**Contingent Provisional Emergence As Emptiness**

On July 13, 2023, Peter Carlson gave a talk that focused on “Mindfulness of Feelings and Dependent Origination”; this talk will provide an investigation of Dependent Origination and Emptiness, which will hopefully increase our understanding of how the fundamental interactions between mind and body creates the illusion of self. The term *sunnata* (soon-yah-tah) is translated into English as *emptiness* or *voidness*, but this literal translation is, I believe, misleading. Sunnata isn’t like the voidness of interstellar space—interestingly, contemporary astrophysics studies “dark matter”, a mysterious “something”--the invisible medium through which cosmic particles operate in the manifestation of gravity, radiation, and other aspects of the universe operates. In this way, emptiness is a strange representation of fullness.

Sunnata represents an important and ever-present aspect of subjective experience that must be directly understood to realize anatta (ah-nah-tah), the impersonal nature of subjective reality, usually termed as the absence of an autonomous self. As will be described when talking about Contingent Provisional Emergence, ignorance/lack of penetrating insight regarding sunnata is how dukkha (doo-kah), the distress and confusion of lived experience, occurs. The word *sunna* is understood to describe the *absence of objects within a space—*a Buddhist simile describes it as a palace with no inhabitants, which is meant to represent the quietness of a mind that is free from thought and self-creation. Another simile involves the Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form (sensory stimulation) is like foam; Feeling is like a bubble; Perception is like a mirage; Mental Fabrications are like a banana tree, lacking a core of “heartwood”; and Consciousness is like a magic trick. This concept is meant to foster realization that the self is an impersonal aggregated phenomenon—the interaction of the variety of sensory stimulation occurring within an environmental event (sensory “form”), with the affective (Feeling), perceptual (Perception), and cognitive/interpretive (Mental Fabrication) processes, all mirrored impersonally in ongoing awareness (Consciousness).

From a more contemporary perspective, sunnata can be described in a variety of ways. Over the many years of my studying and teaching Buddhism, I have researched how contemporary psychological, sociological, and neuroscientific research supports basic Buddhist concepts, principles, and practices. The following paragraphs reflect some of this research:

**Neurological processes**

Daniel Siegel is a research scientist and long-time Buddhist meditator. He wrote a book that has significantly influenced my understanding of contemporary Buddhism: “Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology—An Integrative Handbook of the Mind”. In Chapter 29, he begins a complex description of how contingent provisional emergence operates—the chapter is entitled “Plane of Possibility”. I will attempt to explain how I interpret what he has written:

He describes the brain functions in a systematic way that transforms the basic energy provided by food and oxygen into information and action through the networking of billions of neurons in the brain, extending throughout the body. The connections between neurons are so numerous and thoroughly complex in their interconnections that, considering a basic process of self-organization, the potential for interpretation for each stimulus activating each of the “sense doors” of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, somatosensory stimulation and memory, approaches infinity—representing *emptiness* regarding potential interpretations and actions. In a very rapid and dynamic process of interneural activity, the potential for interpretation and action of incoming stimuli begins approaching infinity/emptiness, but almost instantaneously moves through interpretative neurological layers toward certainty regarding identity and behaviors, while still lacking essential “personality”—this is related to the functioning of the five aggregates mentioned above.

Initial perceptual processes begin to emphasize pathways that sort through various neural networks that determine priorities regarding sensory input, emphasizing some potential outcomes and ignoring others, subsequently feeding energy into interpretive patterns. Within a fraction of a second, meaning-making processes in the brain become predominant and a more certain development of a definitive self is developed in preconsciousness--*emptiness* begins to transform through craving and clinging into a self-state organization that is “personified”, imbued with ego and action, that not only defines oneself, but also how the world must be! This is the manifestation of dukkha regarding oneself and the world. Distress is experienced because the transitory and fabricated nature of “selfing” is inherently insecure and uncertain, and there is confusion and uncertainty because the process emerges out of the infinite realm of possibilities--the emptiness of infinite potentiality regarding the interdependent interactions between external circumstances and internal mental conditioning functions.

