

## Upanisā Sutta

### The Discourse on Immediate Causes

[The transcendental dependent arising]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23/2:29-32)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

#### Introduction

##### 1 Upanisā

There are three texts entitled “Upanisā Sutta,” namely, our Sutta here, and two identical texts from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, dealing with how the evil destroy the possibilities of all high attainments, but not so for the righteous (A 11.3-4/5:313 f, 5:315 f). The first of these two Aṅguttara texts we shall call **the (Dussīla) Upanisā Sutta**<sup>1</sup> and the second, attributed to Sāriputta, we shall call **the (Sāriputta) Upanisā Sutta**.<sup>2</sup> The term *upanisā* is also found in **the Sambodha, pakkhika Dhamma Sutta** (A 9.1), where five “proximate causes” for the limbs of awakening to arise.<sup>3</sup>

The Pali dictionaries define *upanisā* as follows (these excerpts have been abridged and adapted):

##### *The Critical Pali Dictionary:*

**upa-ni-sā**, f. [Skt, BHS *upaniṣad*]; in Pāli a semantic blend has taken place with *upanisaya*, the contracted form of which could be \**upanissā* (cf Ke Se reading at B 20.6, sv *upanisādin*); — **1.** sitting down near a teacher to listen respectfully and attentively to his words, attention (cf *upanisīdati* [A 4:387,21] and *sa-*; Comys usually explain by words for “cause”); **2.** cause, condition, basis, prerequisite (cf Geiger, S tr 2:43); **3.** likeness (cf BHSD *upaniṣad*); **4.** Proper name of various suttas; Sadd 384,15; 385,11; Abhp 1125. ... — **2.** *kā...khaye ñāṇassa...vimuttiyā...~ā*, S 2:30,3-31,24; *sambodha-pakkhikānaṃ...dhammānaṃ kā ~ā bhāvanāya*, A 4:351,12 (= *ko upanissaya-paccayo*, AA; *kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ...kā ~ā savanāya*, Sn 140,5 (= *kāraṇaṃ, payojanaṃ*, SnA).

##### *A Dictionary of Pali (Cone)*

**upanisā**, f. [Skt *upaniṣad*, BHS also *upaniṣā*]...**2.** cause, basis, condition, prerequisite; Abhp 1125; S 3:30, 3 (*kā ca bhikkhave khaye ñāṇassa ~ā vimuttī 'ssa vacanīyaṃ*); A 4:351,12 (*sambodha, pakkhikānaṃ āvuso dhammānaṃ kā ~ā bhāvanāya ti*; AA 4:162,7: *kā ~ā ti ko upanissaya, paccayo*); Sn p 140,5 (*kā ~ā savanāyā ti*); Peṭk 146,7 (*tassa samudāgamassa ayaṃ ~ā*, Be Ce so; Ee wr *upanissā*); Sadd 385,11 (*upanisīdati phalam etthā ti ~ā kāraṇaṃ*);...

##### *Bhikkhu Bodhi's note*

[SA] glosses *sa-upanisā* as *sa, kāraṇa, sa-p, paccaya*, “with cause, with condition.” [SAṬ] adds: *upanisīdati phalam etthā ti kāraṇa upanisā*, “the cause is called the proximate cause because the effect rests upon it.” Thus the commentators take *upanisā* to be the equivalent of Skt *upaniṣad*, not a contraction of *upanissaya*. Although, as CPD points out, “a semantic blend” with the latter takes place, the two words must be kept distinct because not everything that is an *upanisā* (proximate cause) for other things is an *upanissaya, paccaya* (decisive support condition) for those things. The latter refers solely to something which plays a strong causal role. (S:B 746 n68)

<sup>1</sup> A 11.3/5:313 f.

<sup>2</sup> A 11.4/5:315 f.

<sup>3</sup> A 9.1/3:351-353.

In the context of our Sutta, since *upanisā* refers to the way one factor immediately effects the next (or proximate) factor, the best translation for it, as such, is “proximate cause,” “immediate condition” or “proximate condition,” or “immediate cause.”

