

Penetrating Body-Mind Delusion

Compiled and edited by

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Much wisdom may come from discerning and correcting our own mistakes and mental misapprehensions, but the only way to understand the continuum of the mind is to follow its intentions and movements and thought-processes, through close, continued, concentrated-observation and analysis of the way the mind actually works, through *vipassana* meditation. Knowledge from books doesn't help us much in watching what is going on in our own minds. Good guidance from competent teachers of the Dhamma, however, can help set us and guide us on the right path of mental-development in our own practice.

Many may be unaware that there are good teaching sources to be found on the Internet which, indeed, are often better than commercially published books to be found in print and sold in bookstores, which only keep titles on the shelves which will sell quickly.

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See, for example, the following text from the Yellow Robe Website under the title of **Dependent Origination-The Subtlest Dhamma-Patticasamupadda** in which:

Mahasi Sayadaw has written that all starts with ignorance (*avijja*).

“According to the Buddha, *avijja* is ignorance of the four Noble Truths, viz, the truths about suffering, its cause, its cessation and the way to its cessation. In a positive sense *avijja* implies misconception or illusion. It makes us mistake what is false and illusory for truth and reality. It leads us astray and so it is labeled *micchapatipatti-avijja*. *Avijja* and, therefore, differs from ordinary ignorance.

Ignorance of the name of a man or a village does not necessarily mean misinformation, whereas the *avijja* of *Paticcasmuppada* means something more than ignorance. It is misleading like the ignorance of a man who has lost all sense of direction and who, therefore, thinks that the east is west or that the north is south.

The man who does not know the truth of suffering has an optimistic view of life that is full of *dukkha* (pain and evil). It is a mistake to seek the truth of *dukkha* in a book for it is to be found in one's own body. Seeing, hearing, in short, all *nama-rupa* arising from the six senses are *dukkha*.

For this phenomenal existence is impermanent, undesirable and unpleasant. It may end at any time and so all is pain and suffering. But this *dukkha* is not [rightly understood] by living beings who look upon their existence as blissful and good. So

they seek pleasant sense-objects, good sights, good sounds, good food, etc. Their effort to secure what they believe to be the good things of life is due to illusion (*avijja*) about their existence.

Avijja is here like the green eye-glass that makes a horse eat the dry grass which it mistakes for green grass. Living beings are mired in sensual pleasure because they see every thing through rose-colored glasses. They harbour illusions about the nature of sense-objects and *namarupa*.

A blind man may be easily deceived by another man who offers him a worthless *longyi*, saying that it is an expensive, high quality *longyi*. The blind man will believe him and he will like the *longyi* very much. He will be disillusioned only when he recovers his sight and then he will throw it away at once.

Like-wise, as a victim of *avijja*, a man enjoys life, being blind to its *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. He becomes disenchanted when introspection of *nama-rupa* makes him aware of the unwholesome nature of his existence.

Introspection of *nama-rupa* or *vipassana* contemplation has nothing to do with bookish knowledge. It means thorough watching and ceaseless contemplation of all psycho-physical phenomena that comprise both the sense-objects and the corresponding consciousness. The practice leads to full awareness of their nature. As concentration develops, the meditator realizes their arising and instant vanishing, thereby gaining an insight into their *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

Avijja makes us blind to reality because we are unmindful. Unmindfulness gives rise to the illusion of man, woman, hand, leg, etc., in the conventional sense of the terms. We do not know that seeing, for instance, is merely the *nama-rupa* or psycho-physical process, [or] that the phenomenon arises and vanishes, [or] that it is impermanent, unsatisfactory and unsubstantial.

Some people who never contemplate die without knowing anything about *nama-rupa*. The real nature of *nama-rupa* process is realized by the mindful person. But the insight does not occur in the beginning when concentration is not yet developed. Illusion or the natural way of consciousness precedes contemplation and so the beginner does not gain a clear insight into the nature of *namarupa*.

