

**KARMA PARTY**  
**Guide to the 12 Nidanas for Party Goers**

**1. ignorance**

enter the door  
don't know anyone, no reference point  
freeze, go numb  
heightened self-consciousness

**2. formations**

can't stay at the door all night  
must do something  
impulse to find a landing spot  
vision narrows to find a reference point  
head for the bar

**3. consciousness**

have now made it into the party  
but need to nourish and fortify yourself  
oral compulsion  
have a drink

**4. name/form**

feel warmth pervading body  
feel fortified, empowered, embodied  
feel more expansive

**5. six sense fields**

survey the situation  
look for someone to talk to

**6. contact**

see a certain someone who catches your eye

**7. feeling**

person looks good, attractive, worthy of our attention  
we feel good, attractive, worthy of their attention

**8. craving**

desire to talk to them, engage them  
irresistible impulse  
so lonely

**9. grasping**

mind is fixated on how to approach them  
can't ignore them  
already caught  
build up courage, come up with opening line, imagine scenarios, etc.

## **10. becoming**

walk over to talk to the person  
start talking and keep talking and talking

## **11. birth**

get to know the person  
give birth to a relationship  
high hopes you have found the right person

## **12. aging & death**

conversation, focus starts to flag, diffuse  
more gaps of silence  
other person loses interest and walks away  
big gap, no one to talk to, alone again

## **1. ignorance**

panic, freeze, go numb  
heightened self-consciousness, loneliness

## **2. formations**

head back to the bar for another drink, etc.

Inspired by traditional sources and Trungpa Rinpoche's oral teachings, I came up with a party approach to the 12 nidanas for a talk I gave in the Ngedön School abhidharma course in Boulder in the early 1980s. This example was given at the end of a much longer talk, which also covered the three-lifetime approach to the 12 nidanas. The original intention of the party example was not to placate Westerners who could not relate to the notion of past and future lives, but to show how the 12 nidanas can be understood and applied to any situation and in any time frame.

In his commentary to the *Abhidharmakosha* (chapter 3, verses 24-25), Vasubandhu talks about four ways to teach dependent origination:

1. momentary or of one instant,
2. prolonged or extending over several moments,
3. succession through the connection of causes and effects, and
4. static (meaning 12 different states of the five skandhas).

He noted that one Buddhist school, the Vaibhashikas, held that the Buddha taught dependent arising in a key sutra as static (12 states of the five skandhas) as well as prolonged (over three successive lifetimes). Based on this famous text and others, the 12 nidanas are often taught in the context of three lifetimes. This is how the Sakyong presents the 12 nidanas in the *1999 Sutrayana Transcripts*, Book 1, pp. 82-120.

However, it is clear from Vasubandhu's commentary that one can also see dependent arising in one moment or over a short period of time. Vasubandhu himself presented an example of the 12 nidanas found within one moment of murder:

In one and the same moment, when people who are prey to passion commit a murder, the twelve nidanas are actualized:

1. their delusion is ignorance;
2. their intention is the formations;
3. their consciousness separate from a particular object is consciousness;
4. the four skandhas coexisting with consciousness is name/form;
5. the organs in relation with name/form are the six sense faculties;
6. the application of the six sense faculties is contact;
7. experiencing the contact is feeling;
8. desire [to kill] is craving;
9. intensification of this desire due to the outbreak of residual kleshas is grasping;
10. the physical action [such as stabbing with a knife] is becoming;
11. the culmination of this action is birth [of a complete karmic result, i.e. their death];
12. the maturing is old age; the end [of this action] is death.

Buddhaghosa, a great Theravadin teacher, also presented the 12 nidanas using similes that occur over a short period of time (*Visuddhimagga*, chapter 17, #303):

1. ignorance: blind person
2. formations: stumbling
3. consciousness: falling
4. name/form: appearance of a tumor
5. six sense faculties: swelling of the tumor
6. contact: something hits the tumor
7. feeling: pain of the blow
8. craving: longing for a remedy
9. grasping: seizing a remedy that is unsuitable
10. becoming: applying the ineffective remedy
11. birth: tumor gets worse
12. death: tumor bursts

In his teaching "Wheel of Life: Illusion's Game" (*Garuda II*), Trungpa Rinpoche presents the 12 nidanas in a way that is not tied to any particular time frame. To my mind, this was his genius. He did not talk down to his students nor did he water down the dharma. Rather he pointed to the timeless essence of dharma, which can be recognized in any place at any time.

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