

SANKHARA

When we discussed the five aggregates of clinging (pañca upādānakkhandha) (පංචඋපාදාන ස්කන්ධ), we discussed form (rūpa) (රූප) and feeling (vedanā) (වේදනා). I want to go a little bit deeper into this topic and explain how we can use this knowledge to achieve right view (sammā-diṭṭhi) (සම්මාදිට්ඨි) – that is supra-mundane right view (lokuttara sammā-diṭṭhi) (ලෝකෝත්තර සම්මාදිට්ඨි). This should be the main purpose of our listening to and discussing the Dhamma.

When discussing feeling, we talked about three types of feeling– pleasant feeling (sukha vedanā) (සුඛ වේදනා), unpleasant feeling (dukkha vedanā) (දුක්ඛ වේදනා), and neutral feeling (adukkha-m-asuka vedanā) (අදුක්ඛමභසුඛ වේදනා). We also talked about the latent dispositions (anusaya) (අනුසය) associated with each of these, and how one can direct that knowledge to attain Nibbāna. The path that leads to Nibbāna begins with neutral feeling because the opposite (paṭibhāga) (පටිභාග) of neutral feeling is ignorance (avijjā) (අවිජ්ජා); the opposite of ignorance is wisdom (vijjā) (විජ්ජා); the opposite of wisdom is liberation (vimutti) (විමුක්ති), and the opposite of liberation is Nibbāna. By contemplating on this, one has the possibility of achieving right view and entering the path to Nibbāna.

Today we will talk about thought-formation (saṅkhāra) (සංඛාර). The term thought-formation is mentioned in different contexts in the Dhamma. It is mentioned as the fourth of the five aggregates of clinging – form, feeling, perception (sañña) (සංඤා), thought-formation, and consciousness (viññāṇa) (විඤ්ඤාණ). Then in dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) (පටිච්චසමුප්පාදය), thought-formation is mentioned as the second link in the series, as being conditioned by ignorance (avijjā paccaya saṅkhāra) (අවිජ්ජා පච්චයා සංඛාරා). A question very frequently asked is whether thought-formation in these two contexts refers to the same concept or different concepts. There are many different explanations but since we are pursuing the supra-mundane (lokuttara) (ලෝකෝත්තර) path, we should understand what exactly the Buddha said about thought-formation. The Buddha did not waste his words, so when he used the word ‘saṅkhāra’, he did not refer to different things in different contexts. It is our wrong interpretation of the term, our inability to explain it, or our lack of understanding of the term that has led to a lot of confusion.

If someone says that he knows everything, the validity of that statement cannot be accepted according to Buddhism unless that person is an Arahant (අරහන්). Even if you are a Stream Winner (Sotapatti) (සෝතපත්ති), a Once-Returner (Sakadāgāmi) (සකදාගාමී) or a Non-Returner (Anāgāmi) (අනාගාමී) still you would not have complete knowledge and understanding of the Dhamma, because these are merely different levels of knowledge based on each person’s level of wisdom. We must understand that the Buddha did not give different meanings to the term ‘saṅkhāra’ in different situations. To say that he did merely shows our own lack of understanding of the Dhamma. So this is a good way to start investigating the Dhamma.

As saṅkhāra is explained as thought-formation, sometimes you can take it as kamma (කම්ම). Intention (cetanā) (චේතනා) is also explained as kamma, as the Buddha said, ‘Intention, O monks, I call kamma’ (cetanāham bhikkhave kammam vadāmi) (චේතනාහං භික්ඛවෙ කම්මං වදාමි). This line explains that cetanā itself becomes kamma. There are three types of thought-formation – formation of merit

(puññābhisaṅkhāra) (පුඤ්ඤාභිසංඛාර), formation of demerit (apuññābhisaṅkhāra) (අපුඤ්ඤාභිසංඛාර) and formation of the imperturbable āneñjabhisaṅkhāra (ආනෙඤ්ජාභිසංඛාර). Formation of merit refers to good deeds or good kamma, formation of demerit refers to bad deeds or bad kamma, and formation of the imperturbable is a state you attain when you are in the meditative absorptions (jhānas) (ධ්‍යාන), especially in the formless meditative absorptions (arūpāvacara jhānas) (අරූපාවචර ධ්‍යාන). Formation of merit results in rebirth in the higher realms (sugati) (සුගති), formation of demerit results in rebirth in the lower realms (duggati) (දුගති) and formation of the imperturbable results in rebirth in the Brahma realms. So formation of merit will give good results, formation of demerit will give bad results, and with formation of the imperturbable one has the possibility of going to higher levels of the Brahma worlds. These are the three types of thought-formation. In dependent origination it is said that thought-formation is conditioned by ignorance. So there is ignorance involved in all three types of thought-formation.

