OVERVIEW OF CETASIKAS (FACTORS CONDITIONING CONSCIOUSNESS)

These notes are prepared to create a general understanding of those functions of the mind that create our subjective experience. To begin, a review of the Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form, Feeling, Perception, Mental Conditioning Factors and Consciousness. Form is sensory stimulation: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and the array of sensory experience in the body. Feeling is characterized by the initial affective response that is instinctual, on a range from ecstatically pleasurable through mildly delightful, neutral, mildly unpleasant to agonizingly painful. Perception is the initial process of identification related to the sensation that is felt; it initiates a process of isolating that particular sensational focal attention from other co-occurring stimuli—sorting out and disregarding stimuli that isn’t associated with prior conditioned experience. Mental Conditioning Factors elaborate the perceptual process through associating the stream of stimulation with at least similar prior remembered experience, and this remembering is largely subconscious. Consciousness is the “screen” upon which the products of the Mental Conditioning Factors are “projected” into present-moment awareness through a stream of consciousness.

The focus of this talk is to generally review the characteristics of Feeling, Perception, and Mental Conditioning Factors, which are termed cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs). The word cetasika basically means “those factors associated with consciousness”. The combination of conditioning factors and consciousness are fundamental—a moment of experience includes a mental formation and the consciousness that reflects it. There are Buddhist conceptual terms that are functionally synonymous with cetasika: sankhara (sahn-kah-rah) and karma. Sankhara is typically translated as a particular conditioning factor manifested in each moment of the selfing process. Karma is the forming or coalescing dynamic involved in the manifesting process. I suppose what differentiates cetasikas from the other terms is the categorization involved—in the Theravada system there are 52 cetasikas, and the sankhara are “categorically contained” in the cetasikas, potentially activated when conditions stimulate that process. Another way to understand these factors is that they represent how karma operates in lived experience, influencing self-identity and actions.

The cetasikas are subdivided into various categories: The first two are separated from the remaining 50 as “bridging” factors—Feeling and Perception—they initiate a process of integrating initial stimulation with cognition. They are associated with the cetasikas in groupings: Universal, Occasional or Particular, Unwholesome and Wholesome aggregations. Feeling and Perception have no karmic consequence because they are inherently free from craving and clinging, but the rest are karmically affected, that is, they are conditioned by sankharas. The Universal aggregate has five factors, occurs in every moment of consciousness (along with Feeling and Perception) and each of the five are ethically malleable, that is, their manifestation is affected by whether they are accompanied by unwholesome of wholesome conditioners. The Occasional or Particular aggregate has six factors and they are also ethically malleable; as suggested by the terminology, they may or may not accompany other cetasikas. The Unwholesome aggregate has 14 conditioners and is subdivided into four segments—the first four accompany every moment of dukkha formation and the other unwholesome categories may or may not be associated with dukkha. The Wholesome aggregate has 25 factors divided into five categories: the first aggregate has seven factors, operating during every moment of a wholesome selfing process and are free of dukkha, even if they occur only momentarily. This category is followed by twelve factors called the “six beautiful pairs” and represent a high level of coordinated functioning between conditioning factors and consciousness. There remain three subcategories reflecting elements of virtue (three in number), empathy (two in number) and a final category, Wisdom.

Over the next several weeks, I plan to focus more thoroughly on the subcategories of cetasikas, with the intention to explore how these concepts can be realized through regular mindfulness meditation in the context of applying Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood in daily life.