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DEPENDENT ORIGATION AS EMERGENCE OF THE SUBJECT

Gabriel Ellis, PhD cand. Warsaw University, Jan 8th 2020

Abstract: Dependent Origination (Pāli paṭiccasamuppāda) is one of the fundamental concepts of early Buddhism. Traditionally, it is interpreted as a description of saṃsāra, the cycle of rebirths. This article offers a psychological interpretation of Dependent Origination as a model which describes how the forming unconscious of the fetus develops into the sequential human mind as we know it. This perspective opens new possibilities for the integration of Buddhist mind development, cognitive psychology, and psychotherapy.

Beyond the traditional interpretation as a description of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirths) there have been in recent decades alternative attempts to make sense of the Dependent Origination (DO)¹. Such attempts are necessary because the early Buddhist sources themselves certainly mention the twelve-fold sequence numerous times², but beyond that they don't provide a precise context for the DO, nor do they help us to understand how exactly the individual limbs interlock. Moreover, even the earliest Buddhist texts were composed over a few centuries, meaning that they contain teachings of the historical Buddha and mix them with the eiseges of later teachers. The texts of early Buddhism are, therefore, only of limited help when we want to understand the psychology of the Buddha's original concepts³.

In this article I understand the Buddha above all as an expert in the human mind and its spiritual development. Accordingly, I propose that he must have had a refined understanding of what we today call the 'unconscious', and that indeed the DO is where he encoded this knowledge most prominently. My conclusions are consistent with portions of the early Buddhist sources but are equally influenced by my psychological work and meditative insights into the structure of the

¹ E.g. in Jones, 2009.

² In the early Pāli suttas Dependent Origination appears at numerous places, most notably in the collection of suttas dedicated to the DO, i.e. SN 12.

³ In the context of this article it is of little importance that the DO was originally probably not twelve-fold. I use it as the 'standard version'. I also put aside the question of DO and rebirth which requires a separate treatment.

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mind. The article is therefore meant as a contribution to original research in the intersection of Buddhism and contemporary psychology⁴.

In short, I argue that Dependent Origination describes the fabric of the human mind and how it develops from the ‘unconscious field’ of the fetus to the human mind as we know it. Consistent with the sources I conceptualize the unconscious of early Buddhism as an instable mental force which, for the sake of survival, depends on anticipating the future and therefore desperately strives for continuity. As a consequence it gradually brings forth a self-conscious subject which imagines itself in a projected future and yet suffers from the instable mental fabric it is made of.

Below, I re-interpret the limbs of Dependent Origination and comment on their psychological function and how they contribute to generating the self-conscious subject.

1. Ignorance (Pāli *avijjā*, lit. ‘non-knowledge’). I interpret *avijjā* in the sequence of Dependent Origination from a psychological perspective as the forming unconscious of the fetus, and more generally as a broad term for unconscious tendencies⁵ and their harmful consequences⁶. In the context of early Buddhism ‘ignorance’ can only be destroyed by Buddhist insight and meditative liberation⁷. In comparison, there is no psychotherapeutic approach which aspires such a radical transformation⁸.

2. The forming unconscious field (Pāli *saṅkhāra*, lit. ‘together-making’). The Pāli term describes what the primitive unconscious actually does, namely incessantly weaving an interconnected cognitive ‘field’. In the unconscious there are no isolated parts, there are rather networks of meaning which always refer to other networks within the field. We get an

⁴ De Silva (1967) draws several similarities between Buddhist concepts of the unconscious and Freudian psychology. Waldron (2003) investigates the role of the unconscious in later Buddhism.

⁵ E.g. in SN 22.47

⁶ In most other contexts *avijjā* refers to the lack of liberating Buddhist knowledge.

⁷ SN 1.23 SN 1.28, SN 7.6, SN 9.2, SN 11.19, SN 35.229, SN 48.50, AN 3.33, AN 3.58, AN 3.60, AN 3.66, AN 4.196, AN 7.55, AN 8.11, MN 4, MN 9, MN 22, MN 27, MN 36, MN 39, MN 65, MN 76, MN 79, MN 80, MN 112, MN 121, DN 2, DN 10, Snp 5.13.

