

Concept of Dependent Origination

Samsara



At its heart, Dependent Origination is a universal law of conditionality.

The Buddha famously summarised it with a simple, elegant formula:

"When this is, that is.

This arising, that arises.

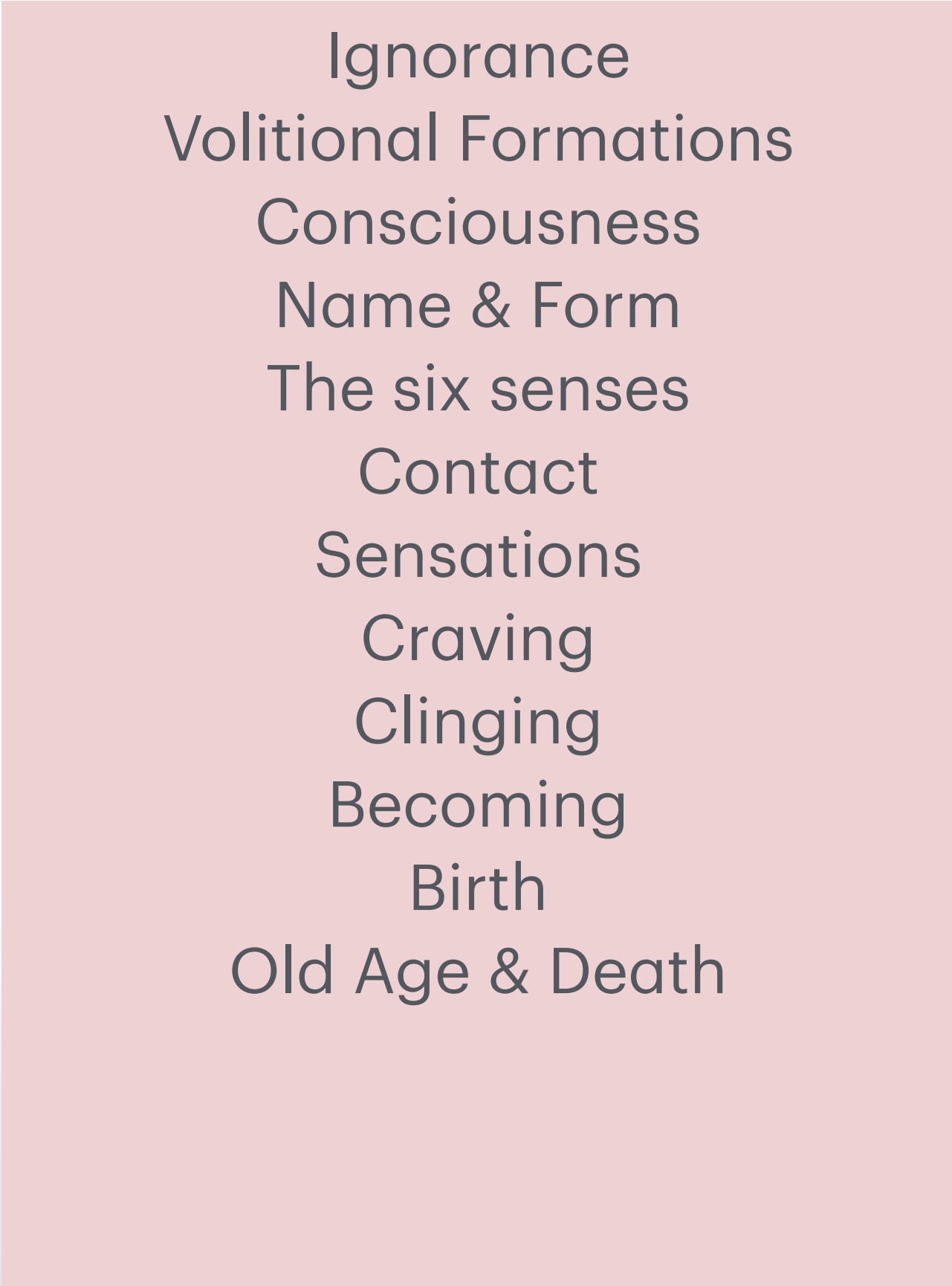
When this is not, that is not.

