

**‘Preconditions’:
The *Upanisā Sutta* in Context**

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Abstract

The *Upanisā Sutta* (Saṃyutta Nikāya 12: 23) has been interpreted as presenting an overarching account of conditionality, joining the twelve *nidānas* of *paṭicca-samuppāda* with a further series of positive factors (*upanisās*) leading to awakening. The discourse has a parallel preserved in Chinese translation. A close reading of these versions shows how the series of *upanisās* belongs to a ‘family’ of *upanisā* discourses. The connection of the series to the twelve *nidānas* appears rhetorical rather than doctrinal. The concept of *upanisā* in Pāli literature is related to the concept of *upaniṣad* in Vedic literature, and *upanisā* was also a topic of debate in the ascetic milieu of ancient India. The Buddhist concept of *upanisā* emerges as that of a supportive inner state that is a necessary condition for achieving the aim of liberation. I propose to translate *upanisā* as ‘precondition’.

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Introduction

In the ‘editorial notes’ to her pioneering 1922 translation of the *nidāna-saṃyutta* (volume 2 of *Kindred Sayings*, her translation of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*), Mrs Rhys Davids deplores the ‘stiff framework of words, of formulas, in which no semblance of the living words remains’ which characterizes the collected discourses on causation.² Then, amidst these ‘swept-up heaps of little Suttas’, she discovers the *Upanisā Sutta*,³ on which she reflects as follows:

But thick as is the crust of the set word-scheme over these records, some signs of that variety of utterance which is life peep through... Yet more refreshing is it to find that oasis... where a causal sequence of joy and happiness is, for this once only, harnessed to the scheme! How might it not have altered the whole face of Buddhism to the West if that sequence had been made the illustration of the causal law! –

“Conditioned by suffering [comes to pass] faith;
conditioned by faith [comes to pass] joy;
conditioned by joy [comes to pass] rapture;
conditioned by rapture [comes to pass] serenity;
conditioned by serenity [comes to pass] happiness;
conditioned by happiness [comes to pass] concentration;
conditioned by concentration [comes to pass] knowledge and
insight into things as they really are.”⁴

And how true! Yet how hidden away in this book! How many students of Buddhism have ever seen it? It is true that India, like the rest of the world, was in need of a guide to lead her through the dark valley of the fact that man’s wrongdoing brings misery. But a creed for all time and space needs to give equal emphasis to the joy of the good life, and the insight that comes of moral growth to richer life.⁵

²Rhys Davids 1922 p.vii.

³S 12: 23 PTS ii.29–32.

⁴Her words here in her ‘notes’ do not in fact reproduce her translation, in which each stage of the path is the ‘cause’ and is ‘causally associated’ with the succeeding stage. Rather, this paraphrase in the ‘editorial notes’ seems to be an ideal Buddhist doctrine of Mrs Rhys Davids’ imagination, that, according to her, might have altered the face of Buddhism in the West.

⁵Rhys Davids 1922 pp.viii–ix. On p.26 n.1, amidst the translation of the discourse, she adds: ‘This series has never yet won the notice it deserves as a sort of Causal Law formula *in terms of happiness*.’

Mrs Rhys Davids complains that the constant repetition of the twelvefold formula of dependent arising in the *Nidāna Saṃyutta* (and elsewhere), which concerns the arising and cessation of suffering, has become dead doctrine; but she delights in the *Upanisā Sutta* with its living emphasis on the joy and happiness that comes from spiritual practice, a universal message of hope that could change the perception of Buddhism in the west.

Sangharakshita follows Mrs Rhys Davids’ lead in drawing attention to the unique formulation of causation in the *Upanisā Sutta*; he explains how the discourse presents a complement to the better-known cessation sequence of dependent arising, in terms of ‘the production of positive factors which progressively augment one another until with the realization of *sambodhi* the whole process reaches its climax’.⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi takes up this same interpretation in ‘Transcendental Dependent Arising’, his study of the *Upanisā Sutta*.⁷ The Buddha teaches a universal principle of conditionality;⁸ its application to the origination and cessation of suffering is expressed in the familiar twelvefold formulation; but several discourses give expression to a less-well-known application of conditionality to the factors that structure the path leading to deliverance from suffering. And hence the peculiar value and significance of the *Upanisā Sutta*:

By linking the two series into a single sequence, the sutta reveals the entire course of man’s faring in the world as well as his treading of the path to its transcendence. It shows, moreover, that these two dimensions of human experience, the mundane and the transcendental... are governed by a single structural principle, that of dependent arising.⁹

⁶ Sangharakshita 2018 p.114. He continues (on p.114): ‘Attention was first drawn to [the *Upanisā Sutta*] in modern times by Caroline Rhys Davids, who... recognizes its importance and who, not without a slight intemperance of expression, refers to it as an ‘oasis’ of affirmation in the midst of an arid desert of negation.’ For Sangharakshita, Mrs Rhys Davids’ perception of the lifeless repetition of the twelvefold formulation of dependent arising is an ‘arid desert’; the *Upanisā Sutta* is an ‘oasis of affirmation’ which brings back life to the teaching of dependent arising, though this is somewhat immoderate since the twelvefold formulation is not really dead so much as full of negation.

⁷ Bodhi 1980; see also the introductory comments in Bodhi 2000 p.524.

⁸ See also Sangharakshita 2018 pp.88–97.

⁹ Bodhi 1980 pp.i–ii.

Following the early exegetical work, the *Nettipakaraṇa*, Bhikkhu Bodhi calls the positive series of progressive stages of the path ‘transcendental dependent arising’ (*lokuttara paṭicca-samuppāda*), in contrast to the ‘worldly dependent arising’ (*lokiya paṭicca-samuppāda*) of the twelve links.¹⁰

All the authors cited above take note of the uniqueness of the *Upanisā Sutta*; it is the only discourse in the Pāli canon, among the very many discourses concerning dependent arising, to present the usual twelvefold *nidāna* chain together with the stages of the path in a single linked series. In this article I seek to explore and even try to explain this uniqueness. I do this in two stages. First, I analyse the structure of the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel preserved in Chinese translation, comparing it with related discourses on the theme of a positive series of progressive stages of the path. This analysis suggests some specific literary intentions in the way the *Upanisā Sutta* connects the *nidānas* of dependent arising with the stages of the path. Second, I investigate the word *upanisā*, which is the single term by which the double series of factors is linked. I show how the Pāli *upanisā* is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *upaniṣad*. While in the early Upaniṣads (which were named for this very word) *upaniṣad* means a cosmic ‘connection’ or mystic ‘equivalence’ between levels of reality, in the ascetic culture in which early Buddhism arose, *upaniṣad* appears to have had the significance of a spiritually ‘supportive condition’. I go on to reconstruct the way in which the early Buddhists developed their own sense of *upaniṣad* as the presence of a natural, purposive causal connection or instrumentality between states or qualities that progressively fulfil awakening. The translation of *upanisā* as ‘precondition’ seeks to suggest this, while distinguishing *upanisā* in translation (‘precondition’) from *paccaya* (‘condition’) and *hetu* (‘cause’).

In this way, I argue that the *Upanisā Sutta*, the Discourse on Preconditions, represents a presentation of the Buddha’s teaching that includes the teaching of dependent arising in a series of *upanisās*. The rhetorical nature of this presentation shows up in the tension between two very different kinds of series of conditions. I conclude by arguing that all this has implications for how we interpret the significance of the discourse for an understanding of dependent arising. It suggests that the *Upanisā Sutta* did not originally signify a philosophical statement concerning the scope of dependent arising, but was rather a rhetorical flourish that integrates a knowledge of saṃsāra into the unfolding of the path to liberation.

¹⁰ For more on this topic, see Jones 2019.

1. The *Upanisā Sutta* and its Literary Context¹¹

As Mrs Rhys Davids was so pleased to discover, the Pāli *Upanisā Sutta* is found in the *nidāna-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*,¹² among discourses concerned with causation (*nidāna*) in general and with dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) in particular.¹³ The discourse presents 23 phenomena, each the ‘precondition’ (*upanisā*) of the next,¹⁴ as follows:

[1] ignorance (*avijjā*) [2] formations (*saṅkhārā*) [3] consciousness (*viññāna*) [4] name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) [5] the six sense spheres (*saḷāyatanā*) [6] contact (*phassa*) [7] feeling (*vedanā*) [8] craving (*taṇhā*) [9] appropriation (*upādāna*) [10] continuing existence (*bhava*) [11] birth (*jāti*) [12] unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) [13] faith (*saddhā*) [14] gladness (*pāmojja*) [15] joy (*pīti*) [16] tranquillity (*passaddhi*) [17] happiness (*sukha*) [18] concentration (*samādhi*) [19] knowing and seeing what is actually the case (*yathābhūtañānadassana*) [20] disenchantment (*nibbidā*) [21] dispassion (*virāga*) [22] liberation (*vimutti*) [23] knowledge about the ending (of the corruptions) (*khaye ñāṇa*).

