

Fetus in the Buddha's  
**Conditioned Co-origination**  
*(paṭīccasamuppāda)*  
**Formula?**

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### 1. An Introductory Word

In the *Mahanidana Sutta*<sup>1</sup>, the Buddha outlines the Conditioned Co-origination (*paṭīcca samuppāda*) in nine links. Declaring “Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering” in the *Nidanasamyutta*<sup>2</sup>, this conditionality is shown in twelve links, adding three more (see 1, 2 & 5 below).

The prevailing view regards the series as spanning three successive lives. This, of course, is on the basis of the reality of rebirth<sup>3</sup>, which as I have shown elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, serves as the very empirical basis for the Four Noble Truths.

While the conditionality has its down-to-earth praxic applications to the life of an individual in a given lifetime, the Buddha's message, of course, is that it goes beyond that, and relates to existence<sup>5</sup> itself, relating to all and any time, without beginning or end, in relation to the repeated round of the birth-death cycle. It is indeed, as characterized by the American scholar Joanna Macy (1992), “The Dharma of Natural Systems”<sup>6</sup>.

The Conditioned Co-origination relationship is deep and complex<sup>7</sup>, and this paper does not pretend to provide an understanding of its intricacies. Our effort is merely to take a rather unconventional perspective of the Formula, as relating to not three lives, but to a single life of a human being. And this is by explicating it at a very rudimentary level, to help the uninitiated reader get a glimpse into the Formula as a sort of ‘short catechism’ “intended to elicit the condition for each dependent factor in the series”<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Conditioned Co-origination Formula Outlined

Basically, each link of the Formula reads something like, “conditioned by A is B”. That is to say that the absence of A is the condition for the absence of B. Since birth is the condition for decay and death – no debate about that, is there now, cut off birth, and there would be no suffering, decay or death. Neat logic, isn’t it? Cutting off birth, of course, is to attain *Nibbāna*, a characterization of it being ‘unborn’<sup>9</sup>.

To begin the cycle, then, we have 1. literally ‘Non-knowing<sup>10</sup> [of reality]’, but *a.t.a.* (also translated as) ‘Ignorance’, serving as a condition for ‘Forces’ (*a.t.a.* ‘Volitional formations’). These are the physical, psychological and verbal ones lodged in our minds, but dead wrong because of our Ignorance, such ignorance being in relation to the Four Noble Truths.

Next, 2. Conditioned by ‘Forces’ is ‘Consciousness’. To make for easy reading, let’s list the rest:

3. Consciousness > mindbody;

Here, the wedge (>) is to be read as ‘conditioned by’ the item at the left of the item to the right. Thus, beginning with the wedge, and looking to the left, ‘Conditioned by Consciousness is Mindbody’.

- 4. Mindbody > Six Sense-bases (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind);
- 5. Six Sense-bases > Contact;
- 6. Contact > Sensation;
- 7. Sensation > Thirst;
- 8. Thirst > Clinging;
- 9. Clinging > Existence;
- 10. Existence > Birth;
- 11. Birth > Ageing and Death;
- 12. Ageing and Death > Sorrow, lamentation, suffering, displeasure, despair<sup>11</sup>.

So beginning with 4 (*Mindbody*), we could say that our having a mindbody means having a *Consciousness* (3). It also means we have the *Six sense bases* (5). Taking the eye-sense, e.g., seeing a beautiful thing, i.e., making *Contact* (6), or, say, getting money into our hands, there’s excitement in us: (7) *Sensation*. Next we *Thirst* for it (8), meaning, come to

love it. Your salary goes up, but *Clinging* (9) setting in, you decide, “Not enough”. Seen any strike action lately? ‘Social drinking’ ending up ‘habitual drinking / addiction’? How about Wall Street entrepreneurs lining their pockets? The process finally peaks into a ‘*Existence*’ (10) (see later for an exploration of this).

So far so good. We can understand all this as relating to *living* human beings. But then, when we come to *Birth* (11) and *Death* (12), we begin to wonder. If up to now there was a living being, getting drunk, greedy and acting in ignorance, why ‘birth’ at this point in the chain? The being is already born! So then we begin to wonder if 11 and 12 perchance refer to another life, not this.

Then there is also at the beginning, Ignorance (1) and Forces (2), from an earlier life. So, three lives, as is the general understanding of the Formula<sup>12</sup>?

Further, following 12 are *sorrow, suffering, lamentation*, etc. We are into even more confusion since they are **not** the experiences of the person who has died but of those of us still around. Yet another life?

