

Twelve Links of Dependent Origination

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination describe how suffering and repeated becoming arise through conditions. Their familiar image is a chain: each link depends upon others and helps sustain what follows. The teaching invites us to look beneath an apparently isolated experience and ask what supports it. This inquiry has a compassionate purpose. When the conditions of bondage can be understood, they can also become the field of a practice directed toward release.

The links are called *Nidanas* in Theosophical literature. Blavatsky describes each as the effect of an antecedent cause and a cause of its successor. Professor Iyer places this relationship within a wider study of karma, reincarnation and *Maya*. His treatment emphasizes that a particular condition must be understood through its place in a whole. An event does not become intelligible merely because we have found someone to blame or have named the feeling it produces in us.

The standard Buddhist sequence begins with ignorance, *Avidya*, and volitional formations, *Samskara*. Ignorance here concerns failure to understand suffering, its arising, its cessation and the path of practice. Formations condition *Vijnana*, consciousness; consciousness conditions *Namarupa*, name-and-form. These are dependent aspects of experience, rather than an unchanging owner moving through otherwise external circumstances. Name-and-form includes mental and bodily factors; its meaning exceeds the everyday act of giving something a name.

The next links are the six sense-bases, *Shadayatana*; contact, *Sparsha*; and feeling, *Vedana*. Mind belongs among the six bases alongside the familiar bodily senses. Contact therefore includes mental encounters as well as encounters with visible or tangible things. Feeling concerns the pleasant, painful or neutral tone of experience. It should be distinguished from the more elaborate emotions and stories that may gather around that tone.

Feeling conditions craving, *Trishna* or *Tanha*; craving conditions clinging, *Upadana*; and clinging conditions becoming, *Bhava*. Becoming leads to birth, *Jati*, and birth to aging and death, *Jaramarana*. This sequence concerns the arising of suffering and renewed existence. Its psychological usefulness should not reduce its scope to a passing mood. Conversely, its larger scope need not prevent a student from recognizing how craving and appropriation operate during an ordinary day.

The Sanskrit names have corresponding Pali forms, including *Avijja*, *Sankhara*, *Vinnana*, *Salayatana* and *Phassa*. Historical Theosophical lists sometimes arrange or explain the links differently. It is useful to retain the standard Buddhist sequence when learning their relationships, while reading each Theosophical passage in its own context. A difference in terminology calls for careful comparison. It does not authorize us to change a quotation or assume that every author means exactly the same thing.

One distinction deserves particular care. Buddhist conditioned consciousness is not an immortal personal Self. Blavatsky's account of an enduring individuality that assimilates the spiritual value of successive personalities belongs to her Theosophical interpretation of continuity. Professor Iyer similarly approaches dependent origination through the One Life and universal law. These interpretations form the setting of his teaching; they should be identified as such when placed beside Buddhist analysis.

The chain is more subtle than a line of falling objects. Its links concern different but related dimensions of embodied experience, and their interpretation extends beyond a single brief sequence of reactions. What remains practically illuminating is conditionality itself. Something that now seems inevitable may depend upon habits, assumptions and repeated acts that we have scarcely examined. Finding those conditions can restore a measure of responsibility without pretending that everything lies within personal control.

A causal explanation also differs from fatalism. If a response depends upon conditions, the introduction of a new condition can matter. Instruction, a trustworthy friendship or a deliberately renewed practice may alter what becomes possible. None guarantees an immediate result. Their significance lies in the lawful opportunity for learning. The chain invites investigation of how an experience is sustained, while the path asks for the patient cultivation of understanding and conduct capable of changing its direction.

Consider a group organizing a shared meal. One person feels a sting when a task is reassigned. The sting quickly becomes a demand to be recognized; that demand hardens into the conviction that the others are ungrateful. A sharp remark follows, and the group begins to organize itself around the quarrel. This is a modest illustration of feeling, craving and clinging, not a complete enactment of all twelve links. Its value is to make a point of practice visible.

The person need not deny the hurt. They can ask what they actually know, whether the change was necessary, and what they are now trying to secure through protest. Recognition may still matter, and an unfair arrangement may still need correction. Yet the inquiry can loosen the demand that one particular response from others must establish one's worth. A truthful question then becomes possible where accusation had seemed unavoidable.