The identity of the first eleven of these preconditions with the *nidānas* of dependent arising is of course not meant to be missed, though in the Discourse on Preconditions, the usual [12] ageing-and-death (*jarāmaraṇa*) of dependent arising has been generalized to [12] unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), which then becomes the launching-point for a series of eleven ‘positive’ factors, from [13] faith (*saddhā*), to [23] knowledge about ending (*khaye ñāṇa*). There is an elegance in this exposition, since elsewhere in the Pāli discourses ignorance (*avijjā*) is said to arise with the corruptions (*āsavas*) as its condition,¹⁵ such that in the list of 23 links, the achievement of the 23rd necessitates the end of the first, and thereby by implication the initiation of the cessation of those very links by which unsatisfactoriness is said to arise.

¹¹ In this article I use the words ‘literary’ and ‘literature’ for convenience, in relation to compositions that were originally ‘oral literature’.

¹² S 12:23 PTS ii.29–32.

¹³ The *nidāna-saṃyutta* also includes discourses on *āhāra*, ‘sustenance’; see the introductory comments in Bodhi 2000 pp.523–4. Choong 2000 pp.150–205 compares the Pāli *nidāna-saṃyutta* with the parallel *nidāna-saṃyukta*, preserved in the Chinese translation of the Sarvāstivādin *Saṃyukta Āgama*, and finds the two collections to cover the same topics of dependent arising and sustenance. But no equivalent to the *Upanisā Sutta* is to be found in the parallel *saṃyukta*.

¹⁴ I explain my translation of *upanisā* as ‘precondition’ below; CPD and DOP i.458 s.v. *upanisā* has ‘cause, basis; condition, prerequisite’; Bodhi 2000 pp.553–6 translates it ‘proximate cause’.

¹⁵ M 9 PTS i.54.

1.1 The *Upanisā Sutta* compared to a parallel preserved in Chinese translation

There is a parallel to the *Upanisā Sutta*, called the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, preserved in Chinese translation.¹⁶ The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is found, not in the *Nidāna Saṃyukta*, the parallel to the Pāli *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, but in the *Mādhyama Āgama* (MĀ), the parallel to the Pāli *Majjhima Nikāya*.¹⁷ The discourse is the 15th of the 17 discourses that make up Division 5 of MĀ, each of which are linked by a common concern with 習 (*xí*), the Chinese character that here corresponds to the Pāli *upanisā*.¹⁸ A comparison of the *Upanisā Sutta* with its parallel shows up three main differences: (i) the *Upanisā Sutta* has an introduction not found in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*; (ii) the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* lists 29 *upanisā*, whereas the *Upanisā Sutta* lists 23; and (iii) the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is found amid a family of 16 other *sūtras*, each of which sets out a related series of *upanisās*, whereas the *Upanisā Sutta* is isolated in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, so that its kinship to related discourses is more difficult to perceive.¹⁹ I will explore each of these differences in turn. This will lead to a discussion of the *Upanisā Sutta* as literature.

The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is structurally similar to the *Upanisā Sutta*. However, it lacks an introductory section comparable to that found in its Pāli equivalent, which explains that the ‘ending of the corruptions’ (*āsavānaṃ khayō*) is for one who has developed knowledge and vision into the arising and passing away of the five constituents (*khandhas*). However, MĀ 54, the discourse immediately preceding the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, has a similar introductory section, differing slightly in that it is said that the ending of the corruptions is for one who has knowledge and vision of the four noble truths.²⁰ This kind of difference of detail is an

¹⁶ MĀ 55 (T.26 490c–91a), trans. Bingenheimer, Anālayo, and Bucknell 2013 pp.346–9. Since I do not know Chinese, my discussion of Chinese characters below is merely terminological. Strictly, the title *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is incorrect, since we know that the original of MĀ was in Prakrit not Sanskrit.

¹⁷ The study on these collections by Minh Chau 1991 includes a summary (p.351) of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.

¹⁸ Bingenheimer et al. (2013) translate 習 (*xí*) as ‘condition’; this is in contrast to 因 (*yīn*), the usual translation of *hetu*, ‘cause, reason’; and 緣 (*yuán*), the usual translation of *pratyaya*, ‘condition’.

¹⁹ Another difference is that the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* lacks the simile of water flowing to the sea, which concludes the *Upanisā Sutta* so effectively. I will discuss this simile for progressive fulfilment, as well as a related simile of a tree coming into full flourishing, in a forthcoming article.

²⁰ T 26 490a; trans. Bingenheimer et al. 2013 p.343. MĀ 54 goes on to describe a series of 24 *xí* or *upanisās* that partly differ from those given in MĀ 55. The list of stages of the path in MĀ 54 begins with eight stages not found in MĀ55 or its Pāli parallel at S 12: 23: (1) respect for good friends; (2) approaching a teacher; (3) listening to the true Dharma; (4) hearing [of the Dharma,

example of the slight differences between otherwise similar discourses originally preserved orally and transmitted by communities of reciters (*bhāṇakas*).²¹

The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* includes 29 *xī* (*upanisās*) as compared to the *Upanisā Sutta*’s 23. Whereas the twelfth link of dependent arising in the Pāli version refers to unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) rather than ageing-and-death (*jarāmaraṇa*), the version in Chinese translation includes ageing-and-death, followed by *dukkha*. Also, between the stages of faith (*saddhā*) and gladness (*pāmojja*) in the Pāli version, the version in Chinese translation has (1) right attention, (2) right mindfulness and right attentiveness, (3) guarding of the sense faculties, (4) keeping of the precepts and (5) being without regrets. As we will see, these stages have parallels in other Pāli discourses in the ‘*upanisā* family’. Finally, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* concludes with ‘attaining nirvāṇa’.²² In short, what the Pāli version, with its 23 stages, gains in spare elegance, the MĀ version, with its 29 stages, retains in completeness and coherence. Ven. Anālayo, writing on the dynamics of oral recitation and transmission among the early Buddhists, comments that differences of this sort may not signify any deliberate intention on the part of the reciters to vary what was remembered as the teaching of the Buddha.²³ Rather, it seems more likely that differences like this may reflect how the early Buddhist monastics used recitation as a means of meditation as well as for passing on the teachings.²⁴ The difference between 23 and 29 stages in our parallel discourses may reflect a less-than-conscious preference of a monastic reciter or their community for a more elegant or a more complete version of the teaching in their meditative recitation.

connoting the ‘learning’ of it]; (5) reflecting on the meaning of the Dharma; (6) memorizing the Dharma; (7) recitation of the Dharma; (8) accepting the Dharma through reflection. This series of eight very practical conditions have parallels in two Pāli discourses, in M 70 PTS i.480, and in more detail at M 95 PTS ii.173–6. The series is described as ‘gradual training, gradual activity, gradual progress’ (*anupubbāsikkhā anupubbakiriyā anupubbapaṭipadā*), and is supplemented in the Pāli versions by zeal (*chanda*), application (*ussāha*), scrutiny (*tulanā*) and striving (*padhāna*). The remaining 16 factors in MĀ 54 are the same as those in MĀ 55, from faith to the ending of the corruptions, as discussed below.

²¹ Discussed by Anālayo 2011 pp.855–91.

²² This is characteristic of the discourses in the ‘*upanisā* family’ preserved in Chinese translation, whereas equivalent discourses in Pāli conclude with ‘knowledge about ending’ (*khaye ñāṇa*).

²³ See especially Anālayo 2011 p.875.

²⁴ Anālayo 2011 p.859.

1.2 The ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses

The third difference between the Pāli *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel in Chinese translation is that the former appears isolated in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, among discourses concerned with dependent arising and related themes, while the latter is found among other discourses concerned, in various ways, with stages of the path to awakening. An examination of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* in the context of the other discourses in Chapter 5 on *xī* (*upanisā*) reveals that the discourse belongs to a ‘family’ of discourses concerned with *xī*, including more or less of a distinct set of progressive factors. Likewise, the Pāli *Upanisā Sutta* also belongs to a ‘family’ of discourses concerned with *upanisā*, except that these other family members are scattered throughout the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* in accordance with the number of *upanisās* they describe. Nevertheless, each family member has exactly the same structure, presenting a series of states or qualities as the *upanisā* of a further state of quality, up to the goal. The relationships between these various discourses can most easily be represented in a table:

Stages of the path	Pāli discourses							discourses in Chinese				
	A 5:24 A 5:168	A 6:50	A 7:65	A 8:81	A 10:3–5	A 11:3–5	S 12:23	MĀ 47–8 SĀ 495	MĀ 44	MĀ 45–6	MĀ 55	
<i>no. of stages</i>	5	6	7	8	10	11	23	12	14	18	29	
[the goal]	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
liberation							■	■	■	■	■	
dispassion	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
disenchantment	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
knowledge and vision	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
[...]												
concentration	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
happiness					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
relaxation					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
joy					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
gladness					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
freedom from remorse					■	■		■	■	■	■	
virtuous conduct	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	
restraint of the sense-faculties		■	■	■				■	■	■	■	
shame and remorse			■	■								
mindfulness and clear knowing				■				■	■	■	■	
right attention									■	■	■	
faith							■		■	■	■	
love and respect									■	■	■	
shame and remorse									■	■	■	
unsatisfactoriness							■				■	
11 or 12 nidānas							■				■	

Table 1: the ‘upanisā family’ of discourses

This table requires a few explanatory notes. (1) The ‘stages of the path’ on the left are English translations of Pāli terms, to which the corresponding Chinese terms are presumed to be translations of equivalent terms. (2) I mark the final stage as ‘[the goal]’ since it is given variously as ‘knowledge and vision of liberation’ (*vimuttiñānadassana*) in Pāli (or as ‘knowledge about ending’ (*khaye ñāṇa*) at S 12: 23), but as ‘attaining nirvāṇa’ (得涅槃, *dé nièpán*) in Chinese, though these expressions are presumably synonymous.²⁵ (3) Dark boxes mark the presence of the corresponding *upanisā* in that discourse; white boxes their absence. (4) ‘Shame and remorse’ appears twice in the list of stages of the path to simplify the presentation, since there is a difference in where Pāli and Chinese discourses locate this stage. (5) Many Pāli discourses count ‘disenchantment and dispassion’ as a single stage, whereas other Pāli discourses and all Chinese ones count them separately.

