

Moliya Phagguna Sutta

The Discourse to Moliya Phagguna

[There is no self behind our mental processes]

(Sāmyutta Nikāya 12.12/2:12-14)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Dependent arising

The Moliya Phagguna Sutta is a discourse on how the four foods sustain and proliferate rebirth through *dependent arising* [§1-7], and how this cycle is broken through *dependent ending* [§8]. A more elaborate explanation of this process, using the simile of seeds, is given in **the Bija Sutta** (S 22.54).¹ The dependent arising sequence as given in the Moliya Phagguna Sutta begins thus:

Consciousness as food → future rebirth → the 6 sense-spheres → contact (sense-stimulation). [§3-4]

Here, “consciousness as food” plays the role of the “consciousness” causal link (*nidāna*), and this consciousness is defined in **the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2) as the six types of consciousness,² each arising at their respective sense-faculties. Harvey, based on his interpretation of **the Bija Sutta** (S 22.54), concludes that consciousness-as-food

must thus be the equivalent of these [the six sense-faculties], with the root-like discernment [consciousness] of [**the Bija Sutta**, S 22.54] being a form which does not occur in the processing of sensory or mental objects, just as *bhavaṅga* does not. The root-like nature of this discernment [consciousness] would also make it like *bhavaṅga*, for this not only precedes but also makes possible the “process of *cittas*” which arises in the sensory channels: it is like the root from which they grow. (Harvey 1995:158 f)³

The Bhava Sutta (A 3.76), too, compares consciousness to a seed [4].

This distinction is a very important and useful one, and has earlier been pointed out by a number of scholars.⁴ The term *viññāṇa* is used in early Buddhism in at least two important senses, that is, **the two basic conscious processes**—namely, the functions of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*)—discovered by the Buddha, that is, as cognitive consciousness and as existential consciousness. The first—cognitive consciousness—centering around *viññāṇa* and *nāma,rūpa*, shows how our senses work and how our lives are sustained down to the moment. The second function of dependent arising—that of existential consciousness—centering around *taṇhā* (craving) and *upādāna* (clinging or fuel), is to show the true nature of what we call an “individual,” going through various lives, and it shows this by stating that *consciousness* arises conditioned by ignorance and formations. In simple terms, the former is our present-life life flow of consciousness, while the latter is the rebirth-consciousness.⁵

2 Moliya Phagguna’s wrong view

The Commentary explains that the name *Moliya* was given to Phagguna⁶ in lay life because he wore his hair in a huge topknot (*moḷi* or *cūḷa*), and the nickname remained with him after he joined the order

¹ S 22.54/3:54 f = SD 8.3(9-10).

² S 12.2.13/2:2-4 = SD 5.15.

³ See SD 8.3(9-10).

⁴ Amongst the scholars who have used this distinction are OH de A Wijesekera 1964, Rune EA Johansson 1965: 198 f, & WW Waldron 2003: 41-45. See *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a(6.1) & **The unconscious** = SD 17.8b(3).

⁵ For details, see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a(6.1) & **The unconscious** = SD 17.8b(3).

⁶ S 23.32/2:50. There is a Phagguna of **Phagguna S** (S 35.83/4:52 f), who asks the Buddha whether the past Buddhas could be known by way of any of our sense-faculties, but the Buddha replied no. It is not certain whether the two are the same person.

(SA 2:30).⁷ Throughout the Sutta, Phagguna only asks the Buddha the following “who” questions: “... who consumes...?” [§3]; “...who touches?” [§4]; “...who feels?” [§5]; “...who craves?” [§6]; and “... who clings?” [§7]. All these questions are pregnant with an implicit self-view: one assumes that there is a *person* involved, without any real knowledge of *what* constitutes a “person.” The Commentary says that Phagguna believed that he understood the three other kinds of food, but as regards consciousness he had conceived the notion that there was a “being” (*satta*) that depends on consciousness as food:

Why does he omit the other three? Because they are more obvious conditions of effects. He could see anyone eating food. He could easily understand contact as food, such as, by looking at a partridge, a quail, a peacock, or a hen, being raised by its mother’s contact. And he sees mental volition as food, as when a turtle lays her eggs in the sand above the highwater mark. (SA 2:29)

He is however unfamiliar with the workings of consciousness, and fall backs on his own opinions.