**Physiological Processes**

These functions of the brain and extended nervous system create a sense of physical separation from the environment--for example, that the skin separates the body from the world outside. The mind naturally creates the separation with the identification--“This is my body”. However, when closely investigated with a microscope, the boundary between the cellular tissues of the skin (or the lining of the lungs or digestive tract) becomes less and less distinct. Liquids and gases pass through these membranes both ways, inwards and outwards. When the tissues are investigated through an electron microscope at the atomic level, there is more *emptiness* than there is any nuclear structure—another way of describing sunnata.

Subjectively, while practicing body scanning meditation with enough concentration and investigation, any interest in defining physicality beyond an indeterminate field of vibrational experience diminishes--where is the body-self located during that experience? The absence of any mental need to determine where the body leaves off and the world begins is another manifestation of emptiness--in this case the absence of craving/clinging to the belief that the skin provides a solid boundary for the body.

The same sort of subjective *emptiness* of self is experienced in what are called the “formless jhanas” (jah-nahs), highly developed and subtle levels of concentrated consciousness, during which the mind is totally disengaged sensory awareness—infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite no-thingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. Traditionally, Siddhartha, before his Awakening into Buddhahood, mastered these levels of awareness and realized that they are inadequate for total liberation from dukkha. Subsequently he perfected vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah), insight, realizing the full potential of sunnata upon Awakening.

**Psychosocial Processes**

Here is a quote downloaded from “The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology” regarding sociological phenomenology:

When phenomenologists and phenomenological anthropologists write about experience, they are primarily concerned with describing the essential conditions of experience. Therefore, rather than simply providing a description of a series of events and activities that accumulate over time and shape a person’s life, phenomenologists investigate and describe the potentialities and relationships that make experience possible in the first place. Rather than merely describing that a homeless person in Boston may be ‘struggling along’, phenomenological anthropologists will also investigate which conditions led to this predicament in the first place and offer a way for understanding how these conditions shape lives.

Wikipedia describes phenomenology as a philosophy that “…seeks to investigate the universal features of [consciousness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness) while avoiding assumptions about the external world, aiming to describe [phenomena](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenon) as they appear to the [subject](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subject_(philosophy)), and to explore the meaning and significance of the [lived experiences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lived_experience).”—a very Buddhist perspective about life. The above quote emphasizes that what creates “struggling along” emerges from a lifetime of phenomenological relationship experiences. Considering contemporary psychosociological research, careful investigation of interpersonal exchanges show that our sense of self requires feedback from others through the course of one’s life. This is called *interpersonal attachment theory*--attachment in this case is not related to the Buddhist concept of attachment, which in that case is synonymous with clinging--instead, it refers to the relational bond between people. We build a personality through interpersonal exchanges, from birth to death. Self-experience is co-created, interpersonal, and therefore “empty” of separate identity.

My sense of self develops through ongoing interpersonal reinforcement. I have been socially conditioned to identify as cis-male, as a post-WWII baby boomer, a U.S. citizen, as Caucasian, and so on. All of these cultural designations are *empty* of inherent reality but create a “social self”. Much of human distress and confusion occurs because of psychological conflicts that emerge due to a “mismatch” between these acculturated identities and immediate subjective experience. Contemporary social mores are fabricated and impermanent; for example, a cis-male identity may not be as valued as was the case in 1980--many young people are culturally conditioned towards more gender flexible identities. If I had been born 10 years before or after WWII, cultural norms would condition a different constellation of identity reinforcers because of the impact that WWII had that was different from the interpersonal reinforcers of someone born in the late 1950’s. The cultural norms associated with the color of one’s skin have different psychological and interpersonal impacts also. The gist of this is that one’s personality and self-identity is *empty* of certainty and continuity, depending on a multiplicity of socially reinforcing pressures. This is another example of interdependence which, when not understood with Wisdom, foster dukkha.

