

Sankhara

Introduction

by
Anagarika Tevijjo

A lot of meditators and practitioners have a problem understanding the term '*sankhara*,' especially when it is translated from the original Pali as 'formations' or 'volitional formations.'

Such terms mean almost nothing to the average reader and may even befuddle the occidental student of epistemology who might confuse 'being,' in an ideal and permanent, metaphysical sense with 'becoming,' as a continuing, impermanent arising in the causal Buddha-Dhamma sense.

To pin-point the paradox more exactly:

- On the one hand, (according to the Buddha-Dhamma), 'form' is perceived as a process of dependently-arising, impermanently-appearing phenomena, flowing in a continuum and disappearing as the process is ultimately ceasing;
- While on the other hand, (as seen in a Greek philosophical sense,) 'form' is a metaphysically-fixed, finite or infinite 'form' as an absolute and permanently-abiding thing.

Phenomena are either fixed or they are moving. Phenomena are either absolute entities or they are changing appearances in continuum relative to one another. They cannot be both at the same time.

While this may be unclear to some, at least we have put our finger on the source of the epistemological problem. In summary, what is perplexing about so-called reality is that, in a phenomenological sense, 'Things may not be what they seem and appear to be.'

An illustration which may help us to better understand the arising formations of *sankhara* is contained in the following explanation by Danister I. Fernando:

***Sankhara*-Conditioned Phenomenon**

“How pretty is a flower in bloom! Yet, it fades away and meets with destruction in no time! Why is that so? It is because the flower is a '*sankhara*' - a conditioned phenomenon. According to Buddha-word, '*Sabbe sankhara anicca*', 'All conditioned phenomena are subject to constant change' Let us see.

The term '*sankhara*', according to its context, has different shades of meaning. In this essay, I have decided to use this term as it occurs in the sense of anything compounded and conditioned, and includes all things whatever in the world, nay, in the universe, all phenomena of existence.

All things that arise on account of 'causes' are said to be conditioned phenomena or '*sankhara*'. To find out what these 'causes' are let us first take the simple example of a mango tree. The modern belief is that plants have life. Buddha also has said that those with life belong to three categories - human beings, animals and plants; but, plants do not have a mind (*vinnana*). Therefore I shall take this example of a mango plant as something with life but without '*vinnana*'.

A mango plant, to grow up, requires a seed and a host of other requirements. If the seed is kept on a dry surface it'll never grow. It has to be planted along with the other requirements. So then, the main 'cause' (*hetu*) for the plant to come up is the seed. The contributory causes (*pratyā*) - attached to it are soil, water, sunshine etc. Since the mango plant grows because of 'causes' or conditions, it is a conditioned phenomenon - a '*sankhara*'.

Let us now take the case of a human being, a man. How has he come into being? That also occurs on account of 'causes'. Buddhist psychology speaks of '*Vinnana*' (consciousness) as that which plants itself in the womb of a mother.

The '*vinnana*' or '*citta*' which passes from one existence to the next is called '*patisandhi vinnana*' or '*patisandhi citta*'. This term means "The again-linking-up" consciousness, that ever and again supplies the bond between one existence and another.

At this juncture, it has to be clearly understood that the very same consciousness does not come to the new birth from the previous one. It is only to causes contained in the previous existence that its new appearance is due.

[This is sometimes called 'rebirth,' but one must be careful when using the term- 'rebirth.' Consciousness continuing in a new formation does not imply the rebirth of a 'person' or 'self' but only a continuum or a relinking-consciousness as mere

mind mental energy changing or moving from a particular set of aggregates and moving into another relative causal, dependent and impermanent form.]

Buddhism does not make any acceptance to a permanent 'soul' (*atta*) - definitely not. The concept of soul is only a mental perception. What really happens is that accumulation of kamma, wholesome, and unwholesome collected during 'samsara' forms an energy which becomes the potential for a new birth.

Therefore for a man to be born the '*patisandhi vinnana*' becomes the main cause. The contributory causes are parents' contribution, the mother's womb, the necessary nutrients etc. Under these causes a being conceives. So the man is a conditioned phenomenon - a 'sankhara'.

Similarly, the conditioned nature is common to each and everything in this Universe, and all are subject to change, decay and destruction in a flux. The mind (*nama*) too is conditioned because it also rises owing to causes. We should understand that there is no body organ which can be identified as mind. There are merely a number of states of mind in very rapid succession. We should understand that both body and mind (*rupa* and *nama*) are conditioned phenomena. In the ultimate sense, there exist only ever-changing physical and mental phenomena.

The causes (*hetu*) themselves, which bring about effects (*phala*) also cease to exist. Then simultaneously effects too cease to exist. This fact is stated in the Dhamma thus:

"Hetun paticca sambhutan Hetu bhanga nirujjhati"

One loses a loved-one all of a sudden. What befell the loved-one is this very same thing, a thing that befalls all conditioned phenomenon. That person was born of conditions. He lived because of conditions and he passed away also due to the same reason. This is the nature of *sankhara* - conditioned phenomena.

This happens not only to that loved one. I, who am writing this essay, and you who are reading it and all others existing in this Universe, will definitely have to face this situation. So, really speaking one should not lament over a death, since

it is only a general law. Buddha has said, "*Sabbe satta marissanti*," All beings die. It is greed (*lobha*) and delusion (*moha*) that are responsible for lamentation.

But, however, The Blessed One has declared that there is one only 'Dhamma' which is unformed and unconditioned (*Asankhata dhatu*) and that is Nibbana - the only reality.

The unconditioned state of ultimate release.”

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We may gain further insight into the Buddhist background and the relative dependence of *sankharas* on conditions and concomitant factors by reading the following:

The Buddhist Way

by
Acharn Lee Dhammado

What follows is a discussion of the Buddhist way, a way discovered by a human being whom large numbers of people have respected and praised as being a worthy person who has shown us the way as well. When we study his teachings, we are free to believe them or not, as we see fit; the man who discovered them never laid down any rules coercing us in any way.

When a group of people sees that a doctrine can lead them to become good and they give that doctrine their respect and adherence, it is said to be their religion. As for the religion or doctrine of the Buddha, it can be summarized in three points.

1. We should refrain from doing anything at all in thoughts, word, or deed that would be evil or destructive, that would cause suffering to ourselves or to others. Even if we find ourselves already doing such things, we should make an effort to stop.
2. We should develop within ourselves all qualities that we know to be good and virtuous, maintaining the virtues we already have - this is called *arakkha-sampada* - and constantly aiming at developing the virtues we haven't yet been able to acquire.
3. Whatever activities we may engage in, we should do so with purity of heart. We should make our hearts pure and clean. If we can't keep them that way constantly, we're still doing well if we can make them pure from time to time.

All three of these points are the aims of the Buddha's teachings.