### 3. Conditioned Co-origination as Relating to three Lifetimes

Let’s then first get an understanding of the prevailing 3-lifetime view. Drawn upon the *Abhidhamma*<sup>13</sup> interpretation, links 1-2 relate to a past lifetime, 3 to 10 to a second, and 11 to 12 to a third, in terms of *causal* and *resultant* phases:

- Ignorance (1) and Forces (2) serve as the *causal phase* of conditionality, based in a *past* life.
- Consciousness (3) > Mindbody > Six Sense-bases > Contact > Sensation (7) are then seen as the *resultant phase* in a *present* life.
- Sensation (*a.t.a.* Feelings) leads to Thirst, and in turn to Clinging, serving as a condition for Existence. Still in the present life, it serves as the next *causal* phase.
- Birth > Ageing and Death are its *resultant* phase, but now in a *future* life.

In this scenario, the process can be set to begin with ‘Exit consciousness’<sup>14</sup> at the point of Death. Of the three terms for Consciousness<sup>15</sup>, the one used here is *citta*. And if its cognate *citra*, as adjective, comes to your mind, you’re on the right track: ‘beautiful’, ‘tasty’, ‘spiced’, etc.. Or, as noun,

‘painting’, with its associations of (as also in Sanskrit, and contemporary Sinhala) ‘art’, ‘palette’, etc. These, then, are the colours, paint and taints of ignorance / non-knowing, metaphorically but also literally speaking, settled on to the palette of our own ‘Exit consciousness’ that takes leave of the mindbody at the point of death.

So now we begin with link 1: conditioned by *Ignorance* are the *Forces*. The Ignorance here, of course, is that contained in the ‘Exit-consciousness’ given that we’re all, until becoming an Arhant, deranged<sup>16</sup>. This, then, generates the Forces, like currents in a *stream*, consciousness also called so<sup>17</sup>.

Thus it is that we have the second link, 2. Conditioned by ‘Forces’ is *Consciousness* (3), the synonym opted for in this context being *viññāṇa*. As in the Commentaries, we may understand this as referring to ‘*Relinking consciousness*’<sup>18</sup>, now beginning the **new** life. So it is the *first* step of a second life.

Consciousness, of course, can’t be in a vacuum. It has to be housed in a mindbody. So we have, 3. *Consciousness* > *Mindbody* (4). Following it are the *Six Sense-bases* > *Contact* > *Sensation* > *Thirst* > *Clinging* > *Existence*.

In the prevailing view, Existence marks the end of the present life. This may possibly be on the same basis as Forces which is taken to be a terminal point even without a physical manifestation. So considering Existence as the terminal point of the present life on the analogy of Forces may be seen as an attempt to explain away the next conditioned step, namely Birth.

*Birth* and *Death*, then, serve as the third lifetime.

#### **4. Fetal Life of a Single life as Basis for All 12 Links**

Let us now try to understand the conditionality entailed in the Formula in terms of a temporally progressive chain of cause and effect, even as we understand it to be more than that<sup>19</sup>. And that is to talk about it in relation to a *hypothetical*, ‘first lifetime’<sup>20</sup> - shh, moot point<sup>21</sup>, of a given individual as a human being<sup>22</sup>.

In the context of a *first-time* life<sup>23</sup>, then, we may identify the *source* of Ignorance and Forces, conditioning a new offspring, as being, not past life, but none other than the *parents* themselves!

*Ignorance* of each parent, from a Buddhist perspective, of course, would be, as noted, in relation to the Four Noble Truths. That is, like the rest of us 'commonfolk'<sup>24</sup>, not wanting to face the reality of *dukkha*, or take seriously enough the need for or the possibility of liberation from it all that comes with *Nibbāna*. Had there been no Ignorance in these two parents, they would've been, of course, Arhants - ones with defilements cut off<sup>25</sup>. Since, by definition, the very fact of producing an offspring establishes they're, like all of us, steeped in 'sense-thirst'<sup>26</sup>, there can be said to be Ignorance on the part of each of the parents. And it is this Ignorance that comes to be passed on to the offspring that would result from their union.

Conditioned by *Ignorance* are the *Forces*, goes the first link. And they are here aplenty indeed! First and foremost, of course, is the parental body-generated force, sexual union itself being the high point. Then there are the standard sense-thirsts, through their six senses. Finally, the forces generated by word, given that there would have been talk of having a child, language being preceded by the psychological process of conceptualization. Mind, body or word, they generate *kamma*<sup>27</sup>. Thus, we may talk of Forces as being *kammic*.