⁸ Yet, some therapeutic approaches have liberating aspirations, which however don’t cover the scope of Buddhist liberation, e.g. the ‘Transpersonal Psychology’ of Stanislav Grof (2000), or ‘Quantum Consciousness’ of Stephen Wolinsky (1993).

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impression of this interwoven nature of the unconscious in dreams, trances, or psychedelic states. Here, our regular distinct ‘I’ yields to a ‘floating’ experience where things happen without the mediation of a controlling agent. When the ‘I’ dips further into the unconscious it disappears along with its memory so that it resembles a blackout or deep sleep. This ‘I-less’ cognitive field is the *sankhāra* of the DO. The constant movement of this field is in the service of the organism’s urge for survival. Psychologically this movement will later on be experienced by the subject as a lack⁹ or desire. At this stage, however, no desiring subject is formed yet.

Early Buddhism directly targets the inherent movement of *sankhāra* with different practices of non-reaction. Foremost is the deep stillness of the mind in *samādhi* or *jhāna*. *Vipassana* or ‘insight meditation’ allows the observation of subtlest movements of the mind from a position of stillness. Beyond that there are practices of imperturbability (*āneñja*)¹⁰, and ascetic exercises of patient endurance¹¹.

Even though psychotherapy is not trying to achieve this radical stillness of mind we still find in the modern mindfulness-movement elements of *vipassana* practice. Also, a well-established component of cognitive-behavioral treatment of anxieties is ‘response prevention’ which is a ‘therapeutic stillness’ in emotionally distressing situations¹². The far-reaching wholesome effects of profound stillness in Buddhist practice warrant further therapeutic research to find more applications beyond just the current ‘mindfulness’ hype.

3. Rudimentary consciousness (Pāli *viññāṇa*, lit. ‘cognition’). The movement of the unconscious cognitive field eventually brings to rise a rudimentary consciousness which can also

⁹ See also the psychological concept of fundamental lack in the works of Jacques Lacan (Fink 1995, 53-55).

¹⁰ This aspect of the mind is established just before liberation, see SN 12.51, AN 3.58, AN 3.59, AN 3.116, AN 4.190, AN 4.198, AN 5.75, AN 5.76, AN 6.55, AN 8.11, AN 9.26, MN 4, MN 19, MN 27, MN 36, MN 39, MN 51, MN 60, MN 65, MN 76, MN 79, MN 85, MN 94, MN 100-102, MN 105-106, MN 112, MN 122, MN 125, DN 2, DN 3, DN 10, DN 33.

¹¹ Namely the patient endurance of cold and heat; hunger and thirst; flies, mosquitoes, wind, the burning sun, serpents; rude and offensive speech; and painful bodily feelings (AN 4.114, AN 4.157, AN 4.165, AN 5.140, AN 6.58, AN 10.71, MN 2, MN 119, MN 125).

¹² See for details Abramowitz et al. (2019).

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be found in animals¹³. But why should organisms develop consciousness at all? Why couldn't the cognitive field with its networks remain unconscious? Recently, Donald Hoffman (2019) has proposed a plausible answer to this question, in which he compares consciousness to a computer interface: From the myriads of unconscious associations the organism elevates very specific bits of information in order to run more complex calculations, e.g. scenarios, simulations, or in order to prepare consequential decisions. From an evolutionary perspective these calculations improve the fitness of the individual organism. From a Buddhist perspective consciousness and its 'interface' function represent the starting point of the self-aware subject¹⁴.