We are immersed in a culture that identifies security and self-worth as consumers of material goods and services. We are conditioned through our earliest formative cultural experiences to identify ourselves through materialistic standards, as consumers. The more we are identified through craving/clinging to the results of sociological conditioning, the more dukkha plays a role in our lives, especially during the rapidly changing socioeconomic circumstances of contemporary life.

The concept of *emptiness* is not necessarily nihilistic, that is, not valuing life experience, although a person lacking insight and Wisdom can thoroughly identify with this view, which would generate cynicism and hopelessness, with important negative consequences. *Emptiness can also convey hope and opportunities for beneficial change*. Neurologically and physiologically, neuroplasticity is real--the ability to change how the mind creates a self can be monitored with mindfulness and investigative insight and then reorganized through the application of Right Effort. Neuroplasticity emerges from sunnata!

**Contingent Provisional Emergence**

Another way to understand sunnata is through what the Buddha regarded as the core concept of *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah), translated as *Dependent Origination*--the key element for understanding the dynamic and impersonal nature of human experience.

I have modified the terminology as Contingent Provisional Emergence: The word *contingent* means that multiple events are interactive in function, mutually dependent and mutually influential—the events are in proximity and “press” on each other. A moment of experience is mutually interdependent with other co-occurring factors. Regarding the five aggregates, the stimulation of Form (varieties of co-occurring sensory stimulation) interacts dynamically with Feelings, Perceptions, Mind Conditioning Factors, and these are reflected in Consciousness, all affected by craving and clinging, and are contingent upon each other. The logic of contingency is as follows: if A occurs, B occurs; if A doesn’t occur, B doesn’t occur. In fact, this concept is a core consideration in traditional Buddhist understanding of paticcasamuppada:

When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising (uppada) of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation (nirodha) of this, that ceases. — *Samyutta Nikaya 12.61*

Within the incredible complexity of life, as suggested in the discussion of neurological interactivity, the number of contingent variables far exceeds the number of letters in the alphabet, and in totality is limitless in terms of manifestations!

The term *provisional* in this context means that because one condition exists in a certain way, the accompanying condition is influenced in its emergence, that is, the emerging nature of A *provides* an influence on the co-occurring B, and vice-versa. For example, a man, A, would respond to a woman, B, differently than if B was a man. The response of A to B, whether B was male or female, would also be influenced by the context of the encounter, for example, in a workplace setting rather than a familial context. This provisional conditioning is another example of sunnata.

The word *contingent* describes the existence or non-existence of conditions A *or* B, while *provisional* describes the nature of conditions provided by the interactions between A *and* B. In the paticcasamuppada concept, the conditions of A and B are constantly changing, in a process that fluctuates, more or less rapidly. Sometimes it is termed as *codependent* or *interdependent origination*. I have substituted the word *provisional* to emphasize *the conditionality of the process*, as well as the transformational possibilities implied by the term—when we describe something as provisional, it implies that it is temporary, fabricated the way it is in order to meet some circumstantial need—different conditioning *provides* different results.

The conceptual structure of paticcasamuppada involves 12 integrated links of provisional emergence that *provide* a karmic outcome, which could be the emergence of a wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral moment of experience. This process literally describes how we actually change our minds—changing karmic results. In neuropsychology, this transformative capacity is called neuroplasticity, and is another way to understand sunnata. Contingency also describes the Buddhist view of *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), non-self, a moment of self-awareness can’t be truly independent; rather, that moment is inherently contextual rather than created by a permanent, separate, autonomous self.

The term *emergence* is used to avoid the potential for misunderstanding that occurs with the word *origination*, which implies an origin or beginning. Buddhism doesn’t consider first causes, because the emphasis is on modifying the constantly changing states of mind that constitute a self, rather than the origins of life, which must be abstract and theoretical. Also, the word origination implies a singular cause in the sequence of events, which isn’t really possible, considering the inconceivably complex and interdependent nature of life in the universe!