Professor Iyer's "The Mahamudra of Voidness" joins discernment to calmness, patience and steadfastness. This pairing prevents self-study from becoming another form of agitation. If one examines a difficult reaction while inwardly prosecuting oneself, the examination may simply create new material for resentment. A steadier attention can acknowledge an unworthy motive and still discover the next useful act. Insight needs a sufficiently quiet field in which to work.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes the question from who has injured my position to what conditions would help the whole undertaking. The meal is for people who need nourishment and companionship. Some volunteers are tired; others have information we lack. These circumstances do not settle every disagreement, but they bring omitted realities into view. The wider circle gives judgment more to consider and offers motives beyond the defence of an image.

Human Solidarity follows through the recognition that others, too, live amid conditions they did not wholly choose. We may understand the force of a habit without endorsing its harmful expression. We may also help change the setting in which a habit repeatedly takes hold: clarify responsibilities, make a concern speakable, or distribute a burden more fairly. Compassion becomes practical when it attends both to a person's inward struggle and to the circumstances through which that struggle is being renewed.

None of this means that another person's suffering can be read backward into a verdict about their moral history. We rarely possess such knowledge. The doctrine gives us work to do with the causes we can recognize, including the effects of our own conduct. It does not give us permission to explain away someone else's pain. Sometimes the most responsible contribution is direct assistance before philosophical discussion.

The teaching of cessation gives the chain its liberating significance. The removal of ignorance is described as ending the conditions that sustain suffering and renewed becoming. This is a profound spiritual aim, not a promise that one moment of watchfulness abolishes every difficulty. Ordinary acts of restraint, generosity and truthful inquiry are ways of beginning the work. They help the student discover that a familiar impulse need not always determine the next action.

In Theosophical language, the inquiry helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*: thought becomes more receptive to an understanding that includes other lives. Professor Iyer's "The Eye of Wisdom" presents learning as experiment, tested in experience and enriched through compassion. The Twelve Links then cease to be only a sequence remembered for study. They encourage a patient attention to what we are helping to bring into being, and to the places where a wiser cause can enter the shared life.

Glossary

Absolute — Unconditioned reality, beyond the limits and relations of manifested existence.

Arya — Noble; used of the Buddhist path of understanding and practice.

Avidya / Avijja — Sanskrit and Pali forms for ignorance; in dependent origination, failure to understand suffering, its arising, its cessation and the path of practice.

Bhava — Becoming or conditioned existence; the tenth link, supported by clinging and conditioning birth.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or faculty of intuitive discernment; Buddhist means pertaining to it.

Catenated — Linked in a connected series; used in the source for the causal relations among the *Nidanas*.

Cognition — Knowing or the act of knowing; cogniser names the knower, and cognised refers to what is known.

Conditioned — Dependent upon causes, circumstances or relations; not independently or unchangeably existent.

Dependent Origination — The Buddhist teaching that suffering and conditioned existence arise through supporting causes and conditions; the twelvefold sequence is set out in *Samyutta Nikaya* 12.2.

Dhyana — Meditation or contemplative absorption; a term used within different disciplines of spiritual practice.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish what is relevant, true or beneficial; spiritual discernment joins clarity to a wider concern for life.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include more relationships, consequences and the needs of others.

Fatalism — The belief that outcomes cannot be affected by choice or effort; distinguished here from the study of conditional relations.

Four Noble Truths — The Buddhist teaching concerning suffering, its arising, its cessation and the path of practice leading to cessation.

Gandhian — Pertaining to Gandhi; in the quoted phrase, deliberate experiments in living according to truth.

Gupta Vidya — Sacred or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected Theosophical writings.

Hall of Wisdom — The spiritual condition or field of learning named in *The Voice of the Silence* and Professor Iyer's interpretation; distinguished from merely accumulated information.

Hinayana — A historical and contested designation used in the quoted Theosophical source; its presence preserves that source's terminology rather than classifying contemporary Buddhists.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Ideation — The activity of thought or the expression of ideal patterns; Divine Ideation concerns cosmic intelligence in the cited teaching.

