

Name and Form: *nāmarūpa* in the suttas

Bhikkhu Cintita

Abstract. *Name-and-form* (Pali, *nāmarūpa*) is, according to what you are about to read, the richest part of experience. It is the subjective experience that plays out in each of the five material senses: for instance, that which appears as patterns of shapes and colors on the retina, as sound vibrations on the eardrum, as an aroma in the nose, as a stimulations on the tongue, or as local sensations anywhere in the body. It spans physical sensation and percept.

Name-and-form is further extended by consciousness, which locates the percepts as objects, typically giving them ontological status out there in the real world and establishing identities with previously encountered objects. In relation to consciousness, name-and-form *designates* of what is “out there.” Many consequences arise from the interplay of consciousness and name-and-form.

This cognitive account is throughout motivated from earliest scriptural sources, the *nikāyas/āgamas*. It is argued that the biological interpretation of name-and-form common in later schools is derivative from the early understanding. The implications for meditation practice are also reviewed.

Name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) is an important but often poorly understood, concept in the discourses of the Buddha that has given rise to some disagreement in recent decades. Yet we know it must be fundamental, for the Buddha spoke in the *Jaṭā (Tangle) Sutta*, in reference to the entanglement of the worldly mind:

(1) “Where name-and-form as well as sense and designation are completely cut off, it is there that the tangle gets snapped.” (SN 7.6)

It is also said of name-and-form that it is “the root of both subjective and objective disease.” (Sn 530)

The Pali word *nāma-rūpa* is often translated as *mind-and-body* or *mentality-materiality*, but we will translate it more literally and neutrally as *name-and-form*. It shows up primarily as a causal factor in dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), itself an important but often poorly understood account of human experience found in the discourses of the Buddha, generally as the fourth in the standard twelve-linked causal chain.

(2) ignorance → fabrications → consciousness →
name-and-form → sixfold-sphere → contact →
feeling → craving → attachment → being →

birth → old age, death, this mass of suffering

In the *Great Causation (Mahānidāna) Sutta* (DN 15), the most comprehensive description of dependent co-arising in the discourses, we learn that consciousness and name-and-form are actually mutually conditioning, that is,

(3) consciousness ↔ name-and-form

In illustrating this relationship in this discourse, name-and-form and consciousness are described with reference to patently biological roles in the conception and development of the human organism:

(4) “If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?” “No, lord.”

“If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow up, develop and reach maturity?” “No, Lord.” (DN 15)

This particular passage is the primary support for the traditional biological understanding of name-and-form. In contrast, the interplay of consciousness and name-and-form in the same discourse is described as a cycle, round or a whirlpool (*vatta*) that underlies the entirety of *samsāric* life:

(5) “In so far only, Ānanda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designation, in so far only is the range of wisdom, in so far only is the round kept going for there to be a designation as the this-ness, that is to say: name-and-form together with consciousness.” (DN 15)

In a sutta already cited, name-and-form together with consciousness is called “a tangle within and a tangle without” (SN 7.6). Name-and-form is most explicitly defined in the same sutta and elsewhere by listing the constituents of name and of form (SN 12.2):

(6) Name: *feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention.*

Form: *earth, water, air, fire and derivatives thereof.*

We also learn that these respective groups are involved in two mutually conditioning cognitive processes: *verbal impression (adhivacana-samphassa)*, driven by the factors of name and *physical impression (paṭigha-samphassa)*, driven by the factors of form, that together array (give form to) and conceptualize (give name to) sense data.

In another sutta we see that name-and-form is indeed involved in sense perception:

(7) So, there is this body and external name-and-form: thus this dyad. Dependent on this dyad there is contact. There are just six sense spheres, contacted through which – or through a certain one among them – the fool experiences pleasure and pain. (SN 12.19)

More commonly contact is defined as based on the duality of sense faculty – eye, ear, etc. – and sense

object – visual form, sound, etc. –, that consciousness arises dependent on these two, and that contact is the co-occurrence of these three. *Body*, in this context, appears to stand for any or all of the sense faculties, so external name-and-form seems to stand for any kind of sense object.

This is a quick overview of how name-and-form appears in the early texts. I will return in the course of this essay to each of these examples, after we get a better conceptual handle on just what name-and-form is.

What is name-and-form?

The expression name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) seems to have a pre-Buddhist origin in the *R̥g Veda* and in the early *Upaniṣads*, and specifically in the brahmanic *jātakarman* ceremony, in which a father gives a name to his newly born son.¹ Here *form* represents the outward appearance of the son, and *name* the father's designation for his son. The ceremony thereby confers a conceptual status upon the son which is said to complete the son's creation out of the formless chaos. It should be noticed at this early point that, although this use of *name-and-form* is connected with birth and creation, its specific task is to provide the external conceptual or cognitive rather than internal psychophysical or biological component of identity, which is presumably already there.

The position of this paper is that name-and-form is best understood in a cognitive function as the most immediate, intimate, rich and vivid part of conceptual sense experience. The closest example at hand is the conscious visual experience of the reader as you perceive this page, or, if you will now look out through any available window, your visual experience as you behold what appears there. Name-and-form might also be an audible experience, perhaps of music, traffic or birds, or a gustatory, aromatic or tactile experience. In each case, it is a rich and dynamic sense experience, including raw sense data but also alive in pursuit of interpretation. We have experiences that are not name-and-form, such as a sudden inspiration or a step in a reasoning process, and these lack this immediate, intimate, rich and vivid quality of name-and-form; they are more anemic.

Cognition within name-and-form. As I look out at, say, a forest – consciousness has alighted there – certain physical elements touch my eye faculty, experienced as vibrant colors, shapes and movements. *Physical impression* is based on identifying the traditional fundamental elements of the physical world: *earth* or solidity, *water* or liquidity and cohesion, *fire* or heat and cold and process, *air* or motion, and compounds of these four elements and their properties, such as colors and shapes. The Pali for physical impression, *paṭigha-samphassa*, also translates as *impingement contact* and suggests the impact of a physical force. We can understand this as beginning with raw sense data.

Verbal impression begins as *feelings* arise alongside colors and shapes. Specific objects emerge as *perceptions*, for instance tree trunks astanding, leaves arustling, rabbits ahoppig, and bluebirds aflittering. My present *volitional* task, also part of the experience at hand – maybe I am a hunter, intent on prey, or a birdwatcher, binoculars in hand, or a fire lookout – provides an overlay, tending to bring

¹ Reat (1987, 18), Jurewicz (2005, 175), Hamilton (2000, 151).

certain objects to the fore, such as bunny, bluebird or a billowing smoke. As a result, the eye will then make *contact* with that object such that *consciousness* then alights there. *Attention* induces further analysis of the particular object and the process repeats itself, in this example with a narrower focus that backgrounds the rest of the forest that constituted a previous name-and-form. The suttas tell us, “All things have attention as their origin” (AN 8.83), or as it has more recently² been put, “Attention is the discoverer of 'the thing!'.” Contact and attention, conditioned by volition, are also noticeably augmented by bodily movement perhaps with respect to all five physical senses. For instance, as the eye itself moves to establish contact, the head turns or the entire body turns around with attention. These movements are probably both voluntary and involuntary.³

Now, these cognitive processes not only shape the content of name-and-form, the way they play out is the sense experience of name-and-form itself. Name and form are defined in terms of the factors just mentioned:

(6) Name: *feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention.*

Form: *earth, water, air, fire and derivatives thereof.*

Name-and-form is not simply a static *result* of the processes of verbal impression and physical impression, but is alive, typically at once, with all of the factors engaged in the processes that constitute name and form as the elements of the complete sensual experience, raw matter and our ways of relating to it. In fact, the description of the interaction *between* the name and form components is quite elegant.

(8) “If those various characteristics by which name were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of verbal impression with regard to form?” “No.”

“If those various characteristics by which form were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of physical impression with regard to name?” “No.”

“If those various characteristics by which both kinds were conceived were absent, would there be any corresponding discernment of either verbal or physical impression with regard to name?” “No.” (DN 15)

In short, form can discern nothing without name and vice versa. Even the four elements cannot be discerned on their own account. As a former cognitive scientist, I found this quite insightful when I first encountered it; in fact it reminded me of computational architectures in artificial intelligence in which quasi-independent parallel processes communicate and are constrained by each other's intermediate results. It has been pointed out⁴ that the resulting complex interdependence between name and form undermines the alleged dichotomy between the physical and the mental, since neither is here independent of the other. Figure 1 illustrates all of

² Ñāṇānanda (2015 vol 1, 54).

³ Bodhi (1995, 15-17) describes such a process as an oscillation between reception (form) and response (name) where form as sense perception brings objects within the range of the verbal or designation consciousness.

