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Saṅkhārā (Formations)

A study of the 4th aggregate
by Piya Tan ©2005

1 How formations function in daily life

1.1 Mental formations (saṅkhārā)—ideas that we consciously or unconsciously form—are impermanent and occur at every moment of our waking lives. A common example will show how formations work. Once we perceive someone as having all the qualities that we look for in another or project onto them, we think we like or have “fallen in love” with that person. We *think* that this person is the most beautiful or most wonderful person we know. We *say* wonderful things and *do* all kinds of things to gain the attention of this person. All this, however, is often guided by our habitual tendencies or past conditionings, rooted in lust, hate, delusion or fear

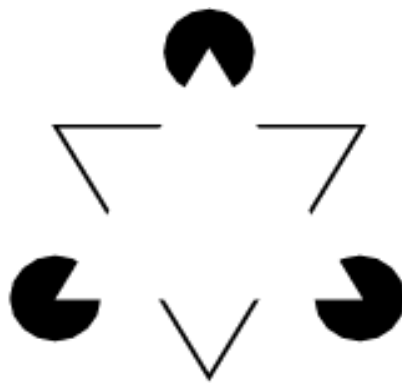


Diagram 1. Kanizsa's Triangle

In a worst-case scenario: when the affair or marriage fails, we actually *hate* this person or feel the pain of the fallout. In a broken marriage, one party might even sue the other for divorce, and the situation can get very painful and destructive. Many others related to or connected with the feuding couple will be negatively affected, too. In some cases, one might even murder the other. All this is because of wrong perception and unwholesome formations, based on greed, hate and delusion.

1.2 Formations regard themselves as the “doer,” the busybody that wants to be in control of the situation. This controller dictates what we *do*, what we *say*, even what we *think*. Indeed, every little action that is consciously done—like turning our head (towards an attractive object), or saying hello, or waking in the middle of the night and feeling lost—is a result of the formations of one kind or another. Understandably, as such, formations are

often regarded as the self. In reality, like all the other aggregates, formations are only processes. Since they are all impermanent, we do not own them; we are not them; they are not the self or soul.

1.3 The Kanizsa triangle is a famous optical illusion that was first described by the Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa in 1955. In this figure we “see” a white equilateral triangle where in fact there is none. This effect is known as a *subjective* or *illusory* contour. The non-existent white triangle also appears to be brighter than the surrounding area, but really has the same brightness as the background. The Kanizsa triangle is an effective way to show how we perceive things and then go on to construct our own image of them, which is actually not the true picture at all!

2 Language and knowledge

2.1 LANGUAGE TENDS TO THINGIFY THINGS

2.1.1 Formations play a central role in language and communication in general.¹ Human language, however, is based on a naming process (*nāma*) so that it has a form (*rūpa*) that is understandable and

¹ For a discussion on “speech and action,” see SD 17.4 (6).

communicable amongst one another. In other words, language tends to create or reify things. *We tend to regard the name as the thing named.*

Wúmén'guān case 29: The Sixth Patriarch's "Not wind, not flag"

無門關 第二十九 公案 六祖² 之非風非幡
Wúmén'guān dì'èr shí jiǔ gōng'àn liùzǔ zhī fēi fēng fēi fān³

六祖因風颺刹幡，有二僧對論，*Liùzǔ yīn fēng yáng chà fān, yǒu èr sēng duì lùn*

The 6th Patriarch saw a temple flag⁴ [a streamer] flapping because of the wind. Two monks were arguing.

一云：“幡動。” 一云：“風動。” *Yī yún: "fān dòng" yī yún: "fēng dòng."*

One said, "The flag is moving!" The other said, "The wind is moving!"

往復，曾未契理。*Wǎng fù céng wèi qì lǐ*

They argued back and forth, and could not reach a conclusion.

祖云：“不是風動，不是幡動，仁者心動！”*Zǔ yún, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, rén zhě xīn dòng.*

The Patriarch said, "It's not the wind that is moving; it's not the flag that is moving—it's your mind that is moving!"

二僧悚然。*Èr sēng sǒng rán.*

The two monks were awe-struck.

Wumen's Comment

無門曰：“不是風動，不是幡動，不是心動，甚處見祖師？”

Wú mén yuè, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, bú shì xīn dòng, shěn chù jiàn zǔshī.

Wumen says: "It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves. Where do you go to see the patriarch?"

若向者裏見得親切，方知二僧買鐵得金。

Ruò xiàng zhě lǐ jiàn de qīn qiè, fāng zhī èr sēng mǎi tiě de jīn.

If you see this deeply [truly understand this], then you will know that the two monks, buying iron, received gold.

祖師忍俊不禁，一場漏逗。

"Zǔ shī rěn jùn bù jīn, yì cháng lòu dòu.

The venerable Patriarch could not hold back his mirth, teasing them for a while."

Wumen's Verse 頌曰 sòng yuè

風幡心動

fēng fān xīn dòng

Wind, flag and mind are (all) moving:

一狀領過

yì zhuàng lǐng guò

(this is) a case that is simply dismissed.

只知開口

zhǐ zhī kāi kǒu

They only know how to open their mouths,

不覺話墮

bù jué huà duò

unaware of their fault in talking!

² Orig Chinese text from: <http://homepage1.nifty.com/poem-club/mumonkan/mumonkanwoyomu.htm>. I thank my wife Ratna for assisting me with the pinyin transliteration and translation of the Chinese. For an English tr, see Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*. NY: Weatherhill, 1977:26-137.

³ See also **Taming of the bull**, SD 8.2 (11).

⁴ "Temple flag," 刹幡 *chà fān*, a streamer, a long narrow flag.

2.1.2 On a word and sound level, religion is nothing more than received learning: we are merely a vessel filled up from another vessel, and so on. We are then the proverbial spoon that tastes not the soup, but the soup is cold and lacking nutriment, anyway. We learn the memes⁵ and replicate them thoughtfully or unthoughtfully. A **meme** is “an element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, especially imitation” (OED).⁶ **Hamilton** gives examples of how such a meme (she does not use this term) is passed on socially (through language):

At a ceremonial conferring of a Knighthood, the British sovereign does not just touch the recipient’s shoulder with the point of a sword⁷ but also says “I dub thee Sir Knight.” And we do a similar thing at a more commonplace level all the time. When we raise a glass to someone we nearly always say “cheers,” “*salut*,” “it’s good to see you,” to acknowledge that the salutation is being made. When we shake hands, we say “how do you do,” “good morning,” “hello.”

A verbal explanation of a non-verbal symbol acts in a similar way. If we do not understand a mathematical symbol we see on a page[,] a verbal explanation of it “makes real” to us what it represents—and this example indicates that reifying in this sense of making something a real part of one’s experience applies to what is abstract just as much as to what is concrete.

(2000:148)

2.1.3 There is a dark side, a shadow, to all this. In a pathological group, community or society, communication is almost only on a language level (that is, through words, body language and symbols), and no deeper. Here, people say and do things mainly to be a part of the group, that is, to seek the approval of others. If there is more than one pathological group, and there usually are in a pathological society, each group will have a private discourse reserved for internal group communication, and a public discourse to maintain harmony of sort. In such a pathological society, social distance⁸ and power distance announce one’s social status, wealth, political power, etc.

2.1.4 As Buddhism gains wider acceptance and popularity, it quickly attracts the entrepreneurs, the social elite and aspirants to social elitehood. Buddhism becomes a status symbol, and Buddhists become commodities and statistics. The notion of karma might also be misconstrued to favour the elite and the successful, since, obviously, their current status *must* have been the result of their past good karma. Status, structures, power and money then define Buddhism. In such a situation, form, numbers and wealth become more important than substance, spirit and succour. Social work, despite its vital potential for people-helping—is used to give one a respectable social face or front, but often at the cost of moral values and the spiritual life. The point is that one should not merely *show* that one is a Buddhist—indeed, one need not even show that one *is* a Buddhist—but that one cultivates moral virtues for the sake of mindfulness that seeks liberating wisdom.

2.1.5 There are today 2 kinds of world religions: the word-based and the thought-based. The classic example of a word-based teaching is the opening of John’s Gospel in the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). A thought-based faith is one that is based on the leader’s thoughts, that is, his personality and usually his person, too. In other words, this is a cult.

⁵ This is more fully discussed at SD 26.3.

⁶ See, eg, Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 1999.

⁷ During this ceremony, it is actually the flat of the sword that is used.

⁸ See, eg, Geertz Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1991. See also http://www.international-business-center.com/international_newsletter/april_2003/april_03_web.htm#article.

What are we seeking for in life? We are often seeking for something or someone to endorse or approve of what we think or feel, or hope to find something we are “looking for” without making much or any effort to even understand what we really need or why we need it. So we are left to accept another’s *word*, or we fall into the gravity field of another’s *thought*, or we are simply drawn to a person who seems to embody all what we desire in life—whatever that may be.

They are caught up in the net of a “word” search. The words in our heads, like alien replicators,⁹ work to put together a person, or faith, even a truth, exactly the way we wish it. We only hear or read what we want to hear, what we are able to read. We merely listen or read *about* a guru or a religion without really examining them further. We take it all on a *word* level. After all, the word is the beginning of it all [2.1.5]. Words, language, even truth itself, are only the *means* to an end, and that end is spiritual awakening.

2.1.6 “Spiritual” has become such a dirty word in some society, especially the affluent, where words are simply used as bait to hook by the earful. When we have been taken for a ride by spiritualists, or enslaved by the spirituality of gurus, we see all that darkness petrified into the world spirituality. The point is that no one is more bereft of spiritual than these spiritualists and gurus. Our painful habit is to see their wiles and ways as something “spiritual.”

To start healing ourselves, we have to reclaim that word from these spiritless peddlers of falsehood. Secondly, we need to understand that the spirit is ours to claim, and no one else has the right to it, as it were. This is our self, the heart of our true being, we need work to discover, embrace and enjoy. In this way, we have define our own spirit, and so liberate it.

2.1.7 The truth-based approach to religion is very rare, even in Buddhism. “Spiritual,” however, has a liberating power if we understand “spirit” to refer to our *self*, in the sense that we give meaning to life (or not); we work out the reasons for things when they do happen or not. The spirit of life, then, is to understand ourselves, how our mind and heart work.

Our mind works with words, our heart play with views. These are the toys we have been raised in, and still keep clinging to them, often to the very end. Even when we reach the pinnacle or fame or power, we are merely standing on the high heap of toys and games or virtual reality we have been playing with all our lives. Such a heap of playthings is clearly unstable, and we invariably in time fall painfully to the hard ground of true reality.

Only in giving up our toys and games, we move on to learn real personal skills. Only in letting go of the passing views of life, do we get to see the real living visions before us. It is in this spirit, that in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), the Buddha declares,

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma, how much more that which is not Dharma!¹⁰ (M 22,14/1:135), SD 3.13

Letting go of the word-based and thought-based virtual truths, we directly see the wordless and thought-free true reality here and now.¹¹

⁹ On replicators, see SD 44.1 (6.4.2).

¹⁰ *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag’eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean “good states,” ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 66,26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṅhāsaṅkhaya S** (M 38,14/1:260 f), SD 7.10, as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that “*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake.” (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See SD 3.13 Intro.

2.2 RITUAL AND SUPERSTITION

2.2.1 Language and action are powerfully combined in ritual performances. The power of rituals is simply their ability to make one perceive the word as the thing. A brahminical priest or a Tantric shaman makes physical gestures during a ritual, makes offerings and mutters chants: all this, to the believer, has the power to bring about the desired result of the ritual.¹²

Religious rituals are often merely perceived solutions with a catch, and the only benefactor is the ritual performer, peddling us guff that we gullibly paid for. They appear to work because they are often based on **superstition**, that is, our irrational and unjustified belief in the supernatural (we must see the *natural* to be “super”), that *our* actions and lives are controlled by *external* agencies. And we think we can negotiate (such as not walking under a ladder) or appease (such as offering religious sacrifices) to such agents or agencies. Perhaps, we could bribe them, as our parents had bribed us to get us to what would not.

Superstition tends to be strong in those of us who lack self-knowledge or spiritual strength, making us surrender self-effort and wisdom to external agencies. We then believe that *another’s* words and actions can change or control our lives. We are changed, indeed, but we take the shape of the hand that crushes us; we are controlled as pets on the leash of our guru and lord, at the beck and call of their whims.