3 The Buddha’s clarification

3.1 INVALID QUESTIONS. For each of Phagguna’s invalid questions, the Buddha rephrases it. Thus, when Phagguna asks, “Who consumes...?” the Buddha rephrases it as “What is the food that is consciousness for?” (*Kim paccayā nu kho...phasso ti*). The Commentary explains that this means: “For what state (*katamassa dhammassa*) is consciousness as food a condition (*paccaya*)?” According to **Nyanaponika**:

The term *dhamma*, in the sense of an impersonal factor of existence, is here contrasted with the questioner’s assumption of a being or person performing the respective function. By re-formulating the question, the Buddha wants to point out that there is no reason for assuming that the nutrient consciousness “feeds” or conditions any separate person hovering behind it; but that consciousness constitutes just one link in a chain of processes indicated by the Buddha in the following. (1981:45)

Bodhi adds that in the valid question, *Kissa nu kho...viññāṇ’āhāro ti* [§3], the Buddha replaces the personal pronoun *ko*, “fraught with substantialist connotations,” with the impersonal *kissa*, genitive singular of the stem *ki-*,⁸ and also the dative of *ko* (“who”) and *kim* (“what, which”), but the context requires neuter gender.⁹

3.2 BHAVA SUTTA. In connection with consciousness as food, **the Bhava Sutta** (A 3.76) applies another simile, thus,

Karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture...to become established in ⟨a low realm⟩ ⟨a middling realm⟩ ⟨a subtle realm⟩. Thus there is the production of further rebirth.

Kammaṃ khettaṃ viññāṇaṃ bījaṃ taṇhā sineho...⟨hīnāya⟩ ⟨majjhimāya⟩ ⟨paṇitāya⟩ dhātuyā viññāṇaṃ patiṭṭhitaṃ. Evaṃ āyatim punabbhavābhiniṅgati hoti. (A 3.76/1:223 f) = SD 23.13

“This implies,” says **Bodhi**, “that it is the stream of consciousness coming from the preceding existence, at the moment of conception, the initial rebirth-consciousness, which in turn brings forth (or “nourishes”) the concomitant name-and-form.” (S:B 733 n24). As already seen above, **the Bija Sutta** (S 22.54), too, compares consciousness to a seed [1].

⁷ There is another “Moliya,” ie Sīvaka, who wore a similar topknot; cf J 1:65. See **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21) = SD 5.6; also SA 3:81.

⁸ See Geiger, *Pāli Grammar*, §111.1. Bodhi addas that “Although all eds read here *kissa nu kho bhante viññāṇ’āhāro*, the sense seems to require that we add *paccayo* at the end. [SA] glosses: *Bhante ayaṃ viññāṇāhāro katamassa dhammassa paccayo? Paccayo* does in fact occur in the reply.” (S:B 733 n23)

⁹ See S:W 2:9 n2.

3.3 PHAGGUNA’S WRONG VIEWS. The Buddha patiently corrects Phagguna’s wrong views, explaining the dependent arising formula, two limbs (or connections) at a time, until the limb of existence (*bhava*). The Commentary at this point asks,

Why does not the monk continue to ask: ‘Who becomes?’ Because as one holding wrong views, he believes that ‘A being has become, has come to be,’ and the Blessed One’s answer would contradict his belief. Hence, he does not question further. Furthermore, after being contradicted so many times, he is convinced, and the Teacher, too, continued the discourse without a pause to prevent him from asking further invalid questions. The Teacher ends the exposition here, thinking: “However much he questions, he will not be satisfied. He is just asking empty questions.” (SA 2:31)

3.3 DEPENDENT ENDING. The Buddha then continues the teaching with dependent ending, beginning thus: “But, Phagguna, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the sixfold sense-base for contact there is the cessation of contact” [§8]. The Commentary notes,

Here the Teacher takes up that very point from where he started the exposition: “Conditions by the sixfold sense-base, there is contact,” and here he now turns round the exposition (to the dependent ending).

In this discourse, there is one link (of cause and fruit) between consciousness and mind-and-body; one link (of fruit and cause) between feeling and craving, and one link (of cause and fruit) between the process of existence and birth. (SA 2:31)

The Sāmyutta Sub-Commentary adds here that

Since, in the words of the discourse, ‘The food that is consciousness is a condition for the future arising of a renewed existence,’ is taken as a condition in a former existence for a future existence, and as being a principal cause (*mūla, kārana*), therefore the Commentary says that ‘there is a link (of cause and fruit) between consciousness and mind-and-body.’ Hence it should be understood that by the term consciousness, also the ‘kamma-forming consciousness’ (*abhisāṅkhāra, viññāṇa*) is implied” (ie, apart from being resultant rebirth-consciousness). (SAT:Be 2:35)

4 The Kakacūpama Sutta

The Kakacūpama Sutta (M 21) opens with the Buddha admonishing Moliya Phagguna on his excessive socializing with the nuns.¹⁰ The Buddha explains to Phagguna that his attachment to the nuns has made him prone to feeling upset when anyone speaks ill of them. Applying a “graduated scale of ill-treatment” model, the Buddha exhorts him:

Phagguna, if anyone were to speak ill of the nuns...you should abandon any desire based on the household life, or any thought based on the household life...