My discussion of the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel in Chinese translation suggests that its literary context is the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses. There are twelve Pāli and seven Chinese discourses in this family. Common to all of them is a core set of successive factors, from (8) concentration (*samādhi*), through (9) knowledge and vision of what is actually the case (*yathābhūtañānadassana*), (10) disenchantment (*nibbidā*) and (11) dispassion (*virāga*) to (12) the goal. We can call these the ‘insight’ series of factors. All the longer discourses in the *upanisā* family (except the *Upanisā Sutta*) also include an ‘integration’ series of factors, from (1) virtuous conduct (*sīla*), through (2) freedom from remorse (*avippaṭisāra*), (3) gladness (*pāmojja*), (4) joy (*pīti*), (5) relaxation (*passaddhi*), (6) happiness (*sukha*) to (7) concentration (*samādhi*). Twelve factors therefore constitute a common long version of stages of the path. From this point of view, the Pāli *Upanisā Sutta* is a representative example of the ‘*upanisā* family’, except that it includes the factor of faith and does not include the factors of virtuous conduct and freedom from remorse.²⁶ The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, in Chinese translation, however, includes all the factors of the long version, along with some additional ones. The different discourses in the family represent, we might say, variations on the theme of a path consisting of successive stages, each the supporting condition for the next. The general theme they have in common is the idea of the Buddhist path as one of progressive fulfilment through successive *upanisās*.

²⁵ Hence the Pāli commentary on S 12: 23 at Spk ii.51–3 glosses ‘knowledge about ending’ (*khaye ñāṇa*) as *nibbāna* and as ‘arahantship’ (*arahattā*); and at Mp iii.381 (on A 6: 50) glosses ‘knowledge and vision of liberation’ (*vimuttiñānadassana*) as ‘reviewing knowledge’ (*paccavekkhañāṇa*) of ‘the fruit of arahantship’ (*arahattaphalaṃ*).

²⁶ This point is explored in Attwood 2013.

1.3 The *Upanisā Sutta* as literature

This comparative analysis of the *upanisā* family of discourses allows me to make some historical conjectures. The existence of parallel versions preserved in Pāli as well as in Chinese translation implies that they belong to a phase of Buddhist literature that existed prior to the separation of oral transmission lineages. The slight differences I have noted between Pāli and Chinese versions of the discourses suggest variations occurring during oral transmission by groups of reciters (*bhāṇakas*). The distribution of these discourses in different canonical collections – in the *Madhyama Āgama* of the Sarvāstivāda school, as preserved in Chinese translation, or in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and *Samyutta Nikāya* of the Theravāda school – implies some later sorting processes. Judging by the similarities between our discourses, these later processes simply appear to have involved allocating the *upanisā* discourses to different collections.

Turning specifically to the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel in Chinese translation, these discourses represent a unique occurrence within their respective transmission lineages of a member of the *upanisā* family that incorporates the *nidānas* of dependent arising into its series of stages. These discourses (or, perhaps, their hypothetical common ancestor) have evidently been created out of two independent teachings already in existence: that of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and that of the stages of progressive fulfilment (*upanisās*).²⁷ We might infer that the literary intention behind linking these teachings in this way was to present an overarching statement of how conditionality works in experience. This, of course, is exactly the inference that the modern authors discussed in the Introduction have made.

Working against this inference, however, is the possibility that the juxtaposition of the two teachings is more of a rhetorical gesture than a doctrinal statement. The message of the *upanisā* discourses, taken as a family, might be said to be that the attainment of liberation and nirvāṇa is the goal of a path with regular and distinct stages. The message of the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, is then that this path originates from the unsatisfactoriness of the whole round of saṃsāra, described in terms of the links of dependent arising. This is more intended to persuade an audience to take up the path than to formulate a doctrine concerning the range of conditionality.

²⁷ There seems no reason *prima facie* not to attribute this creative teaching to the Buddha; if we do so, we can further conjecture that it belongs to a mature stage of the Buddha’s teaching career, since it appears to link two already well-established teachings.

Two factors suggest such a rhetorical intention: the wording of the discourses, and their respective locations. Firstly, both the *Upanisā Sutta* and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* first present a sequence of *upanisās* or *xí* beginning from the end.²⁸ The Pāli version begins:

‘Monks, when there is ending, whatever knowledge there may be about ending, I say that it has a precondition (*upanisā*), that it does not lack a precondition. And what, monks, is the precondition of knowledge about ending? The answer to that is *liberation*...

‘I also say, monks, that liberation has a precondition, and does not lack a precondition. And what, monks, is the precondition of liberation? The answer to that is *dispassion*.’²⁹

The *upanisā* or *xí* in both Pāli and Chinese versions are presented in a series working back to ignorance (*avijjā*). Both the discourses go on to present the sequence of factors in forwards order.³⁰ In the Pāli version:

‘So, monks, [1] with ignorance as their precondition [2] there are formations; with formations as its precondition [3] there is consciousness...’³¹

The significance of this wording is that both discourses are concerned with *upanisā* (or *xí*), and neither of them uses the language of dependent arising,

²⁸ Using the terminology of Nakamura 1980, this way of presenting the *upanisās* in backward order corresponds to the ‘discovery’ mode of presenting *paṭicca-samuppāda*, whereas the usual way of listing the links in forward order is the ‘presentation’ mode.

²⁹ S 12: 23 PTS ii.30: *yam pissa tam bhikkhave khayasmiṃ khaye ñāṇaṃ taṃ sa-upanisam vadāmi no anupanisam. kā ca bhikkhave khaye ñāṇassa upanisā. vimuttīti ssa vacanīyaṃ... kā ca bhikkhave vimuttiyā upanisā virāgo ti ssa vacanīyaṃ. virāgam p’āham bhikkhave sa-upanisam vadāmi no anupanisam.*

³⁰ There is another slight difference between the discourses in this regard, since in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*’s ‘presentation’ sequence, the relationship of terms of dependent arising, from ignorance to suffering is described in terms of 緣 (*yuán*, the equivalent of *paccaya*, ‘condition’), rather than *upanisā*; whereas the relationship of terms of stages of the path, from faith to the attaining of nirvāṇa, is described in terms of 習 (*xí*, the equivalent of *upanisā*). Hence, 緣行識, ‘based on [*yuán*] karmic formations there is consciousness’ (trans. Bingenheimer *et al.* 2013 p.349); and 習苦便有信, ‘conditioned by [*xí*] suffering there is faith’ (trans. Bingenheimer *et al.* 2013 p.349).

³¹ S 12: 23 PTS ii.31: *iti kho bhikkhave avijjūpanisā saṅkhārā. saṅkhārūpanisam* [reading with Be; PTS has *saṅkhārūpanisāṃ*] *viññāṇaṃ.*

which involves such terms as *paccaya*, ‘condition’. I am not aware of any other use in Buddhist canonical literature of the term *upanisā* to describe the relationship of the factors of dependent arising, nor any use of the term *paccaya* to describe the relationship of stages of the path. The implication is that, in the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel, the language of *upanisās* is extended backwards in a rhetorical gesture that gathers up the whole of conditioned existence into a precondition for the Buddhist path.

Secondly, the allocation of the *Upanisā Sutta* to the *nidāna-samyutta* of the Pāli canon gives the somewhat misleading impression that it is concerned with *nidāna* or causation, along with the many other discourses in that *samyutta* concerned with dependent arising. However, a familiarity with the family of *upanisā* discourses to which the *Upanisā Sutta* belongs helps to set it into its more proper literary context. By contrast, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is to be found among other discourses concerned, one way or another, with *xī* or *upanisā*, emphasizing its primary intention as presenting stages of the path.

I will return to the larger question of the interpretation of the *Upanisā Sutta* in my conclusion. Meanwhile, and to help decide to what degree the literary intention behind the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel is rhetorical rather than doctrinal, I turn now to investigate the significance of the word *upanisā* in early Buddhist discourses.

