

The Spiral Path or Lokuttara Paṭiccasamuppāda.

Jayarava, March 2011.¹

The idea that *paṭicca-samuppāda* comes in two varieties – one of which models human bondage through being trapped in cycles of craving and grasping; the other which models the process and dynamics of liberation from those same cycles – was lost to Buddhism for many centuries. It seems not to appear in Mahāyāna presentations of the Dharma. It occurs many times in the Pāli nikāyas, but rarely after that. It is mentioned in passing in the Nettipakaraṇa, a commentarial text included in the canon, and then again in passing, in the *Visuddhimagga*. After this it apparently disappears from Theravāda literature as well. Caroline Rhys Davids, having re-discovered the idea in 1902, highlights the *Upanisā Sutta* in the ‘editorial notes’ to her *Samyutta Nikāya* translation (1922):

"Yet more refreshing is it to find that oasis on p.26, where a causal sequence of joy and happiness is, *for this once only*, harnessed to the scheme [of *paṭicca-samuppāda*]! 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!²

Dr Beni Barua took up the theme in his lecture *Buddhism as Personal Religion*, published in the *Mahabodhi Society Journal* in 1944.³ It appears to be Barua who first used the terminology ‘cyclic’ and ‘progressive’ of the two forms of conditionality. Barua presents a progressive sequence of steps, but attempts to locate this precise sequence in the canon have not identified it, and it seems Barua may have been taking poetic license with canonical lists. The only identifiable text Barua cites is the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (MN 44) and Sāgaramati has shown that it is doubtful whether this sutta actually represents an example of progressive conditionality at all. However Sangharakshita used Barua’s presentation as the basis of his own early thinking on this subject in his 1954 lecture series, subsequently published as *A Survey of Buddhism* in 1957 which includes an extensive quote from Barua. Mrs Rhys Davids also seems to have made an impression on Sangharakshita who refers to her ‘slightly intemperate’ comments when introducing the sequence in *A Survey*.⁴ At that time he was under the impression that the *Upanisā Sutta* (SN 12.23) was one of a kind, “... being without parallel in the Tipiṭaka” (p.136). Sangharakshita has mentioned the Spiral Path in numerous lectures and written works. His books *A Guide to the Buddhist Path* (1990a) and *What is the Dharma?* (1998) use edited extracts from his 1966 lecture *The Stages of the Spiritual Path*. This material was reiterated in the 1967 lecture *The Psychology of Spiritual Development*. Sangharakshita also published a treatment of *The Three Jewels* (1991 [1967]) often

¹ My research into this topic dates to May 2004 when I wrote my essay *A Footnote To Sangharakshita’s ‘A Survey of Buddhism’* clarifying my own thinking about the presentation of the spiral path in Sangharakshita (1993). At that time I was unaware of essays by Sāgaramati and Ratnaprabha on this subject, or that others had identified other versions of the spiral path.

² Rhys Davids and Woodward (1922), Part II, ‘The nidāna book’ p.viii. [my italics].

³ Cited in Sangharakshita (1993) but see Sāgaramati (2010) for a detailed discussion of the severe problems in Barua’s presentation.

⁴ Sangharakshita (1993), p.136

illustrating the points using Sanskrit terminology material drawn from Mahāyāna sources such as the idea of *śūnyatā*.⁵ It was Sangharakshita who coined the term Spiral Path for this sequence, to contrast it with the cyclic *nidānas*.⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi (1980) wrote in response to Sangharakshita (1991 [1967]) in order, as he says, to give a Theravāda account of the teaching. Finally Ayya Khema used the *Upanisā Sutta* as the basis of teaching on a meditation retreat published as *When the Iron Eagle Flies* (1991). This seems to be the extent of the literature. There is no scholarly account of the Spiral Path in its breadth and variation, and only the *Upanisā Sutta* is considered in most of the literature.

Unfortunately Rhys Davids' assertion that the sequence occurs "for this once only" was incorrect. Subsequently several members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, including myself, have independently identified a number of other suttas which contain the progressive form of *paṭicca-samuppāda* with minor variations.⁷ Even when the key texts, such as AN 10.2 are translated the significance of the Spiral Path is not brought out.

Our first task, then, will be to survey the Pāli literature of the Spiral Path and discuss the salient features of the idea in the Canon. We must next look critically at the contemporary English language literature of the Spiral Path. A comparison of the various texts allows us to see that though the *Upanisā Sutta* is the *locus classicus*, it is not in fact representative of the bulk of the occurrences of this idea. A better choice of archetypal text, if we had to make one would be the *Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta* (AN 10.2).

It is not unusual to see *avijjā*, *saṅkhārā* etc being referred to as *nidānas* or as 'links' but items in the list are more correctly *dharmas*, whereas *nidāna* refers to the relationship between the items in the lists. In order to make this clear I will discuss the items on the lists as *nodes*, and the relationships between them as *links*. Each lists contains a number of nodes and these are linked by a certain type of relationship. However since the label *nidānas* is so widespread and accepted I will continue to use it to refer to the nodes collectively. On the model of '*nidānas*' I adopt '*upanisās*' as my generic term for *lokuttara* sequences on the model of the *nidānas*. Since the links are more generalised than the nodes I will discuss them separately.

The Sequences in Pāli

The sequences of nodes and links that make up the Spiral Path occur throughout the *nikāyas*, as well as one mention in the *Visuddhimagga* (T = translated in the appendix).

