner, instead, “experiences that feeling with detachment,” cutting off the stream of dependent arising at that point. Here she is “not forming, not choosing, not clinging to anything in the world,” and so is completely cooled (*parinibbāyati*). She is not forming and not choosing because her consciousness is not stuck on any object, but letting go of whatever object arises. Like a mountain stream is not hindered by any dam, but flows continuously without hindrance, so the stream of consciousness is not blocked at any point in the flow.

“Experiencing a feeling terminating with the body, he understands: ‘I am experiencing a feeling terminating with the body.’ Experiencing a feeling terminating with life, he understands: ‘I am experiencing a feeling terminating with life.’ He understands that, after the breaking up of the body in the future and the ending of life here, everything experienced and not delighted in will become cool; mere bodily remains will be left. It is like a man who removes a hot clay pot from a potter’s kiln and stands it on level ground; right there its heat would fade away and the potsherds would remain. In the same way, a bhikkhu experiencing a feeling terminating with the body ... mere bodily remains will be left.

Here the image is of the cooling of a hot pot from the kiln. Heat implies agitation; coolness implies peace. The *arahant* dies without agitation, because she has, in a sense, already died. Her sense of a separate and independent self died along with the agitation and heat of passion and delight, of obsession. So we have the verb *parinibbāyati*, “to completely cool,” from which we derive *parinibbāna* or just *nibbāna*, the complete cooling of the passions.

“What do you think, bhikkhus? Would a bhikkhu for whom the *āsavas* are destroyed form a meritorious formation, or form a demeritorious formation, or form an imperturbable formation?”
“Certainly not, bhante.”

“When there are utterly no formations, with the cessation of formations, would consciousness be discerned?” “Certainly not, bhante.”

“When there is utterly no consciousness, with the cessation of consciousness, would name-&-form be discerned?” “Certainly not, bhante.”

“When there is utterly no name-&-form ... no six sense spheres ... no contact ... no feeling ... no craving ... no clinging ... no becoming ... no birth, with the cessation of birth, would ageing-&-death be discerned?” “Certainly not, bhante.”

“*Sādhu, sādhu*, bhikkhus! It is exactly so and not any other way. Put your trust in me, have faith in this. Don’t be doubtful or uncertain about this. Just this is the end of suffering.”

Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Volume One. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 586-89.

The destruction of the *āsavas* refers to the attainment of full awakening. The *arahant* does not “form” or “construct” anything, and so consciousness does not arise for her. The fundamental formation is the formation of the self, the person whose experience this is, to whom this happens. The *arahant* is conscious, but does not *have* consciousness, for she knows there is no-one who is conscious, there is no-one to whom this is happening. There is just dependent arising and the dependently arisen, with no-one getting in the way. This is expressed in terms of unsupported consciousness in our following text, Atthirāgo, There is Passion.

Atthirāgo

“There are these four kinds of nutriment (*āhāra*) for the maintenance (*ṭhiti*) of beings that have already come to be and for the entry of those seeking birth. What four? They are: physical food as nutriment, gross or subtle; contact as the second; mental volition (*manosañcetanā*) as the third; and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as the fourth. These are the four nutriments for the maintenance of existing beings and for the entry of those seeking birth.

Here we have the version of dependent arising centred on nutriment (*āhāra*). We have seen that the four nutriments are major conditions for personal continuity, and so are associated with identity and rebirth. The arising of the nutriments is conditioned by craving (*taṇhā*), so “nutriment” is an alternative way of expressing clinging (*upādāna*), since *craving conditions clinging*. The Pāli word for clinging (*upādāna*) is also the word for fuel, and fuel “feeds” or sustains a fire. So there is a close association between the concepts of craving, clinging and nutriment. In *Cetanā* and *Parivimamsana* we have seen how these texts elaborate on and clarify aspects of the basic conditional relationship of *ignorance conditions formations; formations condition consciousness*. Here we are concerned with an elaboration and clarification of *craving conditions clinging*, with a particular focus on the role of consciousness. And again, when we are speaking of consciousness, we are speaking of causation over time and rebirth - the flow of experience over time.

Supported consciousness

“If there is passion (*rāga*), delight (*nandi*) and craving (*taṇhā*) regarding *physical food* as nutriment, consciousness is supported (*patiṭṭhita*) and developed (*virūḷha*). When consciousness is supported and developed, there is the entry (*avakkanti*) of name-&-form. When there is the entry of name-&-form, there is the growth (*vuddhi*) of formations. When there is the growth of formations, there is further becoming in the future. When there is further becoming in the future, there is birth, ageing and death in the future. When there is birth, ageing and death in the future, it is accompanied with sorrow, grief and despair, I declare.

