MN 38 — MN 38 The Greater Craving-Destruction Discourse | Mahā Taṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta

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Text

The Greater Craving-Destruction Discourse

Mahā Taṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38)

Introduction

This sutta teaches how to understand the relationship of consciousness to rebirth in a way that helps put an end to rebirth.

Although the Buddha never used any word corresponding to “rebirth” in his teachings, he did describe birth as a process following on death again and again as long as the appropriate conditions are present. In other words, even though he didn’t use the word

“rebirth,” his teachings on birth are teachings on repeated birth: how it happens, how it inherently involves suffering and stress, and how it can be brought to an end.

The idea that death can be followed by birth was not universally accepted in India in the Buddha’s time. As DN 2 and MN 102 show, some prominent contemplative schools actively rejected the idea of rebirth while others affirmed it. Thus when the Buddha taught rebirth, he wasn’t simply following an unexamined cultural assumption. He was consciously taking a stand on one of the controversial issues of his time. However, his explanation of rebirth differed from other schools on both sides of the issue in that he avoided the question of whether or not there’s a “what” that gets reborn, or if there is a “what,” what it is (SN 12:12; SN 12:35). He also discouraged such speculations as, “If I take rebirth, what was I in the past, and what will I be in the future?” (MN 2)

He put all these questions aside because they interfered with the path of practice leading to the end of suffering. Instead, he focused on the process of how birth happens, because the process involves factors that are immediately apparent to one’s awareness throughout life and lie enough under one’s control to turn them toward the ending of birth. An understanding of the process as process—and in particular, as an example of the process of dependent co-arising—can actually contribute to the end to suffering, because it gives guidance in how to apply the tasks appropriate for the four noble truths to all the factors in the process leading up to birth.

One of the salient features of dependent co-arising is its lack of outside context. In other words, it avoids any reference to the presence or absence of a self around or a world behind the processes it describes. This allows one to focus directly on the factors of the process as factors, parts of a causal chain. And this, in turn, makes it easier to notice which factors—such as ignorance—cause suffering and should thus be abandoned; which ones—such as attention and intention—can be converted to the path to the end of suffering, and so should be developed before they, too, are abandoned; and which ones—such as clinging and becoming—constitute suffering, and so should be comprehended to the point of disenchantment and dispassion, leading to release.

This sutta concerns a monk—Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son—who refuses to heed the Buddha’s care in treating all the elements of the process of wandering on from birth to birth as processes. Sāti states that, in his understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, consciousness is the “what” that does the wandering on. His fellow monks and then the Buddha treat him and his erroneous view in a way that parallels the way they treat Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers in MN 22. First the narrator notes that the view is not merely wrong, but actually evil and pernicious: To adopt it would be to place an obstacle in one’s path. The monks try, unsuccessfully, to dissuade Sāti from his view, after which they report the case to the Buddha. The Buddha calls Sāti into his presence, and after ascertaining that Sāti will not abandon his view even when reprimanded by the Buddha himself, he abandons Sāti as too recalcitrant to teach, and turns to cross-question the monks as to the relevant right view of how consciousness functions in the process leading to repeated birth.

The Buddha's treatment of Sāti might seem harsh, but he is actually acting out of compassion for the monks in the assembly, in case any of them might be swayed by Sāti's position. Seeing Sāti as a lost cause, the Buddha doesn't want this lost cause to cause further losses among the other monks. We have to remember that during the Buddha's lifetime there were no written accounts of his teachings; the monks and nuns all had to rely on their memory of what they had heard directly from him or through word-of-mouth from fellow members of the Saṅgha. Thus the Buddha saw the need to establish orthodoxy whenever a member of the Saṅgha was espousing false interpretations of his teaching.

Because Sāti's evil view deals with issues that are much more complex than those touched on in Ariṭṭha's, the Buddha's cross-questioning of the monks here is correspondingly longer and more complex than in MN 22. However, the complexity can be comprehended by keeping in mind that, essentially, the cross-questioning aims at accomplishing two things at once: In providing a correct understanding of consciousness as a conditioned phenomenon, it also shows why the sort of question Sāti was trying to answer is ill-conceived.

The first part of the cross-questioning treats the conditioned nature of consciousness as a process in the context of two frameworks: (1) the standard description of the factors of dependent co-arising, and (2) the four nutriments of consciousness.

Following the pattern of dependent co-arising, the Buddha first classifies consciousness in terms of the way it arises in dependence on the six sense-media. This analysis points to the way consciousness functions as a sub-factor under the factor of contact in dependent co-arising.