2.2.2 The language of **faith-centred religion** is essentially a language of fiction: it does not stand the test of scrutiny and personal experience. What does it mean, for example, when someone claims that “God created the world”? It is not a self-evident fact but needs to be “explained” or endorsed by some authority or authority figure, from a “top-down” authorization process. It can never be a common search for or examination of true reality, as there are already biases, assumptions and a closed mind.¹³

Not all rituals are bad. A Buddhist gathering often starts with a puja when the salutation (*Namo tassa ...*), the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts are recited in unison. This not only reminds us of our practice, but also helps boost spiritual fellowship. However, when we chant mantras into a Buddha pendant, thinking it would make us bulletproof or irresistibly lovable, it is superstition, if not stupidity.

In other words, meaningful rituals may be beneficial in bringing us mental peace or boost fellowship and wholesome thoughts, but they become harmful when we become superstitious about them. For example, a salesman might think that he makes good sales when he is wearing a certain shirt, but this way of thinking can also hinder his progress if, say, he loses his shirt or damages it. Similarly, a superstitious fear of Friday the 13th may raise our level of anxiety.

2.2.3 Most, if not all, of our superstitions are learned as children. Young people tend to be superstitious because of their ignorance and their sense of **uncertainty and vulnerability**. However, as we mature, we usually forget our superstitions or outgrow them. Those who are dominated by lustful greed or by hate, tend to be anxious and restless, and so are more likely to remain superstitious.

There seems to be a greater propensity for superstition amongst women than men (we often find horoscope forecasts in women’s magazine, but less so in men’s magazines). This propensity seems stronger when a woman feels that she has less control over her life. On the other hand, men can be just

¹¹ See **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/1:188-193), SD 35.4(3a(4)3).

¹² See Hamilton 2000:148.

¹³ There is a campus joke about this (here is one version of it): a philosopher is like myopic or purblind person looking for a non-existent black cat in a dark room. A lawyer is one who smuggles in a cat in his coat, and then emerges from the room triumphantly showing off the cat. A theologian, on the other hand, is like a blind man in the same dark room who claims he has found that non-existent cat!

as superstitious, if not more so, especially where there is a play for power, a gamble or some kind of prize or victory. Baseballers, footballers, firemen and sailors, too, have their lucky shirts and trinkets. The religious who worry about money, tend to believe in their karma, good or bad, when they expect donations and windfalls from wealthy patrons.

2.2.4 Our locus of control, too, is a major contributing factor to how superstitious we are or not.¹⁴ If we have an internal locus of control, we feel confident as being in charge of our life and in control of the situation. If we have an external locus of control, then we lack confidence about ourself and believe that things *happen* to us. People with an external locus of control are more likely to be superstitious as a way of getting more control over their lives.

Superstition, then, plays a negative role in our lives, especially when the situation is compounded by a bad habit such as greed or gambling. Compulsive gamblers are classic examples of those who tend to be very superstitious, especially since they have high expectations or hopes of being lucky. Gamblers, when obsessed by chance and luck, can come to a point where they lose all control of their lives.

3 How do we know things?

3.1 Superstition, as we have seen [2.2], often arises from ignorance and craving. This being the case, an understanding of the nature of knowledge should help. Firstly, how does knowledge arise? The simplest answer is found in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23): knowledge arises through the 6 sense-doors [6.3]. However, these sense-doors are not so much data-sensors, as they are filters and interpreters. We only *see* what we want or expect to see, and hear only what we want to hear; yet our eyes blind us, our ears deafen us, and we are not exactly in control of our actions and thoughts. They seem to have a life of their own propelled by our past and habitual tendencies.

On a more wholesome level, when we make an effort of keeping an open mind and learn, then, we have a better chance to go beyond the autopilot of our habitual tendencies. There are 3 ways of learning things.¹⁵ The most common way we can gather knowledge is through **listening** (*suta,mayā paññā*). This is the most common way of teaching in ancient India, so that the learned is said to be “well-heard” (*bahu-s,suta*). This way of learning is based on a direct teacher-pupil interaction and not just book learning.

Buddhist studies *without* meditation would fall into the category of book-learning. Religious teachers, including Buddhist teachers, however, should not only bring wisdom to their students, but also instill *character* into them. This is probably much more than can be said of one being *well-read*, which would be the modern parallel of one who is “well-heard.” Either way, this can be called “academic knowledge.”

3.2 The second level of learning is that of **thinking** (*cinta,mayā paññā*), when we reflect over what we have heard and begin to more deeply fathom into it so that the wisdom becomes more mature. Sometimes, wisdom through thinking arises first in us, especially when we are thoughtful and mindful. This type of knowledge is beneficial insofar as it helps us to examine and refine what we have already known. This self-thought wisdom can be called “philosophical knowledge.”

3.3 The 3rd level of knowledge is the most important: it is that of **mental cultivation** (*bhāvanā,mayā paññā*). This is actually first-hand wisdom since it arises from the calm depth and clear breadth of our

¹⁴ H M Lefcourt, *Locus of control: Current trends in theory and research*. Potomac, MD: Erlbaum, 1976 & SA Vyse, *Believing in magic. The psychology of superstition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁵ D 3:219; Vbh 324.

own mindfulness. Wisdom through listening is at best second-hand knowledge, for we have received it from another.

Wisdom through thinking hovers between second-hand and first-hand wisdom. Our thinking is usually rooted in our latent tendencies¹⁶ and other external influences. There is also a good chance that we could be wrong in our views. If we are still unawakened, this knowledge, no matter how perfect, is still put together by mental constructs (*saṅkhārā*).

Wisdom through mental cultivation is wholesome knowledge in that it is a direct experience of true reality. We see and understands the true nature of existence, that it is impermanence, and therefore, not satisfactory. In due course, as our wisdom deepens, we realize the selflessness (*anattā*) of all things, that they are all without an abiding essence. This is the wisdom that liberates us from suffering.¹⁷

4 Saññā and saṅkhārā

4.1 *Saññā* and *saṅkhārā* are closely related in the sense that they both *perceive* things. The etymologies of the two words help to throw some light on their differences. *Saññā* comes from *saṃ* (together, in the sense of *putting* together)¹⁸ + √JÑĀ, “to know,” giving the root sense of “knowing together”; *saṅkhārā* derives from *saṃ* + √KR, “to do,” with the root sense of doing together.” Their connotations are clear: *saññā* is generally a passive process, while *saṅkhārā*, an active one.

4.2 *Saññā* or perception is the process of putting together one’s bare sense-experiences that *viññāṇa* (consciousness) has recorded at the sense-doors, along with the attending feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), and then relating them to similar data one has already experienced. Depending on how we react to feelings, the latent tendencies may or may not be reinforced. If we are attracted to the pleasant feeling, *lust* is reinforced; if we show aversion towards the unpleasant feeling, *hate* is reinforced; if we ignore or are ignorant of the feeling, *ignorance* is reinforced. Thus, our world is created and reinforced.

4.3 These **latent tendencies** spring into action at the slightest trigger through unwise attention at the 6 sense-doors, and the appropriate formations arise through the 3 karmic doors: the body, speech, and the mind. So we live our world. The continuous flow of sense-experiences gives us the impression of permanence, and that there is an abiding “self” experiencing them. In reality, all the experiences or phenomena simply arise and fall away depending of conditions, internal and external.

4.4 One of the most harmful aspects of formations is its propensity for fabricating ideas and notions even when there is apparently no cause for doing so, but the conditions are there: these conditions are the latent tendencies; and they are always there in the unawakened person. **The Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) gives us some insight into this situation:

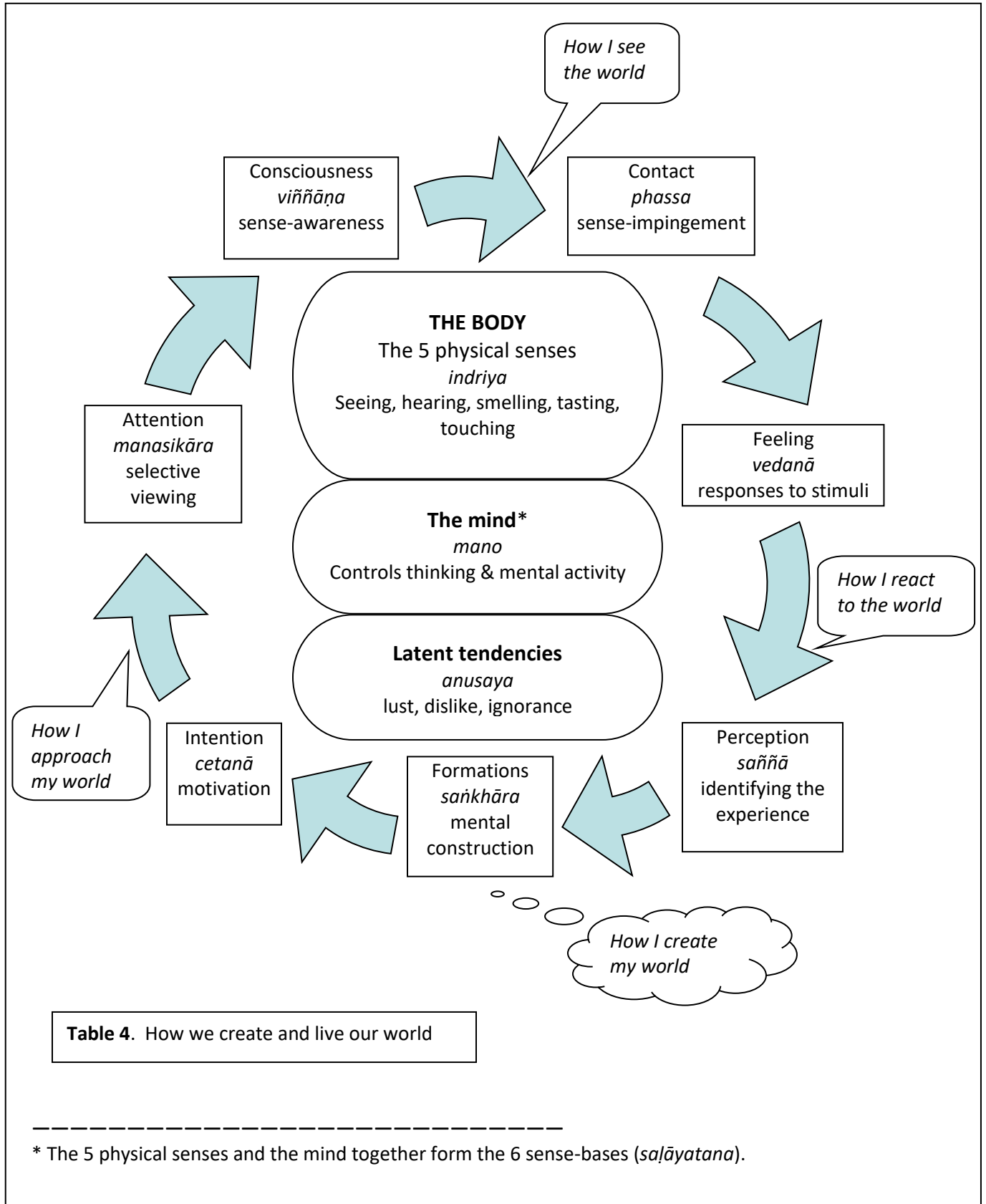
“Bhante, can there be anxiety over what is non-existent internally?”

“There can be, bhikshu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikshu, has the view:

¹⁶ See SD 17.4(7.3).

¹⁷ See **Levels of learning**, SD 40a.4 (6.1).

¹⁸ Similar to Latin *con-* (eg “connection”) or *co-* (as in “coincidence”).



‘The world is the self; after death I will be permanent, everlasting, eternal, unchanging in nature, eternally the same, I will endure as long as eternity’—this too he regards thus: ‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self.’

He hears the Tathāgata or the Tathāgata’s disciple teaching the Dharma for the elimination of all fixations¹⁹ to grounds for views, mindsets, obsessions, inclination and latent tendencies,²⁰ for the stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, for the fading away (of lust),²¹ for the ending (of suffering), for nirvana.

He thinks thus: ‘So I will be annihilated! So I will perish! So I will be no more!’

Then he sorrows, grieves and laments, he weeps beating his breast and become distraught.

That is how there is anxiety regarding what is non-existent internally.”