This ceasing, that ceases."

This principle asserts that nothing exists in isolation, independent of other factors. Every phenomenon, every experience, every state of being arises because of a specific set of conditions. When those conditions change or cease, the phenomenon also changes or ceases. This applies to everything from the growth of a plant to the arising of a thought to the entire cycle of birth and death.

The 12 Links of Dependent Origination

This is a chain of twelve interdependent factors that explain the origin and perpetuation of suffering (dukkha) and the cycle of rebirth (saṃsara).



Ignorance
Volitional Formations
Consciousness
Name & Form
The six senses
Contact
Sensations
Craving
Clinging
Becoming
Birth
Old Age & Death

The 12 Links of Dependent Origination Defined

Ignorance, Volitional Formations, Consciousness, Name & Form

- 1. **Ignorance** (Avidyā): Not understanding the true nature of reality—specifically, the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, non-self, and suffering. This is the fundamental conditioning factor.
- 2. **Volitional Formations** (Saṅkhāra): The karmic actions (body, speech, mind) fueled by ignorance. These are the "seeds" planted for future experiences.
- 3. **Consciousness** (Viññāṇa): The first moment of consciousness in a new existence, conditioned by the past karmic formations. This is the "link" between lives.
- 4. **Name and Form** (Nāma-rūpa): The psycho-physical organism. "Name" refers to the mental components (feeling, perception, volition); "Form" is the physical body.
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The 12 Links of Dependent Origination Defined

Six Sense Bases, Contact, Feeling, Craving

- 5. **Six Sense Bases** (Ṣaḷāyatana): The five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body) and the mind.
- 6. **Contact** (Sparśa): The meeting of sense organ, sense object, and corresponding consciousness.
- 7. **Feeling** (Vedanā): The raw, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensation that arises from contact.
- 8. **Craving** (Tṛṣṇā): The immediate reaction to feeling—the desire for more pleasant feelings and the aversion to unpleasant ones. This is the fuel for the next round of the cycle
- Continue ->

The 12 Links of Dependent Origination Defined

Clinging, Becoming, Birth, Aging & Death

- 9. **Clinging** (Upādāna): Craving intensifies into clinging and grasping. We cling to views, rituals, sense pleasures, and the idea of a self.
- 10. **Becoming** (Bhava): The powerful karmic energy created by clinging that propels one toward a future existence. This is the "planting" of new seeds for the next life.
- 11. **Birth** (Jāti): The actual rebirth into a new realm of existence, resulting from the karmic force of "becoming."
- 12. **Aging and Death** (Jarāmaraṇa): And with it, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair and because we are still shrouded in Ignorance (1), the entire cycle begins again.

The Twelve Links are typically presented in three lifetimes

Past Life (The Karmic Seeds)

- 1. Ignorance
- 2. Volitional Formations

Present Life (The Karmic Fruit)

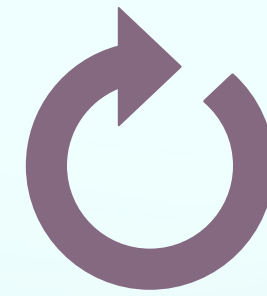
- 3. Consciousness
- 4. Name and Form
- 5. Six Sense Bases
- 6. Contact
- 7. Feeling
- 8. Craving
- 9. Clinging
- 10. Becoming

Future Life (The Next Rebirth)

- 11. Birth
- 12. Aging and Death

In your Present Life, you are subject to Volitional Formations (Karmic Seeds) from Past Lives and also from your present life. Ignorance is the “elephant in the room” it colors all of the other links... always. The presence of Ignorance guarantees the next rebirth. ...Samsara

The connection between the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next is the most crucial part of understanding how Samsara perpetuates itself. It is the very mechanism that makes the wheel turn endlessly.



