

## *Saṅkhāra* (Formations)

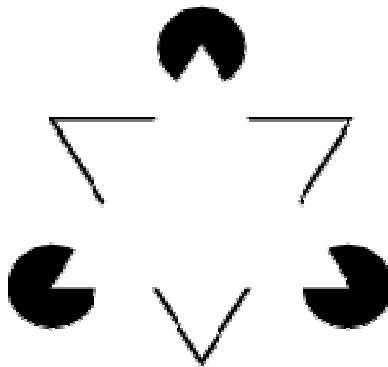
### A study of the 4<sup>th</sup> aggregate

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#### 1 How formations function in daily life

Mental formations occur at every moment of our waking lives. A common example will show how formations work. Once one perceives someone as having all the qualities that one is looking for in another, one thinks one has “fallen in love” with that other person. One *thinks* that this person is taken to be the most beautiful and most wonderful person in the world. One *says* wonderful things and *does* all kinds of things to have the attention of this person. All this however is often guided by habitual tendencies (or past conditioning), rooted lust and delusion.

Then when the affair or marriage fails, one actually *hates* this person or feels the pain of the fallout. In a broken marriage, one party might even sue the other for divorce, and the situation can get very painful and destructive. Many others related to or connected with the feuding couple will be negatively affected, too. In some cases, one might even murder the other. All this is because of wrong perception and unwholesome formations, based on greed, hate and delusion.



**Diagram 1. Kanizsa's Triangle**

Formations regard themselves as the “doer,” the busybody that wants to be in control of the situation. This controller dictates what you *do*, what you *say*, even what you *think*. Indeed, every little action that is consciously done—like turning your head (towards an attractive object), or saying hello, or waking in the middle of the night and feeling lost—is a result of the formations of one kind or another. Understandably, as a result, the formations are often regarded as the self. In reality, like all the other aggregates, formations are only processes. Since they are all impermanent, you do not own them; you are not them; they are not the self or soul.

The **Kanizsa triangle** is a famous optical illusion that was first described by the Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa in 1955. In this figure we “see” a white equilateral triangle where in fact there is none. This effect is known as a *subjective* or *illusory* contour. The non-existent white triangle also appears to be brighter than the surrounding area, but really has the same brightness as the background. The Kanizsa triangle is an effective way to show how we perceive things and then go on to construct our own image of them, which is actually not the true picture at all!

#### 2 Language and knowledge

**2.1 LANGUAGE TENDS TO REIFY THINGS.** Formations play a central role in language and communication in general.<sup>1</sup> Human language, however, is based on the naming process (*nāma*) so that it has a form (*rūpa*) that is understandable and communicable amongst one another. In other words, language tends to create or reify things. *We tend to regard the name as the thing named.*

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on “speech and action,” see SD 17.4(6).

## Case 29 The Sixth Patriarch's "Your Mind Moves" 二十九 非風非幡<sup>2</sup>

六祖、因風颺刹幡。有二僧、對論。

The wind was flapping a temple flag, and two monks started an argument.

一云、幡動。一云、風動。

One said the flag moved, the other said the wind moved;

往復曾未契理。

they argued back and forth but could not reach a conclusion.

祖云、不是風動、不是幡動、仁者心動。

The Sixth Patriarch said, "It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves."

二僧悚然。

The two monks were awe-struck.

### Mumon's Comment

無門曰、不是風動、不是幡動、不是心動、甚處見祖師。

It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves. How do you see the patriarch?

若向者裏見得親切、方知二僧買鐵得金。

If you come to understand this matter deeply, you will see that the two monks got gold when buying iron.

祖師忍俊不禁、一場漏逗。

The patriarch could not withhold his compassion and courted disgrace.

### Mumon's Verse 頌曰

風幡心動	Wind, flag, mind, moving,
一狀領過	All equally are to blame.
只知開口	Only knowing how to open his mouth,
不覺話墮	Unaware of his fault in talking.

On a word and sound level, religion is nothing more than received learning: one is merely a vessel filled up from another vessel, and so on. One is the proverbial spoon not tasting the soup, and the soup is not nutritious, anyway. One learns the memes<sup>3</sup> and replicates them thinkingly or unthinkingly. A **meme** is “an element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp imitation” (OED).<sup>4</sup> **Hamilton** gives examples of how such a meme (she does not use this term) is passed on socially (through language):

At a ceremonial conferring of a Knighthood, the British sovereign does not just touch the recipient’s shoulder with the point of a sword but also says “I dub thee Sir Knight.” And we do a similar thing at a more commonplace level all the time. When we raise a glass to someone we nearly always say “cheers,” “*salut*,” “it’s good to see you,” to acknowledge that the salutation is being made. When we shake hands, we say “how do you do,” “good morning,” “hello.”

A verbal explanation of a non-verbal symbol acts in a similar way. If we do not understand a mathematical symbol we see on a page a verbal explanation of it “makes real” to us what it represents—and this example indicates that reifying in this sense of making something a real part of one’s experience applies to what is abstract just as much as to what is concrete. (2000:148)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/mumonkan.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> This is more fully discussed at SD 26.3.

<sup>4</sup> See eg Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 1999.

There is a dark side, a shadow, to all this. In a pathological group, community or society, communication is almost only on a language level (that is, through words, body language and symbols), and no deeper. Here, people says and do things mainly to be a part of the group, that is, to seek the approval of others. If there are more than one pathological group, and there usually are in a pathological society, each group will have a private discourse reserved for internal group communication, and a public discourse to maintain harmony of sort. In such a pathological society, social distance<sup>5</sup> and power distance announce one's social status, wealth, political power, etc.

As Buddhism gains wider acceptance and popularity, it quickly attracts the entrepreneurs, the social elite and aspirants to social elitehood. Buddhism becomes a status symbol, and Buddhists becomes commodities and statistics. The notion of karma might also be misconstrued to favour the elite and the successful, since, obviously, their current status *must* have been the result of their past good karma. Status, structures, power and money then define Buddhism. In such a situation, form, numbers and wealth become more important than substance, spirit and succour. Social work, despite its vital potential for people-helping—is used to give one a respectable social face or front, but often at the cost of moral values and the spiritual life. The point is that one should not merely *show* that one is a Buddhist—indeed, one need not even show that one *is* a Buddhist—but that one cultivates moral virtues for the sake of mindfulness that seeks liberating wisdom.

There are today two kinds of world religions: the word-based and the truth-based. The classic example of a word-based teaching is the opening of John's Gospel in the Bible: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In a truth-based teaching, words, language, even truth itself, are only the *means* to an end, and that end is spiritual awakening. It is in this spirit, that in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), the Buddha declares,

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma, how much more that which is not Dharma!<sup>6</sup> (M 22.14/1:135) = SD 3.13

Letting go of the word-based and thought-based virtual truth, one directly sees the wordless and thought-free true reality here and now.<sup>7</sup>

**2.2 RITUAL AND SUPERSTITION.** Language and action are powerfully combined in ritual performances. The power of rituals is simply their ability to make one perceive the word as the thing. A brahminical priest or a Tantric shaman makes physical gestures during a ritual, makes offerings and muttering chants: all this, to the believer, has the power to bring about the desired result of the ritual.<sup>8</sup>

Religious rituals are often merely perceived solutions with a catch, and the only benefactor is the ritual performer. They appear to work because they are often based on *superstition*, that is, the irrational and unjustified belief in the supernatural, that one's actions and lives are controlled by external agencies, often with which one could negotiate (eg not walking under a ladder) or appease (eg offering religious sacrifices). Superstition tends to be strong in those who lack self-knowledge and spiritual strength, causing then to surrender self-effort and wisdom to external agencies.

The language of faith-centred religion is generally and essentially a language of fiction: they do not stand the test of scrutiny and personal experience. What does it mean, for example, when someone claims

<sup>5</sup> See eg Geertz Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1991. See also [http://www.international-business-center.com/international\\_newsletter/april\\_2003/april\\_03\\_web.htm#article](http://www.international-business-center.com/international_newsletter/april_2003/april_03_web.htm#article).

<sup>6</sup> *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag'eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean "good states," ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 66.26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṇhāsāṅkhaya S** (M 38.14/1:260 f = SD 7.10) as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that "*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude to which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake." (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See SD 3.13 Introd.

<sup>7</sup> See **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/1:188-193) = SD 35.4(3a(4)3).

<sup>8</sup> See Hamilton 2000:148.

that “God created the world”? It is not a self-evident fact and needs to be “explained” by some authority figure or from a “top-down” communication process. It can never be a common search for and examination of true reality as there are already biases, assumptions and a closed mind.<sup>9</sup>

Not all rituals are bad, of course. A Buddhist gathering usually starts with a puja when the salutation (*Namo tassa...*), the three refuges and the five precepts are recited together. This not only reminds one of one’s practice, but also helps boost spiritual fellowship. However, when one chants mantra into a Buddha pendant, thinking it would make one bulletproof, it is superstition.

In other words, meaningful rituals may be beneficial in bringing one mental peace or boost fellowship and wholesome thoughts, but they become harmful when one becomes superstitious about them. For example, a salesman might think that he makes good sales when he is wearing a certain shirt, but this way of thinking can also hinder his progress if, say, he loses his shirt or he damages it. Similarly, a superstitious fear of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> may raise one’s level of anxiety.

Most, if not all, of one’s superstitions are learned as children. Young people tend to be superstitious because of their ignorance and their sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. However, as one matures, one usually forgets one’s superstitions or outgrows go. Those who are dominated by lustful greed or by hate, tend to be anxious and restless, and as such are more likely to remain superstitious. There is a greater propensity for superstition amongst women than men (one often finds horoscope forecasts in women’s magazine, but rarely in men’s magazines). This propensity is stronger where women feel that they have less control over their lives than men do.