There are a few Buddhist practices which seem to directly target this stage of the DO. There is an advanced meditation which leads to the 'realm of infinite consciousness' (*viññāṇañcāyatana*) and might represent a state in which *viññāṇa* is active, yet 'blank'. A similar practice is mentioned where one meditates on non-dual consciousness¹⁵. Furthermore, *viññāṇa* is one of the five traditional mental components (*khandha*) of identification and attachment, and hence a general practice of dis-identification is advised¹⁶. All these practices, however, are not aiming at deactivating the rudimentary consciousness, but rather to mitigate some of its harmful effects for the subject.

4. Linguistic consciousness (Pāli *nāmarūpa*, lit. 'name-shape'). Building on rudimentary consciousness the mind introduces the ability to associate an object with a name or a symbol. This ability to form a 'primitive language'¹⁷ is only the beginning of the impact of language on the mind. In contrast to the 'interwoven field' of the unconscious the symbolic mind is sequential, allows linear thinking, distinct concepts, and a proper memory in which single units of information refer to other single units. It cannot be overstated how important this step is in forming the human mind as we know it, for the self-aware subject mainly processes in the form

¹³ Early Buddhism doesn't understand animal psychology well. While there is a focus on compassion towards animals they are not referred to as beings with occasionally complex languages, as we understand them today.

¹⁴ Outside the DO *viññāṇa* usually refers to the six types of consciousness, of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body/skin, and mind.

¹⁵ *viññāṇa-kasiṇa*, in AN 1.464, AN 10.25, AN 10.26, AN 10.29, MN 77, MN 102, DN 33, DN 34.

¹⁶ See the collection dedicated to the *khandhas*, SN 22, and further below where we examine 'identification'.

¹⁷ So called by Wittgenstein (1986) in *Philosophical Investigations* I.2.

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of language. But linguistic processing is not limited to consciousness - also parts of the unconscious are structured like a language and greatly influence consciousness¹⁸.

The entire teachings of early Buddhism depend on the ability to comprehend language. After all the Buddha Dhamma is a set of concepts, transmitted by language¹⁹, memorized, interpreted, and practiced. Similarly, most types of psychotherapy (except some forms of body-oriented psychotherapy) utilize language-based concepts for their treatments, regardless if they focus on a verbal or non-verbal cure. On the other hand a merely language-based understanding of spiritual or therapeutic principles is ineffective and requires additionally a processing which involves more aspects of the organism²⁰.

There is another, less ambitious aspect in early Buddhism which involves language: ‘Right Speech’ (*sammā-vācā*) is an important ethical principle at the beginning of the Buddhist path. It stabilizes practitioners in not-harming themselves or others and thus facilitates an overall wholesome re-direction of the mental apparatus. In psychotherapy this effect of ‘Right Speech’ has been underused²¹, even though the impact of positive self-talk generally finds more recognition²².

5. Emergence of the Subject (Pāli *saḷāyatana*, lit. ‘sixfold center of experience’). At this stage the self-aware subject as we know it (Pāli *citta*) emerges for the first time, due to experience being centered in the sense organs and the mind. Thus, the unconscious field, striving for ever more stability, has formed a distinct conscious ‘self’ to navigate the organism. This subject experiences itself as the legitimate representative of the organism and is yet alienated from large parts of the mental apparatus because it cannot directly perceive what is unconscious, and because it processes sequentially (i.e. one bit after the other, with limited capacity in each moment). In other words, the crudely cobbled-together subject is self-aware but feels alone

¹⁸ Mostly this is the unconscious that Freud refers to in his investigations. Similarly, for Lacan the unconscious is structured like a language (Fink 1995, 8).

¹⁹ Both the Vedic *brahman* and the Buddha Dhamma were conceptualized as ‘transformative speech’. See Ellis (2020, 220-224).

²⁰ See SN 1.35: “Not by mere speech nor solely by listening / Can one advance on this firm path of practice”

²¹ See for exceptions Boorstein (1985),

²² E.g. Orvell et al. (2020).

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because it is cut off from the direct guidance by unconscious needs. Rather, the subject finds itself acting involuntarily and tries ‘to catch up’ with its own sequential processing and self-reflections.