⁴ Ñāṇānanda (2007, 30-1).

the factors of name-and-form.



Figure 1. Name and Form.

Name-and-form has been called⁵ the structure of the cognitive system. Indeed, it seems self-sufficient in this way. Now, much of what happens within name-and-form is also found outside of name-and-form in the standard chain of dependent co-arising, (2) above, which contains name-and-form. Dependent co-arising in this way seems to offer itself another perspective on the cognitive system. Feeling and contact are directly named as factors in the chain. Perception is found in a side-branch of dependent co-arising that splits at feeling. Volition is related to fabrications and to craving. And attention is described elsewhere as a factor of consciousness, also conditioned by craving. Many of these same processes are also found in descriptions of the sense spheres, yet another, third, perspective of the cognitive system. Each of these three structures seems to contain a self-sufficient cognitive system, but I think it useful to see these as perspectives of the same apparatus. What follows should make that clearer.

Examples. Illustration 1 allows us to observe the dynamic unfolding of the name-and-form experience in slow motion, simply because it is a difficult image to process. This is a *photograph* of an entity abundantly familiar to all, but in which light and dark colors are sharply contrasted. The physical impression of form is simple, just black and white earthy areas contacting the retina, no motion, no heat, no liquidity, for it's a still image. Feeling arises; the sharp contrast in shading might seem initially somewhat ominous. We perceive the area as a whole as an image, but then perception typically balks. We might observe ourselves speculating whether certain shapes are recognizable objects: For instance, is that a clenched fist holding some small object reaching from the upper right corner? Volition is also

⁵ Hamilton (2000, 150)

in play, for the introductory remarks are likely to be taken by the reader as a challenge to succeed in recognizing what the heck this is a picture of. The volition also drives contact and attention, tracked as the eye moves quickly from one region to another looking for something recognizable.

Moreover, we can watch the interplay of the processes of verbal impression and physical impression as we alternatively work bottom-up from the raw image data itself, or top-down from the concepts we might impose. If perception should succeed in isolating the mysterious entity depicted, contact will occur with attention focused then on the now apparent entity, intent on perception of further properties.⁶ The main point to take



Figure 2. What is this?

*From American Journal of Psychology, Copyright 1951
by the Board of the University of Illinois.*

from this is how the name factors are active parts of our experience of this image. For most images the processing produces quick recognition of the constituents.

Another, particularly prominent and almost continuous, example of name-and-form is the awareness we have of our own bodies. This has many components: Our tactile sense is aware of impingement with the surface of our skin, which can be fairly passive, but also active, for instance, as we explore the surface of something in the dark by running our fingers over it. Our tactile sense reports on touch, tingling, pricking, itching, hot and cold, and so on. Our kinesthetic sense tracks the positions of the parts of the body in three dimensions. We are also able to monitor the functioning of various internal organs in terms of muscle tension, heat, fullness, nausea, a sense of suffocation, and so on. We discover all of the four elements of form. With regard to name, *feeling* is a particularly prominent component as the first indicator of distress in the body. *Perception* can identify tactile sensations, or diagnose particular problems in the state of the body. *Volition* may vary as we make particular demands on the body, for instance to perform at a high level during a work-out, to look good on social occasions or to recover from an illness. We have a different relationship to the body under each of these circumstances, which affects our feelings and perceptions about the body. *Contact* occurs as consciousness alights on a particular part of the body for further analysis. Pain or other discomforts draw our *attention* to a particular part of the body that may be in distress.

In summary, name-and-form is immediate sensual experience. In the rest of this paper I will discuss

⁶ I haven't decided whether I will reveal the mystery entity in Illustration 1 at the end of this essay for the readers who might fail to discover it themselves.

how name-and-form integrates with the broader teachings of the discourses, attempt to account for the various statements about name-and-form in the discourses, draw implications for the arising of the *sense of self* (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) for which dependent co-arising is meant to account and look at what all this means for practice.

Name-and-form and the sense spheres

I have stated that name-and-form *per se*, dependent co-arising and the sense spheres represent three perspectives on cognition in Early Buddhism. I want to take up the perspective of the sense spheres and then of dependent co-arising and the role of name-and-form with regard to each of these. But I begin with emphasizing the experiential basis that characterizes all of early Buddhist psychology.

Dhammas: elements of experience. Early Buddhist psychology has a *phenomenological* orientation, that is, it is almost completely restricted to elements as they occur in *experience*, with almost no interest in mechanisms that might underly experience or persist behind the scenes, or even in a world “out there,” beyond our experience.⁷ In fact, the *world* itself is most generally understood not as something “out there,” but as just this world of experience. Quite to the point,

(9) “It is in this fathom-long living body endowed with perception and mind that I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the way leading to the cessation of the world.” (AN 4.45)

This perspective is just the opposite of what many of us, including the most scientifically oriented of us, tend to think, those who give “objective reality” and the world “out there,” primacy and may even, along with American behaviorists, deny the reality of subjective experience altogether. And indeed the Buddha himself seems to speak of the world “out there” when he talks about bodily and physical actions and their consequences in the world. However, even his ethics is primarily experientially based, in terms of the arising of wholesome and unwholesome intentions. The Buddha called the elements or factors of experience *dharmas* (*dhammas*) – in contrast to *the Dharma* – which in modern philosophical terms is accurately translated as *phenomena*.

A primary reason for the phenomenological perspective is that the human condition arises in and through experience. The Buddha's interest lies fundamentally in *epistemology*, how we think we know what we do, rather than in *ontology*, what actually exists in the world.⁸ In particular, the Buddha was concerned with the arising of *delusion* in human experience, which he saw as the root of the human condition. The failure to recognize this perspective is responsible for many common misunderstandings of the Dharma.⁹ It is in experience that suffering arises, and it is the elements of experience that

7 This use of the word *phenomenological* was popularized by Edmund Husserl, founder of philosophical school of Phenomenology, which has aimed to understand the arising of human knowledge on the basis of experience. Sokolowski (1999) is a good introduction to phenomenology. A number of scholars have remarked on the close affinity of the Buddha's perspective to Husserl's, and I have found it helpful in my own understanding.

8 Ronkin (2011, pp. 3-4).

9 Hamilton (2000, 140).

condition its arising. It is for the elements of experience that we develop mindfulness, it is the elements of experience that we examine with clear comprehension and into which we develop insight or see as they really are. The Buddhist practitioner will find the shift to a phenomenological perspective, once completed, very satisfying since it produces what we can verify empirically for ourselves, particularly in quiet meditative states.

The main principle to keep in mind in the phenomenological perspective is that the world “out there” – assuming it exists at all, which we can assume, but cannot prove – is beyond direct experience. When we think we see something “out there,” a cow, for instance, our experience is name-and-form, something more akin to an internal image, mediated by the playing out of shapes and colors on the retina, then processed physiologically through our neural hardware before the experience arises. Nonetheless, we can have the impression that we are looking at a cow “out there,” impute the existence of a cow “out there,” and reason about that cow “out there.” We can even impute and reason about abstract objects, untouched by name-and-form. But our impressions, imputations and reasoning are themselves just experiences. Our thoughts and language characteristically have a *referential* quality, the ability to seem to *point to* or *designate* something “out there.” But a pointing-to is itself just an element of experience; the thing “out there” itself is never directly experienced in itself, and therefore is not in “the world,” as the Buddha uses the term in (9) above.

Sense Spheres. Now, the world of experience arises in our senses: eyes, ears, nose, etc. Without the senses, there could be no experience. But wait: even if the five material senses were cut off, we would still experience thoughts and emotions and imaginings, wouldn't we? Yes! That is why in Buddhism, rather than *five* senses, we have *six*, the five physical senses that we are already familiar with (eye or seeing, ear or hearing, tongue or tasting, nose or smelling, and body or touching), and as a sixth the mind sense (*mano*) through which we experience our internal thoughts and mental processes, in times of introspection, of remembering or of imagination, for instance, or of abstract imputations about the things “out there.” Happiness, lust, products of reasoning, dreams and even the imputation that something exists “out there”, are thereby included in our world of experience, and so we can reflect on these things and talk about them. The following is the echo of (9) from the perspective of the sense spheres.

