NEW LIGHT ON THE TWELVE NIDĀNAS

Dhivan Thomas Jones

Paticca samuppāda (dependent arising) is the central philosophical principle of Buddhism, and is most commonly exemplified in the suttas in terms of the twelve nidānas. The ubiquitous interpretation of the twelve nidānas of paticca samuppāda as taking place over three lives, a religious doctrine explaining the rebirth process, is a commentarial development, not found in the suttas. Recent Theravādin exegetes Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa and Ānāvāra Thera argue for an interpretation of the twelve nidānas of paticca samuppāda as taking place in the present moment, but Bhikkhu Bodhi disputes the claim that their interpretation is the Buddha’s original meaning. Recent work by Vedic scholar Joanna Jurewicz, however, suggests that originally the twelve nidānas were a parody of Vedic cosmogony. This scholarship opens the way for renewed exegesis of paticca samuppāda liberated from Indian Buddhist metaphysics.

Introduction

The Buddha is recorded as telling Ananda that it was through not understanding and not penetrating paticca samuppāda (dependent arising) that humanity ‘has become like a tangle of string covered in mould and matted like grass’, and so does not go beyond the miseries of conditioned existence (D 15 PTS ii 55, S 12:60 PTS ii 92). It is said that just before his enlightenment the bodhisatta reflected on how dukkha (unhappiness) arose dependent on conditions—how ageing and death (jārāmarāna) arose on condition of birth (jāti), birth on existence (bhava), existence on clinging (upādāna), clinging on craving (tanha), craving on feeling (vedanā), feeling on contact (phassa), contact on the six sense-bases (salāyatana), the sense-bases on name and form (nāmarūpa), name and form on consciousness (viññāna), consciousness on formations (saṅkhāra), and formations on ignorance (avijjā). It was just through the ceasing of these twelve nidānas that the Buddha, like Buddhas before him, attained the path to awakening, that overgrown road to the ancient city of enlightenment (S 12:65 PTS ii 104). To investigate these twelve linked conditions of samsāra is to understand the ‘noble method’ of the Dharma (A 10:92 PTS v 182); and the cessation of just these twelve nidānas is the end of dukkha.

From the paramount importance given to the teaching of the twelve nidānas in the Pali canon, one might expect the formula to be clearly explained.
But not so. Although each nidāna or link is expounded to some extent, ‘the earliest texts give very little explanation of how the formula is to be understood’ (Gethin 1998, 149). Later Buddhist tradition interpreted the twelve-fold formula as an explanation of the rebirth process over three lives, but it there is no evidence that this is what the Buddha originally meant.

In this article I will explore the interpretations of the twelve nidānas of paticca samuppāda offered by two recent Theravādin thinkers, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Bhikkhu Nānavīra, who in different ways criticise the three-life interpretation and, reading the suttas afresh, offer accounts of how the links of paticca samuppāda can be understood as working in the present moment. I will also indicate the criticism of this present moment interpretation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, a defender of Buddhist tradition. I will then present a completely different approach to the problem, starting from the idea that the arrangement of the nidānas begins to make sense when one takes into account the brahminical religious context in which the Buddha was teaching. In this context, the various links in different ways turn upside down the assumptions about Self (atta), reality (brahman) and the supposed purpose of brahminical rituals current in the Buddha’s time. This suggests that the arrangement of the twelve nidānas was originally intended as a parody of brahminical beliefs as well as a statement of what the Buddha taught.

**Conditionality and paticca samuppāda**

Before discussing the traditional three-life interpretation, I will clarify some terms. Paticca samuppāda can be translated as ‘dependent arising’, ‘dependent origination’ or ‘conditioned co-production’, and the term is often used for the principle of conditionality: ‘when this is, that becomes; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist; with the cessation of this, that ceases’. This philosophical principle explains explaining without reference to a creator God, while at the same time avoiding any recourse to chance and meaningless; insight into this principle is the aim of Buddhist contemplation—‘who sees paticca samuppāda sees the Dharma’ (M 28 PTS I 191) and leads to liberation.

However, in the Pali suttas, the statement of the principle of paticca samuppāda is often followed by a statement of the twelve nidānas (for instance, in the Udāna 1.1–3), as if they are the fundamental exemplification of the principle. These twelve links are often simply listed, in order of arising and order of ceasing, without explanation; in other places the Buddha discusses and analyses the links; and in several suttas there are lists of nine, ten, or more, or less, links instead of twelve. But the twelve links are the basic list. Here I will not be discussing the general principle of conditionality, but specifically the selection and arrangement of the twelve nidānas, and the meaning of that selection.
The three-life interpretation

Early Buddhist thinkers, seeking to understand and systematise the Buddha’s teaching as it had been passed down to them, came to see in the twelve links an explanation of *samsāra*, of how the individual human being passes through lifetimes according to karma. This process of reflection reached its culmination with the fifth-century C.E. commentator Buddhaghosa, who devotes Chapter 17 of his *Visuddhimagga* to how the twelve links apply over three lifetimes. The approach can be summarised as Table 1, which shows the commentarial interpretation of each *nidāna* alongside the sutta version.