The 12 links are co-occurring, operating simultaneously in processing sense data that can be described in ways similar to modern complexity theory. Here is a more elaborated discussion of the 12 links:

**Ignorance,** called *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), is considered to be the primary or fundamental cause of *dukkha* (doo-kah), *distress* and *confusion* regarding the transitional mind states which are occurring on a moment-to-moment basis; another term commonly describing avijja is *delusion*. It could be described as the uninvestigated “default programming” of lived experience, taking what arises in awareness as a true rendering of the self and the world. How ignorance operates must be understood both conceptually and experientially.

Conceptually, ignorance is a fundamental misunderstanding regarding how the environment and the mind interact. Buddhist doctrine stipulates that momentary, ever-changing “self-creating” is a fundamental characteristic of subjective human reality. The self-creating process crystallizes a moment of “selfing” through craving and clinging, producing distress and confusion, as the consequence (craving and clinging are described in more detail further on). The essential nature of the objective world is a state of flux involving either the flow of a stream of water or the rapid nuclear vibrations of granite. Buddhism explores what the mind creates regarding this flux. As a meaning-making process repeats multiple times a second in the brain, contemporary neuroscientific technology reveals how the imaginative process derived from memory (understood in Buddhist terms as karma) takes precedence over what new data input might reveal. This process of “jumping to conclusions” is called *confirmation bias* in contemporary psychology. This creates a false perception of a permanent self “observing” what happens, and this misperception is avijja.

Experientially, the untrained mind does not adequately track the extremely rapid emergent changes in the process of awareness, influenced by emotionally potent conditioning functions--karmic formations-- described further below, that distort perception. A highly complex series of simultaneously activated neural events, some related to sensory input, some to cognitive processes, dispersed throughout the brain, operate very rapidly, manifesting a “magical” illusion of continuity that we call the self or ego. Ignorance of this sort is deeply and fundamentally conditioned and is the final obstacle to be overcome in achieving full Awakening.

We train through disciplined meditation practice to be mindfully and directly aware of the rapid arising and passing of self-states, not identifying with the momentary self-organizations as anything other than provisional consequences of imagination. This stage of insight involves developing the Seven Factors of Awakening: *mindfulness, investigation, energy/effort, joy/enhanced interest, tranquility, concentration,* and *equanimity/balance*.

As these highly refined processes become more skillfully applied, several insights may be evident. There might be awareness of a “flickering” effect, somewhat like being in a room with a strobe light. In this case, moments of self-organizing are directly recognized as arising and passing away multiple times per second. It is also possible that moment-by-moment awareness becomes increasingly “disenchanted” with craving and clinging to the belief that transitory moments of awareness constitute an enduring, autonomous self. In this case the formed thoughts and urgencies lose credibility and potency. This disenchanted quality of awareness is called *viraga* (vih-rah-gah), interpreted as *dispassion.* The thoughts and impressions that come and go in awareness are fleeting and insubstantial, and this is directly realized, with more awareness of the “spaciousness” of consciousness and less on the stream of thoughts and impressions. This spaciousness is sunnata.

**Karmic Influences,** called *sankhara* (sahn-kah-rah)*,* are *the fabricating processes that emerge from stored memories*, tendencies embedded in the mind, that shape the perceptual process into self-experience. These formations are latent and emotionally potent until they are stimulated into processes that shape momentary self-state organizations. In the brain, short-term memory eventually consolidates into long-term memory, stored as a multiplicity of very complex, associated neural networks that are co-operating throughout the brain. As memory is transitioning from short-term to long-term, the degree of emotional potency that co-occurs with the retained event is also stored.

