

Dharma talk: We are all Pavlov's dogs in the search for the deconstruction of perceptual habits  
April 28, 2018

Dharma talk time.

I am going to talk a bit about the role of habits, both subtle and obvious. Perceptual habits are important. They circumscribe our sense of self. They perpetuate our delusions.

I am hoping I will say something that will be useful to someone.

Take in what is useful to you, and let go of the rest.

Simply listen.

Sometimes dharma talks can inspire you to dig back into your practice.

Sometimes it brings words to a dawning understanding, which can open internal doors. Sometimes you may not have a clue as to what I am talking about. All of this is just fine.

Take in what is useful to you, and let go of the rest.

This is not a time for intellectual challenge.

There is a Buddhist word, in the Pali language, for perceptual habits—*sankhara*.

*Sankharas* shows up on two essential Buddhist lists, translated with slightly different nuances, depending on the context and the understanding of the translator. It can be translated as: fabrications, determination, volition, volitional activities, or mental formations. I am sure there are more.

*Sankharas* can take an active form, as in the act of forming perception, or a passive state, of a pre-determined formation. Or both. There is an implication that there is some choice is available around this forming. Depending on the context, *sankharas* can be fully conscious and volitional, and it can also present as concomitants of unconscious processes. Either way, *sankharas* pre-determine, circumscribe, what it is that is possible for us to think we know.

*Sankhara* arises in the mind and is a persistent factor in the on-going conditioning of the mind.

It shows up second on the list of dependent co-arising. This list is the basic twelve links of cause and effect, which determines our suffering. It is the principle that all phenomena arise in dependence to other phenomena. If this exists, that exists. If this ceases to exist, then that ceases to exist. It is a chain effect. Ignorance is the first cause. *Sankhara* is the second. And consciousness is the third.

Think about this. First there is the state of ignorance. We are clueless. Out of our cluelessness we fabricate a world, an activity which is outside our awareness. And then we become conscious of what we have pre-determined to be able know

out of our limited experience. And we keep replicating our suffering this way. We construct a notion of self from this experience. Repeated enough, and it solidifies into character.

The good news is that this list of dependent co-arising can be worked backwards and forwards. In meditation, we can bring conscious attention back to these habits of perception, these fabrications, and we can bring ourselves out of ignorance. We can broaden what is possible to perceive. We can modify our notion of a working self. We can change, over time, what has ossified into our character. We can deliberately move toward wholesomeness.

[ Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta: Analysis of Depend Co-Arising, translated by Tthanissaro Bhikku, 1997]

*Sankharas* can be lightly embedded within us, like a line drawn on water, which quickly disappears. Some have a medium quality, like a line drawn on sand, which disappears after a while. Those that are heavy are like a line carved in rock, which disappears only after a long time. We need to be patient.

Paraphrased from Enclyopedia Britannica entry on Skandha:

*Sankhara* also shows up on the fundamental list of the five aggregates. The five aggregates constitute and explain our mental and physical existence. Obviously, this is a wondrously complex topic. It is something we can return to over and over again.

We are not trying to memorize the lists during this dharma talk.

All we are trying to do is drop some ideas and metaphors into the silence to help illuminate how these patterns operate. There is little we need to do to change them. The illumination itself is a process that unfolds over time, and there is no work you must do.

*Sankhara* shows up on the list of the five aggregates, not as an object, but as an active verb. These habits of perception are part of a system along with: material form, cognition, feelings, and consciousness.

The habits of our perception create and define the world we live in, and lead to our suffering, craving, and delusions.

It behooves us to begin to understand how this operates to contain us within predictable limitations, and keeps us stuck in suffering in very predictable ways.

The five aggregates have been described as bundles or piles of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness....However, these piles are best understood, not as things, but as activities, defined in terms of their functions.

Material form is constantly changing. Feeling feels pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. Perception labels or identifies objects. Consciousness cognizes the six senses, along with their objects. (The intellect being the sixth sense.) Of the five aggregates, fabrication is the most complex. Passages in the canon sometimes define it as intention, but it includes a wide variety of activities, such as attention, evaluation, volition, and all the active processes of the mind. It is the most fundamental aggregate, for its intentional activity underlies the experience of form and feeling, in the present moment. In practice, we change our intentions toward the aggregates so as to change their functions. Instead of using them for the purpose of construction a poorly working self, we use them for the purpose of creating a path to the end of suffering.”

[taken from The Five Aggregates, a Study Guide, Thanissaro Bhikku, 2010, p. 3]

“Owing to the influence of ignorance, these five aggregates are experienced as embodiments of the notion ‘I am.’ From the unawakened point of view, the material body is ‘Where I am’, feelings are ‘How I am’, cognitions are ‘What I am’ perceiving, volitions, or *sankharas*, are ‘Why I am’ acting, and consciousness is “Whereby I am” experiencing. In this way, each aggregate offers its own contribution to enacting the reassuring illusion that ‘I am’.” [slightly paraphrased from Satipatthana, Analayo, 2003, p. 206]

There is a mutual dependency between the mind-body and consciousness. Together, mind-body and consciousness condition each other. Mind and body conditions consciousness and consciousness conditions mind and body. And that dyad is conditioned by the *sanskaras*. The ignorance patterns of *sankharas* are then colored by the felt emotional experience. They are all inter-determined.