The three-life interpretation of *paticca samuppāda* is the mainstream Buddhist exegesis, found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakosa* as well as in Theravādin tradition. However, nowhere in the suttas is the Buddha recorded as saying that the twelve *nidānas* should be understood over three lifetimes, or that *paticca samuppāda* is meant to explain an individual’s continual re-arising according to karma and its result. The division of the twelve links into karma-process and result-process is a later commentarial interpretation. The scholar Paul Williams comments:

This twelvefold formula for dependent origination as it stands is strange. In one way it makes sense spread over three lives, yet this explanation looks like an attempt to make sense of what may well be a compilation from originally different sources. Why, for example, explain the first of the three lives only in terms of the first two links, and explain the tenth link, ‘becoming’, as essentially the same as the second link, ‘formations’? Why introduce explanations in terms of karman where none of the links obviously mentions karman? (Williams 2000, 71–72)

### TABLE 1

Sutta version and commentarial interpretation of each *nidāna*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Nidāna</em></th>
<th>Sutta</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Avijjā</em></td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td>Ignorance in the last life</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Saṃkharā</em></td>
<td>Formations</td>
<td>Volitional formations in the last life</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Viññāna</em></td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
<td>Re-linking (<em>patisandhī</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Nāma-rūpa</em></td>
<td>Name and form</td>
<td>Mind and body arising at conception in this life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Saḷāyatana</em></td>
<td>The six sense realms</td>
<td>The six sense organs in the child</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Phassa</em></td>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vedanā</em></td>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>Feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Taṇhā</em></td>
<td>‘Thirst’, craving</td>
<td>Craving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Upādāna</em></td>
<td>‘Fuel’, grasping</td>
<td>Grasping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhava</em></td>
<td>Becoming</td>
<td>Becoming in <em>samsāra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jāti</em></td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Birth in the next life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jarā-maranam</em></td>
<td>Old age and death</td>
<td>Old age and death in the next life</td>
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</table>
I will not here address how the twelve-fold *paticca samuppāda* might be compiled from different sources;¹ but if it is, there are few traces left in the canon of how the compilation came about. It would appear that whatever the Buddha originally meant by the twelve links must have been as difficult to understand for the early Buddhists as it is for us, which is why they developed the three-life interpretation to make some sense of it. However, in doing so they had to make some changes to what the Buddha is recorded as saying about what some of the links referred to.

First, the early Buddhists interpreted *sankhāra* specifically as the past volitional formations—that is, past karma—on the basis of which the present individual arose. The suttas, however, describe *sankhāra* very generally as bodily, verbal and mental formations, with no reference to time or karma. Next, the commentators interpreted *vīññāna* specifically as the re-linking (*patisandhi*) consciousness that passes over from death to conception in the next life, the ‘seed’ consciousness that starts off the new existence. The suttas, however, although they describe a ‘descent of consciousness’ into the womb, generally explain the *vīññāna* of the twelve *nīdānas* simply as consciousness associated with each of the six senses. Similarly, the name-and-form of the three-life interpretation is defined as that which develops in the womb on condition of the re-linking consciousness, whereas in the suttas the *nāma* of *nāma-rūpa* is generally defined as ‘feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention’, clearly the complex mental concomitants of the adult mind. While the commentators give the six sense bases the specific meaning of the senses of the newly-arisen being, in the suttas they are not so specified. By interpreting the feeling or *vedanā* of *paticca samuppāda* as a karma-result, the commentators appear to have limited their conception of feeling merely to the feeling that arises due to past karma, whereas the suttas describe all feeling, whether as a result of karma or not, as dependently arisen. Finally, we should note that while the commentators take birth and old age and death to refer specifically to the next life, the suttas appear simply to define these *nīdānas* quite generally as being born, ageing and dying.

In short, it would appear that the commentators, by assigning specific, literal meanings to each of the twelve *nīdānas*, created out of *paticca samuppāda* a religious and metaphysical doctrine describing the rebirth process according to karma. In the suttas, however, the *nīdānas* are defined in more general and suggestive ways, and the twelve-fold formula does not mention karma. This is not to say that the Buddha did not teach karma and rebirth, which he clearly did; only that *paticca samuppāda* is not presented in the canon as explaining it. Indeed, the Buddha does not appear to have explained the mechanism of the rebirth process or the exact workings of karma. Perhaps this is why the later Buddhists utilised *paticca samuppāda* to render into definite religious doctrine what the Buddha had left unexplained.


**Paticca samuppāda in the present moment**

The commentators, then, took the twelve links of *paticca samuppāda* to be referring to a linear causal process occurring through time, on the scale of lifetimes. This enabled the early Buddhists to conceptualise the rebirth process that the Buddha taught and which they believed in, and eventually this sophisticated interpretation of the suttas must have settled into a generally accepted part of Buddhist doctrine. The traditional images for the twelve links stretched around the outside of the ‘wheel of life’ suggest that by the time this symbol was devised the doctrine had become embedded into the religious imagination, along with the Buddhist cosmology of which *paticca samuppāda* is the guiding principle.

Evidence within the Pali canon shows the gradual development of the exegetical principles behind the three-life interpretation (*Patis* PTS 50–53; Warder 1997, 50–53); however, in the Theravādin Abhidhamma texts there is also evidence of a different kind of interpretation. In the *Vibhaṅga* there is an analysis of *paticca samuppāda* in which the twelve links are presented as occurring together in the present moment (PTS 144; Thittila 1969, 189). This example of *paticca samuppāda* in the present moment was not supposed to be an account of what the Buddha had taught in the suttas, since the Abhidhammikas clearly distinguished between this approach and the method by which they interpreted the discourses. But it illustrates another early interpretation. More recently, two Theravādin thinkers, Buddhādāsa and Nāṇavīra, have each specifically criticised the commentarial interpretation of *paticca samuppāda* and proposed their own interpretations that they claim are nearer to the Buddha’s original meaning.

**Buddhādāsa: *paticca samuppāda* in daily life**

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906–93) was a highly respected Thai meditation master, as well as an outspoken critic of some of the popular beliefs of Thai Buddhists. In a lecture on *paticca samuppāda* given in 1971 at his monastery, Suan Mokh (‘Garden of Enlightenment’), he criticised the three-life interpretation and set out an interpretation of the twelve *nidānas* as occurring in the present moment (Buddhādāsa 1986; condensed in Buddhādāsa 1989; discussed in Seeger 2005). This was not supposed to be a version of the Abhidhamma interpretation, which Buddhādāsa regarded as ‘superfluous, inflated Abhidhammic knowledge’, a merely intellectual analysis (Buddhādāsa 1986, 55), and ‘totally useless’ (Buddhādāsa 1989, 122).

