**HOW TO CHANGE YOUR KARMA**

On Wednesday, February 7, 2024, I talked about the characteristics of the Second Noble Truth-, that is, the craving and clinging that creates and sustains the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self, the primary cause of Dukkha. This talk focuses on how this self-experience is formed, through a core concept of Buddhist psychology, *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah). The traditional translation of this view of human personality formation is *dependent origination*, but I have developed a different way to understand this important concept that I call *contingent provisional emergence*. These notes are derived from several previously prepared notes for talks I have given over the last several years regarding this very important Buddhist concept.

The focus of the previous talk, the function of craving and clinging, which creates the conditions of the First Noble Truth, Dukkha, was to describe the characteristics of *craving* as *an instinctual, driving force that provides an impulsive reaction to any stimulation*—to approach and sustain pleasurable physical and mental experience or avoid or get rid of unpleasant physical and mental experience. *Clinging* comes about as the result of *the inability to objectively and non-reactively investigate how the mind makes meaning and creates behavioral responses that emerge from the experience of craving*. The goal of spiritual practice is to become directly and immediately aware of craving/clinging and overcome the resulting karmic consequences.

The traditional view of paticcasamuppada extends over the course of several rebirths, while other commentators describe this system as a conceptual way to understand how the various functions of the Five Aggregates create a “self” almost instantaneously and “blends” the recurrence of these momentary fabrications into the stream of subjective awareness we live through. I find the second interpretation more useful in the practice of vipassana. For those who are interested in how Buddhadasa, a very well-respected teacher analyses this concept in the book “Paticcasamuppada—Practical Dependent Origination”. Here is the URL for a free copy of the book:

<https://www.suanmokkh.org/system/books/files/000/000/126/original/Buddhadasa-Paticcasamuppada-20200319.pdf?1599466277>

Another excellent resource for additional study of this important concept is “The Shape of Suffering” by Thanissaro, an American monk. Here is the URL for this free .pdf book:

[https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/#shapeofsuffering](https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/%23shapeofsuffering)

The Buddha regarded this concept as crucial to understand conceptually and realize experientially, on a moment-by-moment basis, in regard to the Five Clinging-Aggregates, the Buddhist concept of personality:

"The form of what has thus come into being is gathered under the form clinging-aggregate. The feeling of what has thus come into being is gathered under the feeling clinging-aggregate. The perception of what has thus come into being is gathered under the perception clinging-aggregate. The fabrications of what has thus come into being are gathered under the fabrication clinging-aggregate. The consciousness of what has thus come into being is gathered under the consciousness clinging-aggregate. One discerns, 'This, it seems, is how there is the gathering, meeting, & convergence of these five clinging-aggregates. Now, the Blessed One has said, "Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising." And these things — the five clinging-aggregates — are dependently co-arisen. Any desire, embracing, grasping, & holding-on to these five clinging-aggregates is the origination of stress. Any subduing of desire & passion, any abandoning of desire & passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress.' And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal." Majjhima Nikaya # 28, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Additionally, in the Mahaniddana Sutta, the Great Causes Discourse, the Buddha describes how difficult this process of self-formation and self-transformation is to comprehend, in this translation by Thanissaro:

[The] Ven. Ānanda approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: “It’s amazing, lord, it’s astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be.”

(The Buddha:) “Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It’s because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations.

I have studied this concept repeatedly over the 40 years of my practice of Buddhist doctrine. I believe each generation has a responsibility to carefully make use of current cultural terminology to revisit and validate the concepts within Buddhism. The wide-spread access to scholarly studies regarding Buddhist principles and practices, along with contemporary scientific research, has significantly enhanced my understanding, and the following analysis is my attempt to revisit paticcasamuppada and make best use of the concepts in my practice.

**Contingent Provisional Emergence**

The word *contingent* means that multiple concurrent events are interactive in function, mutually interdependent and mutually influential—the events are in proximity and “press” on each other. A moment of subjective experience is mutually interdependent with other environmental and co-occurring factors. Regarding the Five Clinging-Aggregates, as described above, the stimulation of Form (varieties of co-occurring sensory stimulation) interacts dynamically with Feelings, Perceptions, and Mind Conditioning Factors, all reflected in Consciousness, and all affected by craving and clinging, contingent upon each other. In fact, this concept is a core consideration in traditional Buddhist understanding of paticca samuppada:

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, the number of contingent variables far exceeds the number of letters in the alphabet, and in totality is limitless in terms of potential manifestations!

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, internally and externally, 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 ways that are either wholesome, unwholesome, or karmically inconsequential!* 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 the result of an interaction between stimuli and conditioned mental responses, rather than created by a permanent ongoing self.

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.

The term *emergence* is used to avoid the potential for misunderstanding that occurs with the traditional translation *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 sequence of self-organizing moments rather than the origins of life, which must be 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!

Another consideration related to emergence relates to contemporary physics and the development of *complexity theory,* which has had a tremendous and revolutionary impact on our understanding of reality. Very simply stated from a psychological perspective, it is the limitless complexity of the changing physical environment, interacting with the incredible complexity of human psychological functions, which are transitional in nature. Emergence is the term used to describe the dynamic, ever-changing interactional process as a moment of “structural coherence” emerges into awareness.