Thought-formation is also called cetanā. Cetanā is a thought-forming process because you think about your intentions, ideas and so on. While vedanā is the feeling that you experience about an object, cetanā is thinking about it. Cetanā is a mental factor (cetasika) (චෛතසික) like feeling and perception. Mental factors occur with the mind (citta) (චිත්ත), arising together with the mind and passing away along with the mind. In other words, mental factors cannot exist without the mind. So feeling, perception and intention cannot exist without the mind. This is an important thing to understand.

There are two famous verses that refer to formations starting with ‘All formations are impermanent’ and ‘All formations are suffering’ (‘sabbe saṅkhāra annicāti and ‘sabbe saṅkhāra dukkāti’ (‘සබ්බෙ සංඛාරා අනිච්චාති. සබ්බෙ සංඛාරා දුක්ඛාති’)). What is meant by all formations? This includes all types of formations. So you cannot talk about any formation that does not belong to this category. When the Buddha says ‘all formations’, properties such as impermanence and suffering apply to all of them without exception.

Formations can also be categorised into four types. The first type is saṅkhata saṅkhāra (සංඛත සංඛාර) which arise due to direct and indirect causes (hetu-pratyaya) (හේතුප්‍රත්‍යය). The second type is abhisaṅkhata saṅkhāra (අභිසංඛත සංඛාර) which occur as the result of past kamma (vipāka) (විපාක). For example eye consciousness (cakkhu viññāna) (චක්ඛු විඤ්ඤාණ) which arises in relation to seeing occurs as the result of previous kamma. Similarly, sotha viññāna (සොත්ථ විඤ්ඤාණ) which arises in relation to hearing occurs as the result of previous kamma. The third type is abhisaṅkharanaka saṅkhāra (අභිසංකරණක සංඛාර) which occur as new kamma and produce further effects or results in the future. If it is good kamma you get good results. If it is bad kamma you get bad results. The fourth type is payoga saṅkhāra (පයෝග සංඛාර) which occur within the Noble Eightfold Path (ariyamagga) (ආරියමග්ග). Payoga means prayoga, (ප්‍රයෝග) which means using your wisdom or right view to reduce new kamma.

To summarise, the four types of formations are formations that occur due to direct and indirect causes, formations that occur as the effects of past kamma, formations that occur as new kamma, such as formations of merit, formations of demerit and formations of the imperturbable which have the potential to produce effects in the future, and formations that occur on the path to Nibbāna which help to reduce new kamma. Due to formations that occur as new kamma, we are caught in a cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra) (සංසාර) as they keep producing results in the future. These are the causes and effects which make us travel on this *sansaric* journey.

How can we stop this sansaric journey? It is only through the Noble Eightfold Path where only a certain type of thought formation is generated, which helps to reduce new kamma. In this instance, wisdom is used to stop the sansaric journey. This type of thought formation can also be considered as merit (kusal) because it has the ability to stop demerit (akusal). There is a difference between merit which is known as pin (පින්) and merit which is known as kusal (කුසල්). Thought-formation that helps to reduce new kamma is kusal because it helps one progress on the path leading to Nibbāna.

Thought-formation occurs through the six faculties - the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Take the example of seeing something. To perform the act of seeing, we need the eye, form, and eye consciousness. Eye contact - phassa (එස්ස) occurs only when all three come together (tinnaṃ saṅgati phasso) (නිශ්ඡං සංඝති එස්සෙසා). These three are collectively known as contact (phassa) (එස්ස). How do we get the sense faculties? As the Buddha has explained, it is due to the result of previous kamma. For example, we have got a human eye because of good kamma in our previous life. As a result of a wholesome thought that occurred as the last thought in our previous life, we have got a functioning human eye, a functioning human ear etc. As the faculties occur due to the result of cause and effect, they can be considered as conditioned formation. Even form is conditioned because it is generated by the faculties which are conditioned by direct and indirect causes.