Individuality — The enduring spiritual Ego in Theosophical usage, distinguished from the temporary personality of a particular life.

Jaramarana — Aging and death; the twelfth link, conditioned by birth.

Jati — Birth; the eleventh link, conditioned by becoming.

Karma — Action and its consequences; in Theosophy, the law of ethical causation and adjustment.

Mahamudra — A contemplative discipline discussed by Professor Iyer in relation to voidness, self-grasping and the union of calmness with discernment.

Manas — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher sense, the reincarnating individuality. Manasic means pertaining to this principle.

Maya — Conditioned or illusory appearance when compared with ultimate reality; not a denial of responsibility within lived experience.

Meta-psychological — Concerning assumptions about mind and self that underlie a particular account of psychological experience.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental nature and principles of reality, including consciousness and causation; metaphysical means pertaining to such inquiry.

Moksha — Spiritual liberation from bondage; the cited passage places its paths within the study of conditioned existence.

Namarupa — Name-and-form; mental and bodily factors in dependent origination, rather than merely the naming of an object.

Nidanas — Causal links or conditions; the Twelve *Nidanas* describe the arising of conditioned existence. *Nidana* is the singular.

Nirvana — Spiritual liberation from the bondage of conditioned existence.

Noble Eightfold Path — The Buddhist path of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration; Professor Iyer uses such renderings as Right Knowledge and Right Motive.

Noumenon — An underlying reality or intelligible ground distinguished from its appearance to an observer; noumena is the plural.

One Life — The universal unity of life underlying and expressed through the many lives and forms of Nature.

Pali — The language of the Theravada Buddhist canon; the source of forms such as *Avijja*, *Vinnana* and *Phassa*.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Phenomena — Things or events as they appear or are experienced; the singular is phenomenon.

Prajna — Wisdom or spiritual insight; paired with method in Professor Iyer's discussion of Right Knowledge.

Pralaya — A period of dissolution or rest between cycles of manifested activity.

Protean — Capable of taking many forms; used of self-grasping and its varied expressions.

Reincarnation — The return of the enduring individuality through successive lives within the Theosophical account of evolution.

Rupa — Form or body; the first of the five aggregates in the quoted Theosophical classifications.

Samkhara — The spelling used in the Key's historical list of the *skandhas* for mental tendencies; related to *Sankhara* and *Samskara*.

Samskara / Sankhara — Sanskrit and Pali forms for formations; in dependent origination, volitional formations are the second link. The term has other uses in discussions of habits and impressions.

Sanna — Pali for perception or recognition; rendered abstract ideas in the Key's historical list of aggregates.

Self-grasping — Clinging to an assumed self through desire, thought or identity; treated by Professor Iyer as a subtle source of bondage.

Self-Knowledge — Understanding of self and spiritual reality, joined in the quoted teaching to examination of motive and conduct for the benefit of all.

Shadayatana / Salayatana — Sanskrit and Pali forms for the six sense-bases: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; the fifth link.

Skandhas — The aggregates or changing factors of personal experience; distinct from the twelve causal links. Historical Theosophical translations of the factors vary.

Sparsha / Phassa — Sanskrit and Pali forms for contact; the sixth link, including contact associated with mind as well as the bodily senses.

Stanzas of Dzyan — The archaic stanzas presented and interpreted in *The Secret Doctrine*.

Theosophy — Divine wisdom; the spiritual philosophy and discipline of inquiry, self-development and service informing these essays.

Trishna / Tanha — Sanskrit and Pali terms for craving or thirst; the eighth link, conditioned by feeling and conditioning clinging.

Upadana — Clinging or grasping; the ninth link, including attachment to views and a doctrine of self as well as sensory objects.

Upaya — Method or means; paired with wisdom in the cited account of understanding and spiritual practice.

Vedana — Feeling or sensation, especially the pleasant, painful or neutral tone of experience; the seventh link and one of the five aggregates.

Vijnana / Vinnana — Sanskrit and Pali forms for consciousness; the third link and one of the five aggregates. *Viññāṇa* is the Pali form with diacritics.

