

From Avijjā to Taṇhā: Re-reading the First Two Links of Dependent Origination as the Origin of Dukkha

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Abstract—The article reconsiders the source of dukkha, redirecting analytical focus away from the canonical fixation on taṇhā, and instead to the upstream process of avijjā → saṅkhārā within dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda). While most interpretations see craving as the "samudaya," we argue that dukkha's genesis is front-loaded. Ignorance does not simply block information; it also misdirects attention (manasikāra) and orientation (diṭṭhi), conditioning the volitional constructions (saṅkhārā) that predetermine the field within which contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā) arise. With affect thus biased, the move from vedanā to taṇhā is the most proximate trigger of a chain of determinants, not the sole origin. Combining methodological approaches that integrate close reading of the Pāli Nikāyas (especially SN 12, DN 15, MN 9, MN 38, MN 148) and selected commentarial literature, along with philosophical analysis in the mind's theory (intentionality of attention and affect), the outcome offers a dual doctrinal contribution. Structural and dual-stage accounts of the phenomenon are anticipated avijjā-saṅkhārā as the first level, and vedanā taṇhā as the second. More pragmatically, we also suggest guidance for upstream intervention through right view and wise attention, and away from urge-level strategies that focus solely on craving, which we presume are the principal targets.

I. INTRODUCTION

Where, precisely, does one observe dukkha in the chain of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda)? The default, somewhat Tibbten-shd answer, made on the Second Noble Truth, views taṇhā (craving) as the "origin" (samudaya) of dukkha (suffering). The early discourses, however, also stress that avijjā (ignorance) conditions saṅkhārā (volitional formations), which in turn condition consciousness, along with the remaining nidāna. If avijjā and saṅkhārā together and in the first instance, pre-structure experience, the later

affective turn from feeling (vedanā) to craving may be a predictable response rather than a spontaneous eruption. This forms the basis of the paper's central question: does dukkha arise solely at the point of craving, or does the avijjā-saṅkhārā dyad, which defines how we construct, value, and pursue objects, already pre-structure the experience?

There are three, and only three, reasons the stakes are what I have just explained. Textually, the location of origin shifts how we read the key suttas in the Nidāna-samyutta, Mahānidāna Sutta, and Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta. The location of the origin shifts (1) the glosses of phassa, vedanā, taṇhā, and upādāna and (2) how we construe causality and agency. Doctrinally, the location of origin in the chain of dependent origination also affects the Buddhist systems of causality and agency. If ignorance is merely privative, craving must carry the decisive burden. If ignorance actively misdirects attention (manasikāra) and view (diṭṭhi), however, volitional construction presupposes affective dissatisfaction. The origin point geographically prescribes training: the strategies that aim at urge-level regulation (taṇhā) are different from the upstream strategies that foster right view and wise attention (avijjā and saṅkhārā). The clarification of the locus of origin thus holds out the possibility of providing textual clarity, coherence of doctrine, and actionable guidance in practice.

The article is developed in five steps. The first step describes the key terms, the causal assumptions, the distinction between linear sequence and conditional interdependence, and what "origin" can mean in this context. The second step presents a close reading of the passages on avijjā and saṅkhārā to argue that ignorance, as distortion, is constructive rather than merely absent. The third step reconstructs the micro-sequence from contact to feeling to craving. It shows

how upstream construction can tilt affective valence, thus rendering *taṇhā* the proximate trigger rather than the sole beginning. The fourth step addresses potential objections arising from canonical emphasis, concerns about determinism, and the pragmatics of practice. The final step extracts the ethical, meditative, and possible contemporary cross-disciplinary implications.

II. AIM OF THE ARTICLE

The goal of this article is to re-position the "origin" of *dukkha* with the dependent origination framework and redistribute the causal significance of the early links *avijjā* and *saṅkhārā* and the affective pivot from *vedanā* to *taṇhā*. More specifically, it pursues six integrated goals: Textual Clarification. To conduct close readings of the Pāli canon's key texts (SN 12; DN 15; MN 9, 38, 148) to demonstrate how "not seeing" operates as more than privation; it also functions as an organizing misorientation that structures volitional construction. Conceptual Distinction. To distinguish structural origin (background conditions: *avijjā-saṅkhārā*) from proximate origin (the *vedanā taṇhā* ignition point) to avoid both reductionisms to craving and a fatalism about ignorance.