The six-fold consciousnesses occur as the result of previous kamma. Therefore they are known as thought-formation conditioned by past kamma. This type of thought-formation is harmless because it does not create new kamma and so cannot take us on the sansaric journey. But if we create kamma conditioned by ignorance as mentioned in dependent origination, such kamma can bind us to samsara because they create results in the future. We discussed that this type of thought-formation which takes us on the sansaric journey is known as new kamma.

We discussed three types of thought-formation early on – formation of merit, formation of demerit and formation of the imperturbable. The first is good kamma, the second is bad karma and the third is a higher level of thought-formation that is created in the meditative absorptions. The important factor here is that all three types of thought-formation are conditioned by ignorance. However, if you have attained right view and are progressing through the Noble Eightfold Path, then your thought-formation is not conditioned by ignorance. We discussed that this type of thought-formation helps to reduce new kamma.

Now we need to know how to convert thought formation conditioned by ignorance to thought formation that is not conditioned by ignorance. In other words, how to enter the path leading to Nibbāna. We can recognise these two types of thought-formation when we look at how the faculties work. For example, at the initial eye consciousness level, only a colour image is created but you have not recognised that yet. This means that if you look at some flowers, initially you only get a colour image. The eye can only generate the image and eye consciousness merely becomes aware of it. But to recognise this colour image as a rose, you need not only the signal that you get through the eye, but also information from past experience. So if you have never seen a rose before, you may not be able to recognise the image as a rose. For example, a small child may not be able to identify the colour image as a rose. From this it is clear that when you recognise something, cetanā is also present. This means that by creating new thoughts you create new kamma – cetanā.

There are two things happening at this point. The first is sensing the signal (colour information) through eye consciousness. The second is recognising the signal through mind consciousness (mano viññāna) (මනෝ විඤ්ඤාණ) and thinking about it in terms of other aspects like beauty, smell etc. This is where new kamma is created. If you do not know what is going on, then the third type of thought-formation, which produces new kamma is created. However, if you know what is going on, then you have the ability to reduce new kamma by applying right view.

Right view is of two types - one is at the worldly (laukika) (ලෝකික) level and the other is at the supra-mundane level. The supra-mundane level of right view can be achieved only by listening to the Dhamma - the teachings of the Buddha. When you listen to the teachings, then there is a possibility of achieving supra-mundane right view. To be able to do this one has to understand the teachings very clearly. The teaching, however, is very profound and deep.

How can one convert the third type of thought formation that creates new kamma to the fourth type of thought-formation that reduces new kamma? In other words, how do you move from thought-formation conditioned by ignorance to thought-formation that is not conditioned by ignorance? At the worldly level, when we see something, we cannot help generating thoughts about it. We first get information about it through our eye. The eye consciousness becomes aware of it and then thoughts are generated through mind consciousness. That is thought-formation based on cetanā and the next thing is, we believe that whatever we thought or created in our mind belongs to that external object. For example, when we see a rose, we believe that the concept of the rose that arises in our mind belongs to the external object made of the four elements (satara mahā dhātu) (සතර මහා ධාතු). That is the worldly level of understanding. Similarly, when we see someone, we might think of that person as a good person or a bad person. Then we think that the good or bad quality we created in our minds belongs to the external form. But how does this happen?

First we see only the figure of the person. We get this information through the eye. Then we combine that information with our past experience and generate new thoughts. We create our own interpretations and our own story about that person. That is cetanā. For example, if we think that the person is bad, we attach that quality to the external figure - that is to the form we see. Where is all this generated? The bad person or the good person is generated within the mind, but we attach that quality to the external person. That is what we do at the worldly level.