He described the three-life interpretation as a ‘cancer, an incurable tumour of Buddhist scholarship’ (Seeger 2005, 111). He pointed out that in the suttas the Dharma is described as ‘self-evident’ (*santiṭṭhika*), ‘timeless’ (*akālika*) and ‘to be experienced individually by the wise’ (*paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhi*), and that *paticca samuppāda* was said by the Buddha to be identical to the Dharma (M 38 PTS i 265). By spreading the links of *paticca samuppāda* over three lifetimes, such
that ignorance and formations refer to the past life, and birth, old age and death to the next, the *nīdānas* are no longer self-evident, timeless and able to be directly experienced. Therefore the three-lifetime interpretation is ‘completely useless’ (Seeger 2005, 112) and ‘makes it impossible to practice *paticca samuppāda*’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 16). Worse, by interpreting *viṁśāna* as the re-linking consciousness that goes over to the next life, the commentators have smuggled some eternalism into the Dharma, in the form of a self-identical consciousness that is supposedly reborn. Buddhadhāsa notes that Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* contains the oldest version of the three-life interpretation that has come down us, although Buddhaghosa himself says it was already accepted. Buddhadhāsa speculates that eternalistic brahminical views about a transmigrating self had begun creeping into Buddhism from an early stage.

According to Buddhadhāsa, the problem started with the commentators taking *jāti*, birth, to refer to literal, physical birth. But, he says, *paticca samuppāda* is a teaching in the language of ultimate truth, and in this language, birth refers to the ‘birth of the “I”-concept which is only a feeling, and not the physical birth from a mother’s womb’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 44). The commentators interpreted *paticca* *samuppāda* literally, in the language of everyday life, to refer to a person who dies and is reborn. But in the language of ultimate truth, there is no person; there is only *nāma-rūpa* (name and form). The ‘person’ then arises when the I-concept attaches to a feeling, and comes into existence again and again because of attachment and because of the feeling that ‘I’ am someone or other. Buddhadhāsa takes each of the *nīdānas* exactly as they are explained in the suttas, but interprets them from the standpoint of ultimate truth as pertaining to the arising, death and re-arising of the ultimately non-existent ‘self’. In this sense, ‘one round of *paticca samuppāda* is nothing more than a manifestation of stupidity’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 44).

Buddhadāsa therefore interprets *paticca samuppāda* psychologically rather than literally. ‘Dependent origination is defined only within the boundaries set by grasping. It doesn’t refer to simply being alive and having thoughts and feelings. Therefore, the law of Dependent Origination does not affect a child in the womb’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 72). A single round of *paticca samuppāda*—that is, the birth and death of the I-feeling based on ignorance and grasping—may happen in a flash, so fast we may not be aware of it. But the teaching of the twelve *nīdānas* enables us to understand that the sense of self arises on conditions and to begin to observe this arising. When there is no sense of self, which is quite an ordinary part of experience, one abides in a passive, non-grasping original state; but this state is primed for the arising of the delusion of the ‘I’ concept when sense-experience occurs. Buddhadhāsa emphasises that *paticca samuppāda* is a teaching that should be practised. ‘If you ask how it can be practised the only answer is to have mindfulness when there is sense-contact ... See that you remain in your original state’ (Buddhadāsa 1986, 86).

Buddhadāsa does not make this point, but this emphasis on practice returns us to the sutta teaching of *paticca samuppāda* as ‘noble method’. His point would appear to be that it is hard to imagine how the three-life interpretation could be
practised in any way, since it is more of a theoretical model for the working of samsāra than a practical account of how dukkha comes about in experience. Buddhadaśa’s practice-oriented interpretation allows him to speak of the ‘radiant wheel of dependent origination’ (Buddhadaśa 1986, 86) that begins with ignorance and ends with knowledge of the destruction of the āsavas via the arising of faith dependent on dukkha—a reference to the 23 nidānas, including those of the path, of the Upanisa Sutta (S 12:23 PTS ii 29).²

In conclusion, Buddhadaśa’s interpretation of paticca samuppāda is sutta-based, empirical, sceptical as regards rebirth, and oriented towards meditation. However, Buddhadaśa’s attempted refutation of the three-life interpretation may not fit what the suttas actually say about the twelve nidānas, and some of Bhikkhu Bodhi’s objections to Nāṇavirā’s criticisms of the commentarial tradition, which I will discuss later, apply also to Buddhadaśa. We might especially note that the distinction of the language of ultimate truth from that of conventional truth, upon which his interpretation of the suttas depends, is itself post-canonical, being found first in the Milindapanhaṇā.

