

The Strange Case of Beni Barua and the Therī Dhammadinnā

(Dharmacārin Sāgaramati)

In his *Survey of Buddhism*,¹ Sangharakshita mentions that it was Mrs. Rhys Davids who first drew attention to a little known yet highly important formula of ‘conditioned-arising’ (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which unfolds as a progressive *nidāna* sequence beginning with ‘confidence (in the Dharma)’ [*saddhā*] arising from experiencing ordinary life as *dukkha*, culminating in ‘knowledge of the destruction (of the *āsavas*)’ [*khaye ñāna*], which arises in dependence upon ‘liberation’ [*vimutti*].² As she says in the ‘Editorial Notes’ to her translation of the second volume of the *Kindred Sayings* [*Samyutta Nikāya*], which is where we find this progressive *nidāna* sequence, ‘How might it not have altered the whole face of Buddhism to the West if that [progressive] sequence had been made the illustration of the causal law!’ [i.e. *pratītya-samutpāda*]. And she adds that the discovery of this progressive sequence in 1902 came upon her ‘like a flash of sunshine in a dark room’.³

Here we can only wonder why, especially at least within the Theravāda tradition, it took a scholar who wasn’t even a Buddhist to notice this progressive formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda*, and not only notice it but to recognize its spiritual value and importance.

So having paid homage to Mrs. Rhys Davids for drawing attention to this progressive *nidāna* sequence, Sangharakshita concludes that what this discovery implies is that within *pratītya-samutpāda* itself there are two possible trends: there is a cyclical trend and there is a spiritually progressive trend. Thus ‘at each causal stage [in the causal sequence] it should be possible to speak, not only of the cessation of this or that condition making for rebirth, and hence for suffering, but also of the production of positive factors which progressively augment one another until with the realization of *sambodhi* the whole process reaches its climax’.⁴ And in this context Sangharakshita introduces us to an article by Dr. Beni Madhab Barua.

In his article, *Buddhism as a Personal Religion*,⁵ Barua attempts to demonstrate that if within *pratītya-samutpāda* there are indeed these two trends, the cyclical and the progressive, this raises the question as to ‘the logical relation between *Pratītya-Samutpāda* and *Nirvāṇa*’; these, he continues, ‘constituting the two main points of consideration in [the] Buddha’s religion’.⁶ This being so, Barua later asks ‘whether or no, the abiding order of cosmic life

¹ *A Survey of Buddhism*, p. 136, Seventh Edition, 1993 (hereafter, *Survey*).

² This is the *Upanisa-sutta* from the *Samyutta Nikāya* [S ii. 29-32]. Here we find an unique formula of *pratītya-samutpāda* consisting of a sequence of twenty-three *nidānas* (loosely, ‘causal’ conditions), beginning with a sequence of conditionality in its cyclical form, which changes half-way through to sequence of conditionality in its progressive form. The cyclical form begins with ‘spiritual ignorance’ [*avijjā*], through to ‘birth’ (no. 11), which in the standard twelvefold cyclical formula is usually followed by ‘old-age, disease and death’, but is here replaced by *dukkha* (no. 12). These represent the standard cyclical order of *pratītya-samutpāda*, corresponding to the processes that constitute *samsāra*, the ‘round of birth and death’. However, *dukkha* here [which is also the first Noble Truth] is ambiguous as it can be understood doctrinally as the inevitable ‘end’ that all cyclical processes lead to, or it can also be understood as the first step in leaving the cyclical process behind. It can also be viewed as an intermediary state between the cyclical process and progressive or spiritual process that follows. I would put *dukkha* in the ‘intermediate’ category between the cyclical and progressive processes as it possible to experience the unsatisfactoriness of worldly life [*dukkha*] without venturing onto a spiritual path – for example, one can become a nihilist, (as some *śramaṇas* in the Buddha’s day did). The progressive process would then begin with ‘confidence (in the Dharma)’ [*saddhā*] (no. 13), which arises in dependence upon *dukkha*, followed respectively by ‘joy’ [*pāmojja*] - rapture [*pīti*] - tranquillity [*passaddhi*] - bliss [*sukha*] - meditative concentration [*samādhi*] - knowing and seeing things as they really are [*yathā-bhūta-ñāna-dassana*] - disentanglement [*nibbidā*] - passionless [*virāga*] - liberation [*vimutti*] - culminating in ‘knowledge of the cessation [of the (*āsavas*)]’, (no. 23), the final *nidāna*. So we have eleven cyclical *nidānas*; one intermediary *nidāna*, *dukkha*, which replaces ‘old-age, disease and death’, the usual final cyclical *nidāna*; and eleven progressive *nidānas*.

³ *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, Part II, London, 1922, p. ix.

⁴ *Survey*, p.136.

⁵ *Maha Bodhi*, 52 (1944), pp.54-68 (hereafter, BPR.).