The degree of emotional potency, along with the frequency of events similar in context and degree of emotional tension, builds a tendency for the emotionally potent memories to “jump to the head of the line” of possible meanings for what the eye sees, the ear hears, etc., and this emergent process, when not investigated, becomes the “default mode” of self-referencing—this is confirmation bias. Additionally, associations develop through repeated activation of the network--these can be called “habits”. Sankhara are much like templates stored in memory—when a current stimulus arises, the mind searches out memory “bits” through an extremely rapid and complex process, to determine the “best fit” template to make sense of the flow of incoming data. The “best fit” is often the template with the strongest emotion or most frequently reinforced potency. The accompanying process of craving and clinging forces the fit. Craving, another of the links described below, is the driven and urgent quality of feeling, either wanting to delight in pleasant associations or avoid unpleasant feelings. The experience of clinging, another link described below, arises as the associations activated are unexamined and therefore misperceived as an enduring self; this is the manifestation of *avijja*, ignorance. This is particularly evident when someone overreacts impulsively to a situation, then, upon later reflection, realizes that their initial assessment was inaccurate and likely maladaptive.

The term *sankhara* (sahn-kah-rah) can be understood as a *noun*, with the stored memory providing a template. When activated through craving and clinging, sankhara then functions as a *verb*, a self-creating force, becoming, another link described below, and after activation the sankhara subsides back into its memory category, in reserve until reactivated. When repeatedly reactivated, the shaping force of the sankhara gets stronger and more convincing as it arises. *The most consequential and potent result of the function of sankhara is the notion of an enduring, autonomous self*.

The word karma is functionally synonymous with sankhara. *Karma* originally meant *action*, the fulfillment of the process of being, another link, which could either be wholesome or unwholesome in outcome. In the Buddha’s culture, it meant that humans are meant to follow the edicts of the gods in thoughts and actions, as manifested in the societal norms of their clan, in order to assure a benevolent rebirth. The Buddha repurposed the term to focus more on individual ethical thoughts and actions that support the process of Awakening rather than conforming to the edicts of the Brahman world view.

Sankhara is one of the *five clinging-aggregates.* It operates to aggregate or pull together *sanna* (sahn-yah), *perception*, and *vedana* (vwey-duh-nah), *feeling*, reflected upon *vinnana* (vihn-yah-nah), *consciousness*, creating the subjective experience of selfing. These four aggregates constitute the Buddhist notion of the mind. The fifth aggregate is *rupa* (roo-pah)*, form*—the stimulations from the sensational world, through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and bodily sensing.

On a mundane level, the categories manifested by sankhara, activated by craving and clinging, are either wholesome or unwholesome moments of self-awareness. As spiritual purification develops, the increasing frequency of wholesome karmic formations produce insights leading to the selflessness of nirvana.

**Consciousness,** called *vinnana* (vih-nyah-nah)*,* represents*the medium upon which the karmic formations are reflected*, like the screen upon which a motion picture is projected and reflected. In the same way that a screen has no opinion regarding the projection, consciousness in the absence of craving and clinging cannot manifest as a self. A moment of consciousness reflects the karmic formations, sensitized by the emergence of the conditioned mental phenomena. The sensitized moment of consciousness has a lingering quality—an example being the enduring afterimage of light that occurs after looking at a bright light, then closing the eyes. This lingering “glow” in the mind, although very brief, predisposes the shaping tendencies of sankhara during the successive thought-moments of subjective life experience, creating the blending of different selfing moments into “I am” and “this is the world”. This is a fundamental aspect of ignorance, a blending of consciousness moments, much as the untrained mind blends the images of a film strip to produce the illusion of forms moving on a screen.

**Mind-and-Form,** called *nama-rupa* (nah-mah-roo-pah), clarifies an important distinction: nama-rupa is essentially a natural organic process, emerging from the interactions between a sense object (rupa) and a cognitive function (nama). For example, the vibrating wave we call sound (the sense object) is a separate category of reality than the mental process (the cognitive function we call hearing) that perceives the sound and makes it into a meaningful self-experience.

Due to ignorance and karmic shaping, the emerging, impressionable consciousness (vinnana) misperceives mind-and-form as the same phenomenon—however, they are *not* conditioned similarly. For example, what stimulates the ear might be the sound of a radio, while what conditions the mind’s interpretation of that sound depends on prior experiences which may or may not be a good fit-for example, prior experience might misinterpret the sound as someone actually talking in the next room!