Nāṇavirā: paticca samuppāda as the structure of existence

In 1963, a few years before Buddhadaśa’s lecture, an English Bhikkhu named Nāṇavirā published his Notes on Dhamma, also concerned with an interpretation of paticca samuppāda in present experience as against over three lives. Nāṇavirā was born Harold Musson in 1920 and, due to his knowledge of European languages, served during the Second World War in the intelligence corps as an interrogator. While in Italy he translated Evola’s Doctrine of Awakenment to brush up his Italian, and this was his first contact with the Dhamma (although he later expressed reservations about Evola’s book, with its elitist conception of the Aryans). After the war, he and his friend Osbert Moore went to Sri Lanka to ordain as Bhikkhus, and in 1949, at the Island Hermitage, they became Nāṇavirā and Nāṇamoli, respectively, the latter becoming a prolific translator best known for his translation of the Visuddhimagga as The Path of Purification. While Nāṇamoli remained at the Island Hermitage until his untimely death in 1960, Nāṇavirā moved to a more solitary kuti near Būndala on the mainland. In 1959 he claimed privately (although the news leaked out) to have attained stream-entry. However, he began to suffer stomach pains so severe that he was unable to meditate, and then, apparently in response to the drugs administered for the stomach complaint, developed an equally debilitating psycho-sexual illness. He committed ‘spiritual suicide’ in 1965 because he could not meditate but did not want to go back to lay life. In the years before his death, unable to meditate but able to study, he wrote Notes on Dhamma, and many letters in which he shared his outlook. In 1987 his notes and letters were published as Clearing the Path, and Nāṇavirā’s thinking has subsequently attracted something of a cult following. His ‘existential’ re-interpretation of paticca samuppāda is more radical and better argued than that of Buddhadaśa, and starts from the fundamental issue of the relationship of dependent arising to time.
Nanavira, like Buddhadasa, notes that the Buddha described the Dharma as sandiththika and akālikā (self-evident and timeless), and seeing paticca samuppāda as seeing the Dharma. The general principle of conditionality—‘this being, that becomes’ and so on—should therefore be taken as referring to the dependence of one thing on another thing already existing, rather than as a temporal (causal) process by which one thing happens after another thing. He writes:

For as long as paticcasamuppāda is thought to involve temporal succession (as it is, notably in the traditional ‘three-life’ interpretation), so long is it liable to be regarded as some kind of hypothesis (that there is rebirth and that it is caused by avijjà). (Nanavira 1987, 84)

By contrast, Nanavira notes, the dependence of vipāka upon karma is not a matter of a simple dependence, since vipāka usually arises after the karma has ceased, and for this reason the karmic process, along with the process of rebirth, cannot be considered a manifestation of paticca samuppāda.

If paticcasamuppāda is sandiththika and akālikā then it is clear that it can have nothing to do with kamma and kammavipāka . . . for the ripening of kamma as vipāka takes time – vipāka always follows kamma after an interval and is never simultaneous with it. (Nanavira 1987, 22)

Since the three-life interpretation of paticca samuppāda divides the nidānas into karma-process and result-process, he believes this interpretation to be fundamentally wrong.

In Nanavira’s view, the twelve nidānas are not a causally related sequence of temporally successive phenomena. Instead, they are the structurally related phenomena that make up the lived experience of being an ordinary human being, meaning, the experience of being a self, a ‘someone’, an ‘I’. This experience, characterised as dukkha, is ultimately a mistake since it finds a self, a sense of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ where, according to the Buddha, no such self can really be found. Direct seeing of paticca samuppāda means seeing that experience is thus structured, thereby enabling the process of cessation, by which there is liberation from dukkha. An analogy for what Nanavira means by the twelve nidānas as the structure of experience is that of a building. Just as a house cannot have a roof without walls, so there can be no subjective existence as a self (bhava) without craving (tanhā) and grasping (upādāna); similarly, just as there can be no lower walls without foundations, there can be no consciousness of being a self (viññāna) and the name and form of that experience (nāma-rūpa) without ignorant unawareness (avijjà). The roof does not arise after the walls but depends on those walls for its existence; conversely, without a foundation, the whole building ceases to stand. However, whereas a building is a static entity, human experience is dynamic. The sense of self, of being a ‘someone’, is constantly attempted and renewed through the processes of feeling, craving and appropriation by which personal life is sustained.
Notes on Dhamma consists mainly of detailed discussion of particular sutta passages concerning individual nidānas, and how they are to be interpreted satisfactorily, which Nānavīra does with the help of the method and vocabulary of modern European philosophers, especially Kierkegaard. As with Buddhadāsa’s interpretation, a crux of Nānavīra’s dispute with the three-life interpretation is whether the eleventh nidāna—jāti or birth—is to be understood literally, as physical birth, or in some other way. Nānavīra’s answer is to distinguish the jāti of paticca samuppāda from the punabhava, the re-birth that the Buddha is recorded as teaching in a quite literal sense. Nānavīra does not doubt that the Buddha taught rebirth (Nānavīra 1987, 23), only that paticca samuppāda is supposed to explain it. Jāti refers not to rebirth but to the individual person’s belief that they are a ‘someone’, a self who has been born:

The *puthujjana* [ordinary person] takes what appears to be his ‘self’ at its face value; and so long as this goes on he continues to be a ‘self’, at least in his own eyes (and in the eyes of others like him). This is bhava or ‘being’. The *puthujjana* knows that people are born and die; and since he thinks ‘my self exists’ so he also thinks ‘my self was born’ and ‘my self will die’. The *puthujjana* sees a ‘self’ to whom the words *birth* and *death* apply. In contrast ... the *arahat* ... has altogether got rid of asissimana [the conceit ‘I am’], and does not even think ‘I am’ ... since he does not think ‘I am’ he also does not think ‘I was born’ or ‘I shall die’. In other words, he sees no ‘self’ or even ‘I’ for the words *birth* and *death* to apply to. (Nānavīra 1987, 23–24)

Nānavīra’s conception of jāti is therefore psychological, like Buddhadāsa’s, referring to the birth in subjective experience of a sense of self through ignorance, craving and the other nidānas.

**Bhikkhu Bodhi: in defence of tradition**

Nānavīra wrote that ‘the views expressed in [Notes on Dhamma] will perhaps be regarded in one quarter or another as doubtful or definitely wrong’ (Nānavīra 1987, 14). Since he regarded the traditional three-life version of paticca samuppāda as wrong, it is not surprising that a representative of the tradition, in this case Bhikkhu Bodhi, should rise to its defence against a detractor, and indeed try to show that Nānavīra was wrong. Bhikkhu Bodhi, born in New York in 1944, was ordained in Sri Lanka in 1972, and is well known through his translations of Pali texts. In two articles (Bodhi 1998a, 1998b), he analyses Nānavīra’s interpretations of bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), and sankhāra (formations) in order to show that they are wrong, and that the three-life interpretation is more adequately consistent with the suttas.