⁶ *ibid.* p.54.

which is expressed by [the] Buddha's causal genesis [i.e. *pratītya-samutpāda*] is an all-inclusive reality? If so, does it or does it not include *Nirvāṇa* in it'.⁷ Sangharakshita then introduces a *caveat* to Barua's question: 'the question at issue is not so much whether the *pratītya samutpāda* is an all-inclusive reality as whether it is an all-inclusive *formulation* of reality'.⁸ With this modification, the question now becomes: If *pratītya-samutpāda* is an all-inclusive formulation of reality, is *nirvāṇa* contained within any such formulation? Is *nirvāṇa* contained within any of the formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda*? Or is *nirvāṇa* excluded from all formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda*, *nirvāṇa* being something literally 'unconditioned' that stands 'outside' all such formulations of conditioned-arising? After all, whatever arises in dependence upon conditions must, so it seems by definition, be said to be 'conditioned'. Reformulating Barua's question we can ask: Can *nirvāṇa* be said to arise in dependence upon conditions? If *nirvāṇa* does not arise in dependence upon conditions, if it is 'outside' all formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda*, then the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* cannot claim to be an all-inclusive *formulation* of reality. As Barua says, if *pratītya-samutpāda* 'is not all-inclusive, it does not deserve the name of reality at all. To be reality it must be not only a fact but the whole of the fact, known or knowable, actual or potential'.⁹

Barua then goes on to say that this very puzzle, as to whether *nirvāṇa* is included within the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* or not, has 'divided the Buddhist teachers into two sharply antagonistic schools of opinion, one maintaining that *Nirvāṇa* representing the counter-process of cessation was logically excluded from the Buddha's Causal Genesis which is concerned with the process of becoming'.¹⁰ As to who these two antagonistic schools are, assuming that there were or are two such antagonistic schools, Barua leaves us to guess. And, for the sake of logical completion, we must assume that the other school or schools assume that the 'counter-process of cessation' [i.e. *nirvāṇa*] is logically contained within some formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda*.¹¹

Now as far as I am aware, the view that *nirvāṇa* is excluded from any formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda* is held by the orthodox Theravāda. For example, in *The Questions of King Milinda*, Milinda asks Nāgasena 'what there is in the world that is not produced [*nibbatta*] by either *kamma*, cause [*hetu*], or natural physical change [*utu*]'.¹² Nāgasena replies that there are two such things: 'space' [*ākāsa*] and *nibbāna*. Milinda, whilst agreeing about 'space' being such, accuses Nāgasena of 'soiling the words of the Conqueror' [*jinavacanam makkhehi*] in declaring that *nibbāna* has no cause. The Buddha, he points out, did teach a path for the realization of *nibbāna*, so how can *nibbāna* not have a cause? Nāgasena says this is true, but:

Whilst it is possible to teach a path (*magga*) for the realization [*sacchikiriyā*] of *nibbāna*, no cause [*hetu*] for its arising [*uppādāya*] can be pointed to [*dassetum*]' . [p.269]

The reason why one is able to declare a path for the realization of *nibbāna*, but not its origin, is because '*nibbāna* is unconditioned [*asaṅkhata*], it is not created by anything. It cannot be said to be produced, non-produced, or come into existence; that it is past, future, or present; it is not perceptible by the eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body'. Yet '*nirvāṇa* exists' [*atthi nibbānam*], and is cognizable by the mind [*mano-viññeyyam*], but only by the purified mind [*visuddhena mānasena*], 'which is exalted [*paṇīta*] upright [*ujuka*], unhindered [*anāvarena*],

⁷ *ibid.* p.62.

⁸ Survey, p.138, italics mine. Sangharakshita adds this qualification to Barua's question because of 'the need for distinguishing between thoughts and things'. Thus we are referring to conceptual formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda*.

⁹ BPR, p.62.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Barua says that 'The great Pali Scholiast Buddhaghosa ... has discussed this question', and in fn 13, p. 63, refers us to Buddhaghosa's '*Visuddhimagga*, Ch. xvii: *Paññā-bhūmi-niddesa*', ('Description of the Soil in which Understanding Grows', in Nāṇamoli's translation, *The Path of Purification*, Vol. II, pp.592-678). However, I can find nothing in this chapter that remotely relates to this question.

¹² Such as the changing of the seasons, day and night, the weather, temperature, mensuration, etc. This section is called *Akammajādipaṇḥo*, 'Questions on what is not born of *kamma*, etc.', pp. 268-271.

and free from worldly desires [*nirāmiṣa*]. It is only by rightly practicing [*sammapaṭiṭṭhāna*] the Buddha's teaching that it becomes possible for one to 'see *nirvāṇa* [*nibbānaṃ passati*]'.¹³

Thus according to the *Questions of King Milinda*, whilst 'the realization of *nirvāṇa*' does arise in dependence upon conditions, *nirvāṇa* itself must be 'outside' of all causes and conditions. Therefore *nirvāṇa* cannot be contained within any formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda*, as all that is contained in any of the formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda* arises in dependence upon conditions. This seems to be the Theravādin position.¹⁴ But it does not seem to be the Buddha's.¹⁵ But does Barua have anything to counter this view?

In order to put his case that *nirvāṇa* can be understood as being contained within the formula of *pratītya-samutpāda*, Barua then turns to a *sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* or 'Shorter Questions and Answers', where we find the *bhikkhunī* Dhammadinnā answering questions put to her by Visākha, who is said elsewhere to be her ex-husband.¹⁶ And it is here, in this *sutta*, that Barua turns for an answer to his question.

Barua says:

The most welcome light on this point [i.e. whether *nirvāṇa* is contained within the formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda* or not] comes from the intellectually gifted early Buddhist sister Dhammadinnā whose views were fully approved and endorsed by the Buddha, with the remark that he had nothing further to add to them. As interpreted by her,

¹³ Mph 269-270.

¹⁴ One also finds this view in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*: see VM pp. 508-509 (xvi 70-76; p.580 of Nāṇamoli's translation, *The Path of Purification*. For a modern version of the same, see p. 40 of Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (Paperback Edition, 1978).

