**Reviewing Mind Conditioners—Part 1**

Recently, on August 24, 2022, the Dependent Origination concept was reviewed. One element of the process, *sankhara* (sahn-kah-rah), interpreted as *mind conditioning factors*, bears a more comprehensive review. Each moment of self-state organization has three elements: *a stimulating circumstance* and *a conditioning factor*, reflected in *consciousness*. The stimulating circumstance could be either a physical sensation or a preceding conditioning factor. For example, a sound initiates an initial response— “That’s a bird”—and that perception stimulates a cascading process of cognitive elaboration—“I wonder what kind of bird it is?”, which stimulates “I should get an app for my phone that includes bird songs and the birds that make the sounds!”. All of these subjective moments of experience are reflected in consciousness, which may be “tinted” with a mood—impatience, desire, doubt, etc.

There are 52 conditioning factors, according to the conceptual system developed over a few hundred years after the time of the Buddha and described in the Visuddhimagga (veh-soo-dee-mah-gah), a very extensive text compiled by the scholastic Theravada monk Buddhagosa around 500 CE. The categories within which the sankhara are “stored”are called cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs), interpreted as “Conditioning factors found in the mind”. Imagine the sankharas are files, and the cetasikas are the folders that they are stored in. Their interactions are very dynamic, changing rapidly, and are mutually influential in creating the subjective experience we commonly refer to as “myself”. There are clusters of cetasikas that aggregate into a flowing selfing experience—universal, particular, and either wholesome or unwholesome in their functions.

Sankhara is synonymous with karma, that is, influencing the process of cognition, through which we subjectively experience an internal narrative that creates a non-existent “observer” with a “selfing story” about “something” being observed—a duality, observer/observed. The ultimate goal of Buddhist practice is to dissolve the observer/observed—the experience of Nirvana is nondual, the absence of the observer/observed fabricating process. Previous experience is stored as memory; in this way sankhara can be understood as a “noun”, static, but susceptible to stimulation. When sufficiently stimulated, sankhara operates as a “verb”, providing a karmic influence which is activated and potent for “fleshing out” beliefs and behaviors.

This system for categorizing mind conditioning factors is intended to provide a way to subdivide the complex process of self-creation in order to deconstruct the deeply conditioned belief that there is an enduring and autonomous self—the observer. The deconstruction occurs through the practice of vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah), insight into how the selfing process operates. The cetasika system is a conceptual exercise developed over centuries of meditation practice and analysis of the selfing process and involving generations of debate among many very sophisticated observers of human nature. It is meant to be contemplated, combining thorough intellectual study of the cetasika concepts along with dedicated practice of Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Phenomena, the first two of the Seven Awakening Factors, which will be reviewed in depth during upcoming talks.

The system is subdivided into several categories: Universal, Particular, Unwholesome, and Wholesome cetasikas. The first two categories are considered to be ethically malleable, while the remaining categories list cetasikas that provide ethical shaping to the process of selfing. This talk will include a review of the Universal cetasikas, which are five in number, plus two additional cetasikas that are not technically sankharas that condition the mind—Feeling and Perception—so this section of the review will include seven factors. The Particular cetasikas will also be reviewed, six in number. Feeling and perception are universal but listed separately to acknowledge their function as two of the five aggregates, i.e., form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Feelings and perceptions provide a “bridge” between initiating stimuli and subsequent shaping of a self that results from the karmic actions of the sankhara, so there is no dukkha that directly results from feelings and perceptions. As explained in the talk focusing on dependent origination, focusing in a non-reactive way on the phenomena of feeling creates a different karmic consequence.

In reviewing the cetasikas, understand that they don’t operate sequentially, although that is how they are listed and described. The karmic actions of the sankhara are co-occurring and integrated in the way the experience of selfing manifests in consciousness.

**UNIVERSALS**:

1. **FEELING**: This is sensation and affect—instinctive, impulsive reactivity, not emotion; the range of feeling extends from exceedingly pleasant through neutral or indifferent to exceedingly unpleasant. In meditation practice, one focuses on any impulsive urgency, either physical or emotional. The goal of mindful training is to create clear awareness of the impulsive reactivity with a determination to actively investigate the condition without reacting behaviorally—if there is an itch, notice how the mind and body react without scratching the itch! This sort of response doesn’t ignore the feeling, but instead creates a “buffer” of non-reactive present-moment awareness that acknowledges the feeling as a phenomenon, not a demand for action. The same principle applies regarding a pleasant feeling—if you like candy, notice the pleasurably toned impulsive reactivity without grabbing the candy and eating it.
2. **PERCEPTION**: This is also understood as recognition or memory. This part of the mental process distinguishes a particular aspect of the experiential flow from peripheral stimulation; any other stimuli become fade into the background of awareness. Its function is to highlight that stimulus for more detailed attention.

The remaining 50 factors as a subset are the remaining cetasikas.This term categorizes the sankharas—imagine them as being placed in cetasikas folders according to how they function to shape the selfing process. Sankharas shape the development of each moment of experience, as a further development of perceptions. One commentary suggests that Buddhist spiritual practice is the purification of Sankharas to uproot the misperception of a separate self. Co-operating with Feeling and Perception, there are 5 mind conditioning factors that occur as a cluster with each moment of consciousness and are therefore called universals. They are considered to be ethically malleable, in that they are conditioned through their interaction with either the Unwholesome or Wholesome mind conditioning factors. In addition, other ethically malleable conditioning factors can be present as well, the Particular factors, reviewed further on in these notes.