The locus of control is also a major contributing factor as to whether one is superstitious or not.<sup>10</sup> If you have an internal locus of control, you feel confident that you are in charge of your life and in control of the situation. If you have an external locus of control, you lack confidence about yourself and believe that things *happen* to you. People with an external locus of control are more likely to be superstitious as a way of getting more control over their lives.

Superstition can play a negative role in our lives, especially when the situation is compounded by a bad habit such as gambling. Compulsive gamblers are classic example of those who tend to be very superstitious, especially since they have high expectations in being lucky. Gamblers, being obsessed by chance and luck, can come to a point where they lose all control of their lives.

### 3 How do we know things?

Superstition, as we have seen [2.2], often arises from ignorance and craving. As such, an understanding of the nature of knowledge should help. Firstly, how does knowledge arise? The simplest answer is found in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23): knowledge arises at the six sense-doors [6.3]. However, these sense-doors are not data-sensors, but are filters and interpreters. We only see what we want to see, and hear only what we want to hear; yet our eyes blind us, our ears deafen us, and we are not exactly in control of our actions and thoughts. They seem to have a life of their own propelled by our past and habitual tendencies.

On a more wholesome level, if we make an effort to keep an open mind and learn, then we have a better chance to go beyond the autopilot of habitual tendencies. There are three ways we can learn things.<sup>11</sup> The most common way we can gather knowledge is through **listening** (*suta, mayā paññā*). This is also the most common way of teaching in ancient India so that the learned is said to be “well-heard” (*bahu-s, suta*). This way of learning is based on a direct teacher-pupil interaction and not just book learning. Sutta and Abhidhamma studies would fall into this category. The spiritual teachers, however, not only bring wisdom to his students, but also instill character into them. This is much more than can be said

<sup>9</sup> There is a campus joke about this (here is one version of it): a philosopher is like myopic looking for a non-existent black cat in a dark room. A theologian, on the other hand, is like a blind man in the same dark room who claims he has found that non-existent cat! And a lawyer is one who smuggles in a cat in his coat, and then emerges from the room triumphantly showing off the cat!

<sup>10</sup> HM Lefcourt, *Locus of control: Current trends in theory and research*. Potomac, MD: Erlbaum, 1976 & SA Vyse, *Believing in magic. The psychology of superstition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> D 3:219; Vbh 324.

of being “well-read,” which would be the modern parallel of one who is well-heard. Either way, this can be called “academic knowledge.”

The second level of learning is that of **thinking** (*cinta, mayā paññā*), when one reflects over what one has heard and begins to fathom deeper into it so that the wisdom becomes more mature. Sometimes, wisdom through thinking arises first in a person, especially when one is thoughtful and mindful. This type of knowledge is beneficial insofar as it helps one to examine and refine what one has already known. This self-thought wisdom can be called “philosophical knowledge.”

The third level of knowledge is the most important: it is that of **mental cultivation** (*bhāvanā, mayā paññā*). This is actually first-hand wisdom since it arises from the calm depth and clear breadth of one’s own mindfulness. Wisdom through listening is at best second-hand knowledge, for one has received it from another. Wisdom through thinking hovers between second-hand and first-hand wisdom. One’s thinking is usually rooted in latent tendencies<sup>12</sup> and other external influences. There is also a good chance that one could be wrong in one’s views. For one still unawakened, this knowledge, not matter how perfect, still comprises of mental constructs (*saṅkhāra*).

The wisdom through mental cultivation is wholesome knowledge in that it is a direct experience of true reality. One sees and understands the true nature of existence, that it is impermanence, and as such, not satisfactory. In due course, as one’s wisdom deepens, one realizes the selflessness (*anattā*) of all things, that they are all without an abiding essence. This is the wisdom that liberates one from suffering.

#### 4 Saññā and saṅkhāra

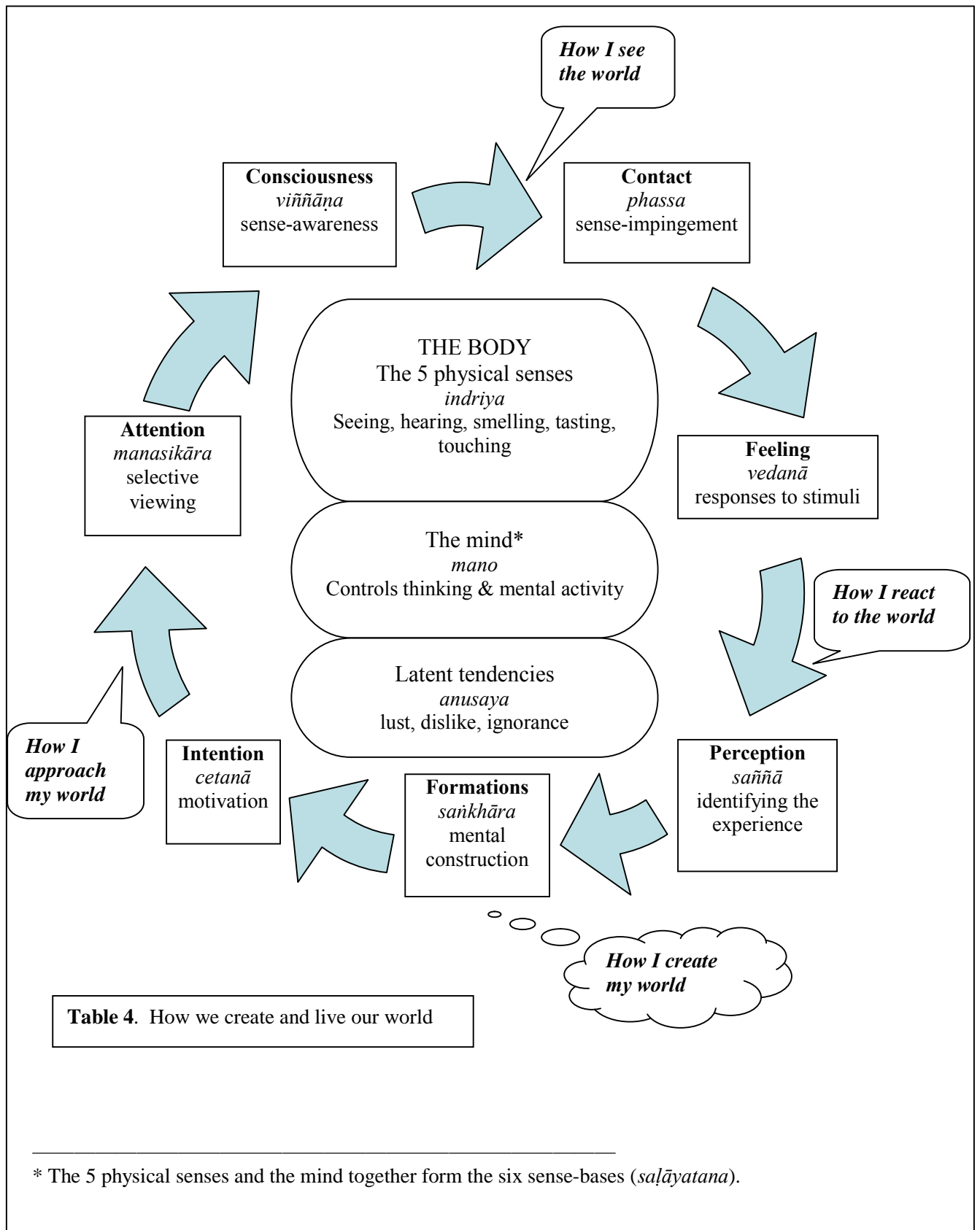
*Saññā* and *saṅkhāra* are closely related in the sense that they both *perceive* things. The etymologies of the two words help throw some light on their differences. *Saññā* derives from *saṃ* (together, in the sense of *putting together*)<sup>13</sup> + √JÑĀ, “to know,” giving the root sense of “knowing together”; *saṅkhāra* derives from *saṃ* + √KR, “to do,” with the root sense of doing together.” Their connotations are clear: *saññā* is generally a passive process, while *saṅkhāra*, an active one.

*Saññā* or perception is the process of putting together one’s bare sense-experiences that *viññāṇa* (consciousness) has recorded at the sense-doors, along with the attending feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), and then relating them to similar data one has already experienced. Depending on how one reacts to the feelings, the latent tendencies may or may not be reinforced. If one is attracted to the pleasant feeling, *lust* is reinforced; if one shows aversion towards the unpleasant feeling, *hate* is reinforced; if one ignores or is ignorant of the feeling, *ignorance* is reinforced. So one’s world is created and reinforced.

These latent tendencies spring into action at the slightest trigger through unwise attention at the six sense-doors, and the appropriate formations arise through the three karmic doors: the body, speech, and the mind. So one lives one’s world. The continuous flow of sense-experiences gives one the impression of permanence, and that there is a self experiencing them. In reality, all the experiences or phenomena simply arise and fall away depending of conditions, internal and external.

<sup>12</sup> See SD 17.4(7.3).

<sup>13</sup> Similar to Latin *con-* (eg “connection”) or *co-* (as in “coincidence”).



\* The 5 physical senses and the mind together form the six sense-bases (*saḷāyatana*).

One of the most harmful aspects of formations is its propensity for fabricating ideas and notions even when there is apparently no cause for doing so, but the conditions are there: these conditions are the latent tendencies; and they are always there in the unawakened person. **The Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) gives us some insight into this situation:

“Venerable sir, can there be anxiety over what is non-existent internally?”