1. *Samaññāphala Sutta* (DN 2; repeated at DN 9, 10, 11, 12, 13⁸)

⁵ We can see this as part of Sangharakshita's conscious efforts to disidentify with the Theravāda at time, and to make it clear that his sympathies were non-sectarian. The use of Sanskrit rather than Pāli, despite the lack of any Sanskrit source for the *Upanisā Sutta*, was an aspect of this.

⁶ Sangharakshita accepts and has always taught the traditional 'three lifetimes' interpretation of the 12 *nidānas* and often makes use of the *bhavacakkha* or 'wheel of life' with the 12 nodes around the outside forming a circle in his teaching.

⁷ See Jayarava (2004); Sāgaramati (2010); Ratnaprabhā (1996); See also Dhīvan (2011). I have also identified a number of other suttas which present another list, e.g. the eight-fold path, in terms of a progression (D ii.218).

The list of *bojjhaṅgas* shares some terms with *upanisā* sequences, c.f. SN 46.1 discussed below.

⁸ I will refer to all of these simply as DN 2.

2. *Dasuttara Sutta* (DN 34)
3. *Vatthūpama Sutta* (MN 7; repeated at MN 40) T
4. *Kandaraka Sutta* (MN 51)
5. *Upanisā Sutta* (SN 12.23) T
6. *Pamādavihārī Sutta* (SN 35.97) T
7. *Pāṭaliya Sutta* (SN 42.13)
8. *Nandiya Sutta* (SN 55.40) T
9. *Parisā Sutta* (AN 3.96) – partial to samādhi only.
10. *Vimuttāyatana Sutta* (AN 5.26)
11. *Mahānāma Sutta* (AN 6.10) T
12. *Satisampajañña Sutta*⁹ (AN 8.81) T
13. *Kimatthiya Sutta* (AN 10.1 = AN 11.1) T
14. *Cetanākaraṇīya Sutta* (AN 10.2 = AN 11.2) T
15. *Paṭhama-upanisā Sutta* (AN 10.3 = AN 11.3) T
16. *Dutiya- and Tatiya-upanisā Suttas* (AN 10.3 and 10.4; AN 11.3 and 11.4) repetitions of *Paṭhama-upanisā Sutta* spoken by Sāriputta and Ānanda respectively.
17. *Visuddhimagga* (Vism i.32)¹⁰

See also the diagram below.

The overall division into morality, meditation and wisdom will prove a useful structure to our discussion. Philosophers would probably make a distinction between morality and ethics: the former is a general concern for how we should live, and tends to be descriptive; while the latter concerns specific formulations of a good life, guidelines and rules for good behaviour (as well as sanctions for bad behaviour), and is prescriptive. The Pāli word *sīla* seems to be used loosely in both senses. In the threefold path we might translate it as ‘morality’, but in, say, AN 8.81 it more likely refers to following the Buddhist precepts and should be translated as ‘ethics’.

Morality

In the stage of morality there are several types of nodes: some appear to be *starting points*, some involved *praxis*, and lastly some appear to be *fruits of practice*. So for instance in the DN 2 – which gives us the most extensive list of nodes, but no strong sense of the links between them – the starting point is the arising of a *tathāgata* in the world. In the MN 7 it is impurities of the mind (*cittassa upakkilesa*) and in SN 55.40 perfect confidence (*aveccappasāda*), though this arises later in both of the texts already mentioned in this paragraph as a result of hearing the dhamma in DN 2 and from abandoning defilements in the MN 7. Faith (*saddha*) also features in the *Upanisā Sutta* where its precondition is the *dukkha* that arises with birth as a precondition (*jātūpanisaṃ dukkhaṃ, dukkhūpanisā saddhā*).

⁹ this sequence beginning with *hirotappe* is found at AN 7.65; with *indriya-saṃvara* at AN 6.50, and beginning with *sīla* at AN 5.24 and 5.168. I will use AN 8.81 as a collective designation for all of these.

¹⁰ Ñāṇamoli (1964) p.13

The bulk of the nodes in the stage of morality section, though, reflect moral praxis especially ways of paying attention to experience:

- *saṃvara*; or *indriyesu-saṃvara*, *-saṃvuta* = *indriyesu guttadvāra* (AN 8.81, SN 35.97, MN 7, MN 51, DN 2)
- *yoniso-manasikāra* (DN 34)
- *appamattassa vihārato* (SN 55.40)
- *sati & sampajañña* (DN 2, MN 51)
- *hirotappa* (AN 8.81),
- *sīla*; *kusalāni sīlāni* (AN 8.81, AN 10.1 etc, DN 2)

Saṃvara etc, *yoniso-manasikāra*, *appamāda* and *sati-sampajañña* all refer to how one pays attention to experience and to the effects that experience has on the experiencer. Buddhists often characterise the problem of human existence in terms of intoxication (*pamāda*), obsession (*pariyādāya*), or infatuation (*madanīya*) with sense information, and the solution as ‘sobering up’ (e.g. SN 35.97). *Saṃvara* refers to restraining the sense faculties, not allowing the attention to run wild amongst sense pleasures. *Yoniso-manasikāra* is also typically understood as being careful about where one’s attention wanders.¹¹ *Appamatta* and the related form *appamāda* (literally ‘non-intoxication’) are often translated as ‘vigilance’, and again suggest care where attention rests and sobriety. Indeed the canon often explains *appamāda* in terms of guarding the senses. So all of these terms are closely related. The presence of *sati & sampajañña* in this list suggests that we should see them as moral qualities also. The two refer to awareness more generally and the previous terms could be said to define how *sati & sampajañña* are put into practice. *Sīla* is a generic term for behaviour especially virtuous behaviour (*kusala sīla*). The compound *hirotappa* is made from *hiri* ‘shame’, or remorse at bad conduct; and *ottappa* the fear of letting people down with one’s poor conduct, often translated as moral dread.

