Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas

These notes focus on what are termed *akusalacetasika* (ah-koo-suh-lah-cheh-tah-see-kah), typically translated as *unwholesome mind conditioners*. The cetasikas are a categorical organization of tendencies that shape how the selfing process is formed in an ongoing way. The term akusala is the absence of kusala—the letter *a* can mean *the absence of,* in this case, the absence of kusala, wholesomeness. The cetasikas are characteristic of the human condition—when we are born, the cetasikas come with the package, and everyone is affected by them--contained within these categories are the specific memory traces, that is, emotions and cognitive descriptive associations that are unique to each of us. These particular processes “contained” within the cetasikas are termed sankhara (sahn-kah-rah) and are specific in the way our personalities are organized; the sankharas are synonymous with karma.

In previous talks we have reviewed the Universal Cetasikas that occur in every moment of experience and the Particular or Occasional Cetasikas, which may or may not occur, depending on circumstances. These two categories are considered to be ethically neutral and malleable, that is, they accompany either wholesome or unwholesome cetasikas. This talk on the Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas begins an analytical review of the Unwholesome Cetasikas with specific focus on those cetasikas that participate in shaping every personal moment that is burdened with dukkha (do-kah), distress and confusion. There are three more categories in the akusala aggregation, and they will be reviewed during future talks.

The Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas are Delusion, Shamelessness, Recklessness and Restlessness, and reviews of each are listed below. My intention in reviewing these is to not only provide a conceptual understanding but also provide suggestions regarding how to recognize them as we are meditating and, hopefully, during our daily life routines. The first step in changing how we think and behave is being able to recognized what category of self is forming, wholesome or unwholesome, and how that forming process occurs, along with ways and means for interrupting dukkha and reorganizing a sense of self that is organized through the actions of the Wholesome Cetasikas.

**Delusion:** The Pali word for delusion is *moha* (mow-hah) and is synonymous with *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), ignorance (The letter *a* once again denotes *the absence of* *vijja* (vee-jah), *direct experiential awareness of how things truly are*.) Here is how Bhikkhu Bodhi describes moha in his translation of “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, on page 83: “Its characteristic is mental blindness or unknowing…Its function is non-penetration, or concealment of the real nature of the object. It is manifested as the absence of right understanding or as mental darkness. Its proximate cause is unwise attention…it should be seen as the root of all that is unwholesome.”

The complexity of life is literally incomprehensible in the scope and unrelenting flow of subjective stimulation. We are bombarded each moment by visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory (odor) and gustatory (flavorful) stimulation, and this cascading process must be sorted through in order to at least survive if not thrive. The mental processes involved almost entirely operate preconsciously—the conscious mind only sees an oversimplified and fabricated rendering of what is happening, and the level of subjective awareness and self-discipline involved in this processing typically operates through the cetasika of moha. Our previous experience is “stored” in the cetasika as sankhara, and we each have our unique karmic inclinations.

In contemporary psychological terms we operate through what is called “confirmation bias”, which is describe this way in the Wikipedia site:

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports one's prior [beliefs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belief) or values. It is an important type of [cognitive bias](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_bias) that has a significant effect on the proper functioning of society by distorting evidence-based decision-making. People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a [biased](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias) way. For example, a person may cherry-pick empirical data that supports one's belief, ignoring the remainder of the data that is not supportive. People also tend to interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting their existing position. The effect is strongest for desired outcomes, for [emotionally](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotion) charged issues, and for deeply entrenched [beliefs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belief).

Moha can occur associated with either greed or hatred separately, but not simultaneously, so we can understand that when we are affected by dukkha, moha is always participating in the shaping of a self. Moha is the default mode of the mind that distorts our beliefs, values and goals until Wisdom replaces its function in the selfing process. Wisdom is the first aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path, including Right Understanding and Right Intention, and is cultivated through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

**Shamelessness** and **Recklessness**: The first Pali term here is *ahirika* (ah-hih-rih-kah), and it is very closely associated with the next universal unwholesome cetasika, recklessness, termed as *anottappa* (ahn-oh-tah-pah). As with avijja, mentioned above, the first term is the absence of *hiri* (he-ree), which can be understood as having *a clear awareness of virtue*; ahirika is typically described as shamelessness. The second term is the absence of *ottappa* (oh-tah-pah), *respect for the consequences of shamelessness.* As a result of delusion being the default mode of self-organizing functions and inattentiveness regarding the lawfulness of karma, we are quite vulnerable to repeatedly behaving in ways that are associated with *desire* or *aversion*. In either case, the resulti is selfishness, involving the association of moha, ahirika and anottappa with several other unwholesome cetasikas such as *wrong view, conceit,* and *sloth/torpor*, which will be reviewed during future talks. To quote a phrase often repeated by those who are involved in 12 step groups: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results”

**Restlessness**: The Pali term here is *uddhacca* (ooh-dah-chah), and it is also represented as one of the Five Hindrances, combined with *kukkucca* (koo-koo-chah), typically translated as *worry* or *regret*. The characteristic of restlessness is an unstable and unsettled quality of attention—a metaphor is what happens to a pile of ashes when a rock is dropped onto it.

The countering of these universal unwholesome cetasikas involves intentionally training the mind to be alert as to how the sequentially organized flow of self-state organizations operates with as much persistence, attention to detail and clarity of purpose regarding being kind, compassionate, generous and truthful. The cultivation of the Wholesome Cetasikas provides that training.

**Delusion is countered** by careful attention to the sensational details of each in- and out-breath, combined with careful attention to how the mind is making meaning relative to the sensations of breathing or of any other stimulus that comes to attention. This fosters *yoniso manasikara* (yo-nee-so mah-nah-see-kah-rah), translated as *wise attention*.

**Shamelessness and Recklessness are countered** by the Four Noble Efforts: 1-The effort to notice an already arisen unwholesome self and redirect attention back to the breath. 2-The effort to notice the potential arising of an unarisen wholesome self and direct attention to that, by directing attention back to the breath. 3-The effort to sustain attention to an already arisen wholesome self as long as its constituent elements remain wholesome. 4-The effort to prevent the arising of an unarisen unwholesome self in the future.

**Restlessness is countered** by cultivating *samadhi/passadhi* (sah-mah-dee/pah-sah-dee), *stability of attention/tranquility of mind*. This is fostered through persistent attention to the neutrality and nonverbal characteristics that are associated with mindfulness of breathing.