[Maha-nidan Sutta: The great Causes Discourse, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997, p. 2-3]

[Maha-nidan Sutta: The great Causes Discourse, Alexander Duncan, p. 3-5]

The *citta*, another Buddhist concept, is the heart-mind container of all this. It primarily represents one’s mindset, or state of mind. It is the term used to refer to the quality of mental processes as a whole. It is neither an entity nor a process.

Quoting a well known teacher of the Thai Forest Tradition:

There is a notion of mind that is unconditioned in its essence. It is known at *citta*, used interchangeably as “heart” or “mind”. We still have mind without its pre-occupations, without it’s conditioning by *sankharas*. “Like the owner of a house: Whoever receives the guests is the owner of the house. The guests can’t receive the owner. The owner has to stay put at home. When guests come to see him, he has to receive them. So who receives preoccupations? Who lets go of preoccupations? Who knows anything? [laughs] That is what we call ‘mind’....Don’t analyze it so much...Is there something there? Yes. What’s it like? We don’t know. Understand? That thing...that thing is what we call the ‘mind’. Don’t go looking far away.” –Ajaan Chah, from Wikipedia on the Thai Forest Tradition

“...mind precedes mental fashionings...” -Ajaan Mun, *ibid.*

In contrast, all *sankharas* are impermanent and essenceless, subject of disintegration

If these things are created, then they are malleable, and can be taken apart.

I want to read you pieces of a poem by the founder of the Thai Forest Tradition. It is from the “Ballad of Liberation from the Aggregates (*Khandhas*):

The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandas  
Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatta Mahathera  
Translated from the Thai by Thanissaro Bhikku, 1995  
Excerpt:

*“What gains total release from the five khandhas [5 aggregates]*

The heart, of course, and the heart alone.  
It doesn’t grasp or get entangled.  
No more poison of possessiveness,  
    No more delusion,  
    It stands alone.

No *sannas* [mental formations] can fool it into following along  
Behind them.”

*“When they say there’s death, what dies?”*  
“Sankharas die, destroying their effects.”

*“What connects the mind into the cycle?”*

“The tricks of *sanna* [mental formations] make it spin.  
The mind goes wrong because it trusts its *sannas* [mental formations],  
Attached to its likes,  
Leaving this plane of being,  
Going to that, wandering till it’s dizzy,  
Forgetting itself,  
Completely obscure to itself.  
No matter how hard it tries to find the *Dhamma*,  
It can’t catch a glimpse.”

*“What ferrets out the Dhamma?”*  
“The heart ferrets it out,  
trying to find out,  
trying to find out how *sannas* [mental formations] say ‘good’  
and grasp at ‘bad’  
and force it to fasten on loving and hating.”

....

“You can’t remedy the changing of *sankharas* [mental formations].  
Fashioned by kamma,  
They’re out to spit no one.  
If you grasp hold of them  
To push them this way and that,  
The mind has to become defiled and wrong.  
Don’t think of resisting  
The natural way of all things.  
Let good and evil follow their own affairs.

    We simply free  
    Ourselves.

Unentangled in *sankharas* [mental formations]:  
That’s what’s peaceful and cool.  
When you know the truth,  
You have to let go of *sankharas* [mental formations]  
As soon as you see their changing.  
When you weary of them,  
You let them go easily,  
With no need to be forced.  
    The Dhamma is cooling.  
    The mind will stop  
    Being subjected to things.”

...

“And as for the phrase,  
‘Cool, at ease, and freed from fever,’  
this refers to the mind that’s rescued itself  
from the addictive error  
[of correcting other things].”

“Beware of the mind  
when you focus on making it refined,  
for you’ll tend to force it  
to get stuck on the stillness.  
Get the heart to look again and again  
At its inconstancy, until it’s a habit.  
When you reach ‘Oh!’  
It will come on its own:  
    Awareness of the heart’s song,  
    Like a mirage.”

“There is no one way to get free from the trap of world passions. Suppose you caught a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a fox and a monkey, six creatures of very different nature, and you tie them together with a strong rope and let them go. Each of these six creatures will try to go back to its own lair by its own method: the snake will seek a covering of grass, the crocodile will seek water, the bird will want to fly in the air, the dog will seek a village, the fox will seek the solitary ledges, and the monkey will seek the trees of a forest. In the attempt of each to go its own way there will be a struggle, but being tied together by a rope, the strongest at any one time will drag the rest. Like the six creatures in this parable, man is tempted in different ways but the desires of his six senses: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch and brain, and is controlled by the predominant desire.

If the six creatures are all tied to a post, they will try to get free until they are tired out, and then will lie down by the post. Just like this, if people will train and control the mind, there will be no further trouble from the other five senses. If the mind is under control, people will have happiness both now and in the future.”  
p. 10

“Those who follow the teachings of the Buddha, because they understand that everything is characterized by ‘non-substantiality’, do not treat lightly the things that enter into a man’s life, but they receive them for what they are and then try to make them fit for Enlightenment.

They must not think that this world is meaningless and filled with confusion while the world of Enlightenment is full of meaning and peace. Rather, they should taste the way of Enlightenment in all affairs of this world.”  
p. 24

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The five aggregates:

*Rupa*—matter, body (4 elements: earth, air, water, fire)

*Vedana*—sensations, feelings

*Sanna*—perception of sense objects, recognition

*Sankharas*—mental formations, determination, fabrication; some choice, active and passive

*Vinnana*—consciousness of the 3 other mental aggregates