- (10) In the six the world has arisen,
 In the six it holds concourse.
 In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

We might suppose, given how we have described it, that name-and-form is limited to the five physical senses, but consider memories or imaginings of physical experiences. For instance, if someone asks us how many windows our house has, we are likely to bring up an image from memory, then take an imaginary walk around that image counting windows. We seem to treat this image as a name-and-form even though none of the physical senses is actually active in this case. As far as I know, the Buddha said nothing about such cases, and we need not reflect on them further

The senses are generally discussed in terms of *spheres* (*āyatana*), a word which suggests a space or location, or a realm of activity associated with the respective sense faculty. Sometimes translators prefer *bases* to *spheres*, but I find *bases* less clear. The *Saḷ'āyatana-Saṃyutta* (*Sixfold-Sphere* division of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*) variously lists a number of factors that belong in each of the six spheres. For instance in the eye sphere we have:

(11) ... eye, form, eye consciousness, eye contact and whatever arises with eye contact as a condition. (SN 35.24-28)

Feeling and craving, in particular, have contact as a condition, letting also woe into the sphere. It should be noted that *form* (*rūpa*) conventionally refers, but only in the context of the sense spheres, specifically to an object of *sight*, where elsewhere it can refer to any materiality. There are exactly analogous lists for the other five sense spheres, each with a distinct name for its sense object. The factors for all sense spheres accordingly look like this:

(12)	<u>sense faculty</u>	<u>sense object</u>				
	eye	form	eye-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving
	ear	sound	ear-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving
	nose	odor	nose-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving
	tongue	taste	tongue-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving
	body	tactile object	body-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving
	mind:	mind object	mind-consciousness	contact	feeling	craving

Notice that contact, feeling and craving – themselves like consciousness classified in terms of the respective sense – in each sense sphere match a causal sub-chain within the links of dependent co-arising:

(12) contact → feeling → craving

In fact a causal sequence obtains straight across, for contact itself is defined as the coming together of the dyad of eye and eye-object with consciousness:

(13) Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. (MN 18)

Similarly for ear, sounds and ear-consciousness, etc. Various suttas refer to the sixfold-sphere as *the all* (*sabba*), in the sense that they exhaust the world, the realm of experience. The *All Sutta* states:

(14) If anyone, bhikkhus, should speak thus, 'Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all', that would be a mere empty boast on his part. ... that would not be within his domain." (SN 35.23)

Sense objects. Our concern here will be primarily the sense objects, which appear, it will be claimed, as name-and-form (except, as mentioned, sometimes in the case of mind objects). Most of us have a *commonsense* model of how our senses work that is something like the following, taking the eye sense as an example:

(15) object “out there” → contact → consciousness

Briefly, an object “out there,” let's say, a cow, makes contact with the eye (by means of light), and as a result we become conscious of that external object. However, this account is inadequate in terms of the unfolding of *experience*, since an object “out there” is not experienced directly or independently at all, and certainly not before consciousness arises, after which we can impute, refer to or otherwise indirectly experience an object “out there.” The best we can say is that experientially consciousness or something following upon consciousness refers to or designates the visible object existing out there in the world, and what we experience actually unfolds like this:

(16) eye → eye-consciousness → designation of object “out there”

We will see later that consciousness itself has a characteristic referential quality, which allows us to say that we are conscious *of* something.

So far we have an account of what a sense object is *not*, but not what a sense object *is*. We still need sense objects because the eye faculty by itself conveys no specific information that would account for what kind of external object to impute or refer to. We are able to impute or refer only because the eye exhibits colors and shapes dancing around on the retina, the ear exhibits vibrations in the ear drum and so on. The eye, ear, nose, etc. are *faculties* (*indriya*) that allow the events that constitute seeing, hearing, smelling and so on to occur. *Physiologically* our original model makes sense, that an external object impinges on the eye and is mapped by that faculty onto some form related to that external object. However, *experientially*, the sense object simply arises in the eye apparently from nowhere. The astute reader can anticipate where this is going:

(17) Sense objects (forms, sounds, odors, tastes, etc.) belong to name-and-form.

Notice that I do not say sense objects *are* names-and-forms. Unlike objects, name-and-form does not have a plural in the early discourses; it is not countable. Rather, as I have described it, it is a field of activity arising in any of the senses, out of which specific objects are perceived.

The attribution of sense object to name-and-form, though generally overlooked, is not unprecedented.¹⁰ For us, name-and-form, as we have described it, acts exactly how we expect a sense object to act, and since the sense spheres are “the all,” name-and-form must fit in there somewhere. Although the term name-and-form is not generally used in the context of the sense spheres (in which *form* itself has the specialized meaning of *eye object*), that also is not unprecedented. In the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* we learn indeed that name-and-form is a sense object:

¹⁰ Bucknell (1999, 321-6), Reat (1987, 25) have also identified name-and-form with sense objects providing varying arguments in support.

(18) So, there is this body and external name-and-form: thus this dyad. Dependent on this dyad there is contact. There are just six sense spheres, contacted through which – or through a certain one among them – the fool experiences pleasure and pain. (SN 12.19)

Similarly, in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* we find the equivalent passage:¹¹

(19) Within the body there is this consciousness and outside the body there is name-and-form. Conditioned by these two arises contact. Contacted by these six sense-contacts, the ignorant, untaught worldling experiences painful and pleasurable feelings variously arisen.

Notice the use of the word external (*bahiddhā*) in (18) and the care taken to distance this from the body in (19). We will see later how name-and-form is in fact extended by consciousness to produce an *external* reference for what is fundamentally an *internal* experience.

The understanding of sense object as name-and-form brings the causal sequence within the sense spheres even closer to the chain of dependent co-arising. In both we find the following sequence.

(20) name-and-form → contact → feeling → craving

Consciousness still appears to match awkwardly, as do the sixfold-sphere (*saḷāyatana*), since consciousness occurs between name-and-form and contact in the sense spheres, but the sixfold-sphere occurs instead in that position in some versions of dependent co-arising. We will resolve the apparent discrepancy when we understand consciousness better below.

Before that, let's ask, What exactly is a sense faculty? It would seem that the eye, the ear, the nose, etc. need no definition, or that they might alternatively be regarded as something given physically or as a kind of functionality. However, the Buddha says something remarkable about this when he calls the six senses old *karma*:

(21) “What, bhikkhus, is old *karma*? The eye is old *karma*, to be regarded as fabricated (*abhisankhata*) and planned by volition, as something to be perceived.” (SN 35.146)

The same passage is then repeated substituting ear, nose, tongue, body and mind for eye. Now, if kamma is intentional action to which we are heir, old *karma* must be our inheritance, conditioned potentialities that will play themselves out as *karmic* results in the future. This quote attributes to the eye faculty, etc. a habituated way of processing dependent on accustomed fabrications or volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*). For instance, where the farmer might see a cow, say, the hunter might see a moose. Where the shopkeeper might see broken glass, the jeweler might see spilled diamonds. Where the farmer might see a fertile field, the realtor might see an excellent home site. Such dispositions have been learned through past *karma*, and in view of the depth of the interpretations we place on sensual experience, seemingly through many lives of accumulating such *karma*. The eye faculty, etc. is conditioned to see in certain ways, as old karma, and thereby as a critical determinant of the entire world (of experience). The closest correspondent of the sense faculties in the chain of dependent co-

11 Bucknell (1999, 324).

arising seems to be *fabrications* (*saṅkhāra*), which precede name-and-form, via consciousness, in the chain.

At this juncture we can report that name-and-form, as we have described it here, has a clear role in the sense spheres that fits well with the causal structure of their presentation in the early discourses. It remains to explore the role of consciousness, which is intimately involved in name-and-form.

The interplay of name-and-form with consciousness

The two constantly swirl around one another. Recall that this interplay is described, in passage (5), as the source of the whirlpool (*vaṭṭa*) that underlies the entirety of *samsāric* life. In this section we will look at consciousness and its relationship to name-and-form more closely, and we will do that within the context of dependent co-arising, in which the interplay becomes clearest.

Overview of dependent co-arising. Dependent co-arising in its standard formulation is the following causal chain, with name-and-form as the fourth factor:

(22) ignorance → fabrications → consciousness →
 name-and-form → sixfold-sphere → contact →
 feeling → craving → attachment → being →
 birth → old age, death, this mass of suffering

This chain is an account of (1) the arising of the illusion of self, (2) the affective consequences of a self-centered world view and (3) the resulting perpetuation of the continuation of existence, that is of *samsāra*. As such, it falls naturally into three parts. The first is fundamentally cognitive in nature:

(23) ignorance → fabrications → consciousness →
 name-and-form → sixfold-sphere → contact →

That it begins with ignorance, a kind of cluelessness, that tells us that in what follows we are dealing with unskillful cognition, the arising of delusion rather than of knowledge. This delusion comes to completion in contact, in which the illusion of the self already has its foot firmly in the door. *The Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) famously defeats sixty-two speculative views current at the time of the Buddha, dismissing each with “that too is dependent on contact,” that is, on the climax of the cognitive subchain implicated in delusion.¹²

The second sub-sequence of dependent co-arising is fundamentally affective or emotional in nature:

(24) → feeling → craving → attachment →

Briefly, this represents more than an escalation of the emotional response: Feeling is a momentary

¹² As Ñāṇānanda (2015 vol. 1, 72) points out in this context.

assessment of the object of contact: positive, negative or neutral. Craving is very much forward-looking in that it seeks a satisfactory future condition. Attachment is an accumulation of dispositions and attitudes conditioned by repeated craving, including the development of views in cognitive support of dispositions.

