Buddhist Personality Theory—Part Two

During the talk presented last week, a review of the Five Aggregates, as described in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, focused on how a conceptual structure called the 52 cetasikas (cheh-tah-sik-kahs) can be useful for “deconstructing” a person’s belief that the personality is an enduring entity, a self, instead describing the human personality as a dynamically changing construct that varies on a moment-by-moment basis, depending on external conditions. The word cetasika can be translated as “Those factors that are reflected in consciousness”. The cetasikas operate like cognitive and emotional filters—as stimulation occurs, various mental conditioning factors channel the “selfing” process through already existing memories. These memories “aggregate” into subjective trains of thoughts and actions.

The first part of this document repeats some of the descriptions found in the notes prepared for the previous talk—the Universal and Occasional cetasikas. That talk focused on reviewing the Unwholesome Conditioning Factors, while this talk focuses on the Wholesome Conditioning Factors, the effective functioning of which liberate the mind from the distress and confusion generated by the Unwholesome Conditioning Factors. The full development of the combined effects of the Universal, Occasional, and Wholesome Conditioning Factors leads to the ultimate experience of Awakening.

Here are the Five Aggregates:

**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”.

The primary focus of attention here is how the Mind Conditioning Factors—the cetasikas--filter experience. There are 7 Universal cetasikas, occurring in every moment of consciousness, and 5 Occasional cetasikas, which may or may not occur in every moment of consciousness. They are considered to be “ethically malleable”, meaning they can be associated with either Unwholesome or Wholesome Cetasikas. There are 25 Wholesome Cetasikas, while the Unwholesome Cetasikas number 14. The Unwholesome Cetasikas were the topic for the previous talk.

Here is the review of the Universal and Occasional Cetasikas, repeated from those notes: 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 through reducing the potency of craving and clinging.

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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. When associated with the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas, activated attention functions well.

***Maintaining focused attention*** involves sustaining applied awareness. Dullness also interferes with this cetasika, as well as distractedness. When associated with the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas, activated attention functions beneficially.

***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, while the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas contradict dullness and doubt.

***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. When associated with the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas, Right Effort, one element of the Noble Eightfold Path, is activated.

***Enthusiasm*** represents the degree of actively engaged attention devoted to consciousness, which can vary from heightened interest to exuberant experience. This is significantly beneficial when associated with the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas.

***Will To Do*** or ***Zeal*** is the initiation of mental or physical activity. The Universal Wholesome Cetasikas increase one’s confidence and capabilities with great benefit for resilience and patience.

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***Universal Wholesome Cetasikas*** coordinate with the ethically malleable cetasikas to fabricate a personality structure free from greed, aversion and delusion:

***Confidence*:** Particularly faith regarding the benefits of virtue, wisdom and meditative training. It is not based on hearsay but grounded in actual results. Buddhist commentary suggest three levels of *faith*: based on logical argument, based on the example set by a wise person, and based on direct experience. The first two are “shakeable”, because they are based on supposition, while the third is confirms through direct experience. It can only accumulate gradually, through skillful, persistent and consistent practice. The result of this accumulation is the ability to be unshakable regarding applying the acquired skills and the benefit of the outcome, despite circumstances and the opinions of others. Confidence provides the antidote for the hindrance of skeptical doubt. There is a well-known sutra describing the importance of faith, called the Kalama Sutta (translated by Thanissaro, downloaded from Access To Insight):

Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness" — then you should enter & remain in them.

***Mindfulness***: "…recollecting, calling back to mind: the mindfulness that is remembering, bearing in mind, the opposite of superficiality and of obliviousness…". This is probably the most important of the conditioners of the mind. As the first of the Seven Factors of Awakening, it monitors and supports regulation of all the other mental factors. Its primary function is to support Right Effort, i.e., the arising of wholesome consciousness and the non-arising of unwholesome consciousness. The Satipatthana Sutta is dedicated to the cultivation of mindfulness in all aspects of life and is regarded as perhaps the most useful sutta in Buddhism.

***Moral Shame***: This is the opposite of shamelessness, a Universal Unwholesome Cetasika that appears in every moment of distress and confusion about the path to awakening. Moral Shame represents modesty, humility, conscientiousness, and scrupulousness. It prevents regret and remorse. It is present at any moment when virtue is activated.

***Fear of Consequences***: This is the opposite of another Universal Unwholesome Cetasika, recklessness. We are all inherently social creatures, and recklessness creates distrust and disharmony. This factor focuses on the intentional cultivation of virtue so that social support is readily available for awakening. Another result of this cetasika is recognition that an emerging unwholesome self-state organizing process will produce regrettable results. Moral Shame and Fear of Consequences cooperate, with the result being heightened alertness and avoidance of any violation of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

***Non-Attachment***: This cetasika is considered a fundamental root factor for awakening, along with non-aversion and Wholesome Understanding. Classically, it is described as "…being detached, like a drop of water on a lotus leaf…" It is the cause of generosity and realizing the reality of non-self. It is the antidote for the Universal Unwholesome Cetasikas of Ignorance, and Wrong View.