In addition, regarding the Buddhist concept of the five aggregates, rupa is the first aggregate, form; the other four aggregates, feeling, perception, karmic formations, and consciousness, are nama. *Mindful awareness of this difference between nama and rupa is an important skill to cultivate during the process of awakening from distress and confusion*. As mindfulness of breathing practice supports the development of *samadhi/passadhi* (sah-mah-dee/pah-sah-dee)—*concentration/tranquility--*a quality of non-reactive spaciousness develops in consciousness as a “buffering zone” (explained further in the section regarding equanimity/equipoise). This supports the possibility of alternate perceptions to emerge into awareness and further shaped by karmic conditioning; in the case just described, assuming someone is speaking in the other room becomes a contingent and provisional understanding—more consideration would clarify the mental process, producing the view that the sound was created by a radio.

The **Six Sense Bases**, called *salayatana* (sah-lah-yah-tah-nah), represents the processes of *the* *eyes and seeing, the ears and hearing, the nose and smelling, the tongue and tasting, the somatosensory system and touching*, and, finally, *the mind and remembering, defining,* or *planning*. There is a consciousness that reflects each specific sense base, e.g. the function of the ear, combined with the part of the brain dedicated to processing signals from the auditory nerve; without consciousness, there would be no sense base. In the brain, each sensory processing system operates separately, and is finally coordinated by the associational cortex of the brain before emerging into awareness as a coherent and meaningful moment of selfing. The separate sense bases are initially processed by *feeling* and *perception*, which function as a bridge between the raw sensory stimulation and higher-level cognitive processes (see feeling/perception, below). The gathering and shaping aspect of karmic formations pushes one of the sense-based processes into awareness through the mind’s function of remembering and planning.

**Contact,** called *phassa* (fah-sah),represents *the actual moment of stimulus-response interaction*, e.g., light hitting the eye, sound the ear drums, etc., as a basis for karmic influences. At this point in the process, there are present a stimulus (light, sound, etc.), a sense base (eyes and seeing, ears and hearing, etc.) and contact (the feeling/perception bridge between sense data and mental processing). As mentioned above, the incoming sensory data is channeled separately, through the previously described sense bases, outside awareness, emerging into consciousness through the processes of feeling, karmic conditioning, craving, clinging, and becoming.

**Feeling,** called *vedana* (vay-dah-nah), represents *the immediate affective reaction of the mind to stimulation of the sense bases*. It is experienced through an instinctual, impulsive process that manifests in a range extending from the extremely pleasant through a neutral range to the extremely unpleasant. Feeling is associate closely with sanna (sahn-yah), perception, which functions to “zoom in” on a particular part of the flow of the sense doors, separating that stimulus and integrating with the feeling tone.

Vedana is not thinking as such--not any internal narrative--but conditions and is conditioned by karmic formations. There are five sorts of feelings: *pleasant or unpleasant physical feelings, pleasant or unpleasant mental feelings*, and *feelings that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant*.

The experience of feeling, either physical or mental, is the first moment of conscious awareness that might be available subjectively; all the links are now emerging, and ***mindful, non-reactive awareness of feeling at this moment of emergence as an impersonal phenomenon is the primary opportunity for mindful investigation to intervene and redirect the unfolding of karma by letting go of craving and clinging.***

This moment in the process of contingent provisional emergence happens very quickly—this is why the mental training described in the Noble Eightfold Path, combining Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, culminating in the perfection of the Seven Awakening Factors, is so valuable. As mental training develops through rigorous mindfulness meditation practice, the capacity to quickly notice and assess each emerging moment of feeling improves. This assessing process includes a non-reactive equanimity/equipoise regarding the pull of craving, and is guided by virtue--Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

Mastering the practice of mindfulness of feelings is key to the process of awakening. The skillful practice includes seeing the feelings as just feelings, not as the self that ignorance and karmic formations create:

“And how, monks, does he in regard to feelings abide contemplating feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling he knows ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel and unpleasant feeling’; when feeling a neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel a neutral feeling.’” *Satipatthana Sutta,* translated by Thanissaro

Closely associated with vedana is *cetana* (chey-tah-nah), translated as *intention* or *volition*. Cetana functions to coordinate the karmic formations towards action. Being mindful of intentions is very useful for investigating the transition from feeling to craving. Noting this intention skillfully in order to prevent the arising of craving and clinging requires persistent activation of mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena, two of the seven Awakening Factors.