The population of sequences with these nodes varies considerably as does the ordering. Particularly DN 2 seems to have a very different order from the AN and SN texts. The comprehensive list and the different ordering suggest that this is a compilation that has been reordered to be more logical to the compiler.

These practices in turn lead to some early fruits such as a clear conscience *avippatisāra* (AN 10.1 etc), an undefiled mind *avyāsittacitta* (SN 35.97), knowledge of the letter and spirit of teachings *athaveda & dhammaveda* (MN 7, AN 6.10) and satisfaction *santuttho* (DN 2). Importantly all of these are conditions for *pamojja*. *Pamojja* seems to occupy the threshold between morality and meditation. Ayya Khema emphasises that without *pamojja* that meditation is simply not possible (1991, p.92), though *pamojja* is not included amongst the characteristics of absorption (*jhānaṅga*).

In AN 8.81 the sequence is first stated in the negative, ie without *satisampajañña* ‘recollection and clear comprehension’ the basis for *hirotappa* ‘shame and moral dread’ is

¹¹ The translation ‘wise attention’ reflects the received tradition regarding this quality of attention. However the etymology suggests another interpretation: *manasi* ‘in the mind’ (a rare case of a the first member of a compound being declined – in this case the locative); *kāra* ‘making’; *yoniso* ‘according to origins’ – ‘making in the mind’ (i.e. ‘thinking about, imagining’) the origin of experiences.

destroyed (*hatūpanisaṃ*), etc; and then in the positive when there is *satisaṃpajañña* then there is a basis (*upanisa*) for *hirotappa*. The syntax here mirrors the general conditionality formula i.e. *imasmim sati, idam hoti*,¹² as it does in SN 35.97.

The Vism sequence appears to be a monastic adaptation of AN sequences. Morality is rephrased in the monastic language of discipline (*vinaya*) and restraint (*saṃvara*). Although Buddhaghosa traces the series through to *vimutti* and *vimutti-ñānadassana*, he places the series as a whole in the context of mundane (*lokiya*) virtue which “brings about improvement in future becoming and is a prerequisite for the escape from becoming”. Supramundane (*lokuttara*) virtue, by contrast, “brings about the escape from becoming and is the plane of Reviewing Knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇañāṇassa*).”¹³ Contrast *Nettipakarāṇa* which, as Bhikkhu Bodhi has noted, describes the Spiral Path as *lokuttara* or ‘transcendental’.¹⁴ The series is given no great prominence in Vism, and appears only once in this context.

These are classical expressions of the moral restraint which is expected of the Buddhist practitioner to counteract the powerful intoxication (*pamāda*), obsession (*pariyādāya*), or infatuation (*madanīya*) with the objects of the senses that afflicts ordinary people.

Meditation.

As the diagram above makes clear most of the lists converge at *pamojja*, and all share the sequence *pamojja, pīti, passadhi, sukha, samādhi*; except AN 8.81, which goes from *sīla* straight to *samādhi*. Despite the unanimity of the texts regarding these terms the translation of them varies considerable – we do not apparently have good English equivalents. I’ve settled on joy, rapture, serenity, bliss, and integration respectively. In MN 7 and elsewhere the sequence of verbs is *labhati, jāyati, passambhati, vedeti, samādhīyati*, so: joy is obtained, rapture is born, the body is pacified, bliss is experienced, and the mind is integrated. Meditation then involves a series of states characterised by increasingly subtle positive mental states that culminate in some form of knowledge or knowing (*ñāṇa*). This knowledge instigates the wisdom part of the Spiral Path.

There is another sequence of items which has some cross over with the *upanisās* which is the *satta bojjhaṅgas* or ‘seven factors of awakening’¹⁵: mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of mental states (*dhammavicaya*), energy (*virīya*), rapture (*pīti*), serenity (*passadhi*), integration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Pursuing and attaining these states (*dhammas*) leads to

¹² This type of construction is called a ‘locative absolute’.

¹³ Ñāṇamoli p.13. [my italics] Nyanatiloka (2004) explains *paccavekkhaṇañāṇassa* as “retrospective knowledge... any inner experience just passed” (p.136) – I wonder if here it refers to *vimuttiñāṇa*, the knowledge of having just experienced *vimutti*.

¹⁴ Netti 65. The phrase ‘Transcendental Dependent Arising’ (*lokuttara paṭiccasamuppāda*), used by Bodhi doesn’t actually occur, what it says is: “This is the end of disappointment: dependent arising. It is of two types: ‘of the world’, and ‘beyond the world’. ‘Of the world’ is from ‘with ignorance as condition there is volition’ up to ‘old age and death’. ‘Beyond the world’ is ‘a clear conscience is born in the virtuous’, up to ‘he knows there is no further rebirth’.” (*Esevanto dukkhassā’ti paṭiccasamuppādo. So duvidho lokiyo ca lokuttaro ca. Tattha lokiyo avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, yāva jarāmaraṇā. Lokuttaro silavato avipparisāro jāyati, yāva nāparam itthattāyāti pajānāti.*). The Spiral Path here doesn’t seem to correspond exactly to any of the sequences I have identified: it begins like 10.2, but ends like MN 51. I’m very doubtful about using ‘transcendental’ as a translation of *lokuttara*, as it comes with considerable baggage. The path is not ‘transcendental’ by any of the definitions supplied by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 9th ed.