2. The Meaning of the Word *upanisā*

The Pāli commentary on this sutta is straightforward: ‘It has an *upanisā* means it has a cause (*kāraṇa*), it has a condition (*paccaya*)’.³² Elsewhere, the commentary also glosses *upanisā* as it occurs in the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses as ‘support’ (*upanissaya*).³³ The dictionary definition of *upanisā* follows this commentarial gloss of *upanisā* as ‘cause, condition, support’.³⁴ The word has been translated in the *Upanisā Sutta* as ‘proximate cause’ and ‘specific basis’.³⁵ The disadvantage of

³² Spk ii.53: *saupanisanti sakāraṇaṃ sappaccayaṃ*.

³³ Mp iii.229 on A 5: 24, a member of the ‘*upanisā* family’, adds *hatūpanisoti hataupanissayo hatakāraṇo*: ‘lacking an *upanisā* means lacking a support (*upanissaya*), lacking a cause (*kāraṇa*)’; on A 6:50 *upanisā* is glossed as *upanissaya* (‘support’); Mp iv.50 on A 7: 65 *hatūpanisā*, ‘lacking *upanisā*’, is glossed as ‘having its condition cut off’ (*chinnapaccaya*).

³⁴ CDP s.v. *upanisā* ‘cause, condition, basis; prerequisite’; DOP i.458 s.v. *upanisā* ‘cause, basis; condition, prerequisite’.

³⁵ ‘Causal association’ (Rhys Davids 1922); ‘supporting condition’ (Bodhi 1980); ‘proximate cause’ (Bodhi 2000, Bodhi 2012); ‘specific basis’ (Gethin 2008 p.213).

such translations, however, is that they do not communicate much of the distinctive semantic character of *upanisā*, but merge its significance into the broad category of words for causes and conditions. In fact, the word *upanisā* is the Pāli equivalent of Sanskrit *upaniṣad*, a word with a long history in Vedic literature, always with distinctive soteriological connotations. These connotations carry over into the distinctive meaning of Pāli *upanisā*, as a kind of condition or instrumentality internal to a person and attained for the sake of a soteriological goal. I propose to translate *upanisā* in the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses as ‘precondition’, to distinguish *upanisā* from other words used in translation for ‘cause’ or ‘condition’.

2.1 Pāli *upanisā* and Sanskrit *upaniṣad*

English translations of *upanisā* such as ‘proximate cause’ and ‘specific basis’ do not communicate much about the cultural background or semantic character of *upanisā*. In fact the word *upanisā* is the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit *upaniṣad*, which is an important term in Vedic religious thought. This was not clear to the early western scholars of Pāli, perhaps in part because the Pāli commentarial tradition does not make the connection. For the authors of PED and CPD the Pāli *upanisā* seemed to represent a contraction of *upanissaya*, ‘support’.³⁶ But in 1945, French scholar Louis Renou argued convincingly that *upanisā* is without doubt the same word as *upaniṣad*, although it means ‘cause’ in early Buddhism, in contrast to its Vedic sense as ‘connection’.³⁷ He cites an extract from the 2nd c. ce Sanskrit poem *Saundarananda* by the poet Aśvaghoṣa, in which we find the Buddha teaching Nanda in a way which directly parallels the long version of the *upanisā* discourse.³⁸

My friend, you should accept that dispassion is the *upaniṣad* of liberation, understanding of dispassion, and knowledge-and-vision of understanding.

³⁶ PED p.144 s.v. *upanisā*: ‘if = Vedic *upaniṣad*, it would be fr. *upa+ni+sad*, but if, as is more likely, a contracted form of *upanissaya*, it would be fr. *upa+ni+śri*. The history of this word has yet to be written’. CPD s.v. *upanisā*: ‘in Pāli a semantic blend has taken place with *upanissaya*’.

³⁷ Renou 1978 (1945) p.150: ‘*Upanisā* en pāli signifie «cause», comme on sait. On a hésité longtemps à mettre le mot en parallèle avec *upaniṣad* en raison de la différence de sens. On a été jusqu’à supposer que le mot pāli remontait à *upanissaya*. Mais *upanisā* est à *upaniṣad* ce qu’est *parisā* à *pariṣad*, et le Sanskrit bouddhique connaît parfaitement la forme *upaniṣad* (à côté d’*upaniṣā*, mal sanskritisé) au sens de «cause». L’énumération *mokṣasyopaniṣat... vairāgyam, jñānasyopaniṣat... samādhiḥ*, etc. Saundaran. XIII, 22 sqq., qui reproduit celle d’Anguttaranik. V p.311, confirme bien qu’il s’agit d’un doublet pur et simple.’

³⁸ A 11: 3 PTS v.313; with an exact parallel at MĀ 47, which concerns *xi*.

You should consider that concentration is actually the *upaniṣad* of knowledge, and that the *upaniṣad* of concentration is happiness of body and mind.

The *upaniṣad* of happiness is supreme relaxation of body and mind, and you should understand that the *upaniṣad* of relaxation is joy.

Likewise the *upaniṣad* of joy is thought to be the highest gladness, and that of gladness is freedom from remorse concerning what has been done badly or not done.

The *upaniṣad* of the mind’s freedom from remorse is purity of virtue; so purify your virtue, for virtue leads the way.³⁹ It seems likely that Aśvaghōṣa had access to a version of the Buddhist discourses in which the Sanskrit *upaniṣad* appeared as the equivalent to the Pali *upaniṣā*.⁴⁰ This parallelism of *upaniṣā* and *upaniṣad* is confirmed by the BHS dictionary,⁴¹ in which Edgerton cites *duḥkhopaniṣac chraddhā* in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*,⁴² which corresponds to *dukkhūpaniṣā saddhā* (‘with unsatisfactoriness as its *upaniṣā* there is faith’) in Pāli.⁴³

2.2 Sanskrit *upaniṣad*

The Pāli *upaniṣā* like the Sanskrit *upaniṣad* is derived from the verbal root *sad* ‘sit’ with the prefixes *upa* ‘near’ and *ni* ‘down’, hence ‘sitting down near’. Earlier western scholars of Indian religion understood this ‘sitting down near’ to imply a student sitting at the teacher’s feet, hence the ‘secret teaching’ that the teacher imparted, and finally the name of the class of texts (the Upaniṣads)

³⁹ Aśvaghōṣa, *Saundarananda*, 13:22–31: *mokṣasyopaniṣat saumya vairāgyam iti gr̥hyatām | vairāgasyāpi saṃvedaḥ saṃvido jñānadarśanam || jñānasyopaniṣac caiva samādhir upadhāryatām | samādherapy upaniṣat sukhaṃ śārīramānasam || praśrabdhiḥ kāyamanasaḥ sukhasyopaniṣat parā | praśrabdher apy upaniṣat prītir apy avagamyatām || tathā prīter upaniṣat prāmodyaṃ paramaṃ mataṃ | prāmodyasyāpy ahr̥llekhaḥ kukṛteṣvakṛteṣu vā || ahr̥llekhasya manasaḥ śīlaṃ tūpaniṣac chuci | ataḥ śīlaṃ nayaty agryam iti śīlaṃ viśodhaya ||*

⁴⁰ Johnson 1936 p.xxxv argues that Aśvaghōṣa may have belonged to the Bahuśrutikas, a subsect of the Mahāsaṅghikas. Johnston 1932 p.74 notices but cannot quite explain the alternation of *saṃveda* (‘understanding’) in Aśvaghōṣa for *nibbidā* (‘disenchantment’) in the Pali (*nirveda* in Sanskrit).

⁴¹ BHS s.v. *upaniṣad*.

⁴² Bhāṣya on ADK 2.1; Prahlad Pradhan 1967 p.39.

⁴³ In S 12: 23 PTS ii.31.

which concern this ‘secret teaching’.⁴⁴ But more recent scholars present an alternative picture. Brian Black comments:

Although [the student sitting at the teacher’s feet] is undoubtedly what the word has come to mean, scholars have challenged this as the original connotation on the grounds that this is not how the word is employed in its initial occurrences, or indeed anywhere in the texts that we now call the Upaniṣads. Rather than defining the word by its etymology, scholars have noticed that in its earliest textual contexts, *upaniṣad* is used to describe a connection between things, often presented in a hierarchical relationship.⁴⁵

In short, the original meaning of *upaniṣad* in the Upaniṣads and other texts is a ‘connection’ or ‘equivalence’;⁴⁶ it denotes the fact that two things are placed in a relationship.⁴⁷ Within Brahmanical thinking it connects levels of reality in a hierarchy. Joel Brereton has clarified the use of the term *upaniṣad* in the Upaniṣads as follows:⁴⁸

The Upanishadic sages set up a system of levels that shows which powers include other powers or which are dependent on which others. Ultimately, by moving towards progressively deeper levels, the sage identifies the fundamental principle on which everything else is established. In one sense, this is the most characteristic technique of the Upanishads, for it is from it that the Upanishads have their name. The word “*upaniṣad*,” though usually translated “secret teaching” or the like, originally meant the subordination of one thing to another. The purpose of arranging things in such a progression is finally to identify the dominant reality behind an object.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ This point is reviewed in Vacek 1991.

