

## “The City”, in which the Buddha Shows that His Teachings Evolved

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SN 12.65, “The City”, contains two versions of dependent arising, one with ten links, one with eleven. Some have assumed that this was not original to the discourse, that perhaps it reflects two *suttas* combined. This paper proposes that the two schemes are part of one original *sutta*, and that the reason they are presented with differing numbers of links is evident from the *sutta* itself.

In the second book of the Saṃyutta Nikāya there is a *sutta* known as “The City”,<sup>1</sup> in which the Buddha tells us a tale about his thinking just prior to his awakening. He tells us that his insight began with him thinking about the difficulties that the world finds itself in. The *dukkha* he is thinking about is equated to aging-and-death (*jarāmaraṇa*), so the first question he asks himself is what is its cause; it is, of course, birth (*jāti*). The chain continues back as it does in the classic twelve-link version, but it stops at the interdependent pairing of *nāmarūpa* (name-and-form) with *viññāṇa* (consciousness), giving us a ten-step formulation that leaves out the classic version’s first two links, *saṅkhārā* (volitional formations) and *avijjā* (ignorance).

He then again takes the chain back from aging-and-death, this time working on how the cessation of each cause leads to the cessation of what follows it, and he stops at the same spot: still ten links here. There in the opening of the *sutta*, he has described the early thought processes that led him to his awakening.

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<sup>1</sup>SN 12.65 [PTS S ii 104]

In the middle of the *sutta*, he gives the parable from which the *sutta* gets its name, a story about a lost city that someone stumbles on in the jungle. The city is the equivalent of the knowledge he has just described: the structure of dependent arising (and ceasing). Both the city and what was happening in dependent arising were there long before he or the explorer discovered them. Next, he describes how the fellow who found the city returns to tell his king about it, suggesting he move there and restore the place, which he does, and the city thrives (just as would happen if people “moved into” the *dhamma*).

The final piece of the discourse returns us to the frame story, that of the Buddha, later in his life, describing how the tale of the lost city parallels the story he has just told about how he came to see the *dhamma* through an understanding of dependent arising. He says the path through the jungle is like the eight-fold path, and:

“I followed that path and by doing so I have directly known aging-and-death, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. I have directly known birth ... existence ... clinging ... craving ... feeling ... contact ... the six sense bases ... name-and-form ... consciousness ... volitional formations, their origin, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation.”

In this final portion, *saṅkhārā* at last appears, though ignorance is still, overtly at least, missing; but as Bhikkhu Bodhi points out in his notes to the *sutta*,<sup>2</sup> ignorance is implied by the mention of the origin of *saṅkhārā*.

We have here a few mysteries presented by the discrepancies between the classic twelve-link dependent arising, and the ten-link and eleven-link versions appearing together in this *sutta*. One question is, “Why does the first rendering here stop at consciousness and name-and-form?” A second is, “Why does the second version have eleven links?” One last question would be, “Why do both versions appear in the same *sutta*?”

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the commentary has an explanation for the first question: “...ignorance and volitional formations belong to a third existence and this insight is not connected with them.” Presumably that third existence is a past life, and this is suggesting that the Buddha was not thinking about past lives at that moment. This seems to be at odds with stories of how the Buddha reached

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<sup>2</sup>“At this point *saṅkhārā*, omitted earlier, are finally introduced, and *avijjā*, their condition, is implied by the mention of ‘their origin.’”

his awakening by seeing his past lives, though we could assume that the Buddha is not telling us about the whole of his insight in this *sutta*, just one small piece of it.

A simpler explanation – and one that seems quite clear when we approach the *sutta* as a story being told – is that on the day of the Buddha’s awakening, he came to see the *dhamma*, and when he formulated a way to describe it, he saw it clearly back to the pairing of name-and-form and consciousness; later he saw more, or more clearly: either he later saw more deeply into what comes before those two and he added that in, or he had already seen it but not found how best to describe it. Either way, the *dhamma* was, on the day of his awakening, exactly what it was on the day he took his last breath (and as it is even now) because the *dhamma* exists apart from all the ways we describe it; it remains what it is, even when we see it fuzzily. The challenge is to get very clear on what it is, and then to describe it.

My understanding of what is going on with the two versions is that the Buddha is being honest with us: his method of describing what he saw, and/or his perception of how far back one could trace events, evolved over time. Originally he conceived of it as having the ten links presented in the story he tells here of his past discovery, but by the time he is telling us the story, he understands it better as twelve.

This answers the last question: “Why do both versions appear in the same *sutta*?” It is because the *sutta* is describing both an initial understanding of the *dhamma/paṭicca samuppāda* (the way he described it for at least a little while, long enough to give us the few discourses in which he taught it that way), and then it is describing the finalized version.<sup>3</sup>

The next question is, “Why eleven links?” As mentioned above, the missing link (ignorance) is implied. Why leave it just implied? Because, semantically, logically, the structure of what is being said there about the links in the chain precludes a mention of ignorance, which is a negative state, a lack of knowledge. By

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<sup>3</sup>This is not to say that the language he is using to describe the links in “The City” is the original language he used – remember that the Buddha is not attached to language – but that the concepts he was trying to describe are the same. MN 74: “Indeed, Aggivessana, a monk with liberated mind neither supports nor opposes those who debate views; because of this, he uses whatever worldly language [is useful], without embracing it.” [PTS M ii 500] In my paper on the *sutta* “Quarrels and Disputes” I will try to show, with that early example of a discourse on dependent arising, that though the language used to describe the links may change, the links themselves are pointing to the same things.