But if we observe this process carefully, we may see that there is thought-formation going on within our mind and the series of thoughts generated do not belong to the external object. That is, the thoughts have nothing to do with the external object. For example, when we see someone, that person does not have any idea about what we are thinking about him or her. This is because the thoughts are generated only in our mind and do not belong to the external object. In other words, the thoughts generated in our mind do not belong to the external world. If we can see this reality, that whatever we think is within us and there is no way that those thoughts can be attached to the external object, then that is seeing things with wisdom. If we separate external form from whatever is generated within our mind, in other words, if we know how to separate mind and matter, that is right view. Whatever is created within our mind is not matter. It is known as mentality (nāma) (නාම) because the mind and the mental factors are known as mentality. They do not belong to external form or matter. The ability to distinguish between the two is called the separation of mind and matter.

This teaching is profound, so let me give you another example. Suppose someone abuses us, what is it that you hear? Initially it is only a sound signal. Then we interpret it, giving it a meaning and we assign our own values to it. At this point we make a judgement about what we hear and say that the person is abusing us. This part is generated within our mind. However, we do not know that whatever we created is within our mind and so we come to the conclusion that the person is abusing us.

Let me explain this further. When we hear someone talking we interpret what we hear. Let us say someone talks to us in a totally different language that we cannot understand - in Chinese or Japanese or whatever language that we do not know. Still we hear the sound but we do not know whether that person is saying good or bad things about us, whether he is abusing us or praising us. Why? Because we do not understand the language and so we do not have the ability to interpret it and create our own cetanā. In this instance, we do not attach anything to that person because we have not created anything in our minds about that person. But if this person is talking in a language we understand, then it makes a difference because we are able to interpret what we hear. We might think that the person is abusing us and then attach that thought to what we hear. So if we think that this person is abusing us we get angry, but if we think that he or she is praising us and saying good things about us, then we like that person.

Now compare the two situations - in the first there is a person talking in a language that we do not understand and in the second there is a person talking in a language that we understand. In both these situations we use the ear faculty - the ear door to get the sound signals. In the first situation, we hear an unknown language, therefore we cannot interpret what we hear. So we cannot use our past experience to generate new thoughts. In the second situation, we have the ability to interpret what we hear using past experience because we understand the language we hear. Generating new thoughts by putting together past experiences is thought-formation. Not only do we engage in thought-formation, we also attach whatever thoughts are generated such as 'He's a good person', 'He's a bad person', 'He's abusing me for no reason' etc. to the form we see.

This is the point I want to make. First the signal comes in through one of our sense doors. Next the processing of that signal takes place. Then we think that whatever thoughts are generated belong to the external object or person we see or hear. If it is something bad like someone abusing us, we think that the abuse comes from the external person. And then we get angry with that person. This happens because we collect the sound signals, process them, arrive at our own conclusions and believe that they all belong to the external person. In other words, we assign all our thoughts to the external person. This is due to ignorance and delusion. We do not see that these thoughts are generated in our mind and are all confined to the mind. We do not see that these thoughts do not belong to external form or matter. In other words, we do not see that the mind and the mental factors that arise cannot be attached to external objects or forms.

If you see this reality, can you get angry with an external person? Can anyone praise or abuse us? The only input we get from outside is the sound signal. It is our own interpretation of the signal that creates the praise or abuse within us. As the external person can only give us the sound signals, no one can praise or abuse us other than ourselves. There is a story about how a Brahmin once abused the Buddha. After the Brahmin got tired of abusing the Buddha, the Buddha asked him a question. The Buddha asked if the Brahmin invited some friends or relatives and offered them food and if they did not accept the food, what the Brahmin would do. The Brahmin replied that he and his family would consume the food. 'Similarly',

the Buddha said, 'I have not accepted your abuse, so you can share it with your family'. So in reality, no one can abuse us because we ourselves generate those thoughts and believe that the external person abused us. If we are mindful of our ear door we can see that what we heard is only a series of sounds and that there is no way the sounds can abuse us. We have created the abuse ourselves. While in reality we abused ourselves, at the worldly level we believe that the external person abused us. That is why at a worldly level, worldly things or people can give us happiness or sadness. This happens as long as we believe that they can abuse us or praise us. But in reality, we get only sound signals through our ear door. Everything else is created within ourselves. They do not belong to the person outside.