The final sub-series represents a kind of overlaying of affective and cognitive factors to produce the consolidation of the human personality in all its complexity and in its relation to the world, and its propensity to propel itself into a new birth in which the anguish of life repeats itself:

(25) → being → birth → old age, death, this mass of suffering

Although the standard form of dependent co-arising presents a linear sequence, this is a stalk with branches that also become part of its dynamics. Sprouting out of feeling and thereby in parallel with craving, the following branch describes the tendency of cognition to spin out of control (MN 18):

(26) → contact → feeling → perception → thought →
proliferation → besetting of perceptions-and-notions

Similarly, sprouting out of craving is a branch leading to behavior in the world charged with cunning, passion and interpersonal conflict (DN 15):

(27) → feeling → craving → seeking → acquisition → decision-making →
lustful desire → attachment → appropriation → avarice →
defensiveness → taking up of stick and sword; quarrels,
disputes arguments, strife, abuse, lying ...

We have already seen that consciousness and name-and-form are in constant conversation. Name-and-form arises where consciousness is present and consciousness is present where name-and-form is most interesting. Sometimes the alighting of consciousness within name-and-form brings the whole body into play in order to guide what will next falls on the retina or strikes the ear drum. In the the *Great Causation Sutta* we learn that each serves as a condition for the other:

(28) This consciousness turns back from name-and-form, it does not go beyond. In so far can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far as this is, namely: consciousness is dependent on name-and-form, and name-and-form on consciousness. (DN 15)

We can represent the mutuality of consciousness and name-and-form like this:

(29) consciousness ↔ name-and-form

The Venerable Sāriputta, in the *Naḷakalāpī Sutta*,¹³ compares consciousness and name-and-form to two bundles of reeds. When two bundles of reeds stand, one supporting the other, if one of those is removed, the other would fall down. Neither stands on its own.

13 SN 12.67.

Although the Buddha described dependent co-arising in terms of these tidy linear chains, the actual dynamics plays out in a more complex way. One aspect of this is that consciousness is forever arising anew and can arise in relation to any of the other factors of the chain; in fact, we would not know about the other factors if we were not conscious of them. Particularly interesting to track, aside from the interplay of consciousness and name-and-form, is the interplay of consciousness and craving, for not only does consciousness give rise to craving further up the chain, but craving is a strong attractor for new instances of consciousness. We tend to give what we crave our full attention. I've come, in my attempts to fully comprehend dependent co-arising, to think not so much in terms of feedback loops (as some scholars have suggested), but as a repeated staggered overlaying of new activations of the chain.

Notice that the perspective of dependent co-arising tends to draw out the various name-and-form factors within name-and-form in order to get clearer about how these factors condition one another. This is not to say that these factors as they occur in dependent co-arising are separable from their occurrence in the sense-sphere perspective, nor in the internal perspective of name-and-form.

Designation. The Buddha strikingly emphasized the illusory quality of consciousness and of the other factors of cognition. In the *Phena Sutta*, we find the following statement concerning the five aggregates (*khaṇḍa*), with consciousness as the fifth:

- (30) Form is like a mass of foam,
 And feeling but an airy bubble.
 Perception is like a mirage,
 And fabrications a plantain tree.
 Consciousness is a magic-show,
 A juggler's trick entire. (SN 22.95)

A plantain or banana tree is characterized as having no core or hardwood, but just layer over layer of the same woody substance. The Buddha likens consciousness (*viññāṇa*) to a magical show in that it fabricates a reality by slight of hand and illusion, but one which the wise are able to see through if they look carefully:¹⁴

- (31) Now suppose that a magician or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any consciousness that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness?” (SN 22.95)

What is it that consciousness conjures up? Most fundamentally, a reality “out there.” Recall that we

14 Ñāṇānanda (2007) elaborates and modernizes this simile of the magic show in a wonderfully illustrative way.

cannot experience anything “out there” directly, we can only imagine something “out there.” But having imagined something out there,” we can become conscious of whatever we imagine, and once we are conscious of it it seems quite real, we *objectify* what we imagine. We can be conscious of something *without* – or actually *in lieu of* – experiencing it directly, just as we can use words to describe something in its absence. This opens up name-and-form to an entire new dimension.

To illustrate how this works, consider how in our experience one thing is able *designate* or stand for, or point to, or refer to, another. The most obvious thing that designates is language. The word “cow,” or “Ol' Betsy” might, for instance, likewise be a designator for something “out there.” Figure 3 shows a photo, which is able to designate a cow “out there,” and even looks a bit like it.

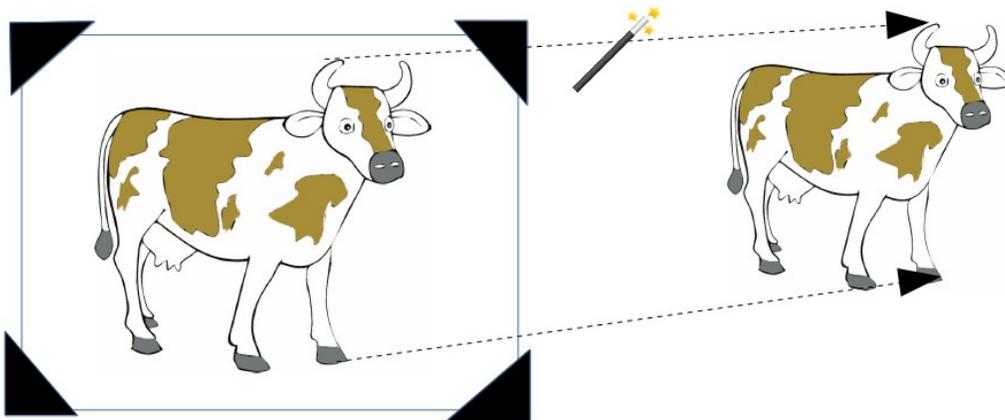


Figure 3. Designation.

I represent the designation relationship with two dashed lines, from designator to what is designated, marked by a magic wand, for this is how the reality “out there” is conjured up. Indeed, consciousness does something magical in such a circumstance. If we are conscious of the photo, our attention is drawn there, and we are likely to begin noticing properties of the photo, certainly that it is flat, maybe that it has coffee stain, and also to perceive a flat cow shape in it, well-centered in the photo. But we might instead – and here is the magic – be conscious of the designated cow “out there,” and likewise begin to notice properties – three-dimensionality for one – and even bring in memories of “Ol' Betsy,” and reason about the circumstances of the reality “out there.” Because we are conscious of Ol' Betsy “out there,” all of the factors conditioned by consciousness through dependent co-arising potentially come into play: feeling, craving, thought, proliferation, besetting of notions and so on. In fact, the cow “out there” comes alive, becomes possibly even more real than the photo, something we can imagine walking around and touching, even though it is no more than the imagination of something imputed to stand behind the photo. The cow in the picture has been *objectified*.

An image on a TV screen similarly designates a reality “out there” quite removed from the image itself. Conscious of the image itself, we perceive a flat rectangular surface, pixels lighting up in various colors, shapes, a horse shape or a cowpoke shape, etc. But if consciousness alights on what is designated “out there,” then a whole reality opens up, we get to know the characters, identify with their

problems, feel their fears, wondering how Hank is going to rescue Maude from the cattle-rustlers before the dynamite goes off, and so on.

While consciousness makes real the thing upon which it alights, the designator itself generally fades from experience. While we are watching a TV show it is as if we are looking right through the TV itself into the magic world of setting, characters and drama in which consciousness dwells. Experientially, it is as if we have been displaced into an alternative reality. Figure 4 illustrates displacement. We can have a similar experience even in reading a novel, itself a kind of designator of a magic reality.