(M 22,20/1:136 f), SD 3.13

5 Meanings and usages of *saṅkhāra*

5.1 OVERVIEW. Note that the form *saṅkhāra* is a stem-form (the kind of word which is used as a head-word in a dictionary). Generally, the form *saṅkhāra* may also include its better known and more widely used plural form, *saṅkhārā*. Otherwise, the form, *saṅkhārā*, is self-explanatory.

According to British Buddhist scholar, Rupert Gethin,

The *nikāyas* define *saṅkhāras* primarily in terms of will or volition (*cetanā*); they also describe them as putting together (*abhisāṅkharonti*) each of the *khandhas* in turn into something that is put-together (*saṅkhata*).²² In this way *saṅkhāras* are presented as conditioning factors conceived of as active volitional forces. *Cetanā* is, of course, understood as *kamma* on the mental level,²³ and in the early *abhidhamma* texts all those mental factors that are considered to be specifically skilful (*kusala*) fall within the domain of *saṅkhārakkhandha*.²⁴ Thus it is that the composition of *saṅkhārakkhandha* leads²⁵ the way in determining whether a particular arising of consciousness constitutes a skilful or an unskillful *kamma*. All this accords well with the *nikāyas*’ singling out of *cetanā* as characteristic of the nature of *saṅkhāras*. (Gethin 1985:37)

The formations aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k,khandha*) is a comprehensive group comprising a number of volitional factors. The Abhidhamma lists 50 types of mental formations (or, formations, for short).²⁶ The most important is **volition** (*cetanā*), the mental factor that causes us to act by way of body and speech. Mental formations do not include feeling (which forms a different aggregate) but includes all the different desires and emotions, including the wholesome and unwholesome roots. They are the psychological roots of unwholesome actions (greed, hatred and delusion), and the roots of wholesome actions (charity, lovingkindness and wisdom).

¹⁹ -*adhiṭṭhāna*- see foll n.

²⁰ *Diṭṭhi-t,ṭhān’ādiṭṭhāna,pariyuṭṭhān’abhinivesānusaya*.

²¹ *Virāga* also “fading away of lust” or “dispassion” (see §21).

²² Eg, **Khandha Saṃyutta** defs, S 3:59 f, 86 f. (Gethin’s fn)

²³ A 3:425. (Gethin’s fn)

²⁴ “This is most simply expressed at Dhk 9 where the truth of arising and the truth of the path are said to be *saṅkhārakkhandha*; it is elaborated at Dhs 185-225, and at Vbh 63-69, where the various categories of unskillful *dhammas* are treated in terms of the *khandhas*.” (Gethin’s fn)

²⁵ Cf Vism 14.135. (Gethin’s fn)

²⁶ See Vbh §§92-120/40-53. For the 50 types of formations, see Vism 14.131-184/462-472, & for summary, see Vism:Ñ 880 (Table II).

5.2 DERIVATION. The term *saṅkhāra* is resolved as *saṃ* (= con, “together”) + √KR, “to do” → *karoti*, “he does, he makes”; hence, giving the sense of “putting something together.” In fact, it literally means “constructing, construction.”²⁷ The noun has both the active and passive senses: as such, *saṅkhārā* are both the things that deliberately put together, construct and compound other things, and also the things that are put together, constructed and compounded.²⁸

5.3 MEANINGS AND USAGES

5.3.1 Due to its **polysemy** (multiple meanings), *saṅkhārā* is perhaps the most difficult early Buddhist term. Boisvert (1995:91-112) identifies 5 meanings of *saṅkhārā*: (1) as *saṅkhata*; (2) as *paccaya*; (3) as *āyu,saṅkhāra*; (4) as part of *sa,saṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, and (5) as a *khandha*. I will use this fivefold scheme (with some rearrangement), adding a few more categories, to explain the further intricacies of *saṅkhāra*.

5.3.2 At least **8 meanings of *saṅkhāra*** can be identified in the suttas, that is, (1) as formations, (2) as *paccaya*, (3) as *khandha*, (4) as *āyu.saṅkhāra*, (5) as *sa,saṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, (6) as karma, (7) the 5 aggregates, and (8) all our perceptions.

(1) “Formations” or “conditioned phenomena” (*saṅkhārā*, pl). In the widest sense, *saṅkhārā* comprise all conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhammā*). Here, all the 5 aggregates, not just the 4th, are *saṅkhārā*—as shown in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).²⁹ In other words, it refers to all the universe, but not to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). A conditioned phenomenon produces other conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). In this narrower sense, it is identical to (5).

(2) The 2nd factor of dependent arising, that is, as *paccaya* or *nidāna*. While (1) is the “passive” conditioned state, *saṅkhārā*, as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*) (as well as (6) *khandha*), is the active “producing” or “generating” conditioner.³⁰ As the 2nd factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence—as such, it is here best rendered as “volitional activities” or “karma-formations” to distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).³¹ This latter set (as formations) is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,³² and never used in connection with dependent arising—see usage (6) below. In **the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta** (A 3.15), however, we see this meaning applied to *abhisāṅkhāra*, that includes the broader sense of the aggregates (as the karma of the 3 doors).³³

(3) *Saṅkhārā* as the 4th aggregate (*khandha*) (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking parable: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *saṅkhārā* is defined as the 6 classes of volitions (*cha cetanā,kāya*), as in **the (Upādāna)**

²⁷ S 22.79/3:87. See also BDict: *saṅkhāra*.

²⁸ For defs of *saṅkhāra*, see Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 1996:66-81 (ch 4).

²⁹ S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

³⁰ S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

³¹ S 41.6/4:293.

³² See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

³³ A 3.15/1:110-113 (SD 17.7). On the term’s usage as “aggregate,” see foll def.

Parivaṭṭa Sutta (S 22.56),³⁴ that is, volition in terms of each of the 6 sense-objects. Here, rendered as “**volitional formations.**” (In the Abhidhamma, *saṅkhāra-k, khandha* refer to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)

(4) “**Life-formation**” (*āyu, saṅkhāra*)³⁵ is the same as *bhāva, saṅkhāra*, ie as “fuel” to rebirth or the *bhava* link in dependent arising (2). Buddhaghosa, in his Commentary on **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), explains the Buddha’s overcoming his serious illness at Beluva (D 16.2.23) as a result of his own physical strength and from his attainment of fruition (*phala, samāpatti*). This new strength, derived from the attainment, helps him to both overcome the illness and extend his life. Buddhaghosa goes on to explain that there are two kinds of “life-formation” (*jīvita, saṅkhārā* or *āyu, saṅkhāra*), namely, (1) life itself by which life is propelled on, and (2) the attainment of fruition. The former, acquired at birth, refers to a kind of “life-faculty” (*jīvit’indriya*) which maintains and vitalizes the living physical body, whose quality and length is further determined by past karma, and whose length is determined at birth.³⁶ The latter is nurtured in the current life, and according to Buddhaghosa, it is this latter that is referred to in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (DA 2:547).³⁷

(5) *Sa, saṅkhāra* (with *saṅkhāra*) and *asaṅkhāra* (without *saṅkhāra*) are used in connection with *parinibbāyī*:³⁸ a *sa, saṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “with effort,” who eradicates the mental fetters through striving (Pug 17); an *asaṅkhāra parinibbāyī* is one who attains nirvana “without effort,” such as Bāhiya Dāruṅīya who understands the truth instantaneously.³⁹

(6) **The 3 kinds of intentional actions or karma-activities (or karma-formations)**, namely, bodily activities (*kāya, saṅkhāra*),⁴⁰ verbal activities (*vacī, saṅkhāra*)⁴¹ and mental activities (*citta, saṅkhāra* or *mano, saṅkhāra*).⁴² In meditation terminology, the first refers to in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial thought and sustained thought (because by thinking, we form the ideas that we express through language); the third, perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind).⁴³ Two of these—the bodily activity and the mental activity—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.⁴⁴

(7) **The 5 aggregates as a whole.** Occasionally, we see *saṅkhārā* used in the sense of the 5 aggregates as a whole, that is, the person. A well-known case is found in **the Vajirā Sutta** (S 5.10), which records the nun Vajirā’s reply to Māra who tries to distract her by asking speculative questions on the

³⁴ S 22.56,16-18/3:60 + SD 3.7 (3.3).

³⁵ D 2:99, 108; A 4:312; Kvu 2:559.

³⁶ Rhys Davids aptly renders the first kind of *jīvit’indriya* as “life till allotted time” (D:RD 2:106; cf Divy 203).

³⁷ See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9. **The Dhanu-g, gaha Sutta** (S 20.6/2:265 f) says that the life-formation runs faster than the speed at which as man could catch a flying arrow. Comy there says that *āyu, saṅkhāra* refers to the physical life-faculty (*rūpa, jīvit’indriya*), but it is impossible to describe the breakup of formless phenomena (ie mental states, because according to the Abhidhamma, they break up 16 times faster than physical states) (SA 2:227).

³⁸ S 5:70; A 1:233.

³⁹ A 1:24; U 1:10; DhA 2:209 ff.

⁴⁰ M 118,24/3:83 (SD 7.13).

⁴¹ M 118,25/3:84. (SD 7.13)

⁴² See, eg, **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 4.13-15/1:301); (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:3), **Bhūmija S** (S 12.25,-3/2:39 f); **Kāma, bhū S 2** (S 41.6/4:293).

⁴³ See **Kāma, bhū S** (S 41.6,5), SD 48.7.

⁴⁴ **Ānāpāna, sati Sutta**, M 118.18 f/3:82 = **Eka, dhamma Sutta**, S 54.1/5:311 f.

origin and nature of a being (*satta*). Vajirā replies that Māra is mistaken if he thinks there is any substantial “being,” since, in reality, there is “only a heap of formations” (*suddha,saṅkhāra,puñja*), that is, the 5 aggregates.⁴⁵

Another example of the same usage is found in **the Adhimutta Thera,gāthā** (Tha 715). The arhat Adhimutta replies to a band of bandits about to kill him as a religious sacrifice that he is fully free from fear, since he knows that there is no “I” to be killed: only formations (*saṅkhārā*) cease to exist (Tha 715). The bandit chief is simply impressed by his calm wisdom and courage that the whole band renounces the world under the Buddha. (ThaA 3:17 f)

(8) All our perceptions. In the **Pañca-t,taya Sutta** (M 102), we see a special usage of the term *saṅkhārā* as “formations,” that is, meaning “a measure of formations by way of what is seen, heard, sense or cognized” (*diṭṭha,suta,muta,viññātabbassa saṅkhāra,mattena*). The Sutta explains that the “neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious” (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññā*) can only be attained with a subtle presence of perception.⁴⁶ This usage of *saṅkhārā*, in fact, refers to the totality of all our perceptions (our sense-experiences and mentation).

A further example of this usage is found in **the Sumedha Therī,gāthā**, which relates to the nun Sumedhā, as a girl, when she is about to be married to a prince. Rather than marry, she decides to renounce the world, explaining that she “has no delight in whatever is connected with formations” (*saṅkhāra,gate ratim alabhamāna*) (Thī 514). Here, *saṅkhārā* refers to all the possible sensual pleasures that await her marriage.

5.4 SAṅKHĀRĀ AND KARMA. E J Thomas, in *The History of Buddhist Thought*, proposes that this type of *saṅkhārā*, divided into bodily, verbal and mental activities is “probably a simpler and probably earlier analysis of the aggregates”⁴⁷ [1]. He is referring to the fact that the Abhidhamma tradition classifies *saṅkhārā-k,khandha* into 50 different mental activities, only one of which is volition (eg Dhs 62).

5.5 SAṅKHĀRĀ AND PUÑÑĀ. On a broader scale, there are 3 **volitional formations** (*abhisāṅkhāra*): meritorious formation (*puññābhisāṅkhāra*), demeritorious formation (*apuññābhisāṅkhāra*) and imperturbable formation (*āneñjābhisāṅkhāra*).⁴⁸ Meritorious formations occur in the sense-base and the form base; demeritorious formations occur only in the sense-base; and the imperturbable formations occur in the formless base. These 3 volitional formations are actually identical with the *saṅkhārā* link of dependent arising, where they are rendered as volitional activities.