These articles go about their critical business with academic detachment, but Ven. Bodhi’s traditionalist temper is evident in comments he makes elsewhere. Justifying his method of translation of the Nidāna Samyutta of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, concerned with paticca samuppāda, he writes:
Because the texts lack a clearcut explanation of the [twelve-fold] formula of paṭicca samuppāda, modern interpreters of early Buddhism have sometimes devised capricious theories about its original meaning, theories which assume that the Buddhist tradition itself has muddled up the interpretation of this most basic doctrine. To avoid the arbitrariness and wilfulness of personal opinion, it seems more prudent to rely on the method of explanation found in the Buddhist exegetical tradition, which despite minor differences in details is largely the same across the spectrum of early Buddhist schools. (Bodhi 2000, 518)

The unnamed ‘modern interpreters’ are doubtless Buddhādaśa and Nānavīra, whose interpretations of paṭicca samuppāda he therefore regards as capricious, arbitrary, wilful, and matters merely of personal opinion. By contrast Bhikkhu Bodhi is convinced of and satisfied by the traditional three-life interpretation as what the Buddha meant.

It does not take Ven. Bodhi very much effort to show that what is meant by jāti in the suttas appears to be just physical, biological birth, not the metaphorical ‘birth’ of the puthujjana’s sense of self; moreover, ‘Nānavīra does not cite any suttas to support his understanding of bhava, jāti and jāramarana, and in fact there are no suttas to be found in the Pāli canon that explain the above terms in this way’ (Bodhi 1998a, 51–52). Bhikkhu Bodhi goes on to demonstrate suttas which show that, contra Nānavīra, the jāti of paticca samuppāda is more or less synonymous with punnabhava or rebirth. Similarly, Ven. Bodhi cites suttas in which the bhava (becoming) of paticca samuppāda clearly refers to objective existence in one of the three realms of becoming, the sensual realm, the realm of form or the formless realm. Bhava in these suttas cannot therefore mean the puthujjana’s sense of being a self.

Bhikkhu Bodhi similarly takes to task Nānavīra’s interpretation of saṅkhārā as ‘determinations’ in the widest sense as ‘things that other things depend upon’ (Nānavīra 1987, 24). Nānavīra wished to give this word, saṅkhārā, the widest possible meaning so as to indicate the structural condition by which dukkha arises from ignorance—that the puthujjana’s sense of self takes for granted (as permanent and as ‘self’) things that are composite, impermanent, and therefore unable to support a lasting, satisfactory experience of self-identity. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s repudiation of Nānavīra’s interpretation consists of showing that when the word saṅkhārā is used in connection with paticca samuppāda, it always refers either to a threefold division of saṅkhārā as being of body, speech or mind, or to a threefold division of saṅkhārā as meritorious, demeritorious or imperturbable (Bodhi 1998b, 157–160). This usage can be best understood in relation to cetanā (‘intention’), giving the traditional meaning of saṅkhārā as ‘volitional formations’, equivalent to karma. The word saṅkhārā is also used in the suttas in a general, non-karmic sense, which Nānavīra takes as primary—such as when in-and-out breathing is said to be a saṅkhāra or ‘determination’ of the body—but Bhikkhu Bodhi shows that this sense is clearly distinct from the meaning of saṅkhārā in relation to paticca samuppāda.
Such literal interpretations of *saṅkhāra*, *bhava* and *jāti* also count against Buddhadaśa’s metaphorical reading of these terms. Ven. Bodhi also explains, against both Buddhadaśa and Ǹāṇavīra, how the traditional three-life model can be understood as timeless, *akālika*:

the word qualifies, not the factors such as birth and death themselves, but the principle (*dhamma*) that is seen and understood. The point made by calling the principle *akālika* is that this principle is known and seen immediately, that is, that the conditional relationship between any two terms is known directly with perceptual certainty. (Bodhi 1998b, 178)

*Contra* both Ǹāṇavīra and Buddhadaśa, *patīcca samuppāda* is self-evident, timeless and to be experienced directly because the principle of conditionality underlying the dependent arising of the *nidānas* is so, not because the twelve *nidānas* themselves do not occur over three lives.

With these arguments and more, Bhikkhu Bodhi purposes to ‘vindicate the traditional three-life interpretation against Ǹāṇavīra’s critique’ (Bodhi 1998a, 45). However, Bhikkhu Bodhi does not empathise with either Buddhadaśa’s interest in *patīcca samuppāda* as something to be *practised* in meditation, independent of religious beliefs, or with Ǹāṇavīra’s interest in how the Buddha’s teaching of *patīcca samuppāda* addresses the present existential suffering of the existing individual. Ven. Bodhi is convinced that in the twelve links of *patīcca samuppāda* the Buddha taught a religious-metaphysical doctrine concerning the objective structure of *samsāra* extending through lifetimes, rolling on according to karma and its result. Further, Bhikkhu Bodhi can only admit, and in no way alter the fact, that the traditional interpretation of *patīcca samuppāda* in terms of karma, and extending over three lives is not explicit in the suttas, and can only be read back into the suttas with the help of exegetical tools developed centuries later.

Indeed, Ven. Bodhi believes that the three-life interpretation, ‘far from deviating from the Suttas, simply makes explicit the Buddha’s intention in expounding dependent arising’ (Bodhi, 1998a, 45). He draws attention to a particular sutta that, in his opinion, ‘confirms the three-life interpretation of PS [*patīcca samuppāda*] almost as explicitly as one might wish’ (Bodhi 1998b, 165). The Baḷapandita Sutta (S 12:19) opens:

Bhikkhus, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has thereby originated. So there is this body and external name-and-form: thus this dyad. Dependent on the dyad there is contact. There are just six sense bases, contacted through which—or through a certain one among them—the fool experiences pleasure and pain.