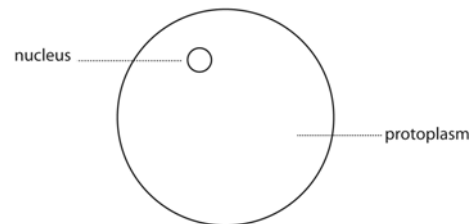
Quite independent of the personally generated 'Forces', there's also, as we may draw upon western science, the evolutionary force for the continuity of the species, which, by definition, goes counter to the process of leading towards the state of the 'unborn', i.e., *Nibbāna*.

Conditioned by parental and evolutionary *Forces*, themselves conditioned by Ignorance (link 1), then, is *Consciousness* (link 3) of a new life generated. While in the standard understanding this would be *Relinking consciousness* of one already in *samsara*, here it would simply be '**Linking** consciousness'.

By 'linking' can be understood the multiple cybernetic interactions between the mom-DNA and dad-DNA that take place following the impregnation of the egg by the sperm, setting off the fertilization process, the egg and the cell then traveling through the fallopian tube for the few days before the first cell comes to be. The process could even be called, in a tongue in cheek twist, 're-linking', meaning 'again and again', the twin DNA experimentally and experientially trying to figure out which of the traits of each of them (mom and dad) should the offspring come to have. It is the

outcome of this (re)linking process, then, that can be said to be the Consciousness conditioned by Ignorance and Forces.

We then invite you to join me to see the *Mindbody* (4), I mean the *first cell*, that results from the union, conditioned by *Consciousness* (3):



**Diagram 1: Basic Cell showing its Parts**

In the above figure, there is a 'nucleus' at the top centre, with a cell wall around it. We may then consider the cell nucleus the 'mind', since it carries all the genetic information needed for its growth into a full-blown human being. The cell wall, of course, is the 'body'. So, here, dear reader, again, is your first mindbody of a first-lifetime<sup>28</sup>!

But, just as we have three square meals a day in order to keep our mindbody going, so our tiny, invisible to the naked eye, first mindbody, can be expected to starve to death if it's not fed. Uh oh, minor problem. It has no mouth. But worry not. Let us note that the cell wall at least comes into *contact* with the mother. Now there's a term. *Contact*, which the Buddha says is one of four kinds of food, for both those that are already born as well as 'those that are coming to be'<sup>29</sup>. 'Contact food'<sup>30</sup>. There's the contact through the umbilical chord, and with the amniotic fluid in the sac. There is also 'consciousness food', from the consciousness itself. Then there is the 'mind-volitional food' generated by ignorance, inherited from the parents, but now part of the new sentience.

While we shall not get into any complex details here, the brief characterization above, I believe, is sufficient to establish how the first cell formed at conception can justifiably be called a 'mindbody'. The mindbody, of course, is nothing but an estimated several billion to trillion such cells, each with a nucleus, carrying vital psychopraxic information (i.e., relating to thought and action).

This *Mindbody*, at this point in time, of course, is ‘born of mother and father’<sup>31</sup>. But s/he<sup>32</sup> is yet to be “complete in all limbs and faculties” (see footnote above). It cannot e.g., get drunk, greed, compose this page, etc. But soon we begin to see the initial physical signs of a being that is going to be able to do all of the above and more.

The first cell divvying itself up - 2, 4, 8, 16... etc., over time, there begin to appear the organs - body, nose, tongue and ears, with eyes last. This includes the mindsense that precedes the physical organs, remembering that *Consciousness* is the first link. Mind is the forerunner, as in the *Dhammapada*<sup>33</sup>. Thus we have 4. *Mindbody* < *Six Sense-bases* (5), the third addition in the *Samyutta* version.

Senses condition, again, *Contact* (6), which brings *Sensations* (7) – the warmth in the womb - “oh, but it’s cramped in here”; “I’m hungry”, etc. The growing life begins to not only thirst for food, but also a ‘*Thirst*’ (8) to grow – a variation of *bhava tanhā*, one of the three thirsts sentient beings live on<sup>34</sup>. Getting what s/he wants, growing now comes to be her/his agenda (*Clinging*) (9). (So Clinging is not always bad, eh!)

By the end of the ninth / tenth month, senses now fully functional (including the malfunctions, of course), the new life can said to have ‘Become’ (10), *a.t.a. Existence*<sup>35</sup>, being now ‘complete in all limbs and faculties’<sup>36</sup>.

Excellent, 10 out 10! And behold, a becoming face, too, if I should say so, and shy, still hiding it in the womb!

In the prevailing view, of course, this *Existence* relates to the *kamma* carried over from previous lives. It, however, could well be the *kamma* of this in-fetus lifetime, resulting from *Clinging*.

The new sentient being is now ready to take the plunge into the blinding light of the sun and a confusing universe, leaving behind a cozy womb. Soon we have the midwife / doctor congratulating a pacing husband in the room adjacent to the delivery room. “You’re the proud father of a baby girl/boy.” *Birth* (11)!