It is only through steadfast practice that concentration and perception develop and lead to insight-knowledge. If, for example, while practicing mindfulness, the meditator feels itchy, the meditator is barely aware of being itchy. He does not think of the hand, the leg, or any other part of the body that is itchy nor does the idea of self as the subject of itchiness, "I feel itchy" occurs to him. There arises only the continuous sensation of 'itchiness.' The sensation does not remain permanent but passes away as he notes it. The watching consciousness promptly notes every psycho-physical phenomenon, leaving no room for the illusion of hand, leg and so on. Illusion dominates the un-mindful person and makes him blind to the unsatisfactory nature (*dukkha*) of all sense-objects. It replaces *dukkha* with *sukha*. Indeed *avijja* means, both, ignorance of what is real and misconception that distorts reality.

Because he does not know the truth of *dukkha*, man seeks pleasant sense-objects. Thus ignorance leads to effort and activity (*sankhara*). According to the scriptures, because of *avijja* there arises *sankhara* but there are two links, viz, *tanha* and *upadana* between them. Ignorance gives rise to craving (*tanha*) which later on develops into attachment (*upadana*). Craving and attachment stem from the desire for pleasure and are explicitly mentioned in the middle part of the doctrine of *Paticcasamuppada*. When the past is fully described, reference is made to *avijja*, *tanha*, *upadana*, *kamma* and *sankhara*.

Ignorance of the Origin of Dukkha

People do not know that craving is the origin (*samudaya*) of suffering. On the contrary they believe that it is attachment that makes them happy, that without attachment life would be dreary. So they ceaselessly seek pleasant sense-objects, food, clothing, companion and so forth. In the absence of these objects of attachment they usually feel ill at ease and find life monotonous. For common people life without attachment would be indeed wholly devoid of pleasure. It is *tanha* that hides the unpleasantness of life and makes it pleasant. But for the *Arahat* who has done away with *tanha*, it is impossible to enjoy life. He is always bent on nibbāna, the cessation of conditioned suffering.

Tanha cannot exert much pressure even on the meditators when they become absorbed in the practise of *vipassana*. So some meditators do not enjoy life as much as they did before. On their return from meditation retreat they get bored at home and feel ill at ease in the company of their families. To other people the meditator may appear to be conceited but in fact his behaviour is a sign of loss of interest in the workaday world. But if he cannot as yet overcome the sensual desire, his boredom is temporary and he usually gets readjusted to his home life in due course. His family need not worry over his mood or behaviour for it is not easy for a man to become thoroughly sick of [or disenchanted with] his home life.

So the meditator should examine himself and see how much he is really disenchanted with life. If his desire for pleasure lingers, he must consider himself still in the grip of *tanha*. Without *tanha* we would feel discomfited. In conjunction with *avijja*, *tanha* makes us blind to *dukkha* and creates the illusion of *sukha*. So we frantically seek sources of pleasure. Consider, for example, men's fondness for movies and dramatic performances. These entertainments cost time and money but *tanha* makes them irresistible although to the person who has no craving for them they are sources of suffering.

A more obvious example is smoking. The smoker delights in inhaling the tobacco smoke but to the non-smoker it is a kind of self- inflicted suffering. The non-smoker is free from all the troubles that beset the smoker. He leads a relatively care- free and happy life because he has no craving for tobacco. *Tanha* as the source of *dukkha* is also evident in the habit of betel-chewing. Many people enjoy it although in fact it is a

troublesome habit. Like the smoker and the betel-chewer people seek to gratify their craving and this *tanha*-inspired-effort is the mainspring of rebirth that leads to old age, sickness and death. Suffering and desire as its cause are evident in everyday life but it is hard to see these truths. For they are profound and one can realize them not through reflection but only through the practice of *vipassana*.

Ignorance of the Third and Fourth Noble Truths

Avijja also means ignorance of the cessation of *dukkha* and the way to it. These two truths are also profound and hard to understand. For the truth about cessation of *dukkha* concerns nibbāna which is to be realized only on the *Ariyan* holy path and the truth about the way is certainly known only to the meditator who has attained the path.

No wonder that many people are ignorant of these truths. Ignorance of the end of suffering is widespread and so world religions describe the supreme goal in many ways. Some say that suffering will come to an end automatically in due course of time. Some regard sensual pleasure as the highest good and reject the idea of a future life. This variety of beliefs is due to ignorance of the real nibbāna.