If you can see this with wisdom, you can understand what the Buddha meant when he said 'In the heard will be merely what is heard' (sute sutamattam) (සුතෙ සුතමත්තං). This means hearing is only hearing. You can apply the same principle to the other sense doors as well. For example, you can apply 'In the seen will be merely what is seen' (ditthe ditthamattam) (දිට්ඨෙ දිට්ඨමත්තං) to the eye; 'In the sensed will be merely what is sensed' (mute mutamattam) (මුතෙ මුතමත්තං) to the nose, tongue and body. That is why the Arahants or the Noble Ones do not get affected by worldly things, by what is known as the eight worldly concerns (atalo dahama) (අටලෝ දහම) - gain and loss (ලාභ අලාභ), praise and blame (ප්‍රශංසා නින්දා), fame and disrepute (යස අයස), pleasure and pain (සුඛ දුක). We however get deeply affected by these eight worldly concerns. This happens because we believe that whatever thoughts generated in our minds belong to external objects or external persons we see. Similarly with sound, we make our own interpretations about what we hear and believe that they belong to the external world.

If you see the reality of what is going on, then there is a possibility of converting thought-formation conditioned by ignorance to thought-formation that is not conditioned by ignorance. Otherwise you will always get angry or happy with the external object or person you see or hear and react accordingly. This creates bad kamma. If you think that the person you see is a good person then you might generate good kamma but all this depends on the initial ignorance and delusion. Ignorance is not knowing that there is mentality on one side, that is the mind and the mental factors, and materiality on the other side, that is form or matter, and that there is no way that they can be connected together because they are two different things.

Mentality is the thoughts we create. Cetanā is a mental factor which is within us and so belongs to mentality. How can we think that it belongs to external objects or persons which are materiality? You may get angry thoughts but still if you have the ability to see that the angry thoughts are generated within yourself, then you will not attach them to external objects or persons. If you see this, which is only part of the reality, then you are in a position to reduce kamma by generating the fourth type of thought-formation which produces merit needed to enter the path leading to Nibbāna.

In other words, if you see this reality, that itself is enough to make you realize the rest. That itself is enough for you to escape from worldly suffering - the eight worldly concerns that affect worldly people. That is how you can remain un-shattered by the eight worldly concerns. If we allow external objects and people to affect our mind then the eight worldly concerns will always be present to harass us. But it is up to us. We must try to develop our minds so that we are able to realize that whatever thoughts that are created within ourselves do not belong to external form or matter. If we can differentiate mind and matter, that is the first stage of entry to the supra-mundane path. Whatever thoughts or cetanā created

within ourselves are within our mind only. We cannot attach these thoughts to external form. The important thing is to separate mind and matter without linking them together.

At the worldly level, we do not realize this and think that whatever we think belongs to external objects or people and this thinking makes us go after them. This is the nature of our sensuous world (kāmaloka) (කාමලෝක) and so we get affected by sensuous pleasure (kāmacchanda) (කාමච්ඡන්ද) and ill-will (vyāpāda) (ව්‍යාපාද). We believe that whatever form we experience through our sense doors, and whatever thoughts we create within us about those forms are all connected. But we should realize that we think in such a way due to our ignorance and delusion. So when we generate thoughts about external forms we identify those thoughts with the forms. That is how we link them together. For example, when we see a flower, by habit we believe that it is a beautiful flower because we attach our value judgment to the external form. Similarly, when we get the smell of a flower, we think about it as a good smell and believe that the smell belongs to the external object. We do not know what the mind is doing and so we get deluded.

So whenever we use the eye and create thoughts about what we see, the first step is to understand and realize that thought-formation belongs to our mind and not to the external object. In the same way, whatever sound we hear is only a sound signal and whatever thoughts we generate through our previous experience about that signal are only thought-formation within us and do not belong to any external object or person. If we do not pursue what we see or hear, then and there it comes to a complete end. We should know that whatever we think is only a thinking process and that we cannot attach it to the external world.

The same theory is applicable to the other sense doors. What I have explained is mainly for the eye and form and the ear and sound, but the same principle can be applied to the nose and smell, the tongue and taste and the body and touch. You can get the signal of a smell and then generate thoughts about it. At this point stop for a moment to separate the thoughts from the smell and see that they belong to the mind, that they are only mentality. They do not belong to any external object. If you experience a taste, whatever thoughts you generate about the taste do not belong to any external object. If you can cut off mentality from materiality at this point, you will not go after that object again and again and that is the end of suffering.