## 2 Dependent arising

The Upanisā Sutta belongs to the famous family of suttas dealing with dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*).<sup>4</sup> This teaching shows the causal sequence of how suffering arises (forward sequence, *anuloma*) and how suffering ceases (reverse sequence, *paṭiloma*). Our sutta makes use of the classic 12-link dependent arising, but with an interesting difference. It replaces the usual “decay-and-death” (*jarā, maraṇa*) with **suffering** (*dukkha*) [§15] as the last member of the series, and which then heads the series in the second sequence, leading up to **faith** (*saddhā*). The series then proceeds through the retrospective knowledge of liberation, confirming the destruction of the mental defilements.

By linking the two series into a single sequence, the Sutta shows one’s entire worldly cycle as well as one’s spiritual ascent and liberation. Both these cycles—the mundane and the supramundane—reflect one’s involvement with the world and one’s engagement with the spiritual life, and they are both governed by a single principle: dependent arising. So vital is this second application that **the Netti-p, pakaraṇa**, a Pali work on exegesis, has called it the “**transcendental dependent arising**” (*lokuttara paṭicca, samuppāda*).

While suttas on dependent arising as a rule deal with the mundane path, that is, the arising of suffering (or the second noble truth), and the ending of suffering (or the third noble truth), in this latter case, simply by reversing the sequence, the Upanisā Sutta is unique in that it gives a positive account of the latter process of spiritual ascent. [Diag 2]

**Bhikkhu Bodhi** has written a short but useful and readable essay on the Upanisā Sutta, entitled *Transcendental Dependent Arising* (1980)<sup>5</sup> which should be read along with this study.

## 3 Related suttas

The opening paragraphs of the Upanisā Sutta [§§1-3] are also found in **the Vāsi, jāta Sutta** (S 22.-101),<sup>6</sup> but with a different sequel. Section 3 of our Sutta also contains the stock meditation formula on the five aggregates, found in a number of other suttas<sup>7</sup> and in the two Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas.<sup>8</sup>

The point that faith arises through suffering [§15] should be studied with **the Pubba, koṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44),<sup>9</sup> especially the discussion on “Faith” in the Introduction to the Sutta Discovery text.

The simile of the rain [§27] is well known and is applied in different ways in other suttas. The simile has a sutta of its own, **the Vassa Sutta** (S 5:396), illustrating the nature of the four limbs of stream-winning (*sotāpatti-y-āṅga*):<sup>10</sup>

Even so, monks, for the noble disciple these things—wise faith<sup>11</sup> in the Buddha, wise faith in the Dharma, wise faith in the Sangha, and the virtues dear to the noble ones<sup>12</sup>—flow onwards and, having gone beyond, they lead to the destruction of the cankers.<sup>13</sup> (S 55.38/5:396)

<sup>4</sup> See (**Kāya**) **Na Tumha S** (S 12.37), (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2), **Dependent Arising** (essay), and **Mahā Nidāna S** (M 15) = SD 5.14-17 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Accessible at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/bps/wheels/wheel277.html>.

<sup>6</sup> S 22.101.1-4/3:152 f, “The Adze Handle” Discourse; also called **Nāva S** (The Ship); Se *Vāsiṭṭha S*.

<sup>7</sup> For example, **Upanisā S** (S 12.23.3/2:29), **Sīha S** (S 22.78.7/3:85), **Khemaka S** (S 22.89.23/3:130 f), **Vāsi, jāta S** (S 22.101.4/3:152 f).

<sup>8</sup> D 22.14/2:301,29-302,13; M 10.38/1:61,3-8.

<sup>9</sup> S 48.44/5:220-222 = SD 10.7 Introd (1) (2005). See also **Āpaṇa S** (S 48.50) = SD 10.4(2.3) & diagram 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Sotāpatti-y-āṅgāni*, alt tr “limbs of streamwinning” (D 33.1.11(13)/3:227; Pm 2:189 f). These are preliminary practices that lead to the attainment of streamwinning. In **Paññā, vuḍḍhi S** (A 5.246) these same 4 qualities are called *vuḍḍhi, dhamma*, “virtues conducive to growth” (A 5.246/2:245); cf the 5 Factors of Noble Growth (*ariya, vuḍḍhi*), A 3:80. See SD 3.3(3) (2003). Cf *sotāpannassa āṅgāni* in **Pañca, bhera, bhaya S** (S 12.41/2:68-70) = SD 3.3.4(2).