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The Buddha taught in line with the true nature of the world. He said, "*Khaya-vaya-dhamma sankhara, appamadena sampadetha,*" which means,

"All *sankharas*, once they have arisen, decay by their very nature. Don't be heedless or complacent. Be thoroughly mindful and completely self-aware, and you will attain peace and security."

What this means is this: All things that appear in the world arising from actions (*kamma*) are called *sankharas* - fabrications, fashionings, compounded things. *sankharas*, by their nature, are of two sorts - *sankharas* on the level of the world and *sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma*.

1. "*Sankharas* on the level of the world" refers to the eight ways of the world: status, fortune, praise, and pleasure, which are things to which we all aspire but - *sankharas* being what they are, unstable and inconstant - results of another sort may interfere: Having had status, we may lose it. Having had fortune, we may lose it. Having been praised, we may be criticized. Having tasted the pleasure that comes from material wealth, we may become needy and destitute, afflicted with suffering and pain. Therefore the Buddha taught us not to be heedless as to be deluded by these things. If we can't keep this point in mind, we're sure to suffer.

2. "*Sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma*" refers to the properties (*dhatu*), aggregates (*khandha*), and sense media (*ayatana*) that lie within us and that result from unawareness and the *sankharas* concocted by the mind giving rise to *dhamma-sankharas* on the outer level.

a. *Dhatu*: The properties that are fashioned into *sankhara* of the level of the *Dhamma* are six:

(1) The solid or dense components of the body, such as bones, muscle, and skin, are called the earth property.

(2) The liquid aspect, such as the blood, permeating throughout all parts of the body, is called the water property.

(3) The forces, such as the in-and-out breath, that flow through the body are called the wind property.

(4) The aspect that gives warmth to all the parts of the body is called the fire property.

(5) The empty spaces in the body, where the other properties can move, enter, and leave, the passages that permit air to enter and leave, and allow us to move - such as the ear canal, the nasal passages, and mouth, all the way to the pores - are called the space property.

(6) These various aspects of the body, if there's no consciousness overseeing them, are like a dead flashlight battery that can no longer produce the power to give rise to brightness or movement. As long as consciousness is in charge, it can cause the

various qualities and parts of the body to be of use to living beings. Good and evil, merit and demerit can arise only if consciousness is giving the orders. Thus, good and evil come ultimately from awareness itself. This is called the property of consciousness.

All six of these properties are one class of *sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma*.

b. *Khandha*: The various categories of things that we experience are called the five aggregates -

(1) Form: All visible sense data, both within us and without, are called the aggregate of form.

(2) Feeling: the feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain that result when consciousness and sense data come into contact with one another are called the aggregate of feeling.

(3) Perception: The act of labeling and identifying people and things, both within and without, is called the aggregate of perception.

(4) Fabrications: the thoughts and mental constructs that arise from the mind - good, bad, right, wrong, in line with the common nature of all thinking - are called the aggregate of fabrications.

(5) Consciousness: Distinct awareness in terms of conventional suppositions - for example, when the eye sees a visual object, the ear hears a sound, a smell comes to the nose, a taste comes to the tongue, a tactile sensation comes to the body, or an idea arises in the intellect - being clearly aware through any of the senses that, "This is good, that's bad, this is subtle, that's fine": To be able to know in this way is called the aggregate of consciousness.

All five of these aggregates come down to body and mind. They are *sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma* that arise from unawareness.

c. *Ayatana*: This term literally means the "base" or "medium" of all good and evil. Altogether there are six sense media: the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, feeling, and ideation.

All of these things are *sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma*. The Buddha taught that all of these *sankharas* are undependable, fleeting, and unstable. They appear, remain for a moment, and then disband. Then they appear again, going around in circles. This is inconstancy and stress. Whether they're good or bad, all *sankharas* have to behave in this way. We can't force them to obey our wishes. Thus the Buddha taught they're not self. Once we've developed precise powers of discernment, we'll be able gradually to loosen our attachments to these *sankharas*. And once we've stabilized our minds to the point of Right Concentration, clear cognitive skill will arise within us. We'll clearly see the truth of *sankharas* on the level of the *Dhamma*, and will shed them from our hearts. Our hearts will then gain release from all *sankharas* and attain the noblest happiness as taught by the Buddha, independent of all physical and mental objects.

Although this discussion of these two topics has been brief, it can comprehend all aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

To summarize: Heedfulness. Watchfulness. Non-complacency. Don't place your trust in any of these *sankharas*. Try to develop within yourself whatever virtues should be acquired and attained. That's what it means not to be heedless.

(translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Yet another reference to cite to in explaining the term '*sankhara*' is in the actual words of the Buddha, as may be found in an oft-quoted *sutta* called *The Questions of Kutadanta*. This is an excellent discussion between Kutadanta, who was a Brahman leader, and the Buddha on the nature of identity, causation, and rebirth, which is unusually intelligent and profound.

This is a passage well-worth reading for the sake of broader understanding:

The Questions of *Kutadanta*

Taken from *The Gospel of Buddha*,

Compiled by Paul Carus.

Kutadanta: I am told you are the Buddha,
the Holy One, the All-knowing, the Lord of the World.
But if you were the Buddha,
would you not come like a king
in all your glory and power?

Buddha: Your eyes are hindered.
If the eye of your mind were undimmed
you could see the glory and the power of truth.

Kutadanta: Show me the truth and I shall see it.
Your doctrine, however, is without consistency.
If it were consistent, it would stand;
but as it is not, it will pass away.

Buddha: The truth will never pass away.

Kutadanta: I am told that you teach the law,
yet you tear down religion.
Your disciples despise rites and abandon immolation,
but reverence for the gods can be shown only by sacrifices.
The very nature of religion consists in worship and sacrifice.

Buddha: Greater than the immolation of bullocks is the sacrifice of self.
He who offers to the gods his evil desires
will see the uselessness of slaughtering animals at the altar.
Blood has no cleansing power,
but the eradication of lust will make the heart pure.
Better than worshipping gods
is obedience to the laws of righteousness.

Kutadanta: You believe that beings are reborn,
that they migrate in the evolution of life,
and that subject to the law of karma we must reap what we sow.
Yet you also teach the non-existence of the soul!
Your disciples praise utter self-extinction
as the highest bliss of Nirvana.
If I am merely a combination of the *sankharas*,
my existence will cease when I die.
If I am merely a compound of sensations and ideas and desires,
where can I go at the dissolution of the body?

Buddha: O Brahman, you are religious and earnest.
You are seriously concerned about your soul.
Yet your work is in vain because you are lacking
in the one thing that is needful.

There is rebirth of character,
but no transmigration of a self.
Your thought-forms reappear,
but there is no ego-entity transferred.
The stanza uttered by a teacher
is reborn in the student who repeats the words.

Only through ignorance and delusion do men indulge in the dream
that their souls are separate and self-existent entities.

Your heart, O Brahman, is still cleaving to self;
you are anxious about heaven,
but you seek the pleasures of self in heaven,
and thus you can not see the bliss of truth
and the immortality of truth.