Advanced meditations aim at moving the *citta*-subject from its fixation with the body-mind towards more subtle *āyatana*s, i.e. centers of experience²³. Other sets of meditations also result in *cetovimutti*, a temporary liberation of the subject²⁴.

Psychotherapy has hardly recognized the potential of such radical switches of the center of experience. Somewhat related concepts can, however, be found in hypnotherapeutic principles like ‘de-hypnotizing’ (Wolinsky, 1991) or the ‘mini-satori’ of Fritz Perls (Houston 2003, 23).

Psychotherapy could gain more benefits from realizing that human cognition in general (and symptoms specifically) are located in a specific center of experience. Mostly, the implicit understanding of therapy is that the client remains at the same ‘place’ but improves their cognitive-emotional processing. In contrast, I propose to conceptualize sustainable improvements (i.e. healing) as *shifts* in the center of experience. Accordingly, I suggest to do more research into how to facilitate such wholesome shifts and to explore the value of Buddhist concepts to this end.

6. The Subject as Agent (Pāli *phassa*, lit. ‘touch’). Now that the subject has emerged it can finally act and thus contribute to the desired predictability of the organism’s future. Thus, the previously only roughly assembled subject is now further rigidified through *intention* – the subject has the ability to *intend* a concrete action (for example a movement of the arm), *executes* it, and (when successful) *benefits* from the confirmation that it exercised influence on its surrounding and its experience. This, in turn, validates the subject and encourages it to expand the intentional grasp of its surrounding.

²³ See for a more general treatment of *āyatana* as ‘center of experience’ Ellis (2020b).

²⁴ See also De Silva (1978).

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7. Feelings (Pāli *vedanā*, lit. ‘sensation’). In the realm of consciousness we now have a self-aware subject and its main tool, intention. But where should it direct its intentions to? As mentioned above, the subject is alienated from its unconscious needs and drives, so it needs a conscious equivalent as a guiding light – a type of conscious experience which indicates where to reach and what to strive for: *feelings*.

The Buddhist practice of monastics is particularly connected with this stage. Since monastics should lead a simple life and can under no circumstances have sexual relations, they depend on not ‘touching’ objects with their senses which could tempt them into transgression. ‘Guarding the senses’ is therefore especially important for novices who have no experience yet with how to properly protect their mind²⁵. The practice of ‘guarding the mind’ is related to the term *nimitta*²⁶, which signifies a causative characteristic of an object – the practitioner hence understands which objects lead to which feelings and is in daily life very careful not to interact with characteristics which create an obstacle.

Much more than in the previous stages feelings are an established domain of psychology and psychotherapy. Exactly because the subject is deeply guided by feelings their regulation became an obvious field of basically all forms of psychotherapy.

Still, early Buddhism has new perspectives to offer. In Buddhism feelings are not an expression of the subject’s bottom line authenticity. Rather, the subject that strives for liberation also wants to liberate itself from the power of feelings. Hence, Buddhist practices teach to change the *conditions* in which problematic feelings occur, or to even change them directly. There is for example an advanced practice where the meditator willingly turns a pleasant perception into an unpleasant one, and vice versa²⁷. Again, Hypnotherapy and Gestalt Therapy have in the

²⁵ ‘Protecting the doors of the mind’ (*indriyesu guttadvāro*; SN 35.120, SN 35.127, SN 35.132, SN 35.129, SN 35.240, AN 3.16, AN 4.37, AN 5.56, AN 5.114, AN 5.150, AN 5.167, AN 6.17, AN 6.31, AN 7.28, AN 8.9, AN 8.79, AN 10.72, MN 5, MN 39, MN 53, MN 69, MN 107, MN 125, DN 2, DN 8, DN 10, DN 28, Snp 3.1). It appears as an alternative to a similar term, ‘sense restraint’ (Pāli *indriyasamvara*), as a common element in the so-called ‘gradual training’ for monastics (AN 4.198, AN 5.76, AN 10.99, MN 27, MN 38, MN 39, MN 51, MN 53, MN 60, MN 76, MN 79, MN 94, MN 101, MN 107, MN 112, MN 125, DN 2-13. Beyond that also in SN 2.7, SN 46.6, AN 5.114, AN 6.50, AN 6.58, AN 7.65, AN 8.81, AN 10.61-62, AN 10.73, AN 10.99, MN 2, MN 54, DN 21).