Little does the little fellow realize that s/he has just created a condition for not only *Ageing* and *Death*, but suffering, too (12). Of course, it was a process begun at the birth of the very first cell itself. For the cell to grow

into two, it has to first break up. To break up, it has to have an existence, even if it's for a nanosecond, or a mindmoment as in the *Abhidhamma*. To have existence, it must have first come to be. To put another way, each cell goes through the phases of arising, staying put and breaking up<sup>37</sup>. This is the process of birth and decay that continues throughout, first helping the seed to grow into a full-blown tree, but then beginning to wither away (as cells that die outpace those that are born). The very final break up of the last cells result in *Death* (12 again).

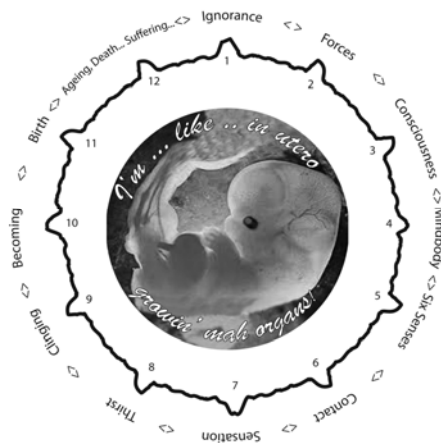
So we can see that in our interpretation, all through 1 to 12, the conditioning can be understood in relation to the *fetus* (the early stage, *embryo*, understood here as well).

The Buddha asks Ananda (*Mahanidana*), “If consciousness were not to come to the mother’s womb, would mind-and-body develop there?”. Answered, “No, Lord”, another question: “Were consciousness ... to be cut off, would mind-and-body *grow, develop and mature?*”.

**Grow, develop and mature.** Hm! Sounds like fetal growth to me!

Here, then, is a figure capturing the idea of the twelve conditioning-conditioned links as relating to a single lifespan:

FETUS IN THE BUDDHA'S CONDITIONED CO-ORIGINATION FORMULA?



**Diagram 2: The Buddha’s Conditioned Co-origination Formula as Relating to a Single Lifetime**



Can you hear the embryo talking to us, in her/his best warbled language, “I am growing my organs in her uterus”? Or as in the diagram, “I’m, like.. *in utero*, growin’ mah organs”. Wow! The linguistic sophistication already – *in utero*, throwing in a colloquialism (‘.. like’), too, for good measure!

We may breakdown the process of conditionality as in Diagram 2 as follows:

*Ignorance* ..... *Forces*  
*Mother / Father (1) > (2)*  
*Consciousness* ..... *Existence*  
*(cell > embryo > fetus) (3 to 10)*  
*Birth*..... *Death*  
*(decay / ageing) (11 to 12)*

**Diagram 3: Outline of the Conditioned Co-origination Phases Within a Single Lifetime.**

What is shown in the centre in the Diagram can be understood as the source and/or process which helps the conditioning the emergence of each new phase / condition.

From such a perspective, then, we could say that the entirety of the Conditioned Co-origination Formula can be explained in relation to a *single* lifetime, but remembering that this would be *only in the context of a first-time born*.

However, the context of rebirth may also be accommodated within our fetal basis interpretation, allowing for two lifetimes. The first lifetime would entail Ignorance and Forces, but with two sources: one’s own, in kammic terms, as well as that of the parents. The second lifetime would be from Consciousness to Birth and Death, taking Existence not as the terminal point in a second life, but as a continuing condition, in fetal terms, for Birth.

**5. Closing Remarks**

**5.1** One may wonder how a pre-birth explanation of the Formula would be relevant when it is the post-birth sentient beings that the Buddha is seeking to help in ending *dukkha*. An answer may go along the following lines.

Post-birth sentient beings come with the same characteristic features of sentience, only more developed and more complex. But the blueprint is

already there at the fetal level. Increasing scientific evidence tells us that every aspect of the chain, from Consciousness to Clinging, has its manifestation, if minimally, at the fetal level. Thumb sucking for pleasure, enjoying the tastes in the amniotic fluid, reacting to music (all affective, in the realm of 'sense-thirst'), learning the mothertongue (cognitive), etc.

There is little doubt in my mind that if indeed the Buddha were to outline his Teaching to a room full of scientists today, He would not hesitate to draw upon the knowledge available in relation to fetal life. The audience would go, "Of course, Honoured One, we fully understand the rudiments in terms of the stages", and implore Him<sup>38</sup> to now go deeper to help them understand the intricacies.