Even among Buddhists some hold that nibbāna is an abode or a sort of paradise and there are many arguments about it. All these show how hard it is to understand nibbāna. In reality nibbāna is the total extinction of the *nama-rupa* process that occurs ceaselessly on the basis of causal relationship. Thus according to the doctrine of *Paticcasamuppada*, *avijja*, *sankhara*, etc, give rise to *nama-rupa*, etc, and this causal process involves old age, death and other evils of life. If *avijja*, etc, become extinct on the Ariyan path, so do their effects and all kinds of *dukkha* and this complete end of *dukkha* is nibbāna.

For example, a lamp that is refueled will keep on burning but if it is not refueled there will be a complete extinction of flame. Likewise for the meditator on the Ariyan path who has attained nibbāna, all the causes such as *avijja*, etc., have become extinct and so do all the effects such as rebirth, etc. This means total extinction of suffering, that is, nibbāna which the meditator must understand and appreciate before he actually realizes it. This concept of nibbāna does not appeal to those who have a strong craving for life. To them the cessation of *nama-rupa* process would mean nothing more than eternal death. Nevertheless, intellectual acceptance of nibbāna is necessary because on it depends the meditator's whole-hearted and persistent effort to attain the supreme goal.

Knowledge of the fourth truth, viz, truth about the way to the end of *dukkha* is also of vital importance. Only the Buddhas can proclaim the right path; it is impossible for anyone else, be he a deva, a Brahmā or a human being, to do so. But there are various speculations and teachings about the path. Some advocate ordinary morality such as love, altruism, patience, alms giving, etc., while others stress the practice of mundane *jhana*. All these practices are commendable. According to the Buddhist teaching, they lead to relative welfare in the deva-Brahma worlds but do not ensure freedom from *samsaric dukkha* such as old age, etc. So they do not form the right path to Nibbanna although they are helpful in the effort to attain it. Some resort to self-mortification

such as fasting, living in a state of nature and so forth. Some worship devas or animals.

Some live like animals. From the Buddhist point of view all these represent what is termed *silabbataparamasa* which means any practice that has nothing to do with the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Noble Path comprises right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right contemplation. The path is of three kinds, viz., the basic path, the preliminary path and the Ariyan path. Of these the most vital is the Ariyan path but this path should not be the primary objective of the meditator nor does it require him to spend much time and energy on it. For, as the *vipassana* practice on the preliminary-path develops, the insight on the Ariyan level occurs for a thought-moment. For example, it requires much time and effort to produce fire by friction but ignition is a matter of a moment's duration. Similarly, the insight on the Ariyan path is instantaneous but it presupposes much practice of *vipassana* on the preliminary path.

Avijja Leads To Sankhara

To them sensual pleasure is the source of happiness, *nibbāna* as the extinction of *nama-rupa* is undesirable and the way to it is arduous and painful. So they seek to gratify their desire through three kinds of action (*kamma*) viz., bodily action, verbal action and mental action. Some of these actions may be ethically good and some may be ethically bad. Some people will practice *dana*, etc for their welfare hereafter, while some will resort to deceit or robbery to become rich.

A Pali synonym for *kamma* (action) is *sankhara*. *Sankhara* is also of three kinds, viz., *sankhara* by thought, *sankhara* by speech and *sankhara* by body. *Sankhara* presupposes *cetana* (volition).

The function of *cetana* is to conceive, to urge or to incite and, as such, it is the mainspring of all actions. It is involved in killing, alms-giving, etc. The meditator knows its nature empirically through contemplation.

In another sense there are three kinds of *sankharas*, viz, *puññabhi* (wholesome) *sankhara*, with its good kammic result, *apuññabhi* (unwholesome) *sankhara* with its bad kammic result and *aneñjabhi-sankhara* that leads to wholesome *arupajhana* which literally means immobile *jhana*. *Rupajhana* and all the good actions having the kammic results in the sensual world are to be classified as *puññabhisankhara*.