**The Parisā Sutta** (A 3.93) uses the rain simile to show how spiritual friendship builds up positive qualities leading to mental concentration:

Even so, monks, when the monks dwell together in concord, in mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, looking at each other with kindly eyes.<sup>14</sup>

At such time they generate much merit. At such time they dwell in the divine life, that is to say, in they rejoice in the liberation of mind.<sup>15</sup> On account of joy, zest is born. On account of zest, the body becomes tranquil. The tranquil body feels joy [happiness]. The joyful mind becomes concentrated. (A 3.93.5/1:243)

**The Avijjā Sutta** (A 10.61) applies a causal scheme similar to the Upanisā Sutta to show how ignorance beginning with not association with “true persons” (*sappurisā*). The simile of the rain of the Avijjā Sutta is used in a negative sense to show how this lack of wisdom builds up (A 10.61.3/ 5:114).

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<sup>11</sup> “Faith,” *saddhā*. There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) “rootless faith” (*amūlaka,saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith. (M 2:170); (2) “faith with a good cause” (*ākāravati,saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320,8 401,23); also called *avecca-p,pasāda* (S 12.41.11/2:69). “Wise faith” is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = “not seen, not heard, not suspected” (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). **Gethin** speaks of two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective (eg ERE: Faith & Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387): “Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody...the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary.” (Gethin 2001:207; my emphases).

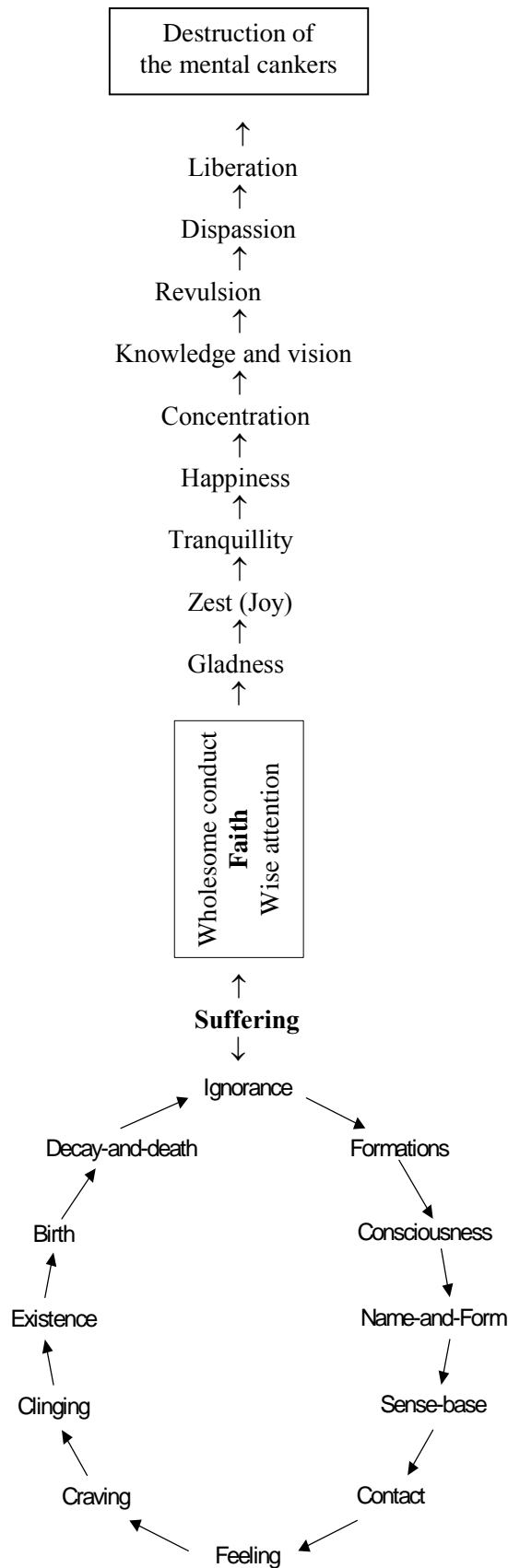
<sup>12</sup> “Virtues dear to the noble ones,” *ariya,kantāni sīlāni*. The virtues of the noble one are explained at Vism 221 f. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the Five Precepts; hence, these virtues are dear to them (SA 2:74).

