

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02-02-2016.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Discourse on Setting In Motion The Wheel Of Dhamma, the Buddha tells us

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of *dukkha* [i.e., unsatisfactoriness and suffering]: birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, illness is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; union with what is displeasing is *dukkha*; separation from what is pleasing is *dukkha*; not to get what one wants is *dukkha*; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*."¹

and

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of *dukkha*: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."²

This is where the next aggregate, the aggregate of *saṅkhārā*, comes in. It is involved in:

1. craving, thirst, hunger for what we perceive as pleasant sense experience, including pleasant thoughts;
2. craving for what we perceive as a pleasant, satisfying way of being in the world; and
3. craving to avoid or escape what we perceive as a painful or unsatisfactory way of being in the world.

But the Buddha also told us that

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."³

Saṅkhārā also plays a crucial role in the "remainderless fading away and cessation" of craving.

What Is *saṅkhārā*? Bhikkhu Bodhi, the most prominent contemporary English translator of the suttas, said that the word *saṅkhārā* "is derived from the prefix *saṃ* (=con), 'together,' and the verb *karoti*, 'to make.'"⁴ So it's literal meaning is something along the lines of "to make together".

Bhikkhu Bodhi also said "The noun straddles both sides of the active-passive divide. Thus *saṅkhāras* are both things which put together, construct, and compound other things, *and* the things that are put together, constructed, and compounded."⁵

The word *saṅkhārā* is used in several ways in the suttas, in some places emphasizing the creative side, in other places emphasizing the object or result of creation. When *saṅkhārā* is used to refer to the aggregate, the emphasis is more on the active, the creative side. So it is usually a reference to a volition or intention that leads to some kind of action, some kind of *kamma*, in the form of thought, word or deed. In light of this, Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as *volitional formations*, while Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates it as *fabrications*.

Saṅkhārā-as-intention is the little energetic impulse that pulls together the resources of body and mind to form, fabricate or create some kind of action. It sets an activity in motion. The action that *saṅkhārā* initiates can be unwholesome, some form of craving that leads to more unsatisfactoriness or suffering. Or the action can be wholesome, some form of non-craving or non-clinging that leads to peace, harmony and ease in the world.

After the Buddha's death, an effort was made to organize what he had presented about the mind and body into a more systematic model. The collection known as the Abhidhamma was the result of this effort.

One of the things the Abhidhamma looks at is the mental factors that arise, along with consciousness, whenever there is a moment of contact (sensory organ/system, sensory object and sensory consciousness coming together at the same time.) Excluding the factors/aggregates of feeling and perception, the *saṅkhāras*-as-aggregate are these mental factors. I want to mention a few of them just to give a sense of what they are. The unwholesome mental factors that always play a role in creating an unwholesome action are:

1. delusion (not seeing things clearly);
2. lack of shame about doing something harmful (shamelessness);
3. lack of fear about doing something harmful (lack of fear of wrong-doing); and
4. restlessness (an inability to be at peace with things as they are.)

Some of the wholesome mental factors that always play a role in creating a wholesome action are:

1. faith (a sense of trust, confidence or conviction);
2. mindfulness;

3. non-greed (including but not limited to generosity);
4. non-hatred (including but not limited to *mettā*: loving-kindness or goodwill); and
5. tranquility (which, of course, is a necessary condition for the development of concentration.)

All of this matters because it describes a non-personal way that *dukkha* can be created, and that we can learn to live without creating *dukkha*.

1. Contact between a sense object, a sensory system and consciousness occurs (the form aggregate and the consciousness aggregate.)
2. A feeling (the feeling aggregate) arises in association with that.
3. And there is a perception (the perception aggregate) of that contact and feeling.
4. The feeling and perception will stimulate any underlying tendencies (the passive forms of *saṅkhāras* - the kamma or results of previous actions).
5. Those activated underlying tendencies will lead to unwholesome or to wholesome actions.
6. And those actions, whether unwholesome or wholesome, will create conditions (*kamma*) for future feelings and perceptions to stimulate more of those same reactions or responses.

There doesn't need to be an "I" in there to explain how functioning occurs. One condition leads to another, and another, and another.

One of the dangers as we give attention to actions and to intentions is to identify with them, to take them as "I, me or mine." That's getting entangled in the delusion of an independent and enduring self, which leads us to further *dukkha*. But by bringing the *saṅkhārā* of mindfulness to the aggregates, we can see for ourselves how the arising and passing of each moment of the aggregates is an impersonal process. This weakens the delusional view of an independent and enduring self.

Besides having an intention to bring mindful attention to all of our self-ing, our I-ing, it can be useful to bring mindful attention to our intentions to move, to engage in some activity. If you have time to be patient and to pay close attention, notice how movement doesn't occur until there is that little energetic impulse to do something.

Look for yourself and see. Perhaps it will contribute to a more spacious and relaxed attitude towards yourself and the things and people around you.

Notes:

1. adapted from SN 56.11 Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 1844, {PTS 421}.

NOTE: In this and the following two quotes the word "suffering" has been replaced by "*dukkha*" to more fully capture its meaning of unsatisfactoriness as well as suffering. The bracketed text in this quote is my own.

2. *ibid*, p. 1845, {PTS 422}.

3. *ibid*, p. 1845, {PTS 422}.

4. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "General Introduction: *Saṅkhārā*," *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. op cit., p.45.

5. *ibid*.

Other Resources Used:

Goldstein, Joseph, *Mindfulness*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2013, pp. 183-188.

Hamilton, Sue, *Identity and Experience*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996, pp. 66-81.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Five Piles of Bricks: The Khandhas as Burden and Path," *The Karma of Questions*, Mettā Forest Monastery, 2002, pp. 53-59.