Buddhist Personality Theory—Part One

Buddhist doctrine represents what can be considered as the earliest concept of human psychology in history. This talk, and one following, will focus on the factors that create an understanding of how a person’s individual history and cultural associations develop throughout a lifetime.

A relatively concise concept of personality can be developed through the Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form, Feeling, Perception, Mind Conditioning Factors, reflected in Consciousness. After a brief review of the individual aggregates, a primary focus of attention will be on the Mind Conditioning Factors.

Form: This category involves all varieties of sensory stimulation—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and physical sensations throughout the body. In Buddhist meditation practice, this involves Mindfulness of the Body, the first of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Feeling: This category represents the initial affective response we all have to some stimulation—not necessarily an emotion, but rather an impulsive reaction, either to want or not want the stimulation.

Perception: This is the initial identification process that begins to interpret the stimulation experience. Its function is closely associated with the feeling tone of the stimulation.

Mind Conditioning Factors: These are the memory-based interpretative processes that make meaning out of the feeling and perception of a stimulus.

Consciousness: All the above processes are reflected in conscious awareness, which we experience as “myself and the world”.

Personality is the composite effect of these factors. Buddhist psychology, called Abhidhamma (ah-bee-dah-mah), is an extensive analysis of human experience, and the category of Abhidhamma that is represented by Mind Conditioning Factors is called Cetasikas (cheh-tah-sih-kahs); the word can be loosely translated as “Those factors that are reflected in the mind”

There are 52 cetasikas described in Theravada Buddhism. They are categorized as Universal (Conditioning every moment of consciousness), Particulars (Which may or may not condition each moment of consciousness), Unwholesome (Which condition each moment of suffering in consciousness), and Wholesome (Which condition each moment of consciousness that is liberated from suffering).

This talk, Part One, will focus on a more detailed review of the Universal, Occasional and Unwholesome Cetasikas. The next talk, Part Two, will once again review the Universal and Occasional Cetasikas and include the Wholesome Mind Conditioners.

Imagine that the cetasikas represent filters that modify incoming feelings and perceptions, and that the filters affect how we experience a meaningful self-experience. The cumulative effect of the combined mind conditioning factors is what Buddhist psychology calls a sankhara (sahn-kah-rah), a term that is synonymous with the much more familiar term, karma.

The first two cetasikas are considered factors that create a bridge between unprocessed sensory stimulation and the filtering processes of the mind:

***Feeling***, one of the Five Aggregates, is an instinctual response to a stimulus, either physical or mental. Feelings have different tones—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and are considered to be ethically malleable, that is, they are affected by whether they are co-occurring with either Unwholesome or Wholesome cetasikas.

***Perception***, another of the Five Aggregates, involves the initiating of an interpretive process in the mind. We are being stimulated through multiple systems, and perception begins to separate out one particular stimulation from any accompanying stimuli—as you are reading this, the visual attention process is prioritized over any auditory or other sensory stimulation, and this prioritization begins to align with more involved memory-based associations. This initial prioritization is perception, and is also considered to be ethically malleable, depending on the associated cetasikas, either Unwholesome or Wholesome.

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***Universal Cetasikas*** are five in number and are also considered to be ethically malleable, depending on associations with either Unwholesome or Wholesome cetasikas. In their basic function, there is no suffering associated with the function of the Universal Cetasikas; even Buddhas experience the Universal Cetasikas, but there is no suffering in an Awakened mind. They occur in every moment of consciousness:

***Contact*** is the initial stimulation of experience, for example, when light stimulates the optic nerve.

***Volition*** is intention or willingness. It serves the function of organizing the aggregated mental factors toward coordinated action "like the chief disciple or chief carpenter, etc., who fulfill their own and others' duties." Volition generates the momentum that "pulls" the associated cetasikas toward action, manifesting as sankharas, the potency of karma.

***Concentration*** is also called *one-pointedness*, occurring naturally in every moment of experience. It stabilizes the focus of the attention in association with either unwholesome or wholesome mind conditioning factors. Concentration meditation, when combined with mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort purifies and sustains wholesome one-pointedness, developing insight into the transitory and impersonal nature of subjective experience, with enlightenment as the goal.

***Vitality*** is the energized activity of the mind as meaning-making occurs. We are energy transforming organisms, using the nutrients that come from food, along with oxygen, to fuel the activities of the very complex neural activities of the nervous system. Vitality can activate either unwholesome or wholesome self-states. The goal of meditative training is to channel the energy of attention and action in wholesome ways.

***Attention*** is the application of focused awareness in the mind. Craving and clinging, the primary cause of suffering, creates an attentional process that is driven and distorted, interfering with effective functioning. The goal of meditative training is to purify attentional focus.