Volitional — Involving intention or the exercise of will.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 39.

“The twelve *Nidanas* or causes of being. Each is the effect of its antecedent cause, and a cause, in its turn, to its successor; the sum total of the *Nidanas* being based on the four truths, a doctrine especially characteristic of the *Hīnayāna* System. They belong to the theory of the stream of catenated law which produces merit and demerit, and finally brings Karma into full sway.”

Meditation thought: Each link receives and transmits conditions. Study one recurring response through what sustains it, allowing the search for causes to become an opportunity for a wiser contribution.

2. R.N. Iyer — “The Message of Buddha”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 225.

“Subjects and objects, acts and events, mental processes and physical phenomena, are related to each other in cause-effect-cause sequences, every effect carrying within itself the potency of further causation, just as it in itself is the product of prior causation. *Buddha* not only proclaimed the existence of One Life Principle but also pointed to the interconnectedness of everything, the root causes of embodied existence, and the Chain of Dependent Origination. Any particular position or condition in space and time must be viewed as a part in relation to the whole, and not in terms of the illusory ego or the separative self.”

Meditation thought: Professor Iyer interprets dependent origination through the One Life. Let the wider field correct an explanation built entirely around your own position, while preserving the distinction between his interpretation and the Buddhist teaching.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 40.

“According to the *Stanzas of Dzryan*, both the causes of the misery of existence and the seven paths to the bliss of *moksha* have a reality which is relative to a period of manifestation. In *pralaya* they are not.”

Meditation thought: Causes and paths have their place within manifestation. The larger cosmic horizon should deepen the study of present conditions without making their practical consequences seem unimportant.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 39.

“*Maya* or illusion is an element which enters into all finite things, for everything that exists has only a relative, not an absolute, reality, since the appearance which the hidden noumenon assumes for any observer depends upon his power of cognition.”

Meditation thought: An appearance is conditioned by the powers of the observer. What might another perspective reveal about an event whose meaning you had considered settled?

5. R.N. Iyer — “The Eye of Wisdom”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 205.

“If human beings mired in illusion and a false sense of their own being are to gain what *The Voice of the Silence* calls 'the right perception of existing things' and 'the knowledge of the non-existent', then they must seek for Him who will give them birth in the Hall of Wisdom. It is there that the teachings of *Gupta Vidya* in relation to the twelvefold chain of the *nidanas*, the chain of dependent origination governing birth and death, and also the four Noble Truths of *Buddha* have their greatest but most secret meaning. There are secret truths contained within all uttered truths, within the doctrine of the *nidanas*, and within the four truths. There are secrets within secrets, worlds within worlds.”

Meditation thought: The passage places the doctrine within a discipline of learning and spiritual guidance. Reverence can keep inquiry open when familiarity with a sequence begins to substitute for understanding it.

6. R.N. Iyer — “The Eye of Wisdom”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 206.

“The wise are those who, when they receive such teaching, become almost from the beginning deaf and blind to everything else, and see all else only in relation to that which is sacred. They make the very best experiments they can as early as possible, therefore garnering the lessons of life and become unacknowledged but self-dependent sources of inner wisdom. Tested by experience and enriched by human pain and suffering, they become endowed with the light and the lustre, the beneficence and the benediction, of true compassion in their conscious ideation in meditation, let alone in their outward utterances and external deeds. As dauntless and detached learners, they make the fields of their experience the basis of Gandhian experiments in truth.”

Meditation thought: Teaching becomes fruitful through consciously chosen experiment. Carry one understood principle into a real encounter, and attend honestly to what the encounter teaches in return.

7. R.N. Iyer — “The Mahamudra of Voidness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 392.

“One must find out one's resources and potentials for calmness and for generating the maximum field of patience, peacefulness, gentleness and steadfastness. Then one must combine in practice one's capacity for calmness with one's capacity for discerning what is essential. Inevitably, this will involve a protracted study lasting over lifetimes, and include enquiry into the fundamental propositions of *Gupta Vidya*, the study of karma and the study of what Buddhist thought refers to as the chain of dependent origination.”