An important concept within complexity theory is the *attractor*, which represents how *a particular element of interactions between multiple phenomena provides an initiating organizational function through which a momentary coherence emerges*. For example, we know that a minute particle of dust provides a core which “attracts” moisture in the air to create a drop of water; when the temperature drops below freezing, a complex transformation of the liquid water into a snowflake occurs.

There is a Buddhist term that describes this emergent process well: *papanca* (pah-pahn-chah), which translates as *the proliferation of a thought process from a seed moment of perception*. For example, a vibration in the air of a certain frequency stimulates the auditory nerve and an initial perception is formed and through moment-by-moment mental processing in various areas of the brain this perception proliferates into conscious awareness, experienced as “There is a bird singing”.

Paticcasamuppada represents what may be the first statement in human history of what the modern mind recognizes as a psychology of consciousness. In terms of spirituality, rather than attributing the origin of human salvation or damnation to an external supernatural being, the focus of Buddhist vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah)--insight practice involves investigating how psychological conditions unique to the individual *and* the contextual circumstances of environmental conditions provide the critical interdependent factors that affect spiritual progress or downfall. This concept doesn’t deny a supernatural force in the universe, but rather indicates that humans are ultimately responsible for their salvation, whether there is a God or not. In terms of logic, *if there is a God, the moment that God influences the outcome of the natural world, then God is also interdependent—contingent and provisional, emergent in the unfolding of subjective reality!*

Contingent provisional emergence describes a complex, dynamic process of interactive factors coming together to produce a brief, transitory moment of subjective experience, which I call *selfing moments.* Buddhist psychology posits that the self-experience is constantly emerging and then rapidly transforming, relentlessly producing a fluid blending of physical sensations and mental fabrications that, regardless of any religious attributions, is simply miraculous.

**HOW THE SYSTEM OPERATES**

The Theravadin Buddhist tradition considers provisional emergence to be a chain of associations with 12 links: **Ignorance** clouds or distorts the incoming sense data as various karmic formations are activated; **karmic formations** are reflected in **consciousness**, which, in turn supports the interaction providing the mind-and-form process; **mind-and-form** acts through one or more of the six sense bases; provisionally, through the **six sense bases**, contact or stimulation arises; **contact** provides feeling/sensation; because ignorance and karmic formations are influencing **feeling/sensation**, then **craving**, which is strongly linked to **clinging,** produces the aggregation of conditions that shape **becoming**; this immediately leads to **birth,** that is a momentary aggregation of the provisional self, followed immediately by **decay**, and, finally, **death** (of a transitory ego state which, due to ignorance, through the actions of craving and clinging, what we call the self recurs).

This graphic illustrates the dynamic interactions between the different functions in the process of contingent provisional emergence:

**IGNORANCE**

**KARMIC INFLUENCE**

**CONSCIOUSNESS**

**MIND-AND-FORM**

**SIX SENSE BASES**

**CONTACT**

**FEELING**

**CRAVING**

**CLINGING**

**BECOMING**

**BIRTH**

**DECAY AND DEATH**

The 12 links are co-occurring, operating simultaneously in processing sense data that can be described in ways similar to modern complexity theory. *Through the training of mindfulness meditation, the emergence of feeling and papanca, the proliferation of mental fabrications can be observed quickly being shaped through craving and clinging, as the process repeats multiple times a second*. The repeated cycling of these factors can be considered in two ways--as describing physical birth, death, and rebirth, (the human life cycle), but in a way more immediately important--as the existential and phenomenological emergence and passing away of subjective life events. It is very important to realize that even though the system described here *seems* linear, that is, a sequential series of stages, or links, it is holistic and nonlinear. This is a significant conceptual mistake. Buddhist teachings and modern scientific research emphasize the fundamentally *contingent, nonlinear* nature of reality. The Buddhist concept of *interdependence* or *interbeing* relies on nonlinear dynamics.

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, unquestioningly 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 how reality 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 their result (craving and clinging are described in more detail further on). The essential nature of the objective world is a state of flux involving, for example, 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 the meaning-making process repeats multiple times a second in the brain, contemporary neuroscientific technology reveals how the imaginative process derived from memory (karma) takes precedence over what new data input might reveal. This process of “jumping to conclusions” is called *confirmation bias* in contemporary psychology and is synonymous with papanca. 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 interactive neural events, some related to sensory input, some to cognitive processes, dispersed throughout the brain, operating very rapidly, manifesting as the 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, as realized in the Third Noble Truth.

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, rapture/enhanced interest, tranquility, concentration,* and *equanimity/equipoise*. These factors overcome avijja, realizing the Wisdom aggregate within the Noble Eightfold Path.

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.

**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. These formations, one’s accumulated life history, 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 contingent, emergent process, when not investigated, becomes the “default mode” of self-referencing—this is confirmation bias. Additionally, associations develop through repeated activation of the neural networks--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 is the driven and urgent quality of feeling, either wanting to delight in pleasant associations or avoid unpleasant feelings. The experience of clinging 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, 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, 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* (vey-dah-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,* 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 has no 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 Clinging-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”. This supports the possibility of alternate perceptions to emerge into awareness and further shaped by, hopefully, wholesome 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 initiation*, 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 associated 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 an 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 is also traditionally translated as attachment and is described as *fuel* or *sustenance*. 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 through confirmation bias. 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”, stored memories, 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 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.