I have not come to teach death, but to teach life,
and you do not discern the nature of living and dying.

This body will be dissolved
and no amount of sacrifice will save it.
Therefore, seek the life that is of the mind.
Where self is, truth cannot be;
When truth comes, self will disappear.
Therefore, let your mind rest in the truth;

propagate the truth, put your whole will in it, and let it spread.
In the truth you shall live forever.

Self is death and truth is life.
The cleaving to self is a perpetual dying,
while moving in the truth
is partaking of Nirvana
which is life everlasting.

Kutadanta: Where, O venerable Master, is Nirvana?

Buddha: Nirvana is wherever the precepts are obeyed.

Kutadanta: Do I understand you correctly that Nirvana is not a place,
and being nowhere it is without reality?

Buddha: You do not understand me correctly. Now listen and answer these
questions:
Where does the wind dwell?

Kutadanta: Nowhere.

Buddha: Then, sir, there is no such thing as wind!

Kutadanta: (silence)

Buddha: Answer me, O Brahman, where does wisdom dwell?
Is wisdom a locality?

Kutadanta: Wisdom has no allotted dwelling-place.

Buddha: Do you mean there is no wisdom,
no enlightenment, no righteousness, and no salvation,
because Nirvana is not a locality?
As a great and mighty wind
which passes over the world
in the heat of the day,
so the Tathagata comes to blow
over the minds of mankind
with the breath of his love,
so cool, so sweet, so calm, so delicate;
and those tormented by fever assuage their suffering
and rejoice at the refreshing breeze.

Kutadanta: I feel, O Lord, that you proclaim a great doctrine,
but I cannot grasp it.
Forbear with me that I ask again:
Tell me, O Lord, if there be no atman,
how can there be immortality?
The activity of the mind passes,

and our thoughts are gone
when we have done thinking.

Buddha: Our thinking is gone,
but our thoughts continue.
Reasoning ceases,
but knowledge remains.

Kutadanta: How is that? Is not reasoning and knowledge the same?

Buddha: It is as when a man wants,
during the night, to send a letter,
and, after having his clerk called,
has a lamp lit, and gets the letter written.
Then, when that has been done, he extinguishes the lamp.
But though the writing has been finished
and the light has been put out the letter is still there.
Thus does reasoning cease and knowledge remain;
and in the same way mental activity ceases,
but experience, wisdom, and all the fruits of our acts endure.

Kutadanta: Tell me, O Lord, pray tell me,
where, if the sankharas are dissolved, is the identity of my self?
If my thoughts are propagated, and if my soul migrates,
my thoughts cease to be my thoughts
and my soul ceases to be my soul.
Give me an illustration, but pray, O Lord,
tell me, where is the identity of my self?

Buddha: Suppose a man were to light a lamp;
would it burn throughout the night?

Kutadanta: Yes, it might do so.

Buddha: Now, is it the same flame that burns
in the first watch of the night as in the second?

Kutadanta: (hesitates) No, it is not.

Buddha: Then is there more than one flame, one in the first watch
and the other in the second watch?

Kutadanta: No, sir. In one sense it is not the same flame,
but in another sense it is the same flame.
It burns the same kind of oil,
it emits the same kind of light,
and it serves the same purpose.

Buddha: Very well And would you call those flames
the same that have burned yesterday

and are burning now in the same lamp,
filled with the same kind of oil,
illuminating the same room?

Kutadanta: They may have been extinguished during the day.

Buddha: Suppose the flame of the first watch
had been extinguished during the second watch,
would you call it the same if it burns again in the third watch?

Kutadanta: In one sense it is a different flame,
in another it is not.

Buddha: Has the time that elapsed during the extinction of the flame
anything to do with its identity or non-identity?

Kutadanta: No, sir, it has not.
There is a difference and an identity,
whether many years elapsed or only one second,
and also whether the lamp
has been extinguished in the meantime or not.

Buddha: Well, then, we agree that the flame of today
is in a certain sense the same as the flame of yesterday,
and in another sense it is different at every moment.
Moreover, the flames of the same kind,
illuminating with equal power the same kind of rooms
are in a certain sense the same.

Kutadanta: Yes, sir.

Buddha: Now, suppose there is a man
who feels like yourself, thinks like yourself,
and acts like yourself, is he not the same man as you?

Kutadanta: No, sir.

Buddha: Do you deny that the logic which holds good for yourself
also holds good for the things of the world?

Kutadanta: (hesitates) No, I do not.
The same logic holds good universally;
but there is a peculiarity about my self
which renders it altogether different
from everything else and also from other selves.
There may be another man who feels exactly like me,
thinks like me, and acts like me;
he may even have the same name
and the same kind of possessions,
but he would not be myself.

Buddha: True, Kutadanta, he would not be yourself.
Now, tell me, is the person who goes to school the same person
when he finishes his schooling?
Is it one who commits a crime, another
who is punished by having his hands and feet cut off?

Kutadanta: They are the same.

Buddha: Then sameness is constituted by continuity only?

Kutadanta: Not only by continuity,
but also and mainly by identity of character.

Buddha: Very well, then you agree that persons can be the same,
in the same sense that two flames of the same kind are called the same;
and you must recognize that in this sense
another man of the same character
and product of the same karma
is the same as you.

Kutadanta: Well, I do.

Buddha: And in this same sense alone are you the same today as yesterday.
Your nature is not constituted by the matter of which your body consists
but by your sankharas, the forms of the body, sensations, and thoughts.
Your person is the combination of the sankharas.
Wherever they are, you are.
Whether they go, you go.
Thus, you will recognize in a certain sense
an identity of your self, and in another sense a difference.
But he who does not recognize the identity should deny all identity,
and should say that the questioner is no longer the same person
as he who a minute later receives the answer.
Now consider the continuation of your personality,
which is preserved in your karma.
Do you call it death and annihilation,
or life and continued life?

Kutadanta: I call it life and continued life,
for it is the continuation of my existence.
But I do not care for that kind of continuation.
All I care for is the continuation of self
in the other sense - the sense that makes of every man,
whether identical with me or not,
an altogether different person.

Buddha: Very well. This is what you desire
and this is the cleaving to self.
This is your error.
All compound things are transitory:

they grow and they decay.
All compound things are subject to pain:
they will be separated from what they love
and be joined to what they abhor.
All compound things lack a self, an atman, an ego.

Kutadanta: How is that?

Buddha: Where is your self?

Kutadanta: (silence)

Buddha: Your self to which you cleave is in constant change.
Years ago, you were a small babe;
then, you were a boy;
then a youth, and now, you are a man.
Is there any identity of the babe and the man?
There is an identity in a certain sense only.
Indeed, there is more identity between the flames
of the first watch and the third watch,
even though the lamp might have been extinguished during the second watch.
Now which is your true self,
that of yesterday, that of today, or that of tomorrow,
for the preservation of which you clamour?

Kutadanta: I see my error, but I am still confused.

