Reviewing The Universal Mind Conditioners

An argument can be made that the Buddha was the first human to be able to articulate a psychology of personality. A key element of this project involves contemplating the Five Aggregates of Clinging. The fourth of the five aggregates is termed s*ankharakhandha* (sahn-kah-rah-kahn-dah), with *sankhara* translated as “*that which puts together”*, or *“that which has been put together”*, and *khandha* as a *group* or an *aggregation*. The alternative term for sankhara is *cetasika* (cheh-tah-see-kah), translated as “*that which is found in consciousness*”. There are 52 cetasikas, and an overview of these functions is found in the archived Dharma talk of August 18, 2021, entitled “Overview of the Mind Conditioning Factors”.

These notes provide a review of those cetasikas that are present in every moment of consciousness, hence they are termed the *Universal Mind Conditioners*. The Universal Mind Conditioners are ethically malleable, that is, they are subject to the influence of accompanying factors that may be wholesome or unwholesome ethically. They can be subdivided into two categories: *Feeling* and *Perception*, then *Contact, Volition, Concentration, Vitality* and *Attention.* The first subcategory occurs in every moment but are set into their own unique position, that is, a bridging function that merges physical sensation with mental fabrication. Feeling and Perception are important enough that they represent another two of the five aggregates. Here are terms that can expand upon the characteristics of the Universal Mind Conditioners:

FEELING: The term in Pali is *vedana* (vwey-dah-nah). The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism describes vedana as “…’sensation’ or ‘sensory feeling’; the physical or mental sensations that accompany all moments of sensory consciousness. Sensations are always understood as being one of three: pleasurable, painful or neutral… [it is] the seventh constituent in the twelvefold chain of dependent origination… the second of the four foundations of mindfulness.” (The twelvefold chain of dependent origination will be reviewed in detail during a future Dharma talk).

It is important to know feeling as a quality of consciousness, not a self—for example, we typically say “I feel hurt when you say that!”—there is no “I”, only the feeling of distress and aversion because of the way the mind has made meaning from the sounds uttered by another person. This feeling creates an emotional “bridge” between the unprocessed stimulus and the other Mind Conditioning Factors that are the impersonal “makers” of meaning.

In contemporary psychological terms, vedana is understood as affect, that is, 1. The range of reactivity in response to a stimulus, either affect approach, affect avoidance or affect neutrality. 2. The degree of emotional and physiological arousal associated regarding a stimulus. 3. The degree of impulsive behavioral reactivity associated with a stimulus.

Contemporary research in the area of affect tolerance suggests that the cultivation of what is called trait mindfulness increases awareness of the experience of affect while reducing impulsive reactivity to that affect, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. The cultivation of samadhi (sah-mah-dee), the unification of wholesome mind conditioners, is a fundamental way to improve equanimity, which is the ability to be aware of an affect without impulsive reactivity.

PERCEPTION: The term in Pali is *sanna* (sahn-yah),, which is *the function of the mind that separates a particular part of the general flow of stimulation for more focused attention*. It has the characteristic of recognition or labelling of a stimulus for future reference in order to assess how to create a memory trace that fabricates an internal narrative and response to the stimulus. As with vedana, the problem with sanna can be illustrated when “I saw a bird”—there is no “I” or bird, there are simply the neural processes that interact and then are reflected in consciousness to more specifically focus on parts of the flow of stimulation.

Feeling and Perception can be related to functions of two key clusters of neural nuclei in the brain, the amygdala and the hippocampus. The amygdala’s function is related to feelings, as the neural process is to sort through various affective reactions to pleasant or unpleasant stimuli. The hippocampus is situated next to the amygdala and part of its function is to relate the feeling tone originated in the amygdala to prior experience, and this can be related to perception.

CONTACT: The Pali word for this function is *phassa* (fah-sah), which literally means *to touch*. Because phassa is a mental phenomenon, there is no physical contact, so the more appropriate understanding is *the cognitive interaction between a stimulus and the associated cetasikas*, specifically the Universal Mind Conditioners and whichever other cetasikas are involved, either wholesome or unwholesome in their functions. In the context of feeling and perception, the interaction between these two neural processes activates associated neural “memories” that almost instantaneously fabricate meaning in relationship to the flow of stimulation. This activation is phassa.