“There can be, bhikshu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikshu, has the view:

‘The world is the self; after death I will be permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, eternally the same, I will endure as long as eternity’—this too he regards thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

He hears the Tathāgata or the Tathāgata’s disciple teaching the Dharma for the elimination of all fixations<sup>14</sup> to grounds for views, mindsets, obsessions, inclination and latent tendencies,<sup>15</sup> for the stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the fading away (of lust),<sup>16</sup> for the ending (of suffering), for nirvana.

He thinks thus: ‘So I will be annihilated! So I will perish! So I will be no more!’

Then he sorrows, grieves and laments, he weeps beating his breast and become distraught.

That is how there is anxiety regarding what is non-existent internally.”

(M 22.20/1:136 f) = SD 3.13

## 5 Meanings and usages of *saṅkhāra*

The *nikāyas* define *saṅkhāras* primarily in terms of will or volition (*cetanā*); they also describe them as putting together (*abhisankharonti*) each of the *khandhas* in turn into something that is put-together (*saṅkhata*).<sup>17</sup> In this way *saṅkhāras* are presented as conditioning factors conceived of as active volitional forces. *Cetanā* is, of course, understood as *kamma* on the mental level,<sup>18</sup> and in the early *abhidhamma* texts all those mental factors that are considered to be specifically skilful (*kusala*) fall within the domain of *saṅkhārakkhandha*.<sup>19</sup> Thus it is that the composition of *saṅkhārakkhandha* leads<sup>20</sup> the way in determining whether a particular arising of consciousness constitutes a skilful or an unskillful *kamma*. All this accords well with the *nikāyas*’ singling out of *cetanā* as characteristic of the nature of *saṅkhāras*. (Gethin 1985:37)

The formations aggregate is a comprehensive group comprising a number of volitional factors. The Abhidhamma lists 50 types of mental formations (or, formations, for short).<sup>21</sup> The most important is volition (*cetanā*), the mental factor that causes us to act by way of body and speech. Mental formations do not include feeling (which forms a different aggregate) but includes all the different desires and emotions, including the wholesome and unwholesome roots. They are the psychological roots of unwholesome actions (greed, hatred and delusion), and the roots of wholesome actions (charity, lovingkindness and wisdom).

The term *saṅkhāra* is resolved as *saṃ* (= con, “together”) + √KR, “to do” → *karoti*, “he does, he makes”; hence, giving the sense of “putting something together.” In fact, it literally means “constructing,

<sup>14</sup> *-adhiṭṭhāna-* see foll n.

<sup>15</sup> *Diṭṭhi-ṭṭhāna, pariyaṭṭhāna, abhinivesānusaya.*

<sup>16</sup> *Virāga* also “fading away of lust” or “dispassion” (see §21).

<sup>17</sup> Eg **Khandha Saṃyutta** defs, S 3:59 f, 86 f. (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>18</sup> A 3:425. (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>19</sup> “This is most simply expressed at Dhk 9 where the truth of arising and the truth of the path are said to be *saṅkhārakkhandha*; it is elaborated at Dhs 185-225, and at Vbh 63-69, where the various categories of unskillful *dhammas* are treated in terms of the *khandhas*.” (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>20</sup> Cf Vism 14.135. (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>21</sup> See Vbh §§92-120/40-53. For the 50 types of formations, see Vism 14.131-184/462-472, & for summary, see Vism:Ñ 880 (Table II).

construction.”<sup>22</sup> The noun has both the active and passive senses: as such, *saṅkhārā* are both the things that deliberately put together, construct and compound other things, and also the things that are put together, constructed and compounded.<sup>23</sup>

Due to its polysemy (multiple meanings), *saṅkhāra* is perhaps the most difficult early Buddhist term. Boisvert (1995:91-112) identifies 5 meanings of *saṅkhāra*: (1) as *saṅkhata*; (2) as a *paccaya*; (3) as *āyu,-saṅkhāra*; (4) as part of *sa,sāṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, and (5) as a *khandha*. I will use this fivefold scheme and build on it, adding a sixth category, to explain the intricacies of *saṅkhāra*. (For my purposes, I have put (5) “as a *khandha*”

(1) “Formations” or “conditioned phenomena” (*saṅkhāra*). In the widest sense, *saṅkhārā* comprise all conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhammā*). Here all the 5 aggregates, not just the 4<sup>th</sup>, are *saṅkhārā*—as shown in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).<sup>24</sup> In other words, it refers to all the universe, but not to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). A conditioned phenomenon produces other conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). In this narrower sense, it is identical to (5).

(2) The 2<sup>nd</sup> factor of dependent arising, that is, as *paccaya* or *nidāna*. While (1) is the “passive” conditioned state, *saṅkhāra*, as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*) (as well as (5) *khandha*), is the active “producing” or “generating” conditioner.<sup>25</sup> As the 2<sup>nd</sup> factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence—as such, here best rendered as “volitional activities” or “karma-formations” to distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).<sup>26</sup> This latter set (as formations) is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,<sup>27</sup> and never used in connection with dependent arising—see usage (6) below. In **the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta** (A 3.15), however, we see this meaning applied to *abhisāṅkhāra*, that includes the broader sense of the aggregates (as the karma of the three doors).<sup>28</sup>

(3) *Saṅkhāra* as the 4<sup>th</sup> aggregate (*khandha*) (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking simile: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *saṅkhāra* is defined as the six classes of volitions (*cha cetanā,kāya*), as in **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56),<sup>29</sup> that is, volition in terms of each of the six sense-objects. Here, rendered as “volitional formations.” (In the Abhidhamma, *saṅkhāra-k,khandha* refer to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)

(4) “Life-formation” (*āyu,sāṅkhāra*)<sup>30</sup> is the same as *bhāva,sāṅkhāra*, ie as “fuel” to rebirth or the *bhava* link in dependent arising (2). Buddhaghosa, in his Commentary on **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), explains the Buddha’s overcoming his serious illness at Beluva (D 16.2.23) as a result of his own physical strength and from his attainment of fruition (*phala,samāpatti*). This new strength, derived from the attainment, helps him to both overcome the illness and extend his life. Buddhaghosa goes on to explain that there are two kinds of “life-formation” (*jīvita,sāṅkhārā* or *āyu,sāṅkhāra*), namely, (1) life itself by which life is propelled on, and (2) the attainment of fruition. The former, acquired at birth, refers to a kind of “life-faculty” (*jīvit’indriya*) which maintains and vitalizes the living physical body, whose quality and length is further determined by past karma, and whose length is determined at birth.<sup>31</sup> The

<sup>22</sup> S 22.79/3:87. See also BDict: *saṅkhāra*.

<sup>23</sup> For defs of *saṅkhāra*, see Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 1996:66-81 (ch 4).

<sup>24</sup> S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

<sup>25</sup> S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

<sup>26</sup> S 41.6/4:293.

<sup>27</sup> See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

<sup>28</sup> A 3.15/1:110-113 = SD 17.7. On the term’s usage as “aggregate,” see foll def.

<sup>29</sup> S 22.56/3:60 = SD 3.7.

<sup>30</sup> D 2:99, 108; A 4:312; Kvu 2:559.

<sup>31</sup> Rhys Davids aptly renders the first kind of *jīvit’indriya* as “life till allotted time” (D:RD 2:106; cf Divy 203).

latter is nurtured in the current life, and according to Buddhaghosa, it is this latter that is referred to in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (DA 2:547).<sup>32</sup>

(5) *Sa,saṅkhāra* (with *saṅkhāra*) and *asaṅkhāra* (without *saṅkhāra*) are used in connect with *parinibbāyī*:<sup>33</sup> a *sa,saṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “with effort,” who eradicates the mental fetters through striving (Pug 17); an *asaṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “without effort,” such as Bāhiya Dārucīriya who understands the truth instantaneously.<sup>34</sup>

(6) The three kinds of intentional actions or **karma-activities** (or karma-formations), namely, bodily activities (*kāya,saṅkhāra*),<sup>35</sup> verbal activities (*vacī,saṅkhāra*)<sup>36</sup> and mental activities (*citta,saṅkhāra* or *mano,saṅkhāra*).<sup>37</sup> In meditation terminology, the first refers to in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial thought and sustained thought (because by thinking one forms the ideas that one expresses through language); the third, perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind). Two of these—the bodily activity and the mental activity—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.<sup>38</sup>

EJ Thomas, in *The History of Buddhist Thought*, proposes that this type of *saṅkhāra*, divided into bodily, verbal and mental activities is “probably a simpler and probably earlier analysis of the aggregates”<sup>39</sup> [1]. He is referring to the fact that the Abhidhamma tradition classifies *saṅkhāra-k, khandha* into 50 different mental activities, only one of which is volition (eg Dhs 62).

On a broader scale, there are three **volitional formations** (*abhisāṅkhāra*): meritorious formation (*puññābhisāṅkhāra*), demeritorious formation (*apuññābhisāṅkhāra*) and imperturbable formation (*āneñjābhisāṅkhāra*).<sup>40</sup> Meritorious formations occur in the sense-sphere and the form sphere; demeritorious formations occur only in the sense-sphere; and the imperturbable formations occur in the formless sphere. These three volitional formations are actually identical with the *saṅkhāra* link of dependent arising, where they are rendered as volitional activities.