¹⁵ However, this view does not accord very well with what the Buddha is said to have taught in the Pāli suttas. There *nirvāṇa* is not some 'Unconditioned, Transcendent Other', but a process of an Awakened mind that has become perpetually free from all conditions and causes whose effects could manifest within the round of *samsāra*, i.e. as an unawakened mind. According to the Pāli suttas, one of the main non-metaphorical 'definitions' of *nibbāna* is the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion, a mind perpetually free from and unconditioned by such conditions [S iv. 251]. Being liberated from greed, hatred, and delusion is also the definition of other terms such as 'unconditioned' [*asaṅkhāta*]; this definition is given 56 times at S iv. 359-369], arhantship [S iv. 252], 'the final goal of the spiritual life' [*brahmacariya-pariyosāna*], as well for many of the metaphors for *nibbāna* such as 'the Deathless' [*aññanta*; S iv. 370], the 'Uninclined' [*anata*; S iv. 368], the 'Taintless' [*anāsava*; S iv. 369], the 'Destination' [*parāyana*; S iv. 378], etc. If one takes all these terms as being synonyms for the supreme goal of Buddhism, then they all point to that goal in terms of the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion. As only 'minds' can be spoken of in terms of affects such as greed, hatred, delusion, etc., we are here talking about a level of *mind* that is free from, liberated from, and unconditioned by, greed, hatred, and delusion. Simply stated, this is an Awakened mind, which responds to being in the world in terms of generosity [*dāna*], compassion [*anukampā*], transcendental insight [*prajñā*], and so on. But the view of *nibbāna* we have above in the Milinda takes *nibbāna* as something other than the state (or non-state) of being fully Awakened, i.e. of being a Buddha. Yet we find in the 'Reverence Discourse' [*Gārava Sutta*, S i. 138f.], where the newly Awakened Buddha, finding no one or object in the whole universe whom he could honour and revere, decides that it is only 'this very Dhamma to which I have fully Awakened' that he can 'honour, revere, and dwell depending on [*upanissāya*]'. Given the view in the Milinda, one might expect that it would be *nibbāna* that was the 'object' of the Buddha's reverence. But it here it is the Dhamma as revealed to an Awakened mind, a mind liberated from the influences of greed, hatred, and delusion, what we could call a '*nibbānized mind*'. In the preceding *sutta*, the 'Petition of Brahmā Sutta' [S i. 136f.], which also takes place 'at the foot of the Goatherd's Banyan Tree' just after the Buddha's Awakening, the Dhamma there is said to be 'deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, beyond the sphere of reasoning, subtle, to be experienced only by the wise', and that this Dhamma is identified with *pratītya-samutpāda*. So it seems we have (1) the Theravādins saying that *nibbāna* is beyond *pratītya-samutpāda* and the Awakened mind; (2) *sutta* readings saying that *nibbāna* is nothing other than the Awakened mind; (3) *pratītya-samutpāda* as the Dhamma which is 'something' beyond an Awakened mind (i.e. beyond *nibbāna*) that the Buddha honours and reveres and 'dwell(s) depending on'. Taking the Dhamma here as *pratītya-samutpāda* in its 'Reality' [*tathatā*] aspect, it would be strange to talk of this Dhamma or *pratītya-samutpāda* as possessing such qualities as 'non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion', etc. Can such qualities be said to belong to *pratītya-samutpāda*? Surely such qualities can only belong to a 'mind', in this case an Awakened mind. So here *nibbāna*, rather than being beyond *pratītya-samutpāda*, is in fact the mind that reveres *pratītya-samutpāda* as reality, as the Dhamma!

¹⁶ In the *Āgama* version of this *sutta*, now only extant in Chinese translation, it is Visākha, a female lay disciple, who puts these questions to Dhammadinnā. My source here is *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya: a comparative study*, by Thich Minh Chau, Delhi (1991), pp. 269-278.

[the] Buddha's Causal genesis admits of two different trends of things in the whole of reality. In one of them, the reaction (*paṭibhāga*) takes place in a cyclical order between two opposites (*paccanīkas*), such as, pleasure and pain (*sukha-dukkha*), virtue and vice (*puñña-pāpa*), good and evil (*kusala-akusala*). This is aptly termed by Buddhaghosa as *visabhāga-paṭibhāgas* [sic]. In the other, the reaction takes place in a progressive order between two counterparts or complements or between two things of the same genus the succeeding factor augmenting the effect of the preceding one. This is what Buddhaghosa terms *sadisa-paṭibhāga*. [BPR pp. 62-3]

He then goes on to say that what we call the ‘world’, i.e. *samsāra*, represents only one trend of *pratītya-samutpāda*, the cyclical trend, whilst what we call *nirvāṇa* represents the other progressive trend, in which ‘the course of reaction lies from strength to strength, good to further good, from that to still greater good’, etc. and goes on to enumerate, more or less, with a couple of omissions and a couple of additions of his own, a list similar to the elevenfold progressive *nidāna* sequence that, in 1902, lit up old Mrs Rhys Davids’ gloomy room.¹⁷