Puñña literally means something that cleanses or purifies. Just as a man washes the dirt off his body with soap, so also we have to rid ourselves of kammic impurities through *dana*, *sila* and *bhāvanā*.

These good deeds are conducive to welfare and prosperity in the present life and hereafter. Another meaning of *puñña* is the tendency to fulfill the desire of the doer of the good deed. Good deeds help to fulfill various human desires, e.g., the desire for health, longevity, wealth and so forth. If a good deed is motivated by the hope for *nibbāna*, it leads to a life that makes it possible to attain his goal or it may ensure his happiness and welfare till the end of his last existence. *Abhisankhara* is the effort to do something for one's own welfare. It tends to have good or evil kammic results.

So *puññabhi sankhara* is good deed with good kammic result. There are eight types of good deeds in the sensual sphere (*kamavacakusala*) and five types in the fine material sphere (*rupavacara*). All these may be summed-up as of three kinds, viz., *dana*, *silā* and *bhāvanā*.

Giving *dana* gladly means wholesome consciousness which is kammically very fruitful. So the donor should rejoice before, during and after the act of alms-giving. In the scriptures this kind of *dana* is credited with great karmic productivity. The attitude of the donor may also be one of indifference (*upekkha*) but, if the mind is clear, his act of *dana* too has high kammic potential. Any act of alms-giving that is based on the belief in kamma is rational, and it may bear fruit in the form of rebirth with no predisposition to greed, ill-will and ignorance. An act of *dana* that has nothing to do with a sense of its moral value or the belief in kammic result is good but unintelligent and it will lead to rebirth with no great intelligence.

It may bear such kammic fruit in everyday life but it does not make the donor intelligent enough to attain the path in his next life. Again one may do a good deed spontaneously without being urged by others (*asankharikakusala*); some do good deeds at the instigation of others (*sasankharika-kusala*). Of these two kinds of good deeds the former is kammically more fruitful than the later. When we consider the four kinds of deeds the former is kammically more fruitful than the later. When we consider the four kinds of good deeds mentioned earlier in terms of these last two attributes, we have a total of eight types of wholesome consciousness in the sensual sphere.

Whenever we do a good deed, we are prompted to do so by one of these *kusala* dhammas; when we practise concentration and meditation, we have to begin with these eight types of wholesome dhammas. It is *bhāvanā* that can lead to *jhana*, the meditator attains *rupavacara jhana* when his *samadhi* is well developed.

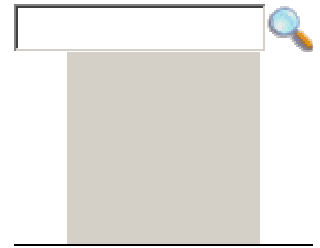
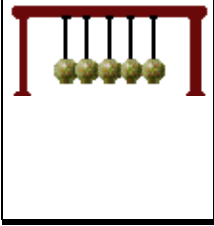
Jhana means total concentration of mind on an object of mental training. *Samatha-Jhana* is concentration for bare tranquility. *Jhana samadhi* is like flame burning in still air. According to the *Suttas*, the *rupavacara jhana* has four levels; in *Abhidhamma* it has five levels.” Thus end Mahasi Sayadaw’s quote.

Jhana is almost impossible to describe to those who have not experienced it, so let’s come back to the topic of concentration on the body for the purpose of eradicating the mind-body delusion.

The next quotation which follows comes from the **BuddhaMind** Website under the heading of **Teaching: Dependent Origination**, (author presently unknown) which cleverly maps the track of all volitional formations together, from beginning to end and around again and again, in a cycle that is ever-recurring and never repeating itself. The reader can search for the website himself and follow it through, from beginning to end and back again, remembering all the while that the process is always taking place at the moment, all through the cycle of life. If you can’t find it any other way, then type in ‘*avijja*’ and search for the appropriate entry.