1. **CONTACT**: This is *the stimulation of the appropriate sensory tract*, e.g., the reaction of the optic nerve after light hits the eye, the initial stimulation of sound in the auditory process, odors and smell, flavors and taste, kinesthetic stimuli (temperature, pressure, etc.). Contact is also part of the initiation of meaning-making, the “selfing story” of subjective experience. Normally all of the “sense doors” are stimulated to some extent at any moment, but feelings and perceptions operate to reduce awareness of all but one of them in a moment of self-state organization. Contact is also involved in the dependent origination concept.
2. **VOLITION**: This is *intention*. 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 aggregated self-state organizations from one momentary rebirth to another and is what makes karma potent. Mindfully investigating volition is a key contemplative skill. While practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation it is useful to persistently aim attention at the intention that initiates the beginning of the in-breath and the intention associated with the beginning of the out-breath—this conditions the brain to be alert for an intention that might become the initiating factor regarding a hindrance or, alternatively, the initiating factor regarding the emergence of a wholesome state of being.
3. **CONCENTRATION**: Also called *one-pointedness*, this factor occurs naturally in the untrained mind as the aggregated fabrications pop into awareness. It stabilizes the focus of the mind. Concentration meditation, when combined with mindfulness and investigation of either wholesome and unwholesome states plus Right Effort (Part of the Noble Eightfold Path), purifies and sustains one-pointedness, with enlightenment as the goal. Concentration is one of the seven Awakening Factors involves the unification of the other six factors in their capacity for liberating the mind from dukkha.
4. **VITALITY**: This is the vitality of each moment of consciousness, not some latent force that sustains consciousness. If volition is what pulls the aggregates from formation to formation, vitality is what enlivens the aggregation of the formation. One way to understand this cetasika is to acknowledge that the food we eat and the air we breathe brings vitality to the brain. Vitality is of great benefit when it manifests as the Awakening Factor of Joy, which is the subjective experience of engaged and non-reactive awareness.
5. **ATTENTION**: If perception is what differentiates each moment of consciousness, attention, combined with one-pointedness, "faces" the object reflected in consciousness. Attention, when cooperating with mindfulness and investigation, can bring wise awareness regarding how contact initiates a meaning-making process in the mind. Without concentration, attention is scattered and uncertain regarding an object of awareness.

**PARTICULARS:** These 6 mental factors do not arise with every moment of consciousness, but often cluster with the universals, aggregating with wholesome or unwholesome factors of the mind. They are:

1. **MOVING ATTENTION TO AN OBJECT:** Called *vitakka* (wee-tah-kah) in Pali, this has the function of "throwing" attention at an object, "as one throws a bit of wet clay at a wall'. In a trained mind, it becomes crucial as a factor supporting Right Concentration (Also part of the Noble Eightfold Path), stabilizing and unifying wholesome functions of the mind. When the mind is afflicted with the hindrance of Sloth and Torpor, this capacity for directed attention is disabled. When functioning well it provides a key element that supports the Awakening Factor called Investigation of Mental Phenomena.
2. **SUSTAINING ATTENTION:** Called *vicara* (wee-chah-rah) in Pali, it has the function of "rubbing against" an object, or functions "as a bit of wet clay, when thrown, sticks to a wall". With unwholesome sankharas, vicara supports clinging in the mind. In the wholesome practice of vipassana, it “rubs against” what is revealed by vitakka and clarifies what is forming in the mind. Vicara is disabled by the hindrances of Sloth and Torpor or Restlessness and Worry. It supports the function of Investigation of Mental Phenomena, one of the 7 Awakening Factors. It also can support renunciation of craving and clinging and sustaining wholesomeness, aligning with Right Understanding and Right Effort of the Noble Eightfold Path.
3. **DETERMINATION:** Also called resolution, this sankhara manifests conviction, and is disabled by Skeptical Doubt or Sloth and Torpor. With unwholesome sankharas, it manifests as stubbornness. It is important to realize that the factor of conviction is only associated with each moment of consciousness and is not a permanent state. When aligned with wholesome sankharas, it supports confidence in the process of Awakening.

11) **ENERGY:** Also called effort, it can be wholesome or unwholesome. It is disabled by the hindrance of Sloth and Torpor. When it is wholesome it is one of the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Effort, and is also known as the Energy Awakening Factor. It manifests vigor and persistence. It channels vitality to produce the stream of awareness we all experience.

12) **ENTHUSIASM:** This factor supports the Joy and Investigation of Mental Phenomena Awakening Factors, and manifests as the enthusiastic engagement of the energy of attention. Even though it is associated with joyful moments of consciousness, enthusiasm can be unwholesome, as is the case when an alcoholic takes delight in the presence of alcohol, or a person becomes enraged. It is disabled by Sloth and Torpor or Skeptical Doubt. When it is wholesome, it fosters the practice of vipassana.

13) **WILL-TO-DO:** This is sometimes called conation or zeal. Zeal searches and reaches for the object that perception recognizes. It is closely associated with volition and can be considered as the triggering event that comprises self-creation. It is disabled by Skeptical Doubt and Sloth and Torpor. In its unwholesome manifestation, it allies with desire and ill will. When wholesome, it allies with Right Effort.