“If there is passion, delight and craving regarding *contact* as nutriment... If there is passion, delight and craving regarding *mental volition* as nutriment... If there is passion, delight and craving regarding *consciousness* as nutriment, consciousness is supported and developed. When consciousness is supported and developed, there is the entry of name-&-form. When there is the entry of name-&-form, there is the growth of formations. When there is the growth of formations, there is further becoming in the future. When there is further becoming in the future, there is birth, ageing and death in the future. When there is birth, ageing and death in the future, it is accompanied with sorrow, grief and despair, I declare.

“Passion, delight and craving,” the “entry of name-&-form,” the “growth of formations” and “further becoming in the future” all bring in different aspects of dependent arising. Here we focus on the centrality of consciousness in all these processes. All of them presuppose the support (*patiṭṭhita*) and development (*virūḷha*) of consciousness. What this means is illustrated by the metaphor of the painting.

“Just as an artist or painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or red, could create the form of a man or woman, complete in every part, on a well polished panel or wall or canvas; in the same way, if there is passion, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment, consciousness is supported and developed. When consciousness is supported and developed, there is the entry of name-&-form.

...

The “form of a man or woman, complete in every part” refers to the person within his or her world. To discern an image of such a person requires some kind of background. A painting requires backing on which to paint - a “support” for the image. Without the support, there can be no image; but with the support, the image is stuck right there, unable to move, fixed in its nature. And as we have seen, if there is stuckness, there is *kilesa*.

Unsupported consciousness

“In the same way, if there is no passion, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment, consciousness is not supported (*apatiṭṭhita*) and developed (*avirūḷha*). When consciousness is not supported and developed, there is no entry of name-&-form. When there is no entry of name-&-form, there is no growth of formations. When there is no growth of formations, there is no further becoming in the future. When there is no further becoming in the future, then there is no birth, ageing and death in the future. When there is no birth, ageing and death in the future, there is no sorrow, grief and despair, I declare. ...

“Suppose there was a house or hall with a peaked roof, with windows to the north, the south and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it be supported (*patiṭṭhita*)?” “On the western wall, bhante.”

“If there was no western wall, where would it be supported?” “On the earth, bhante.”

“If there was no earth, where would it be supported?” “On the water, bhante.”

“If there was no water, where would it be supported?” “It would be unsupported (*apatiṭṭhita*), bhante.”

“In the same way, bhikkhus, if there is no passion, delight and craving regarding physical food as nutriment ...

Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Volume One. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000: 599-601.

In the same way as a painting, light requires a background. Although we have the expression, “He saw the light,” actually, we don’t see light; we see *things* that are illuminated by light. If there is no light, we see no things; if the light is faint, we see things, obscurely. If the light is strong, we see things, clearly. The things we see provide the support or establishment of the light. But what sense does it make to speak of light, when there are no things that are illuminated? Just as light requires something to be illuminated, so consciousness requires an object; and just as light is bound to, constrained by, defined by, found only in relation to, the things that are illuminated, so is consciousness bound to, constrained by, its object.

If light is not supported by a surface, then it is “unsupported.” What happens to light when it does not strike a surface? Does it still exist in some way? Or is it non-existent? If consciousness is not supported by what feeds it, then it is “unsupported.” What happens to consciousness that is unsupported? Does it exist, or not? Since both existence (*atthi*) and non-existence (*natthi*) are rejected by dependent arising, we must have some other way of explaining what is happening. But explanation requires concept, and as we learned in Mahānidāna Sutta, for there to be concepts, there must be consciousness together with name-&-form:

To this extent, Ānanda, one can be born, age, and die, fall (from one existence) and rise (into another); to this extent there is a pathway for designation, a pathway for language, a pathway for concept, a sphere for wisdom; to this extent the round turns as far as can be discerned in this state, that is, (when there is) name-&-form together with consciousness.