According to the Dīgha Commentary (DA 3:998), however, the imperturbable formation refers to the will for rebirth in the formless realm, which is the meaning also found in the Abhidhamma (Vbh 135). According to **the Parivīmaṅsana Sutta** (S 12.51), these three volitional formations are the volitions of an ignorant person (*avijjā’gata purisa,puggala*), and when ignorance is abandoned for wisdom, we will no more create the three volitional formations.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ S 553*/5.10/1:135 (SD 102.13).

⁴⁶ M 102,9.3 n (SD 40a.12).

⁴⁷ “They appear to be compiled in order to include every mental phenomenon, and the Dhammasaṅgaṇi makes sure of this by adding ‘and any other non-material things that have arisen causally.’ The Pāli and Skt lists largely agree, but are not identical” (1933:61 n2). Thomas refers to Abhk 2:23; Mvyut 154.

⁴⁸ D 3:217; S 12.51/2:82; Pm 2:206; Vbh 135. The term “merit” (*puñña*) here is buddhicized and has the sense of “fortunate, virtuous, auspicious quality, good” in reference to actions and their results. For a discussion, see Cousins 1996:153-156.

⁴⁹ S 12.51/2:80-84 @ SD 11.5. See Hamilton 1996a:74 f.

5.6 SAÑKHĀRĀ AND EFFORT. There are also the “**volitional formations of striving**” (*padhāna,sañkhāra*),⁵⁰ a designation for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (*samma-p, padhāna*), applied to the “4 paths to spiritual power” (*iddhi,pāda*): desire or will power, energy, mind, investigation (S 51.13).⁵¹

5.7 SAÑKHĀRĀ AS FUEL. From the above, it is thus clear that *sañkhārā* (pl) and *sañkhāra* (sg)⁵² occur in many different contexts in the Nikāyas, and can be difficult to explain or understand. However, the first three contexts—in the 3 characteristics (*ti,lakkhaṇa*) formula, as the second link of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) and as an aggregate (*sañkhāra-k,khandha*)—are especially common and important to understand. Although these contexts often overlap, their roles are distinct enough for us to see how they are the “fuel” by which an individual continues in samsara, and how liberation can be won.

6 Sañkhārā in the “3 characteristics” formula

6.1 THE 3 CHARACTERISTICS FORMULA

6.1.1 Meaning of *sañkhārā*. In its widest sense, *sañkhārā* (pl)⁵³ comprise all conditioned phenomena (*sañkhata,dhammā*), that is, this whole universe, all its “contents,” and all the principles or laws underpinning them. The word *contents*, or even its simpler synonym, *things*, might give us some false notion of permanence or lasting stability. The point is that whatever exists, must exist in *time*. To exist in time means to be impermanent, to become other. Hence, to exist means to necessarily change. All this should be understood by the term *sañkhāra* or its anglicized form “samskara” or its translation “**formations.**”

6.1.2 The extent of *sañkhārā*. Here, all the 5 aggregates, not just the 4th, are *sañkhārā*—as shown in the **Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).⁵⁴ A conditioned being produces and experiences conditioned phenomena in conjunction with consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and form (*rūpa*). This narrower sense is identical to *sañkhārā* (1) above [5.3]. The adjective “conditioned” (*sañkhata*) means subject to being a part of a network of causes and effects, not having a reality of its own.

6.1.3 Nirvana is *neither a formation nor a dharma*

6.1.3.1 Here, however, *sañkhāra* has a much broader sense: it refers to all the universe, but *not* to nirvana, which is unconditioned (*asañkhata*). This important sense should be teased out from these **Dhamma,pada** verses, where the terms *sañkhārā* and *dhammā* appear:

*Sabbe sañkhārā aniccā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All conditioned things are impermanent:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity.

Dh 277

⁵⁰ Bodhi’s term see S:B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects).

⁵¹ **Chanda Samādhi S** (S 51.13/5:268).

⁵² On *sañkhāra* (sg), see SD 40a.9 (2.4.4).

⁵³ On the sg form, *sañkhāra*, see **Cūḷa Vedalla S**, SD 40a.9 (2.4).

⁵⁴ S 22.90/3:132 f; see also S 3:87.

*Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory [suffering]:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity. Dh 278

*Sabbe dhammā anattā ti
yadā paññāya passati
atha nibbindati dukkhe
esa maggo visuddhiyā*

All things are non-self:
who sees thus with wisdom,
is revulsed at suffering—
this is the path to purity. Dh 279

6.1.3.2 In Dh 227+228, we have the key word, *saṅkhārā*, “formations,” which refers to all conditioned things, that is, all life and the whole universe: they are *impermanent* (Dh 227), they are *unsatisfactory* (Dh 228). This is where we can also say, “Every *thing* in this universe is impermanent, and whatever is impermanent is unsatisfactory,” as elaborated in such discourses as **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa** (S 22.59).⁵⁵

Dh 229 needs closer scrutiny, especially the last line, where some of the best scholars, even Buddhist ones, have misunderstood its subtle but fundamental implication. They misinterpret *dhammā* here as embracing “all states,” that is, the conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), namely, nirvana.⁵⁶ In other words, “nirvana is free from a permanent soul,” that is, non-self.⁵⁷ This is incorrect, as we shall see.

6.1.3.3 The truth is that *sabbe dhammā* refers to all things, states or phenomena and all principles underlying them, and they are non-self: *everything* is non-self. In other words, there is no abiding self or eternal essence of any kind to be found whether in the 5 aggregates as a whole or in part, neither within nor without them. Nirvana, although spoken as being “unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata*) in linguistic terms, is not included in the word “everything.” Since nirvana is also not a “thing,” it is also not included in “every thing.”⁵⁸

6.1.3.4 On a deeper Dharma level, to say that there *is* a self, soul or abiding entity is to fall into the view of eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), and to say that there is *no* self, soul or abiding entity is to uphold the view of annihilationism (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*). The middle way rejects both: nirvana cannot be referred to as existing (then it would be impermanent) nor non-existing. It is unconditioned, like when a fire that has gone out, has really not gone anywhere.⁵⁹

6.1.3.5 The fact is that nowhere in the suttas is nirvana ever stated as being “non-self.” It is also very clear from such discourses as **the Mahā Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (M 64), we need to let go of whatever that is tinged by the 3 characteristics for something higher, that is, nirvana, thus:

Whatever that is therein that consists of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness, he regards those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour,

⁵⁵ S 22.59/3:66-68 ≈ Mv 1.6.38-47 (V 1:13 f), SD 1.2.

⁵⁶ I B Horner, in her Majjhima tr of the **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35), eg, notes: “*dhammā*. These include, beside the *saṅkhārā* (conditioned things), the unconditioned nibbāna as well.” (M:H 1:281). See foll n.

⁵⁷ Narada Thera in Dh:N 4th ed 1993: 225 (*italics added*). A similar idea was held by W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed, 1967:57 f. Both were Sinhala scholar monks.

⁵⁸ For convenience, we can take *sabbe saṅkhārā* as referring to “all things” (ie, conditioned states) and *sabbe dhammā* as referring to “everything.” Hence, these two terms are *not* synonyms: nirvana is *not* in “everything.”

⁵⁹ See the fire parable in **Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72,18 f/1:487), SD 6.15.

as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as non-self.⁶⁰ He turns his mind away from these states.⁶¹

Having turned his mind away from these states,⁶² he directs his mind to the death-free element, thus:

“This is peaceful, this is sublime,⁶³ that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all birth-basis,⁶⁴ the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.”⁶⁵

(M 64,9/1:435 f), SD 21.10

Note that all the 3 characteristics are listed in the first sentence, with its 11 adjectives (“impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as non-self”): 6 of these refer to impermanence, 2 to unsatisfactoriness, and 3 to non-self. Turning away from these states, the practitioner directs his mind to the “death-free element,” that is, nirvana, which is then explained as “the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all birth-basis, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.” The term “non-self” is not found here at all.⁶⁶

6.1.4 To exist is to change. All samsaric existence, that is, all life and the universe itself, are conditioned: all that exist are part of a dynamic network of incessant and fluctuating networks of causes and effects. By the very fact that they are conditioned, they are *impermanent*. Indeed, whatever that exists is impermanent: *existence itself is impermanence*. Whatever exists, exists in change: existence is change.

Whatever does *not* change, or more correctly, *conceived* so, does not exist. For meaning only exists in change: to consider anything as impermanent or unchanging is making a meaningless statement. The world or the universe, in other words, if it any cause at all, does not arise from a single cause. As the 4th-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, **Vasubandhu**, puts it:⁶⁷

If the world had a single cause, whether that single cause be God or something else, the entire universe would have to arise all at once.

⁶⁰ “Impermanent ... non-self,” *aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato parato palokato suññato anattato*: as at M 1:500; A 4:422 f; cf A 2:128. Comy says that the marks of suffering are sixfold (*dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhato*), the impermanent twofold (*aniccato palokato*), the non-self threefold (*parato suññato anattato*) (MA 3:146). This refrain (and the rest) shows the attainment of calm (*samatha*), leading to the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*), or “insight preceded by calm” (*samatha, pubbaṅgamā vipassanā*), ie, on emerging from dhyana, one contemplates on it as an object of insight, reflecting it as having arisen through conditions, esp volition: see **Aṭṭhaka, nagara S** (M 52.4/1:350), SD 41.2, where Comy says that this is *samatha, pubbaṅgamā vipassanā*; see **(Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā S** (A 4.170/2:157), SD 41.5. In **Kūṭa, danta S** (M 74), this formula is applied to the body, so that we are not attached to it (M 74.9/1:499), SD 16.1.

⁶¹ Comy: “He turns his mind away” (*cittaṃ paṭivāpeti*) from the 5 aggregates included in the dhyana, which he has seen to be marked with the 3 characteristics (of impermanence, suffering, non-self) (MA 3:146). He goes on to regard the dhyana or attainment, thus: “This is peaceful ... nirvana” (see below).

⁶² Comy: That is, from the 5 aggregates, all of which are marked by the 3 characteristics. (MA 3:146)

⁶³ *Paṇītaṃ*, as at M 2:235, 263; A 4:423, 5:8, 110, 320, 322, 354 ff.

⁶⁴ See SD 28.11 (3.2).

⁶⁵ *Etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ yad idaṃ sabba, saṅkhāra, samatho sabbūpadhi, paṇinissaggo taṇha-k, khayo vi-rāgo nirodho nibbānan ti*, as at M 1:136.

⁶⁶ See esp **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285), SD 26.8.

⁶⁷ This tr is from Richard P Hayes, “Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition, <http://www.unm.edu/~rhayes/atheism.pdf>, 1991:5, slightly ed.

[Theist:] But what we observe is that beings occur one after another. Now that fact could be a function of God's intending for each individual that it arises at a given time and disappears later.

[Reply:] But in that case, since there are numerous intentions, it would turn out that the cause of the world is manifold. Moreover, that plurality of intentions would be simultaneous, for the reason that god, which is their source, putatively has no internal divisions.

(Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣyam 2.64d.1; 1975:101 f; see Abhk:Pr 306)

6.2 SAṅKHĀRA AND DHAMMA

6.2.1 Meaning of *dhamma*. At this point, it is useful to look at the central Pāli term, *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*). Bodhi, in the General Introduction to his Saṃyutta translation, says that, like K R Norman, he uses a “pragmatic approach of using different renderings intended to match its different applications”⁶⁸ gives the following usage of *dhamma*, which are summarized here.⁶⁹

<i>Buddha Dhamma</i>	the Buddha's <u>teaching</u>	S 6.2/1:138-140 = A 2:20
<i>Dhamma,rājā</i>	the king of <u>righteousness</u>	S 4:303
<i>dhamma</i> , often <i>dhammā</i> (pl)	<u>things</u>	S 3:225,9 f
<i>dhamma</i> (trait of character)	<u>quality</u>	S 2:204,3-4
<i>dhammā</i> (4 th <i>satipaṭṭhāna</i>)	<u>phenomena</u> , mind-objects	S 5:324 f, 5:329 f
<i>iminā dhammena</i>	by this <u>principle</u>	S 2:58,3-4; 4:328,21-22
<i>paṭicca,samuppannā dhammā</i>	dependently arisen <u>phenomena</u>	S 2:26,7
<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a world- <u>phenomenon</u> in the world*	S 3:139,22 f
<i>kusalākusalā dhammā</i>	wholesome & unwholesome <u>states</u>	S 5:9,17-27
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the awakening-factor of investigation of <u>states</u> (<i>dhamma</i>)*	S 5:331 f
<i>dhamm'āyatana</i> ⁷⁰	<u>mental phenomena</u>	S 2:72
<i>dhamma,dhātu</i> ⁷¹	<u>element of Dhamma</u> *	S 2:56
- <i>dhamma</i> (eg in <i>khaya</i> ,~)	<u>is subject to</u>	S 2:26,9 f
- <i>dhamma</i> (<i>anicca</i> ,~ etc)	<u>nature</u> (of impermanent nature)	S 3:195 f

In a few cases (marked by an asterisk), I have my own preferences, namely:

<i>loke loka,dhamma</i>	a worldly <u>condition</u> in the world
<i>dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga</i>	the awakening-factor of <u>dharma</u> -investigation
<i>dhamm'āyatana</i>	<u>mental phenomena</u>
<i>dhammā,dhātu</i>	<u>dharma-element</u>

⁶⁸ K R Norman takes a similar approach to his tr of *dhamma* in Tha: see his discussion at Tha:N 1/118 n to 1.