If indeed He had a fetal explanation in mind in outlining the shorter version, for which, of course, we have no evidence, it may be because it provides a good explanatory model<sup>39</sup>. Our interpretation can also, then, be seen as a heuristic device, done for reasons of explanatory efficacy. Hopefully, it will help the readers get a grip on the Teaching, encouraging them to explore it in more depth.

**5.2** As for taking the conditionality Formula as being related to a single life, we may first note that the Buddha's shorter characterization, with Ignorance and Forces dropped, can be taken as relating to a single life.

We may see a single-life interpretation in a different sense, too. And this is in the sense that each of the conditions and the conditioned can come to be experienced by a given individual at any given time throughout life. To take an example, let's say that an angry thought comes to one's mind. Clearly it is a Force, a psychological one, based as it is as well in Ignorance: any understanding of its potential harm to self and others, that anger, along with sense-pleasure, is inimical to liberation, etc., given a leave of absence. The thought leads to the formation of a Consciousness, with the rest following, resulting in the birth of yet other thoughts along the same lines ('Birth'), although eventually, the anger is sure to die ('Death').

This understanding, happily, is not far from the view of the early *Suttas* where all the factors preceding *dukkha* as the final result seem to be operative at every moment in an individual's life at any given living moment.

Our description in the preceding paragraph, of course, may give the impression of a linearity. But it need not, if we were to understand that

conditionality comes to be operational only in the presence of a multiplicity of other conditions – immediate, distant, supportive, etc., and that the interactions, as we know from our experience, are far more complex.

And this complexity seems to be confirmed in the *Paṭṭhāna*<sup>40</sup> interpretation, which explains the process in terms of 24 conditions or dependencies. “These dependencies have no necessary temporal sequence. Some conditions are considered to be mutual, and others are related in such a way that they arise together. Still others are shown to be co-existing. Thus they need not be viewed in some kind of temporal sequence. Each one is a condition related to the stream of individuated life.”<sup>41</sup> The *Paṭṭhāna* interpretation, then, can also be said to allow for an understanding of *Paticcasamuppada* as relating to a single life.

**5.3** So then, the Conditioned Co-origination Teaching may be interpreted as relating to one, or three lifetimes, any interpretation in terms of lifetimes being all post-Buddhian, originating in the Abhidhamma. But the important point to note is that they all serve an explanatory purpose, and that the links are “not to be read as implying hard and fast divisions” (Bodhi, *ibid.*:5). That would be to be mechanistic about it, when the reality of the interrelationships among the various dimensions are dynamic and intricate. Each of the links, e.g., can be taken all by itself, to see how they are interrelated. But each of the partners in a link may also be seen as having links with other partners in many complex ways. We may take the neurons in the brain as an analogy. While each neuron may link up with another, it may also link up with many an other neuron through other dendrites<sup>42</sup>. In this sense, then, it is irrelevant whether it is the life of a reborn or a first-timer that the Formula relates to. What is relevant is that it explains the conditions for *dukkha*.

**5.4** Reflecting on the two versions of the Conditioned Co-origination Formula in the Suttas, it may be conjectured that in the shorter (*Mahanidana*) version, the Buddha seems to be approaching the topic from an evolutionary, naturalist and generic perspective. It’s simply the nature of nature, folks, He seems to be saying. Additionally, but with personal relevance, He brings home the sociological ramifications of the discovery as well. This He does by expanding Thirst (*a.t.a* Craving) into a new series of nine factors. The purpose of the digression, as Bodhi (1984: 14) sharply observes, is clear: “it is to show that the principle of dependent arising can be used to understand the origins of social disorder..”. And the

conclusion that can be drawn? That “the causes of social disharmony lie in the human mind and all stem ultimately from craving [a.t.a.Thirst]”.

Sublime, and profound as the Teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda* is, it is worthy of note that the Buddha doesn't teach conditionality by way of philosophizing, just for the sake of theorizing. Ever the pragmatist, the key reason why He teaches it is in the last link: suffering is conditioned by Birth, through Death and Existence. Going in the reverse order, Suffering is conditioned by *Birth*, by *Existence* by *Clinging* by *Thirst* by *Sensation* by *Contact* by *Six sense-bases* by *Mindbody*. We can see, then, why ‘not being born’ (i.e., *Nibbāna*.) is the end to suffering. Birth absent, absent would be *dukkha*, too, and *Ignorance* leading to another life in the cycle of samsara. Taken through the chain, forward and backward, we can arrive at the truth by ourselves, now beginning to understand the profound Teaching of how suffering comes to be conditioned, and how it can be ended.

The longer version, then, may be seen as His attempt to bring the Teaching closer to the individual and personal level, specifically adding Ignorance and Forces of a past life as having an impact on the Six sense-bases, rendering it not only a relevance but also an immediacy.

