

# ***A Reading Course on the Saṃyukta Āgama (Saṃyutta Nikāya)***

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## **Dependent Origination and the Middle Way**

### ***Ancient Wisdom for a Restless City***

*A reflection on the Saṃyukta Āgama, Sutra 53, and the Twelve Links*

#### **When Hard Work Doesn't Pay Off**

Most of us living in a city have lived some version of this story. You put in long hours at work, only to watch someone else take the promotion. You treat a friend or partner with real sincerity and receive coldness, or worse, betrayal, in return. You live by the rules while the people cutting corners seem to do just fine. After enough of this, a quiet question starts to surface: is there any justice in the way life actually works?

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha was sitting with the same question. His answer was not “have faith” or a pat on the back. He was, as the scriptures say, “a speaker of truth, a speaker of what is real.” What he offered instead was a precise, almost scientific description of how the universe runs. In the old Chinese texts it is called 緣起 (yuán qǐ); in Sanskrit, pratītyasamutpāda; in English, Dependent Origination. It has been the common ground of every Buddhist school ever since.

#### **The Buddha's Framework: “When This Is, That Is”**

In the Saṃyukta Āgama, Sutra 296, the Buddha states the whole principle in a handful of lines:

*“When this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this is not, that is not. When this ceases, that ceases.”*

This is not a religious slogan. It is a description of how things actually behave. Nothing stands alone. Everything holds together because of the conditions that support it, and everything comes apart when those conditions fall away.

The Buddha was careful to point out that he did not invent this law. In Sutra 299, he tells a monk plainly: “Whether a Buddha appears in the world or not, this truth remains.” He called himself a discoverer, not an inventor—much as Newton is said to have discovered gravity rather than creating it.

From this single principle two layers unfold. The first is the objective pattern by which one thing gives rise to another. The second is the specific chain of twelve links through which human life plays that pattern out: ignorance, formations, consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging-and-death.

## The Twelve Links: How Suffering Builds Up Across a Life

The twelve links are the Buddha's most careful diagnosis of how suffering accumulates. They can be read as a single life story that actually spans three lifetimes.

**Past causes.** Because of *ignorance*—a deep, unexamined assumption that there is a fixed, separate “me” to protect—we create *formations*: the mental, verbal, and bodily actions driven by that assumption. These build up a certain momentum, a kind of karmic weight.

**Present results and fresh causes.** That accumulated momentum becomes *consciousness*, carrying forward into a new birth. In the womb it develops as *name-and-form* (mind and body together), and then grows the *six sense bases* (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind). Once we are born, the senses meet the world: this is *contact*, which immediately produces *feeling*—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

**The trap in this life.** If, at the moment of feeling, we lean in or push away, we slip into *craving*, and then into *clinging*—the grabbing, protesting, hoarding, and resisting that shape our daily behaviour. This fresh activity becomes new karma, or *becoming*.

**Future results.** That karma eventually powers another *birth*, and with birth comes the inevitable weathering of *aging, dying, sorrow, and grief*.

Read this chain honestly and you will notice something: it is not only about past and future lives. It is also a description of what happens inside us in the span of a single afternoon—from a tiny sensation to a full-blown mood, story, or grudge.

## Sutra 53: Craving Is Where the Real Trap Is

Among the many teachings on dependent origination, Sutra 53 deserves particular attention. A village brahmin, impressed by the Buddha's reputation, comes to him and asks bluntly, “Master, what is it that you actually teach?”

The Buddha answers, “I teach about cause.” “What cause?” “There is cause and condition for the world arising; there is cause and condition for the world ceasing.”

Then the Buddha spells out the mechanism. An ordinary person does not see what the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness) truly are—how they arise, how they pass, what pleasure they give, what trouble they bring, and how to release them. Not seeing clearly, the person delights in them, praises them, becomes stained and attached. From that delight comes craving; from craving, clinging; from clinging, becoming; and from becoming, the full weight of birth, aging, death, sorrow, and grief.

Then he describes the reverse. A wise disciple sees the five aggregates as they are and does not delight, does not praise, does not get stained, does not stay there. The sutra puts it plainly:

*“Not delighting and not staying, craving for form ceases. When craving ceases, clinging ceases; when clinging ceases, becoming ceases; when becoming ceases, birth ceases; and when birth ceases, aging, death, sorrow and grief cease.”*

This is perhaps the most practical teaching the Buddha left us. The five aggregates themselves are not the problem. The world is not the problem. What traps us is the small, almost invisible move the mind

makes just after contact and feeling—the grabbing or the pushing-away. That tiny, habitual reflex is where suffering is won or lost.