The Buddha says the same regarding a wise man, then asks the bhikkhus what therefore the difference between a wise man and a fool might be. The bhikkhus defer to the Buddha, who says:
Bhikkhus, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has originated. For the fool that ignorance has not been abandoned and that craving has not been utterly destroyed. For what reason? Because the fool has not lived the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering. Therefore, with the breakup of the body, the fool fares on to [another] body. Faring on to [another] body, he is not freed from birth, from aging and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair; not freed from suffering, I say. (Bodhi 2000, 549 – 550)

The wise man, by contrast, has abandoned ignorance and destroyed craving, and thereby does not fare on to another body. Ven. Bodhi reads into this sutta the past causes (ignorance and craving) of present existence, the present results of those causes (the body, the sense bases, contact and feeling), the present causes of future existence (unabandoned ignorance and craving), and future results (birth, ageing and death in a future existence). He notes that:

in this brief sutta we find clearly adumbrated the later exegetical scheme of ‘the four groups’ (catusan˙khepa) and ‘twenty modes’ (visatākāra) . . . This should also help establish the validity of the ‘three-life’ interpretation of paticca-samuppāda and demonstrate that such an interpretation is not a commentarial innovation. (Bodhi 2000, 741)

With all respect to Ven. Bodhi’s powers as a translator, however, his exegesis here shows only that this particular sutta is especially amenable to the later three-life interpretation with its associated exegetical methods. There is nothing in it to prove that it was intended to be understood in the terms of later religious metaphysics. Indeed, it can be read in Nānavira’s existential sense. The ordinary person, unaware of reality and caught up with craving, identifies himself or herself with ‘this body’; having done so, he or she assumes a perceptual situation of self and world in which experience is possible, and therefore continues in existence as a self, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Without spiritual effort and insight, this situation will roll on, an existential structure of experience that destines the puthujjana to unsatisfactoriness as long as it continues. It is hard on strictly linguistic grounds to know why this should be an impossible interpretation of the sutta.3

Paticca samuppāda in historical context

The traditional three-life interpretation turns the twelve nidānas into the terms of a religious doctrine about the workings of samsāra, but Buddhadaśa’s and Nānavira’s criticisms lead us to question whether the Buddha meant to teach religious metaphysics. Bhikkhu Bodhi has tried to show that Nānavira’s interpretation does not square with the suttas, while the three-life interpretation is consistent and coherent. However, if Bodhi’s positive defence of the three-life interpretation is as inconclusive, as I have indicated, then we return to the
situation indicated at the outset of this discussion: that we do not really know what the terms of *patīcca samuppāda* were originally supposed to mean. The interpretations of Buddhadāsa and Ńānavīra, while they cannot be taken to have rediscovered the original meaning, raise the question of that meaning by drawing attention to the inadequacies of the three-life interpretation.

New light has been shed on this matter, however. In a recent paper, the Vedic scholar Joanna Jurewicz has shown how the twelve *nidānas* can be related to the terms and concepts of Vedic cosmogony, as these are preserved in the *Rg Veda*, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and some early Upaniṣads. Richard Gombrich has said of Prof. Jurewicz’s research into how the *nidānas* are responses to Vedic cosmogony that: ‘Given the centrality to Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, I think this may rank as one of the most important discoveries ever made in Buddhology’ (Gombrich 2005, 154).

The details are difficult, but the gist is that the twelve *nidānas* parody Vedic ideas while presenting conditioned existence as just *dukkha*. The Buddha, not being a brahmin, would not himself have been versed in Vedic scriptures, but the ideas they contain were presumably the common currency of religious belief among many whom he taught. The Buddha clearly enjoyed satirising Vedic religion. In the Kevaddha Sutta, he is represented as parodying Brahmā as a pompous and arrogant pretender to omniscient divinity (D 11 PTS i 211–223). In the Brahmajāla Sutta, the Buddha parodies Vedic stories about the evolution of the world (D 1 PTS i 18–19). In parodying Vedic cosmogony in the twelve *nidānas*, the Buddha might have been giving expression to his own teaching of *dukkha* and its ending in terms that would have had startling significance to his hearers. It would appear, however, that the early Buddhists, having no interest in Vedic ideas, soon forgot about them, and went about preserving the Buddha’s teachings without understanding the religious beliefs in relation to which some of these teachings were formulated. Hence we find very little explicit discussion of the terms of *patīcca samuppāda* in relation to Vedic thought in the Pali canon; what is there is clearly regarded as centrally important but is not explained.

According to Jurewicz, the twelve *nidānas* of *patīcca samuppāda* represent a parody of Brahminical ideas about creation. These ideas concern an *ātman*, an absolute Self, which is at once the subject of experience, the experiencer, and the ultimate object of experience. The Buddha, however, used the same ideas in a simplified form (the twelve *nidānas*) to show that, because in reality there is no *ātman*, all that comes into being is impermanent and therefore *dukkha*. A creation hymn in the *Rg Veda*, the Nāsadiya (RV 10.129), is the *locus classicus* for ideas about origins. It begins:

1. There was neither existence [ṣat] nor non-existence [asat] then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
2. There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one [tad ekam] breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

3. Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one [tad ekam] arose through the power of heat [tapas].

4. Desire [kāma] came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets [kavi] seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. (Doniger 1981, 25)

The hymn is full of questions, and it goes on to end with questions. This is no Book of Genesis, but a poetic cosmogony, more about the origin of cognition in an eternal mind than about the origin of the cosmos in an objective sense.