⁶⁹ Summarized mostly from S:B 42-44; see also index for other refs. For a detailed discussion, see J R Carter 1978 & F WATANABE 1983 ch 2.

⁷⁰ Bodhi: “As a sense base and element, the *dhammāyatana* and *dhammadhātu* are the counterparts of the *man'āyatana*, the mind base, and the *manoviññādhātu*, the mind-consciousness element. The appropriate sense here would be that of ideas and mental images, but the commentaries understand *dhammas* in these context to include not only the objects of consciousness but its concomitants as well. Thus I translate it ‘mental phenomena,’ which is wide enough to encompass both these aspects of experience.” (S:B 44)

⁷¹ See prec n.

6.2.2 Meaning of “all things.” The Dhammapada Commentary glosses “all things” (*sabbe dhammā*) of Dh 279a simply as “only the 5 aggregates are intended” (*pañca-k,khandhā eva adhippetā*) without any elaboration. Such texts as **the (Dve) Khandhā Sutta** (S 22.48) show that when *only* “the 5 aggregates” are mentioned, it refers to both the aggregates “of clinging” (*upādāna*) and those that are not, that is, the aggregates of the arhats.⁷²

This means that *dhammā* here refers to both conditioned things (*saṅkhata,dhamma = saṅkhārā*) as well as to unconditioned things (*asaṅkhata,dhamma*), except nirvana. They are not attributed with being impermanent or being suffering, which are only the special characteristics of conditioned things, that is, the whole of samsara. Nirvana (*nibbāna*), however, is not included here, since, strictly speaking, it has not real attributes, and cannot be predicated in any meaningful way. Nirvana is neither a conceptual nor linguistic category. If it is given attributes or predicated, it is *not* nirvana: we are only trying to speak *about* it. The word are not the thing.⁷³

Some hint of this can be teased out from how the nun Vajirā describes “a being (*satta*) [as] a mere heap of conditioned states” (*satto ... suddha,saṅkhāra,puñja*), as found in **the Vajirā Sutta**,

<p><i>Kin nu satto ti paccesi māra,diṭṭhi,gataṃ nu te suddha,saṅkhāra,puñjo yaṃ na-y-idha satt’upalabbhati</i></p>	<p>553</p>	<p>What “being” is there that you assume? How you have fallen into views, Māra! It is a <u>mere heap of conditioned states</u>: here no being is to be found.</p>
<p><i>Yathā hi aṅga,sambhārā hoti saddo ratho ti evaṃ khandhaṃ santesu hoti satto ti sammuti</i></p>	<p>554</p>	<p>Just as with parts assembled together we have the word “chariot,” even so, when there are the aggregates, there is the convention of a “being.”</p>
<p><i>Dukkham eva hi sambhoti dukkhaṃ tiṭṭhati veti ca nāññatra dukkhā sambhoti nāññaṃ dukkhā nirujjhati.</i></p>	<p>555</p>	<p>Only suffering comes into being; only suffering stands and passes away. Other than suffering, nothing comes to be; other than suffering, nothing ceases.</p>

(S 553-555*/5.10/1:135), SD 102.13⁷⁴

As such, here, the term *saṅkhārā* means something conditioned, constructed, or formed, that is, samsaric phenomena.⁷⁵ *Saṅkhārā* then does not include nirvana.

6.2.3 Meaning of *dhamma*. The saying, “all things are non-self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), as such, refers to the *all*,⁷⁶ that is, whatever is conditioned, and but *not* nirvana (which is the only unconditioned “dharma” in Abhidhamma terms). It is only in the full understanding of what the former—conditioned things—really are that begins to turn our minds towards the unconditioned. But there is one more step, as it were, that is, having fully understood the true nature of the conditioned, we then truly let them go. This total letting-go is nirvana.

⁷² S 22.48/3:47 f (SD 17.1a).

⁷³ See SD 17.4 (4).

⁷⁴ Also at SD 17.6 (6.2.2); SD 52.2e (3.2).

⁷⁵ See S:B 44-47.

⁷⁶ See esp **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

6.2.4 Non-ownership. The perception of letting go of conditioned things can also be a spiritual exercise, which works on the basis of the non-ownership (*na tumhāka*) of them. In fact, there are at least 5 suttas called **the Na Tumhāka Sutta**, namely:⁷⁷

(Kāya) Na Tumhāka Sutta	The body is not yours	S 12.37/2:64 f
(Khandha) Na Tumhāka Sutta 1	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.33/3:33 f (with simile)
(Khandha) Na Tumhāka Sutta 2	The aggregates are not yours	S 22.34/3:34
(Dhātu) Na Tumhāka Sutta 1	The elements are not yours	S 35.101/4:81 f
(Dhātu) Na Tumhāka Sutta 2	The elements are not yours	S 35.102/4:82 (same as 1)

The text of these suttas is also found in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), attesting to its importance, thus:

Therefore, bhikshus, give up [let go of] what is not yours.⁷⁸ When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

What is it that is not yours?

Form is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Feeling is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Perception is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Formations are not yours. Give them up.

When you have given them up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.

Consciousness is not yours. Give it up.

When you have given it up, it would be for your welfare and happiness for a long time.⁷⁹

(M 22,40/1:140 f), SD 3.13

6.2.5 Nothing is worth clinging to. The Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58), where the Buddha teaches Moggallāna how to overcome drowsiness during meditation, closes with this famous passage known as “the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving.” This whole section is also found in **the Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 37).⁸⁰ Sections 11.1+2 are also found in **the Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.50).⁸¹ It runs thus:

11 When this was said, the venerable Mahā Moggallāna said this to the Blessed One:

“In what way, bhante, in brief, is a monk liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total⁸² perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans?”⁸³

⁷⁷ In all these 5 suttas, the word *dīgha,rattam* is omitted in the closing stock phrase.

⁷⁸ Comy: It is the *attachment* or desire (*chanda,rāga*) to the five aggregates, not the aggregates in themselves, that should be given up: they “cannot be torn apart or pulled out.” I have rendered *yam* as “what” (which has a general sense) rather than as “whatever” which connotes that there are certain things that we do “own,” which would go against the teaching of *anattā*.

⁷⁹ Comy: Only an aggregate (form, etc) is the basis for the wrong concept of a self, since apart from them there is nothing else to crave for.

⁸⁰ M 37,2-3/1:251 (SD 54.8).

⁸¹ A 7.58,11/4:88 (SD 4.11). Their ensuing passages, however, are different. See SD 3.13 (5).

⁸² “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

11.2 ⁸⁴“Here, Moggallāna, the monk has learned⁸⁵ that nothing is worth clinging to.⁸⁶ And, Moggallāna, a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly knows⁸⁷ all things [he directly knows the nature of the all].⁸⁸ Having directly known the nature of all things, he fully understands⁸⁹ all things.

11.3 Having fully understood all things, he knows whatever feelings there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

As regards to those feelings, he dwells contemplating impermanence in them; he dwells contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them; he dwells contemplating ending (of suffering) in them; he dwells contemplating letting go (of defilements).⁹⁰

When he dwells contemplating impermanence in them, contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them, contemplating ending (of suffering) in them, contemplating letting go (of defilements), he does not cling to anything in the world; not clinging, he is not agitated; being not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.

⁸³ In **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37,15/1:255 f), Sakra, the leader of the gods, on the instigation of Moggallāna, asks the same question and the Buddha’s answer is identical to the passage here. It is possible that this passage originally belongs to the Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S, but is added here by the Aṅguttara Reciters for a more complete Sutta. Requests for brief instructions are found elsewhere in the Canon, eg, V 1:39 (Sāriputta to Assaji); S 22.1/3:1-5 (Nakula,pitā to the Buddha).

⁸⁴ This passage [11.2] is also found in **Avijjā Pahāna S 2** (S 35.80,6), SD 16.9. The ensuing passages, however, are different. See (5) above.

⁸⁵ “Has learned,” *suta*, lit “has heard.”

⁸⁶ “Nothing is worth clinging to,” *sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*, lit “all things are not worthy of adhering to.” “All things” here refer to the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense-bases and the 18 elements, all of which are not fit to be clung to. These factors have to do with insight (*vipassanā*). (AA 4:43)

⁸⁷ “He directly knows,” *abhiñānāti*, here meaning to know for oneself by insight, ie through higher self-knowledge, or *abhiññā*. Traditionally, there are 6 “higher powers” or **superknowledges** (*abhiññā*): (1) psychic powers (*iddhi,vidhā*), (2) the “divine ear” or clairaudience (*dibba,sota*), (3) mind-reading, ie the ability to read the thoughts of others (*parassa ceto,pariya,ñāṇa*), (4) the recollection of one’s own past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati*), (5) the “divine eye” (*dibba,cakkhu*), ie the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings, faring according to their karma, and (6) the destruction of mental influxes (*āsava-k,khaya*) [8.4.1.2], ie arhathood. Nos 4-6 are known as “the three knowledges (*te,vijjā*) (D 3:281; A 3:280). Comy says that this knowledge here refers to *ñāta,pariññā* (A 4:43): see foll n.

⁸⁸ “He directly knows all things,” *so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiñānāti*, alt tr, “he directly knows the nature of the all.” Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15 @ SD 7.1).

⁸⁹ “He fully understands,” *parijānāti*, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” This spiritual knowledge is called “**full understanding**” (*pariññā*), of which there are 3 kinds: (1) Full understanding of the known (*ñāta,pariññā*), ie the discernment of the specific characteristics of a phenomena (“Form as the characteristic of being oppressed’ feeling has the characteristic of being felt, etc”); (2) Full understanding by investigating (*tīraṇa,-pariññā*), ie insight wisdom (*vipassanā,paññā*) which as the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and mental state, eg, “Form is impermanent; feeling is impermanent, etc”; (3) Full understanding as overcoming (or abandoning) (*pahāna,pariññā*), ie the insight-wisdom that has the universal characteristics as its objects, and arises after one has overcome the idea of permanence, etc” (Nm 52; Vism 20.3/606 f). Comy says that “full understanding” here refers to *tīraṇa,pariññā* (AA 4:43). The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), etc, are given in the final tetrad (*Dhammānupassanā*, contemplation of mind-objects) of the breath meditation of the **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,21/3:83).

⁹⁰ The monk effects the abandoning of the mental hindrances by the contemplations of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), fading away (of lust) (*viragānupassanā*), cessation (of suffering) (*nirodhānupassanā*) and of letting go (of defilements) (*paṭinissaggānupassanā*), and thus comes to look upon feelings (all experiences) with equanimity.