⁴⁵ Black 2007 p.6.

⁴⁶ Olivelle 1998 p.24. On the meaning of *upaniṣad* see Schayer 1925, Renou 1978, Falk 1986, Vacek 1991.

⁴⁷ Gren Eklund 1984 p.117; she goes on to observe: ‘√ *sad* would, in this case, refer to the location of the objects of knowledge and not to the position of the knowing subject.’ That is, *upaniṣad* refers to a relationship between things known, not to the relationship of a pupil who knows things.

⁴⁸ Brereton 1990 pp.124–5.

⁴⁹ Cohen 2008 p.4 also proposes ‘underlying reality’.

A story from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* nicely illustrates the meaning of *upaniṣad*. Indra from among the gods and Virocana from among the demons (*āsuras*) went to Prajāpati to discover the *brahman* which fulfils all desires. Prajāpati first teaches them the *upaniṣad* between the body and the *ātman* or self (the dominant reality), so that dressing up nicely and keeping healthy is the way to fulfil all desires. While Virocana is happy with this false *upaniṣad*, Indra returns to Prajāpati for further study, and learns the *upaniṣad* or connection between the immortal non-bodily *ātman* or self and the *brahman* (the dominant reality).⁵⁰ Such an *upaniṣad* is soteriological; it is a link between levels of reality, and knowing this *upaniṣad* brings Indra to the truth.

The *upaniṣads* discussed in the Upaniṣads are sometimes also a means to achieve an end – not so much a connection but a teaching for attaining a spiritual goal. A good example from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is the following:

Janaka, the king of Videha, got down from his seat, came up to him [Yājñavalkya the sage], and said: “Homage to you, Yājñavalkya. Please teach me”. Yājñavalkya replied: “Just as a king, when he is about to undertake a great expedition, would equip himself with a chariot or a ship, so have you equipped yourself with these hidden teachings (*upaniṣads*)”.⁵¹

And the *upaniṣads* discussed in the Upaniṣads are also sometimes also presented as chains or series of connections, equivalents, or levels of reality. Another example from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, concerning a series of mystic chants, gives a flavour of this kind of thinking:

When a man knows these hidden connections (*upaniṣad*) of the Sāman chants – speech will yield for him the milk which is the very milk of speech, and he will come to own and to eat his own food.⁵²

These aspects of the meaning of *upaniṣad* in the Upaniṣads suggest some background context for the development of the early Buddhist concept of *upaniṣā*.

⁵⁰ CU 8.7–12; trans. Olivelle 1998 pp.279–87.

⁵¹ BU 4.2.1; trans. Olivelle 1998 p.109; discussed in Vacek 1991 p.260.

⁵² CU 1.13; trans. Olivelle 1998 p.185; discussed in Vacek 1991 pp.261–2; more generally in Gren Eklund 1984 esp. p.117.

2.3 Pāli *upaniṣā* in the context of ascetic debate

Harry Falk, writing on the meaning of *upaniṣad* in Vedic texts more generally, cites a list of *upaniṣads* concerned more with knowledge than with ontological grounding:

There are these eight *upaniṣads* for knowledge (*veda*): intelligence, honour, self-control, faith, inquiry, not making oneself a public object, yoga and obedience to the teacher.⁵³

Falk describes the meaning of *upaniṣad* here as: ‘everything that must necessarily be present for something else to unfold’.⁵⁴ An *upaniṣad*, in other words, is a kind of necessary condition, although Falk adds that thinking of *upaniṣad* in terms of an abstract noun like ‘condition’ fails to take into account the inner state of an agent implied by the term.⁵⁵ We should note too that this inner state is also what is necessary for the sake of a desired aim. In this respect, the method of identifying *upaniṣads* illustrated here is the same as in the Upaniṣads, except that the search for an ontological ground is replaced by a search for knowledge (*veda*).

Falk goes on to point out that this broader Vedic method of identifying *upaniṣads* is also clearly seen in an early Buddhist text. This is the *Sambodhi Sutta* (Discourse on Complete Awakening):

‘Monks, if wanderers of rival religious groups should question you in this way: “Friend, what is the *upaniṣā* for developing those qualities which constitute complete awakening?” – questioned in this way, monks, what should you say in reply to those wanderers of rival religious groups?’⁵⁶

⁵³ *Samhitopaniṣadbrāhmaṇa* 3.20, quoted in Falk 1986 p.96: *athaitā vedasyāṣṭāv upaniṣado bhavanti. vittis copastavaś ca damaś ca śraddhā ca sampraśnaś cānākāśīkaraṇaṃ ca yogaś cācāryaśuśrūṣā ceti.*

⁵⁴ Falk 1986 p.96: *Alles, was notwendigerweise vorhanden sein muß, damit etwas anderes sich entfalten kann.*

⁵⁵ Falk 1986 p.97.

⁵⁶ A 9: 1 PTS iv.350: *sace bhikkhave aññatitthiyā paribbājakā evaṃ puccheyyūṃ sambodhipakkhikānaṃ āvuso dhammānaṃ kā upaniṣā bhāvanāyā ’ti evaṃ puṭṭhā tumhe bhikkhave tesam aññatitthiyānaṃ paribbājakānaṃ kinti byākareyyāthā ’ti.* In a parallel passage in MĀ 57 preserved in Chinese translation, this introductory questioning is not found. The discussion of *upaniṣā* that follows the questioning at A 9: 1 and at MĀ 57 is repeated in the Discourse to Meghiya, found at Ud 4: 1 and A 9: 3 in Pāli, and at MĀ 56 in Chinese translation.

The Buddha answers his own question, teaching that there are five such *upanisās*: (1) spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*), (2) virtuous conduct (*sīla*), (3) suitable conversation (*sappāyā kathā*), (4) steadfast energy (*āradhaviṛiya*), and (5) insight (*paññā*); although the Buddha goes on to teach that spiritual friendship is the most important of these conditions. These *upanisās* are not abstract conditions but intentional activities which are conditions for achieving an aim, in this case, the developing of the qualities which constitute complete awakening.

The opening to this discourse implies that religious wanderers were likely to engage Buddhists in debate on the topic of *upanisā*. This in turn suggests that *upanisā/upaniṣad* was a topic of debate in the ascetic culture of the Buddha’s day.⁵⁷ And this in turn implies that the word *upaniṣad* as used in the Upaniṣads, in other Vedic texts, and as discussed by ascetics and the early Buddhists, involves a common element – a purpose or value for the sake of which some human quality is necessary. This is not to say, however, that the early Buddhist texts uncritically accept such a concept of *upaniṣad*. Another discourse once again implies that *upanisā* was a topic of debate:

‘Monks, if someone were to pose the question, “These wholesome qualities that are noble, conducive to leaving [conditioned existence], leading to complete awakening – what is the *upanisā* for learning about them?”, you should reply to them in this way: “Only so far as to exactly know the teachings in pairs”.’⁵⁸

The answer the Buddha gives to his own question appears incongruous, but I suggest that it appears to advise the monks not to involve themselves in debate about *upanisā*, but rather to emphasize the purpose for which debate may be held.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Bronkhorst 2007 for a presentation and defence of the thesis that the Buddha’s context was not that of Brahmanical culture, but instead the ascetic culture of ‘Greater Magadha’; an argument made independently in Samuel 2008.

⁵⁸ Sn 3: 12 PTS 139: *ye te bhikkhave kusalā dhammā ariyā niyyānikā sambodhagāmīno, tesam vo bhikkhave kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ ariyānaṃ niyyānikānaṃ sambodhagāmīnaṃ kā upanisā savanāyā’ti iti ce bhikkhave pucchitāro assu, te evam assu vacanīyā ‘yāvad eva dvayatānaṃ dhammānaṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñānāyā’ti.*

⁵⁹ The commentary at Pj II 503 says: “Those wholesome qualities ... leading to complete awakening” – what *upanisā* is there, what reason, what purpose is there for you to hear about those wholesome qualities... leading to awakening; what value is there that you should learn about those qualities – this is what is meant.’ *tesam vo bhikkhave ... pe ... savanāya, tesam bhikkhave kusalānaṃ ... pe ... sambodhagāmīnaṃ kā upanisā, kiṃ kāraṇaṃ, kiṃ payojanaṃ tumhākaṃ savanāya, kimatthaṃ tumhe te dhamme suñāthāti vuttaṃ hoti.* I suggest that the commentary

The discourse goes on to set out sixteen ‘teachings in pairs’, contemplating any of which may lead to the goal of liberating knowledge.