<sup>13</sup> “Mental cankers,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (“deadly taints”, RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the canker of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of three cankers (omitting the canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

<sup>14</sup> King Pasenadi uses similar words in praise of the Sangha in **Dhamma,cetiya S** (M 89.11/2:120 f). This is stock: M 1:206, 398, 3:156; A 1:70, 3:67, 104; S 4:225.

<sup>15</sup> “The liberation of mind,” *ceto,vimutti*. Here used in a restricted sense, referring to the temporary suppression of the 5 mental hindrances: sensual lust, ill will, restlessness and worry, sloth and torpor, and spiritual doubt. The mind here is usually applied to the cultivation of the four divine abodes (*brahma,vihāra*), ie, lovingkindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity.

**Diagram 2**  
Transcendental dependent arising



[Source: Payutto, 1994:97]

## The Discourse on Immediate Causes

(S 12.23/2:29-32)

[29]

1 (The Buddha was) dwelling at Savatthi.

### The five aggregates

2 “Monks, the destruction of the cankers (*āsava*) is for one who knows and sees, I say, not for one who does not know and does not see.

3 For one who knows what and sees what is there the destruction of cankers?

‘Such is form, such its arising, such its passing away.

Such is feeling, such its arising, such its passing away.

Such is perception, such its arising, such its passing away.

Such are formations, such their arising, such their passing away.

Such is consciousness, such its arising, such its passing away.’

—The destruction of the cankers is for one who knows in this way and sees in this way. [2:30]

4 “The knowledge of destruction in regards to the destruction [of the cankers]<sup>16</sup> has an immediate cause,<sup>17</sup> I say. It is not without an immediate cause.

### The supramundane or spiritual cycle

5 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for **the knowledge of the destruction [of the cankers]**?<sup>18</sup>

It is **liberation** (*vimutti*), I say.<sup>19</sup>

6 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for liberation?

It is **dispassion** (*virāga*), monks, I say.

7 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for dispassion?

It is **revulsion [disenchantment]** (*nibbidā*), monks, I say.

8 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for revulsion?

It is **the knowledge and vision of reality** (*yathā, bhūta, ñāna, dassana*), monks, I say.

9 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for the knowledge and vision of reality?

It is **concentration** (*samādhi*), monks, I say.

10 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for concentration?

It is **happiness** (*sukha*), monks, I say.

11 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for joy?

It is **tranquillity** (*passaddhi*), monks, I say.

12 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for tranquillity?

It is **zest** (*pīti*), monks, I say.

13 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for zest?

It is **joy [gladness]** (*pāmojja*), monks, I say.

14 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for gladness?

It is **faith** (*saddhā*), monks, I say. [31]

<sup>16</sup> “The knowledge of destruction in regards to the destruction” (*khayasmiṃ khaye ñāṇaṃ*) is review knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa, ñāṇa*), which occurs at the time of the destruction of the cankers, ie arhathood: see Vism 22.19-21/676 & S:B 433 n376.

<sup>17</sup> “Immediate cause,” *upanisā*, alt tr “proximate cause.” See Intro (1).

<sup>18</sup> For a diagram of the foll sequences, see SD 5.16 (18C): Diag 6.

<sup>19</sup> Comy: Having brought the teaching to its climax in arhathood, the Buddha next shows the preliminary practice that the arhat has taken.

The mundane or worldly cycle

15 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for faith?

It is **suffering** (*dukkha*), monks, I say.<sup>20</sup>

16 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for suffering?

It is **birth** (*jāti*), monks, I say.

17 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for birth?

It is **existence** (*bhava*), monks, I say.

18 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for existence?

It is **clinging** (*upādāna*), monks, I say.

19 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for clinging?

It is **craving** (*taṇhā*), monks, I say.

20 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for craving?

It is **feeling** (*vedanā*), monks, I say.

21 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for feeling?

It is **contact** (*phassa*), monks, I say.

22 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for contact?

It is **the six sense-bases** (*saḷāyatana*), monks, I say.

23 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for the six sense-bases?

It is **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*), monks, I say.

24 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for name-and-form?

It is **consciousness** (*viññāna*), monks, I say.

25 And what, monks, is the immediate cause for consciousness?

It is **formations** (*saṅkhāra*), monks, I say. Formations have their immediate cause, I say. They are not without an immediate cause.