He understands. ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’⁹¹

This, Moggallāna, is, in brief, how a monk is liberated through the destruction of craving, that is, one who has reached total⁹² perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans.” (A 7.58,11/4:88), SD 4.11

7 Saṅkhārā in the dependent arising formula

7.1 THE SECOND LINK IN DEPENDENT ARISING

7.1.1 In the dependent arising formula, *saṅkhārā* appears as the second link; in other words, as a condition or connection (***paccaya*** or ***nidāna***).⁹³ While *saṅkhārā* as characteristic (*lakkaṇa*) are a “passive” conditioned state, *saṅkhārā* as a condition (*paccaya*) or link (*nidāna*)—together with sense (5), that is, “effort”) [5.3]—are active “producing” or “generating” conditioners.⁹⁴

As the second factor of dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* are the karmically active volitions responsible, in conjunction with ignorance and craving, for producing rebirth and clinging on to the wheel of existence. Here, *saṅkhārā* is synonymous with *kamma*, both of which are derived from the root √KṚ, “to do” (*karoti*). As such, they are here best rendered as “**volitional activities**” or “karma-formations,” as in **the Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta** (M 120), where it is said that a bhikshu (or any practitioner) who has faith, moral virtue, learning, charity and wisdom, can set his mind to a happy birth, such as birth into a wealthy family, a god or a brahma, that is, if he were to “often cultivate” (*bhāvitā bahulī,katā*), the determination (*saṅkhāra*) towards the desired destiny.⁹⁵

7.1.2 There is, of course, the likelihood that this passage is taken too simplistically to mean that we could simply wish where we want to be reborn. The real point here is that if we keep thinking of something, one becomes somehow *becomes* it.⁹⁶ On some reflection, we could say that the Buddha is making an ironic statement for the benefit of those who are still reluctant to work towards liberation in this life. All the 31 forms of birth are a still a part of samsara, and, as such, are not liberation at all.

Only the last determination, that of awakening in this life, frees us from suffering. (M 120,37/3:103). As Hamilton aptly points out: “So while the *Sutta* does serve to illustrate that specific mental inclinations can produce specific results, the message of the *Sutta* is, rather a warning of the binding power of volitions.”⁹⁷

7.2 FORMATIONS AND INCLINATION

7.2.1 Let us examine this not so well known, but important, term, ***nati***, meaning “inclination” or habitual tendency. It is close to the post-canonical term, “habitual karma” (*āciññā,kamma*).⁹⁸ A couple of interesting passages will clarify the situation. In **the Dvedha,vitakka Sutta** (M 19), the Buddha says:

⁹¹ This para describing thr arhat is stock: V 1:14; D 1:84; M 2:39; S 2:82.

⁹² “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

⁹³ On dependent arising, see SD 5.16.

⁹⁴ S 2:5; Vbh 144, 173. See (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.12) n in SD 5.10 (2004).

⁹⁵ M 120/3:100-103 (SD 3.4).

⁹⁶ Cf **Itṭha S** (A 5.43/47-49), where the Buddha declares, “I do not teach that they [rebirth in heaven, etc] are to be obtained through prayer (*āyācana,hetu*) or through wishing (*patthāna,hetu*): see SD 5.7 (4).

⁹⁷ Hamilton 1996a:75 f, emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Vism 601; Abhs:SR 144.

Bhikshus, whatever a monk often thinks about and ponders upon, that will become his mental inclination (*nati*). (M 19,6/1:115)

This teaching is elaborated in **the Cetanā Sutta 3** (S 12.40), where the Buddha says:

Bhikshus, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever lies latent in one: this becomes a basis (*ārammaṇa*) for the maintenance of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has developed, there is inclination (*nati*). When there is inclination there is coming and going (*āgati,gati*).⁹⁹ When there is coming and going, there is passing away and being reborn. (S 12.40/2:67), SD SD 7.6c

7.2.2 Here, the Commentary glosses *nati*, “inclination,” as craving (*taṇhā*) (SA 2:72). **The Channa Sutta** (S 35.87) goes on to speak of the benefits of letting go of inclinations:

There is wavering in one who is dependent.
 There is no wavering in one who is independent.
 When there is no wavering, there is tranquillity.
 When there is tranquillity, there is no inclination.
 When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going.
 When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and reappearing.
 When there is no passing away and reappearing, there is no here nor beyond nor in between. This is the end of suffering. (S 35.87/4:59 = M 144), SD 11.12

In all these passages, we see *saṅkhārā* functioning as inclination (*nati*), that is, effectively a synonym for habitual tendencies, reinforcing the latent tendencies. All this conduces to suffering and rebirth.

7.3 SYNTHESIS. This kind of *saṅkhārā* (as a link in the dependent arising formula) gives an active synthetic explanation of how an individual existence arises, while as an aggregate (*khandha*), they apply in a passive analytical way. This name will distinguish them from the passive “formations” discussed in **the Kāma,bhū Sutta 2** (S 41.6).¹⁰⁰ This latter set—as passive “formations”—is used only in the context of the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,¹⁰¹ and never used in connection with dependent arising.¹⁰²

The (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2) defines *saṅkhārā* as follows:

And what, bhikshus, are volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*)?
 Bhikshus, there are these 3 kinds of volitional activities: the bodily formation, the verbal formation, the mental formation. These are called volitional activities. (S 12.2,14/2:4), SD 5.15

Texts like **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44)¹⁰³ and **the Kāma,bhū Sutta** (S 41.6)¹⁰⁴ mention a triad of *saṅkhārā* in connection with the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling: bodily formations

⁹⁹ I take *āgati,gati* here to mean karmic activities, pace Comy, which refers only to the dying karmic processes.

¹⁰⁰ S 41.6/4:293 (SA 2:72).

¹⁰¹ See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,42/1:275) n in SD 1.11 (2003a).

¹⁰² See S:B 44-47 & 727 n7 (Abhidhamma aspects). See Brahmavaṃso 2003b:56 f; also see *saṅkhāra* (6) above [1].

¹⁰³ M 44,13-15/1:301.

¹⁰⁴ S 41.6/4:293.

(*kāya,sañkhārā*), verbal formations (*vacī,sañkhārā*) and mental formations (*citta,sañkhārā*). The first is in-and-out breathing (because breath is dependent on the body); the second, initial application and sustained application (because, by thinking, we form the ideas we expresses through language); the third, perception and feeling (because they are dependent on the mind). Two of these—bodily formations and mental formations—are also included in the expanded instructions on the breath meditation.¹⁰⁵

It is interesting here (in the triad of *sañkhārā*) that bodily formations comprise the breathing process, which is not exactly a conscious process, but an involuntary one. Of course, it is a *conscious* process in the sense that one can *know* or become aware of the process, or one can *volitionally* take longer breaths or shorter ones. Surely, arhats, too, breathe, that is, to say, their bodies need air. This clearly shows that *sañkhārā* as bodily formations are still present in the Buddha and the arhat.¹⁰⁶

8 Sañkhārā as an aggregate

8.1 TYPES OF VOLITION

8.1.1 Sañkhāra as volition. *Sañkhārā* as the 4th aggregate (*khandha*) (Vbh 72, 89) is an activity restricted to the mental realm, and refers to both karma as cause (*cetanā*) and as effect (*phala*), as exemplified by the cooking parable: one prepares the ingredients and cooks them (active), but the cooking takes its own effect (passive). Here, *sañkhārā* is defined as the 6 classes of volitions (*cha cetanā,kāya*),¹⁰⁷ as in **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56),¹⁰⁸ that is, volition in terms of each of the 6 sense-objects, thus:

Volition ¹⁰⁹ regarding	forms.
Volition regarding	sounds.
Volition regarding	smells.
Volition regarding	tastes.
Volition regarding	touches.
Volition regarding	mind-objects.

Here, *sañkhārā* is best technically rendered as “volitional formations.” (In the Abhidhamma, *sañkhāra-k,-khandha* refers to all mental concomitants of consciousness apart from feeling and perception.)¹¹⁰

8.1.2 Mental factors. According to the Abhidhamma, while the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) of the 5 aggregates is the mind (*citta*) itself, formations (*sañkhārā*) are the mental factors (*cetasika*) attending and

¹⁰⁵ See **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,18 f/3:82) = **Eka,dhamma S** (S 54.1/5:311 f). Cf M 1:54, 390; S 2:4, Vbh 135; VbhA 142; Vism 350 f where this triad refers to formations in general.

¹⁰⁶ On whether arhats have feelings or not, see SD 17.3(4.2+7). **Sue Hamilton** claims that “The *sañkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (71). [9]

¹⁰⁷ “Classes of volition,” *cetanā,kāya*. “The fact that there is a difference between the name of the aggregate (*sañkhāra-k,khandha*) and the term of definition (*sañcetanā*) suggests that this aggregate has a wider compass than the others. In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the commentaries, the *sañkhāra-k,khandha* is treated as an ‘umbrella category’ for classifying all mental factors other than feeling and perception. Volition is mentioned only as the most important factor in this aggregate, not as its exclusive constituent.” (S:B 1065 n84). On whether the awakened have feelings, see **Vedanā**, SD 17.3 (7).

¹⁰⁸ S 22.56/3:58-61 (SD 3.7).

¹⁰⁹ “Volition,” *sañcetanā*.

¹¹⁰ See S:B 45.

conditioning the mind as “concomitants.” Hence, the formations may also be called “mental concomitants” or “concomitant factors.”

These **mental factors** (*cetasika*) are directly associated with the arising of consciousness (*viññāṇa* or *citta*). The Abhidhamma of the Pali tradition or Theravāda lists 52 mental factors, of which 25 are either karmically wholesome or neutral, 14 are karmically unwholesome, and 13 are simply neutral. Of these 52 types of mental factors, 7 are invariably associated with all the moment of consciousness, that is, consciousness cannot arise without them. Hence, they are called “universals” (*sabba, citta, sādharmaṇā*, “common to all consciousnesses”).

These universals are (1) sense-contact (*phassa*), (2) feeling (*vedanā*), (3) perception (*saññā*), (4) volition or intention (*cetanā*), (5) one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) or concentration (*samādhi*), (6) vitality (*jīvita*), and (7) attention or advertance of the mind to an object (*manasikāra*). This set of 7 head the list of the 52 factors.¹¹¹

8.1.3 Simple terms. I have generally used the term “formations” for *saṅkhārā*, unless the context demands a longer expression for the sake of definitiveness. Although here I am unable to find a simpler translation for it, as a rule, it is still better, by way of clarity and beauty to habitually use simple Anglo-Saxon words for Buddhist terms wherever possible.

We should certainly avoid cumbersome, bizarre and exotic terminology. A true understanding of a religion, at least, in the case of Buddhism, is neither in the exactness of words used nor in its technical accuracies, but what they point to, that is, imbibing the spirit of moral virtue and inner calm so that we can wisely tease the spirit from the letter.

In Buddhist training, there is a vital emphasis on not missing the tree for the forest. We have to cut down the forest of words, but not the tree of wisdom (Dh 283). The spirit lies not in the dead words, but in the living transmission and our inner stillness.

8.2 UNCONSCIOUS ACTIONS

8.2.1 The dark side of formations (*saṅkhārā*) is clearly described in **the Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6). The Sutta opens with the Buddha stating that both the unawakened ordinary person and the awakened saint feel pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and neutral feeling, but there is a difference between the two.¹¹²

7 “Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

8 Bhikshus, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart [arrow],¹¹³ and then they were to wound him with a second dart. As such, bhikshus, that person would feel the sensation of two darts.

Even so, bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

¹¹¹ For the list of 52 mental factors and explanations, see Bodhi et al (ed), *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Kandy, 2nd ed, 1999:78-110.

¹¹² For further details on **Sall’atthana S** (S 36.6), see SD 17.3(7.3). On latent tendencies, see SD 17.4 (7.3).

¹¹³ Comy: The second wound (*anugata, vedham*) would be just a finger’s breadth or two-fingers’ breadth away from the first one. For the one wounded, as such, would feel; the subsequent worse than the first. (SA 3:76).

8.2 And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, **the latent tendency of aversion** (*paṭighānusaya*) towards painful feeling lies latent in him.

8.3 When touched by a painful feeling, he delights in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

Because, bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.¹¹⁴

8.4 And when he delights in sensual pleasure, **the latent tendency of lust** (*rāgānusaya*) towards pleasant feeling lies latent in him.

8.5 He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.¹¹⁵

Not understanding these things according to reality, **the latent tendency of ignorance** (*avijjā'anusaya*) towards neutral feeling lies latent in him.¹¹⁶

8.6 If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say!¹¹⁷ (S 36.6,7-8/4:208 f), SD 5.5

This important passage shows how karma-formations first operate through the 6 sense-faculties, reacting to the 3 kinds of feelings. It should be noted here that such reactions are volitional (in the sense that they are consciously motivated by our innate unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion), that is, we react to them, but *they all can be done unconsciously (asampajāna)*!

8.2.2 In **the Bhūmija Sutta** (S 12.25) the Buddha further explains (as in **the Cetanā Sutta 1**, S 12.38)¹¹⁸ that not all karmic actions are conscious or deliberate, thus:

Ānanda, with ignorance as condition:¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77).