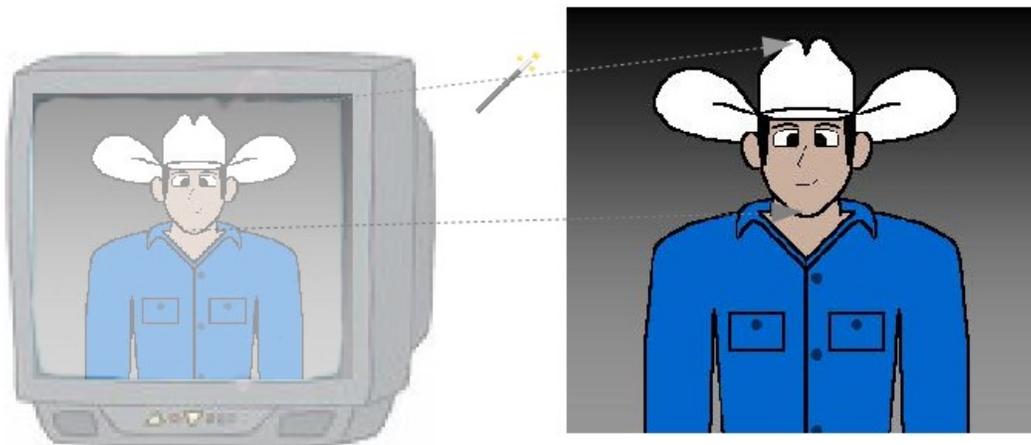


Figure 4. Displacement.

Like a picture or a word or a television show, name-and-form typically also designates something “out there.” For instance, we experience the perception of a cow in name-and-form, and consciousness imputes the existence of a cow “out there,” with the various further characteristics perceived in the cow. But the cow “out there” is much more than that: It may be identified with a cow we’ve seen before, such as Ol’ Betsy. It is also a cow located in three dimensions, that we could walk around and see from various angles, whereas the cow experienced in name-and-form is from a single angle. It becomes worth seeing, and persists even when obscured or unseen. It is also an object of thought and reasoning – a producer of milk, a hazard when it wanders into the flower garden or an obstruction the path of our car, and so on – in a way a mere internal experience cannot be. Once consciousness alights on the thing “out there,” it becomes the object of thoughts and reasoning, and also of intentional manipulation by bodily and verbal actions, in a way mere internal experience cannot be. We may crave or hate it, and make plans concerning it. Consciousness, in this way, in displacing it, *vitalizes* name-and-form.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the cow “out there” is still experienced with the immediacy, richness and vividness of the internal experience in name-and-form. Internal name-and-form is *reflected* in our consciousness of what is “out there.” In fact, we attribute almost our entire cow experience to the object “out there,” imagining that we are experiencing that object directly. It sure *seems* like we are looking at and

¹⁵ As Nāṇānanda (2007, 27) puts it.

experiencing directly the cow “out there” standing in a field, and in fact it is objectified as a three-dimensional object, that can be viewed from various angles and continues to exist even if it is obscured from sight. As consciousness dwells in the reality “out there,” the internal name-and-form fades from experience, or rather seems displaced to “out there.” In this sense, there is both an internal name-and-form and an external name-and-form, underlying our cognition about what is “out there.”

(32) Saraputta once asked a disciple, in order to check his understanding, “On what basis, Samiddhi, do intentions and thoughts arise in a person?”

Samiddhi correctly answered, “On the basis of name-and-form, Bhante.” (AN 9.14)

Moreover, as name-and-form is displaced “out there,” the name factors take on different qualities. Feeling responds not just to raw sense experience itself, but now to the abstract relations imputed to exist “out there.” Perceptions are now constrained by the physical laws that obtain “out there.” Volition now extends to thoughts of manipulating the conditions “out there” to gain benefit and avoid harm. Contact and attention now relate to the objects “out there.” Remarkably, these seemingly mental factors that constitute name generally are reflected “out there” in the external name-and-form as well. For instance, we take the feeling of the name-and-form experience, say unsatisfactoriness, to be an intrinsic property of the thing “out there,” rather than merely a subjective evaluation, and we talk about it that way. Our volition becomes the usefulness or obstructiveness intrinsic to the things “out there.” What we attend to becomes an intrinsic highlight of the thing “out there.” And what we contact out of interest will become the most detailed aspect of the thing “out there.” Our attitudes are projected to become intrinsic to the things “out there.”

Let me give some further examples that might help the reader appreciate the experiential quality of internal as opposed to external or displaced name-and-form. Generally it is hard to experience both at the same time. We experience most instances of hearing as hearing something “out there,” a bird chirping, a train approaching and so on. We can also experience music this way, as the orchestra playing or as a loudspeaker producing sounds. However, music is a somewhat exceptional case since we generally do not attribute its value so much to providing evidence about what is going on “out there,” as to the internal experiences themselves that music evokes. This makes it relatively easy to back off from the external aspect of music and instead to dwell in the internal experience. We do this when we lay back, close our eyes and let the music flow through us or bubble up in the mind. This is depicted graphically in the Tocata and Fugue segment of Disney's *Fantasia*, for instance, which begins by showing the orchestra playing, then moves into a display of mind-generated visual imagery to accompany the music.

A similar backing off happens with regard to obvious illusions, for instance, due to imperfections in the sense faculties, such as ringing in the ear or floaters in the eye. One might occasionally experience these as existing “out there,” as a vexing electronic buzz or as annoying flying insects, but then, realizing they are neither, they fail to designate, and so we back off from the objectification of the experience and simply let them remain as internal experiences. More typically in the case of a visual

experience, we become locked into the external experience such that it becomes difficult to see it as anything else, though even this circumstance may occasionally break down in meditative practice. Looking out the window at a squirrel we are almost always convinced that we see the squirrel directly rather than an internally generated visual image.

Growing the world. It is remarkable that on the basis of physical impression, “raw sense data,” that a coalition of consciousness and name and form can not only make some sense of shapes and colors, sounds and smells, but fabricate an elaborate reality “out there” with far more mastery than the best magician, one of enduring identities and relationships subject to attitudes, views and manipulation. In terms of dependent co-arising it is made possible through fabrications, which are like slights of hand or the mirrors, false bottoms and other tricks of the magician's trade and are themselves grounded in ignorance.¹⁶ We fabricate a reality “out there” and then, as far-fetched as this may sound, actually believe in it.

Now, as consciousness alights on things “out there,” external reality grows. As we might expect, consciousness is attracted toward things of interest, things of desire and especially things of craving. The Buddha states,

(33) ... all things are rooted in desire [*canda*]. They come into being through attention [*manasikāra*]. They originate from contact [*phassa*]. (AN 10.58)

For instance, the hunter is interested in game, so attention is drawn there and contact with the bunny occurs when consciousness alights there. The birdwatcher sets her sights a bit higher. In this way, the external reality that is grown from name-and-form is highly individuated, largely excluding altogether what is beyond personal interest, desire or craving. Your external reality is likely to be quite different from mine or that guy's. The internal and external worlds nonetheless *appear* to the worldling as two independently originated but parallel streams, such that internal cognitive processes are intent on keeping up with what is happening in the external world.¹⁷ Accordingly we treat the external world as an independent “objectively” given reality. We fail to recognize that almost the opposite is true: the internal processes are actually fabricating the reality “out there.” The very beginning of the *Dhammapāda* reads,¹⁸

(34) All things have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief, they are mind-made.

The growth of the world culminates in being (*bhava*), a late factor in dependent co-arising. What constitutes being is a matter of some complexity in its own right, but seems to involve a folding together of affective factors, particularly attachment, with cognitive factors. A rather compelling simile of the Buddha is the following:

(35) “Thus, Ananada, for beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed and craving the moisture for their consciousness to be established

16 Ñāṇānanda (2007, 15).

17 Hamilton (2000, 92).

18 As Ñāṇānanda (2007, 59) reminds us in this regard.

in an /inferior/middling/superior/ realm.” (AN 3.76)

Here consciousness is a seed that results in further being when watered by craving. It grows out of kamma, which can be roughly equated with fabrications.

Subject and object. Wherever there is designation, there is a kind of duality. Where name-and-form is a designation, we have been using the words internal and external to refer to the ends of the duality. We can also call it the subject-object duality. Briefly, if there is an “out there” there must be an “in here,” a sphere of subjective experience. Once consciousness has conjured a reality “out there” to be experienced, there seems to be a contrasting world “in here” as the seat of experience, and – this is the rub – an *experiencer* who occupies that seat and looks out at what is “out there.” Although this architecture does not define what the self is, it provides a niche for the self, the greatest kink in the tangle, the thorniest knot. This is the cradle of the illusory self that underlies human suffering.

The *Contemplation of Dualities Sutta* states,

(36) Just see the world, with all its gods,
Fancying a self where none exists,
Entrenched in name-and-form it holds,
The conceit that this is real. (Sn 756)

The Pali word for internal or subjective is *ajjhatta*, which is derived from *atta* (self). (Objective or external is *bahiddhā*.) This dualistic way of conceptualizing the world is what I think of as a *fortress world* for its conceptual and behavioral consequences. Ñāṇānanda puts it in brief as,¹⁹ “Where there is a fence, there is offense and defense.”