Buddha: It is by a process of evolution that sankharas come to be.
There is no sankhara which has sprung into being without a gradual becoming.
Your sankharas are the product of your deeds in former existences.
The combination of your sankharas is your self.
Wherever they are impressed, there your self migrates.
In your sankharas, you will continue to live
and you will reap in future existences
the harvest sown now and in the past.

Kutadanta: Verily, O Lord, this is not a fair retribution.
I cannot recognize the justice that others after me will reap
what I am sowing now.

Buddha: Is all my teaching in vain?
Do you not understand that those others are you yourself?
You yourself will reap what you sow, not others.

Think of a man who is ill-bred and destitute,
suffering from the wretchedness of his condition.
As a boy he was slothful and indolent, and when he grew up
he had not learned a craft to earn a living.
Would you say his misery

is not the product of his own action,
because the adult is no longer the same person as was the boy?

Thus, I say to you:
Not in the heavens,
not in the midst of the sea,
not if you hide yourself away in the clefts of the mountains,
will you find a place where you can escape the fruit of your evil actions.

At the same time, you are sure
to receive the blessings of your good actions.

The man who has long been travelling and who returns home in safety,
the welcome of kinsfold, friends, and acquaintances awaits.
In the same way, the fruits of his good works bid him welcome
who has walked in the path of righteousness,
when he passes over from the present life into the hereafter.

Kutadanta: I have faith in the glory and excellency of your doctrines.
My eye cannot as yet endure the light;
but I now understand that there is no self,
and the truth dawns upon me.
Sacrifices cannot save, and invocations are idle talk.
But how shall I find the path to life everlasting?
I know all the Vedas by heart and have not found the truth.

Buddha: Learning is a good thing; but it avails not.
True wisdom can be acquired by practice only.
Practise the truth that your brother is the same as you.
Walk in the noble path of righteousness
and you will understand that while there is death in self,
there is immortality in truth.

Kutadanta: Let me take my refuge in the Blessed One,
in the Dharma, and in the brotherhood.
Accept me as your disciple
and let me partake of the bliss of immortality.

[AS 498] *Niddesa 10, #44*

The *Kutananda Sutta* helps us to gain wider and deeper knowledge of what the Buddha said about *sankhara*, but it also implies that there is no way to tie up a tight definition of the term and put it in a compact-parcel because we begin to see that *sankhara* denotes an ever-expanding causal network of co-dependent relations which reaches beyond the potential for understanding of a common, mundane human individual. Ultimately, the term, *sankhara*, refers to a process of conditioned and, ultimately, unconditioned states which only an enlightened mind can comprehend.

At this point, it will be appropriate to provide a more detailed and extensive analysis of the flow of conditional 'becoming' in the Buddhist sense. And perhaps the best way for us to accomplish this task is to refer to an expert opinion which we will find in the writings of Venerable Bodhi who many, quite rightly, call "the best Pali-English translator presently alive in the world."

Anicca Vata Sankhara

by
Bhikkhu Bodhi

Anicca vata sankhara — "Impermanent, alas, are all formations!" — is the phrase used in Theravada Buddhist lands to announce the death of a loved one, but I have not quoted this line here in order to begin an obituary.

I do so simply to introduce the subject of this essay, which is the word *sankhara* itself. Sometimes a single Pali word has such rich implications that merely to sit down and draw them out can shed as much light on the Buddha's teaching as a long expository article. This is indeed the case with the word *sankhara*. The word stands squarely at the heart of the Dhamma, and to trace its various strands of meaning is to get a glimpse into the Buddha's own vision of reality.

The word *sankhara* is derived from the prefix *sam*, meaning "together," joined to the noun *kara*, "doing, making." *Sankharas* are thus "co-doings," things that act in concert with other things, or things that are made by a combination of other things. Translators have rendered the word in many different ways: formations, confections, activities, processes, forces, compounds, compositions, fabrications, determinations, synergies, constructions. All are clumsy attempts to capture the meaning of a philosophical concept for which we have no exact parallel, and thus all English renderings are bound to be imprecise. I myself use "formations" and "volitional formations," aware this choice is as defective as any other.

However, though it is impossible to discover an exact English equivalent for *sankhara*, by exploring its actual usage we can still gain insight into how the word functions in the "thought world" of the Dhamma.

In the *suttas* the word occurs in three major doctrinal contexts. One is in the twelvefold formula of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*), where the *sankharas* are the second link in the series. They are said to be conditioned by ignorance and to function as a condition for consciousness. Putting together statements from various *suttas*, we can see that the *sankharas* are the kammically active volitions responsible for generating rebirth and thus for sustaining the onward movement of *samsara*, the round of birth and death. In this context *sankhara* is virtually synonymous with *kamma*, a word to which it is etymologically akin.

The *suttas* distinguish the *sankharas* active in dependent origination into three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. Again, the *sankharas* are divided into the meritorious, demeritorious, and "imperturbable," i.e., the volitions present in the four formless meditations.

When ignorance and craving underlie our stream of consciousness, our volitional actions of body, speech, and mind become forces with the capacity to produce results, and of the results they produce the most significant is the renewal of the stream of consciousness following death.

[In the first major domain,] it is the *sankharas*, propped up by ignorance and fueled by craving, that drive the stream of consciousness onward to a new mode of rebirth, and exactly where consciousness becomes established is determined by the kammic character of the *sankharas*.

If one engages in meritorious deeds, the *sankharas* or volitional formations will propel consciousness toward a happy sphere of rebirth. If one engages in demeritorious deeds, the *sankharas* will propel consciousness toward a miserable rebirth. And if one masters the formless meditations, these "imperturbable" *sankharas* will propel consciousness toward rebirth in the formless realms.

A second major domain where the word *sankharas* applies is among the five aggregates. The fourth aggregate is the *sankhara-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional formations. The texts define the *sankhara-khandha* as the six classes of volition (*cha cetanakaya*): volition regarding forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and ideas. Though these *sankharas* correspond closely to those in the formula of dependent origination, the two are not in all respects the same, for the *sankhara-khandha* has a wider range. The aggregate of volitional formations comprises *all* kinds of volition. It includes not merely those that are kammically potent, but also those that are kammic results and those that are kammically inoperative.

In the later Pali literature the *sankhara-khandha* becomes an umbrella category for all the factors of mind except feeling and perception, which are assigned to aggregates of their own. Thus the *sankhara-khandha* comes to include such ethically variable factors as contact, attention, thought, and energy; such wholesome factors as generosity, kindness, and wisdom; and such unwholesome factors as greed, hatred, and delusion. Since all these factors arise in conjunction with volition and participate in volitional activity, the early Buddhist teachers decided that the most fitting place to assign them is the aggregate of volitional formations.