In the beginning was neither existence nor knowledge, for sat has both ontological and epistemological import; there was a state of total inexpressibility. Stepping ahead of the argument, it is this state that the Buddha described as avijñā, the ignorance upon which depend the rest of the links of paticca samuppāda. But avijñā is a mockery of this Vedic pre-creative inexpressibility, since the Buddhist term means only ignorance of dukkha and the origin of dukkha in tanhā (craving), whereas in the Vedic myth this pre-creative state will give rise to the ātman through kāma (desire).

In the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, the myth of creation is taken up from the point of this emergence, in relation to the ātman:

In the beginning this world was just a single body (ātman) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, ‘Here I am!’ and from that the name ‘I’ came into being . . . That first being received the name ‘man’ (purusa) . . . (BU 1.4.1 translated by Olivelle 1996, 13)

What comes into being is the possibility of cognition, the knowing subject, the ‘I’, who is as yet alone. In Vedic thought his happens through a process that is described through metaphors of fire. In the Nasadiya ‘that one’ (tad ekam) emerges from the solitude of creative darkness through the arising of tapas (the heat of ascetic ardour) and through kāma (the fire of desire). The Vedic poets recreate this ardour and desire. The Vedic fire rituals similarly recreate the conditions of creation. The saṅkhāra or ‘formations’ of the paticca samuppāda, which arise on condition of avijñā, parody a version of the creation myth in the Śatapatha Brāhmana in which Prajāpati (the creator) forms (abhisamskaroti) himself (ātman) in the form of the fire-altar (Jurewicz 2000, 83).

These Vedic ideas about creation are not philosophical; they are poetic and metaphorical, linked with ancient ritual and belief. The image of fire is a central metaphor in Vedic thought: the fire of desire (kāma) and ascetic ardour (tapas) bring the manifest world into being; the Vedic fire-rituals continue to sustain the universe and bring about desired ends in human life. Consciousness is imagined as fiery; it is appetitive, an eater, it exists through a desire that eats its objects. The ātman
evolves from the primal inexpressibility into a cognising being, a consciousness, when it enters into the manifest world of nāma-rūpa, name and form:

Penetrating this body up to the very nailtips, he remains there like a razor within a case or a termite within a termite-hill. People do not see him, for he is incomplete as he comes to be called breath when he is breathing, speech when he is speaking, sight when he is seeing, hearing when he is hearing, and mind when he is thinking. These are only the names of his various activities. A man who considers him to be any one of these does not understand him, for he is incomplete within any one of these. One should consider them as simply his self (ātman), for in it all these become one, The same self (ātman) is the trail to this entire world, for by following it one comes to know this entire world, just as by following their tracks one finds [the cattle]. Whoever knows this finds fame and glory. (BU 1.4.7 translated by Olivelle 1996, 14–15)

In the Buddha’s parody, viññāna and nāma-rūpa arise dependent on saṅkhāra (the formations)—but, without an ātman, this arising is just the arising of appetitive consciousness into the manifest world, a fire of desire without anyone who could be satisfied.

It is no secret that the Buddha took Vedic ideas about fire and turned them on their head. In the Fire Sermon (the Adittapariyāya Sutta: ‘the discourse concerning what is metaphorically on fire’) we find the Buddha saying that ‘all is burning’—the senses, sense-consciousness, sense-contact and sense-objects—‘burning with the fires of greed, hate and delusion’ (S 35:28 PTS iv 19). The word for the summum bonum of the Buddha’s teaching—nibbāna—means literally the ‘blowing out’ of a fire. In the Mahātaṇhāsankhāya Sutta we find an explicit discussion of consciousness and fire (M 38 PTS i 259–260). A monk called Sati comes to the Buddha’s attention as someone who believes that the same viññāna transmigrates; that is, he believes in the ātman. The Buddha reproves the monk, and compares consciousness and its dependence on the senses with a fire that depends on various kinds of fuel. Present and future existence, the Buddha goes on to say, depends on four kinds of nutriment, consciousness being the fourth, themselves dependent on tanhā, the great ‘thirst’ that gives the sutta its title.

The terms tanha and upādāna in the twelve nidānas also participate in this extended parody of fiery Vedic metaphor. Tanhā—‘thirst’—is usually understood as ‘craving’ in the context of paticca samuppāda, but this is the more abstract side of its meaning. More concretely it means the state of someone who is hot and sweating. Moreover, it is word that in the Vedic context refers to the creative activity both of fire and of the Vedic seers:

It may be assumed that in formulating the trsṇā [tanhā] link, the Buddha was referring to the fiery activity of the poets burning the world in the cosmogonic act of cognition. In his chain, their activity is deprived of its positive dimension
and is identified only with the negative aspect of fire, which in its insatiability digests, and thus destroys, itself and the world around it. (Jurewicz 2000, 96)

On condition of tanhā is upādāna, which means ‘clinging’ in the abstract, but also means the sustenance or fuel for a fire. In relation to Vedic thought it refers to the activity of Agni, the god of fire, who requires constant feeding in order that he can continue to cognise and sustain the world.

On condition of this sustenance arises bhava, jāti and jarāmarana, existence, birth and old age and death. In the Aitareya Upanisad (2.1) we find a discussion of birth:

At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. That is the radiance gathered from all the bodily parts; so he bears himself (atman) in himself (atman). And when a man deposits the semen in a woman, he gives birth to it. (Olivelle 1996, 197)

This new atman becomes part of the mother, and she nourishes (bhāvayati) the new being: Jurewicz thinks that the Buddha’s use of bhava may relate to this Vedic image of nourishing. Once the new being is born, it becomes old and dies, and is then born again. The Buddha describes the reproductive process in similar terms in the Mahātānāsankhaya Sutta (M 38.26–27 PTS i 265–266), suggesting that he was choosing to echo Vedic religio-biological thinking. The difference of course is that for the Buddha there is no atman undergoing birth; there is just the fire of tanhā and the continuation of dukkha.