Barua, having listed his version of a progressive *nidāna* sequence, which he has culminating in ‘the fullest enjoyment of the bliss of Nirvāṇa’, and which from then on he refers to simply as *nirvāṇa*, then goes on to say that when Dhammadinnā was asked by Visākha, ‘what follows by way of reaction from Nirvāṇa’, in other words, what follows on from *nirvāṇa* in this progressive *nidāna* sequence, ‘Dhammadinnā wisely says that Nirvāṇa was generally regarded as the final step in the process in order to avoid an infinite regress, — for the sake of *pariyantagahaṇam* in her own language’.¹⁸ In other words, *nirvāṇa* is not really the final stage in the progressive *nidāna* sequence, but is included here for the sake of *pariyantagahaṇam*, ‘understanding the furthest limit’, presumably the limits of questioning and inquiry. *Nirvāṇa* is therefore a ‘boundary’ [*paryanta*] term introduced to avoid an infinite regress of stages of the Path, the implication being that further stages of the Path cannot be excluded. This is clearly Barua’s view, as he adds that Dhammadinnā ‘has not failed to indicate that even [if] there be any further reaction, that also takes place in line and whatever follows therefrom will also appertain to Nirvāṇa and, therefore, will partake of its nature’.¹⁹ He then concludes:

If such be the correct interpretation of the philosophical position of [the] Buddha's Causal Genesis both *Samsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* may be consistently shown to be included in it, both as possibilities in the one and the same reality. [p. 63].

Now these are extremely interesting and important points that Barua is bringing before us, both spiritually and philosophically speaking. This is probably why Sangharakshita gives him so much space in the *Survey* and brings these points to our attention. And because of this Barua’s presentation has been taken up within the FWBO²⁰ and has come to be regarded almost a ‘traditional’ teaching. However, after checking out Barua’s sources I can only conclude that his argument is based on sources that do not exist in the manner in which he presents them. So let us have a look at some of them.

Firstly, some minor matters.

¹⁷ This is the progressive formulation found in the *Upanisa-sutta* [S ii. 29f.]. Comparing the sutta list with Barua’s ‘list’, missing out the first few worldly’ [*laukika*] factors and comparing the transcendental [*lokottara*] factors, in Barua’s we have in progressive order: ‘... from intuitional knowledge to (*vijjā*) to the feeling of emancipation (*vimutti*), from that to self-mastery (*vasībhāva*) ... and from that to ... the bliss of Nirvāṇa’ [p.63]. The Sutta version goes from ‘knowledge and vision of things as they really are’ [*yathā-bhūta-nāṇa-dassana*] to ‘disenchantment’ [*nibbidā*], to ‘dispassion’ [*virāga*], to ‘liberation’ [*vimutti*], culminating in ‘knowledge of the destruction [of the *āsavas*]. I cannot find any reference to Barua’s *vasībhāva* used in the suttas, but only in the later commentaries. Even the transcendental factors, apart from the final one, cannot be fully identified with *nirvāṇa* because *nirvāṇa* is the final goal. One could call the progressive trend a ‘*nirvāṇic* trend’ as it leads to *nirvāṇa*, but one would not call the road that must be travelled to get to Mount Everest ‘Mount Everest’.

¹⁸ BPR, p.63.

¹⁹ *ibid.* Therefore *nirvāṇa* is here part of the Path, although it can be said to manifest a different order of the Path: as Barua says ‘any further reaction ... will also appertain to Nirvāṇa ... will partake of its nature’.

²⁰ Now called the *Triratna Buddhist Community*.

1. Barua claims that this puzzle, as he calls it — with Sangharakshita’s modification — as to whether *nirvāṇa* was logically included or excluded from the Buddha’s formulation of *pratītya-samutpāda*, and whether the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* can be said to be an ‘all-inclusive reality’ or not, has been discussed by ‘The Great Pali scholiast Buddhaghosa’. The reference Barua gives is chapter xvii of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* or ‘The Path of Purification’. But I’m afraid, after reading through chapter xvii twice — which is a long and detailed analysis of the twelvefold cyclical *nidāna* sequence, and covers some 86 pages in Ñānamoli’s translation — I cannot find the slightest hint of the any such discussion by Buddhaghosa. Nor can I find any such discussion anywhere in the rest of the *Visuddhimagga*, which covers two volumes in the English translation. Perhaps Buddhaghosa discusses this somewhere else, but it is certainly not to be found where Barua points us.

2. Another minor point is Barua’s claim that Buddhaghosa uses the term *visabhāga-paṭibhāga* to define the relationship between the *nidānas* that form the cyclical order of conditionality, and the term *sadisa-paṭibhāga* to define the relationship between the *nidānas* that form the progressive order of conditionality. The term *bhāga* means ‘part’; *paṭibhāga* means ‘counterpart’. A *visabhāga-paṭibhāga* is a ‘different’ or ‘opposite-counterpart’. The term *sadisa-paṭibhāga* literally means ‘similar’ or ‘like-counterpart’. The only reference Barua gives for the use of these terms by Buddhaghosa is the ‘Buddha’s division of human types into ... degraded-elevated ... degraded-degraded ... elevated-degraded ... and ... elevated-elevated in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* and the *Puggala-paññatti*’.²¹ However, neither of these two terms are found in these works. The only place I have been able to find these or similar terms is, not surprisingly, in Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*,²² i.e. the *sutta* where we find Dhammānā discussing these knotty points of Dharma about the nature of *nirvāṇa*. But in his commentary on this *sutta*, we find Buddhaghosa using only one of the terms listed by Barua, the term *visabhāga-paṭibhāga* or ‘opposite-counterpart’. Here it is used to describe the relation between terms that are literally opposites: *dukkha* and *sukha*, *avijjā* and *vijjā*.²³ Obviously, the term *visabhāga-paṭibhāga* is not used here by Buddhaghosa to describe the relationship between the *nidānas* constituting the cyclical process of conditionality, as Barua claims: *avijjā* and *vijjā* are ‘opposite-counterparts’, are *visabhāga-paṭibhāga*, and the context of their relationship does not form any part of the cyclical *nidāna* sequence as *vijjā*, ‘knowledge’, is the goal of the Buddhist spiritual life. *Visabhāga-paṭibhāgas* are simply terms that are opposites. The only other term used by Buddhaghosa in this commentary is not *sadisa-paṭibhāga*, but *sabhāga-paṭibhāga* or ‘similar-counterpart’. He uses the term *sabhāga-paṭibhāga* to indicate, firstly, a ‘similarity’ (*sabhāga*), as for example the similarity between ‘indifference’ [*upekkhā*], ‘blindness’ [*andhakārā*], ‘obscurity’ [*avibhūtā*], ‘confusion’ [*duddīpanā*] and *avijjā*;²⁴ and secondly, to show that the terms *vijjā*, *vimutti* and *nibbāna* are similar in that they are all *dhammā anāsavā lokottarā* or ‘transcendental factors free from the biases’.²⁵ There is nothing in any of these relationships that could be descriptive of the augmenting relationship between the *nidānas* constituting the progressive *nidāna* sequence.