"It's in dependence on a pair that consciousness comes into play. And how does consciousness come into play in dependence on a pair? In dependence on the eye & forms there arises eye-consciousness. The eye is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Forms are inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Thus this pair is both wavering & fluctuating—inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise.

"Eye-consciousness is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Whatever is the cause, the requisite condition, for the arising of eye-consciousness, that is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Having arisen in dependence on an inconstant factor, how could eye-consciousness be constant?

"The coming together, the meeting, the convergence of these three phenomena is eye-contact. [Similarly with ear-, nose-, tongue-, body-, and intellect-consciousness.]" —SN 35:93

The discussion then switches to consciousness as dependent on four types of nutriment: physical food, contact, intellectual intention, and consciousness itself. Here the sutta focuses on the need—in practice—to see this dependence as it actually occurs, and on the

need to use this view for the proper purpose. As other passages in the Canon point out, the purpose of all Dhamma teachings is to induce the disenchantment/distaste for the nutriment that will allow for release.

“For a monk practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, this is what accords with the Dhamma: that he keep cultivating disenchantment/distaste with regard to form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness. As he keeps cultivating disenchantment/distaste with regard to form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness, he comprehends form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness. As he comprehends form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness, he is totally released from form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness. He is totally released from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is totally released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.” —SN 22:39

“Just as the ocean has a single taste—that of salt—in the same way, this Dhamma-Vinaya has a single taste: that of release.” —Ud 5:5

In other words, the ability of the monks to give, in unison, the right answers to the Buddha’s questions does not fulfill the teaching’s purpose. The right answers are meant to be used as tools to induce a sense of disenchantment/distaste for continued feeding on the processes leading to suffering. This sense of disenchantment/distaste is what leads to release.

The reference to the raft analogy here is another point on which this sutta parallels MN 22, in which the monks also give correct answers in unison to the Buddha’s questions. Perhaps the reason for why the raft analogy is cited in both suttas is that it was seen as a corrective for the sort of complacency that can come when one can recite with others an orthodox view.

At any rate, the discussion of consciousness in the framework of nutriment is then tied into the discussion of dependent co-arising through the fact that nutriment is dependent on craving. This places nutriment in the position of clinging/sustenance in dependent co-arising—as dependent on craving, and acting as a condition for becoming. This placement is affirmed by passages elsewhere in the Canon that speak of consciousness plus its nutriment as among the sub-factors providing the conditions for further becoming:

“Kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in/tuned to a lower property… a middling property… a refined property. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. This is how there is becoming.” —AN 3:76

“Like the earth property, monks, is how the four standing-spots for consciousness [the properties of form, feeling, perception, and fabrications] should be seen. Like the liquid property is how delight & passion should be seen. Like the five types of propagation [through roots, stems, joints, cuttings, & seeds] is how consciousness together with its nutriment should be seen.” —SN 22:54

Given that consciousness also functions at a point in dependent co-arising prior to sensory contact—as following on fabrication and preceding name-and-form—it thus plays a role at three stages in the process: as a factor following on fabrication, as a sub-factor of contact, and as a sub-factor of clinging.

The remainder of the Buddha's cross-questioning of the monks further explores the framework of dependent co-arising, arriving at the conclusion that a person thus trained in understanding dependent co-arising would no longer be interested in pursuing questions of identity and existence—such as, "Am I?" "Am I not?" "What am I?" "What was I?" "What will I be?" This is because, as MN 2 points out, such questions are instances of inappropriate attention; and as SN 12:2 points out, the framework of dependent co-arising classes inappropriate attention under the factor of "name" as a cause of suffering. Thus the discussion arrives at the reasons why the Buddha was so careful to put the sort of question asked and answered by Sāti aside.

The sutta then turns to the path of practice by which an understanding of dependent co-arising can gain the power and focus needed to put an end to suffering. It begins with an account of birth, noting that the birth of a human being requires not only that the parents have intercourse when the mother is in her season, but also that a "gandhabba" is present. Usually in the Canon, the term gandhabba means a being on the lowest level of the celestial devas—devas who are often represented as obsessed with lust. However, the Commentary notes that gandhabba in this context means a being whose kamma enables it to take birth on that occasion, an interpretation supported by a discussion in MN 93.

By introducing a being into the discussion, the Buddha might be suspected of introducing a "what" into his discussion of birth. However, on the level of dependent co-arising, the Buddha did not treat the concept of a being as a "what." His definition of a "being" shows that he recommended that it, too, be regarded as a process:

As he was sitting there, Ven. Rādha said to the Blessed One: "'A being,' lord. 'A being,' it's said. To what extent is one said to be 'a being'?"

"Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Rādha: When one is caught up [satta] there, tied up [visatta] there, one is said to be 'a being [satta].'

"Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling... perception... fabrications...

"Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness, Rādha: When one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be 'a being.'" —SN 23:2

Thus the Buddha advocated viewing a "being" simply as a process of attachment to desire, passion, delight, and craving. And it is precisely this attachment to craving that allows for rebirth after death:

[The Buddha:] "Just as a fire burns with sustenance and not without sustenance, even so I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance and not of one without sustenance."

[Vacchagotta:] "But, Master Gotama, at the moment a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, what do you designate as its sustenance then?"

"Vaccha, when a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, I designate it as wind-sustained, for the wind is its sustenance at that time."

"And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, what do you designate as its sustenance then?"

"Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time." —SN 44:9

However, a being—in the Buddha's sense of the term—not only takes birth after the death of the body, it can also take birth, die, and be reborn many times in the course of a day—as attachment develops for one desire, ends, and then develops for another desire. This is why the processes leading to rebirth after death can be observed and redirected in the present moment during life. This is why the ability to understand and observe the processes of dependent co-arising is so important in putting an end to rebirth on all its many levels.

To emphasize the desirability of putting an end to rebirth, the sutta moves from the topic of conception to note the pains and anxieties suffered by the mother in carrying the fetus and giving birth. But then what does her child do? He spends his time in trivial pursuits, childish games and then, as he grows older, the quest for sensual pleasures. If the child—now an adult—realizes the limited nature of such an existence, he gains conviction in the need to practice the Dhamma. He becomes a monk, develops virtue and concentration, and then on the basis of his attainment in concentration he approaches the senses in a way that overcomes the limitations experienced by one who approaches them simply for the pursuit of sensual pleasure. This, the Buddha says, is a short description of the destruction of craving—and, by implication, of the ending of the consciousness and the birth that depend on craving as a condition.

One of the ironies in the organization of the sutta is that, after a long detailed discussion of discernment, virtue, and concentration, the description of how these factors actually are brought together to arrive at the end of craving and birth leaves out many important details. For instance, there is no discussion of how, once the monk has attained concentration, he uses it wisely in such a way that actually puts an end to craving. As the Buddha states in other suttas—such as MN 29, MN 113, and AN 4:178—it is possible to attain strong states of concentration and use them, not as a basis of release, but as a basis for increased defilement and attachment.

This means that the Buddha is not being coy when he states at the end of this long sutta that his discussion of the destruction of craving is brief. It's up to the reader to put the elements of triple training together in practice to see how they lead from a limited awareness through a limitless awareness to total release.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Now on that occasion this evil viewpoint [diṭṭhigata] had arisen in the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on (from birth to birth), not another." A large number of monks heard, "They say that this evil viewpoint has arisen in the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on (from birth to birth), not another.'" So they went to the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son and on arrival said to him, "Is it true, friend Sāti, that this evil viewpoint has arisen in you—'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on, not another'?"

"Exactly so, friends. I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One such that it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on, not another."

Then those monks, desiring to pry the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son away from that evil viewpoint, quizzed him back & forth and rebuked him, saying, "Don't say that, friend Sāti. Don't slander the Blessed One, for it is not good to slander the Blessed One. The Blessed One would not say anything like that. In many ways, friend, the Blessed One has said of dependently co-arisen consciousness, 'Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness.'" And yet even though he was quizzed back & forth and rebuked by those monks, the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son, through stubbornness and attachment to that very same evil viewpoint, continued to insist, "Exactly so, friends. I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One such that it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on, not another."

So when the monks were unable to pry the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son away from that evil viewpoint, they went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they (told him what had happened).

So the Blessed One told a certain monk, "Come, monk. In my name, call the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son, saying, 'The Teacher calls you, friend Sāti.'"

"As you say, lord," the monk answered and, having gone to the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son, on arrival he said, "The Teacher calls you, friend Sāti."

"As you say, friend," the monk Sāti the Fisherman's Son replied. Then he went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Is it true, Sāti, that this evil viewpoint has arisen in you—'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on, not another'?"

"Exactly so, lord. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is just this consciousness that runs and wanders on, not another."

“Which consciousness, Sāti, is that?”1

“This speaker, this knower, lord, that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & evil actions.”

“And to whom, worthless man, do you understand me to have taught the Dhamma like that? Haven’t I, in many ways, said of dependently co-arisen consciousness, ‘Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness’?2 But you, through your own poor grasp, not only slander us but also dig yourself up (by the root) and produce much demerit for yourself. That will lead to your long-term harm & suffering.”