The third major domain in which the word *sankhara* occurs is as a designation for all conditioned things. In this context the word has a passive derivation, denoting whatever is formed by a combination of conditions; whatever is conditioned, constructed, or compounded. In this sense it might be rendered simply "formations," without the qualifying adjective. As bare formations, *sankharas* include all five aggregates, not just the fourth. The term also includes external objects and situations such as mountains, fields, and forests; towns and cities; food and drink; jewelry, cars, and computers.

The fact that *sankharas* can include both active forces and the things produced by them is highly significant and secures for the term its role as the cornerstone of the Buddha's philosophical vision. For what the Buddha emphasizes is that the *sankharas* in the two active senses (i) the volitional formations operative in dependent origination, and (ii) the kammic volitions in the fourth aggregate — construct the *sankharas* in the passive sense: "They construct the conditioned; therefore they are called volitional formations. And what are the conditioned things they construct? They construct the body, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness; therefore they are called volitional formations" (SN XXII.79).

Though external inanimate things may arise from purely physical causes, the *sankharas* that make up our personal being — the five aggregates — are all products of the kammically active *sankharas* that we engaged in our previous lives. In the present life as well the five aggregates are constantly being maintained, refurbished, and extended by the volitional activity we engage in now, which again becomes a condition for future existence.

Thus, the Buddha teaches, it was our own kammically formative *sankharas* that built up our present edifice of personal being, and it is our present formative *sankharas* that are now building up the edifices of personal being we will inhabit in our future lives. These edifices consist of nothing other than *sankharas* as conditioned things, the conditioned formations comprised in the five aggregates.

The most important fact to understand about *sankharas*, as conditioned formations, is that they are all impermanent: "Impermanent, alas, are formations."

They are impermanent not only in the sense that in their gross manifestations they will eventually come to an end, but even more pointedly because at the subtle, subliminal level they are constantly undergoing rise and fall, forever coming into being and then, in a split second, breaking up and perishing: "Their very nature is to arise and vanish."

For this reason the Buddha declares that all *sankharas* are suffering (*sabbe sankhara dukkha*) — suffering, however, not because they are all actually painful and stressful, but because they are stamped with the mark of transience. "Having arisen they then cease," and because they all cease they cannot provide stable happiness and security.

To win complete release from suffering — not only from experiencing suffering, but from the unsatisfactoriness intrinsic to all conditioned existence — we must gain release from *sankharas*. And what lies beyond the *sankharas* is that which is not constructed, not put together, not compounded. This is Nibbana, accordingly called the Unconditioned — *asankhata* — the opposite of what is *sankhata*, a word which is the passive participle corresponding to *sankhara*.

Nibbana is called the Unconditioned precisely because it's a state that is neither itself a *sankhara* nor constructed by *sankharas*; a state described as *visankhara*, "devoid of formations," and as *sabbasankhara-samatha*, "the stilling of all formations."

Thus, when we put the word *sankhara* under our microscope, we see compressed within it the entire worldview of the Dhamma. The active *sankharas* consisting in kammically active volitions perpetually create the *sankhara* of the five aggregates that

constitute our being. As long as we continue to identify with the five aggregates (the work of ignorance) and to seek enjoyment in them (the work of craving), we go on spewing out the volitional formations that build up future combinations of aggregates.

Just that is the nature of *samsara*: an unbroken procession of empty but efficient *sankharas* producing still other *sankharas*, riding up in fresh waves with each new birth, swelling to a crest, and then crashing down into old age, illness, and death. Yet on it goes, shrouded in the delusion that we're really in control, sustained by an ever-tantalizing, ever receding hope of final satisfaction.

When, however, we take up the practice of the Dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of *sankharas*. We learn to see the true nature of the *sankharas*, of our own five aggregates: as unstable, conditioned processes rolling on with no one in charge. Thereby we switch off the engine driven by ignorance and craving, and the process of kammic construction, the production of active *sankharas*, is effectively deconstructed.

By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asankhata-dhatu*, the unconditioned element. This is Nibbana, the Deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore our verse concludes: "The subsiding of formations is blissful!"

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The above article comes from the **Buddhist Publication Society**, in Kandy, of which Venerable Bodhi was the editor for many years, before his departure for America, where he is performing an invaluable service in the dissemination of the Dhamma.

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An understanding of *sankharas* co-arising in the present including past, kammic events recorded in the mind continuum demands an ever-expanding power of mind as may be shown in another textual reference which may be consulted as follows in

The *Buddadasa* Archives

Bhikkhus, any group of Samanas or Brahmins when recollecting *pubbenivasa* previous dwellings [in states of mind], naturally recollect such previous dwellings in diverse numbers; in doing so, all of those Samanas and Brahmins recollect the five *upadana-khandhas* or any one of the five *upadana-khandhas*. What are these five? The five are ...

Bhikkhus, when they recollect, they naturally recollect *rupa* (form) as "in the distant past we had a *rupa* like this."

Bhikkhus, when they recollect, they naturally recollect *vedana* (feeling) as "in the distant past we had *vedana* like this."

Bhikkhus, when they recollect, they naturally recollect *sanya* (recognition, perception) as "in the distant past we had *sanya* like this."

Bhikkhus, when they recollect, they naturally recollect *sankhara* (concocting, thinking, emotions) as "in the distant past we had *sankhara* like this."

Bhikkhus, when they recollect, they naturally recollect *vinyana* as "in the distant past we had a *vinyana* like this."

Bhikkhus, why do they speak of *rupa*? Bhikkhus, this nature naturally disintegrates (*ruppanti*, vexed, oppressed), for this reason it is called "*rupa*." Why does it disintegrate? It disintegrates due to cold, due to heat, due to hunger, due to thirst, and due to the contacts of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and crawling animals. This nature naturally disintegrates, for this reason it is called "*rupa*."

Bhikkhus, why do they speak of *vedana*? Bhikkhus, this nature is felt (*vedayati*), for this reason it is called "*vedana*." What does it feel? It feels pleasure, pain, and neither-pain-nor-pleasure. Bhikkhus, this nature feels, for this reason it is called "*vedana*."

Bhikkhus, why do they speak of *sanya*? Bhikkhus, this nature naturally recognizes (*sanjanati*, perceives), for this reason it is called "*sanya*." What does it recognize? It recognizes green, yellow, red, and white. Bhikkhus, this nature naturally recognizes, for this reason it is called "*sanya*."

Bhikkhus, why do they speak of *sankhara*? Bhikkhus, this nature naturally concocts concocted things (*abhisankharonti*), for this reason it is called "*sankhara*." What does it concoct? It concocts *rupa* as something concocted with "formness," it concocts *vedana* as something concocted with "feelingness," it concocts *sanya* as something concocted with "recognition-ness," it concocts *sankhara* as something concocted with "concoctingness," it concocts *vinyana* as something concocted with "cognition-ness." Bhikkhus, this nature naturally concocts concocted things, for this reason it is called "*sankhara*."