According to the Dīgha Commentary (DA 3:998), however, the imperturbable formation refers to the will for rebirth in the formless realm, which is the meaning also found in the Abhidhamma (Vbh 135). According to **the Parivāṁsana Sutta** (S 12.51), these three volitional formations are the volitions of an ignorant person (*avijjā’gata purisa,puggala*), and when ignorance is abandoned for wisdom, one will no more create the three volitional formations.<sup>41</sup>

There are also the “**volitional formations of striving**” (*padhāna,saṅkhāra*),<sup>42</sup> a designation for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (*samma-p, padhāna*), applied to the “four roads to spiritual power” (*iddhi,pāda*): desire or will power, energy, mind, investigation (S 51.13).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9. **The Dhanu-g, gaha Sutta** (S 20.6/2:265 f) says that the life-formation runs faster than the speed at which as man could catch a flying arrow. Comy there says that *āyu,saṅkhāra* refers to the physical life-faculty (*rūpa,jīvit’indriya*), but it is impossible to describe the breakup of formless phenomena (ie mental states, because according to the Abhidhamma, they break up 16 times faster than physical states) (SA 2:227).

<sup>33</sup> S 5:70; A 1:233.

<sup>34</sup> A 1:24; U 1:10; DhA 2:209 ff.

<sup>35</sup> M 118.24/3:83.

<sup>36</sup> M 118.25/3:84.

<sup>37</sup> See eg **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 4.13-15/1:301); (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:3), **Bhūmija S** (S 12.25.3/2:39 f); **Kāma,bhū S 2** (S 41.6/4:293).

<sup>38</sup> **Ānāpāna,sati Sutta**, M 118.18 f/3:82 = **Eka,dhamma Sutta**, S 54.1/5:311 f.

<sup>39</sup> “They appear to be compiled in order to include every mental phenomenon, and the Dhammasaṅgaṇi makes sure of this by adding ‘and any other non-material things that have arisen causally.’ The Pāli and Sanskrit lists largely agree, but are not identical” (1933:61 n2). Thomas refers to Abhk 2:23; Mvyut 154.

<sup>40</sup> D 3:217; S 12.51/2:82; Pm 2:206; Vbh 135. The term “merit” (*puñña*) here is buddhicized and has the sense of “fortunate, virtuous, auspicious quality, good” in reference to actions and their results. For a discussion, see Cousins 1996:153-156.

<sup>41</sup> S 12.51/2:80-84 = SD 11.5. See Hamilton 1996a:74 f.

<sup>42</sup> Bodhi’s term see S:B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects).

<sup>43</sup> **Chanda Samādhi S** (S 51.13/5:268).

From the above, it is thus clear that *saṅkhāra* occurs in many different contexts in the Nikāyas, and can be difficult to explain or understand. However, the first three contexts—in the three characteristics (*ti,lakkhaṇa*) formula, as the second link of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) and as an aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k,khandha*)—are especially common and important to understand. Although these contexts often overlap, their roles are distinct enough for us to see how they are the “fuel” by which an individual continues in samsara, and how liberation can be won.

## 6 *Saṅkhāra* in the “three characteristics” formula

**6.1 THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS FORMULA.** In its widest sense, *saṅkhārā* comprise all conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhata,dhammā*), and is as such simply rendered as “**formations**.” Here all the five aggregates, not just the 4<sup>th</sup>, are *saṅkhārā*—as shown in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).<sup>44</sup> A conditioned being produces and experiences conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). In this narrower sense, it is identical to *saṅkhāra* (5) above [1]. “Conditioned” (*saṅkhata*) means being subject change and conditionality (being part of a network of causes and effects), not having a reality of its own.

Here, however, *saṅkhāra* has a much broader sense: it refers to all the universe, but not to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), as evident from these **Dhammapada** verses:

<p><i>Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ti yadā paññāya passati atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā</i></p>	<p><u>All conditioned things are impermanent:</u> who sees thus with wisdom, is revulsed at suffering— this is the path to purity.</p>	<p>Dh 277</p>
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<p><i>Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ti yadā paññāya passati atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā</i></p>	<p><u>All conditioned things are unsatisfactory [suffering]:</u> who sees thus with wisdom, is revulsed at suffering— this is the path to purity.</p>	<p>Dh 278</p>
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<p><i>Sabbe dhammā anattā ti yadā paññāya passati atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā</i></p>	<p><u>All things are not self:</u> who sees thus with wisdom, is revulsed at suffering— this is the path to purity.</p>	<p>Dh 279</p>
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All samsaric existence, that is, life and the universe, are conditioned: all that exist are part of a dynamic network of incessant causes and effects. By the very fact that they are conditioned, they are *impermanent*. Indeed, whatever that exists is impermanent: *existence itself is impermanence*. Whatever exists, exists in change: existence is change. Whatever does *not* change, or more correctly, *conceived* so, does not exist. For meaning only exists in change: to consider anything as impermanent or unchanging is making a meaningless statement. The world or the universe, in other words, if it has a cause at all, does not arise from a single cause. As **Vasubandhu**, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, puts it:<sup>45</sup>

If the world had a single cause, whether that single cause be God or something else, the entire universe would have to arise all at once.

[Theist:] But what we observe is that beings occur one after another. Now that fact could be a function of God’s intending for each individual that it arises at a given time and disappears later.

<sup>44</sup> S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

<sup>45</sup> This tr is from Richard P Hayes, “Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition, <http://www.unm.edu/~rhayes/atheism.pdf>, 1991:5, slightly ed.

[Reply:] But in that case, since there are numerous intentions, it would turn out that the cause of the world is manifold. Moreover, that plurality of intentions would be simultaneous, for the reason that god, which is their source, putatively has no internal divisions.

(Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣyam 2.64d.1; 1975:101 f; see Abhk:Pr 306)

**6.2 SAṄKHĀRA AND DHAMMA.** At this point, it is useful to look at the central Pāli term, *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*). **Bodhi**, in the General Introduction to his Saṃyutta translation, says that, like KR Norman, he uses a “pragmatic approach of using different renderings intended to match its different applications”<sup>46</sup> gives the following usage of *dhamma*, which are summarized here:<sup>47</sup>

<i>Buddha Dhamma</i>	the Buddha’s <u>teaching</u>	(S 6.2/1:138-140) = A 2:20
<i>Dhamma,rājā</i>	the king of <u>righteousness</u>	(S 4:303)
<i>dhamma</i> , often <i>dhammā</i> (pl)	<u>things</u>	(S 3:225,9 f)
<i>dhamma</i> (trait of character)	<u>quality</u>	(S 2:204,3-4)
<i>dhammā</i> (4 <sup>th</sup> <i>satipaṭṭhāna</i> )	<u>phenomena</u> , mind-objects	(S 5:324 f, 5:329 f)
<i>iminā dhammena</i>	by this <u>principle</u>	(S 2:58,3-4; 4:328,21-22)
<i>paṭicca,samuppannā dhammā</i>	dependently arisen <u>phenomena</u>	(S 2:26,7)
<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a world- <u>phenomenon</u> in the world*	(S 3:139,22 f)
<i>kusalākusalā dhammā</i>	wholesome & unwholesome <u>states</u>	(S 5:9,17-27)
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the enlightenment-factor of discrimination of <u>states</u> *	(S 5:331 f)
<i>dhamm’āyatana</i> <sup>48</sup>	<u>mental phenomena</u>	(S 2:72)
<i>dhamma,dhātu</i> <sup>49</sup>	<u>element of Dhamma</u> *	(S 2:56)
<i>-dhamma</i> (eg in <i>khaya</i> ,~)	<u>is subject to</u>	(S 2:26,9 f)
<i>-dhamma</i> ( <i>anicca</i> ,~ etc)	<u>nature</u> (of impermanent nature)	(S 3:195 f)

In a few cases (marked by an asterisk), I have my own preferences, namely:

<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a worldly <u>condition</u> in the world
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the awakening-factor of <u>dharm</u> a-investigation
<i>dhamm’āyatana</i>	<u>mental phenomena</u>
<i>dhammā,dhātu</i>	<u>dharm</u> a-element

The Dhammapada Commentary glosses “all things” (*sabbe dhammā*) of Dh 279a simply as “only the five aggregates are intended” (*pañca-k,khandhā eva adhippetā*) without any elaboration. Such texts as **the (Dve) Khandhā Sutta** (S 22.48) show that when *only* “the five aggregates” are mentioned, it refers to both the aggregates “of clinging” (*upādāna*) and those that are not, that is, the aggregates of the arhats.<sup>50</sup>

This means that *dhammā* here refers to both conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhamma* = *saṅkhāra*) as well as to unconditioned things (*asaṅkhata,dhamma* = *nibbāna*). All things, including nirvana, are without a self (*anattā*). They are not attributed with being impermanent or being suffering, which are only the special characteristics of conditioned things, that is, the whole of samsara. This is what is meant when the

<sup>46</sup> KR Norman takes a similar approach to his tr of *dhamma* in Tha: see his discussion at Tha:N 1/118 n to 1.

<sup>47</sup> Summarized mostly from S:B 42-44; see also index for other refs. For a detailed discussion, see JR Carter 1978 & F WATANABE 1983 ch 2.

<sup>48</sup> Bodhi: “As a sense base and element, the *dhammāyatana* and *dhammadhātu* are the counterparts of the *man-āyatana*, the mind base, and the *manoviññādhātu*, the mind-consciousness element. The appropriate sense here would be that of ideas and mental images, but the commentaries understand *dhammas* in these context to include not only the objects of consciousness but its concomitants as well. Thus I translate it ‘mental phenomena,’ which is wide enough to encompass both these aspects of experience.” (S:B 44)

<sup>49</sup> See prec n.