We have seen that eye and form give rise to eye consciousness and the coming together of the three is contact. This is what the wise know. However, this is not how the wordling generally experiences contact; for the wordling contact appears to be a direct relation between “me” and a thing “out there.”²⁰ The world divides naturally into needs and wants on the inside and resources and dangers on the outside. Outside the walls of the fortress are the things to desire and exploit and things to fear and avoid. Somewhere inside, it is presumed, is “me,” in some form or another, to do the exploiting and avoiding. This dichotomy entails a evaluation of objects beyond the walls in terms of attraction or aversion, which implicitly underlies the links of feeling, craving and attachment that follow.

And how do we look out through the walls of the fortress? Through the senses, or through six *doors* (*dvāra*) as they are commonly called in this context. And so a *contact* is a peek through one of the six sense doors. In the *Great Causation Sutta* name-and-form is the direct condition of contact. However, more commonly we find an intervening condition, the sixfold-sphere, as follows:

(37) name-and-form → sixfold-sphere → contact →

19 Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 15).

20 Ñāṇavīra (2010, 73).

The *sixfold-sphere* have to do with the senses, but they should not be confused with the sense *faculties*. Ñāṇānanda equates the arising of the spheres (*āyatana-uppāda*) with the discriminative function of consciousness, that is, with the bifurcation of name-and-form into internal and external.²¹ We don't generally see this discriminative function as we experience its results, we think in terms of a *seer* simply looking through one of the six *sense doors* and a *seen* that is really “out there,” as illustrated in figure 5.

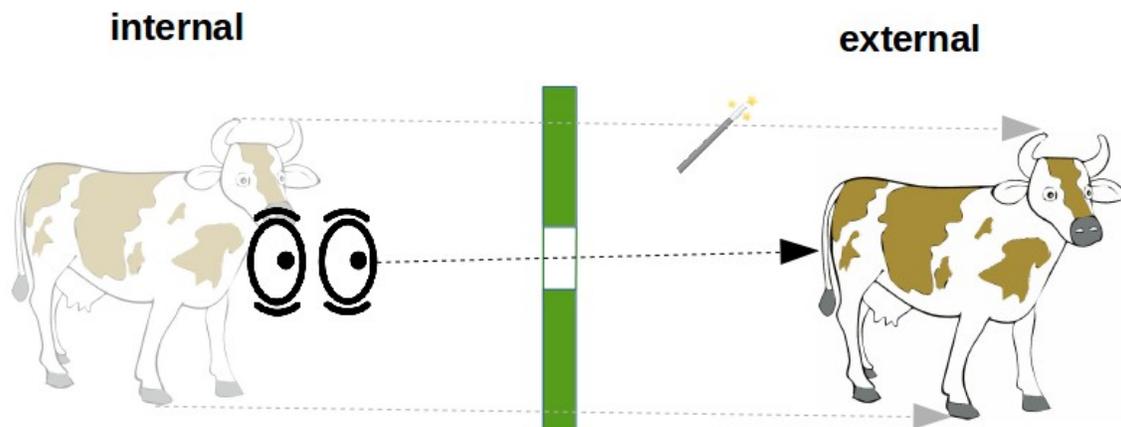


Figure 5. Contact for the worldling.

When we see the arising of the spheres clearly in our wiser moments, the mind is released from this delusion. Ñāṇānanda cites the *Sona Sutta*:

- (38) In one who is intent upon the destruction of craving,
 And the non-delusion of the mind,
 On seeing the arising of the sixfold-sphere,
 The mind is well released. (AN 6.55)

As Ñāṇānanda states, “The discrimination between an ‘internal’ and an ‘external’ is the outcome of the inability to penetrate name-and-form, the inability to see through it. There is an apparent duality: I, as one who sees, and name-and-form, as the objects seen. Between them there is a dichotomy as internal and external. It is on this very dichotomy that the six sense-bases are ‘based’. Contact, feeling, craving and all the rest of it come on top of those six sense-bases.”²²

This account of name-and-form is complex and probably challenging to the reader. But take heart that the Buddha claimed that dependent co-arising is profound and difficult to understand and even admonished Ven. Ānanda for finding it otherwise. Furthermore, this very interplay of name-and-form with consciousness is right at the heart of dependent co-arising. This matter is worthy of careful and detailed study. On the other hand, this account is not arcane; it is presented entirely in experiential

²¹ Ñāṇānanda (2009, 26-27).

²² Ñāṇānanda (2008, sermon 9).

terms subject to personal verification step by step. Sometimes I've differentiated between what *the wise* sees and what *the worldling* sees, but this too is subject to verification as we transition through our practice and understanding from worldling to wise.

What name-and-form means for Buddhist practice

We fabricate our own world in a particular way, then we become enamored with what we find there. As a result, we find life to be a problem, full of neediness, aversion and anguish. In short, we find ourselves almost hopelessly entangled in circumstances of our own making. The cognitive architecture we fabricate is quite astonishing: Starting with raw sense experience, we progressively stack up levels of designation ending with an elaborate imputed reality “out there,” beyond experience but of enormous complexity. In the process we split our world into inner and outer, mediated through sense contact through the sense doors, implying a seer and a seen, which turns out to be the heart of the human dilemma. On the basis of this architecture craving and attachment with regard to the things “out there” make sense as we seek personal advantage, and these become the guiding factors of our *samsāric* lives.

Practice is how we disentangle all this. We do that through insight into the fabricated-ness of the world, to see it as the Buddha sees it:

(39) ... a Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight; he does not conceive an unseen; he does not conceive of a thing worth seeing; he does not conceive about a seer. (*Kāḷaka Sutta*, AN 4.24)

Practice seeks to resolve the human predicament by shining the light of wisdom to reveal its many slights of hand, false bottoms and hidden mirrors, so that we become disenchanted with the illusions. In the process we discover that name-and-form is deeply implicated.

(40) Where name-and-form as well as sense and designation are completely cut off, it is there that the tangle gets snapped.” (SN 7.6)

Like Cold War Berlin, name-and-form lives on both sides of the wall, internally and externally. It is ...

(41) ... the root of both subjective and objective disease. (Sn 530)

Delusive implications. Our conceptualizations of reality “out there” do not keep pace our with evolving world of experience. Consciousness conjures up an reality “out there” of relatively fixed objects and relations, mistakenly assuming it to be relatively independent of our inner experience. To objectify is to abstract. For instance, our immediate experience of a bird is from a particular angle and has a limited duration. We objectify the bird into something that remains the same bird no matter what angle we see it from, or even whether or not it is visible at a particular time. So far, so good, but we seem to go too far in attributing an unrealistic degree of permanence, pleasantness and beauty.

For instance we are repeatedly surprised when our possessions and loved ones, or we ourselves, age. If

we believe in an “objective reality” beyond our experience that the world we conceptualize as “out there” somehow approximates, we would say that our conceptual world fails to keep pace with “objective reality.” However, we actually notice the discrepancy as a difference between our expectations and how our experienced world plays out. Our conceptual feet stumble over each other as they try to keep pace with experience.

The teaching of the *three signs (ti-lakkhana)* are a reminder that helps us break up this bias in the way we fabricate the world. We learn, instead, to see things as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*) and sometimes as ugly (*asubha*) as well. Let's look at non-self more closely.

Investigating the self. The self is a special case. It is generally fabricated as a constant presence, permanent and in control. It is that which sees, that which hears, that which decides. It is the experiencer, it is what craves and what hates. It is also an abstraction, but one that does not exist “out there,” but rather in the inner space created by the split between subjective and objective. Our primary practice in deconstructing the self is introspection, which is to objectify the subjective world.

In general we tend to identify the subjective world with our own bodies and with the mental aspects of experience. However, the boundary between subject and object can be stretched as much as we like, revealing its artificiality. Recall that consciousness can alight wherever it likes within the world of experience. We can contemplate our breath, for instance, viewing it independent of our intention to breathe. In this way we can objectify the breath, noting its qualities as if we were watching someone else's breath. In this case aspects of the inner tactile name-and-form lead to contact with, and attention to, experiences attributed to things that, although located within our own body, are conceptually treated exactly like things “out there,” and viewed through the sense doors. Given that our feelings, perceptions and volitions are already attributed to things “out there,” even our inner mental states can be objectified in this way.