Ignorance is Not Just the Start

It is the Constant Condition

- The most important thing to realize is that Ignorance (Link 1) is not just the first link in a chain and then it's gone. It is the fundamental, underlying delusion that colors every single link that follows.
- Think of Ignorance not as a single action, but as the operating system of the unenlightened mind. It's the deep-seated, instinctual belief that things are permanent, satisfying, and possess an independent self. This misperception is active during birth, during contact, during feeling, and it is absolutely active during aging and death.
- So, when we reach Link 12 (Aging and Death), we are experiencing it "through the lens of Ignorance".

Suffering is the Ultimate Catalyst for Craving

The Four Noble Truths

- The Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths starts with the truth of suffering – dukkha.
- The second truth states that the cause of suffering is craving.
- Now, think about the experience of Aging and Death. It is the most intense and concentrated form of suffering that a being encounters in a single lifetime.
- Continue ->

Suffering is the Ultimate Catalyst for Craving

Aging and Death

- Physical pain: The body breaking down.
- Mental anguish: The fear of non-existence, of losing everything and everyone you know.
- Grief and despair: The sorrow of leaving things unfinished and the powerlessness to stop it.
- This intense suffering is an incredibly powerful trigger. And how does an Ignorant mind react to suffering? It "craves" and "clings".
- Continue ->

Suffering is the Ultimate Catalyst for Craving

Aging and Death

- We crave for the pain to go away.
- We crave for life to continue.
- We cling desperately to our memories, our identity, our loved ones.
- We develop an aversion (a form of craving) to the process of death itself.

The Moment of Death

...is a Moment of Intense Karmic Creation

This reaction of craving and clinging, happening at the most critical moment of life, is itself a “karmic action”. It is a powerful **Volitional Formation** (Link 2). So, the loop looks like this:

- 1. A life is lived, based on the karmic seeds from a "previous" life.
- 2. This life inevitably culminates in the intense suffering of **Aging and Death** (Link 12).
- 3. Because the mind is still operating under the influence of **Ignorance** (Link 1). it reacts to this suffering with powerful **Craving** and **Clinging** (Links 8 & 9)".
- 4. This final, intense act of craving plants a fresh set of karmic seeds **Volitional Formations** (Link 2) into the consciousness stream (or the Ālaya-vijñāna).
- 5. These new seeds are the very things that will condition the next **Becoming** (Link 10) and **Birth** (Link 11).

An Analogy

Imagine the cycle of Samsara is a spinning top.

- **Ignorance** (1) is the fundamental misunderstanding that makes you think the top must keep spinning.
- **Volitional Formations** (2) are the flick of your wrist that sets the top spinning (rebirth).
- The entire chain of links is the top spinning across the floor.
- **Aging and Death** (12) is when the top starts to wobble violently, scrape the floor, and slow down. It's experiencing friction and resistance—this is its “suffering.”
- Seeing the top about to fall, your Ignorance-driven panic sets in. You desperately want it to keep going. This desperate desire is **Craving** (8).
- You reach out and give it another frantic flick to keep it spinning. This new flick is a new **Volitional Formation** (2), a new karmic act born from the suffering of the wobbling top.

So, to put it candidly...

...the end of one life is not a passive conclusion

It is the most fertile ground for planting the karmic seeds of the next. The suffering inherent in death, when viewed through the distorted lens of Ignorance, forces us to react in exactly the ways that guarantee we will be reborn to face the whole process all over again. The only way to stop the cycle is not to give the top another flick—to face the wobbling top with wisdom, not craving. This is the path to liberation.

The Central Question

This model explains the process of rebirth, but it raises a critical question:

"If there is no permanent self or soul (anātman), what is the "thing" that carries the karmic potential from the "Volitional Formations" of a past life to the "Consciousness" of a new one?

What is the substrate for this continuity?"