The term *sadisa-paṭibhāga*, which Barua says is used by Buddhaghosa to describe the relation between the *nidānas* constituting the progressive order, as far as my searching the *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka CD-ROM*, and the PTS editions of the appropriate texts reveals, does not actually appear anywhere in the whole Pāli Canon, its commentaries, its sub-commentaries, and other works. The term *sadisa-bhāga* does appear once in an Abhidhamma commentarial

²¹ BPR, fn.14, p.63.

²² *Mūlapaṇṇāsa-aṭṭhakathā*, ii. 355f. [*Cūḷavedalla-sutta-vaṇṇanā*].

²³ *ibid.* p. 370

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

text, the *Pañcappakarāṇa-aṭṭhakathā*, but here it just says that the terms *sadisa-bhāga* and *paṭi-bhāga* are interchangeable.²⁶

Secondly, some important Points

Here there are three issues.

1. I mentioned that Barua presents us with what is clearly a list representing a progressive *nidāna* sequence. But this list, although it contains some of the factors that go to make up the elevenfold progressive *nidāna* sequence, is not one listed anywhere in the *suttas*. He has made up his own, which, in principle, is fine. But one of the little additions Barua makes here is in describing what would be the final *nidāna* as ‘the fullest enjoyment of the bliss of Nirvāṇa’, which, on the face of it seems an innocent enough remark. But what he is doing is taking ‘the bliss of *nirvāṇa*’ as being synonymous with *nirvāṇa* itself, thereby including *nirvāṇa* within his own self-made formulation of the progressive *nidāna* sequence. But we have to remember that the final stage in the progressive *nidāna* sequence is in fact ‘knowledge of the destruction [of the *āsavas*]’. In other lists of progressive *nidāna* sequences, the final stage is either ‘one is liberated [*vimuccati*]’, or ‘liberation through knowing and seeing’ [*vimutti-ñāṇa-dassana*].²⁷ None of these texts actually list ‘*nirvāṇa*’ or ‘the bliss of *nirvāṇa*’ as the final stage. The reason I’m making this distinction is that his original question is whether *nirvāṇa* is contained within the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* or not. By adding *nirvāṇa* to the end of his own progressive *nidāna* sequence Barua is thereby answered his own question: he’s pre-empted the fundamental issue of whether *nirvāṇa* is contained with the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* or not by simply placing *nirvāṇa* within it! But the fact is that the real question still remains. The real question, which Barua, by sticking *nirvāṇa* at the end of his progressive *nidāna* sequence tries to side-step, is whether the final *nidāna* listed in the various versions of the progressive *nidāna* sequence, for example, ‘knowledge of the destruction [of the *āsavas*]’, can be equated with *nirvāṇa* or not. And as I mentioned, at least according to *The Questions of King Milinda*, the answer is ‘No’, it cannot, because whilst knowledge and liberation do arise in dependence upon conditions, *nirvāṇa*, being neither produced nor unproduced, cannot be said to arise in dependence upon conditions.²⁸ The nub of the problem seems to be that as it is said that all that arises in dependence upon conditions is *dukkha* or ‘unsatisfactory’ and *anicca* or ‘impermanent, whatever *nirvāṇa* is it certainly cannot be said to be *dukkha* or *anicca*!²⁹ Barua, therefore, has not really answered this problem at all.

²⁶ p.107, *sadisapuggalo hi paṭipuggalo sadisabhāgo ca paṭibhāgo ti vuccati*: ‘Here sadisabhāga is called paṭibhāga, just as a sadisapuggala is called a paṭipuggala’.

²⁷ For example, see D iii. 360, and A iii. 19 respectively.

²⁸ Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, [fn 15] in the *suttas* *nirvāṇa* is also said to be the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion, which is synonymous with the cessation of the *āsavas*.