Then the Blessed One said to the monks, “What do you think, monks? Is this monk Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, even warm in this Dhamma & Vinaya?”

“How could he be, lord? No, lord.”

When this was said, the monk Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, sat silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words.

Then the Blessed One, seeing that the monk Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, was sitting silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words, said to him, “Worthless man, you will be recognized for your own evil viewpoint. I will cross-question the monks on this matter.”

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Monks, do you too understand the Dhamma as taught by me in the same way that the monk Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, does when, through his own poor grasp (of the Dhamma), he not only slanders us but also digs himself up (by the root) and produces much demerit for himself?”

“No, lord, for in many ways the Blessed One has said of dependently co-arisen consciousness, ‘Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness.’”

“It’s good, monks, that you understand the Dhamma taught by me in this way, for in many ways I have said of dependently co-arisen consciousness, ‘Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness.’ But this monk Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, through his own poor grasp (of the Dhamma), has not only slandered us but has also dug himself up (by the root), producing much demerit for himself. That will lead to this worthless man’s long-term harm & suffering.

Consciousness Classified by Requisite Condition

“Consciousness, monks, is classified simply by the requisite condition in dependence on which it arises. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the eye & forms is classified simply as eye-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the ear & sounds is classified simply as ear-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence

on the nose & aromas is classified simply as nose-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the tongue & flavors is classified simply as tongue-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the body & tactile sensations is classified simply as body-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the intellect & ideas is classified simply as intellect-consciousness.

“Just as fire is classified simply by whatever requisite condition in dependence on which it burns—a fire that burns in dependence on wood is classified simply as a wood-fire, a fire that burns in dependence on wood-chips is classified simply as a wood-chip-fire; a fire that burns in dependence on grass is classified simply as a grass-fire; a fire that burns in dependence on cow-dung is classified simply as a cow-dung-fire; a fire that burns in dependence on chaff is classified simply as a chaff-fire; a fire that burns in dependence on rubbish is classified simply as a rubbish-fire—in the same way, consciousness is classified simply by the requisite condition in dependence on which it arises. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the eye & forms is classified simply as eye-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the ear & sounds is classified simply as ear-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the nose & aromas is classified simply as nose-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the tongue & flavors is classified simply as tongue-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the body & tactile sensations is classified simply as body-consciousness. Consciousness that arises in dependence on the intellect & ideas is classified simply as intellect-consciousness.

On Becoming

“Monks, do you see, ‘This has come to be’?”3

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, do you see, ‘It comes into play from that nutriment’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, do you see, ‘From the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“From the doubt—‘Has this come to be?’—does uncertainty arise?”

“Yes, lord.”

“From the doubt—‘Does it come into play from that nutriment?’—does uncertainty arise?”

“Yes, lord.”

“From the doubt—‘From the cessation of that nutriment, is what has come to be subject to cessation?’—does uncertainty arise?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, for one who sees with right discernment, as it has come to be, that ‘This has come to be,’ is that uncertainty abandoned?”

“Yes, lord.”

“For one who sees with right discernment, as it has come to be, that ‘It comes into play from that nutriment,’ is that uncertainty abandoned?”

“Yes, lord.”

“For one who sees with right discernment, as it has come to be, that ‘From the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation,’ is that uncertainty abandoned?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, are you thus free from uncertainty here that ‘This has come to be’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Are you thus free from uncertainty here that ‘It comes into play from that nutriment’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Are you thus free from uncertainty here that ‘From the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, is it well seen (by you) that ‘This has come to be’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Is it well seen (by you) that ‘It comes into play from that nutriment’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Is it well seen (by you) that ‘From the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, if you were to adhere to this view—so pure, so bright—if you were to cherish it, treasure it, regard it as ‘mine,’ would you understand the Dhamma taught as analogous to a raft,4 for crossing over, not for holding on to?”

“No, lord.”

“If you were not to adhere to this view—so pure, so bright—if you were to not to cherish it, not to treasure it, not to regard it as ‘mine,’ would you understand the Dhamma taught as analogous to a raft, for crossing over, not for holding on to?”

“Yes, lord.”

Nutriment & Dependent Co-arising

“Monks, there are these four nutriments for the maintenance of beings who have come into being or for the support of those in search of a place to be born. Which four? Physical food, gross or refined; contact as the second, intellectual intention the third, and consciousness the fourth.