¹¹⁵ Cf **Cūḷa Sīhanāda S** (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (*samudaya*) the views of being (*bhava, ditṭhi*) and non-being (*vibhava, ditṭhi*) are due to any of these eight conditions (*attha-ṭ, ṭhāna*): the 5 aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskillful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. Their disappearance (*atthaṅgama*) is the path of streamwinning which eradicates all wrong views. Their gratification (*assāda*) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (*ādīnava*) is the continual bondage that they entail; the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from them is nirvana (MA 2:11). See also **Chachakka S** (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148,8-33/3:285).

¹¹⁶ The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See SD 5.5 §3n. See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, 2003:171.

¹¹⁷ **Mahā Tanhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—“he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it.” It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38,30-41/1:266-271). See Intro above & also **Cūḷa,vedalla S** (M 44.25-28/1:303 f).

¹¹⁸ The Sutta says, “If, monks, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one is still driven by latent tendencies (*anuseti*)—this is a mental basis that supports consciousness.” (S 12.38/2:65 f), SD 7.6.

when there is **the body**, because of bodily volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;
 or, when there is speech, because of verbal volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;
 or, when there is mind, because of mental volition, pleasure and pain arise internally;
 either by oneself (*sāmañ*), Ānanda, one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩¹²⁰ conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally;

or, on account of others (*pare*), one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩ conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Either consciously [deliberately] (*sampajāno*), Ānanda, one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩ conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally;

or, unconsciously [undeliberately] (*asampajāno*), one creates ⟨that bodily volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that verbal volitional formation,⟩ ⟨that mental volitional formation,⟩ conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Ignorance, Ānanda, pursues these (six) states.¹²¹ But, Ānanda, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance,

that body is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,

that speech is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,

that mind is not conditioned whereby pleasure and pain arise internally,¹²²

That field, that site, that base, that foundation, does not exist, conditioned by which that pleasure and pain arise internally.¹²³ (S 12.25,13-19/2:39-41, condensed), SD 31.2¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Comy: This section shows that pleasure and pain do not arise conditioned by contact alone, but with other conditions as well. In this case, the bodily volitions (*kāya,sañcetanā*), verbal volitions (*vacī,sañcetanā*) and mental volitions (*mano,sañcetanā*) are the karmically effective volitions that function as conditions for the resultant pleasure and pain (*vipāka,sukha,dukkha*) (SA 2:57). Bodhi, following Be & Ce, reads *avijjā,paccayā ca* and takes this phrase as belonging to the end of the present para. This has the support of SA, which explains that this is said to show that these volitions are conditioned by ignorance (SA 2:58). PTS reads *va* for *ca*, and places the phrase at the start of the next para. (S:B 561 n77)

¹²⁰ Here *mano,sāṅkhāra*, but, as **Bodhi** notes, from the context, this is clearly syn with *citta,sāṅkhāra* in (**Paṭicca-samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.14/2:4), SD 5.15 (see S:B 727 n7). Furthermore, there is no textual justification for identifying the latter with the *citta,sāṅkhāra* at (S 41.6/4:293,17) & (M 1:301,28-29), def as *saññā* and *vedanā*. (S:B 561 n79)

¹²¹ Be Ce Se: *imesu Ānanda dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*; PTS *imesu Ānanda chasu dhammesu avijjā anupatitā*, where Bodhi thinks *chasu* is redundant (S:B 561 n80). Comy: Ignorance is included among these states under the heading of decisive support (*upanissaya*). For they are all understood under the phrase, “with ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations.” (SA 2:58). On the interpretation of dependent arising by way of the 24 conditional relations of the Paṭṭhāna, see Vism 17: see Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 1971:159-173.

¹²² Comy: No such body exists where it would enable pleasure and pain to arise conditioned by bodily volition: the same applies to speech and mind. (Question:) But an arhat acts, speaks and thinks, show how is it that his body, etc, do not exist? (Reply:) In the sense that they do not create karmic results. For the deeds done by an arhat are neither wholesome nor unwholesome karma, but merely functional (*kiriya,matta*); thus, for him, it is said: “that body, etc, do not exist.” (SA 2:58). On the arhat’s functional consciousness, see Abhs:BRS 1.15. **Bodhi** says that “an alternative expl might be simply that with the elimination of ignorance there will be no further arising of the five aggregates, the basis of all experience, and thus no further experience of pleasure and pain.” (S:B 749 n81)

¹²³ Comy: There is no *field* (*khetta*) in the sense of a place of growth; no *site* (*vatthu*), in the sense of a support; no *base* (*āyatana*) in the sense of a condition; no *foundation* (*adhikaraṇa*), in the sense of a cause. (SA 2:59)

¹²⁴ This passage also at **Sañcetanā S** (A 4.171/2:157-159), SD 31.2.

The Commentary identifies **the 3 volitional formations**—*kāya,saṅkhāra, vacī,saṅkhāra, mano,saṅkhāra*—with the 3 types of volition just mentioned. We create them “ourself” (*sāmaṃ*) when we act without being induced by others, with an unprompted mind [without deliberation] (*asaṅkhārika,citta*); we create them “on account of others” (*pare*) when we act with a prompted mind [deliberately] (*saṅkhārika,citta*). We act consciously (*sampajāno*) when we act, knowing karma and its fruit; unconsciously (*asampajāno*), when we act without such knowledge (SA 2:58). This text, Bodhi notes, “may be the original basis for the Abhidhamma distinction between *sasaṅkhārika,citta* and *asaṅkhārika,citta*.”¹²⁵

8.2.3 In short, the unawakened mind unwittingly constructs a private world from the flickers and fragments of the past. This virtual reality of ancient shadows in the form of habitual tendencies only grows in obscuring true reality so that we are shielded from liberating self-knowledge. Only in breaking through the shell of this private reality can we truly liberate ourselves.

8.3 READING THE MIND & READING THE WORLD

8.3.1 In **the (Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60), the Buddha explains that the skilled mind-reader is able to know another’s mind by fathoming the other person’s *mental formations*, here meaning thought-processes, thus:

Furthermore, brahmin, one does not make his declarations by means of a sign, nor after having heard voices of humans, of non-humans, or of devas, nor from having applied and sustained his mind, and then listening to the sound of a person’s thought-vibrations¹²⁶but, having attained samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application, one knows the mind of another with his own, thus:

“By the way the mental formations (*mano,saṅkhāra*) of this good man are inclined, the depth of that mind will think such and such a thought.”¹²⁷

And however many such declarations he makes, they are exactly so and not otherwise.

This is called the miracle of mind-reading. (A 3.60.5/1:171) = SD 16.10

Here “samadhi that is free from initial application and sustained application” (*avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhim*) clearly refers to the 4th dhyana, where psychic powers (such as mind-reading) are the real source of psychic powers, as explained, for example, in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).¹²⁸

8.3.2 Broadly, “mental formations” (*mano,saṅkhāra*) refers to how we “create” our own world, or how we see the world. **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), in effect, declares that “all” (*sabba*) that we can know comes through the sense-faculties and their sense-objects. In other words, the only sources of our knowledge are our six senses. This is not to say that the external world does not exist, but that it is merely the four elements, and which in themselves have no moral impact on us.¹²⁹

8.3.3 The cosmos is neutral, but we make sense of the cosmos in a very personal and biased manner. The nature of the world that our senses create is explained in such suttas as **the Lok’anta Gamana Sutta**

¹²⁵ See Abhs:BRS 1.4. (S:B 561 n78).

¹²⁶ From here to “thus”: *api ca kho avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhim samāpannassa cetasā ceto paricca pajānāti.*

¹²⁷ *Yathā imassa bhoto mano,saṅkhārā paṇihitā imassa cittassa antarā amun,nāma vitakkaṃ vitakkissatī ti.*

¹²⁸ D 2,81-94/1:71-82 @ SD 8.10. On the Comy differing from the text on this point, see **(Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava S** (A 3.60.5(2)/1:171), SD 16.10

¹²⁹ Curiously thinks that “we have no evidence to support the supposition that the world is volitionally formed, only that it is conditioned (*saṅkhata*)” (1996a:79).

1 (S 35.116)¹³⁰ and **the (Samuday’atthaṅgama) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44).¹³¹ In the former Sutta, it is said that while it is not possible to reach the end of the physical universe (it has none), one has to reach “the end” of our sense-fabricated to overcome suffering, which is defined by Ānanda as follows:

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called “the world”¹³² in the noble one’s discipline.¹³³

And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world?

The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.¹³⁴

The ear

The nose

The tongue

The body

The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the noble one’s discipline. [96]

Friends, when the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Monks, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, monks, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling, I understand its meaning in detail to be as follows. (S 35.11,11-12/4:95 f), SD 7.4

8.4 THE “DOER” AND THE “KNOWER”

8.4.1 The unconscious, preconscious and consciousness

8.4.1.1 The key lesson about formations (*saṅkhārā*) is this: we have to let go of the notion that we are really “in charge” of things. This is especially true in meditation: the idea of “taking charge,” of controlling, the meditation, leads to restlessness. This willfulness is the machinations of “**the doer**,” the old mind that wants to run our lives but actually always ends up making a mess of it. It takes some wisdom to realize that this “doing” is really a conditioned process. This “doing,” as I understand it, is a simple term for mental formations or volitional formations (*saṅkhārā*).¹³⁵

8.4.1.2 If the “doer” lurks in our preconscious mind, where it wreaks havoc in the absence of wholesome mindfulness: its weapons are greed, hate and delusion. Its roots lie deeper in the dark recesses of our unconscious mind lurks “**the knower**.” It is called “knower” because it feeds on knowing **the “all,”**

¹³⁰ S 35.116/4:93-97 @ SD 7.4.

¹³¹ S 12.44/2:71-73 = S 7.5.

¹³² See for example **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) where “the world” refers to the 12 sense-bases.

¹³³ *Yena kho āvuso lokasmim̐ loka,saññī hoti lokamānī ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko.* See **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26) in SD 7 esp (2). On the physical sense-bases making one a “perceiver” and the mind-base making one a “conceiver,” see Bodhi’s remark in Intro above. See **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67/4:125-127), SD 15.1.5.

¹³⁴ On the 6 sense-bases as “the world” (*loka*) in the sense of disintegrating, see **Loka S** (S 35.82/4:52 f) in SD 7. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi’s remarks in SD 7.4 Intro.

¹³⁵ See Brahmavamso, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:40.

that is, the world of the sense-faculties and sense-objects.¹³⁶ The knower “knows” the world because it is the Almighty Creator that conditions how we “sense” the world: in other words, it projects the virtual that we inhabit.

8.4.1.3 The doer and the knower actually work together. The doer is **the agent** of the knower: the knower acts through the doer through the doors of body, speech and mind as karma (*kamma*), our existential habits and as formations (*saṅkhārā*), the habit-formers. Hence, “doer” comprises specifically karma and broadly, formations.

We may stop “the doer” for a little while in the dhyanas, but later, when we turn away from the light of dhyana, it returns. We may even stop “the doer” for aeons by arising in the dhyanic realms: the form and the formless worlds. Yet, it will still return when we fall from those worlds

The knower is functions through our consciousness. Where there is consciousness, there is the knower (or “cognizer”). The “knower” reacts to what it knows, and feeds “doing” and grow it. What the knowers creates and gathers is called **the mind** (*citta*), which is what *knows*.

The mind works with the 5 physical senses—the “all” [8.4.1.2]—to create our virtual world. These senses are the openings to the world and *are*, in turn, our virtual world. These openings let the world into our mind. The flood and flow through these openings are **the influxes** (*āsava*),¹³⁷ that prevent us from awakening and keeps us in samsara.

8.4.1.3 Knowing can occur in a positive way. It is possible, with some understanding and training, for us to just **know** and not be touched or twisted by what we know. We just know heat and cold, pleasure and pain—we should leave it at that. We know beauty and ugliness, and we should let it be. In other words, we can either just stand back when we know things, especially something negative (without taking it in), or we can enjoy (respond with joy) when we know something positive, what is beautiful and true.

Further, we need to understand that consciousness arises and passes away so rapidly that it gives an illusion of continuity. Owing to this illusion, we miss the point that whatever we see with our eyes, or feel with the body, and so on, the mind takes as its own object. The mind knows that it *saw*, it knows that it *felt*. it can even know that it *knew*.