This way of thinking is known as reducing new kamma. This is the difference between creating new kamma and reducing new kamma. If you use wisdom, that is mindfulness (sati) (සති) and clear comprehension (sampajañña) (සම්පජ්ඣා) together, then you are able to reduce new kamma. Otherwise we remain in the worldly path and keep travelling on this endless sansaric journey, just like we have been doing in countless lives through the aeons.

May the Noble Triple Gem bless you.

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## Glossary

Clear comprehension - sampajañña (සම්පජ්ඣා)

Consciousness - viññāna (විඤ්ඤාණ)

Contact - phassa (ඵස්ස)

Cycle of birth and death - saṃsara (සංසාර)

Dependent origination - paṭiccasamuppāda (පටිච්චසමුප්පාදය)

Direct and indirect causes - hetu-pratyaya (හේතුප්රත්‍යය)

Ear consciousness - sotha viññāna (සෝතවිඤ්ඤාණ)

Eight worldly concerns - atalo dahama (අටලෝ දහම)

Eye consciousness - cakkhu viññāna (චක්ඛු විඤ්ඤාණ)

Feeling - vedanā (වේදනා)

Five aggregates of clinging - pañca upādānakkhandha (පංචඋපාදාන ස්කන්ධ)

Form - rūpa (රූප)

Formation of demerit - apuññābhisaṅkhāra (අපුඤ්ඤාභිසංඛාර)

Formation of merit - puññābhisaṅkhāra (පුඤ්ඤාභිසංඛාර)

Formation of the imperturbable - āneñjabhisaṅkhāra (ආනෙඤ්ඤාභිසංඛාර)

Formation conditioned by causes - saṅkhata saṅkhāra (සංඛත සංඛාර)

Formation conditioned by past kamma - abhisaṅkhata saṅkhāra (අභිසංඛත සංඛාර)

Formation that generates new kamma - abhisaṅkharanaka saṅkhāra (අභිසංකරණක සංඛාර)

Formation the reduces new kamma - payoga saṅkhāra (පයෝග සංඛාර)

Formless meditative absorptions - arūpāvacara jhānas (අරූපාවචර ධ්‍යාන)

Four elements - sata mahā dhātu (සතර මහා ධාතු)

Higher realms - sugati (සුගති)

Ignorance - avijjā (අවිජ්ජා)

Intention - cetanā (චේතනා)

Latent dispositions - anusaya (අනුසය)

Liberation - vimutti (විමුක්ති)

Lower realms - duggati (දුගති)

Meditative absorptions - jhānas (ධ්‍යාන)

Mental factors - cetasika (චේතසික)



Mentality – nāma (නාම)  
 Mind - citta (චිත්ත)  
 Mind consciousness - mano viññāna (මනෝ විඤ්ඤාණ)  
 Mindfulness – sati (සති)  
 Neutral feeling - adukkha-m-asuka vedanā (අදුක්ඛමභසුඛ වේදනා)  
 Noble Eightfold Path - ariyamagga (ආර්යමග්ග)  
 Noble One – arahant (අරහන්)  
 Non-returner - anāgāmi (අනාගාමී)  
 Once-returner - Sakadāgāmi (සකදාගාමී)  
 Opposite - paṭibhāga (පටිභාග)  
 Perception - saññā (සංඤා)  
 Pleasant feeling - sukha vedanā (සුඛ වේදනා)  
 Result of past kamma - vipaka (විපාක)  
 Right view - samma ditthi (සම්මාදිට්ඨි)  
 Sensuous pleasure - kamachchanda (කාමච්ඡන්ද)  
 Sensuous world - kāmaloka (කාමලෝක)  
 Stream winner - sotapatti (සෝතපත්ති)  
 Supra-mundane - lokuttara (ලෝකෝත්තර)  
 Thought-formation - saṅkhāra (සංඛාර)  
 Unpleasant feeling - dukkha vedanā (දුක්ඛ වේදනා)  
 Wisdom - vijjā (විජ්ජා)  
 Worldly – laukika (ලෝකික)