“Now, these four nutriments have what as their cause, what as their origination, through what are they born, through what are they brought into being? These four nutriments have craving as their cause, craving as their origination, are born from craving, are brought into being from craving.

“And this craving has what as its cause, what as its origination, through what is it born, through what is it brought into being?

“Craving has feeling as its cause… is brought into being through feeling.

“And this feeling has what as its cause… through what is it brought into being?

“Feeling has contact as its cause….

“And this contact has what as its cause… through what is it brought into being?

“Contact has the six sense-media as its cause….

“And these six sense-media have what as their cause… through what are they brought into being?

“The six sense-media have name-&-form as their cause….

“And this name-&-form has what as its cause… through what is it brought into being?

“Name-&-form has consciousness as its cause….

“And this consciousness has what as its cause… through what is it brought into being?

“Consciousness has fabrications as its cause….

“And these fabrications have what as their cause… through what are they brought into being?

“Fabrications have ignorance as their cause, ignorance as their origination, are born from ignorance, are brought into being from ignorance.

The Arising of Stress & Suffering

“Thus:

From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

“‘From birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death’: Thus was it said. Now, monks, is it the case that from birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death, or not, or how is it here?”

“Lord, from birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death. That’s how it is for us here: From birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death.”

[Similarly with the remaining requisite conditions down to:]

“‘From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications’: Thus was it said. Now, monks, is it the case that from ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications, or not, or how is it here?”

“Lord, from ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. That’s how it is for us here: From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.”

“It’s good, monks, that you say that, and I say that,5 too.

When this is, that is.

From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

In other words:

From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

The Cessation of Stress & Suffering

“Now from the remainderless fading and cessation of that very ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications.

From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness.

From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form.

From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of the six sense media.

From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact.

From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling.

From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving.

From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance.

From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming.

From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth.

From the cessation of birth, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

"'From the cessation of birth comes the cessation of aging-&-death': Thus was it said. Now, monks, is it the case that from the cessation of birth comes the cessation of aging-&-death, or not, or how is it here?"

"Lord, from the cessation of birth comes the cessation of aging-&-death. That's how it is for us here: From the cessation of birth comes the cessation of aging-&-death."

[Similarly with the remaining requisite conditions down to:]

"'From the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications': Thus was it said. Now, monks, is it the case that from cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications, or not, or how is it here?"

"Lord, from the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. That's how it is for us here: From the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications."

"It's good, monks, that you say that, and I say that, too.

When this isn't, that isn't.

From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

In other words:

"From the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications.

From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness.

From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form.

From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of the six sense media.

From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact.

From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling.

From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving.

From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance.

From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming.

From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth.

From the cessation of birth, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

Inappropriate Questions Avoided

"Now, monks, knowing thus and seeing thus, would you run after the past, thinking, 'Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? How were we in the past? Having been what, what were we in the past'?"

"No, lord."

"Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you run after the future, thinking, 'Shall we be in the future? Shall we not be in the future? What shall we be in the future? How shall we be in the future? Having been what, what shall we be in the future'?"

"No, lord."

"Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you be inwardly perplexed about the immediate present, thinking, 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound'?"6

"No, lord."

"Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you say, 'The Teacher is our respected mentor. We speak thus out of respect for the Teacher'?"

"No, lord."

"Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you say, 'The Contemplative says this. We speak thus in line with the Contemplative's words'?"

"No, lord."

“Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you dedicate yourselves to another teacher?”

“No, lord.”

“Knowing thus and seeing thus, would you return to the observances, grand ceremonies, & auspicious rites of common contemplatives & brahmans as having any essence?”

“No, lord.”

“Is it the case that you speak simply in line with what you have known, seen, & understood for yourselves?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Good, monks. You have been guided by me in this Dhamma which is to be seen here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be realized by the observant for themselves. For it has been said, ‘This Dhamma is to be seen here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be realized by the observant for themselves,’ and it was in reference to this that it was said.

The Birth & Growth of a Being

“Monks, the descent of the embryo occurs with the union of three things. There is the case where there is no union of the mother & father, the mother is not in her season, and a gandhabba7 is not present, nor is there a descent of an embryo. There is the case where there is a union of the mother & father, and the mother is in her season, but a gandhabba is not present, nor is there a descent of an embryo. But when there is a union of the mother & father, the mother is in her season, and a gandhabba is present, then with this union of three things the descent of the embryo occurs.

“Then for nine or ten months the mother shelters the embryo in her womb with great anxiety, as a heavy burden. Then, at the end of nine or ten months, she gives birth with great anxiety, as a heavy burden. Then, when the child is born, she feeds it with her own blood—for mother’s milk is called blood in the discipline of the noble ones.