**5.5** There is now monumental evidence from western scientific research of the last 50 years or more itself to establish Rebecoming<sup>43</sup> (though erroneously called ‘reincarnation’), as also in contrast with Rebirth, as reality<sup>44</sup>. Yet, there are those out there, including Buddhists, who do not still believe in rebirth<sup>45</sup>. So, would linking a past birth towards explaining Links 1 and 2 make it lose its credibility as a “The Dharma of Natural Systems”? Would it lose its applicability? First, it is well worth recognizing that the Buddha's shorter version does not include a past life. Neither does our own characterization. So a reflection of the Teaching along these lines may hopefully stymie any attempt on the part of skeptics and non-believers to torpedo the ship of conditionality, and will continue to be a relevant paradigm for the understanding of the origin of *dukkha* as well as The Dharma of Natural Systems.

**5.6** Now for a final caveat, perhaps for the more discerning. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is made up of *paṭicca* + *saṃ-* + *-uppāda*, literally, ‘conditioned + co-<sup>46</sup> + origination’. In English translations, however, I have often seen the dropping of the ‘co-’ of ‘co-origination’. This, however, is not to quibble about a mere translation, but to understand the centrality of the ‘co-’ relationship.

If there's one place the 'co-' functioning is in your face, it's in the growth of the emerging life, between 'Consciousness' and 'Existence' in the chain / loop. Conditioned by Consciousness, we've read, is Mindbody. But it is not as if the whole body, limb and all, springs to life at the moment of conception. It is an *incremental* process, as hardly needs be said, when the first nano element of Consciousness comes to condition the first cell, i.e., body, and the cell in turn nourishing Consciousness into further growth. It's well to remember that 'consciousness' is one of four foods the Buddha talks about.

Taking the DNA present in the nucleus, western science tells us that the proteins 'feed' (my take on it) amino acids which in turn feed proteins. If this is not a 'co-' relationship, then I don't know what is. Organs come to be functional, however marginally, as they emerge, the growth in turn making the organ physically grow, the growing organ becoming more effective, and sharper and more precise in its operations. So, it is a process of A conditioning B towards B+ which, then, reverse conditions A towards A+ conditioning B+ towards B++ reverse conditioning .... And so on. By the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> week, we begin to see the first tangible results of this *mutual* growth relationship when we hear the first heartbeat. Tick-tick, tick-tick, steady there! The culmination of this growth process is the potency towards Existence (10)<sup>47</sup>.

Basically, then, it is the mutuality, the co-conditioning, that is the critical process in the relationship, forward or backward. The loss of co- may then be seen as contributing to the weakening of the intended tight mutuality and the complex interrelationality of the process<sup>48</sup>.

**5.7** As a final point, it cannot be emphasized enough that the interpretation given by us of the Conditioned Co-origination Formula, as relating to a single life, is by no means an attempt to circumvent the reality of rebirth.

## **6. Summary**

The major points in this paper can be summarized as follows:

1. There are two versions of the *paticcasamuppāda* 'Conditioned Co-origination' Formula, the shorter one with nine links, and the longer with twelve.
2. The Buddha's characterization does not relate it to any particular number of lifetimes.