2.4 Pāli *upanisā* in Buddhist discourses

The word *upanisā* also features in early Buddhist discourses that are not connected with debate, such as in the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses, where it occurs with a distinctively ‘Buddhist’ meaning. This implies that the idea of *upanisā* was taken up in early Buddhist thought from Vedic and ascetic religious discourse, like other Buddhist terms borrowed from a Brahminical context.⁶⁰ For instance, in the *Kathāvattu Sutta* (Discourse on Topics of Conversation), after a detailed analysis of the types and value of conversation, the Buddha concludes:

‘Monks, you should decide whether or not someone has *upanisā* in relation to their conversation. Monks, one who does not listen attentively does not have *upanisā*; one who does listen attentively has *upanisā*... Monks, this is the aim (*attha*) of conversation, this is the aim of discussion, this is what *upanisā* aims at, this is the aim of listening attentively – namely, the liberation of the mind through non-appropriation.⁶¹

In this context, *upanisā* stands alongside conversation (*kathā*), discussion (*mantanā*) and listening attentively (*sotāvadhānaṃ*), as a state of the person which acts as a condition for the attaining of a purpose, namely, liberation of the mind (*cittassa vimokkha*).⁶² While *upanisā* is not explicitly defined here, we can easily think of the five *upanisās* of the *Sambodhi Sutta* (spiritual friendship and so on, as listed above) as intentional activities which are conditions for achieving the aim of liberation.

is not here defining *upanisā* as ‘aim’ or ‘purpose’ (pace Bodhi 2017 p.280, p.1000 and p.1505 n.1711), but rather glossing it in this way to highlight the purposive aspect of *upanisā*.

⁶⁰ Discussed for instance by Norman 1991; *upanisā* should perhaps be classed among ‘Terms taken over by the Buddha but used with new senses.’

⁶¹ A 3: 67 PTS i.198: *kathāsampayogena bhikkhave puggalo vedītabbo yadī vā saupaniso yadī vā anupaniso. anohitasoto bhikkhave anupaniso hoti, ohitasoto saupaniso hoti... etadatthā bhikkhave kathā etadatthā mantanā etadatthā upanisā etadatthaṃ sotāvadhānaṃ, yadidaṃ anupādā cittaṃ vimokkhe ti.*

⁶² Both DOP i.458 s.v. *upanisā* and CPD s.v. *upanisā* take *upanisā* in this context to mean ‘sitting near (a teacher) to listen; attention; secret knowledge’. But the commentary (Mp ii.312) glosses *upanisā* here as ‘support’ (*upanissaya*), ‘condition’ (*paccaya*), and translators follow. The commentary goes on to interpret conversation, discussion, *upanisā* and listening attentively as a progressive chain.

A related passage in the Vinaya rehearses an extended version of the stages of the path before concluding in the same way:

‘Discipline is for the sake of (*atthāya*) restraint; restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse; freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness; gladness is for the sake of joy; joy is for the sake of relaxation; relaxation is for the sake of happiness; happiness is for the sake of concentration; concentration is for the sake of knowledge and vision of what is actually the case; knowledge and vision of what is actually the case are for the sake of disenchantment; disenchantment is for the sake of dispassion; dispassion is for the sake of liberation; liberation is for the sake of knowledge and vision of liberation; knowledge and vision of liberation are for the sake of nirvāṇa without appropriation; conversation has this aim; discussion has this aim; *upanisā* has this aim; listening attentively has this aim – namely, the liberation of the mind without appropriation.’⁶³

Once again, *upanisā* can be understood in these contexts as a supportive inner state that is a necessary condition for achieving the aim of liberation. Indeed, *upanisā* here seems to imply the principle of having such supportive inner states, exemplified by spiritual friendship, suitable conversation and so on.

This Vinaya passage also presents fourteen stages of the path, overlapping with the twelve-stage long version of the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses,⁶⁴ with each stage presented as being ‘for the sake of’ (*atthāya*) the next.⁶⁵ When we turn to the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses themselves, we find a formulation of the stages of the path in which each ‘for the sake of’ in the Vinaya passage is

⁶³ Vin v.164: *vinayo saṃvaratthāya, saṃvaro avippaṭisāratthāya, avippaṭisāro pāmujjatthāya, pāmujjam pītatthāya, pīti passaddhatthāya, passaddhi sukhatthāya, sukham samādhatthāya, samādhī yathābhūtañānadassanatthāya, yathābhūtañānadassanaṃ nibbidatthāya, nibbidā virāgatthāya, virāgo vimuttatthāya, vimutti vimuttiñānadassanatthāya, vimuttiñānadassanaṃ anupādāparinibbānatthāya. etadatthā kathā etadatthā mantanā etadatthā upanisā etadattham sotāvadhānaṃ, yadidaṃ anupādācittassa vimokkho’i.*

⁶⁴ Except that ‘virtuous conduct’ is replaced by ‘discipline’ and ‘restraint’; and with the addition of ‘nirvāṇa without appropriation’ as the goal.

⁶⁵ The commentary (at Sp 1366) adds: ‘*upanisā* means this successive conditionality belonging to the words starting “discipline is for the sake of restraint” and is for the sake of that’ (*upanisā’i ayaṃ ‘vinayo saṃvaratthāyā’i ādikā paramaparaccayatā’pi etad atthāya*).

replaced by an *upanisā*; for instance, ‘gladness is for the sake of joy’ (*pāmujjam pītathāya*) becomes ‘joy has gladness as its *upanisā*’ (*pāmojjūpanisā pīti*).⁶⁶ Not only does *upanisā* in these discourses represent the principle of supportive conditions, but each of these inner states of the Buddhist practitioner is for the sake of the next, with *nirvāṇa* as the ultimate aim. The idea of a series or chain of *upanisās* bears some resemblance to the chains or series of *upaniṣads* of the Upaniṣads. This does not seem to imply any direct influence of the Upaniṣads on the formulation of early Buddhist discourses, but perhaps points to a general tendency of thought in ancient India.⁶⁷

The various discourses belonging to the ‘*upanisā* family’ provide the great majority of instances of the word *upanisā* in the Pāli canon.⁶⁸ This suggests that the main use of the word *upanisā* in early Buddhism is in the specifically Buddhist formulation of the path as characterized by progressive fulfilment. In this formulation, the idea of *upanisā* has developed beyond the idea of a supportive condition for the sake of awakening, into the idea of a chain of conditions, such that each stage of the path is an *upanisā* for the next, where an *upanisā* is both a necessary condition (like a *paccaya*) and a purpose or aim (an *attha*). In this way, we see how a distinctively Buddhist concept of *upaniṣad* developed out of the concept found in Vedic texts and in the culture of ascetic debate. We can trace the stages of the Buddhist transformation of *upaniṣad* as follows:

1. In the early Upaniṣads, *upaniṣad* means a ‘connection’ or ‘equivalence’ between levels of reality; knowledge of these *upaniṣads* is for the sake of realizing the spiritual goal; and these *upaniṣads* may be arranged in chains or series.
2. In other Vedic texts and in the culture of ascetic debate of the Buddha’s day, an *upaniṣad* is a quality or state of the practitioner which is instrumental for realizing the spiritual goal.
3. The Buddha is reported as teaching distinctively ‘Buddhist’

⁶⁶ At S 12: 23 PTS ii.32. Likewise, at A 11: 1 (≠ 10: 1), each stage of the path is the *attha* (‘goal’) and *ānisaṃsa* (‘benefit’) of the one before it.

⁶⁷ This is the line of interpretation taken by Gren Eklund 1984.

⁶⁸ In an Appendix below, I catalogue all the appearances of the word *upanisā* in Pāli discourses, a task which would distract from the main thrust of the argument here, but which is nevertheless of interest in that it confirms how the meaning of Buddhist *upanisā* is continuous with the meaning of *upaniṣad* in wider Indian religious and intellectual culture.

lists of *upanisads* for the sake of developing the qualities of awakening, emphasizing the importance of *upanisad* as a spiritually supportive inner state.

4. And finally the Buddha is reported as teaching chains of *upanisads*, very different from such chains in the Upanisads, which set out a series of inner states, for the sake of liberation, in terms of conditionality.

Finally, in the *Upanisā Sutta*, alone among Pāli Buddhist discourses, the series of *upanisās* is extended beyond or behind supportive inner states that progress towards awakening, in terms of the *nidānas* of dependent arising. Since these *nidānas* are not usually presented as purposive, nor as intentional inner states of a practitioner, the *Upanisā Sutta* would appear to be a somewhat experimental or rhetorical extension of the full version of the *upanisā* series. The extension depends on treating each *paccaya* (‘condition’) of the *nidāna* series as an *upanisā*, exploiting the fact that *upanisā* implies ‘necessary condition’. The import of this rhetorical presentation might be that knowledge of the twelve *nidānas*, in the sense of a direct appreciation of the conditionality of experience and the inevitability of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) in conditioned existence, is exactly the kind of inner state which is a necessary condition for embarking on the way to liberation.