¹⁵ For example at SN 46.1ff; PTS S v.63ff (The *Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta*)

liberation. The crossover comes in the middle of both sequences. Both are further obviously related to the *jhānaṅgas* or *jhāna* factors: *vitakka* ‘initial thought’, *vicāra* ‘sustained thought’, *pīti* ‘rapture’, *passadhi* ‘calming down’, *sukha* ‘bliss’, and *samādhi* ‘concentration’. I suggest that in fact the *jhānas* are not different from the meditation nodes: that the first *jhāna* is characterised by rapture, the second by serenity, the third by bliss, and the fourth by absorption. Other traditional descriptions add to these characteristic qualities, but we can take the nodes from joy to absorption as being synonymous with the *jhānas*.

There are some partial sequences (e.g. AN 3.96) which end on *samādhi*, however although the sequence is not completed we can infer that having attained *samādhi* will complete it. Cf SN 35.99: “A bhikkhu with a concentrated mind understands things as they are,”¹⁶.

Wisdom

The culmination of the meditation in most cases is *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*. This is often described in terms of knowledge of Reality, though I think Nyanatiloka gets closer when he defines it ‘knowledge and vision according to reality’¹⁷ Following Sue Hamilton, I understand the Buddhist doctrine to be referring to *experience* not to *Reality*, and I understand this node in terms of understanding the true nature of experience. The knowledge is the knowledge of why and how we experience *dukkha*. This avoids a lot of haggling over ontologies, and also avoids the necessity for supernatural knowledge – so called “direct contact with reality” which is perceived and cognised by some mysterious extra (but unnamed and unknowable) faculty other than the five physical senses and the mind.

The characteristic formulation is that knowledge & vision of experience-as-it-is (*yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*) cause one to be disenchanted (*nibbidā*) with sense experience and to lose interest in it, one thereby ceases to be caught up in the passions (*virāga*) aroused by it. Most of the sequences reach the point of *vimutti*, but some elaborate this as liberation of the mind (*cittam vimutti*) and others spell out that the mind is liberation from the *āsavas*. The result is another kind of knowledge – the knowledge that one is liberated, or that the *āsavas* have been destroyed, which amount to the same thing. DN2 diverts through the four *rūpa jhānas* and arrive at ‘knowledge of seeing through’ *vipassanañāṇa* which is a synonym for *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*.

The SN 35.97 and SN 55.40 diverges from *samādhi* to *dharmānaṃ pātubhāva* ‘the manifestation of phenomena’. I suggest that this is functionally equivalent to *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*. MN 7 goes from *samādhi* to *brahmavihara*, and then knowledge of escape beyond the perceptual situation (*pajānati... saññāgataṃ uttariṃ nissaraṇaṃ*). M 51 goes directly from the fourth *jhāna* to *tevijjā*, the three ‘knowledges’ that constitute the intellectual content of awakening.

In this main sequence liberation is an experience from the desire which causes suffering. This experience itself is not easily communicable, but no experience is. Imagine trying to communicate the experience of eating a peach to someone who had never seen one. However

¹⁶ S iv.80 *Samāhito, bhikkhave, bhikkhu yathābhūtaṃ pajānātīti*

¹⁷ Nyanatiloka 2004, p.247.

we can communicate about having had the experience, how we felt at the time, how we feel about it now. We can usually speak about the significance an experience has had for us, especially if it was transformative. And this is what makes the *knowing* important. We do not communicate the experience so much as the knowledge of having had the experience, the insights we gained as a result, and the meaning the experience for our lives.¹⁸

Some form of knowing – an awareness of dissatisfaction – sets us on the path of practice. With success in meditation comes the knowledge of the nature of experience and why it is dissatisfying. This we can expect to be communicated and indeed it forms a considerable proportion of Buddhist literature. But this knowledge also transforms our relationship to experience which feeds back into how we experience the world. It allows us to cease being intoxicated (*pamāda*) with the world of the senses (*kāmaloka*), to sober up, and be liberated from the oppression of the passions which overtake and overwhelm us.

This brief outline gives us the main features of the *lokuttara paṭicca-samuppāda* sequences. The next task is to look at how the *Upanisā Sutta* performs in its role as *locus classicus*.

The Upanisā Sutta in Contemporary Literature

The *Upanisā Sutta* shares the meditation nodes from *pīti* to *samādhi* with all the other lists, but begins and ends idiosyncratically. In particular the *Upanisā Sutta* begins the sequence with faith arising with suffering as a precondition. That suffering is the culmination of the *nidānas* and replaces *jarā-maraṇa* in the usual *nidāna* sequence. requires some exegesis, and some assumptions must be made about how *saddhā* arises out of *dukkha*.