### **Cause, Condition, Result: Why Linear Thinking Fails**

Many people assume causality is a straight line: do A, get B. When B does not arrive, they feel cheated. The Buddha's picture is more accurate, and in its own way more forgiving.

In his teaching, any outcome depends on three ingredients: a cause, one or more supporting conditions, and a result that only emerges when the two meet.

- Cause (因, hetu): the inner driver, like the seed of an apple.
- Condition (緣, pratyaya): the outer supports—soil, water, sunlight, the farmer's care.
- Result (果, phala): the fruit that appears only when cause and conditions come together.

Your effort is the cause. The market, the timing, the state of your health, the other people involved—these are the conditions. When a result does not appear, it is almost never because the cause was wasted. It is because a condition is still missing or still ripening.

This reframes the familiar complaint “I worked so hard for nothing” into a calmer, more productive question: “Which condition is not yet in place, and is there one I can still tend to?”

### **The Middle Way: Neither Eternal Soul Nor Nothingness**

Seeing dependent origination clearly leads naturally to the Middle Way. In Sutra 301, the Buddha tells the monk Kātyāyana that ordinary minds lean toward one of two extremes.

- Eternalism (常見): the belief in a permanent self or soul that will go on forever.
- Annihilationism (斷見): the belief that at death everything simply ends, and cause and effect mean nothing.

The Middle Way refuses both. Life is continuous but not eternal; it is also not nothing. It is a long, flowing sequence of causes and conditions, without any fixed self hiding inside. “When suffering arises, it simply arises; when it ceases, it simply ceases.” Nothing needs to be stamped as “my” suffering, “my” loss, “my” personal story.

Other suttas make the same point from different angles. In Sutra 297, the Great Emptiness Sutra, the Buddha refuses to answer whether body and soul are the same or different, because both framings assume a fixed self. In Sutra 300, he refuses to say whether suffering is “self-made” or “other-made,” for the same reason. The Middle Way is not a compromise between two opinions. It is a sharper way of seeing, and in that clearer seeing both extremes fall away on their own.

In practical terms this means: we do not dwell in regret about the past, trying to work out who we were; we do not daydream about some future “me” that will finally be happy; we do not get tangled in abstract questions about what the “real me” is right now. “Not chasing the past, not chasing the future”—as the sutras put it—cuts off the very root from which anxiety grows.

### **Practice: Letting the Self Quietly Dissolve**

How do we bring all of this into a busy urban life?

The Buddha's first teaching at the Deer Park already set the direction: give up the two extremes of chasing pleasure and punishing oneself, and walk the Noble Eightfold Path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In everyday life, the most practical foothold is the small gap between contact and feeling. My teacher often reminds students to practise three short steps:

- First, notice contact. Know clearly that a sight, a sound, a sensation, or a thought has just arrived.
- Second, notice feeling. Know whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither—without dressing it up with a story.
- Third, let it be. Stop at knowing. Do not let the pleasant one turn into “I must have more”; do not let the unpleasant one turn into “Get rid of this now.”

In formal practice, Master Sheng Yen combined this awareness with two classical Chan methods. In Silent Illumination, the mind is allowed to settle like still water under a clear moon. You simply illuminate whatever rises in body and mind, without sticking the label “I” onto any of it. When even the last thought settles, something the tradition calls “the bottom of the bucket dropping away” reveals itself.

In Huatou practice, one keeps asking a single question—“Who is dragging this corpse around?” “Who is reciting the Buddha's name?”—and refuses every conceptual answer. Again and again, any solid “self” that the mind offers is dismantled, until the very habit of taking the self for real gives out.

When craving and clinging lose their grip, the self-centre that was always grasping or defending begins to loosen. This is what Master Sheng Yen called dissolving the self—not the loss of personality or responsibility, but freedom from the compulsive story of “me”. The mind that has softened around its own self-image can still act decisively in the world; it simply no longer has to defend a fortress that was never really there.

## **A Key You Can Carry for Life**

Dependent Origination is not a rigid doctrine. It is a living way of seeing. It tells us that the world is relational, that suffering has an anatomy, and that the anatomy of suffering can be taken apart, one link at a time.

The next time life disappoints you, try quietly replacing the question “Why me?” with “Which conditions came together to produce this? Which of them can I change, and which can I let be?” That small shift, repeated often enough, is already the Middle Way in action.

May we all learn to walk steadily through the rise and fall of conditions—clear, at ease, and in the very seeing of conditioned arising, find our way to freedom.