²⁹ ‘All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation’ (*yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ yaṃ nirohadhammaṃ*) [D.i.110, 148; M.i.380, and elsewhere]. Also: ‘What is *anicca* that is *dukkha*, that is *anattā*’ (*yadaniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ tadanattā*) [S.iv.1 ff.]. So whatever arises in dependence upon conditions is *anicca* and *dukkha* and *anattā*. How does this fit in with the progressive *nidāna* sequence? For something to be dependently arisen it must therefore be a ‘dependent’ or ‘conditioned’ something. If *nirvāṇa* arises in dependence upon conditions, then it too must be ‘dependent’ and ‘conditioned’. This is a large topic that we can’t fully explore here, but I will make a few comments. The view of *nirvāṇa* presented in the *Questions of King Milinda* above, and is also found in Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught* and elsewhere, seems to be the standard Theravādin view. Rahula says:

It is incorrect to think that Nirvāṇa is the natural result of the extinction of craving. Nirvāṇa is not the result of anything. If it would be a result, then it would be an effect produced by a cause. It would be *saṃkhata* ‘produced’ and ‘conditioned’. Nirvāṇa is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond cause and effect. [p.40]

However, the predominant Pāli sutta definition of both *nirvāṇa* and the ‘unconditioned’ is ‘the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion’ [See fn. 15]. Thus *nirvāṇa* is ‘unconditioned’ only in the sense of being unconditioned by greed, hatred, and delusion; and we can add, the *āsavas*, *kilesas*, and all other states and ways of being that constitute *saṃsāra*. *Nirvāṇa* is liberation from all such. And this is what the progressive *nidāna* formulations show. The fact that these progressive formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda* seem to have been ‘lost’ until rediscovered by the Pāli text translator Mrs Rhys Davids over a century ago, makes one wonder what effect this has had especially on the Theravādin tradition with its seemingly metaphysical absolutizing of the notion of *nirvāṇa*.

2. Given the manner in which Barua introduces Dhammadinnā’s statements from the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, it would be natural to assume that this is where we will find the progressive order of *pratītya-samutpāda* listed. After all, Barua, following on from his enumerating what is a similar list to the elevenfold progressive *nidāna* sequence — which in his list ends with *nirvāṇa* — has Dhammadinnā being asked by Visākha what is the counterpart [*paṭibhāga*] that follows on from *nirvāṇa*, i.e. the next step in the progressive *nidāna* sequence. So it would be reasonable to assume that this question by Visākha comes after Dhammadinnā has given an account of a progressive *nidāna* sequence culminating in *nirvāṇa*. But this is not the case. Dhammadinnā does not mention any such list. In her answering some of Visākha’s questions, a kind of list does appear but not one that in any way corresponds to a progressive *nidāna* sequence. The question and answer between Dhammadinnā and Visākha goes like this:

Lady, what is the ‘counterpart’ [*paṭibhāga*] of pleasant feeling [*sukhā vedanā*]?

‘Friend Visākha, painful feeling [*dukkhā vedanā*] is the counterpart of pleasant feeling’.

What is the counterpart of painful feeling?

‘Pleasant feeling is the counterpart of painful feeling’.

What is the counterpart of neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling [*adukkhamasukhā vedanā*]?

‘Ignorance [*avijjā*] is the counterpart of neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling?’

What is the counterpart of ignorance?

‘True Knowledge [*vijjā*] is the counterpart of ignorance.’

What is the counterpart of True Knowledge?

‘Liberation [*vimutti*] is the counterpart of True Knowledge’.

What is the counterpart of Liberation?

‘Nibbāna is the counterpart to Liberation’.

Lady, what is the counterpart of Nibbāna?

‘[That] question, friend Visākha, goes too far. One is not able to grasp the limit of [such] questions. Friend Visākha, the spiritual life is [for] plunging into *nibbāna*, [has its] goal in *nibbāna*, [finds its] consummation in *nibbāna*.’

So this is what Dhammadinnā actually says.³⁰

What we have here is a list that tells us that pain and happiness are opposites, as are *avijjā* and *vijjā*. That somehow, not experiencing either pain or pleasure has a relationship in the form of a counterpart, a *paṭibhāga*, in *avijjā*. What the relationship here is I fail to see. I fail to see why *avijjā* has any more of a special relationship with feelings that are neither painful nor pleasurable than the other two feelings, i.e. pleasure and pain. Further, Dhammadinnā says that *vijjā*, *vimutti*, and *nibbāna* are also counterparts or *paṭibhāgas*. But, in this context, they seem to be more like synonyms rather counterparts. Indeed, as we saw above, this is how Buddhaghosa interpreted this passage in his commentary: *vijjā*, *vimutti*, and *nibbāna* are *sabhāga-paṭibhāgas* or ‘similar counterparts’ as they are all *dhammā anāsavā lokottarā*, ‘transcendental factors free from the *āsavas*’. Thus it seems obvious that, at least according to Buddhaghosa, the relations between *vijjā*, *vimutti*, and *nibbāna* cannot be said to constitute a progressive *nidāna* sequence, certainly not the kind that Barua leads us to believe was expounded by Dhammadinnā. Nor is there any such exposition by Buddhaghosa in his commentary on the *Upanisā Sutta*, which is where we find the elevenfold progressive *nidāna* sequence expounded.

³⁰ In the *Āgama* version, the question and answer series is the same as the Pāli up to, ‘What is the counterpart of True Knowledge?’ [i.e. *avijjā*]. Here the answer is *nirvāṇa*; the *vimutti* ‘link’ is missing. Dhammadinnā’s answer also appears to be different: ‘You want to ask an unlimited question. But what you ask is not beyond my (knowledge). *Nirvāṇa* has no counterpart, *nirvāṇa* has no defect of entanglement, all entanglements have been removed. Due to this meaning (purpose, aim), people practise the brahma-life under the World Honoured One’ [*The Chinese Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya*, Bhikṣu Thich Minh Chau, Delhi (1991), pp. 269-278].