Bhikkhus, why do they speak of *vinyana*? Bhikkhus, this nature naturally cognizes (*vijanati*), for this reason it is called "*vinyana*." What does it cognize? It cognizes sourness, bitterness, spiciness, sweetness, astringency, non-astringency, saltiness, and non-saltiness. Bhikkhus, this nature naturally cognizes, for this reason it is called "*vinyana*."

Bhikkhus, in these five *khandha*, the well trained noble disciple naturally investigates until seeing clearly that "Right now, I am devoured by *rupa* (form); even in the past, I was devoured by *rupa*, just as I am devoured by present *rupa* right now. If I indulge in future *rupa*, I will be devoured by *rupa* even in the distant future, just as I am devoured by present *rupa* right now." When this noble disciple investigates and clearly sees in this way, she doesn't dwell on past *rupa*, doesn't seek pleasure in

future *rupa*, and practices for disenchantment with, the fading away of, and the quenching of present *rupa*.

(The Buddha then discussed *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana* in exactly the same terms.)

Bhikkhus, how do you consider the following statements? Is *rupa* permanent or impermanent?

"Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

If something is impermanent, is it *dukkha* or *sukha*?

"It's dukkha, Venerable Sir."

Something that is impermanent, *dukkha*, and naturally changes all the time, is it fitting to contemplate it as "this is mine," "this is me," or "this is my *atta* (self)"?

"One shouldn't think that way, Venerable Sir."

(The Buddha then covered *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana* in exactly the same terms.)

Bhikkhus, for these reasons in this matter, any *rupa* whether past, future, or present; whether internal or external, coarse or refined, crude or subtle, distant or near; all these *rupa* should be seen with right wisdom according to reality that "this isn't mine, this isn't me, this isn't my self."

(The Buddha then covered *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana* in exactly the same terms.)

Bhikkhus, we speak of this noble disciple as "he shrinks and doesn't build up," as "he throws away and doesn't cling," as "he scatters and doesn't pile up," and as "he makes die out and doesn't make flare up."

This noble disciple shrinks and doesn't build up what? He shrinks and doesn't build up *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana*.

This noble disciple throws away and doesn't cling to what? He throws away and doesn't cling to *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana*.

This noble disciple scatters and doesn't pile up what? He scatters and doesn't pile up *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana*.

This noble disciple makes die out and doesn't make flare up what? He makes die out and doesn't make flare up *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana*.

Bhikkhus, the well trained noble disciple when seeing in this way, is naturally disenchanted with *rupa*, *vedana*, *sanya*, *sankhara*, and *vinyana*. When disenchanted, naturally becomes dispassionate. Because of this dispassion, he is liberated. When

liberated, he naturally has the insight that liberation has occurred. This noble disciple clearly knows that "birth is ended, the *brahmacariya* is fulfilled, the duties to be done are completed, and no further duties for the sake of liberation remain."

Bhikkhus, we speak of this bhikkhu as "he doesn't build up, doesn't shrink, but having shrunk, dwells there"; as "he doesn't cling, doesn't throw away, but having thrown away, dwells there"; as "he doesn't pile up, doesn't scatter, but having scattered, dwells there"; and as "he doesn't make flare up, doesn't make die out, but having made die out, dwells there."

This noble disciple doesn't build up, doesn't shrink, but having shrunk what, dwells there? He doesn't build up, doesn't shrink, but having shrunk *rupa, vedana, sanya, sankhara*, and *vinyana*, dwells there.

This noble disciple doesn't cling to, doesn't throw away, but having thrown away what, dwells there? He doesn't cling to, doesn't throw away, but having thrown away *rupa, vedana, sanya, sankhara*, and *vinyana*, dwells there.

This noble doesn't pile up, doesn't scatter, but having scattered what, dwells there? She doesn't pile up, doesn't scatter, but having scattered *rupa, vedana, sanya, sankhara*, and *vinyana*, dwells there.

This noble disciple doesn't make flare up, doesn't make die out, but having made what die out, dwells there? He doesn't make flare up, doesn't make die out, but having made *rupa, vedana, sanya, sankhara*, and *vinyana* die out, dwells there.

Bhikkhus, all the devas, together with Indra, Brahma, and Pajapati bow to the bhikkhu who is liberated in this way. Coming from afar they say:

Noble Thoroughbred, Supreme One, we bow in honor of you because there is no way that we can comprehend what you have realized dwelling therein."

[Tan Ajarn Buddhadasa's comment: *Students should note that this sense of pubbenivasanusattinyana isn't in conflict with the Great Standards of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (sutte osaretabbam vinaye sandassetabbam), and has none of the hints of sassataditthi (eternalism) that appear in the usual explanations of the Three Vija. Please ponder this with especial care.*]

The above document was quoted from

Genuine *Pubbenivasanusattinyana* or Recollection of Past Dwellings (not-eternalism)

To bring our understanding back to earth, as opposed to intellectually understanding the role of *sankharas* in the realm of ultimate realities, it will be good to conclude with the following words from the Venerable Ajaan Chah which may be taken to apply to our own daily practice.

Ajaan Chah on Sankhara

In truth it's all uncertain, but our desires want things to be certain. What can we do? We must be patient. The most important thing is *khanti*, patient endurance. Don't throw out the Buddha, what I call "uncertainty" -- don't throw that away.

Sometimes I'd go to see old religious sites with ancient monastic buildings, designed by architects, built by craftsmen. In some places they would be cracked. Maybe one of my friends would remark, "Such a shame, isn't it? It's cracked." I'd answer, "If that weren't the case then there'd be no such thing as the Buddha, there'd be no Dhamma. It's cracked like this because it's perfectly in line with the Buddha's teaching." Really down inside I was also sad to see those buildings cracked but I'd throw off my sentimentality and try to say something which would be of use to my friends, and to myself. Even though I also felt that it was a pity, still I tended towards the Dhamma.

"If it wasn't cracked like that there wouldn't be any Buddha!" I'd say it really heavy for the benefit of my friends or perhaps they weren't listening, but still I was listening.

This is a way of considering things which is very, very useful. For instance, say someone were to rush in and say, "Luang Por! Do you know what so and so just said about you?" or, "He said such and such about you." Maybe you even start to rage.

As soon as you hear words of criticism you start getting these moods every step of the way. As soon as we hear words like this we may start getting ready to retaliate, but on looking into the truth of the matter we may find that, no, they had said something else after all. And so it's another case of "uncertainty." So why should we rush in and believe things? Why should we put our trust so much in what others say? Whatever we hear we should take note, be patient, look into the matter carefully and stay straight.

It's not that whatever pops into our heads we write it all down as some sort of truth. Any speech which ignores uncertainty is not the speech of a sage. Remember this. As for being wise, we are no longer practicing. Whatever we see or hear, be it pleasant or sorrowful, just say "This is not sure!" Say it heavy to yourself, hold it all down with this. Don't build those things up into major issues, just keep them all down to this one. This point is the important one. This is the point where defilements die. Practicers shouldn't dismiss it.