<sup>50</sup> S 22.48/3:47 f = SD 17.1a.

nun Vajirā describes “a being (*satta*) [as] a mere heap of conditioned states” (*satto...suddha,saṅkhāra,-puñja*), as stated in **the Vajirā Sutta**,

553	<i>Kin nu satto ti paccesi Māra,ditṭhigataṃ nu te suddha,saṅkhāra,puñjo yaṃ na-y-idha satt’upalabbhati</i>	What “being” is there that you assume? How you have fallen into views, Māra! It is a <u>mere heap of conditioned states</u> : Here no being is to be found.
554	<i>Yathā hi aṅga,sambhārā hoti saddo ratho ti evaṃ khandhaṃ santesu hoti satto ti sammuti</i>	Just as with parts assembled together We have the word “chariot,” Even so when there are the aggregates, There is the convention of a “being.”
555	<i>Dukkham eva hi sambhōti dukkhaṃ tiṭṭhati veti ca nāññatra dukkhā sambhōti nāññam dukkhā nirujjhati.</i>	Only suffering comes into being; Only suffering that stands and ends. Other than suffering, nothing comes to be; Other than suffering, nothing ceases.

(S 553-555/5.10/1:135)

As such, here, the term *saṅkhāra* means something conditioned, constructed, or formed, that is, samsaric phenomena.<sup>51</sup>

The saying, “all things are not self,” as such, refers to the *all*, that is, whatever is conditioned, and also to nirvana (which is the only unconditioned dharma). It is only in the full understanding of what the former—conditioned things—really are that begins to turn one’s mind towards the unconditioned. But there is one more step, as it were, that is, having fully understood the true nature of the conditioned, one then truly lets them go. This total letting-go is nirvana.

The perception of letting go of conditioned things can also be a spiritual exercise, which works on the basis of the non-ownership (*na tumhāka*) of them. In fact, there is at least five suttas called **the Na Tumhāka Sutta**, namely:<sup>52</sup>

(Kāya)	<b>Na Tumhāka Sutta</b>	The body is not yours	S 12.37/2:64 f.
(Khandha)	<b>Na Tumhāka Sutta 1</b>	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.33/3:33 f (with simile).
(Khandha)	<b>Na Tumhāka Sutta 2</b>	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.34/3:34.
(Dhātu)	<b>Na Tumhāka Sutta 1</b>	The elements are not yours	S 35.101/4:81 f.
(Dhātu)	<b>Na Tumhāka Sutta 2</b>	The elements are not yours	S 35.102/4:82 (same as 1).

The text of these Suttas is also found in **the Alagaddūpama Sutta** (M 22), attesting to its importance, thus:

Therefore, bhikshus, give up what is not yours.<sup>53</sup> When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

What is it that is not yours?

Form is not yours. Give it up. When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Feeling is not yours. Give it up. When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Perception is not yours. Give it up. When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

<sup>51</sup> See S:B 44-47.

<sup>52</sup> In all these 5 suttas, the word *dīgha,rattam* is omitted in the closing stock phrase.

<sup>53</sup> Comy: It is the *attachment* or desire (*chanda,rāga*) to the five aggregates, not the aggregates in themselves, that should be given up: they “cannot be torn apart or pulled out.” I have rendered *yaṃ* as “what” (which has a general sense) rather than as “whatever” which connotes that there are certain things that we do “own,” which would go against the teaching of *anattā*.

Formations are not yours. Give them up. When you have given them up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Consciousness is not yours. Give it up. When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.<sup>54</sup> (M 22.40/1:140 f) = SD 3.13

**The Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58), where the Buddha teaches Moggallāna how to overcome drowsiness during meditation, closes with the following famous passage known as “the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving.” This whole section is also found in **the Cūḷa Tanhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37).<sup>55</sup> Sections 11ab are also found in **the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (A 35.80).<sup>56</sup>

**11a** When this was said, the venerable Mahā Moggallāna said this to the Blessed One:

“In what way, venerable sir, in brief, is a monk liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total<sup>57</sup> perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans?”<sup>58</sup>

**11b**<sup>59</sup> “Here, Moggallāna, the monk has learned<sup>60</sup> that nothing is worth clinging to.<sup>61</sup> And, Moggallāna, a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly knows<sup>62</sup> all things [he directly knows the nature of the all].<sup>63</sup> Having directly known the nature of all things, he fully understands<sup>64</sup> all things.

<sup>54</sup> Comy: Only an aggregate (form, etc) is the basis for the wrong concept of a self, since apart from them there is nothing else to crave for.

<sup>55</sup> M 37.2-3/1:251.

<sup>56</sup> A 35.80.6/4:88, 11-15. Their ensuing passages, however, are different. See SD 3.13 Introd (5).

<sup>57</sup> “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

<sup>58</sup> In **Cūḷa Tanhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37.15/1:255 f), Sakra, the leader of the gods, on the instigation of Moggallāna, asks the same question and the Buddha’s answer is identical to the passage here. It is possible that this passage originally belongs to the Cūḷa Tanhā,saṅkhaya S, but is added here by the Aṅguttara Reciters for a more complete Sutta. Requests for brief instructions are found elsewhere in the Canon, eg V 1:39 (Sāriputta to Assaji); S 22.1/3:1-5 (Nakula, pitā to the Buddha).

<sup>59</sup> This passage [11b] is also found in **Avijjā Pahāna S 2** (A 35/80). The ensuing passages, however, are different. See Introd (5) above.

<sup>60</sup> “Has learned,” *suta*, lit “has heard.”

<sup>61</sup> “Nothing is worth clinging to,” *sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*, lit “all things are not worthy of adhering to.” “All things” here refer to the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense-bases and the 18 elements, all of which are not fit to be clung to. These factors have to do with insight (*vipassanā*). (AA 4:43)

<sup>62</sup> “He directly knows,” *abhiñānāti*, here meaning to know for oneself by insight, ie through higher self-knowledge, or *abhiññā*. Traditionally, there are 6 “higher powers” or **superknowledges** (*abhiññā*): (1) psychic powers (*iddhi, vidhā*), (2) the “divine ear” or clairaudience (*dibba, sota*), (3) mind-reading, ie the ability to read the thoughts of others (*parassa ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*), (4) the recollection of one’s own past lives (*pubbe, nivāsānussati*), (5) the “divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*), ie the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings, faring according to their karma, and (6) the destruction of mental cankers (*āsava-k, khaya*), ie arhathood. Nos 4-6 are known as “the three knowledges (*te, vijjā*)” (D 3:281; A 3:280). Comy says that this knowledge here refers to *ñāta, pariññā* (A 4:43): see foll n.

<sup>63</sup> “He directly knows all things,” *so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiñānāti*, alt tr, “he directly knows the nature of the all.” Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1).

<sup>64</sup> “He fully understands,” *parijānāti* here, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” This spiritual knowledge is called “**full understanding**” (*pariññā*), of which there are 3 kinds: (1) Full understanding of the known (*ñāta, pariññā*), ie the discernment of the specific characteristics of a phenomena (“Form as the characteristic of being oppressed’ feeling has the characteristic of being felt, etc”); (2) Full understanding by investigating (*tīraṇa, pariññā*), ie insight wisdom (*vipassanā, paññā*) which as the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and mental state, eg “Form is impermanent; feeling is impermanent, etc”; (3) Full understanding as overcoming (or abandoning) (*pahāna, pariññā*), ie the insight-wisdom that has the universal characteristics as its objects, and arises after one has overcome the idea of permanence, etc”. (Nm 52; Vism 20.3/606 f). Comy says that “full understand-

**11c** Having fully understood all things, he knows whatever feelings there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

As regards to those feelings, he dwells contemplating impermanence in them; he dwells contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them; he dwells contemplating ending [of suffering] in them; he dwells contemplating letting go [of defilements].<sup>65</sup>

When he dwells contemplating impermanence in them, contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them, contemplating ending [of suffering] in them, contemplating letting go [of defilements], he does not cling to anything in the world; not clinging, he is not agitated; being not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.

He understands. ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’<sup>66</sup>

That, Moggallāna, is, in brief, how a monk is liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total<sup>67</sup> perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans.” (A 35.80.11/4:87 f) = SD 4.11

## 7 Sañkhāra in the dependent arising formula

**7.1 THE SECOND LINK IN DEPENDENT ARISING.** In the dependent arising formula, *sañkhāra* appears as the second link; in other words, as a condition or connection (*paccaya* or *nidāna*).<sup>68</sup> While *sañkhāra* as a characteristic (*lakkhana*) is the “passive” conditioned state, *sañkhāra* as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*)—together with sense (5), that is, “effort” [5]—are active “producing” or “generating” conditioners.<sup>69</sup>

As the second factor of dependent arising, *sañkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence. Here, *sañkhāra* is synonymous with *kamma*, both of which are derived from the root √KR, “to do” (*karoti*). As such, they are here best rendered as “**volitional activities**” or “karma-formations,” as in **the Sañkhār’upapatti Sutta** (M 120), where it is said that a bhikshu (or any practitioner) who has faith, moral virtue, learning, charity and wisdom, can set his mind to a happy birth, such as birth into a wealthy family, a god or a brahma, that is, if he were to “often cultivate” (*bhāvitā bahulī, katā*) the determination (*sañkhāra*) towards the desired destiny.<sup>70</sup>

There is of course the likelihood that this passage is taken too simplistically to mean that one could simply wish where one wants to be reborn. The real point here is that if one keeps thinking of something, one becomes somehow *becomes* it.<sup>71</sup> On some reflection, one could say that the Buddha is making an ironic statement for the benefit of those who are still reluctant to work towards liberation in this life. All the 31 forms of birth are a still a part of samsara, and as such are not liberation at all. Only the last determination, that of awakening in this life, frees one from suffering. (M 120.37/3:103). As Hamilton aptly points out: “So while the *Sutta* does serve to illustrate that specific mental inclinations can produce specific results, the message of the *Sutta* is, rather a warning of the binding power of volitions.”<sup>72</sup>

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ing” here refers to *tīraṇa, pariññā* (AA 4:43). The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), etc, are given in the final tetrad (*Dhammānupassanā*, contemplation of mind-objects) of the breath meditation of the **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118.21/3:83).