“Then, as the child grows and his faculties mature, he plays at children’s8 games: toy plows, stick games, somersaults, toy windmills, toy measures, toy carts, and a toy bow & arrow.

“As he grows and his faculties mature (still further), he enjoys himself provided & endowed with the five strings of sensuality: forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, accompanied with sensual desire; sounds cognizable via the ear… aromas cognizable via the nose… flavors cognizable via the tongue… tactile sensations cognizable via the body— agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, accompanied with sensual desire.

Limited Awareness

“On seeing a form with the eye, he is infatuated with pleasing forms, and gets upset over unpleasing forms. He dwells with body-mindfulness unestablished,9 with limited awareness. He doesn’t discern, as it has come to be, the awareness-release & discernment-release where those evil, unskillful qualities cease without remainder. Engaged thus in predilection & opposition, he relishes any feeling he feels—pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—welcomes it, & remains fastened to it. As he relishes that feeling, welcomes it, & remains fastened to it, delight arises. Now, any delight in feeling is clinging/sustenance. From his clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

“On hearing a sound with the ear….

“On smelling an aroma with the nose….

“On tasting a flavor with the tongue….

“On sensing a tactile sensation with the body….

“On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he is infatuated with pleasing ideas, and gets upset over unpleasing ideas. He dwells with body-mindfulness unestablished, with limited awareness. He doesn’t discern, as it has come to be, the awareness-release & discernment-release where those evil, unskillful qualities cease without remainder. Engaged thus in predilection & opposition, he relishes any feeling he feels—pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—welcomes it, & remains fastened to it. As he relishes that feeling, welcomes it, & remains fastened to it, delight arises. Now, any delight in feeling is clinging/sustenance. From his clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

The Path to Unlimited Awareness

“Now, there is the case where a Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy & rightly self-awakened. He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure.

“He [the person discussed above], hearing the Dhamma, gains conviction in the Tathāgata and reflects: ‘Household life is confining, a dusty path. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn’t easy, living at home, to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the household life into homelessness?’

“So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the ochre robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

Virtue

“When he has thus gone forth, endowed with the monks’ training & livelihood, then—abandoning the taking of life—he abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.

“Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He takes only what is given, accepts only what is given, lives not by stealth but by means of a self that has become pure. This, too, is part of his virtue.

“Abandoning uncelibacy, he lives a celibate life, aloof, refraining from the sexual act that is the villager’s way.

“Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

“Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

“Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large.

“Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

“He abstains from damaging seed & plant life.

“He eats only once a day, refraining from the evening meal and from food at the wrong time of day.

“He abstains from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and from watching shows.

“He abstains from wearing garlands and from beautifying himself with scents & cosmetics.

“He abstains from high and luxurious beds & seats.

“He abstains from accepting gold & money.

“He abstains from accepting uncooked grain… raw meat… women & girls… male & female slaves… goats & sheep… fowl & pigs… elephants, cattle, steeds, & mares… fields & property.

“He abstains from running messages… from buying & selling… from dealing with false scales, false metals, & false measures… from bribery, deception, & fraud.

“He abstains from mutilating, executing, imprisoning, highway robbery, plunder, and violence.

“He is content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is he content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along.

“Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Sense Restraint

“On seeing a form with the eye, he doesn’t grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. On hearing a sound with the ear…. On smelling an aroma with the nose…. On tasting a flavor with the tongue…. On touching a tactile sensation with the body…. On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he doesn’t grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. Endowed with this noble restraint over the sense faculties, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Mindfulness & Alertness

“When going forward and returning, he makes himself alert. When looking toward and looking away… when bending and extending his limbs… when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl… when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting… when urinating and defecating… when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself alert.

Abandoning the Hindrances

“Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, this noble restraint over the sense faculties, this noble mindfulness & alertness, he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down,

crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore.

“Abandoning covetousness with regard to the world, he dwells with an awareness devoid of covetousness. He cleanses his mind of covetousness. Abandoning ill will & anger, he dwells with an awareness devoid of ill will, sympathetic with the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will & anger. Abandoning sloth & drowsiness, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth & drowsiness, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth & drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness & anxiety, he dwells undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness & anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

The Four Jhānas

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—then, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.

“With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance.