**Craving,** called *tanha* (tahn-hah), is *the initial affective response of the nervous system to pleasant or unpleasant feelings/sensations when conditioned by ignorance*. It is an instinctual driving force, an impulsive urgency that seeks to acquire and sustain pleasant feelings or to avoid and eradicate unpleasant feelings. As a non-cognitive force of nature, craving is not related to shame or consideration for the consequences of actions taken. It is typically experienced as a sense of aliveness or vitality that operates like a magnetic force, either pulled toward or pushed away from a sensation or state of mind. *Pleasant or unpleasant feeling “morphs” into craving through ignorance.* The driven quality of craving sets the stage for the development of future ignorance and other karmic formations. The task of Awakening requires the ability to quickly and accurately disregard the urgency of craving, supported by *upekkha* (ooh-peh-kah), *equanimity/equipoise*, the ability to be aware of and not controlled by feeling/craving.

**Clinging,** called *upadana* (ooh-pah-dah-nah), is the obsessive quality of the mind, which, through *ignorance*, is *mis-identifying responses to the emergence of craving as a self or reliable understanding of how the world is*. It can be understood as the “strange stability”mentioned previously in these notes. The mind tends to develop rationalizations that justify acting under the influence of ignorance, karma and craving. The lingering, emotionally potent aftereffect of a moment of consciousness contributes to clinging—in awareness, the rapidly sequenced moment-by-moment emerging products of the aggregate’s actions tend to blend together through papanca, producing an illusion of continuity, cohesiveness, solidity or validity. I regard this misconception as a form of “enchantment”, and part of the process of awakening includes insights that “break the spell of the enchantment”, initiated through wise intention. This disenchantment also is a manifestation of viraga, dispassion.

A useful analogy for understanding and deconstructing this process of craving and clinging is that of the motion picture film. Each image in the different cells has its own formation; the rapidly changing images from cell to cell as the film passes through the projector leaves a brief residual image in the mind, providing the illusion of continuity—the mind is tricked into believing there’s an object moving about on the screen.

**Becoming,** called *bhava* (bah-vah), *represents the emergent function of the process*, occurring as the result of *ignorance, karmic formations, contact, feelings, craving* and *clinging*. This action of the untrained mind reinforces the illusion of self as reliably able to accurately describe reality and reliably take controlling action in situations. *The process of becoming is inherently unstable, insecure and may or may not be a useful rendering of the current situation*. Therefore, we can say that the inevitable result of craving, clinging, and becoming is *dukkha,* distress and confusion, as distress is craving, and confusion is clinging.

It is interesting to note that the original root meaning of *dukkha* referred to *the poor fit between an axle and the hub of a wheel--there would be a rough ride, and the wheel would often fall off the axle!* In modern terms, we could also say that becoming is stressful, in that there is an undercurrent of distress for all people, all sentient beings, since there is no guarantee of perceptions being entirely reliable all the time. Another interesting point is that modern renderings of stress include *distress,* which is unpleasant stress, and *eustress,* pleasant stress!

In fact, the cohesiveness provided by karmic activity is truly provisional, that is, it provides a more or less useful adaptation to changing circumstances. To the extent that craving and clinging are strongly reinforced by ignorance, this illusion just perpetuates the suffering on more or less subtle levels, with greater or lesser consequences; we act out the belief that the mind is clinging to, and then convince ourselves and others that it is justified.