VOLITION: The Pali word for this function is *cetana* (chey-tah-nah) and can also be rendered as *intention* or *motivation*. Cetana is often considered the most important cetasika to be able to notice with mindfulness, as its function is to direct cognition and action. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in “The Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, on page 80, writes:

*Cetana*, from the same root as *citta*, is the mental factor that is concerned with the actualization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. Thus, it is rendered volition. The Commentaries explain that *cetana* organizes its associated mental factors in action upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, and its function is to accumulate (kamma), and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their own tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating kamma, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action.

The neurological components of volition involve various areas of the brain that are interactive and co-operative in function. The two areas most relevant for this review are the *nucleus accumbens* and the *anterior insular cortex*. Research indicates that rigorous mindfulness training strengthens the functions of these areas that are beneficial for generating wholesomeness in the mind.

The Nucleus Accumbens is located in that area of the brain called the striatum, which is located in close proximity to the amygdala and hippocampus. The function of this cluster of neural nuclei is to generate activity in the brain that leads to reward, either to access pleasurable stimulation or avoid painful stimulation. There has been much research investigating how the nucleus accumbens is involved in the variety of addictive behaviors humans suffer from. Its function is closely associated with the Anterior Insulate Cortex, which is part of the inner lining of the cerebral cortex, in close proximity to the striatum. The function of the Anterior Insulate Cortex is to process internal body sensations, particularly emotional/affective experience, personal-interpersonal signaling, particularly involving empathic attunement, and is strongly interactive with the limbic system, where the amygdala-hippocampus and nucleus accumbens are located. Research strongly suggests that mindfulness training strengthens the interconnections among these areas in ways that are beneficial, as these functions are essential for self-awareness and impulse control.

ONE-POINTEDNESS: The Pali word for this function is *ekaggata* (ee-kah-guh-tah), and its characteristic is to *foster unification of all the accompanying cetasikas, wholesome or unwholesome*. Cetana organizes the cetasikas and the immediate result is ekaggata. The effective moment-by-moment interaction between these two mind conditioning factors manifest as karma—intention is often considered to be synonymous to karma, which makes mindfulness of intentions such an important contemplation. Each moment of conscious awareness has this characteristic, but this one-pointedness can be distorted by restlessness—that is, there is a one-pointed manifestation in one moment, while the next moment can be unified by another point of focused attention (attention is another of the Universal Mind Conditioners, reviewed below). Restlessness is a common unwholesome mind conditioner that shapes intention, which creates dukkha. When ekaggata is accompanied by wholesome cetasikas, the flow of attention from moment to moment is fluid and uninterrupted until another moment of wholesome volition initiates a different focused attention.

MENTAL VITALITY: The Pali word for this function is *jivitindriya* (jih-vih-tin-dree-yah). According to Wikipedia “*Jīvitaṃ means “life”, and* [*indriya*](https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Indriya) *means “controlling faculty”*. I often talk about the vitality of neural pathways being fueled by glucose and oxygen; I believe the Buddhist way of expressing this natural phenomenon is jivitindriya. The function of this mind conditioner is significantly disabled, although still functioning, when the mind is afflicted by the hindrance of sloth and torpor.

ATTENTION: The Pali word for this function is manasikara (mah-nah-sih-kah-rah), and is literally translated as “making in the mind”. Here is a definition found in Wikipedia:

Manasikāra (Pāli), derived from manasi (locative of mana thus, loosely, "in mind" or "in thought") and karoti ("to make" or "to bring into") and has been translated as "attention" or "pondering" or "fixed thought"

Theravada Buddhism divides manasikara into two categories: Y*oniso Manasikara* (yo-nee-so mah-nah-see-kah-rah), which means *wise attention*, and *Ayoniso Manasikara* (ah-yo-nee-so….), which is *the absence of wise attention*. The cultivation of Yoniso Manasikara is a major goal in the cultivation of vipassana (vih-pah-see-nah), insight into the characteristics of impermanence, dukkha and non-self.