Meditation thought: Discernment and calmness support one another. Before examining a difficult reaction, make enough room for patience that the examination can reveal something beyond a verdict against yourself.

8. R.N. Iyer — “The Mahamudra of Voidness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 392.

“In essence, this entire course of study is aimed at bringing about a meta-psychological encounter with a false view of the self that must be confronted and dispelled. Ultimately, this complex matter goes to the core of the *mahamudra* meditation. But at a preliminary level and in the course of preparation for that meditation, one must come to grips with the confused notion of oneself that is identified with bodily desire, proclivities towards pleasure and avoidance of pain. At subtler levels one must confront one's conception of oneself that is bound up with the entire chaotic series of thoughts, all of which have particular histories and form associative chains of memory that have been built up over lifetimes of indulgence. All take a variety of forms and leave discernible tracks, all are connected with certain fantasies, wishes, hopes and expectations. They are designated in various ways in different analytic traditions, but always at the root there is the protean force of self-grasping.”

Meditation thought: Self-grasping may attach itself to thoughts as readily as to possessions. Notice a story about yourself that seems to require constant defence, and ask what its maintenance is costing.

9. R.N. Iyer — “The Message of Buddha”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 226.

“Buddhist ethics in its most familiar form is widely disseminated as comprising the critical eight steps of the Noble (*Arya*) Path. The teaching concerning the Eightfold Path is known as the Fourth Truth, the first three Truths being really statements of metaphysics based upon empirical evidence, introspection and meditation. First of all, suffering exists. Suffering is ubiquitous and inevitable. Secondly, the cause of suffering is craving – ignorant, selfish and possessive desire. Thirdly, the cure of suffering is the removal of the false sense of egotistic attachment and personal possession, so that each individual is no longer caught in the meshes of his or her own making, but goes beyond it, looking inwards and heavenwards. Fourthly, the very existence of the Path of enlightenment is the Fourth Truth.”

Meditation thought: The diagnosis includes a path of practice. Recognition of suffering should lead toward the cultivation of its remedy, with respect for the depth and duration of that work.

10. R.N. Iyer — “The Message of Buddha”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 226.

“The First Step on the Eightfold Path is Right Knowledge. Gautama *Buddha* wished to show all earnest seekers for enlightenment the possibility and importance of attaining a rational understanding of the cosmic process, of the law of karma and reincarnation, and of the complexities of human nature. Both wisdom and method, *prajna* and *upaya*, require the calm adoption of a scrupulously rational approach to the subject-matter of traditional religions. *Buddha* came to curb blind belief and to show that the intelligibility of the cosmos must be matched by an individual's reliance on reason, as well as experience and insight or illumination.”

Meditation thought: Reason, experience and insight belong together in the search for understanding. A familiar teaching remains an invitation to inquiry, rather than an exemption from it.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 73.

“There are five *Skandhas* or attributes in the Buddhist teachings: ‘*Rupa* (form or body), material qualities; *Vedana*, sensation; *Sanna*, abstract ideas; *Samkhara*, tendencies of mind; *Vinnana*, mental powers. Of these we are formed; by them we are conscious of existence; and through them communicate with the world about us.’”

Meditation thought: The *skandhas* describe factors of experience and should be distinguished from the twelve causal links. The Key uses historical English renderings; its *Vinnana* names consciousness among the aggregates.

12. R.N. Iyer — “The Message of Buddha”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 226.

“Self-knowledge must be gained, not for the sake of the edification of the illusory personal self, but rather to gain a clear understanding of the cosmic process and to assist all in the universal quest for enlightenment. Thus the Second Step on the Path is Right Motive. With Right Motive one sustains the search for Right Knowledge, and Right Knowledge in turn strengthens the Right Motive. Both require of the seeker a deep scrutiny of the workings of the mind, the assemblage of acquired mental habits and grooves, the interplay of compulsive emotions and contradictory volitions, the repressed desires and hidden longings of the heart.”

Meditation thought: Self-knowledge gains a humane direction when sought for the benefit of others. Let clearer perception strengthen motive, and let a generous motive make the search for clarity more exact.