And when consciousness is unsupported, there is no name-&-form, and so no concept. Beyond consciousness together with name-&-form there is a realm beyond language, one that can be experienced, but not described, illustrated only by the use of simile and metaphor. This is the realm of *nibbāna*. This is why the Buddha refused to explain the fate of a *tathāgata*, a fully awakened one, after death - or the nature of a *tathāgata*'s consciousness in this life. As he explains, “That consciousness by which one describing a *tathāgata* might describe him has been eliminated by the *tathāgata*, cut off at the root, dug up, made non-existent, incapable of future arising. A *tathāgata* is free from reckoning in terms of consciousness, he is profound (*gambhīra*), immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean.” (M72)

This state of a *tathāgata* is illustrated by stories regarding the relationship between Māra and dead *arahants*. Māra is “death,” the Buddhist equivalent of Satan. Unlike Satan, Māra has no particular interest in seeing beings go to hell, but he does want beings to stay within *his* realm - that of birth, and therefore of inevitable death. This realm includes hell, the human realm, and the heavens, so Māra is quite happy to see beings do good deeds and be reborn in heaven, because he knows being born in heaven, one day they will inevitably die. But Māra is nervous regarding the Buddha and his students, because they are practising for the cessation of birth, and therefore of death. They want to escape his realm, and so Māra has a particular interest in keeping his eye on them - especially when they die, and so are due to proceed to another birth. And of course, the process of death and subsequent birth involves the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) that continues to flow because it is supported by something.

But an arahant does not have a supported consciousness. As long as he is alive, his consciousness is connected with his sentient body - name-&-form - but when he dies, and his existing name-&-form dissolve, then his consciousness is entirely unsupported. And Māra goes looking for him, as when the arahant Godhika dies:

Now on that occasion a cloud of smoke, a swirl of darkness, was moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the intermediate quarters. The Blessed One said to the bhikkhus: “Do you see that cloud of smoke, that swirl of darkness, moving to the east, then to the west, to the north, to the south, upwards, downwards, and to the intermediate quarters?” “Yes, bhante.”

“That, bhikkhus, is Māra the Evil One searching for the consciousness of the clansman Godhika, wondering: ‘Where now is the consciousness of the clansman Godhika supported (*patiṭṭhita*)?’ However, bhikkhus, with consciousness unsupported (*apatiṭṭhita*), the clansman Godhika has attained *parinibbāna*.” (S 1.122)

Māra cannot find Godhika’s consciousness, any more than he can find light unsupported by what it illuminates, or a painting unsupported by its backing. And if Māra cannot find it, what can we say about it? Not very much, it seems. Let us look at what the Buddha said about this consciousness in Kevaddha Sutta (D11), when he was asked by a bhikkhu, “Where do the four

great things (*mahābhūta*) - earth element, water element, fire element and air element - cease without remainder?" The Buddha, careful as ever with language, first corrects the question, and then answers it:

*Evañca kho eso, bhikkhu, tejo vāyo na gādhati;
Kattha dīghañca rassañca, añuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;
Kattha nāmañca rūpañca, asesañ uparujjhatī'ti.*

*Viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ, anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ
Ettha āpo ca paṭhavī, tejo vāyo na gādhati.
Ettha dīghañca rassañca, añuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;
Ettha nāmañca rūpañca, asesañ uparujjhatī;
Viññāṇassa nirodhena, etthetaṃ uparujjhatī'ti. (D 1.223)*

Where do earth, water, fire and air find nowhere to stand?
Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul -
Where are name-&-form utterly destroyed?

Where consciousness is non-indicative (*anidassana*), boundless, all luminous (*pabhaṃ*),
That's where earth, water, fire and air find nowhere to stand.
There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul -
There name-&-form are utterly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness, all this is destroyed.

Consciousness is "boundless" because it is no longer stuck to, constrained by, defined by, anything at all. Consciousness is *anidassana*, *a* + *nidassana*. *A* is the negative prefix; *nidassana* is "pointing at," "characteristic," "sign," "attribute." So *anidassana* indicates something that does not point at anything, and therefore cannot be characterised. If I point, my pointing is characterised by what I am pointing at; if there is knowing, knowing is characterised by what it knows. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *anidassana* as "makes no showing," and Maurice Walshe as "signless." Here I follow Ñāṇavīra Thera, who translates it as "non-indicative," meaning consciousness here is not indicating the presence of a subject, one who is conscious, one who knows. Non-indicative consciousness is "all luminous" (*pabhaṃ*) as light, no longer restricted to illuminating any single "thing," illuminates everything, and is everywhere - but illuminates nothing, in that it is limited to no-thing, and is nowhere, in that it is not limited to any one place.

In our course we have been studying dependent arising and the dependently arisen, but here we are dealing with consciousness which is not dependently arisen, and which is beyond the boundaries of dependent arising. And as for what this "means" - it doesn't and can't mean anything. That's the point.