Causal Modelling. To develop conditionality as multi-factorial (necessary, sufficient, contributory, dispositional) rather than linear determinism, while explaining how upstream conditions remain "background policies" that continue to influence later links. Phenomenological Precision. To explain the micro-dynamics of attention (*manasikāra*), view (*diṭṭhi*), and construction that shape contact and feeling, which point to the reason why specific valences are primed before craving manifests. Doctrinal Coherence. To present the argument while situated within Theravāda commentarial perspectives (e.g., *Visuddhimagga*, *Abhidhamma* summaries) and to point out divergences where later exegesis explicitly narrows "origin" to *taṇhā*. Practical Guidance. In forming a two-tier pedagogy, we have: (a) upstream retraining the correct view, *yoniso manasikāra*, ethical habituation to rewrite constructive policies, and (b) downstream regulation of mindfulness and restraint at *vedanā* and *taṇhā* to break the cycle of reactivity.

Along these lines, the article offers a two-stage, philologically grounded, and practically valid account of the *dukkha* phenomenon. In doing so, it also

outlines prospective work on the pre-craving moment and the integration of predictive processing, in which "structural origin" corresponds to priors, precision-weighting, and policy learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, I employ a triangulated approach comprising philological close reading, comparative exegesis, and analytic philosophy of mind. For the First, the textual base focuses on early Pāli discourses that explicitly delineate dependent origination and the affective sequence: the *Nidāna-saṃyutta* (SN 12), DN 15 (*Mahānidāna Sutta*), MN 9 (*Sammādiṭṭhi*), MN 38 (*Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya*), and MN 148 (*Chachakka*). I read these sources in Pāli and in standard English translations to identify the key terms *avijjā*, *saṅkhārā*, *phassa*, *vedanā*, *taṇhā*, and *upādāna* and their morphological, syntactic, and semantic dimensions. I utilize, where possible, parallel passages and internal cross-references to examine consistency claims and differentiate stock formulas from context-sensitive emphases.

In the second, I situate these discourses within commentarial and *Abhidhammic* structures, principally the *Visuddhimagga* and representative summaries of the *Abhidhamma* on conditional relations and *cetanā*. My intention is neither to privilege later exegesis nor to dismiss it, but to analyze how commentarial structures distribute causal weight along the chain and identify where interpretive shifts amplify *taṇhā* as the "origin" and where it is implied that *avijjā-saṅkhārā* plays an upstream, constructive role. I draw on select later perspectives (e.g., Theravāda scholastic elaborations and brief references to *Madhyamaka*/*Yogācāra* on construction and emptiness) as contrast classes to clarify what is distinctive and defensible regarding an early-discourse-centred reading.

The third point concerns the use of specific elements from the analytic philosophy of mind that shape the outlines of arguments rather than serve as extraneous sources of guidance. Here, three ideas are important: attention (*manasikāra*) as the selective organizing of prominence; construction (the *saṅkhārā* role in perceptual-cognitive field shaping); and affect (the way *vedanā* carries and transmits upstream biases). These elements operationalize the claims on "front-loading" the genesis of *dukkha* without doctrinal

psychologizing. The interpretive outlines active in the construction of this section encompass: setting aside unanchored speculative metaphysics; distinguishing descriptive from prescriptive assertions; and the dual treatment of "origin" in structural (upstream conditions) and phenomenal (proximate trigger). An interpretive map that is philologically responsible, historically engaged, and philosophically explicit in its assumptions closes the section.

IV. CONCEPTUAL PRELIMINARIES

Dukkha. In early Buddhism, "dukkha" means pain but also refers to the more widespread unease that pervades conditioned existence. Three standard nuances of dukkha are: (1) dukkha-dukkha (painful feeling), (2) vipariṇāma-dukkha (suffering due to change), and (3) saṅkhāra-dukkha (the strain inherent in constructed phenomena). In this paper, I treat dukkha not only as a subjective feeling but also a processual result in dependent origination (DO) as a reactivity pattern intertwining cognition, feeling, and action.

Avijjā. Although often translated as "ignorance," "avijjā" comprises not-knowing (absence of accurate apprehension) and misconstruing (positively assessing what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self). The latter is pivotal: avijjā is not a passive void. It is an active misorientation of attention (manasikāra) and view (diṭṭhi) that frames what is salient, valuable and threatening and also what counts as valuable and worthy.

Saṅkhārā. The term saṅkhārā describes "formations" or "fabrications," and carries a core volitional sense of cetanā (intention). We highlight saṅkhārā as constructive activity: bodily, verbal, and mental conditioning patterns that scaffold experience. Under avijjā, these constructions encode biases—habitual framings, scripts, and expectations—that shape the field in which contact and feeling will occur.

Phassa, Phassa, or 'contact', refers to the conditioned concurrence of a sense base, an object, and consciousness. However, contact is not the neutral spark. It is contact-as-framed and phassa is the hinge where constructed salience meets a sensory encounter. In other words, phassa is not a neutral hinge; it is already a contact of salience and informs the constructed salience of the encounter. Your contact phassa is already informed and a hinge of the sensory

encounter. Vedanā, In terms of the hedonic valence, vedanā ("feeling tone") indicates whether the contact is pleasant, painful, or neutral. It is consequential, or affectively thin, but downstream craving tracks the valences. Since vedanā inherits the tilt from prior construction, its "pleasant" or "painful" is partially an art reflecting the interpretive work avijjā-conditioned saṅkhārā completed.