3. Taking the longer Formula, the Abhidhamma, however, analyzes it in terms of three lifetimes.
4. This paper seeks to explain the longer version in terms of a single lifetime, taking the fetus as the basis.
5. Using the same fetal basis, the twelve link Formula may be seen as relating to two lifetimes.
6. The interpretation of a single lifetime suggested in the paper is presented as a heuristic device, with no suggestion to deny the Teaching and reality of rebirth.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Digha Nikaya*, # 15. See Walsh, 1995 for a translation.
- <sup>2</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya*, # 12. See Bodhi, 2000, for a translation.
- <sup>3</sup> *Pubbenivāsānussati ñāṇa* ‘knowledge of past lives’; *cutūpapāta ñāṇa* ‘knowledge of exit & birth’
- <sup>4</sup> Sugunasiri, 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> *Bhava*.
- <sup>6</sup> This is the sub-heading of her book, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*.
- <sup>7</sup> See Bodhi, 1984, for a translation of the *Mahanidana Sutta*, with an excellent interpretive introduction.
- <sup>8</sup> Bodhi, 1984: 8.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ajāta*.
- <sup>10</sup> I will be using Capitals throughout to indicate that the terms are used in their technical sense as in the Formula, and not in their ordinary meaning.
- <sup>11</sup> For the curious, here’s the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula in its Pali version:  
*1. avijjā paccayā samkhārā, 2. samkhāra paccayā viññāṇam, 3. viññāṇa paccayā nāmarūpam, 4. nāmarūpa paccayā salāyatanam, 5. salāyāyatana paccayā phasso, 6. phassa paccayā vedanā, 7. vedanā paccayā tanhā, 8. tanhā paccayā upādānam, 9. upādāna paccayā bhavo; 10. bhava paccayā jāti. 11. jāti paccayā jarāmarana, 12. jarāmarana paccayā sokaparidevadukkha-domanassupāyāsā.. [sambhavanti]* (from *Samyutta Nikaya*, 12.2).  
 (Note: 1. numbering added; 2. *paccayā* under each link written separately for the convenience of the reader, and to highlight the Pali term of each of the links).
- <sup>12</sup> See e.g., Varela, Thompson and Rosch (scientists), 1991, p.112. In a note on *bhava*, Walsh (1995, 562, note 284) e.g., refers to “... the ‘coming-to-be’ process in a past life”.
- <sup>13</sup> *Abhidhamma* ‘metaphysics’ is the third compendium of the Tipitaka ‘Three Baskets’ containing the Buddha’s Teachings. See Bodhi, op. cit. for a translation of an early treatment. See Karunadasa, 2010, for a comprehensive study.
- <sup>14</sup> *Cuti-citta*. This is a commentarial addition.
- <sup>15</sup> *viññāṇa, citta, mano*.
- <sup>16</sup> *Sabbe puthujjanā ummattakā*.
- <sup>17</sup> *Viññāṇasota*.
- <sup>18</sup> *Paṭisandhi viññāṇa*, also a commentarial concept, noting that the synonym opted for here is *viññāṇa*, in addition to *citta*.
- <sup>19</sup> See Bodhi, 1984, p. 10 for the specific point.
- <sup>20</sup> To speak mathematically, today the world population is higher than in the Buddha’s time of 2500 years ago. So we may surmise that the increase could have come only with *new* human beings appearing on earth. Of course, this is not to say that an individual could not have had an existence in another realm, including Deva or *Tiracchāna* ‘animal’ (D I.228). However, the *Aggāñña sutta*



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(D.27) ‘Of Knowledge of Beginnings’ as translated by Walsh (1987), the closest in the Tipitaka that comes to the origin of life on earth., does talk of a time when the “females” among some nondescript “beings” “developed female sex organs” and the male beings male sex organs. Soon “their bodies burnt with lust. And later, ... they indulged in sexual activity.” (Walsh, op.cit., 411). This clearly points to a beginning point of human life. And, in evolutionary terms, humans evolved from lower primates, pointing to a human beginning point. And there is no reason to think that such beginning points don’t continue. But to develop the idea further is to go beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>21</sup> “Bhikkhus, this samsara is without conceivable beginning. No first point is discerned of beings roaming and wandering (in samsara)...” (S.XXII.99). This statement I take to mean in the sense of existence in general, and not relating to a given individual. The Buddha says that He teaches only two things: *dukkha* and the liberation from *dukkha*. Given that, the possible ambivalence I see in the Buddha’s words may be related to the fact that whether it is a first birth or a rebirth has no relevance to the issue of liberation.

<sup>22</sup> The Canon speaks of four types of birth (A 4.191). One of them is called ‘spontaneous being’ (*opapātika*), “arisen ... with no visible cause...” (Davids & Stede). Drawing upon research by Ilya Prigogine, western science tells how such a ‘spontaneous’ life may originate: “... when a system is far from equilibrium, or where it is at a much higher temperature than its environment, new types of structure may originate “spontaneously”. The result is that new dynamic states of matter, namely organic life, are created.” (Kafatos & Nadeau, 1990, 144).

<sup>23</sup> Might an *in-vitro* fertilization be a modern condition for a first-time birth, i.e., without the presence of Gandhabba? After all, of the three conditions for conception - coitus, woman in season and Gandhabba (M I.266), only the second seems assured here, unless, of course, artificial insemination, through a tube, is seen as a stand in for penetration. And, would the non-natural (contra ‘unnatural’) context be a condition for the absence of Gandhabba? And indeed, how about, by way of speculation, in a future exercise in ‘human cloning’?

<sup>24</sup> *Puthujjana*.

<sup>25</sup> *Khīnāsava*. Arhant means ‘worthy one’ and refers to one who has cut off all defilements, as a result of which there will be no rebirth. While the Buddha was the first Arhant, there were others in the Buddha’s own time, who came by this spiritual achievement.

<sup>26</sup> *Kāma taṇhā*.

<sup>27</sup> “Intent, I say, is kamma” (*cetanāham bhikkhave kammam vadāmi*) - the Buddha.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, it would be the first mindbody in this life of one in *samsara*, too.