“With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

“With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

Unlimited Awareness

“On seeing a form with the eye, he isn’t infatuated with pleasing forms, and doesn’t get upset over unpleasing forms. He dwells with body-mindfulness established,9 with unlimited awareness. He discerns, as it has come to be, the awareness-release & discernment-release where those evil, unskillful qualities cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned predilection & opposition, he doesn’t relish any feeling he feels—pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain—doesn’t welcome it, doesn’t remain fastened to it. As he doesn’t relish that feeling, doesn’t welcome it, & doesn’t remain fastened to it, delight doesn’t arise. From the cessation of his delight comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

“On hearing a sound with the ear….

“On smelling an aroma with the nose….

“On tasting a flavor with the tongue….

“On sensing a tactile sensation with the body….

“On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he isn’t infatuated with pleasing ideas, and doesn’t get upset over unpleasing ideas. He dwells with body-mindfulness established, with unlimited awareness. He discerns, as it has come to be, the awareness-release & discernment-release where those evil, unskillful qualities cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned predilection & opposition, he doesn’t relish any feeling he feels—pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain—doesn’t welcome it, doesn’t remain fastened to it. As he doesn’t relish that feeling, doesn’t welcome it, & doesn’t remain fastened to it, delight doesn’t arise. From the cessation of his delight comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

“Monks, remember this, my brief (account of) release through the destruction of craving; and Sāti, the Fisherman’s Son, as tied up in the great net of craving, the great tangle of craving.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Notes

1. The Buddha, knowing that there are two types of consciousness—the consciousness aggregate (viññāṇakkhandha), which is experienced in conjunction with the six sense media, and consciousness without surface (viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ), which is experienced independently of the six sense media (MN 49)—is here giving Sāti the chance to identify which of the two types he has interpreted as running and wandering on. Sāti’s answer shows that he is talking about the first type. The remaining discussion of consciousness throughout this sutta is thus directed at this first type. It would have been interesting to see how the Buddha would have attacked Sāti’s misunderstanding had Sāti stated that he was talking about the second.

On the topic of consciousness without surface, see DN 11, note 1, and MN 49, note 9.

2. The Pali here is, Nanu mayā moghapurisa anekapariyāyena paṭiccasamuppannaṁ viññāṇaṁ vuttaṁ, ‘Aññatra paccayā n’atthi viññāṇassa sambhavoti’?

If the first part of this sentence were a complete sentence, its syntax—putting the topic of what is described in the nominative (paṭiccasamuppannaṁ viññāṇaṁ), followed by the word vuttaṁ ("described") plus the speaker in the instrumental (mayā)—could be translated in line with either of two patterns.

An example of the first pattern is in SN 12:24: Paṭiccasamuppannaṁ kho ānanda dukkhaṁ vuttaṁ mayā—"Ānanda, stress has been described by me as dependently co-arisen." In other words, the pattern is: "X has been described as Y by the speaker."

An example of the second pattern is in AN 3:74: Sekhampi kho mahānāma sīlaṁ vuttaṁ bhagavatā, asekhampi sīlaṁ vuttaṁ bhagavatā—"Mahānāma, the virtue of one in training has been described by the Blessed One, and the virtue of one beyond training has been described by the Blessed One." This pattern is: "X has been described by the speaker." Another example of this pattern is in SN 41:2: Idaṁ kho gahapati dhātu-nānattaṁ vuttaṁ bhagavatā: cakkhu-dhātu, rūpa-dhātu, cakkhu-viññāṇa-dhātu… mano-dhātu, dhamma-dhātu, mano-viññāṇa-dhātu—"Householder, this diversity of properties has been described by the Blessed One: eye-property, form property, eye-consciousness property… intellect-property, idea property, intellect-consciousness property." Again: "X has been described by the speaker."

To make a literal translation of the passage here in line with the first pattern would yield: "Worthless man, hasn't consciousness been described as dependently co-arisen by me in many ways (that), 'Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness'?"

To make a literal translation in line with the second pattern would yield: "Worthless man, hasn't dependently co-arisen consciousness been described by me in many ways (that), 'Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness'?"

The translator of MLS renders the sentence both ways. When it earlier appears in the mouths of the monks reprimanding Sāti, she renders it in line with the first pattern: "For, reverend Sāti, in many a figure is conditioned genesis spoken of in connection with consciousness by the Lord, saying: 'Apart from condition there is no origination of consciousness.'" When the sentence appears in the Buddha's mouth, she renders it in line with the second pattern: "Foolish man, has not consciousness generated by conditions been spoken of in many a figure by me, saying: Apart from condition there is no origination of consciousness?"

The translators of MLDB consistently follow the first pattern in rendering this sentence: "Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?" (It might be noted that this rendering inserts a "since" where there is none in the Pali, and ignores the quotation marks (ti) around the sentence beginning, "Apart from" or "without." More on this below.)