“knowledge” here is meant direct knowledge, as knowledge by experience; this contrasts with “knowledge about”. In those final lines, the Buddha says that because of that path, he came to directly know aging-and-death, he gained direct knowledge of birth, and so on, all the way down to volitional formations. But one cannot directly know ignorance, because one cannot know something that is absent.

The same structure – an eleven-link *paṭicca samuppāda* with ignorance the missing twelfth – can be found in a *sutta*<sup>4</sup> on “the forty-four cases of knowledge”. The forty-four is eleven links times the four ways of knowing each link: what it is, its origin, its cessation, the way to its cessation. When the *sutta* rolls back through the links, they go from aging-and-death only as far as *saṅkhārā*. The focus of the *sutta* being knowledge, ignorance is omitted here too. In the *sutta* that follows it, knowledge is again the focus, but ignorance does appear,<sup>5</sup> in this case because it is knowledge about, knowledge of how one condition causes the next, not direct knowledge (experience) of the condition itself that is being discussed. The knowledge that *saṅkhārā* is caused by ignorance is a positive state, and therefore possible.

There are eleven links here in “The City” only because ignorance is not knowable, and direct knowledge was what the Buddha was talking about at the end of this *sutta*.

The answer to the remaining question, “Why does the early version leave out *saṅkhārā* and ignorance?” has already been posited as caused by the Buddha’s teaching methods or by his understanding of what he had seen deepening over time. This explanation is one that is unlikely to have been welcome to those handing the Pali canon on to us over the centuries, or to the commentators, because it implies that the Buddha was just a human, who did not have instant and complete understanding of everything on awakening. This reading of the *sutta* suggests that he either lacked insight into the depth of dependent arising, or into the best ways to teach it, and therefore that he was someone who learned more as he continued through life. This is a logical explanation, though, and is given support by the few other texts in which *paṭicca samuppāda* stops at the same place.

The ten-link dependent arising is also given in SN 12.67, “Sheaves of Reeds”, in which Sāriputta is asked how each of the links comes to be (created by oneself,

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<sup>4</sup>SN 12.33 [PTS S ii 57]

<sup>5</sup>“The knowledge: ‘Volitional formations have ignorance as their condition.’ The knowledge: ‘When there is no ignorance, there are no volitional formations.’” SN 12.34 [PTS S ii 60]

by another, by both, or did it arise fortuitously?) and he responds “none of the above” by naming the preceding link as the cause. His questioner is puzzled by the interdependent nature of the last two links, and questions him about this. This would indicate that the Buddha was still teaching the ten-link version when he first met Sāriputta.

There is another *sutta* that makes reference to exactly the same ten links, and it, too, is associated with an early understanding of the *dhamma*. It is found in DN 14’s story about “the Buddha’s lineage”, in which he tells tales of a Bodhisatta who becomes the Buddha Vipassi, whose life runs in amazingly close parallel to the Buddha’s own.<sup>6</sup> At one point<sup>7</sup> Vipassi comes to realize that “consciousness goes no further, it turns back at name-and-form”, and shortly after this, he states<sup>8</sup> that “with the cessation of name-and-form, consciousness ceases; with the cessation of consciousness, name-and-form ceases”. It seems the Buddha thought that any newly awakened being would see it the way he did.

Perhaps the most famous *sutta* in which the *paṭicca samuppāda* ends with consciousness and name-and-form is DN 15,<sup>9</sup> where causation is given the fullest treatment. It is thought to be a nine-link version, and certainly, aside from *sañ-khārā* and ignorance, one more link is left out: the six senses. But as I noted in an earlier paper,<sup>10</sup> the reason for this is because this discourse makes use of both popular versions of the Prajāpati myth, when it asks the question: what if whatever we perceived around us was indistinguishable, not being individuated through form – in other words, if it was formless? Would we then be able to put what we meet into preconceived categories? (The answer is no.) This discussion of what would happen if everything were formless borrows from the lesser of the two Prajāpati myths, the one in which the created world is too uniform, one big mass, and so there is neither acquisition of the senses, nor anything to sense. This is, I believe, why the six senses don’t appear in DN 15’s version, so that its dependent arising is still, effectively, a ten-link version, trimmed by the necessities of the

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<sup>6</sup>One cannot help suspecting that the similarity was intentional, since the Buddha had nothing he could present as a lineage as it was defined in those days: as teachings handed down directly from master to student. He was quite literally his own master, so whose story could he tell but his own?

<sup>7</sup>[PTS D ii 32]

<sup>8</sup>[PTS D ii 35]

<sup>9</sup>The stopping point is in the middle of the *sutta* at [PTS D ii 62].

<sup>10</sup>“Burning Yourself”, *JOCBS*, vol. 2, May 2012.

discourse, just as the eleven-link version is trimmed by necessity from the twelve-link version in “The City”.

It seems quite likely that many of the versions of dependent arising that have fewer than the ten links presented here, or the twelve of the later version, are shortened for specific reasons: because they discuss only the links needed to make a certain point. Also, there may be *suttas* in which the number of links is greater than is readily apparent, as I show in my paper on “Quarrels and Disputes”.

To summarize, though the two forms of dependent arising found in the “The City” might have some more complex explanation, the simplest answer to the puzzle is to take the story at face value, and accept that when the Buddha is telling us about his initial discovery, he is telling us that he perceived it in ten steps, but that later in life, as he is telling this story, he understands it as having more.