Ālaya-Vijñāna

...the Substrate for Continuity

- ***The Repository of Karma:*** The Ālaya-vijñāna is the storehouse for the karmic seeds planted by Ignorance (1) and Volitional Formations (2). Every time we act out of ignorance, we "perfume" the storehouse with a new seed.
- ***The Engine of Rebirth:*** At death, the seven active consciousnesses dissolve. But the Ālaya-vijñāna, with its full cargo of karmic seeds, continues. It is this subtle stream of consciousness that "carries" the karmic imprints from one life to the next. It is the mechanism that links the end of one life to the beginning of another, providing the continuity that Dependent Origination requires without a permanent soul. When the conditions for a new rebirth are present, a specific karmic seed "matures" and gives rise to Consciousness (3) in a new psycho-physical entity –Name and Form (4).
- Continue ->

Ālaya-Vijñāna

...the Substrate for Continuity

- ***The Manifestation of Reality:*** The entire phenomenal world we experience—from our own body and mind (Name and Form, Six Sense Bases) to the external world and our interactions with it (Contact, Feeling, Craving, Clinging)—is considered a "manifestation" or "projection" from the seeds stored in the Ālaya-vijñāna. Our reality is literally shaped by our past karma.
- ***The Perpetual Feedback Loop:*** This is the crucial part. As we go through life experiencing this projected reality, we react with Craving (8) and Clinging (9). These reactions, rooted in ignorance, are new karmic actions. These actions immediately plant new seeds back into the Ālaya-vijñāna. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the storehouse projects reality, we react to that reality, and our reactions replenish the storehouse, ensuring the cycle continues.
- Continue ->

Ālaya-Vijñāna

...the Substrate for Continuity

- Example: Imagine a person who, in a past life, frequently acted with anger. This action, born of ignorance, plants a "seed of anger" in their Ālaya-vijñāna. At death, their physical consciousness ceases, but the Ālaya-vijñāna, containing the "seed of anger," flows into a new conception.
- In their new life, this seed matures. It manifests as a predisposition to see the world in a hostile way (Name and Form, Six Sense Bases are conditioned by it). Someone bumps into them on the street (Contact). The feeling is immediately unpleasant (Feeling). Because of the latent karmic seed, their reaction is not neutral but one of intense anger (Craving/Clinging—in this case, clinging to the injustice). They yell at the person.
- This new action of anger plants even more powerful seeds of anger back into the Ālaya-vijñāna. The cycle is now strengthened. The person is not only experiencing the result of past anger but is actively creating the causes for future anger, ensuring their world will continue to be filled with it.

Our reality is literally shaped by our past karma.

Summary

"When this is, that is. This arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not. This ceasing, that ceases."

- Dependent Origination is the universal law. It is the blueprint for how suffering operates.
- Ālaya-vijñāna is the mechanism, the "operating system," proposed by the Mahāyāna school to explain how that blueprint runs, especially across lifetimes. It's the karmic soil in which the seeds of the Dependent Origination process are sown, sprout, and are re-sown.
- It's vital to understand that this is a specific Mahāyāna philosophical model designed to solve a tricky problem. Other schools, like Theravāda, explain the continuity of the Dependent Origination chain using the concept of a stream of consciousness or a process of moment-to-moment arising and passing away, without positing a foundational "storehouse." They would argue that introducing a "storehouse" consciousness risks reifying a subtle form of self.
- However, for Mahāyāna, the Ālaya-vijñāna is the perfect solution. It provides a powerful and elegant explanation for continuity without a self, showing how our entire perceived reality is deeply intertwined with our own karmic projections. The ultimate goal, then, is not just to break the chain of Dependent Origination, but to "purify" the storehouse of its defiled seeds, transforming it into the pristine wisdom of a Buddha.

“Heavy Lifting”* compliments of: Z.ai Chat GLM-4.6 & 4.5

*While the exact origin of this idiom is unclear, it likely stems from manual labor jobs where workers were required to lift heavy objects on a regular basis. Over time, the term has evolved to encompass any type of difficult work that requires extra effort beyond what is typically expected.

In this case, the “Heavy Lifting” is the massive research, organizational and logical capabilities that [Z.ai](#) brought to this project.

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