2.5 Translating *upanisā* in Pāli discourses

This leaves the question of how exactly to translate *upanisā*, a word which lacks any obvious parallel in western thought. A translation of *upanisā* has to convey the characteristics of (i) an inner state of the person or agent that is (ii) a necessary condition (iii) for attaining a purpose or aim. One possibility is suggested by Linda Covill, in her translation of Aśvaghōṣa’s *Saundarananda*, a Buddhist Sanskrit poem cited above.⁶⁹ In the context of Aśvaghōṣa’s poetic re-working of the stages of the path, she translates *upanisad* as ‘secret’:

My dear friend, accept that dispassion is the secret of liberation, understanding of dispassion, and knowledge of understanding. Recognize that concentration is the secret of knowledge, and physical and mental bliss of concentration. Understand that

⁶⁹ See n.38 above.

complete confidence is the real secret of physical and mental bliss, and that joy is the secret of confidence. Likewise, great rapture is considered the secret of joy, and the secret of rapture is a clear conscience in respect of things ill-done or undone. But pure moral self-restraint is the secret of a clear conscience; therefore, purify your moral self-restraint, for moral self-restraint comes first.⁷⁰

The word ‘secret’ here has the sense of ‘that which accounts for something surprising or extraordinary; the essential thing to be observed in order to secure some end’.⁷¹ This neatly captures some of the applied meaning of *upanisad*/*upanisā* in the context of the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses in a single English expression.

The English word ‘secret’ also reproduces something of the Upaniṣadic idea of an *upanisad* as a ‘secret teaching’. However, the Buddhist idea of *upanisā* does not involve any sense of a hidden or mysterious teaching imparted by a guru. In lieu of a better English translation, I therefore propose ‘precondition’ as a general translation of *upanisā*, acknowledging that such a translation only partially succeeds in conveying the characteristics of (i) an inner state, (ii) of an inner or ‘secret’ character, (iii) for an aim, that the word *upanisā* implies.⁷²

Conclusion: Conditionality and Interpretation

The first part of my investigation has shown that the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, represent quite sophisticated literary attempts to fuse the stages of the path of the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses with the twelve *nidānas* of dependent arising. The discourses do this by presenting the *nidānas* as *upanisās*, suggesting the overlap of the two concepts. However, the second part of my investigation has shown that *upanisās* are to be distinguished from *nidānas*, in that they are specifically states of the person and are goal-directed. In conclusion, I suggest that the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel represent a rhetorical presentation of the Buddhist path that might be taken to mean that a

⁷⁰ Covill 2007 p.247.

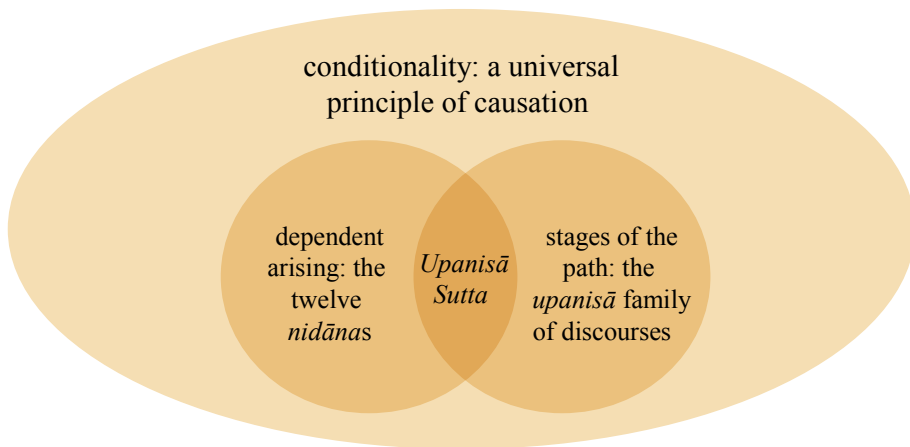
⁷¹ OED s.v. ‘secret’ 4.c.

⁷² The word ‘prerequisite’ is also a possibility, but is often used to translate *nissaya* (PED p.374). I suggest using the words ‘requisite’ and ‘prerequisite’ to render Pāli terms which often connote quite practical forms of dependence, such as *nissaya* and *parikkhāra*, keeping ‘precondition’ specifically to translate *upanisā*.

knowledge of the dependent arising of saṃsāra is, poetically speaking, the first necessary condition of the path towards awakening.

This conclusion implies that the original literary intention of the *Upanisā Sutta* was not likely to have been a serious doctrinal attempt to show the overarching nature of the principle of conditionality. However, for modern western Buddhists, whose intellectual context is a thorough-going naturalism, it is attractive to interpret the *Upanisā Sutta* as showing how both the workings of saṃsāra and the path to the attainment of nirvāṇa arise within an overarching principle of conditionality that governs the arising and ceasing of all conditioned things. This naturalistic interpretation of the *Upanisā Sutta* emphasizes the possibility of a path to awakening that unfolds according to causes and conditions that can be studied and put into practice in a systematic fashion. Hence the *Upanisā Sutta* and its parallel, each unique in their respective canonical collections, and each largely neglected by their respective Buddhist traditions, have come to take on new and unintended significance as the Dharma is translated into the modern western context with its own cultural and philosophical commitments. To echo Mrs Rhys Davids, the *Upanisā Sutta* is indeed ‘a universal message of hope’ – but especially for modern western Buddhists.

My conclusions concerning interpretation can be summed up in a simple diagram, which shows the relationships between the formulations of the twelve *nidānas* of dependent arising and the *upanisās* of the ‘*upanisā* family’ of discourses concerning stages of the path, within the conception of an overarching principle of conditionality:



The dotted line representing the overarching principle of conditionality is designed to indicate that the existence of such a universal principle is an *interpretation* of conditionality, rather than a statement of early Buddhist doctrine. Such an interpretation goes back to early post-canonical Buddhism,⁷³ but is especially attractive to western Buddhists who think in terms of the naturalistic worldview of modern science.

Appendix: Catalogue of appearances of *upanisā* in Pāli Discourses

While the following catalogue of appearances of *upanisā* in the Pāli discourses would have distracted from the main argument above, it might nevertheless be of interest for showing the continuity of the Buddhist concept with the use of *upaniṣad* in the wider Indian religious and intellectual culture of the day. I divide the appearances of *upanisā* into five categories.

1. The category of *upanisā* as ‘likeness’:

- i. in **D 20** among a long list of gods who come to visit the Buddha: ‘The gods who are a likeness (*upanisā*) of the moon came, with the moon before them; the gods who are a likeness of the sun came, with the sun before them.’⁷⁴
- ii. in **Jā 548** a female ascetic says to a king (to stop him giving away his mother): ‘Your mother nourished you and for a long time was kind to you. When Chambhī did wrong to you, she was wise and saw your good, and by placing a likeness (*upanisā*) in your place she released you from harm.’⁷⁵

The meaning of *upanisā* as ‘likeness’ corresponds exactly with the meaning of Sanskrit *upaniṣad*, glossed by Pāṇini as *aupamya*, ‘likeness’.⁷⁶ This is a non-religious meaning of *upaniṣad*, which evidently passed over into Pāli.

⁷³ The interpretation of dependent arising and conditionality in Pāli exegetical literature and by modern western Buddhists is explored further in Jones 2019.

⁷⁴ D 20 PTS ii.259: *candassūpanisā devā, candam āguṃ purakkhatvā | sūriyassūpanisā devā, sūriyam āguṃ purakkhatvā |*. The commentary (Sv ii.690) glosses *upanisā* as *nissitikā*, ‘supported by’ (DOP ii.110).

⁷⁵ Jā 546 PTS vi.470: *posetā te janettī ca dīgharattānukampikā | chabbhī tayi padussati paṇḍitā atthadassinī | aññaṃ upaniṣaṃ katvā vadhā taṃ parimocayi ||*. The commentary (Jā vi.470) glosses *upanisā* as *paṭirūpakam*, ‘likeness’.

⁷⁶ Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.4.79; *aupamya* is an abstract noun from *upamā*, ‘comparison, similarity’.

2. The category of *upanisā* as the instrumental cause for a goal, as a ‘means’:

A stanza at **Dhp 75** runs: ‘The means (*upanisā*) of gain is one thing; that which leads to nirvāṇa is another. In this way having realized this, the monk who is the Buddha’s disciple should not enjoy honour but should practise seclusion.’⁷⁷ Here *upanisā* represents a state of the agent which is instrumental for a goal of life; enjoying honour is a state which leads to gain, but if one’s aim is nirvāṇa, one should instead take up seclusion (*viveka*) as a means.

The meaning of *upanisā* as ‘means’ is not specifically religious, since there is an *upanisā* for the worldly aim of ‘gain’ as well as an *upanisā* for the religious aim of nirvāṇa. The word *upaniṣad* here signifies a kind of cause which is connected with a goal.