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***Particular*** or ***Occasional Cetasikas*** may or may not occur in each moment of awareness, depending on whether or not an accompanying cetasika hinders its functioning. They are also ethically malleable:

***Activating focused attention*** involves the directing of awareness to what is occurring in the mind. Dullness in the mind directly interferes with this cetasika, which is what characterizes it as particular or occasional.

***Maintaining focused attention*** involves sustaining applied awareness. Dullness also interferes with this cetasika, as well as distractedness.

***Determination*** is the actual involvement and engagement of attention regarding awareness. Before determination is activated, focused attention is uncertain and uncommitted regarding what is occurring in the mind. Dullness and doubt interfere with determination.

***Energy*** or ***Effort*** is different from the cetasika of vitality. Vitality is the physiological fuel of consciousness, and energy is the active channeling of it. Dullness has the characteristic of diminishing energy.

***Enthusiasm*** represents the degree of actively engaged attention devoted to consciousness, which can vary from heightened interest to exuberant experience. Doubt disables enthusiasm.

***Will To Do*** or ***Zeal*** is the initiation of mental or physical activity. Doubt and dullness inhibit this factor.

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***Unwholesome Cetasikas*** are fundamental to the experience of dukkha, which I prefer to interpret as self-states characterized by emotional distress and mental confusion. The first four participate in every moment of dukkha, while the remainder may or may not; for example, *desire* cannot co-occur with *aversion*:

***Ignorance*** is the absence of clear awareness and comprehension regarding the transitory and impersonal nature of subjective experience.

***Shamelessness*** is the absence of conscience or moral integrity. This conditioning disallows remorse and a lack of interpersonal and social responsibility. An example of this would be stealing something without anyone knowing and not feeling ashamed.

***Recklessness*** is associated with shamelessness and is the absence of dreading the consequences of immoral actions. This is reflected in the phrase “Insanity is making the same mistake over and over, suffering similar consequences while expecting different results”.

***Restlessness*** is the inherently unstable nature of the untrained mind’s ability to be disciplined. It is the functional opposite of tranquility. Restlessness is so prevalent in the mind that it is not easily noticed. One of the primary goals of concentration meditation practice is to stabilize attention in wholesome ways, such as with mindfulness of breathing meditation. When aligned with regret it is one of the Five Hindrances.

***Desire*** or ***Greed*** represents a person’s instinctual or conditioned attraction regarding a pleasant physical or mental stimulation. It is very powerful, acting like glue that keeps the mind stuck on a pleasurable object. It is seductive, creating motivation for lying, stealing, and so on. It is treacherous, conditioning the mind to believe that overindulgence has no consequences. Even when no harm is done through gratification, desire brings suffering when it ceases. It is one of the Five Hindrances

***Wrong View*** involves the mistaken belief that there is an enduring and autonomous self. The antidote for wrong view is Right Understanding, a core function of the Noble Eightfold Path.

***Conceit*** is very similar to Wrong View and represents attachment to a particular self-state organization. The belief is that there is an objective observer or experiencer—an ego that must be defended or gratified. It supports the delusional sense of separateness and duality. We often think of conceit as self-aggrandizing, as it most often is, but it can also occur when the selfing story demands self-loathing.

***Aversion*** is an adverse instinctual reaction to an unpleasant stimulation, either physical or mental. The experience of desire, when interrupted, can very quickly transform into aversion. This cetasika can “spread” it’s effect, becoming an angry mood that unfavorably filters other life experiences. It is also one of the Five Hindrances.

***Envy*** conditions the mind in ways similar to jealousy, is associated with conceit, under the assumption that someone else’s success and happiness deprives oneself of success and happiness. The antidote for envy is Sympathetic Joy, one of the four Divine Abidings.

***Stinginess*** is closely associated with greed and conditions the mind towards miserliness, the accumulation of material wealth and social status. A person can also be stingy regarding knowledge. It is countered by generosity.

***Regret*** conditions the mind that suffers from a lack of conscience or foresight and is the result of unwholesome speech, actions and lifestyle choices. It is closely associated with restlessness, and the combined effect is one of the Five Hindrances.

The final three of the Unwholesome Cetasikas represent three of the Five Hindrances:

**Sloth** is a sort of mental fog, the absence of alertness and clarity in the mind. It is listed as the partner of the next on the list:

**Torpor** is heaviness and inertia in the mind and body. The combination of the two is the hindrance of Sloth and Torpor.

***Doubt*** is the absence of conviction, decisiveness or confidence regarding conditions in the mind. A person can doubt the wisdom of the teachings or their ability to follow the teachings successfully.