Phagguna, if anyone were to give you a blow with his hand, with clods of earth, with a rod, or with a knife, you should abandon any desire based on the household life, or any thought based on the household life. And here you should train yourself thus:

“My mind will be unaffected, and I shall utter no evil words; and I shall dwell compassionate for his wellbeing, with a mind of lovingkindness, without inner hate.”

This, Phagguna, is how you should train yourself. (M 21.6/1:123 f)

The graduated scale of ill-treatment is famously found in **the Puṇṇ’ovāda Sutta** (M 145).¹¹ However, it is presented in a more dramatic context of **the Kakacūpama Sutta**, “the Discourse on the Parable of the Saw” (M 21), as we will see below.

¹⁰ M 21.1-6/1:122-124.

¹¹ M 145/3:267-270 ≈ Puṇṇa Sutta (S 35.88/4:60-63) = SD 20.15 Intro (4.2).

Sadly, however, it appears that Phagguna is unmoved by the Buddha's admonition or feels that he has failed in the training; for it is reported that he returns to lay life (S 12.32/2:50).¹² In the **Kaḷāra Sutta** (S 12.32) the kshatriya Kaḷāra reports to Sāriputta that Moliya Phagguna has returned to the lay life.

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The Discourse to Moliya Phagguna

(S 12.12/2:12-14)

1 [The Blessed One] was residing at Sāvathī... [13]

The 4 kinds of food

2 ¹³“Bhikshus, there are these four kinds of food [nutriment] for the maintenance of beings that have arisen, and for the support of those seeking birth.

What are the four?

- | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| (1) material food | (<i>kabaḷīṅkāra āhāra</i>), | gross or subtle; |
| (2) contact | (<i>phassa</i>) | is the second; |
| (3) mental volition | (<i>mano,sañcetanā</i>) | is the third; and |
| (4) consciousness | (<i>viññāṇa</i>) | is the fourth. |

These, bhikshus, are these four kinds of food [nutriment] for the maintenance of beings that have arisen, and for the support of those seeking birth.”¹⁴

Consciousness

3 When this was spoken, the elder Moliya Phagguna¹⁵ said this to the Blessed One:

“Now, bhante, *who* consumes (*ko āhāreti*) the ‘food that is consciousness?’”¹⁶

“The question is not valid [wrongly put],” said the Blessed One, “I do not say that ‘One consumes.’”¹⁷ If I had said, ‘One consumes,’ then it would be valid to ask, ‘Bhante, who consumes?’

But I did not speak thus. Since I did not speak thus, if one should ask me,

“Now, bhante, what is the “food that is consciousness” for?”¹⁸—this would be a valid question.

And the answer to this valid question is:

“The “food that is consciousness” is a condition for the re-arising of future rebirth.¹⁹ When that being is, the sixfold sense-base is.²⁰ With the sixfold sense-base as condition, there is contact.”

¹² For another case where the Buddha give teachings even though his audience is not converted, see **Udumbarīkā Sihanāda S** (D 25/3:36-57) = SD 1.4.

¹³ This whole section is stock: see **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38.15/1:261 = SD 7.10) & also in **Āhāra S** (S 12.11/2:11 = SD 12.11). On *sambhavesī*, see **Putta,maṁsa S** (S 12.63.2) = SD 20.6 n ad loc; as “intermediate beings,” see “Beings seeking birth” = SD 2.16(7).

¹⁴ Comy: The Blessed One stops the teaching at this point because he knows that there is an opinionated person (*diṭṭhi, gatika*) in the gathering, and he wants to give him an opportunity to ask his questions. (SA 2:29)

¹⁵ On Moliya Phagguna, see Intro (2).

¹⁶ *Ko nu kho bhante viññāṇ’āhāraṁ āhāreti*. Phagguna clearly believes that there is a “being” (*satta*) that depends on consciousness as food: see Intro (2-3).

¹⁷ *Āhāretī ti ahaṁ na vadāmi*. Comy: “I do not say that there is any being or person that consumes (or eats).” SA 2:31)

¹⁸ *Kissa nu kho bhante viññāṇ’āhāro ti*. Comy: This means: “For what state (*katamassa dhammassa*) is consciousness as food a condition (*paccaya*)?” See Intro (4).

Contact

4 “Now, bhante, *who* touches [feels the contact] (*ko phusati*)?”

“The question is not valid [wrongly put],” said the Blessed One, “I do not say that ‘One touches.’ If I had said, ‘One touches,’ then it would be valid to ask, ‘Bhante, who touches?’