If you disregard this point you can expect only suffering, expect only mistakes. If you don't make this a foundation for your practice you are going to go wrong, but then you will come right again later on, because this principle is a really good one. Actually the real Dhamma, the gist of what I have been saying today, isn't so mysterious. Whatever you experience is simply form, simply feeling, simply perception, simply volition, and simply consciousness. There are only these basic qualities, where is there any certainty within them?

If we come to understand the true nature of things like this, lust, infatuation and attachment fade away. Why do they fade away? Because we understand, we know. We shift from ignorance to understanding. Understanding is born from ignorance, knowing is born from unknowing, purity is born from defilement. It works like this.

Not discarding *aniccam*, the Buddha -- This is what it means to say that the Buddha is still alive. To say that the Buddha has passed into Nibbana is not necessarily true. In a more profound sense the Buddha is still alive [in the Dhamma]. It's much like how we define the word "*bhikkhu*." If we define it as "one who asks," the meaning is very broad. [Isn't it better to say that a *bhikkhu* is] one who lives dependent on the generosity of others. Isn't this more profound? It doesn't go in the same direction as the previous definition, it runs much deeper. The practice of Dhamma is like this. [At first] you don't fully understand it, [then] it becomes something else again. It becomes priceless, it becomes a source of peace

When we have *sati* we are close to the Dhamma. If we have *sati* we will see *aniccam*, the transience of all things. We will see the Buddha and transcend the suffering of *samsara*, if not now then sometime in the future.

If we throw away the attribute of the Noble Ones, the Buddha or the Dhamma, our practice will become barren and fruitless. We must maintain our practice constantly, whether we are working or sitting or simply lying down. When the eye sees form, the ear hears sound, the nose smells an odor, the tongue tastes a flavor or the body experiences sensation, in all things, don't throw away the Buddha, don't stray from the Buddha.

This is to be one who has come close to the Buddha, who reveres the Buddha constantly. We have ceremonies for revering the Buddha, such as chanting in the morning *Araham Samma Sambuddho Bhagava* [and] this is one way of revering the Buddha but it's not revering the Buddha in such a profound way as I've described here. It's the same as with that word "*bhikkhu*." If we define it [only] as "one who asks" then they keep on asking ... because it's defined like that. To define it in the best way we should say "*bhikkhu* -- one who sees the danger of *samsara*."

Now revering the Buddha is the same. Revering the Buddha by merely reciting Pali phrases as a ceremony in the mornings and evenings is comparable to defining the word "*bhikkhu*" as "one who asks." If we incline towards *anniccam*, *dukkham* and *anatta* [Transience, Imperfection, and Ownerlessness,] whenever the eye sees form, the ear hears sound, the nose smells an odor, the tongue tastes a flavor, the body experiences sensation or the mind cognizes mental impressions, at all times, this is comparable to defining the word "*bhikkhu*" as "one who sees the danger of *samsara*." It's so much more profound, cuts through so many things. If we understand this teaching we will grow in wisdom and understanding.

This is called *patipada*. Develop this attitude in the practice and you will be on the right path. If you think and reflect in this way, even though you may be far from your teacher you will still be close to him. If you live close to the teacher physically but your mind has not yet met him you will spend your time either looking for his faults or adulating him. If he does something which suits you, you say he's no good -- and that's as far as your practice goes. You won't achieve anything by wasting your time looking at someone else. But if you understand this teaching you can become a Noble One in the present moment.

That's why this year [2522 of the Buddhist Era, or 1979 CE.] I've distanced myself from my disciples, both old and new, and not given much teaching: so that you can all look into things for yourselves as much as possible.

For the newer monks I've already laid down the schedule and rules of the monastery, such as: "don't talk too much." Don't transgress the existing standards, the path to realization, fruition and nibbana. Anyone who transgresses these standards is not a real practitioner, not one who has with a pure intention to practice.

What can such a person ever hope to see? Even if he slept near me every day he wouldn't see me. Even if he slept near the Buddha he wouldn't see the Buddha, if he didn't practice.

So knowing the Dhamma or seeing the Dhamma depends on practice. Have confidence, purify your own heart. If all the monks in this monastery put awareness into their respective minds we wouldn't have to reprimand or praise anybody. We wouldn't have to be suspicious of or favor anybody. If anger or dislike arise just leave them at the mind, but see them clearly!

Keep on looking at those things. As long as there is still something there, it means we still have to dig and grind away right there. Some say "I can't cut it, I can't do it," -- if we start saying things like this there will only be a bunch of punks here, because nobody cuts at their own defilements.

You must try. If you can't yet cut it, dig in deeper. Dig at the defilements, uproot them. Dig them out even if they seem hard and fast. The Dhamma is not something to be reached by following your desires. Your mind may be one way, the truth another. You must watch up front and keep a lookout behind as well. That's why I say, "It's all uncertain, all transient."

This truth of uncertainty, this short and simple truth, at the same time so profound and faultless, people tend to ignore. They tend to see things differently. Don't cling to goodness, don't cling to badness. These are attributes of the world. We are practicing to be free of the world, so bring these things to an end. The Buddha taught to lay them down, to give them up, because they only cause suffering.

Transcendence

When the group of five ascetics [the *pancavaggiya*, or "group of five", who followed the Buddha-to-be (*Bodhisatta*) when he was cultivating ascetic practices, and who left him when he renounced them for the Middle Way, shortly after which the Bodhisatta attained Supreme Enlightenment.] when the group of the five ascetics abandoned the Buddha, he saw it as a stroke of luck, because he would be able to continue his practice unhindered. With the five ascetics living with him, things weren't so peaceful, he had responsibilities. And now the five ascetics had abandoned him because they felt that he had slackened his practice and reverted to indulgence. Previously he had been intent on his ascetic practices and self-mortification. In regards to eating, sleeping and so on, he had tormented himself severely, but it came to a point where, looking into it honestly, he saw that such practices just weren't working. It was simply

a matter of views, practicing out of pride and clinging. He had mistaken worldly values and mistaken himself for the truth.

For example if one decides to throw oneself into ascetic practices with the intention of gaining praise -- this kind of practice is all "world-inspired," practicing for adulation and fame. Practicing with this kind of intention is called "mistaking worldly ways for truth."

Another way to practice is "to mistake one's own views for truth." You only believe yourself, in your own practice. No matter what others say you stick to your own preferences. You don't carefully consider the practice. This is called "mistaking oneself for truth."

Whether you take the world or take yourself to be truth, it's all simply blind attachment. The Buddha saw this, and saw that there was no "adhering to the Dhamma," practicing for the truth. So his practice had been fruitless, he still hadn't given up defilements.

Then he turned around and reconsidered all the work he had put into practice right from the beginning in terms of results. What were the results of all that practice? Looking deeply into it he saw that it just wasn't right. It was full of conceit, and full of the world. There was no *dhamma*, no insight into *anatta* (not self) no emptiness or letting go. There may have been letting go of a kind, but it was the kind that still hadn't let go.