3. Finally, there is also a slightly more disconcerting point. According to Barua, when Dhammadinnā was asked ‘what follows by way of reaction from *Nirvāṇa*’, Barua claims that Dhammadinnā says:

that *Nirvāṇa* was generally regarded as the final step in the process on order to avoid an infinite regress.

He then goes on to say that Dhammadinnā ‘has not failed to indicate that even [if] there be any further reaction, that also takes place in line and whatever follows therefrom will also appertain to *Nirvāṇa* and, therefore, will partake of its nature’. But when Dhammadinnā was asked what the counterpart of *nirvāṇa* is, as we saw above, what she actually says is:

[That] question, friend Visākha, goes too far. One is not able to grasp the limit of [such] questions. Friend Visākha, the spiritual life is [for] plunging into *nibbāna*, [has its] goal in *nibbāna*, [finds its] consummation in *nibbāna*.

So here there is no reference to any ‘infinite regress’ as Barua claims. Nor is there any reference in Buddhaghosa’s commentary to this *sutta* to avoiding an ‘infinite regress’. In his commentary, Buddhaghosa, or whoever wrote it, says: *nibbānaṃ nāmetam appaṭibhāgam*: ‘That which is called ‘*nibbāna*’ [has] no counterpart’,³¹ which makes the point unambiguously clear: there are *no* counterparts, whether ‘opposite-counterparts’ or ‘similar-counterparts’ to *nibbāna* according to Buddhaghosa. Therefore, at least according to this text, the idea of any ‘infinite regress’ – we should really say ‘progress’ – is in fact denied. As Dhammadinnā actually says, the spiritual life, the *brahmacariya*, has its goal in *nirvāṇa*, finds its consummation or perfection in *nirvāṇa*. As to the question as to what may or may not happen after attaining *nirvāṇa*, or whether there is or is not a counterpart of *nirvāṇa*, I would assume that Dhammadinnā, being well versed in the Dharma, would have considered the response that Barua puts in her mouth as simply going too far, which in fact is what she actually says. As other *suttas* tell us again and again, such questions are *avyākata*, ‘unanswerable’, not susceptible to an either a positive or a negative answer, or any other kind of answer.

So what can we do about all this?

Well, I thought that my own experience of coming across the Dharma might provide a way out of this seeming predicament. It was the writings of Alan Watts that first awakened my interest in the Dharma. These days I would not recommend Alan Watts to someone as an introduction to the Dharma. Yet, nevertheless, I’m very grateful to Alan Watts for awakening my interest. So too with Barua. Barua’s article is an extremely interesting and intelligently written piece of work. He does raise some very important questions that need to be addressed. And this is no doubt why Sangharakshita draws our attention to this in his *Survey*. His article points to pitfalls of having a one-sidedly negative view of *pratītya-samutpāda* as a formulation of the path. He draws our attention to the fact that within the formulations of *pratītya-samutpāda* there are in fact two trends, the cyclical and the progressive. As Sangharakshita says in the *Survey* these two trends give us what he terms a ‘binocular view’:—

The advantages of this binocular view of Reality are enormous. Instead of being a mere defecation of things evil the spiritual life becomes an enriching assimilation of ever greater and greater goods. The *Via Affirmativa* is no less valid an approach to the goal than the *Via Negativa*. [p.141]

The Buddha’s Dharma is the ‘Middle Way’ [*majjhimā paṭipadā*], and Barua has drawn our attention to the fact that if the Buddhist path is solely identified with the *Via Negativa*, identified solely with the cyclical order of conditionality, then we have wandered away from this Middle Way. In a sense, we are no longer following the Dharma. But the other issue Barua raises, whether *nirvāṇa* can be said to be contained within the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* or not remains unsolved. We cannot accept his argument. As an issue it remains to be resolved. But what about Dhammadinnā and the progressive order of conditionality?

³¹ *Mūlapaṇṇāsa-aṭṭhakathā*, ii. 370.

Looking at the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, Dhammadinnā can at least be linked to the principle of the progressive order of conditionality.

Visākha asks Dhammadinnā, what latent tendency [*anusaya*] lies latent [*anuseti*] in pleasant feeling ... in painful feeling ... and in feeling that is neither pleasant nor painful?

Dhammadinnā replies that the latent tendency to sensual desire [*rāgānusaya*] lies latent in pleasant feeling; the latent tendency to anger or aversion [*paṭighānusaya*] lies latent in painful feeling; and the latent tendency to spiritual ignorance [*avijjānusaya*] lies latent in feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful.