In the *Survey* (1993 [1957]) Sangharakshita does not address this problem. In *The Three Jewels* (1991 [1967]) he says that *saddhā* “develops when, as a result of our experience of the painful, unsatisfactory and frustrating nature of *samsāric* experience, we begin to place the heart... not so much on the conditioned as on the Unconditioned”. (p.112) This statement in turn requires some unpacking as what Sangharakshita means by the *Unconditioned* (capital U) is not immediately clear, and in recent interviews he has changed his mind using this kind of terminology as it seems to have been misunderstood in the past. However let us say that by the Unconditioned he means something like ‘the possibility of liberation’ (*vimutti*) which is in keeping with the terminology of the texts we are discussing. As a result of our experience of *dukkha* we develop faith in the possibility of awakening. But it’s not clear that *saddhā* does develop directly from the experience of *dukkha* or Buddhism would be spontaneously break out everywhere. In his 1966 and 1967 lectures, however, Sangharakshita filled in the gaps a little. Awareness of *dukkha* gives rise to “restlessness”, which sets us “searching for something higher”, and once we contact something higher *then* faith arises. Sangharakshita, in effect, introduces three intermediate steps: restlessness, searching, and contact with something higher.¹⁹ We could call these *nidānas* 1a, 1b, and 1c. In *A Guide to the Buddhist Path* Sangharakshita (1990a) defines faith as:

¹⁸ Richard Gombrich (2009) makes a similar point see especially chapter 10 ‘Cognition; Language; Nirvana’.

¹⁹ The transcript for this lecture was published in Sangharakshita (1990) p.95; and again in Sangharakshita (1998) p.109.

“The emotional response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe. Faith is an intuitive response to what is of ultimate value.”²⁰

It is difficult to see how to square this statement with *saddhā* arising directly from *dukkha* (the very opposite of ‘something higher’), and it shows why extra steps are needed get from one to the other. Unfortunately this exposition appears to make the spiral loop back on itself because surely ‘contact with something higher’ is very like *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*. Subhuti’s recent presentation of Sangharakshita’s current thinking on doctrine makes it clear that *saddhā* requires some experience of the path itself. He says: “We need to be confident that it is possible to go beyond our present level of consciousness...”, and confidence is supported by reason, intuition and experience; but paradoxically he says that it is only when we have faith that we will practice in a way which will bring about that shift in consciousness. “Without that confidence we will not apply ourselves to assembling the necessary conditions [for new levels of consciousness emerge]”.²¹ This creates a tautology – knowledge & vision arises with faith as a pre-condition, but faith itself depends on something very like knowledge & vision. Sangharakshita might argue that the two are of a different order and that knowledge & vision refers to a decisive insight that takes us past the point of no return (to use his ‘gravitational’ metaphor), whereas contact with “something higher” merely confirms that there is something other than *dukkha* to aspire to. I can see an argument for making the distinction between reaching the point of no return and lesser insights, but if “something higher” is not *yathābhūta* then what is it? Compare the *lokuttara* and *lokiya* aspects of the Eightfold-path. Sangharakshita says of these:

“The point of distinction is the difference between a virtue consciously and deliberately practised, with more or less success, as a discipline, and a virtue that is the natural expression, the spontaneous overflow, of an inner realization.”²²

This kind of distinction would seem to apply to faith and knowledge & vision as well. My main response to these kinds of arguments would be that the complexity of the exposition required to iron out the apparent contradictions, goes against the description of the Dharma as ‘immediately apparent’ (*sanditthiko*). That *saddhā* arises from *dukkha* is not apparent, let alone *immediately* apparent.²³

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in response to Sangharakshita’s exposition of the Spiral Path in *The Three Jewels*, has also written about the way that *saddhā* depends on *dukkha*.²⁴ Bodhi sees *dukkha* as stimulating a need to make a break from our “instinctual urges”, leading to “a search for something different”, and an “arousing of religious consciousness”. To this point he appears to be thinking along the same lines as Sangharakshita, but he further characterises

²⁰ Sangharakshita (1990a), p.95.

²¹ Subhuti (2010), p.14.

²² Sangharakshita (1993), p.159.

²³ I am arguing on the basis of doctrine. However I am aware that at an experiential level some Buddhist practitioners feel the connection between *saddhā* and *dukkha* is meaningful. I would still argue that they have this experience because as Buddhists they have an approach to *dukkha* that allows *saddhā* to emerge.

²⁴ Bodhi (1980), p.11-13.

the arousing of religious consciousness in terms of an “act of understanding” and an “adoption of a new perspective”.²⁵ Bodhi says: “The urge for liberation can only set in when pain and sorrow have been confronted with reflective awareness and recognised as symptoms of a deeper ailment...”.²⁶ I make this a total of four extra steps between *dukkha* and *saddhā*.

The *Upanisā Sutta* as a model of the spiritual life is also problematic because it does not mention ethics (*sīla*) at all! It is true that there are many ways into the Dharma, many paths which converge, but Sangharakshita’s presentation of the Dharma often relies on the description of the path in terms of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*; or ethics, meditation and wisdom.²⁷ Faith is also important, but in practical terms we cannot leave ethics out. It is precisely from the experience of practicing ethics and meditation and reflecting on the results that *saddhā*, faith in the possibility of liberation, arises.