<sup>29</sup> *Sambhavesi* (SN 2.13).

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<sup>30</sup> *Phassāhāra*. The other three are ‘Consciousness food’ (*viññāṇāhāra*), ‘Mental volition food’ (*manosancetanāhāra*) and ‘solid food’, but including liquids (*kabalinkāhāra*).

<sup>31</sup> *Mātāpettikasambhavo*, a characteristic seen by one whose mind is concentrated, and free of blemishes and “directs his mind towards knowing and seeing” (*Sāmaññaphala sutta*, Walsh, 1994, p. 104).

<sup>32</sup> Even though it is the practice in western science to refer to the Embryo as ‘it’, reflecting its lack of understanding that life begins at conception as we have in the line *viññāṇa paccayā nāmarūpam* ‘conditioned by consciousness is mindbody’, it is recognized today that the gender has already been determined at the point of conception.

<sup>33</sup> *Dhammapada* is a compendium of wise sayings of the Buddha in verse form. See Carter & Palaihwadana, 2000, for a translation.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Sense thirst’ (*kāma taṇhā*) and the ‘thirst to be not’ (*bhava taṇhā*) are the other two.

<sup>35</sup> In the texts, *bhava* ‘Existence’, is three-fold: *kāma bhava* ‘Sense-sphere existence’, *rūpa bhava* ‘material existence’ and *arūpa bhava* ‘immaterial existence’. Our interpretation clearly relates only to the first.

<sup>36</sup> It may be of interest to note that in that in the commentaries, the future verbal form of *bhava*, i.e., *bhavissanti* is explained “not as a mere future of existence” but as “growing” (*vuḍḍhissanti*) (van Zeyst, 1971, p. 10).

<sup>37</sup> *uppāda*, *ṭhiti*, *bhanga*.

<sup>38</sup> The capitalization, here as well as in the pronomial forms elsewhere, is first, to show my deep personal veneration of the ‘Incomparable’ (*anuttaro*) Buddha, the ‘One possessed of Knowledge and Discipline’ (*vijjācaraṇasampanno*). Second, it is also to make a political statement - that there are those in society that should be respected and venerated, and that this hierarchy of respect should not be sacrificed at the altar of equality. And so, second, it is by way of providing a model of one who likes to live by the principle of ‘honouring those deserving of honour’ (*pūjā ca pūjanīyānam*) (*Mahamangala sutta*).

<sup>39</sup> “.. the selection of factors and their sequential arrangement are made from the instructional point of view, the purpose being to expose the inner dynamics or the round in order to demonstrate how to dismantle it.” (Bodhi, 1984:10).

<sup>40</sup> This is a book of the Abhidhamma.

<sup>41</sup> Reworded from Prof. Pemasiri, in a personal communication.

<sup>42</sup> Not shown in the figure of a cell above, dendrites are extensions projecting from cells, serving as the paths of communication, and contact with other cells.

<sup>43</sup> *Punabbhava*, this being the term used by the Buddha, and never

\**punaruppatti* ‘rebirth’ (the star meaning ‘does not occur’).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g., Whitton & Fisher, 1986, and Weiss, 2004, for case studies based on ‘regression’ into past lives, at and even ‘progression’ into the future, for which there is less substantiation. Of more than passing interest in the case of

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regression case studies may be two individuals who have had personal contact with no less a personality than Jesus Christ himself! Intriguingly, while one is a patient, the other is the healer (i.e., Dr Weiss) himself, present together then as now, though in different roles (Weiss, p. 38).

<sup>45</sup> See again Sugunasiri, 2010, for a treatment.

<sup>46</sup> While *sam-* in *samuppāda* also has an intensive sense, as in *sambodhi*, which means ‘full enlightenment’, it may be noted that its ‘primary meaning’ is ‘together’, parallel to Latin ‘con-’ (PED). Indeed, the term *saṃsāra* <*sam-* + *sāra* (from *sar-* ‘to wander’, ‘move’), generally translated as being born again and again, interestingly may mean ‘wandering together’, life after life. As one piece of evidence in this direction, we may note how contemporary research shows sentient beings seemingly travelling together. To give one of any number of examples from *Same Soul, Many Bodies* by Dr Brian L Weiss, “His [i.e., hypnotic subject George] wife in his present life was his son in his past life, and his daughter in his present life was his wife in his past one” (Weiss, 2004, p. 25).

<sup>47</sup> In this context, see <http://this-life-buddhism.blogspot.com/2011/08/early-buddhist-sermons-are-independent.html> for some relevant comments.

<sup>48</sup> I thank Bryan Levman, Prof. P. Pemasiri and Prof. Leonard Priestley for their valuable comments on the different versions of this paper.