Taṇhā In experiencing and craving, taṇhā describes the appetitive upsurge that seeks, resists, or dulls experience (kāma-, bhava-, vibhava-taṇhā). Traditionally emphasized as the "origin" (samudaya) of dukkha, taṇhā is the proximate engine of grasping (upādāna). Our analysis aims to decipher whether taṇhā is the sole origin, or the predictable culmination of upstream misorientation.

V. AVIJJĀ AS PRIMORDIAL MISORIENTATION

In the earliest discourses, avijjā, usually translated as "ignorance," is described as a failure to see the Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence—anicca, dukkha, anattā. But avijjā is not a passive blank where knowledge should be. It is an active mis-taking of the impermanent as permanent, the stressful as satisfactory, and the not-self as self. Avijjā mis-orient the mind's initial conditions, biasing the very field in which contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā) arise. In the Nidāna-saṃyutta, avijjā heads the chain by conditioning saṅkhārā; in the expositions of right view (e.g., Sammādiṭṭhi), the antidote is precisely seeing origination, cessation, and the path. Such passages suggest that "not seeing" already patterns how things appear before explicit desire ignites.

To name avijjā "not seeing" is to involve attention (manasikāra) and view (diṭṭhi). Attention is a cognitive spotlight and, when edged by avijjā, fixation is on the controlling, coherent, and promising, while instability and contingency are downplayed. The view then stretches these refined perceptions into a narrative of reality that seems ownable and enduring. Long before craving speaks in the idiom of I want, the scene is staged: objects are constructed as worth having, selves as capable of possessing, and trajectories as worth pursuing. In this sense, avijjā misorients the mind's initial conditions, biasing the very field in which contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā) arise.

Differentiating between ignorance and absence positively helps clarify the thesis. Information absence

is temporary and episodic, and one can always look it up. In contrast, *avijjā* is structural. It shapes and builds interpretative frameworks and salience habits. It erects a mental scaffolding of anticipations and evaluations to obfuscate neutral contact, framing it as contact-as-touch. This framing bias shapes the affective tone of the *vedanā*, a feeling characterized as pleasant, neutral, or painful so that *avijjā* attributes a tilt to the pleasant feelings: projects aligned with one's identity and the ego. What seems painful, or is associated with *avijjā*, often threatens identity projects. Affect and *taṇhā* craving or grasping remain unidirectional, a consequence of the affective 'dice' and a consequence of the predeterminacy of the distressing affect. For the purpose of this exposition, three aspects of the misorientation remain salient. First, it is pre-affective; second, it is self-implicating. The misapprehension of self looms large; sticky attention to "me" and "mine" was misperceived as a fragment, an ego. The view rationalising this stickiness is *avijjā*. It is regulatory and habit forming. Attention and view can be trained, with repeated misconstrual sedimenting as *saṅkhārā*, conditioning attention and view to close a feedback loop.

Understanding *avijjā* as primary misorientation clarifies why the suttas place great emphasis on *yoniso manasikāra* (wise attention) and right view. There is no need to postpone practice for the resurgence of craving; it can instead intervene upstream by retraining the structures of salience and sense-making. When attention learns to reveal impermanence and view no longer reifies, the progression from contact to feeling to craving operates in a field less oriented toward appropriation and distress.

VI. SAṆKHĀRĀ AS CONSTRUCTIVE ENGINE

Saṅkhārā "formations" or "fabrications" refer to the constructive activities of the mind. In the earliest discourses, they cover three areas: the bodily, the verbal, and the mental. Bodily *saṅkhārā* include patterned tensions and, in one classification, the in-and-out breath. Verbal *saṅkhārā* include directed thought and evaluation, while mental *saṅkhārā* encompass more intricate configurations of perception and feeling, as well as deeper dispositions and habits. A different classification consists of meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable formations. As a whole, these classifications indicate that construction

is not the result of a single act or moment. Instead, it is a layered, learnable behaviour executed through the body, speech, and mind. These formations are closely linked to *cetanā*, or intention. Intention aims, weighs, and selects, while *saṅkhārā* formations solidify these decisions into more permanent habits. Thus, the saying "intention is *kamma*" serves both as ethical accounting and as a phenomenological statement: constructing is an active process. What is repeatedly intended functions as a micro-policy that governs a mode of seeing, speaking, and moving. Under such a policy, the world is pre-sorted for action and deeply suffused with preference.