It is this **knowing** that *it saw*, that *it felt*, that *it knew*, and so on that gives “us” an illusion of **objectivity**, that there is an “object” that is perceived. When the knower thinks that there is “**something**,” it concludes that this *something* or objectivity is the ultimate “Self,” “Soul” or abiding entity.¹³⁸

8.4.2 There is another way we can understand how the “doer” and the “knower” operate. **The doer** is our past karma in the form of latent tendencies that dictate our present habits and biases.¹³⁹ Generally speaking (in a non-technical sense), we can say that the doer is a name for our habit of conceiving ideas and views, while **the knower** is our act of “perceiving” the world. The knower actually creates and projects ideas, or filters and distorts sense-experiences, creating something in its own image.¹⁴⁰ [8.4.1.3]

¹³⁶ See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

¹³⁷ The influxes (*āsava*) are (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). The older list prob has only 3 influxes (omitting views, subsumed under “ignorance”).

¹³⁸ Cf Brahmavamsa, “Anatta (non-self),” 2001.

¹³⁹ Our “biases” (**agati**, “wrong courses”) are due to desire (*chanda’agati*), hatred (*lobha’agati*), delusion (*moha’agati*) or fear (*bhay’agati*): **V 1:339**; Sigal’ovāda S (**D 31.5/3:182**), Saṅgīti S (**D 22.1.11(19)/3:228, agata,gamana**); Agati S 1 (**A 4.17/2:18**, Saṅgaha Bala S (**A 9.5.6d/4:364**), SD 2.21; **Vism 22.55/683, 22.69/685**).

¹⁴⁰ On the notions of “conceiver” (*mānī*) and “perceiver” (*saññī*), see **Lokanta Gamana S** (S 35.116,13) & SD 7.4 (1.3). See also **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (5).

Although the knower has a negative aspect of reacting to sense-experiences (including “knowing” things), we can tame and discipline it to examine sense-experiences in a more skillful manner, that is, to see **impermanence** in all such phenomena. In due course, we begin to fully understand that “all conditioned things are impermanent,” and from there we easily go on to realize that “all conditioned things are suffering [unsatisfactory].” Then, with some meditation or mindfulness, when the both the doer and the knower are put out of action (at least temporarily), we understand that “all things are non-self,” and so be liberated by this.¹⁴¹

8.4.3 In other words, as unawakened beings, we should first tame the doer so that we don’t act as victims of our past like automatons fuelled and propelled by latent tendencies. This is done through practising mindfulness of the present moment, especially experiencing it as being impermanent. The taming of the knower is trickier, as it lies deeper in our latent tendencies, but it is possible with powerful insight when we begin to see through the shadows and charades of various notions of *permanence* and *selfhood*.

8.4.4 Only the knowledge and vision of reality liberate us, only this truth matters, since it is true reality itself: all else is thinking and philosophy. **The Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1)¹⁴² shows why the Buddha disapproves of the various philosophical points, and how we can become what we know and think, so that what we create the world around us, a very private and limited world.

As **R H Robinson** notes:

The Brahmajāla account reveals why the Gotama is said to have disapproved of the points on which he refused to declare an answer. “The Tathāgata knows that these view-points (*diṭṭhi-ṭhānā*) ... will have such and such a result, such and such an effect on the future conditions of those who trust in them” [D:RD 1:40]. Thus the question is not whether these views are true or false, but whether they lead to good or evil rebirth, or to freedom from rebirth. The underlying principle, one often overlooked by modern investigators, is that you become what you know, that what happens in thought affects what happens in existence. (1972b:319)

9 Do arhats have formations?

9.1 Sue Hamilton, in her book, *Identity and Experience*, claims that “The *saṅkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed, ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (1996a:71). Hamilton goes on to say that “[t]he technical status of *saṅkhāras* is suggested in passages which state that Nirvana, the cessation of ignorance, is the stilling (or cessation) of *saṅkhāra*,” (1996a:79), quoting the phrase *sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho ... nibbānaṃ*.¹⁴³ Further, she notes that “At this point [on attaining nirvana], one’s state of mind is without volitional activity,” quoting the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* from the famous *aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ* verse (the Buddha’s first utterance), recorded at Dh 154, which runs thus:

*Aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ*¹⁴⁴
sandhāvissaṃ anibbisam
gahakāraṃ gavesanto
dukkhā jāti punappunam

Through many births in samsara
I ran, not finding
the house-maker that I seek:
painful is repeated birth. (Dh 153)

¹⁴¹ On the doer and the knower in mindfulness training, see Brahmavamso 2006: 19 f, 24, 40 f, 97, 160 f, 208; also SD 15.1(8.5 + 14.6).

¹⁴² See SD 25.

¹⁴³ **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136), SD 12.1; **(Samādhi) Ānanda S** (A 3.32/1:133).

¹⁴⁴ = Tha78ab (**Meṇḍa,sita Tha**).

<i>gaha,kāraka diṭṭho'si</i>	You are seen, house-maker!	
<i>puna gehaṃ na khasi</i>	no more will you build a house:	
<i>sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā</i>	all your rafters are broken,	
<i>gaha,kūṭaṃ visaṅkhitam</i> ¹⁴⁵	the roof-tree destroyed—	
<i>visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ</i>	<u>the mind is free from constructs,</u>	
<i>taṇhānaṃ khayam ajjhagā</i>	it has reached the end of craving.	(Dh 154)

9.2 The Dhammapada Commentary explains the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* as “Now my mind has won freedom from the conditioned, by making nirvana its object” (*idāni mama cittaṃ visaṅkhāraṃ nibbānaṃ ārammaṇa,karaṇa,vasena gataṃ anupaviṭṭhaṃ*, DhA 3:129). It is interesting here that **the Miga,sira Thera,gāthā** (Tha 183cd + 183abc) are identical with Dh 153cd and 154abc, and continues as follows:

<i>thūnirā ca vidālītā</i>	And the house-top torn apart—	
<i>vimariyādi,kataṃ</i> ¹⁴⁶ <i>cittaṃ</i>	<u>the mind, set free,</u>	
<i>idh'eva vidhamissatī ti</i>	will be blown out right here.	(Tha 184def)

We can safely take Tha 184e here as expressing the same idea, since, like Dh 154, it has the same context of spiritual liberation. As such, the phrase *visaṅkhārāgataṃ cittaṃ* should not be taken in itself and read as a “state of mind is without volitional activity,” as Hamilton has done. The phrase is better understood as “the mind, set free” in both the Dhammapada and Thera,gāthā contexts.

9.3 All this suggests, as it were, that a human being, especially the arhat, can function *without* formations, that he experiences feelings *without formations*, as suggested by Hamilton—but merely saying this is problematic. In fact, **Damien Keown**, in his review of Hamilton’s book rejects her statement,

The suggestion is that a human being (paradigmatically an Arhat) can (and does) function without the involvement of this aggregate, and experiences feelings without any concomitant volitions One point which casts doubt on this is that *Theragāthā* 90 [**Sāmidatta Tha**] suggests that in the case of the Arhat all five aggregates remain: “The five aggregates being well understood continue to remain although their roots are cut off.”¹⁴⁷ Another is that the enlightened (such as the Buddha) experience emotions (such as compassion) which seem to trigger off volitional actions (like teaching the Dharma). (Keown 1996:304)

The aggregate of formations (*saṅkhāra-k,khandha*) comprises volitions, representing the conative (or volitional) aspect of the mind, most, if not all, of which are rooted in past karma (some good, some bad) and latent tendencies. In an ordinary person, according to **the Kukkura,vatikā Sutta** (M 57), these volitional activities are of two kinds: the afflictive (*sabyapajjha*) and the unafflictive (*abyapajjha*) karma-formations (actions of body, of speech and of mind), which respectively refer to unwholesome karma and to wholesome karma.¹⁴⁸ **The arhat** is above this karmic dichotomy (that is, he is above greed, hate

¹⁴⁵ **Udāna,varga** 21.7d has *visaṃskṛtaṃ*, which in Pāli would be *visaṅkhatam*, which is a vl.

¹⁴⁶ So Be Se; Ce *vimariyādīkatarā*; PTS *vipariyādīkatarā*.

¹⁴⁷ *Pañca-k,khandhā pariññātā tiṭṭhanti china,mūlakā, | vikkhīno jāti,saṃsāro, n'atthi dāni puna-b,bhavo ti* (Tha 90).

¹⁴⁸ M 57,4-11/1:389-391. These two are often interpreted at the tenfold course of actions (*kamma,patha*): see **Sammā,ditṭhi S** (M 9,4/1:47), SD 11.14. See also (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:60), SD 3.7 & **Satta-ṭ,ṭhāna S** (S 22.57/3:63 f), SD 29.2, where both explain “formations” [volition] as comprising intentions related to form, sound,

and delusion): he acts spontaneously, out of compassion and with wisdom towards others. In other words, the constructive aspects of formations (plural) do not occur in him. Only the functional karmic formation (singular) arises and ceases as befitting the occasion.

9.4 It should be understood that *saṅkhāra* is a very broad term [9.3], but its most important aspect in an unawakened person is volition,¹⁴⁹ or “the will” (for the sake of convenience). Here, the will is simply the “doer” [8.4], who is the true “agent” behind the actor. In other words, as unawakened beings, we do not really have “free will,” but act or not act as our past karma and habitual tendencies dictate.

The arhat, and the non-returned, to some extent, have a stronger “will” (again using the language of convenience). In other words, they have full control of themselves, so that they are not the subject of any karma or habitual tendencies (the arhat has uprooted them all). Using textual language, we can say that arhats (and non-returned, to a great extent) do *not* have any “mental formations” (*mano,saṅkhārā*)—note the plural.¹⁵⁰

They have only “thought-formation” (*citta,saṅkhāro*)—note the singular—since they are still alive and as such have a mind (*citta*) or thinking-process. We might say that they have a *singular* mind, one that is focussed in mindfulness and wisdom, naturally responsive with compassion. This is, in fact, surely one of the senses of *uju,paṭipanna*, “straight in conduct”—he is a *straight* person, so to speak.¹⁵¹

9.5 We might then say that an arhat is *a will-free person*, a truly liberated individual. For, “will” entails thinking and planning based on likes and dislikes, something that the arhat, and the non-returned to a great extent, have transcended. The arhat is awakened because he has overcome this most vital aspect of *saṅkhāra*, that of the will or volition as karma. The arhat, in other words, is an “unintentional” person, a spontaneous individual, *who truly goes with the flow, and yet moves against the world’s currents*. **The Parivāraṃsana Sutta** (S 12.51) describes the arhat as follows:

When he neither creates nor forms¹⁵² volitional formation,
he does not cling to anything in the world.

Not clinging to anything in the world, he is not agitated.¹⁵³

Not agitated, he attains nirvana by himself.¹⁵⁴

He understands,

“Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done.

There is (for me) no more of arising in any state of being.”¹⁵⁵ (S 12.51,14/2:82), SD 11.5

Thera,gāthā 90, that of the elder Sāmi,datta, runs thus:

smell, taste, touch and mind-object. **Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79/3:87), SD 17.9, says that formations interact with each of the other aggregates and conditions them.

¹⁴⁹ Sometimes, the term “will” is used here, but this can be problematic, as D Keown remarks, “I for one would agree, that Buddhism has no concept of the ‘will’ at all, certainly not understood in the Augustinian sense as a spiritual faculty independent of sensuous and intellectual life.” (1997:303): SD 56.17 (9.1.1.1).

¹⁵⁰ On the important difference btw *saṅkhārā* (pl) and *saṅkhāro* (sg), see **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44,13-15/1:301) & SD 40a.9 (2.4).

¹⁵¹ See SD 15.10a (4).

¹⁵² “When he neither creates nor forms,” *anabhisankharanto anabhisañcetayanto*. The word *abhisañcetayati* means “he thinks out, plans.”

¹⁵³ “He is not agitated,” *na paritassati*. See SD 11.5(§14) for nn.

¹⁵⁴ “By himself,” *paccattaṃ*, ie through his own effort, not through the power of another. (SA 2:78)

¹⁵⁵ This quote is the arhat’s reviewing knowledge (*paccavekkana,ñāṇa*), for which, see S:B I n376.

*Pañca-k,khandhā pariññatā
titthanti chinna,mūlakā
vikkhīṇo jāti,samsāro
n'atthi dāni puna-b,bhavo'ti*

The five aggregates, fully known,
stand with roots cut off:
the cycle of birth is utterly exhausted,
there is no more rebirth here. (Tha 90)

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