

Formations as habits

Excerpt from SD 31.9 Unconscious views: an examination of some Buddhist terms for body-mind processes by Piya Tan © 2009.¹

2.3.5 Formations (*saṅkhāra*)

2.3.5.0 At the heart of early Buddhism is the teaching of not-self (*anattā*), that is, the denial that the unchanging self exists. Our sufferings arise from our mistaken view that there is such an abiding self. How is this self-view formed? It decidedly arises from ignorance (*avijjā*), on account of which we form habitual tendencies or “formations” (*saṅkhāra*) of mental, verbal and bodily actions. This feeds our consciousness (*viññāṇa*) [2.3.4]. These three are in fact the beginning of the dependent arising formula.²

British philosopher, **Claire Carlisle**, has presented a very useful analysis of *saṅkhāra* as “habits.”³ Here I shall summarize her presentation with some of my own comments.⁴

2.3.5.1 FORMATIONS ARE HABITS

Formations (*saṅkhāra*) are not just habits, but they replicate themselves and attract other similar habits—and they have karmic consequences. As unawakened beings, our notions of good and evil are rooted in ignorance, and we act accordingly. This is how we form our habits of thinking, speaking and acting.

The term *saṅkhāra* has both senses of “conditioned” and “conditioning.”⁵ Our actions are unconsciously conditions by how we think, and such actions in turn condition future actions. Such thoughts occur exponentially: they are called “mental proliferation” (*papañca*).⁶ And they are very powerful force behind our actions, lying dormant but ever ready to strike. They become latent tendencies [2.3.2].

2.3.5.2 MY HABITS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Our past habits shape our present, both of which shape our future. Our actions, conscious or unconscious, have consequences.⁷ As Charles Reade puts it: “Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny.” (1903: 377). This echoes the Buddhist teaching of karma. As Carlisle explains:

In both cases, the connection between actions and their consequences is not to be understood moralistically—it is not that wholesome deeds are rewarded and unwholesome ones punished. Rather, a purely naturalistic law ordains that as a seed is, so the fruit will be (and here again we find the idea that the same principle underlies both physical and psychical reality).

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/31.9-Unconscious-views.-piya.pdf>

² See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16. On **formations**, see **Saṅkhāra**, SD 17.6.

³ See Claire Carlisle, “Becoming and un-becoming: the theory and practice of *anattā*,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 7,1 2006:75-89.

⁴ See Carlisle 2006:80-83.

⁵ See Carlisle 2006:80 f. On etym of *saṅkhāra*, see Silburn 1955:200.

⁶ See eg **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2).

⁷ On how karma can be unconscious, see **The unconscious mind**, SD 17.8b.

From a Buddhist point of view, actions matter so much because, ... they *affect* and *form* the individual, not just for the duration of the action but for the future: one kind of action leads to another. This means that the focus of moral or spiritual life is the individual's responsibility for his actions, habits, and dispositions. Of course, the effects of one's actions on others must be considered, but this kind of consideration—or the lack of it—is integral to the actions themselves. (Carlisle 2006: 81)

2.3.5.3 HABIT IS A RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

Our habits are an attempt to ease suffering, but which usually does not really work; that is why they become *habituated*: we keep doing them in the hope of getting some positive result, or getting out of a negative situation, or simply because we do not know what else to do. We are caught in the rut of such habits as long as we do not understand that this entails *suffering*, the first noble truth. Our habits only invoke suffering, and we do not understand why.

People are caught up with habits and rituals because they seem to make life easier, more comfortable, and more *lived*. We might even feel a sense of achievement when we have completed habitual act or task (like Sisyphus) [1.1], but we need to keep on doing the same thing again and again. Ironically, habits inevitably turn out to be a source of suffering. Not only do we suffer when we lose those things that we are accustomed to, but our suffering is multiplied by our habitual, and unconscious, reactions of like and dislike to our bodily and mental sensations.

2.3.5.4 HABIT IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH ATTACHMENT

This association, notes Carlisle, is implicit in the etymology of “habit,” which comes from the Latin *habere*, which means to have or to hold. The connotations of possession and belonging, whether desirable or not, even suggest some extent of bondage or addiction.

The self, as popularly conceived, can be said to be “bundles of habits.” William James remarks rather wistfully that if only the young were to realise “how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while they are in the plastic state” (1977: 20).

Things (including ideas) that we are *attached* to do not really satisfy us: for, if they do, then we would not be attached to them. We are attached to things, and these things are always external to us, which we see as filling a lack in our lives. Only when we cultivate such wholesome qualities (especially love) *within* ourselves, could this sense of lack be overcome. This is the second noble truth.

2.3.5.5 HABIT INVOLVES INATTENTION

Habit, on account of its routine and repetitiveness, is likely to involve a diminishing attention: we tend to become less mindful of an action we keep doing over and over. As Marcel Proust puts it, “the heavy curtain of habit (the stupefying habit which during the whole course of our life conceals from us almost the whole universe ...).”⁸

This metaphor, notes Carlisle, reminds us that the word “habit” may refer to clothing, to a particular form of dress; that is, to something that covers one up. Perhaps every

⁸ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* vol 2 (tr Charles Kenneth Scott-Moncrieff), London, 2006: 893.

habitual action is a movement of veiling, a perpetuation and consolidation of oblivion or ignorance. The question now is of what is covered up—who *wears* the habit?

For those whose identity depends on their habits (clothing) and external behaviour, they clearly lack any self-identity, no matter how many layers of habits. What habits conceal, then, is precisely this emptiness, this lack of a fixed, permanent, substantial core: “If habit is a second nature, it prevents us from knowing our first” (Proust 2006: 140). Mindfulness *unconceals* habits, and this revelation weakens and eventually unravels them, so that we see our true self.

2.3.5.6 HUMAN NATURE IS NOT FIXED

The claim that the self is a product of habit means that *human nature is not fixed*. However strong the force of habit, it does not amount to *determinism*: even the most entrenched habits can be changed. This leads us to the third noble truth: that freedom from suffering *is* possible. Habits are constructed, and therefore they can be deconstructed.

When habit is examined in the light of mindfulness, it is a learning process. Indeed, to master a skill, the best way is a habitual act, such as learning a new language, or repeatedly reciting a sutta, or even bringing the distracted mind back to the meditation object. Habitual attention is a powerful tool of inner stillness and clarity.

Indeed, the best way to break a negative habit is a wholesome mindfulness. Habits are seldom broken by a single act, unless it is of such a profound power as to inspire samvega (religious urgency) or infuse joyful faith (*pasāda*) in us. Samvega arises when we are confronted by some sort of life-threatening, or near-death, or ground-removing experience (like when the Buddha sees the first three of the four sights).⁹ Joyful faith is represented by the fourth sight.

To break a habitual mind is to become creative. The goal of creativity is profound joy. The truly spiritual is able to flood himself with such joy from within; for, he is awakened, and free from suffering.

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⁹ See *Mahā,parinibbāna S* (D 16), SD 9 (7f).