It should be noted that almost all themes of mindfulness meditation, for instance, those enumerated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, are easily regarded as part of the internal world of feelings and of one's own body. We generally don't contemplate the things most readily interpreted as “out there,” such as trees, cows or houses. Notable exceptions are the charnel ground contemplations, but even there the tendency is to visualize equivalent conditions in one's own body. Given this, it is significant that the “insight” refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* begins with the following statement:

(42) In this way he abides contemplating body/feelings/mind objects as body/feelings/mind objects internally, or he abides contemplating body/feelings/mind objects as body/feelings/mind objects externally, or he abides contemplating body/feelings/mind objects as body/feelings/mind objects both internally and externally. (MN 10)

This is often interpreted as having to do with contemplating one's *own* body, for instance, then *others'* bodies, but I am convinced something more subtle is going on here. When we abide contemplating internally, we let the inner name-and-form be the inner name-and-form and resist the tendency to

objectification. When we abide contemplating externally, we give way to objectification and displacement. When we contemplate both internally and externally, we keep both in mind; this is most revealing of the way we fabricate the external reality, for both the beginning and end of the process are laid bare. Earlier we considered circumstances in which we can resist the marked tendency to fabricate an external reality, for instance, in the case of music, and even shift from the internal to the external name-and-form. The present circumstance is more subtle because the external name-and-form is very close to the internal.

This is how we may investigate the fabricated nature of the subject-object duality and thereby of the self.²³ As we objectify what at first seems to be internal, we notice that this too is not self. Introspection allows us effectively to look for the self by temporarily shifting the boundary of subject and object and fail to find a self there.

Ñāṇānanda states that penetration into the conditioned nature of consciousness is like storming the citadel of the illusory self,²⁴ and quotes the discourses:

(43) Having understood name-and-form as manifoldness, which is the root of both subjective and objective disease, he is completely released from bondage to the root of all disease. (Sn 530)

Investigating fabrications. A third technique in our toolbox for exposing the way we fabricate the world to the light of wisdom is to observe the process of fabrication itself step by step. What do we base our fabrication on? Fabrications of course, the second factor of the standard chain of dependent co-arising:

(44) ignorance → fabrications → consciousness → name-and-form →

These come into play as notions about how the world works, of what birds and bunnies look like, of what kinds of things televisions or books can designate, of what proper emotive or karmic responses are to given situations, of what the roles of the self are, of what the proper way of going about a given task is, of what things are worth seeing, feeling and craving, of what the potential dangers things pose toward our interests, and so on. Fabrications flourish as a general rule and can be everything from calcified age-old ways of viewing things to wonderfully innovative notions. They are the colors with which we paint the world, the magician's slights of hand.

When we cultivate mindfulness and composure (*samādhi*),²⁵ we begin to appreciate the workings of our own minds. In particular, rather than viewing our self as looking through the sense doors upon a independently existing reality “out there” with its opportunities and dangers, we can no longer fail to see the prestidigitation going on continuously to create that reality, nor the streaks in the fresh paint.

²³ Hamilton (2000, 176-7) also discusses the function of this instruction in similar terms.

²⁴ Ñāṇānanda (2007, 38).

²⁵ *Samādhi* more commonly translates as *concentration*. I am beginning, with others, to prefer *composure* as a more accurate English equivalent. This is my first attempt in my writings to try this out for size.

Mindfulness is particularly important as an instrument of insight, to tease apart the roles of name-and-form, consciousness and fabrications in the process whereby the world is fabricated. Mindfulness itself has the power to stop perception willfully at bare perception, that is, at inner name-and-form – at “contemplating the body in the body” – or to let it proceed step by step, bringing perception-thought-proliferation under control. Composure sharpens mindfulness and, as it deepens, may bring certain mental processes implicated in fabricating the world to a sudden halt with an equally sudden shift in the experience of that world. Proliferation is the first to shut down, but also it will become possible to halt perception at name-and-form, even failing to attribute what we experience to reality “out there.”

The result is as in the Buddha's advice to the monk Bāhiya, which precipitated the latter's awakening.

(45) “When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard, only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that. When Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that, there is no 'you' there. When, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.” (Ud 1.10)

Name-and-form is, for the worldling, compelling: it is vivid and when it is displaced into the reality “out there” it comes truly alive. However, when we see reality “out there” as cheap props, cardboard and thin paint, we become disenchanted.

(46) The one untrammelled by name-and-form,
And passionless, no pains befall. (Dhp 221)

Name-and-form as cognition or as biology?

We have understood name-and-form as a factor implicated in cognition, that is, in how we conceptually construct the world, and have found that this understanding is coherent and that it makes sense of a wide variety of otherwise quite obscure teachings found throughout the discourses. It remains to acknowledge that many Buddhist traditions see name-and-form quite differently, identifying it with the psychophysical organism, that which is conceived, grows as a fetus, is born, lives, ages and dies. The strongest scriptural source for this is the following passage in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*:

(47) “If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?” “No, Lord.”

“If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow up, develop and reach maturity?” “No, Lord.” (DN 15)

It should be noted that an equivalent passage is found in the Chinese Agamas (MA 97)²⁶, as well as in the Pali Canon, making it hard to dismiss this passage as a later addition, as I was tempted to do at one time. We also note that much of the support cited here for name-and-form as a factor of cognition

26 I thank Josten Ma for looking up and translating the relevant passage for me.

comes from this same key discourse, but also that his particular passage does not serve to *define* name-and-form, only to provide an *illustration* of the dependence of name-and-form on consciousness. This suggests that a proper understanding of name-and-form must be general enough to encompass both its cognitive and its biological roles such that the discussion can shift fluidly between the cognitive and biological realm as it seems to in this sutta. Notice that the interlocutors in this discourse, the Buddha and Ānanda, seem to presuppose such an understanding, that the relationship between this biological example and the broader cognitive implications of name-and-form seems to require no further elaboration. What is perhaps troubling is that this relation should seem so obscure to us now. In short, our task will be to try to discover a root understanding of name-and-form that accounts for its biological as well as cognitive implications.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his book on the discourse in question,²⁷ attempts to do the same thing. His view is that the traditional biological interpretation of name-and-form provides the basic meaning. But then he observes that some passages – in particular (18) above, which mentions “external name-and-form” – seem to extend the meaning to “the entire experiential situation, from the psycho-physical organism to the objective sense spheres.” My view is similar, but that the entire experiential situation is the core interpretation and the experience of the psycho-physical organism and instance.

The biological understanding of name-and-form. The biological interpretation generally is such that name-and-form is the psycho-physical organism, that the sixfold-sphere are the sense organs that grow in the organism in the womb and that consciousness is a prerequisite for the existence of the organism.

(48) ignorance → fabrications → consciousness → name-and-form →
 sixfold-sphere → contact →

In the biological account, the psycho-physical organism arises from, and then is sustained by, consciousness, and without the psycho-physical organism there are no senses and therefore no sixfold-sphere. Contact can only arise on the basis of the sixfold-sphere. This is simple and compelling, and easier to comprehend than the account offered above (albeit not as far-reaching). Consciousness is itself conditioned by ignorance and fabrications.

Furthermore, what became the dominant interpretation assumes more specifically that this is a description of conception and the development of the fetus in the womb such that ignorance and fabrications belong to a previous life whose effects are transmitted by consciousness. This is called the “three lives” model of dependent co-arising in which two births occur in the standard chain of dependent co-arising, one at consciousness and the other at,uh, birth.

Although the “three lives model” is quite distinct from what I have described here, this interpretation should not be dismissed lightly. As points out,²⁸ this interpretation aside from being dominant in the Theravada school – where it is found in the *Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga* as well as in Buddhaghosa's

27 Bodhi (1995, 15).

28 Bodhi (1998, 3).

Visuddhimagga (chapter 27) – is also found in the early Sarvastivādin and Mahāsaṅghika schools and even in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Chapter 26).

As a relatively orthodox Buddhist, I feel put in an awkward position here, though I am not alone. On the one hand, the biological/three-life interpretation of name-and-form has a lot of weight behind it: It is compelling and it has been represented and upheld by a variety of Buddhist traditions and wise Buddhist teachers throughout the history of the *Sāsana*. On the other hand, the biological/three-life interpretation *cannot possibly* be right in itself, for these reasons:

- The biological interpretation displaces the role of cognition in the chain of dependent co-arising.
- The biological interpretation is speculative and rather uninteresting in itself, which is incongruent with the alleged profundity of dependent co-arising.
- The biological interpretation provides no basis for practice or insight.

I realize this a bold statement, but I'll be darned if I can find a way around it. I am open to any counterarguments.

Dependent co-arising is intended to be comprehensive, it is equated with the Dharma. It is alleged to be profound and difficult to understand. The Dharma tells us repeatedly that delusion underlies the human dilemma, that that self-view is particularly implicated, and that insight and wisdom cut through delusion. And, consistent with this, the standard chain begins with ignorance. Moreover, the account of name-and-form in cognitive terms described here shows how name-and-form is implicated in the arising of the subject-object duality, in how this provides space for these sense of self to take root and in how the affective factors, like craving, depend on the consequential cognitive structures. The biological interpretation, on the other hand, eviscerates this cognitive account within dependent co-arising and leaves many of the statements that we have analyzed here concerning name-and-form along with the first few links of the standard chain, unintelligible.

