

Free will

The nature of *SAÑKHĀRĀ*

[Previously published as fb200611 Piya Tan]

Source: SD 56.22 “Early Buddhist Psychology as Experience” © Piya Tan, 2020.¹

9.1 WORDS FOR *SAÑKHĀRĀ*

9.1.0 The will, volition, intentionality or conation²—these terms more or less reflect the early Buddhist term, *sañkhāra* [4.2.4]. Any of them can, in psychological terms, be freely used to refer to the property of an action that is performed deliberately rather than accidentally or without purpose. Each of these words, however, has its historical baggage, each interesting in its own way.

Words, however, are the cut and colour of the clothes we wear to express ourselves to hide our nakedness. Yet, it is uncomfortable to keep wearing the same clothes for too long, and it helps to wear different clothes depending on the occasion and ambience, as we make clear and proper exchanges with others, especially in terms of some wholesome communication.

9.1.3 Intentionality

9.1.3.1 Intentionality refers to “aboutness” of the conscious body [1.1.3]. Beings having intentionality have *propositional* attitudes, they have beliefs, knowledge, hopes, dreams, desires, etc, *about* things: they are often looking *outwards* in quest of what they see as “happiness.” Whenever we come across “**that**” in speech or some writing, we know *that* we are dealing with something *intentional*.

Notice the intentionality of the previous sentence. When we hear someone exclaim “ouch,” “oops,” “hey,” and so on, these sounds do not really distinguish us as humans apart from the other the animals. Indeed, according to Buddhism, when we commit subhuman acts, we have fallen down into that level of animality, bestiality, inhumanity. Such habits will then define us, shape our minds, dehumanize us, which will burden us so in the next life, even future lives.

The mind behind such habits is intentionality: it sets us apart from the subhuman: the asura, the preta, the animal, the hell-being. Our *wholesome intentionality* is what sets us apart as a singularly human being.³ This point is so vital that the whole early Buddhist theory of consciousness teaches is not only *what* intentionality is, but also *how* we can and must cultivate it.⁴

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/56.22-Early-Buddhist-psychology-as-experience.piya-PREV-56.17.pdf>

² Etym: From Latin *intentus*, aim or intent, from *intendere*, to stretch forth or give one's attention to, from *in-*towards + *tendere*, to stretch.

³ Univ of Alberta Cognitive Science Dictionary (online), accessed 4 June 2020.

⁴ “Intentional” is not to be confused with ‘intensional’ spelled with an ‘s’, the latter of which refers to the meaning of a term, (along with ‘extensional’). Intentional, intensional, and extensional can be paired loosely in

Our free will keep us free only when we acknowledge it. We are free only when we stand up for what is right, good and true: this is also always beautiful. When we are truly free, we fear not those who ridicule us, who condemn us, who plot against us. We fear no voices of falsehood. For, we only heed the voice of truth and good: the Buddha's voice.

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the following way: intentional with propositional or denotational, intensional with conceptual or connotational, and extensional with perceptual. On intentionality, see also J Proust, "Intentionality," in O Houdé et al (ed), *Dictionary of Cognitive Science*, 2004:193 f.