Avijjā determines the value-laden aspects of this constructive engine. When ignorance misorients attention (*manasikāra*) and view (*diṭṭhi*), *saṅkhārā* adopts that orientation as default: framings, projections, and scripts. A face is framed as an ally or a rival; a sound is projected as a promise or a threat; and a neutral task is scripted as a ladder to self-worth. Here, the construction is not a hallucination but a biased organisation: what becomes figure, what recedes as ground, and which meanings are made available.

This has direct affective consequences. Since contact (*phassa*) is never with raw givens but with already framed objects, it inherits the policy. *Vedanā* then "reads off" that policy as pleasant, painful, or neutral. The delicious taste is delightful partly because the scene was prepared to warrant it as a reward; the irritating noise is vexing because it was already classified as an obstacle. In short, *saṅkhārā* seed is affected by pre-assigning significance. Early sutta materials illuminate this priming function. One stream links bodily formation with the breath, suggesting how training the breath reshapes the bodily field in which contact occurs. Another treats verbal formation as the pair *vitakka-vicāra*, showing how inner speech tilts subsequent encounters. A further strand ties mental formation to feeling and perception, underscoring how categorization and tone are themselves constructed. Together, these passages portray *saṅkhārā* as setting the affordances and constraints within which experience will run.

The constructive engine also feeds back. Craving and clinging reinforce the policies that made them likely, tightening loops of expectation and reaction. In contrast, ethical restraint and meditation loosen and rewrite policies. When right view and wise attention

recalibrate value, *saṅkhārā* no longer over-produce reward and threat signals, and the field of contact becomes less inflammable. To locate *dukkha*'s genesis solely in craving misses its upstream manufacture: *saṅkhārā*, driven by *avijjā*, lay the runway on which craving predictably lands.

VII. DISCUSSION OF THE ARTICLE

This article has argued that *dukkha*'s "origin" is dual: structurally upstream in the *avijjā-saṅkhārā* complex and phenomenally at the *vedanā taṇhā* threshold. Re-reading the first two links relocates decisive causal work to a pre-affective misorientation of attention and view that constructs a salience landscape in which craving predictably ignites. This reframing preserves the canonical emphasis on *taṇhā* as the proximate cause while explaining why urge-level strategies alone often struggle: they confront the flames without addressing the accelerants built into perception and interpretation.

Doctrinally, treating *avijjā* as architectural rather than privative clarifies how conditionality differs from linear determinism. Upstream links do not merely precede craving; they remain as background conditions, continuously inflecting contact and feeling. Practically, this suggests a two-tiered pedagogy: (1) upstream training right view, *yoniso manasikāra*, ethical habits that rewrite policies of construction; and (2) downstream regulation skills that meet *vedanā* and *taṇhā* with mindfulness, restraint, and wise substitution. The model also accommodates feedback loops: craving and clinging consolidate views and habits, while successful upstream training cools the affective field.

Several limitations remain. The argument relies on close readings of selected discourses and commentarial syntheses; a fuller survey of parallel Āgama materials could corroborate or correct emphases. Phenomenological claims about micro-sequences from contact to craving would benefit from first-person reports systematically gathered and analyzed. Finally, cross-tradition dialogue was intentionally concise; more granular comparisons with *Madhyamaka* and *Yogācāra* on construction and emptiness may refine the account.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has outlined the dual origins of *dukkha* as structurally front-loaded in the *avijjā-saṅkhārā* complex and phenomenally ignited across the *vedanā→taṇhā* threshold. In this sequence, *avijjā* is not a mere lack, but a primordial misorientation of attention and view, while '*saṅkhārā*' is a constructive engine that encodes value-laden policies. In this case, 'contact' and 'feeling' arise within an already tilted field. This preserves the canonical centrality of *taṇhā* as the proximate "origin," explaining why interventions that are confined solely to the urge level are fragile: they encounter reactivity downstream without addressing the upstream configuration that sets up craving.

The article makes three distinct contributions. Textually, it unifies passages across SN 12, DN 15, MN 9, MN 38, and MN 148, demonstrating a coherent upstream causal profile. Doctrinally, it reframes dependent origination not as linear determinism but as conditionality, and allows for feedback loops by differentiating between structural and proximate causes. Practically, it inspires a two-tier pedagogy: (1) upstream training in right view and *manasikāra* to recalibrate construction, and (2) downstream skills for confronting feeling and craving with mindfulness, restraint, and wise substitution. The subsequent study should explore the phenomenology of the moments just before craving: micro-analyses of attention shifts, appraisals, and subtle bodily formations that prefigure *taṇhā*. Engaging with the predictive processing literature, cross-disciplinary work could define "structural origin" in terms of priors, precision weighting, and policy learning to show how generative models are updated by contemplative practice. Finally, the scope and durability of this dual-origin account can be examined across historical strata and interpretive lineages through comparative work with parallel Āgama sources and later traditions.

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