Faith (*saddhā*) or its close counterpart ‘confirmed confidence’ (*aveccappassāda*) do occur in several other Spiral Path texts. In DN 2 faith in the Buddha (*tathāgate saddhā*) arises when one hears him speak about the Dharma. In MN 7 confirmed confidence arises in dependence on abandoning the impurities of the mind (*cittassa upakkilesā*), while in AN 6.10 it is conditional upon the mind being directed towards the six recollections (*anussati*): the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha; one’s own virtue & generosity; and the faith (*saddhā*), virtue (*sīla*), religious knowledge (*suta*), generosity (*cāga*) and wisdom (*paññā*) of the *devas* which enabled them to be born in the *devaloka*.

A further minor problem occurs at the end of the *Upanisā Sutta* sequence. We move from *vimutti* to *āsavakhayaṃ ñānaṃ*. This misses out a step which explicitly relates liberation with the destruction of the *āsavas*. Most other texts describe the last stage as the knowledge of liberation. DN2 also finishes with *āsavakhayaṃ ñānaṃ* but this arises out of *vipassanñāna*. Elsewhere (e.g. MN 51) liberation is specifically liberation of the mind from from the taints, but even here the knowledge gained is “it is liberated”.²⁸

The *Upanisā Sutta* has two virtues. Firstly it is the only sutta where the progressive *upanisā* sequence occurs in the same context as the cyclic *nidāna* sequence which gives us a clue that the two trends in conditionality were already seen as two aspects of one process by the time the canon was collated.²⁹ However we do need to note how the two were linked. The progressive sequence is tacked onto the end of the cyclic:

... taṇha > upādāna > bhava > jati > *dukkha* > *saddhā* > pamojja > pīti...

This substitution of *dukkha* for the more usual *jarā-maraṇa* ‘old age and death’ is to some extent consistent with other texts which describe the *nidāna* chain as the origin of this whole mass of suffering (*kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo*),³⁰ and the whole mass of suffering by definition includes death. However when composing a meditation practice

²⁵ Bodhi (1980), p.11.

²⁶ Bodhi (1980), p.11.

²⁷ See for instance Sangharakshita (1993) p.159ff; and (1998) p.163 ff. Part 2 of Sangharakshita (1990a) is organised around the threefold path

²⁸ M i.348. *vimuttasmim vimuttamiti ñānaṃ hoti*.

²⁹ As noted above however AN 8.81 uses the *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti* syntax which we associate with the *nidāna* sequence.

³⁰ e.g. *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, S ii.16.

combining reflection on the two trends, Sangharakshita did not follow the pattern of the *Upanisā Sutta*. His practice begins with the Spiral Path *upanisās* from *dukkha* up to *yathābhūta-nāṇadassana*. The content of the *yathābhūta* insight is the *nidāna* chain, so at this point we go forward through the 12 links from *avijjā* to *marāṇa* in terms of arising, then backwards from *marāṇa* to *avijjā* in terms of ceasing. We then continue through the remaining links in the Spiral Path from *nibbidā* to *khaye-nānaṃ*.³¹

Elsewhere Sangharakshita says that the link at which we break the cycle of *saṃsāra* is between *vedanā* and *taṇha*. “[The spiral path] begins at the crucial point of our experience of *vedanā*, the feelings that befall us in the course of our lives.”³² Similarly “If we refuse to react [to *vedanā* with *taṇha*] and respond instead with a healthy mental attitude we are carried out of the *saṃsāra* into the process of reaction in a progressive order between two counterparts or compliments, at the ‘end’ of which lies Nirvāṇa.”³³ *Dukkha* and *vedanā* become synonymous in this presentation. And “...suffering in this sequence of positive Nidanas corresponds to vedana, or feeling, among the twelve reactive, or cyclical, Nidanas.”³⁴ Again there is an apparent conflict with how the *Upanisā Sutta* connects the two sequences end to end.

The second virtue of the *Upanisā Sutta* is the simile that occurs at the end of the sutta to illustrate the principle. Many people respond more easily to images than to concepts, and this image nicely conveys the point of the progressive sequence. I will discuss this together with related similes below.

Linking the Elements : the Nature of *Upanisā*.

There are four main words which describe the links between the nodes in the Spiral Path: *upanisā*, *attha*, *dhammatā*, and *pāripūri*.

The *Upanisā Sutta*, AN 10.3-4, and the variations on AN 8.81 all refer to the link between the elements of the sequence as an *upanisā* – a word which can mean ‘supporting condition’, ‘precondition’ or perhaps ‘secret connection’.³⁵ The commentary glosses *upanisā* with *kāraṇa* ‘cause’ and *paccaya* ‘condition’.³⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi translates ‘proximate cause’ but it remains debatable whether ‘cause’ is appropriate. Elsewhere Bodhi is resistant to seeing the twelve *nidānas* as causal:

“The sequence of factors should not be regarded as a linear causal process in which each preceding factor gives rise to its successor through a simple exercise of efficient

³¹ This practice is briefly described in Kamalashila (1992), p.217-223.

³² Sangharakshita (1998) p.106.

³³ Sangharakshita (1991), p.111.

³⁴ Sangharakshita (1991)

³⁵ ‘Secret connection’ is a suggestion by Dhīvan and draws on the identity of Pāli *upanisā* with Sanskrit *upaniṣad*. He notes that Aśvaghōṣa “uses upaniṣad in a close parallel to this sutta as Saundarananda 13:22-26.” and that the translator of the Clay Sanskrit Library edition, Linda Covill, has translated ‘secret’ at this point. [Personal communication]. Dhīvan (2009) discusses this issue in greater depth. The translation as ‘secret connection’ is still rather speculative however and, with respect to my friend, I prefer to note it as a possible connotation rather than adopt it as a main translation.