**Birth,** called *jati* (jah-tee), represents *the repetitive and momentary fruition of the contingent provisional emergence cycle*. It is typically what the untrained mind is aware of as a self when a stream of mental formations emerge into consciousness and are acted upon. Buddhist teachings and modern scientific research reveal that the decisions that we are consciously aware of, the self-states, were actually shaped pre-consciously (in other words, the conscious mind is the last to know what’s really going on!). It is the enchantment, the identified self, the “I am”, emerging and crystallizing. Because of ignorance, karmic influences, craving and clinging, this arisen moment is identified with and acted on, typically resulting in suffering.

**Decay and Death,** called *jaramarana* (jah-rah-mah-rah-nah), is *the fulfillment of the cycle*. *It represents the dissolution of the briefly aggregated self-state, whether mental or physical in nature*. Becoming, birth, decay and death represent the culmination of each moment of self-state organization; modern neuroscientific research confirms what Buddhist psychology has proposed for centuries—*the whole cycle of paticcasamuppada recurs multiple times per second throughout the course of life!* A basic principle of Buddhism is impermanence, a term reflected in 20th century philosophy as phenomenology, which is the concept that each moment of experience emerges subjectively and holistically, determined by immediate, contingent causes and conditions.

The implication of this is that each moment of experience is conditioned by prior karmic influences, and that as the moment passes, only the impression of the aftereffects of karma remain, the “glow” of the subsiding mind moment, to subside into the function of karmic outcome, called *vipaka* (vih-pah-kah), the residual “sankhara as a noun”, from which the karmic formations of the next provisional origination cycle are drawn. The absence of mindful awareness results in the confusion and emotional urgency that gets “stored” in memory, for future reference. This lack of mindfulness is *ignorance*, the first of the links

These cycles are incredibly complex, involving the activation of millions of neurons, with trillions of interconnections, replaying multiple times a second, accumulating an illusory experience of a permanent and reliable self. Thus ignorance, plus the driving force of craving and clinging, creates and recreates the dukkha, which is experienced as distress and confusion. The suffering often isn’t dramatic or extreme. The suffering is the inconsistency of our values, plans and other products of sankhara, often experienced as an ongoing dissatisfaction, insecurity and emotional brittleness that occurs during life. The Buddha’s intention was to address this fundamental degree of ignorance, beginning with learning how to observe the selfing process in a way that avoids thinking and behaving in ways that create confusion and distress at an obvious mundane level, and then investigating the fundamental processes that shape the very foundations of the selfing experience.

Using mindfulness of breathing meditation, a person can train the mind to be more internally aware and disciplined. As the wholesome karmic conditioning function of mindfulness is reflected more frequently in awareness, developing higher and higher levels of proficiency, more and more quickly applied, it’s possible to actually observe the transition from feeling into craving and clinging in the selfing process. As we learn to become aware of this cycling process and notice with clarity, dispassion and detachment how the self is derived from the dynamic interactions between karmic formations and sensory input, we can investigate the point that craving and clinging arise in the mind and liberate the mind from dukkha.

As craving is diminished through mindful awareness and the cultivation of samadhi/passadhi, renunciation and equanimity, the tendency of the mind to identify with and unwisely cling to and act on an emergent thought diminishes. The hard, crystallized sense of self begins to soften and dissolve the enchantment of clinging. This reconditions the storehouse of karmic formations away from ignorance and toward wisdom.

In this system, wisdom is defined as the ability to recognize that there is a distinction between what stimulates the sense doors and how the mind perceives the input. There is no permanent, ongoing self to be gratified or defended, no observer or observed, and that karma is a real force in the universe that can be modified from unwholesome to wholesome moments of consciousness.

The ultimate achievement of wholesomeness is Awakening/Nirvana, the unconditioned/uncontained--the only permanent, unchanging reality in the universe, the infinite ground of all being. This is also the ultimate realization of sunnata. This experience can also be called God consciousness, the Tao, Allah, etc., in other faith traditions. This is human salvation. I hope that reading this inspires you to train the mind in order to realize freedom from suffering.