If dependent co-arising is so succinct and profound, why would the Buddha clutter it with a biological account of the conception of the human fetus? Such an account tells us simply that something that relates to the cumulative karma of the previous life is necessary for conception and for the subsequent thriving of the psycho-physical organism. (It is however unclear that consciousness, given the way it is described in the early discourses, is the proper vehicle for that.) How does this account help us end suffering if we cannot observe it in day-to-day or meditative experience and if we can do nothing to disrupt this biological process?²⁹ Why would the Buddha teach this, rather than simply give us,

(49) ignorance → fabrications → contact →

... thereby leaving out the biological factors altogether?

²⁹ Ñāṇavīra (2010, 16-17) requires of a useful interpretation of dependent co-arising that point to something that can be resolved in the present moment, and furthermore that we be able to see in our own experience all the factors at once.

My argument here is, first, that the biological/three-life account of name-and-form makes little pedagogical sense in view of the general purpose and nature of the chain of dependent co-arising and, second, that it leaves gaps in our understanding of cognition. A number of scholars have likewise attacked the biological/three-life view in terms of internal inconsistency. I will not review these arguments here.³⁰ It is astonishing to me that this view seems to have been seriously questioned only beginning in the twentieth century.

An alternative biological but non-three-life account goes back to early sources but has been largely eclipsed until recent decades. The *Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga*, for instance, states that (re)birth in dependent co-arising can be meaningfully interpreted, as an alternative, as the arising of any phenomenon in one moment. Dependent co-arising becomes an arising moment-to-moment. To some extent this addresses some of the concerns listed above. A modern example is the account of the Thai scholar-monk Payutta,³¹ who describes how consciousness arises moment by moment in the six sense spheres, as elsewhere understood in the suttas, but “consciousness → name-and-form” represents the influence of consciousness on the state of mind and body: “Body and mind, especially mental qualities, dependent on the instant of consciousness, will assume qualities harmonious with consciousness.”³² Notice that name-and-form here must stand not for the entire psycho-physical organism, since that is not what arises and falls dependent on instances of consciousness, but certain psycho-physical processes or states within the organism. Likewise “name-and-form → six-fold-sphere” is interpreted as the six sense spheres alerted by the state of body and mind.³³

The alternative, biological/moment-to-moment interpretation gives a basis for practice and insight, since our psycho-physical responses arise in moment-to-moment experience. I have not made up my mind if it says anything particularly interesting, or how helpful it is to observe the consciousness-conditioned body preparing the eye for perception. Nonetheless it does, like the biological/three-life interpretation, leave a significant gap in the understanding of cognition in dependent co-arising, having little of interest to say about subject-object dualism and disease, about designation, about the arising of the world “out there,” about the cognitive conditions underlying a sense of self, etc., leaving dependent co-arising rather thin for a teaching that is said to encompass the entirety of the Dharma.

Reconciling the cognitive and the biological. This still leaves us with the question of how, in the passage (47), we have a seemingly biological illustration of what we have argued is fundamentally a cognitive factor: name-and-form.

Recall that the term name-and-form seems to have its origin in the Vedic and Upaniṣadic *jātakarman* ceremony, in which a father gives a name to his newly born son. What happens here is that the father has a conceptual sense experience of his son (who is a psycho-physical entity) resulting in objectification and naming, before which the son did not fully exist. Name-and-form as a Buddhist

30 See Bucknell (1999), Ñāṇavīra (2003), Mettiko (2007).

31 Payutta (1994).

32 Ibid. p. 50.

33 Ibid. p. 51. Buddhādāsa (1992) and Thanissaro (2011) offer biological interpretations similar to Payutta's.

concept is simply a generalization of the *jātakarman* situation to any conceptual sense experience (not just of the son, or of a psycho-physical entity) by anyone (not just by a father) at any time (not just after the son's birth). The illustration of consciousness descending into the mother's womb is actually close to the *jātakarman* situation in that name-and-form is a conceptual sense experience of a psycho-physical entity, but this time at conceptualization rather than birth, and again at a later time in the growth and development of the psycho-physical entity. Therefore, (47) is no more than an illustration of name-and-form as we have described it here, with consciousness playing its accustomed objectification role.

As Nāṇānanda puts it,³⁴ “Consciousness established in the mother's womb makes the concept of person valid.” The question naturally arises: Whose consciousness are we talking about? It is presumably not the father's, since at the time of conception his mind is probably elsewhere. Presumably it is of the psycho-physical organism itself; it is self-awareness of itself as a psycho-physical being. And this self-awareness is necessary for the psycho-physical organism to take shape, to grow up, to develop and to reach maturity. This makes sense in terms of what happens before anything descends into the womb, that is, in the previous life, for there we have:

(50) being → birth

Without consciousness of oneself as a fully developed being, rebirth cannot occur.

Conclusions

Let's end this essay with one of the most sweeping statements about the implications of name-and-form, and its constant companion consciousness.

(51) "In so far only, Ānanda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designation, in so far only is the range of wisdom, in so far only is the round kept going for there to be a designation as the this-ness, that is to say: name-and-form together with consciousness." (DN 15)

Name-and-form and consciousness set the parameters in which *samsāra* plays out. They give us our sense of self that ripens, via craving and attachment, in being. It is only through objectification of this self that there is something there to be born, to grow old, to die or to reappear. It is on the basis of designation and the role of name-and-form in designation that consciousness can conjure up a reality “out there.” Consciousness does the same with language as it objectifies experience.

We fabricate our own world, but divide it up into a kind of cognitive architecture, separating seer from seen, this-ness from that-ness, with levels of designation spanning raw sense data at one end to an elaborate imputed reality “out there.” We become enamored in what we have fabricated, and then become entangled in it. Life becomes a problem, full of neediness, aversion and anguish. Untangling

34 Nāṇānanda (2015, vol. 1, 78).

this is the range of wisdom. Until then we are stuck in the round of *saṃsāric* existence, due to name-and-form.

References

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1995, *Great Discourse on Causation: the Mahānidāna Sutta and Its Commentaries*, Corporate Body of the Buddha, Taiwan.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1998, “A Critical Examination of Ñāṇavīra's 'Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda',” *Buddhist Studies Review*, also on-line.
- Bucknell, Roderick S., 1999, “Conditioned Arising Evolves,” *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22:2, 311-342.
- Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1992, *Patīccasamuppāda: Practical Dependent Origination*, Corporate Body of the Buddha, Taiwan.
- Hamilton, Sue, 1996, *Identity and Experience*, Luzac Oriental.
- Hamilton Sue, 2000, *Early Buddhism: a New Approach*, Routledge.
- Joanna Jurewicz, 2005, “Playing with Fire: The praṭītyasamutpāda from the perspective of Vedic thought,” in Paul Williams, *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, Vol. I, Routledge.
- Mettiko Bhikkhu, 2007, “Patīccasamuppāda: eine alternative Annäherung” (in German), available on-line.
- Ñāṇānanda, Ven. Kāṭukurunde, 2012, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought: An Essay on Papañca and Papañca-Sañña-Sankhā*, www.seeingthroughthenet.net
- Ñāṇānanda, Ven. Kāṭukurunde, 2007, *The Magic of the Mind: an Exposition of the Kālakārāma Sutta*, Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bharaya: Sri Lanka, also on-line. Originally published, 1974, Buddhist Publication Society.
- Ñāṇānanda, Ven. Kāṭukurunde, 2008, *Nibbāna: the Mind Stilled (aka the Nibbāna Sermons)*, Vol. 1- 5, Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bharaya: Sri Lanka, also on-line.
- Ñāṇānanda, Ven. Kāṭukurunde, 2009, *Seeing Through: a Guide to Insight Meditation*, on-line.
- Ñāṇānanda, Ven. Kāṭukurunde, 2015, *The Law of Dependent Arising: the Secret of Bondage and Release* (draft), Vol. 1-4, Pathgulala Dharmagrantha Dharmasravana Mādhyā Bhāraya (PDDMB), Sri Lanka.
- Ñāṇavīra, 2003, “Note on *Paṭiccasamuppāda*,” in Ñāṇavīra (2010).
- Ñāṇavīra, 2010, *Clearing the Path (1960-1965)*, Path Press.
- Payutto, 1994, *Dependent Origination: the Buddhist Law of Conditionality*, Buddhaddhamma

Foundation, Bangkok.

Reat, Ross, 1987, *Some Fundamental Concepts of Buddhist Psychology*,

Ronkin, Noa, 2011, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*,

Sokolowski, Robert, 1999, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 1999, Cambridge University Press.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2011, *The Shape of Suffering*, Metta Forest Monastery.