²⁶ See Ellis (2021).

²⁷ SN 46.54, SN 52.1, SN 54.8, AN 5.144, MN 152, DN 28.

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therapeutic field a similarly ‘playful’ attitude towards feelings – clients are encouraged to switch between different emotional states in order to ‘un-stuck’ their experience and to allow the organism to find a more wholesome state of mind²⁸.

Another aspect which should find more recognition in psychology is when Buddhism is very mindful of the causative effect of certain characteristics or objects on the mind. A similar but crude concept in psychology is the ‘triggers’ which lead to anxiety, depressive thoughts, or escalation in relationships. But what is still missing is much broader understanding of our mind which constantly perceives ‘causative characteristics’. Such an understanding would allow clients much more to understand their state of mind as the result of such characteristics they habitually ‘touch’ and interact with.

8. Desire (Pāli *taṇhā*, lit. ‘thirst’²⁹). The subject which is supposed to guide the organism has made some steps towards stability and is able to intend an experience which results in pleasant feelings. But in order to have a chance to control the outcome, a specific combination of processes is necessary: (1) *remember* a pleasant experience (“this felt good”), (2) *associate* the feeling with a set of circumstances (“the feeling occurred when I was eating chocolate”), (3) *anticipate* a *future* satisfaction under similar circumstances (“eating chocolate again will feel good again”), (4) *intend* a repetition (“I *want* to get chocolate in order to eat it and feel good”), and (5) *initiate* the according action (going to the kitchen/store, ask for money, etc.). This is the complete ‘set of desire-fulfillment’ – or in short: *desire*.

The first three elements form a ‘theory of fulfillment’, and these theories are essential for the subject because it is alienated from the unconscious out of which it emerged. In the ever continuing search for guidance now the theories of fulfillment become pleasant in themselves because they imply that fulfillment can be foreseen and *planned* – whether the theories in fact lead to pleasant experiences or not. After all, the actual fulfillment lies outside of the organism and might depend on many factors which are not under the subject’s control. In contrast *planning*

²⁸ This is of course a simplification and I refer to the relevant literature for more detailed introductions.

²⁹ See for the term and a further discussion Ellis (2021b).

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fulfillment is always accessible and happens inside the mind, manifesting as fantasies, anticipation, expectation, hope, and longing. Hence, from this stage on the subject strongly engages in planning fulfillment and thus firmly locates itself in the realm of desire and fantasy.

This results in a specific fragmentation. On the one hand the subject enjoys the simple experience of pleasure as a direct confirmation that it is guiding the organism well. On the other hand it engages even more in crafting *theories* of pleasure-fulfillment in order to secure a *future* confirmation to be a good guide. Both are obviously satisfying for the unconscious in their own right. However, this setup burdens the subject with a meta-question it constantly needs to answer anew: “Should I engage in the fulfillments available to me now, or should I invest in future fulfillment?” Over time the maturing subject will prefer the latter because the actual fulfillment shows unpleasant deficiencies: “My favorite food isn’t as tasty as I hoped it would be”, “my actual relationship doesn’t remove my loneliness as I hoped it would”, etc., which questions the subject’s actual ability to guide the organism. In contrast, *in fantasy* the fulfillment can be ideal, and hence also the subject’s self-image to be a good guide.