Visākha then asks Dhammadinnā whether these three latent tendencies are present in all cases of their corresponding feelings, and Dhammadinnā replies that they are not. Visākha then asks what is to be abandoned in these three feelings, and Dhammadinnā replies that the latent tendency to sensual desire is to be abandoned in pleasant feeling, the latent tendency to anger or aversion is to be abandoned in painful feelings, and the latent tendency to spiritual ignorance is to be abandoned in neither painful nor pleasant feeling. Then Visākha asks whether the latent tendency to sensual desire is to be abandoned in all pleasant feeling, the latent tendency to anger or aversion is to be abandoned in all painful feelings, and the latent tendency to spiritual ignorance is to be abandoned in all neither painful nor pleasant feeling? Dhammadinnā replies this is not the case and gives an example:

Here, friend Visākha, a *bhikkhu*, free from sense desires and unskillful mental states, enters into and dwells in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought [*vitakka* and *vicāra*], with rapture and bliss, born of seclusion [*vivekaja*]. In this way he abandons sensual desire [*rāga*]. Here, no latent tendency to sensual desire lies latent. Here, friend Visākha, a *bhikkhu* reflects: ‘When shall I attain and dwell in that sphere that the Nobles Ones [*ariyas*], having attained, are now dwelling in?’ Setting up a desire [*pihā*] for that unsurpassed emancipation, there is born, by means of that desire, discontent [*domanassa*]. In this way, he eliminates aversion [*paṭigha*]. Here no latent tendency to aversion lies latent. Here, friend Visākha, a *bhikkhu*, by leaving behind both pleasant and painful feelings, by the disappearance of former joy and discontent, [*somanassa* and *domanassa*], having entered the fourth *jhāna*, which is purified by mindfulness and equanimity, he dwells in it. In this way he gives up *avijjā*. Here, there lies no latent tendency to *avijjā*.

Now what is being said here isn’t exactly transparent. But the main point that Dhammadinnā is making is that there is no *necessary* relationship between pleasant feeling and sensual desire, and between painful feeling and aversion or anger — I’ll leave the relationship between neither pleasant nor painful feeling and spiritual ignorance out of the equations as I do not understand the relationship. In other words, the relationship between pleasant feeling and sensual desire, and between painful feeling and aversion need not necessarily be of the cyclical order. There is the possibility of a creative response, i.e. a response belonging to the progressive order, which, in Dhammadinnā’s example, is symbolized by the *jhānas*.³² Thus we can say that the essential point demonstrated by Dhammadinnā is that there being no necessary relationship between pleasant feeling and sensual desire, between painful feeling and aversion, there is therefore the possibility of choice and freedom. There is the possibility of a creative response to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. And this links in to the point where, in the *sutta* where the elevenfold progressive *nidāna* sequence is listed, the creative response takes its leave from the twelvefold cyclical *nidāna* sequence. In this *sutta*, the twelvefold cyclical *nidāna* sequence ends with *dukkha*, which replaces the more usual final

³² According to the Pāli suttas, all three kinds of ‘feeling’ can also be either *sāmisa*, ‘carnal, worldly’, or *nirāmisa*, ‘spiritual, unworldly’. In terms of the Buddhist path, the former is ‘regressive’, the later ‘progressive’ and is related to renunciation, and the attainment of the *jhānas*. See A iii 412; D ii. 298; S iv. 235, and Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, p.158. In the ‘Nirāmisa Sutta’ [S iv. 235], ‘rapture’ [*pīti*], ‘happiness’ [*sukha*], ‘equanimity’ [*upekkhā*], and ‘deliverance’ [*vimokkha*] can be either *sāmisa*, *nirāmisa*, or *nirāmisa nirāmisatara*, which Bodhi translates as ‘more spiritual than the spiritual’. *Sāmisa* refers to experiences through the five sense faculties; *nirāmisa* to *jhāna* experiences; and *nirāmisa nirāmisatara* to the destruction of the *āsavas*, and the mind’s liberation from greed, hatred, and delusion, i.e. *nirvāṇa*.

nidāna, i.e. old age, disease and death. And here, rather than a reactive response to *dukkha*, i.e. aversion, we have *saddhā* arising, the first step on the progressive *nidāna* sequence that culminates in liberation. Thus we can say, in a sense, that in principle Dhammadinnā is associated with this distinction between the cyclical *nidāna* sequence and the creative *nidāna* sequence. As we saw, Dhammadinnā pointed out that unpleasant feeling, *dukkha*, need not necessarily give rise to aversion, but to an aspiration to become one of the Noble Ones, which we can say is certainly linked to *saddhā*, the first *nidāna* in the elevenfold creative *nidāna* sequence. Thus we can say that, in a rather round-about way, Dhammadinnā can, at least in principle, be associated with the progressive order of conditioned-arising. But not so in the manner that Barua presents.

However, Barua's question could have been answered simply by referring to the 'Upanisā Sutta' of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where the progressive sequence of *pratītya-samutpāda*³³ ends with the liberated mind, i.e. a mind liberated from, and unconditioned by, greed, hatred, and delusion knowing that the *āsavas* are permanently destroyed. In other words, the attainment of *nibbāna*.

About the Author:

Since 2004 Sagaramati has been a tutor with Dharmapala College, the Triratna Buddhist Community's (once the FWBO) study centre located in Birmingham, UK. He is a senior scholar in the Triratna Buddhist Order (once the WBO), and has given many seminars, workshops and courses, particularly on the subject of conditionality, in several countries. He has held a lecturing post at Cardiff University in Wales UK, and has been a Visiting Numata Professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. His book "Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities" was published by Oxford University Press in 1997. His article "Three Cheers for Taṇhā" appears in vol. 2 of this Review (see Archives). Among his current interests is Greek Philosophy.

³³ It would perhaps be best to use the traditional term for what here is termed 'the progressive sequence of *pratītya-samutpāda*' found in the *Nettipakaraṇa*, '*lokuttara paṭicca-samuppāda*', or 'transcendental conditioned-arising', which is distinct from the 'mundane' or 'worldly' [*lokiya*] form. The *Nettipakaraṇa*, translated as 'The Guide' by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, is a text said to be written by Kaccāna Thera, one of the Buddha's disciples, as a guide to teaching the Dharma.