26 And what is their immediate cause? It is **ignorance**, monks, I say.

The mundane cycle

Thus ignorance	is the immediate cause of formations,
formations	is the immediate cause of consciousness,
consciousness	is the immediate cause of name-and-form,
name-and-form	is the immediate cause of the six sense-bases,
the six sense-bases	are the immediate cause of contact,
contact	is the immediate cause of feeling,
feeling	is the immediate cause of craving,
craving	is the immediate cause of clinging,
clinging	is the immediate cause of existence,
existence	is the immediate cause of birth,
birth	is the immediate cause suffering,

<sup>20</sup> Comy glosses the terms in the above sequence thus (starting from the end): *Suffering* is the suffering of the round (*vaṭṭa,dukkha*). *Faith* (*saddhā*) is repeatedly arising faith (*aparāparam uppajjana,saddhā*; ie tentative faith, not the unwavering faith of a noble disciple). *Joy* (*pāmojja*) is weak zest. *Zest* (*pīti*) itself is strong zest. *Tranquillity* (*passaddhi*) is the settling of distress, a condition for the happiness preliminary to dhyana. *Joy* (*sukha*) is the happiness in the preliminary phase of dhyana. *Concentration* (*samādhi*) is the dhyana used as a basis (for insight: *pādaka-jjhāna,samādhi*). *Knowledge and vision of reality* (*yathā,bhūta,ñāna,dassana*) is weak insight, namely, the knowledges of the discernment of formations, of the overcoming of doubt, of examining (of the 3 characteristics) (*sammasana*), and of what is and what is not the path [Vism ch 18-20]. *Revulsion* (*nibbidā*) is strong insight, namely, the knowledge of appearance as fearful, the contemplation of danger (of evil), of reflection, and of equanimity regarding formations [Vism 21.29-66/645-647]. *Dispassion* (*virāga*) is the path that arises, destroying defilements. (SA 2:53 f). Here I have followed Bhikkhu Bodhi's sequence rather than Comy's reverse sequence.

suffering is the immediate cause of faith,

The spiritual or supramundane cycle

faith	is the immediate cause of joy,
joy	is the immediate cause of zest,
zest	is the immediate cause tranquillity,
tranquillity	is the immediate cause of happiness,
happiness	is the immediate cause of concentration,
concentration	is the immediate cause of knowledge and vision of things as they really are,
knowledge and vision of things as they really are	is the immediate cause of revulsion,
revulsion	is the immediate cause of dispassion,
dispassion	is the immediate cause of liberation,
liberation	is the immediate cause of the knowledge of the destruction [of the cankers].

**27** Just as when the rain falls heavily on the mountain-tops: The water flowing down along the slopes, fills the mountain clefts, gullies and streams. When the mountain clefts, gullies and streams are full, they fill ponds.

When the ponds are full, they fill the lakes. When the lakes are full, they fill the rivulets. When the rivulets are full, they fill the rivers. When the rivers are full, they fill the great ocean.<sup>21</sup> **[32]**

**28** In the same way, monks,

ignorance	is the immediate cause of formations,
formations	is the immediate cause of consciousness,
consciousness	is the immediate cause of name-and-form,
name-and-form	is the immediate cause of the six sense-base,
the six sense-bases	are the immediate cause of contact,
contact	is the immediate cause of feeling,
feeling	is the immediate cause of craving,
craving	is the immediate cause of clinging,
clinging	is the immediate cause of existence,
existence	is the immediate cause of birth,
birth	is the immediate cause suffering,
suffering	is the immediate cause of faith,
faith	is the immediate cause of joy,
joy	is the immediate cause of zest,
zest	is the immediate cause tranquillity,
tranquillity	is the immediate cause of happiness,
happiness	is the immediate cause of concentration,
concentration	is the immediate cause of knowledge and vision of things as they really are,
knowledge and vision of things as they really are	is the immediate cause of revulsion,
revulsion	is the immediate cause of dispassion,
dispassion	is the immediate cause of liberation,
liberation	is the immediate cause of the knowledge of the destruction [of the cankers].

— evam —

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<sup>21</sup> This whole simile appears in **Vassa S** (S 55.38) & the *Anguttara*: see *Introd* (3) above.

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