<sup>65</sup> The monk effects the abandoning of the mental hindrances by the contemplations of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), fading away (of lust) (*viragānupassanā*), cessation (of suffering) (*nirodhānupassanā*) and of letting go (of defilements) (*paṭinissaggānupassanā*), and thus comes to look upon feelings (all experiences) with equanimity.

<sup>66</sup> This para describing the arhat is stock: V 1:14; D 1:84; M 2:39; S 2:82.

<sup>67</sup> “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

<sup>68</sup> On dependent arising, see SD 5.16.

<sup>69</sup> S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

<sup>70</sup> M 120/3:100-103 = SD 3.4.

<sup>71</sup> Cf **Itthi S** (A 5.43/47-49), where the Buddha declares, “I do not teach that they [rebirth in heaven, etc] are to be obtained through prayer (*āyācana, hetu*) or through wishing (*patthāna, hetu*): see SD 5.7 Introd (4).

Hamilton 1996a:75 f, emphasis added.

**7.2 FORMATIONS AND INCLINATION.** Let us examine this not so well known, but important, term, *nati*, meaning “inclination” or habitual tendencies. It is close to the post-canonical term, “habitual karma” (*āciññā,kamma*).<sup>73</sup> A couple of interesting passages will clarify the situation. In **the Dvedha,vitakka Sutta** (M 19), the Buddha says:

Bhikshus, whatever a monk often thinks about and ponders upon, that will become his mental inclination (*nati*). (M 19.6/1:115)

This teaching is elaborated in **the Cetanā Sutta 3** (S 12.40), where the Buddha says:

Bhikshus, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever lies latent in one: this becomes a basis (*ārammaṇa*) for the maintenance of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has developed, there is inclination (*nati*). When there is inclination there is coming and going (*āgati,gati*).<sup>74</sup> When there is coming and going, there is passing away and being reborn. (S 12.40/2:67) = SD SD 7.6c

Here, the Commentary glosses *nati* as craving (*taṇhā*) (SA 2:72). **The Channa Sutta** (S 35.87) goes on to speak of the benefits of letting go of inclinations:

There is wavering in one who is dependent.  
 There is no wavering in one who is independent.  
 When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity.  
 When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination.  
 When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going.  
 When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and reappearing.  
 When there is no passing away and reappearing, there is no here nor beyond nor in between.  
 This is the end of suffering. (S 35.87/4:59 = M 144) = SD 11.12

In all these passages, we see *saṅkhāra* functioning as inclination (*nati*), that is effectively a synonym for habitual tendencies reinforcing the latent tendencies. All this conduces to suffering and rebirth.

**7.3 SYNTHESIS.** This kind of *saṅkhāra* (as a link in the dependent arising formula) gives an active synthetical explanation of how an individual existence arises, while as an aggregate (*khandha*), they apply in a passive analytical way. This name will distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).<sup>75</sup> This latter set—as passive “formations”—is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,<sup>76</sup> and never used in connection with dependent arising.<sup>77</sup>

**The (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2) defines *saṅkhāra* as follows:

And what, bhikshus, are volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*)? Bhikshus, there are these three kinds of volitional activities: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation. These are called volitional activities. (S 12.2.14/2:4) = SD 5.15

Texts like **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44)<sup>78</sup> and **the Kāma,bhū Sutta** (S 41.6)<sup>79</sup> mention a triad of *saṅkhārā* in connection with the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling: bodily formations (*kāya,saṅkhāra*), verbal formations (*vacī,saṅkhāra*) and mental formations (*citta,saṅkhāra*). The first is

<sup>73</sup> Vism 601; Abhs:SR 144.

<sup>74</sup> I take *āgati,gati* here to mean karmic activities, pace Comy, which refers only to the dying karmic processes.

<sup>75</sup> S 41.6/4:293 (SA 2:72).

<sup>76</sup> See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

<sup>77</sup> See S:B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects). See Brahmavainso 2003b:56 f; also see *saṅkhāra* (6) above [1].

<sup>78</sup> M 44.13-15/1:301.

<sup>79</sup> S 41.6/4:293.

in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial application and sustained application (because, by thinking, one forms the ideas one expresses through language); the third, perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind). Two of these—bodily formations and mental formations—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.<sup>80</sup>

It is interesting here (in the triad of *sañkhāra*) that bodily formations comprise the breathing process, which is not exactly a conscious process, but an involuntary one. Of course, it is a *conscious* process in the sense that one can *know* or become aware of the process, or one can *volitionally* take longer breaths or shorter ones. Surely, arhats, too, breathe, that is, to say, their bodies need air. This clearly shows that *sañkhāra* as bodily formations are still present in the Buddha and the arhat.<sup>81</sup>

## 8 *Sañkhāra* as an aggregate

**8.1 TYPES OF VOLITION.** *Sañkhāra* as the fourth aggregate (*khandha*) (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking simile: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *sañkhāra* is defined as the six classes of volitions (*cha cetanā, kāya*),<sup>82</sup> as in **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56),<sup>83</sup> that is, volition in terms of each of the six sense-objects, thus:

- Volition<sup>84</sup> regarding forms.
- Volition regarding sounds.
- Volition regarding smells.
- Volition regarding tastes.
- Volition regarding touches.
- Volition regarding mind-objects.

Here, *sañkhāra* is best technically rendered as “volitional formations.” (In the Abhidhamma, *sañkhāra-k, khandha* refers to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)<sup>85</sup>

I have generally used the term “**formations**” wherever *sañkhāra*, unless the context demands a longer expression for the sake of definitiveness. Although here I am unable to find a simpler word, it is better and more beautiful to habitually use simple Anglo-Saxon words for Buddhist terms wherever possible. Certainly, one should avoid cumbersome, bizarre and exotic terminology. The true understanding of a religion, at least, in the case of Buddhism is not in the exactness of words used, not in its technical accuracy, but in imbibing the spirit of moral virtue and inner calms so that one can wisely tease the spirit from the letter. In Buddhist training, there is a vital emphasis on not missing the tree for the forest. One has to cut down the forest of words, but not the tree of wisdom (Dh 283). The spirit lies not in the dead words, but in the living transmission and one’s inner stillness.

**8.2 UNCONSCIOUS ACTIONS.** The dark side of formations (*sañkhāra*) is clearly described in **the Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6). The Sutta opens with the Buddha stating that both the unawakened ordinary

<sup>80</sup> See **Āṇāpāna, sati S** (M 118.18 f/3:82) = **Eka, dhamma S** (S 54.1/5:311 f). Cf M 1:54, 390; S 2:4, Vbh 135; VbhA 142; Vism 350 f where this triad refers to formations in general.

<sup>81</sup> On whether arhats have feelings or not, see SD 17.3(4.2+7). **Sue Hamilton** claims that “The *sañkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (71). [9]

<sup>82</sup> “Classes of volition,” *cetanā, kāya*. “The fact that there is a difference between the name of the aggregate (*sañkhāra-k, khandha*) and the term of definition (*sañcetanā*) suggests that this aggregate has a wider compass than the others. In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the commentaries, the *sañkhāra-k, khandha* is treated as an ‘umbrella category’ for classifying all mental factors other than feeling and perception. Volition is mentioned only as the most important factor in this aggregate, not as its exclusive constituent.” (S:B 1065 n84). On whether the awakened have feelings, see **Vedanā** = SD 17.3(7).

<sup>83</sup> S 22.56/3:58-61 = SD 3.7.

<sup>84</sup> “Volition,” *sañcetanā*.

<sup>85</sup> See S:B 45.

person and the awakened saint feel pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and neutral feeling, but there is a difference between the two.<sup>86</sup>

7 “Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

**8a** Bhikshus, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart [arrow],<sup>87</sup> and then they were to wound him with a second dart. As such, bhikshus, that person would feel the sensation of two darts.

Even so, bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

**8b** And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, **the latent tendency of aversion** (*paṭighānusaya*) towards painful feeling lies latent in him.

**8c** When touched by a painful feeling, he delights in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

Because, bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.<sup>88</sup>

**8d** And when he delights in sensual pleasure, **the latent tendency of lust** (*rāgānusaya*) towards pleasant feeling lies latent in him.

**8e** He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.<sup>89</sup>

Not understanding these things according to reality, **the latent tendency of ignorance** (*avijjā'nusaya*) towards neutral feeling lies latent in him.<sup>90</sup>

**8f** If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say!<sup>91</sup>  
(S 36.6.7-8/4:208 f) = SD 5.5

<sup>86</sup> For further details on **Sall'atthēna S** (S 36.6), see SD 17.3(7.3). On latent tendencies, see SD 17.4(7.3).

<sup>87</sup> Comy: The second wound (*anugata,vedham*) would be just a finger's breadth or two-fingers' breadth away from the first one. For the one wounded, as such, would feel; the subsequent worse than the first. (SA 3:76).

<sup>88</sup> Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77).

<sup>89</sup> Cf **Cūḷa Sīhanāda S** (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (*samudaya*) the views of being (*bhava, diṭṭhi*) and non-being (*vibhava, diṭṭhi*) are due to any of these eight conditions (*attha-ṭ,thāna*): the five aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskillful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. Their disappearance (*atthaṅgama*) is the path of stream-entry which eradicates all wrong views. Their gratification (*assāda*) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (*ādīnava*) is the continual bondage that they entail; the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from them is nirvana (MA 2:11). See also **Chachakka S** (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148.28-33/3:285).