³⁶ SA 2.52 *Saupanisanti sakāraṇaṃ sappaccayaṃ*. There are a number of these ‘condition’ words which are often synonymous, e.g. *upanisā*, *kāraṇa*, *nidāna*, *nissaya*, *paccaya*, and *hetu*.

causality. The relationship among the factors is always one of complex conditionality rather than linear causation.”³⁷

In the *Three Jewels* Sangharakshita, following Rhys Davids’ translation, calls the link a “causal association”.³⁸ Likewise Ayya Khema very much sees dependent arising in terms of “cause and effect”.³⁹ There is an argument for the use of the language of causality, but it would be better to speak instead of conditionality. To say that *avijjā* causes *saṅkhārā* is to give *avijjā* itself agency. We can however say that agency tainted by *avijjā* gives rise to *dukkha*. The word *upanisā* doesn’t seem to imply a cause, just a condition or especially a precondition.

In AN10.1 and Vism the link is described in terms of *attha*, variously translated depending on the context as ‘benefit, reward, advantage; meaning, purpose.’ This serves a useful methodological purpose as it deals with the motivation to practice – it sets out the Spiral Path as a series of positive benefits which accrue to the spiritual practitioner. In AN10.1 *attha* is paired with its synonym *ānisaṃsa* ‘reward, profit, merit, advantage’. Each subsequent item in the list is the ‘benefit and reward’ of the preceding item.

In AN 10.2 the progress comes because it is ‘natural’ (*dhammatā*) which means that being virtuous one need not make an effort of will (*cetanāya karaṇīyam*) to bring about a clear conscience, it just happens. That a clear conscience is the natural outcome of being virtuous doesn’t require any speculation on our part, it is within the range of everyone’s experience. Neither does it require any extra steps. AN 10.4 and 10.5 also phrase this negatively in that without virtue the basis for a clear conscience is destroyed (*hatūpaniso*), c.f. AN 8.81 which also begins with the way the absence of the previous node destroys the condition for the arising of the next.

What is emphasised in these texts is that morality is where we put in the most effort. By behaving virtuously we set up the conditions for the Spiral Path to naturally and spontaneously arise. Being virtuous is not only its own reward, but continued effort to be ethical drives the whole of the spiritual life. The texts associated with the *bojjhaṅgas* such as the *Himavant Sutta* (SN 46.1) also emphasise virtue as the basis upon which the path leading to liberation rests.

The last term is *pāripūri* ‘fulfils’ or its verbal form *paripūreti* ‘to fulfil’. The latter is the causative form of *paripūrati* ‘to fill up or perfect’. Since this term is closely associated with the simile of streams, discussed below, the translation of ‘filling up’ seems preferable to ‘perfects’ though this is clearly a connotation. While I have argued against the relationship being seen as causal the image of the pool filling up and overflowing into the lake and in turn filling it up adds to our understanding of the process. It is not that virtue causes a clear conscience, but if we practice virtue to perfection then we will have a perfectly clear conscience. With a perfectly clear conscience we would be perfectly happy, in the sense that nothing about our own behaviour would be troubling us, and because we treat everyone with kindness no one is unkind to us. This may well strike the modern reader as more than a little naïve. However several stories in the Pāli Canon suggest that perfect kindness may have

³⁷ Bodhi (2000). p. 523 (introduction to the *nidāna-saṃyutta*.)

³⁸ e.g. Sangharakshita (1991), p.111. “In causal association with *dukkha* arises... (ii) *saddhā*.”

³⁹ Khema (1991) especially p.51ff.

unlooked for benefits. The story of Aṅgulimāla is a good illustration of this. Perfect kindness overcomes even the psychopathic mass murder.

Similes for the Process of Liberation

The fact that the Spiral Path unfolds naturally (*dhammatā*) is a very attractive feature of the AN10/11 *Suttas*. The same point is made by the simile of flowing water in the *Upanisā Sutta*⁴⁰ and the *Himavant Sutta*, and the simile of a healthy tree in AN 6.50.

Streams

Just as, monks, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along with the slope, and fills the clefts, gullies, and creeks; these being filled fill up the pools; these being filled fill up the lakes; these being filled fill up the streams; these being filled fill up the rivers; and these being filled fill up the great ocean.⁴¹

Here our *sīla* is like rain pouring down on the mountain side. The effects of each small ethical act might be small like a single rain drop amongst a shower, but morality is a cumulative process – the effects of our actions accumulate and gain momentum as we become more ethically aware and astute. This is sometimes described in terms of accumulating ‘merit’ (*puñña*). Another version of this simile is found in the *Himavant Sutta* (SN 46.1, PTS S v.63)⁴²:

Monks, the *nāgas* depend on the king of snowy mountains to increase their substance, and account for their power. Increased and empowered they descend into small pools, then into large pools; then they descend into small rivers, and then into large rivers; and finally they descend into the great gathered waters of the ocean. Thus their body becomes great and full. Just like that, monks, the monk depending on virtue, supported by virtue, seriously takes up the practice of, and produces, the seven factors of awakening and attains the greatness and fullness of them.