9. The subject gets an identity (Pāli *upādāna*, lit. ‘taking up closely’). This is the final step in the formation of the subject as we know it. The subject-of-fantasy engages in desire-fulfillment, but that in itself doesn’t prevent erratic fluctuation and jumping from one theory of fulfillment to a very different one in the next moment – which would not serve the purpose of a sustainable guidance of the organism. In order to achieve this there needs to be stability in the way the subject forms theories of desire-satisfaction – forming this stability leads to an ‘identity’ of the subject, or to a ‘personality’. Naturally, identity requires something to identify with, and the Buddhist teaching emphasizes five clusters for identification (Pāli *upādānakkhandhā*): the movement of the cognitive field, including thoughts, concepts, and intentions (*saṅkhāra*), one’s own consciousness (*viññāṇa*), one’s physical appearance (*rūpa*), sense-perceptions (*saññā*), and feelings (*vedanā*)³⁰. The identification with these clusters finally secures a stability of the subject

³⁰ The *upādāna-khandhas* belong to the oldest and most fundamental Buddhist teachings. Even though the *khandhas* cover a variety of objects of identification, they still imply a somewhat solipsistic perspective, as is the case with the entire DO. For, clearly *other people* are missing as a major influence and objects of identification - above all parents, friends, society, or more generally ‘the other’.

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over time and thus completes the journey of the cognitive apparatus, namely out of a futureless and helpless condition to create workable projections of the future and on this basis to guide the organism towards a fitter survival.

It's essential to keep in mind that all the layers which have emerged throughout the development of the cognitive apparatus, i.e. the stages 2-9, remain functional and are not replaced by the next emerging layer. This means that the self-conscious subject has to deal with the repercussions of: its experience being centered in the body-mind, being closely tied to its intentions, being directed by feelings, forming theories of desire-fulfillment, and compulsively identifying with different aspects of body, mind, and surrounding.

10. Stability over time (Pāli *bhava*, lit. 'becoming'). As mentioned above, with *upādāna* the formation of the subject has already been completed which lays the foundation for its perpetuation over time. This result is merely emphasized as this stage of 'becoming'.

11-12. Birth, old age, and death remain inevitable (Pāli *jāti, jarāmaraṇa*, lit. 'birth', 'age-death'). Against the odds of impermanence the unconscious field has generated a subject which can remain stable over time, moving into a seemingly more predictable future. In turn, part of the unconscious forms around the subject and embraces the foreseeable future as a fact – including the inability to imagine a dissolution of the constructed subject.

The problem is that by nature all composites eventually have to change and disintegrate, including the subject and the physical body. Another limitation is that the gain in rigidity of the subject has to be maintained elaborately by myriads of microprocesses of the mental apparatus, which end up exhausting the subject.

If we further take into account the Buddhist worldview which revolves around endless rebirth, ultimately nothing has been gained, because the development of the subject has never really changed the inevitable destiny of the mental apparatus itself. So the last stages of the DO –

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namely again to be born, again to get old, and again to die – appear as tragic reminders that in the end the emergence of the subject has failed.

Obviously, Buddhist practice still sees a way out, a real liberation of the mental apparatus from its fundamental deficiencies. The proposed solution doesn't lie in the emergence of yet another layer of the mind, but in making the conscious agent (Pāli *citta*) realize the nature of its own mental apparatus. This happens by providing a blueprint of the mind (which is this very Dependent Origination), by insight meditation verifies this model (*vipassana*), and by concentration meditation which provides a new center of experience (namely *jhāna* or *samādhi*), unifies the mind in a fundamentally wholesome way and as a consequence reveals the unsatisfactory nature of the mental tendencies. All three result (in one way or another) in a radical dispassion with the normal functioning of the mind itself which supposedly leaves the conscious agent intact but otherwise destroys the deficient structure through which it was established.

I am confident that early Buddhism contains many valuable insights into the fabric of the mind and that further explorations in this direction will reveal more fruitful applications for psychology and psychotherapy. Specifically, psychotherapists can learn more about the different emergent layers of the mind, the resulting fragmentation of the subject, and develop pertinent therapeutic methods to support the development and healing of their clients.

Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
Snp	Suttanipāta

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