<sup>90</sup> The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See SD 5.5 §3n. See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, 2003:171.

<sup>91</sup> **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—“he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it.” It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38.30-41/ 1:266-271). See Introd above & also **Cūḷa,vedalla S** (M 44.25-28/1:303 f).

This important passage shows how karma-formations first operate through the six sense-faculties, reacting to the three kinds of feelings. It should be noted here that such reactions are volitional (in the sense that they are motivated by one's innate unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion) and also conscious (one reacts to them), but *they all can be done unconsciously (asampaja)*!

In **the Bhūmija Sutta** (S 12.25) the Buddha further explains (as in **the Cetanā Sutta 1**, S 12.38)<sup>92</sup> that not all karmic actions are conscious or deliberate, thus:

Ānanda, with ignorance as condition.<sup>93</sup>

when there is the body, because of bodily volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;  
or, when there is speech, because of verbal volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;  
or, when there is mind, because of mental volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;

Either by oneself (*sāmaṃ*), Ānanda, one creates (that bodily volitional formation,) (that verbal volitional formation,) (that mental volitional formation,)<sup>94</sup> conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally;

or, on account of others (*pare*), one creates (that bodily volitional formation,) (that verbal volitional formation,) (that mental volitional formation,) conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Either consciously [deliberately] (*sampajāno*), Ānanda, one creates (that bodily volitional formation,) (that verbal volitional formation,) (that mental volitional formation,) conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally;

or, unconsciously [undeliberately] (*asampajāno*), one creates (that bodily volitional formation,) (that verbal volitional formation,) (that mental volitional formation,) conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.<sup>95</sup>

Ignorance, Ānanda, pursues these (six) states.<sup>96</sup> But, Ānanda, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance,

that body is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,

<sup>92</sup> The Sutta says, “If, monks, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one is still driven by latent tendencies (*anuseti*)—this is a mental basis that supports consciousness.” (S 12.38/2:65 f) = SD 7.6.

<sup>93</sup> Comy: This section shows that pleasure and pain do not arise conditioned by contact alone, but with other conditions as well. In this case, the bodily volitions (*kāya,sañcetanā*), verbal volitions (*vacī,sañcetanā*) and mental volitions (*mano,sañcetanā*) are the karmically effective volitions that function as conditions for the resultant pleasure and pain (*vipāka,sukha,dukkha*) (SA 2:57). Bodhi, following Be & Ce, reads *avijjā,paccayā ca* and takes this phrase as belonging to the end of the present para. This has the support of SA, which explains that this is said to show that these volitions are conditioned by ignorance (SA 2:58). PTS reads *va* for *ca*, and places the phrase at the start of the next para. (S:B 561 n77)

<sup>94</sup> Here *mano,saṅkhāra*, but, as **Bodhi** notes, from the context, this is clearly syn with *citta,saṅkhāra* in **(Pañca, samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.14/2:4) = SD 5.15 (see S:B 727 n7). Furthermore, there is no textual justification for identifying the latter with the *citta,saṅkhāra* at (S 41.6/4:293,17) & (M 1:301,28-29), def as *saññā* and *vedanā*. (S:B 561 n79)

<sup>95</sup> Comy identifies the 3 volitional formations—*kāya,saṅkhāra*, *vacī,saṅkhāra*, *mano,saṅkhāra*—with the 3 types of volition just mentioned here. One creates them “by oneself” (*sāmaṃ*) when one acts without being induced by others, with an unprompted mind (*asaṅkhārika,citta*); one creates them “on account of others” (*pare*) when one acts with a prompted mind (*saṅkhārika,citta*). One acts consciously (*sampajāno*) when one acts, knowing karma and its fruit; unconsciously (*asampajāno*), when one acts without such knowledge. (SA 2:58). This text, Bodhi notes, “may be the original basis for the Abhidhamma distinction between *sasaṅkhārika,citta* and *asaṅkhārika,citta*,” on which see Abhs:BRS 1.4. (S:B 561 n78).

<sup>96</sup> Be Ce Se: *imesu Ānanda dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*; PTS *imesu Ānanda chasu dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*, where Bodhi thinks *chasu* is redundant (S:B 561 n80). Comy: Ignorance is included among these states under the heading of decisive support (*upanissaya*). For they are all understood under the phrase, “with ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations.” (SA 2:58). On the interpretation of dependent arising by way of the 24 conditional relations of the Paṭṭhāna, see Vism 17: see Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 1971:159-173.

that speech is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,  
 that mind is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,<sup>97</sup>  
 That field, that site, that base, that foundation, does not exist, conditioned by which that  
 pleasure and pain arise internally.<sup>98</sup> (S 12.25.13-19/2:39-41, condensed) = SD 31.2<sup>99</sup>

In short, the unawakened mind unwittingly constructs a private world from the flickers and fragments of the past. This virtual reality of ancient shadows in the form of habitual tendencies only grows in obscuring true reality so that we are shielded from liberating self-knowledge. Only in breaking through the shell of this private reality can we truly liberate ourselves.

**8.3 READING THE MIND & READING THE WORLD.** In the **(Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60), the Buddha explains that the skilled mind-reader is able to know another's mind by fathoming the other person's *mental formations*, here meaning thought-processes, thus:

Furthermore, brahmin, one does not make his declarations by means of a sign, nor after having heard voices of humans, of non-humans, or of devas, nor from having applied and sustained his mind, and then listening to the sound of a person's thought-vibrations<sup>100</sup> but, having attained samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application, one knows the mind of another with his own, thus:

“By the way the mental formations (*mano,saṅkhāra*) of this good man are inclined, the depth of that mind will think such and such a thought.”<sup>101</sup>

And however many such declarations he makes, they are exactly so and not otherwise.

This is called the miracle of mind-reading. (A 3.60.5/1:171) = SD 16.10

Here “samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application” (*avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhim*) clearly refers to the fourth dhyana, where psychic powers (such as mind-reading) are the real source of psychic powers, as explained, for example, in the **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).<sup>102</sup>

Here, “mental formations” (*mano,saṅkhāra*) apparently refers to how one “creates” one's world, or how one sees the world. **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) in effect declares that “all” (*sabba*) that we can know comes through the sense-faculties and the sense-objects. In other words, the only sources of our knowledge are our six senses. This is not to say that the external world does not exist, but that it is merely the four elements, and which in themselves have no moral impact on us.<sup>103</sup>

The cosmos is neutral, but we make sense of the cosmos in a very personal and biased manner. The nature of the world that our senses create is explained in such suttas as **the Lok'anta Gamana Sutta 1** (S 35.116)<sup>104</sup> and **the (Samuday'atthaṅgama) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44).<sup>105</sup> In the former Sutta, it is said that

<sup>97</sup> Comy: No such body exists where it would enable pleasure and pain to arise conditioned by bodily volition: the same applies to speech and mind. (Question:) But an arhat acts, speaks and thinks, show how is it that his body, etc, do not exist? (Reply:) In the sense that they do not create karmic results. For the deeds done by an arhat are neither wholesome nor unwholesome karma, but merely functional (*kiriya,matta*); thus, for him, it is said: “that body, etc, do not exist.” (SA 2:58). On the arhat's functional consciousness, see Abhs:BRS 1.15. **Bodhi** says that “an alternative expl might be simply that with the elimination of ignorance there will be no further arising of the five aggregates, the basis of all experience, and thus no further experience of pleasure and pain.” (S:B 749 n81)

<sup>98</sup> Comy: There is no *field* (*khetta*) in the sense of a place of growth; no *site* (*vatthu*), in the sense of a support; no *base* (*āyatana*) in the sense of a condition; no *foundation* (*adhikaraṇa*), in the sense of a cause. (SA 2:59)

<sup>99</sup> This passage also at **Saṅcetana S** (A 4.171/2:157-159).

<sup>100</sup> From here to “thus”: *api ca kho avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhim samāpannassa cetasā ceto paricca pajānāti.*

<sup>101</sup> *Yathā imassa bhoto mano,saṅkhārā paṇihitā imassa cittassa antarā amun,nāma vitakkaṃ vitakkissatī ti.*

<sup>102</sup> D 2.81-94/1:71-82 = SD 8.10. On the Comy differing from the text on this point, see **(Pāṭihāriya)**

**Saṅgārava S** (A 3.60.5(2)/1:171) = SD 16.10

<sup>103</sup> Curiously thinks that “we have no evidence to support the supposition that the world is volitionally formed, only that it is conditioned (*saṅkhata*)” (1996a:79).

<sup>104</sup> S 35.116/4:93-97 = SD 7.4.

<sup>105</sup> S 12.44/2:71-73 = S 7.5.

while it is not possible to reach the end of the physical universe (it has none), one has to reach “the end” of our sense-fabricated to overcome suffering, which is defined by Ānanda as follows:

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called “the world”<sup>106</sup> in the noble one’s discipline.<sup>107</sup>

And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world?

The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.<sup>108</sup>

The ear....

The nose....

The tongue....

The body....

The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the noble one’s discipline. [96]

Friends, when the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Monks, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, monks, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling, I understand its meaning in detail to be as follows. (S 35.11.11-12/4:95 f) = SD 7.4

**8.4 THE “DOER” AND THE “KNOWER.”** The key lesson about formations (*sañkhāra*) is this: one has to let go of the notion that one is really “in charge” of things. This is especially true in meditation: the idea of “taking charge,” of controlling, the meditation, leads to restlessness. This has been called by **Brahmavamso** as the machinations of “the doer,” the old mind that wants to run our lives but actually always ends up making a mess of it. It takes some wisdom to realize that this “doing” is really a conditioned process. This “doing,” as I understand it, is a simple term for mental formations and volitional formations. Brahmavamso goes on to elaborate:

Even deeper than “the doer” is “the knower.” The two actually go together. One can stop “the doer” for a little while in the jhanas, but later it comes back again. One even can stop “the doer” for aeons by going to the jhana realms after one dies. However, it will still come back again. Once there is a “knower” it will react to what it knows, and it will create “doing.”