Here the mythic *nāgas* are the ones making the progress. In Pāli *nāga* frequently means elephant, but can also mean any large or particularly impressive animal. And it is in this sense that it is usually applied to the Buddha. However the *nāgas* were also local animistic deities, often associated with water, but sometimes also with trees. In many ways they personify the water and the life giving properties of it, as well as the fertility it engenders. *Nāgas* often take

⁴⁰ The simile is also found at A i.243. ii.140, v.114; S v.396. At S v.396 (*Mahānāma Sutta*, SN 55.38) there is a coda saying that for a *ariyasāvaka* the four factors of stream entry (confidence in the three jewels, and virtue) flow on, having gone over [to the other shore], and result in the destruction of the āsavas. (*evameva kho, bhikkhave, ariyasāvakassa yo ca buddhe aveccappasādo, yo ca dhamme aveccappasādo, yo ca saṅghe aveccappasādo, yāni ca ariyakantāni sīlāni – ime dhammā sandamānā pāraṃ gantvā āsavānaṃ khayāya saṃvattantīti* S v.396).

⁴¹ Bodhi (2000) p.556

⁴² This simile is repeated at A v.47 but replaces the *bojjhaṅgas* with the eightfold path

the form of serpents - the symbolic connection with serpentine rivers is obvious. Since snakes often live in burrows under the earth, the *nāga* also has chthonic resonances - they are creatures of the underworld.⁴³

In this simile the *nāgas* seem to represent the water itself - the *nāgas* enter (*otarati* - literally 'go down to, descend') each body of water in turn, and come to the collected waters of the ocean (*mahāsamuddasāgara*) where they achieve greatness (*mahantatta*) and fullness (*vepullatta*). The *nāgas* depend on the king of snowy mountains (*himavantam pabbatarāja*) because spring thaws fill the lakes and rivers.

Tree

The other simile I'm aware of likens the upanisās to a tree:

[With sense control in place, this] is like a tree with branches and foliage intact: the buds will mature, and also the bark, the greenwood and the heartwood will mature.⁴⁴

In the tree simile *sīla* is the branches and leaves of the tree that keep it healthy, and make it possible for buds to grow and mature. An even better simile would have been to liken *sīla* to the roots of the tree.

The similes, particular the flowing water simile, are valuable for presentations of the Dharma. The main sense of both of these similes is that if we set up the conditions for spiritual growth then spiritual growth is not only possible, but will *naturally* occur – significantly both of the similes draw on the natural world.

Conclusions

The teaching of the Spiral Path is widespread in the Pāli canon, being found across the four *nikāyas*. Though there is considerable variation, there are thematic similarities across the variations. For instance the majority of sequences seem involve the traditional progression from morality, to meditation, to wisdom. And within each of these phases the emphases are similar to familiar Buddhist approaches. The importance of the Spiral Path is that it models the *dynamics* of the path. In other words the information about the links is more significant than the different selections of nodes, especially as the positive mental events that make the meditation phase of the path are also found in the *jhānaṅgas*.

Caroline Rhys Davids remarked that Buddhism might have presented a different face if the Spiral Path had been chosen as the paradigm for *paṭicca-samuppāda*. It seems unlikely that we will ever understand the processes which lead to it being forgotten. Sangharakshita puts it down to "... the one-sided negativism which came increasingly to dominate the Hīnayāna schools, including the Theravāda".⁴⁵ I'm not sure that this observation would withstand a critical examination. However compare the attitude of scholar Peter Masefield in

⁴³ C.f. Sutherland (1991) p.38-43.

⁴⁴ Nyanaponika & Bodhi (1999) p.166. AN 6.50; PTS AN iii.359.

⁴⁵ Sangharakshita (1993) p.136.

his *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* who argues that liberation is only possible while there is a living Buddha. He characterises the Buddha’s disciples, the *sāvakas* as “...passive recipients of a goal that they could not pass on to others...”⁴⁶. If, as Masefield argues, the early Buddhists believed “... that salvation was impossible after the death of the founder”⁴⁷ then this might explain a loss of interest in the dynamics of liberation. That said Masefield’s thesis is deeply flawed and simply overlooks countless examples which contradict the textual passages which he uses as ‘evidence’ for his assertion. One might also observe that the Buddhist ideal of striving for liberation seems to have survived outside the texts right down to the present day!

However Masefield’s attempted justification of the idea that one has to be in the physical presence of a Buddha to be liberated raises an important question that continues to haunt Buddhism: how can those intoxicated with sense pleasures, and confused by craving and aversion possibly be liberated from them? The Spiral Path was one early answer to this question (which contra Masefield doesn’t require the direct intervention of a Buddha). I suggest that many later innovations seek to answer the same question – I’m thinking of doctrines of interpenetration associated with Huayen Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism; and the controversial doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha*, as well as some aspects of Yogacāra philosophy. So for all that we lost a valuable, and inspiring teaching in the Spiral Path, had we retained it, other interesting and influential ideas might not have emerged.

The *Upanisā Sutta* is only the *locus classicus* because of a quirk of history, and it not representative of the *upanisā* sequences more generally. I suggest that AN 11.2 would make a better *locus classicus* as it has all the important features and other sequences can more easily be seen as variations on it. However while the bulk of the publishing on the subject focuses exclusively on the *Upanisā Sutta* the situation is unlikely to change. I hope this article will go some way towards shifting the reliance on the Upanisā Sutta in the exegesis of the inner workings of the path to liberation.

Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
Netti	Nettipakaraṇa
SA	Samyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā (Samyutta Nikāya Commentary)
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
Vism	Visuddhimagga

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