3. The category of *upanisā* as an inner state which is a supportive condition:

- i. in **A 3: 67** (discussed above): ‘Monks, you should decide whether or not someone has *upanisā* in relation to their conversation’ and so on.⁷⁸
- ii. in **Sn 2: 8** a stanza runs: ‘In this way, the knowledgeable one, self-developed, who is learned and unshakeable, understands, and convinces others who are possessed of the *upanisā* of listening attentively.’⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Dhp 75: *aññā hi lābhūpanisā | aññā nibbānagāminī | evam etaṃ abhiññāya | bhikkhu buddhassa sāvako | sakkāraṃ nābhinandeyya | vivekam anubrūhaye ||*. A parallel at Udānavarga 13.5 reads *anyā hi lābhopaniṣad*, again showing that Pāli *upanisā* = Sanskrit *upaniṣad*. The commentary at Dhp-a ii.102 glosses *upanisā* as *paṭipadā*, ‘means’, but we should understand this as a gloss concerning the instrumental nature of an *upanisā* and not as a definition. In K.R. Norman’s note on this stanza (1997 p.81), he writes: ‘For the meaning “means, way” for *upanisā*, see CPD (s.v. *upanisā*), and BHSD (s.v. *upaniṣad*).’ This must be a mistake, since there is no such mention of that meaning in either dictionary; indeed BHS s.v. *upaniṣad* reads ‘*anyā hi lābhopaniṣad anyā nirvāṇagāminī, for the cause (basis) of gain is one thing, that which leads to nirvāṇa is another*’; i.e. it takes *upaniṣad* to mean ‘cause, basis’.

⁷⁸ A 3: 67 PTS i.198: *kathāsampayogena bhikkhave puggalo veditabbo yadi vā saupaniso yadi...*

⁷⁹ Sn 2: 8 PTS 56, v.322: *evampi yo vedagu bhāvitatto | bahussuto hoti avedhadhammo | so kho pare nijjhapaye pajānaṃ | sotāvadhānūpanisūpapanne ||*. My translation follows Bodhi 2017 p.209 (‘attentive ears as a supportive condition’), against Norman 2001 p.39 (‘the ability to listen attentively’) who follows the commentary in taking *sotāvadhānūpanisa* as a *dvandva*: *sotāvadhānūpanisūpapanne* ‘i sota-odahanena ca maggaphalānaṃ upanissayena ca upapanne (‘sotāvadhānūpanisūpapanne means possessed of the fruits of the path through listening attentively and through having a support’).

- iii. in **Vin v.164** (discussed above): following a fourteen-stage account of the path, each stage ‘for the sake of’ (*atthāya*) the next, the Buddha concludes: ‘Conversation has this aim; discussion has this aim; *upanisā* has this aim; listening attentively has this aim – namely, the liberation of the mind without appropriation’.⁸⁰

The meaning of *upanisā* in these cases is religious, and connotes the necessary attitude or inner state required to understand and practise the Dharma.

4. The category of *upanisās* as specific qualities for the sake of a goal:

- i. in **A 9: 1** (discussed above): ‘Monks, if wanderers of rival religious groups should question you in this way: “Friend, what is the *upanisā* for the development of those factors leading to complete awakening?” and so on.’⁸¹ The discourse goes on to present five *upanisās* headed by spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*).
- ii. in **Sn 3: 12** (discussed above): ‘Monks, if someone were to pose the question, “These wholesome qualities that are noble, conducive to leaving [conditioned existence], leading to complete awakening – what is the *upanisā* for learning about them?” and so on.’⁸²
- iii. in **D 18** a *yakkha* called Janavasabha, who used to be King Bimbisāra, tells Anānda about Brahmā Sanankumāra’s speech to the gods about the Buddha’s teaching, including a teaching concerning ‘right concentration’: ‘noble right concentration is said to have an *upanisā*, and is said to have a requisite (*parikkhāra*)’⁸³ – this *upanisā* consists in the other seven factors of the eightfold path.

⁸⁰ Vin v.164: *etadatthā kathā etadatthā mantanā etadatthā upanisā etadattham sotāvadhānaṃ, yadidaṃ anupādācittassa vimokkho’i*.

⁸¹ A 9: 1 PTS iv.350: *sace bhikkhave aññatitthiyā paribbājakā evaṃ puccheyyūṃ sambodhipakkhikānaṃ āvuso dhammānaṃ kā upanisā bhāvanāyā’i...*

⁸² Sn 3: 12 PTS 139: *ye te bhikkhave kusalā dhammā ariyā niyyānikā sambodhagāmino, tesaṃ vo bhikkhave kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ ariyānaṃ niyyānikānaṃ sambodhagāmīnaṃ kā upanisā savanāyā’i iti ce bhikkhave pucchitāro assu...*

⁸³ D 18 PTS ii.216: *ariyo sammāsamādhi saupaniso iti’pi saparikkhāro iti’pi*. The commentary (Sv ii.645) adds that ‘it is said to have an *upanisā* means that it is said to have a support’ (*saupaniso iti’pī ti saupanissayo iti pi vuccati*).

- iv. in **M 117** the Buddha says: ‘Monks, I shall teach you noble right concentration with its *upanisā* and its requisite’⁸⁴ – these are the other factors of the eightfold path.
- v. in **S 45: 28** this same teaching is repeated.⁸⁵
- vi. in **A 7: 45** the Buddha teaches the first seven factors of the eightfold path as the ‘requisites’ (*parikkhārā*) of right concentration, and adds: ‘Monks, this is called noble right concentration “with its *upanisā*” and “with its requisite”’.⁸⁶
- vii. as a paracanonical guest item in this catalogue, the ***Peṭakopadesa*** says that meditative absorption (*jhāna*) has an *upanisā*: ‘In this context, what is the *upanisā*? The *upanisā* of meditative absorption is spiritual friendship. The *upanisā* of meditative absorption is spiritual intimacy. The *upanisā* of meditative absorption is guardedness of the doors in respect of the sense-faculties. The *upanisā* of meditative absorption is non-contentment in respect of wholesome qualities. The *upanisā* of meditative absorption is hearing the true Dharma. The deep effort of one with a sense of urgency on an occasion apt to stimulate emotion, this is the *upanisā* of meditative absorption’.⁸⁷

In these cases *upanisās* appear as supportive conditions for religious goals, where these conditions are inner qualities of the practitioner. A Vedic text similarly lists various *upaniṣads* in the same meaning.

⁸⁴ M 117 PTS iii.71: *ariyaṃ vo bhikkhave sammāsamādhim desessāmi saupaniṣaṃ saparikkhāraṃ*. The commentary (Ps v.130) adds that ‘with its *upanisā* means with its condition; with its requisite means with its equipment’ (*saupaniṣan’ti sapaccayaṃ saparikkhāran’ti saparivāraṃ*). There is a parallel to this discourse preserved in Chinese translation, MĀ 189 at T I 735b-736c (studied by Anālayo 2011 p.657f.). The parallel again includes the character 習 *xí* in place of Pāli *upanisā* (translated in Anālayo 2010 p.62 as ‘arousings’).

⁸⁵ S 45: 28 PTS v.21. The commentary again glosses *upanisā* as *paccaya*.

⁸⁶ A 7: 45 PTS iv.40: *ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave ariyo sammāsamādhi saupaniṣo iti’pi saparikkhāro iti’pi*.

⁸⁷ Peṭ 148–9: *tattha katamā upanisā? kalyāṇamittatā jhānassa upanisā. kalyāṇasampavaṅkatā jhānassa upanisā. indriyesu guttadvāratā jhānassa upanisā. asantuṭṭhitā kusalesu dhammesu jhānassa upanisā. saddhammassavanaṃ jhānassa upanisā. saṃvejanīye thāne saṃvigghassa yonisso padhānaṃ. ayaṃ jhānopanisā*. Also trans. Ñāṇamoli 1964 p.202, where he translates *upanisā* as ‘stipulate’.

5. The category of *upanisā* as the relationship between inner states in a series:

In this category are **S 12: 23** and **all twelve discourses** belonging to the ‘*upanisā* family’. In each case, an *upanisā* is a specific state or quality that is a supporting condition for the next, in a series that culminates with attaining the goal. Some Upaniṣads also contain series of items described as *upaniṣads*.

Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Morris and Hardy 1885)
BHS	<i>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary</i> (Edgerton 1953)
CPD	<i>Critical Pāli Dictionary</i> (Trenckner <i>et al.</i> 1924)
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad (Olivelle 1998)
Dhp	Dhammapada (Hinüber and Norman 1994)
Dhp-a	Dhammapada-atthakathā (H. C. Norman 1906)
DOP	<i>Dictionary of Pāli</i> (Cone 2001) (Cone 2010)
Jā	Jātaka (Fausbøll 1877)
M	Majjhima Nikāya (Trenckner and Chalmers 1888)
MĀ	Madhyama Āgama (CBETA)
Mp	Manorathapūraṇī (Walleiser and Kopp 1936)
Peṭ	<i>Peṭakopadesa</i> (Barua 1982)
Ps	Papañcasūdanī (Woods and Kosambi 1928)
S	Samyutta Nikāya (Féer 1884)
Sn	Sutta Nipāta (Andersen and Smith 1913)
Sp	Samantapāsādikā (Takakusu and Nagai 1924)
Spk	Sāratthappakāsinī (Woodward 1929)
Sv	Sumaṅgalavilāsinī (T. W. Rhys Davids and Estlin Carpenter 1886)

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