Looking carefully at the situation, the Buddha saw that even if he were to explain these things to the five ascetics they wouldn't be able to understand. It wasn't something he could easily convey to them, because those ascetics were still firmly entrenched in the old way of practice and seeing things. The Buddha saw that you could practice like that until your dying day, maybe even starve to death, and achieve nothing, because such practice is inspired by worldly values and by pride.

Considering deeply, he saw the right practice, *samma patipada*: the mind is the mind, the body is the body. The body isn't desire or defilement. Even if you were to destroy the body you wouldn't destroy defilements. That's not their source. Even fasting and going without sleep until the body was a shrivelled-up wraith wouldn't exhaust the defilements. But the belief that defilements could be dispelled in that way, the teaching of self-mortification, was deeply ingrained into the five ascetics.

The Buddha then began to take more food, eating as normal, practicing in a more natural way. When the five ascetics saw the change in the Buddha's practice they figured that he had given up and reverted to sensual indulgence. One person's understanding was shifting to a higher level, transcending appearances, while the other saw that that person's view was sliding downwards, reverting to comfort. Self-mortification was deeply ingrained into the minds of the five ascetics because the Buddha had previously taught and practiced like that. Now he saw the fault in it. By seeing the fault in it clearly, he was able to let it go.

When the five ascetics saw the Buddha doing this they left him, feeling that he was practicing wrongly and that they would no longer follow him. Just as birds abandon a

tree which no longer offers sufficient shade, or fish leave a pool [in a stream] of water that is too small, too dirty or not cool, just so did the five ascetics abandon the Buddha.

So now the Buddha concentrated on contemplating the Dhamma. He ate more comfortably and lived more naturally. He let the mind be simply the mind, the body simply the body. He didn't force his practice in excess, just enough to loosen the grip of greed, aversion, and delusion. Previously he had walked the two extremes: *kamasukhallikanuyogo* -- if happiness or love arose he would be aroused and attach to them. He would identify with them and wouldn't let go. If he encountered pleasantness he would stick to that, if he encountered suffering he would stick to that. These two extremes he called *kamasukhallikanuyogo* and *attakilamathanuyogo*.

The Buddha had been stuck on conditions. He saw clearly that these two ways are not the way for a *samana*. Clinging to happiness, clinging to suffering: a *samana* is not like this. To cling to those things is not the way. Clinging to those things he was stuck in the views of self and the world. If he were to flounder in these two ways he would never become one who clearly knew the world. He would be constantly running from one extreme to the other. Now the Buddha fixed his attention on the mind itself and concerned himself with training that.

All facets of nature proceed according to their supporting conditions; they aren't any problem in themselves. For instance, [take] illnesses in the body. The body experiences pain, sickness, fever and colds and so on. These all naturally occur. Actually people worry about their bodies too much. That they worry about and cling to their bodies so much is because of wrong view, they can't let go.

Look at this hall here. We build the hall and say it's ours, but lizards come and live here, rats and geckoes come and live here, and we are always driving them away, because we see that the hall belongs to us, not the rats and lizards.

It's the same with illnesses in the body. We take this body to be our home, something that really belongs to us. If we happen to get a headache or stomach-ache we get upset, we don't want the pain and suffering. These legs are "our legs," we don't want them to hurt, these arms are "our arms," we don't want anything to go wrong with it. We've got to cure all pains and illnesses at all costs.

This is where we are fooled and stray from the truth. We are simply visitors to this body. Just like this hall here, it's not really ours. We are simply temporary tenants, like the rats, lizards and geckoes ... but we don't know this. This body is the same.

Actually the Buddha taught that there is no abiding self within this body but we go and grasp on to it as being our self, as really being "us" and "them." When the body changes we don't want it to do so. No matter how much we are told we don't understand. If I say it straight you get even more fooled. "This isn't yourself," I say, and you go even more astray, you get even more confused and your practice just reinforces the self.

So, most people don't really see the self. One who sees the self is one who sees that "this is neither the self nor belonging to self." He sees the self as it is in Nature.

Seeing the self through the power of clinging is not real seeing. Clinging interferes with the whole business. It's not easy to realize this body as it is because *upadana* clings fast to it all.

Therefore it is said that we must investigate to clearly know with wisdom. This means to investigate the *sankhara** according to their true nature. Use wisdom. To know the true nature of *sankhara* is wisdom. If you don't know the true nature of *sankhara* you are at odds with them, always resisting them. Now, it is better to let go of the *sankhara* or to try to oppose or resist them. And yet we plead with them to comply with our wishes. We look for all sorts of means to organize them or "make a deal" with them. If the body gets sick and is in pain we don't want it to be, so we look for various *Suttas* to chant, such as *Bojjhango*, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, the *Anattalakkhanasutta* and so on. We don't want the body to be in pain, we want to protect it, control it. These *Suttas* become some form of mystical ceremony, getting us even more entangled in clinging.

This is because they chant them in order to ward off illness, to prolong life and so on. Actually the Buddha gave us these teachings in order to see clearly, but we end up chanting them to increase our delusion. *Rupam aniccam, vedana anicca, sanna anicca, sankhara anicca, vinnanam aniccam* We don't chant these words for increasing our delusion. They are recollections to help us know the truth of the body, so that we can let it go and give up our longing.

* [*Sankhara*: conditioned phenomena. The Thai usage of this term usually refers specifically to the body, though *sankhara* also refers to mental phenomena.]

This is called chanting to cut things down, but we tend to chant in order to extend them all, or if we feel they're too long we try chanting to shorten them, to force nature to conform to our wishes. It's all delusion. All the people sitting there in the hall are deluded, every one of them. The ones chanting are deluded, the ones listening are deluded, they're all deluded! All they can think is "How can we avoid suffering?"

Where are they ever going to practice?

Whenever illnesses arise, those who know see nothing strange about it. Getting born into this world entails experiencing illness. However, even the Buddha and the Noble Ones, contracting illness in the course of things, would also, in the course of things, treat it with medicine. For them it was simply a matter of correcting the elements. They didn't blindly cling to the body or grasp at mystic ceremonies and such. They treated illnesses with Right View. They didn't treat them with delusion. "If it heals, it heals, if it doesn't then it doesn't" -- that's how they saw things.

They say that nowadays Buddhism in Thailand is thriving, but it looks to me like it's sunk almost as far as it can go. The Dhamma Halls are full of attentive ears, but they're attending wrongly. Even the senior members of the community are like this, so everybody just leads each other into more delusion.

What it comes down to, in the end, is that, whatever your understanding might be, you must further and deepen your understanding through the practice of observing and analyzing and dissecting arising mental phenomena to find and eliminate your hidden delusions rather than merely thinking you know intellectually from the book or from comprehending the content of the texts and thus thinking you can be satisfied with yourself. Intellectual comprehension is not enough. Uncovering our mental delusions takes practice, practice, practice.



Editor's Note:

All of the above works quoted may be found on the Internet by searching under authors names or titles.