“The knower” is usually called consciousness or citta (mind), which is what knows. That knowing is often seen to be the ultimate “self.” Very often people can get the perception, or the paradigm, in their minds of perceiving something in here, which can just know and not be touched by what it knows. It just knows heat and cold, pleasure and pain. It just knows beauty and ugliness. However, at the same time (somehow or other), it can just stand back and not be known, and not be touched by what’s actually happening.

It is important to understand that the nature of consciousness is so fast, so quick, that it gives the illusion of continuity. Owing to this illusion, one misses the point that whatever one sees with your eyes, or feels with the body, the mind then takes that up as its own object, and it knows that it saw. It knows that it felt. It’s that knowing that it saw, knowing that it felt, that gives the illusion of objectivity. It can even know that it knew. (“Anatta (non-self),” 2001; slightly edited)

<sup>106</sup> See for example **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) where “the world” refers to the 12 sense-bases.

<sup>107</sup> *Yena kho āvuso lokasmiṃ loka,saññī hoti lokamānī ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko.* See **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26) in SD 7 & its Introd (2). On the physical sense-bases making one a “perceiver” and the mind-base making one a “conceiver,” see Bodhi’s remark in Introd above. See **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67/4:125-127) = SD 15.1.5.

<sup>108</sup> On the 6 sense-bases as “the world” (*loka*) in the sense of disintegrating, see **Loka S** (S 35.82/4:52 f) in SD 7. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi’s remarks in SD 7.4 Introd.

There is another way we can understand how the “doer” and the “knower” operate. The doer is our past karma in the form of latent tendencies that dictate our present habits and biases. Although the knower has a negative aspect of reacting to sense-experiences (including “knowing” things), we can tame and discipline it to examine sense-experiences in a more skillful manner, that is, to see impermanence in all such phenomena. In due course, we begin to fully understand that “all conditioned things are impermanent,” and from there one easily goes on to realize that “all conditioned things are suffering [unsatisfactory].” Then with deep meditation, when the both the doer and the knower are put out of action (at least temporarily), the understanding that “all things are not self” will arise, followed by liberation.<sup>109</sup>

In other words, as unawakened beings, we should first tame the doer so that we are not victims of our past nor automatons fuelled and propelled by latent tendencies. This is done through practicing mindfulness of the present moment, especially experiencing it as impermanent. The taming of the knower is more tricky but possible with powerful insight when we begin to see through the shadows and charades of various notions of permanence and selfhood.

Only the knowledge and vision of reality liberate us, only this truth matters, since it is true reality itself: all else is thought and philosophy. **The Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1)<sup>110</sup> shows why the Buddha disapproves of the various philosophical points, and how we can become what we know, so that what we create the world around us, but a very private and limited one. As **RH Robinson** notes:

The Brahmajāla account reveals why the Gotama is said to have disapproved of the points on which he refused to declare an answer. “The Tathāgata knows that these view-points (*diṭṭhi-thānā*)... will have such and such a result, such and such an effect on the future conditions of those who trust in them” [D:RD 1:40]. Thus the question is not whether these views are true or false, but whether they lead to good or evil rebirth, or to freedom from rebirth. The underlying principle, one often overlooked by modern investigators, is that you become what you know, that what happens in thought affects what happens in existence. (1972b:319)

## 9 Do arhats have formations?

**Sue Hamilton**, in her book, *Identity and Experience*, claims that “The *saṅkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed, ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (1996a:71). Hamilton goes on to say that “[t]he technical status of *saṅkhāras* is suggested in passages which state that Nirvana, the cessation of ignorance, is the stilling (or cessation) of *saṅkhāra*,” (1996a:79), quoting the phrase *sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho...nibbānaṃ*.<sup>111</sup> Further, she notes that “At this point [on attaining nirvana], one’s state of mind is without volitional activity,” quoting the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* from the famous *aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ* verse (the Buddha’s first utterance), recorded at Dh 154, which runs thus:

*Aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ*<sup>112</sup>  
*sandhāvissaṃ anibbisam*  
*gahakāraṃ gavesanto*  
*dukkhā jāti punappunam*

Through many births in samsara  
I ran, not finding  
the house-maker that I seek:  
painful is repeated birth. (Dh 153)

*gaha,kāraka diṭṭho’si*  
*puna geham na kahasi*  
*sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā*  
*gaha,kūṭam visaṅkhitam*<sup>113</sup>

You are seen, house-maker!  
no more will you build a house:  
all your rafters are broken,  
the roof-tree destroyed—

<sup>109</sup> On the doer and the knower in mindfulness training, see Brahmavamso 2006: 19 f, 24, 40 f, 97, 160 f, 208; also SD 15.1(8.5 + 14.6).

<sup>110</sup> See SD 25.

<sup>111</sup> **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136) = SD 12.1; (**Samādhi**) **Ānanda S** (A 3.32/1:133).

<sup>112</sup> = Tha78ab (**Meṇḍa,sita Tha**).

<sup>113</sup> **Udāna,varga** 21.7d has *visaṃskṛtam*, which in Pāli would be *visaṅkhatam*, which is vl.

visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ                      the mind is free from constructs,  
taṅhānaṃ khayāṃ ajjhagā                      it has reached the end of craving.      (Dh 154)

The Dhammapada Commentary explains the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* as “Now my mind has won freedom from the conditioned, by making nirvana its object” (*idāni mama cittaṃ visaṅkhāraṃ nibbānaṃ ārammaṇa, karaṇa, vasesa gataṃ anupaviṭṭhaṃ*, DhA 3:129). It is interesting here that **the Migasira Thera, gāthā** (Tha 183cd + 183abc) are identical with Dh 153cd and 154abc, and continues as follows:

thūnirā ca vidālītā                              And the housetop torn apart—  
vimariyādīkatam<sup>114</sup> cittaṃ                      the mind, set free,  
idh’eva vidhamissatī ti                              will be blown out right here.      (Tha 184def)

We can safely take Tha 184e here as expressing the same idea, since, like Dh 154, it has the same context of spiritual liberation. As such, the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* should not be taken in itself and read as a “state of mind is without volitional activity,” as Hamilton has done. The phrase better understood as “the mind, set free” in both the Dhammapada and Thera, gāthā contexts.

All this suggests, as it were, that a human being, especially the arhat, can function without formations, and that he experiences feelings without any formations. **Damien Keown**, in his review of Hamilton’s book is not persuaded by her statement,

The suggestion is that a human being (paradigmatically an Arhat) can (and does) function without the involvement of this aggregate, and experiences feelings without any concomitant volitions.... One point which casts doubt on this is that *Theragāthā* 90 [**Sāmidatta Tha**] suggests that in the case of the Arhat all five aggregates remain: “The five aggregates beings well understood continue to remain although their roots are cut off.”<sup>115</sup> Another is that the enlightened (such as the Buddha) experience emotions (such as compassion) which seem to trigger off volitional actions (like teaching the Dharma).” (Keown 1996:304)

The aggregate of formations (*sañkhāra-k,khandha*) comprises volitions, representing the conative (or volitional) aspect of the mind. In an ordinary person, according to **the Kukkuravatikā Sutta** (M 57), these volitional activities are of two kinds: the afflictive (*sabyapajjha*) and the unafflictive (*abyapajjha*) karma-formations (actions of body, speech and mind), which respectively refer to unwholesome karma and to wholesome karma.<sup>116</sup> **The arhat** is above this dichotomy of karma: he acts spontaneously, out of compassion and with wisdom towards others. In other words, the constructive aspects of formations do not occur in him. Only the functional karmic formations arise and cease as befitting the occasion.

It should be understood that *sañkhāra* is a very broad term, in fact, the broadest of the five aggregates.<sup>117</sup> Volition<sup>118</sup> may be the most important factor of formations, but it is not its exclusive component. Indeed, the arhat is awakened because he has overcome this most important aspect of formations, that of volition. The arhat, in other words, is an “unintentional” person, a spontaneous being, who truly goes with

<sup>114</sup> So Be Se; Ce *vimariyādīkatam*; PTS *vipariyādīkatam*.

<sup>115</sup> *Pañca-k,khandhā pariññātā tiṭṭhanti china, mūlakā, |vikkhīno jāti, saṃsāro, n’atthi dāni puna-b, bhavo ti* (Tha 90).

<sup>116</sup> M 57.4-11/1:389-391. These two are often interpreted at the tenfold course of actions (*kamma, patha*): see **Sammā, diṭṭhi S** (M 9.4/1:47) = SD 11.14. See also (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:60) = SD 3.7 & **Satta-ṭ, thāna S** (S 22.57/3:63 f) = SD 29.2, where both explain “formations” [volition] as comprising intentions related to form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind-object. **The Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79/3:87) = SD 17.9 says that formations interacts with each of the other aggregates and conditions them.

<sup>117</sup> The Abhidhamma and the Comys treat *sañkhāra-k,khandha* as an “umbrella category” for all mental factors other than feeling and perception. See S:B 1065 n85.

<sup>118</sup> Sometimes, the term “will” is used here, but this can be problematic, as D Keown remarks, “I for one would agree, that Buddhism has no concept of the ‘will’ at all, certainly not understood in the Augustinian sense as a spiritual faculty independent of sensuous and intellectual life.” (1997:303)



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