But I did not speak thus. Since I did not speak thus, if one should ask me,

‘Bhante, with what as condition is there contact?’²¹—this would be a valid question.

And the answer to this valid question is:

‘With the sixfold sense-base as condition, there is contact.’²² With contact as condition, there is feeling.’²³

Feeling

5 “Now, bhante, *who* feels (*ko vediyati*)²⁴?”

“The question is not valid [wrongly put],” said the Blessed One, “I do not say that ‘One feels.’ If I had said, ‘One feels,’ then it would be valid to ask, ‘Bhante, who feels?’

But I did not speak thus. Since I did not speak thus, if one should ask me,

‘Now, bhante, with what as condition is there feeling?’²⁵—this would be a valid question.

And the answer to this valid question is:

‘With the contact as condition, there is feeling.’²⁶ With feeling as condition, there is craving.’²⁷

Craving

6 “Now, bhante, *who* craves (*ko taṃhīyati*)²⁸?”

“The question is not valid [wrongly put],” said the Blessed One, “I do not say that ‘One craves.’ [14] If I had said, ‘One craves,’ then it would be valid to ask, ‘Bhante, who craves?’

But I did not speak thus. Since I did not speak thus, if one should ask me,

‘Now, bhante, with what as condition is there craving?’²⁹—this would be a valid question.

And the answer to this valid question is:

‘With the feeling as condition, there is craving.’³⁰ With craving as condition, there is clinging.’³¹

Clinging

7 ³²“Now, bhante, *who* clings (*ko upādiyati*)³³?”

¹⁹ *Viññāṇ’āhāro āyatim punabbhavābhiniḃbattiyā paccayo*. “Consciousness as food” here, as such, is the rebirth-consciousness: “This is the name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) conascent with that very (rebirth-)consciousness.” SA 2:31). This refers to the 3rd link of dependent arising: “With (rebirth-)consciousness as condition, name-and-form arises” (*viññāṇa, paccayā nāma, rūpam*). See Intro (5).

²⁰ *Tasmim bhūte sati saḷāyatanam*. Comy: When that name-and-form called “the arising of rebirth” is produced, when it is, there is the sixfold sense-base. SA 2:31). Bodhi: “The conjunction *bhūte sati* is unusual and the redundancy can only be avoided if the past participle *bhūte* is here understood to function as a noun denoting the being that has come to be. (S:B 733 n25)

²¹ *Kim paccayā nu kho, bhante, phasso’ti*. Comy: “The Blessed One said this to give the monk an opportunity for a further question.” SA 2:31)

²² *Salāyatana, paccayā phasso*.

²³ *Phassa, paccayā vedanā*.

²⁴ Ce Ee Ke: *vediyati*; Be: *vedayati*.

²⁵ *Kim paccayā nu kho, bhante, vedanā’ti*.

²⁶ *Phassa, paccayā vedanā*.

²⁷ *Vedanā, paccayā taṃhā*.

²⁸ Be Ee: *tasati*; Ce Ke Se: *taṃhīyati*.

²⁹ *Kim paccayā nu kho, bhante, taṃhā’ti*.

³⁰ *Vedanā, paccayā taṃhā*.

³¹ *Taṃhā, paccayā upādānā*.

³² This passage is abridged in Bodhi’s S:B tr,

“The question is not valid [wrongly put],” said the Blessed One, “I do not say that ‘One clings.’ If I had said, ‘One clings,’ then it would be valid to ask, ‘Bhante, who clings?’

But I did not speak thus. Since I did not speak thus, if one should ask me,

‘Now, bhante, with what as condition is there clinging?’³⁴—this would be a valid question.

Dependent arising (continues)

And the answer to this valid question is:

‘With the craving as condition,	there is clinging. ³⁵
With clinging as condition,	there is existence. ³⁶
With existence as condition,	there is birth.
With birth as condition,	decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair arise.

Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.³⁷

Dependent ending

8 But, Phagguna, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the sixfold sense-base for contact,	there is the cessation of contact; ³⁸
with the cessation of contact,	there is the cessation of feeling;
with the cessation of feeling,	there is the cessation of craving;
with the cessation of craving,	there is the cessation of clinging;
with the cessation of clinging,	there is the cessation of existence;
with the cessation of existence,	there is the cessation of birth;
with the cessation of birth,	decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair cease.

Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”

— evaṃ —

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³³ *Upādiyati*.

³⁴ *Kim paccayā nu kho, bhante, upādānan ‘ti*.

³⁵ *Taṇhā, paccayā upādānam*.

³⁶ *Upādāna, paccayā bhavo*.

³⁷ Comy: “Why does not the monk continue to ask: ‘Who becomes?’ See Intro (6).

³⁸ The dependent ending begins here: see Intro (7).