***Non-Aversion***: This cetasika is equivalent to the Buddhist term *metta*, lovingkindness, and is the antidote for aversion/ill-will, and has the characteristic of gentleness, inclusiveness, tolerance and patience. Non-aversion is not affection, which is sentimental attachment to an object of attention. It is closely aligned with and supportive of another wholesome cetasika, compassion.

***Equanimity***: This Universal Wholesome Cetasika represents the balanced functioning of the wholesome cetasikas. According to Nina Van Gorkom in her book “Cetasikas”, it "…has the characteristic of conveying citta [consciousness] and cetasikas evenly. Its function is to prevent deficiency and excess, or its function is to inhibit partiality. It is manifested as neutrality." "Its proximate cause is seeing [that]…Beings are owners of their deeds [karma]." It supports the optimal balancing of the Seven Factors of Awakening.

When the liberating characteristics of the Wholesome Cetasikas are effectively operating, the quality of present-moment attention becomes more highly developed and productive of extraordinary characteristics. These qualities are termed the “Six Beautiful Pairs”—the pairing of certain functions, reflected in consciousness:

***Tranquility of Mental Factors***: This is the antidote for the unwholesome cetasika of restlessness. The mental factors of feelings, perceptions and mental formations cooperate smoothly, without agitation.

***Tranquility of Mind***: As the 3 other mental factors just mentioned condition consciousness, then consciousness becomes stabilized and serene. Tranquility of Mind and Mental Factors represent the Tranquility Awakening Factor.

***Lightness of Mental Factors***: This mental factor represents "…the capacity of the mind to turn very quickly to a wholesome object or to the contemplation of impermanence, etc.". The co-occurring cetasikas are agile and adaptive in their functioning.

***Lightness of Mind***: Consciousness becomes characterized by lightness when that is the object of attention. This contributes to the clarity of moment-by-moment attention.

***Pliancy of Mental Factors***: This conditioner of citta is the antidote for mental rigidity, for example, the unwholesome cetasikas of wrong view and conceit. It is open-mindedness as to what is good and wholesome. An example of pliancy is “silly putty”, which readily conforms to the surface of a coin by flowing around it and accurately rendering a mirror image of the face of the coin.

***Pliancy of Mind***: As the conditioning function of the mental factors becomes more flexible, consciousness becomes pliantly receptive to the next moment of experience.

***Wieldiness of Mental Factors***: This supports the pliancy and proficiency of other cetasikas. Wieldiness is the capability of a person to reliably use a tool with skill and predictably beneficial results. It is closely associated with the Confidence cetasika.

***Wieldiness of Mind***: This represents the ability of consciousness to reliable accept and be fulfilled by wholesome conditioning without disturbance and with clarity.

***Proficiency of Mental Factors***: This conditioning factor supports competency, and "goodness of fit" regarding the co-arising cetasikas. It is closely associated with Wieldiness and represents the manifestation of good mental health.

***Proficiency of Mind***: A healthy mind-moment, free of disability.

***Uprightness of Mental Factors***: This supports forthrightness and is the antidote for deceit and fraud conditioned by Wrong view, Conceit, Desire and Aversion.

***Uprightness of Mind***: A clear conscience and a personality with a good reputation.

The next cetasikas represent elements of the Noble Eightfold Path that are perfected in their functioning as a result of the full development of the Wholesome Cetasikas:

***Abstinence from Wrong Speech***: The avoidance of lying, slandering, harshness and frivolity of speech.

***Abstinence from Wrong Action***: The avoidance of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and intoxication.

***Abstinence from Wrong Livelihood***: The avoidance of occupations that are manifestations of, supportive of, or extensions of wrong speech or wrong action.

These next two Wholesome Cetasikas represent qualities of Lovingkindness (reflected earlier in the cetasikas listing as Non-Aversion):

***Compassion***: "is characterized as promoting the aspect of allaying suffering. Its function resides in not bearing others' suffering. It is manifested as non-cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it makes cruelty subside and it fails when it produces sorrow."

***Sympathetic Joy***: "is characterized as gladdening (produced by others' success). Its function resides in being unenvious. It is manifested as the elimination of aversion (boredom). Its proximate cause is seeing beings' success. It succeeds when it makes aversion (boredom) subside, and it fails when it produces merriment."

The remaining cetasika is the third "beautiful root", Understanding. As with compassion and sympathetic joy, it does not necessarily accompany every wholesome citta. It is the premiere cetasika that co-arises with mindfulness, as its manifestation overcomes ignorance and delusion:

***Understanding***: This constitutes perceiving the 3 characteristics of reality as impermanent, unsatisfactory and insubstantial. It supports awareness of dependent origination and the deconstruction of the 5 aggregates of clinging regarding the delusional belief in a separate self. This is the Right .Understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is appreciated on 2 levels: that of conceptual understanding, and that of experiential insight.