At any rate, the substantive difference in these two patterns is that the first could be taken as implying that all consciousness is dependently co-arisen, whereas the second states

explicitly that the Buddha's words, "Apart from condition there is no origination of consciousness," apply specifically to one type of consciousness—consciousness arising in dependence on the co-arising of conditions—leaving open the possibility that there is another type of consciousness to which these words do not apply.

Arguing from translations rendered in line with the first pattern, people have asserted that the two passages in the Canon (in DN 11 and MN 49) referring to consciousness without surface are not in keeping with the principle, expressed here, that all consciousness is dependently co-arisen. Thus, the argument continues, those two passages cannot be accepted as coming genuinely from the Buddha, whereas this passage in MN 38 definitely can.

There are three main problems with this argument. The first is that, throughout the suttas, when consciousness as an active agent is discussed without modifiers, it is always with reference to the consciousness aggregate, as that is the sort of consciousness occurring within the territory delimited by the way the Buddha explicitly defines the term, "all" (see SN 35:23). That is clearly the topic of discussion here. Consciousness without surface (see note 1) is discussed explicitly only in passages where the Buddha is citing the superiority of his attainment over that of Brahmās: In knowing this sort of consciousness, which performs no active role and lies outside of the term "all" (MN 49), he knows something that Brahmās do not. Because the consciousness discussed in this sutta is an active agent and definitely lies within the term "all," all references can be understood to apply solely to the consciousness aggregate. What this means is that even if we follow the first pattern in translating this sentence, it would not require that we adopt the argument drawn from it; the people advancing this argument force the passage to say more than it actually says when taken in the context of the suttas as a whole.

Second, it is a poor interpretative strategy to give unnecessary privilege to one passage of the Canon at the expense of two others when we have no way of proving which passages in the suttas are most authentic. This is especially true in light of the fact that the passage here—if we took it as a complete sentence—would not demand a single, unequivocal interpretation. To force such an interpretation on it, knowing that that would discredit other passages as inauthentic, is unfair to the texts.

The third problem with the argument for using this passage to reject DN 11 and MN 49, however, is the most telling: The first part of the above sentence is not a complete sentence. It is followed by a passage in quotation marks: 'Aññatra paccayā n'atthi viññāṇassa sambhavoti'? The only way to make sense of this punctuation is to take this passage in quotation marks as constituting what is said (vuttaṁ) about X as named in the first part of the sentence. In other words, this constitutes the description that the Buddha has made about dependently-coarisen consciousness. The second pattern is the only one that make sense in this context: "Worthless man, hasn't dependently co-arisen consciousness been described by me in many ways (that), 'Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness'?"

Thus it is clear that the Buddha here is discussing dependently co-arisen consciousness in a way that does not preclude the possibility that there is also a consciousness that lies beyond the six sense-media, is not dependently co-arisen, and is neither momentary nor eternal, as it stands outside the dimension of time.

3. See SN 12:31.

4. See MN 22.

5. Both MLS and MLDB treat the "that" here as referring to what follows—MLDB puts what follows into single quotation marks to underline this interpretation—but there are no quotation-marks-within-quotation-marks around what follows, and it would appear that the "that" here refers to the statements made above.

6. MN 2 identifies these questions as topics of inappropriate attention. For a discussion of these questions, and the way in which an understanding of dependent co-arising leaves the mind disinterested in them, see Skill in Questions, Chapter 8.

7. "Gandhabba" usually means a low level of celestial deva. Devas on this level are frequently represented in the Canon as obsessed with sexual desire. However, the Commentary here notes that "gandhabba" here does not mean a being standing near, watching the couple have sexual intercourse. Rather, it means the being, driven by kamma, who will take birth on that occasion. This interpretation is seconded by a passage in MN 93, which builds on the brahman assumption that a person maintains the same caste from one life to the next:

"[Devala the Dark (an ancient brahman seer):] 'Do you know how there is the descent of an embryo?'

"[Seven brahman seers:] 'Yes, master, we know how there is the descent of an embryo. There is the case where the mother & father have come together, the mother is fertile, and a gandhabba is standing present. The coming together of these three is the descent of the embryo.'

"'But do you know for sure whether the gandhabba is a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker?'

"'No, master.'

"'That being the case, do you know who you are?'

"'That being the case, master, we don't know who we are.'"

8. This word, present in all editions of the Canon and in MLS, is missing in MLDB.

9. See SN 35:206.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: AN 10:81; MN 2; MN 43; SN 12:20