Whether jāti in the twelve nidānas refers literally to future (re-)birth, or metaphorically to the ‘birth’ of the sense of being a ‘self’, is an issue that clearly distinguishes the traditional three-life interpretation of paticca samuppāda from that of Buddhadasa and Nānavīra. This discussion of the historical context of paticca samuppāda suggests that jāti does mean future birth, but in a particular sense. In the Vedic context, which the Buddha might be parodying, existence is something desirable; it means the continued existence of the atman, its continued possibility of enjoyment. Birth is obviously the result of pleasure; sexual pleasure is just one example of the creative heat by which the atman continues in its desiring fire. What is meant by jāti as a nidāna, therefore, is the outcome of desire, which leads to old age and death, more dukkha. The Buddha takes up Vedic belief in rebirth and gives it an ironic twist: since there is no atman, only dukkha is reborn. This is made explicit in some old verses in the Pāráyana section of the Sutta Nipāta.

In response to Punnaka’s questions the Buddha says:

‘These many seers (and) men, Punnaka’, said the Blessed One, ‘khattiyas (and) brahmans who offered sacrifices to deities here in the world, offered sacrifices, Punnaka, hoping for existence [bhāva] here, (being) subject to old age [jarā] . . . They hoped, praised, longed for and sacrificed, Punnaka,’ said the Blessed One. ‘They longed for sensual pleasures [kāma], dependent upon gain. I say that they, given over to sacrifice and affected by passion for existence [bhāva], did not cross over birth and old age.’ (Sn 1044 and 1046 translated by Norman 2001, 132)
Although these verses do not relate directly to the twelve nidānas as a formulation of paticca samuppāda, they support the contention that the Buddha was parodying Vedic ideas. The various Vedic religious practitioners mentioned in these verses seek continued existence, with its pleasures, through sacrificing to the gods. But, as the Buddha points out, for all their sacrificing, pleasure and gain they did not go beyond the travails of being born and dying—they did not find what transcends all this dukkha. Jāti in the twelve nidānas therefore refers to the general inevitability of birth for those who, believing in the reality of the self, continue to seek for existence. In this sense, the traditional literal interpretation of jāti as future birth although correct lacks the irony originally attached to the arising of birth from bhava. It might be said that, in defence of Buddhadaśa and Nānavīra, their interpretation of jāti as the metaphorical ‘birth’ of the sense of a self is a de-mythologised psychological version of what the Buddha perhaps originally meant.

Some conclusions

In the light of these discoveries about the historical context of paticca samuppāda, it would appear that the Buddha’s original intention in teaching the twelve nidānas was to parody Brahminical religious beliefs of his day. While he uses some of the terms and ideas of Vedic cosmogony, he does so ironically, since without an atman there is only dukkha arising. The three-life interpretation of paticca samuppāda, by contrast, creates a non-ironic religious doctrine out of the teachings preserved in the early suttas; the nidānas are taken to refer literally and objectively to stages in the individual’s journey through samsāra. However, if the nidānas were originally supposed to parody existing beliefs while at the same time showing poetically how dukkha arises, it would follow that the Buddha did not mean to assign single, objective meanings to any of the links. Instead, the terms of paticca samuppāda signify Vedic ideas at the same time as they simplify and re-interpret their religious values. This might explain how the terms of the nidānas occur in many different contexts in the suttas, and how their definitions overlap and interconnect without being easily reducible to a single systematic meaning.

Placing the nidānas in a historical context suggests that the interpretation of paticca samuppāda as occurring in the present moment (Buddhadāsa) or non-temporally as the structure of existence (Nānavīra) cannot be understood as revealing the Buddha’s original meaning, since they too are unaware of the Buddha’s method. However, these modern interpreters were at least trying to make paticca samuppāda relevant to those seeking release from dukkha: their demythologised and anti-metaphysical interpretations might be closer to the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching than the three-life interpretation even if the latter is, by dint of traditional exegetical effort, more consistent with the letter. But with the discovery of the historical context for the twelve nidānas comes the possibility of a contemporary exegesis in the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching rather than in the terms of the traditional three-life interpretation.
ABBREVIATIONS

A = Anguttara Nikāya
BU = Brhadāranyaka Upanisad
D = Dīgha Nikāya
M = Majhima Nikāya
Patis = Patisambhidāmagga
RV = Rg Veda
S = Samyutta Nikāya
Sn = Sutta Nipāta

NOTES

1. For more details see Frauwallner (1973, 150–169) and Bucknell (1999).
2. In Buddhadāsa (1989, 122) he describes this complete paticca samuppāda as a ‘diamond crowned toad’. The dukkha side of paticca samuppāda is a ‘despicable toad’, ‘absolutely loathsome’, but it is crowned with saddhā, or faith, from which arises the ending of dukkha.
3. Bhikkhu Bodhi would like to convince the reader that kāyupago hoti (here translated ‘fares on to [another] body’) ‘denotes movement towards the fruition of past kamma—movement fulfilled by the process of rebirth’ (Bodhi 1998b, 161). But upaga (lit., “going on to”) cannot be made to mean ‘according to karma’, and he admits that ‘fare on to [another] body’ only loosely corresponds to punnabbhavābhinihbatti, ‘productive of future re-becoming’, a phrase that is more easily glossed in terms of karma (Bodhi 1998b, 167). I would venture to observe that Bhikkhu Bodhi prefers to interpret the meanings of words concerned with paticca samuppāda in terms of the later commentarial exegesis, which is not a historical form of translation, and begs the question of the original meaning of the suttas in question.
4. Also at D 24 PTS iii 29–30. Gombrich (1990, 13) points out that this is a satirical retelling of the creation myth in Brhadāranyaka Upanisad 1.4.1–3.

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