RESOURCES

Paticca Samuppada - Avijja



INTRO	AVIJJA ignorance	SANKHARA formations	VINNANA consciousness	NAMA-RUPA name-form	AYATANA senses	PHASSA contact	VEDANA feeling	TANHA craving	UPADANA grasping	BHAVA becoming	JATI birth	MARANA death
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Avijja is the first link in the chain but should not in any way be thought of as **the** starting point, the 'causeless root-cause of the world.' The images of the circular chain and the wheel representing *paticca samupada* [P.S.] are useful as neither has a defined starting point. The conventional layout of the P.S. formula is intended for reflection, not as any kind of finite cosmological or psychological definition.

"No first-ignorance can be perceived, monks, before which ignorance was not, and after which it came to be. But it can be perceived that ignorance has its specific conditions."
Anguttara X.61

So what are the 'specific conditions' that cause ignorance?

"With the arising of taints (*asava*) there is the arising of ignorance." *Majjhima 9*

And then we want to ask after the cause of the taints. Read the section on *asava* [[□](#)] but it is enough here to note that the standard list of four includes ignorance. Have we just gone in a circle here? Trying to position *avijja* creates a loop similar to the one we find in the eight-fold path: the first step is right view (of the Four Noble Truths) and the last of the Four Truths... is the eight-fold path. We will find many such loops in P.S. as we proceed. Nibbana (the **end** goal) can be defined as: "being perfect in knowledge (*vijja*)" and, "endowed with higher knowledge (*te-vijja*)." If nibbana is where we finish then we are clearly starting from "the absence of *vijja*," which is: *a-vijja*. So, *avijja* sits first on the list as representing a primary obstacle to liberation - and a primary cause of *dukkha*. The teaching of the Buddha has at its core the Four Noble Truths and, as a working summary, **ignorance is not knowing the Four Noble Truths**.



avijja = ignorance; unawareness; unknowing; obscured awareness; delusion about the nature of the mind. All unwholesome states of mind are inseparably bound up with it. The standard English translation, **ignorance**, has its roots in the Greek word 'gnosis' = (revealed), spiritual knowledge, and it is where the words *diagnosis* and *prognosis* come from. Ignorance is the state of not-knowing or, in the particular context of dhamma, non-wisdom. We tend to think of knowledge in terms of facts and information but the path to freedom (from the wheel of birth and death - the chains of P.S.) lies in the space of the mind, the non-positional 'knowing' that is the domain of awareness. And what does this awareness know? - the Four Noble Truths.

Underlying the Four Noble Truths is the teaching on not-self (*anatta* [[□](#)]) and an even more **basic definition of *avijja*** is the held belief that: **I am the five *khandhas***. I believe that the five *khandhas* are me, that they are mine and that they constitute my-self. This parallels the Buddha's summary definition of suffering as "the grasping of the five *khandhas*" [[□](#)].

We can also consider:

- ignorance of the three conditions [[□](#)]; the basic truth for all existence: that everything is impermanent, is *dukkha* (unsatisfactory) and is not-self.

• ignorance as confused thinking based on conjecture and imagination, conditioned by beliefs, fear, and accumulated character traits. This is the kind of mental 'squirrel in a cage' that most people experience. Not *dukkha* with a capital 'D' but just the everyday form of ignorance/confusion. Yes?

The **overall thrust of the Buddha's teaching** is "freedom from suffering" and where the Four Noble Truths presents the conditioned relationship of desire and *dukkha* we see P.S. offering *avijja-dukkha*. The purpose is the same: to understand the cause of *dukkha* is to have a key to be free from *dukkha*.

When the mind operates based entirely on *avijja*, it experiences all things as being independent, separated, alien entities. The observation is one of me (here) holding various knowledges, views, etc. about all-that-stuff (out there). Even the body is seen as a kind of other-thing; it is **my body** - my thoughts, my children, my car and so forth. The apparent, or presumed point of observation is thought to be the centre, with all else peripheral - this is what it is to be ego-centric. Most of us suffer from this delusion but in the normal run of things are not so extremely positioned. I doubt you would be reading this if you were. There is hope :)

From this ego-centric position **another ignorance that we fall prey to** is that of continuity. This appears in two ways. The first is a presumed extension of existence. Of course we all know that everything is impermanent but our knowledge is largely of the factual, conceptual variety. I do know that I am going to die - but of course it is... when? certainly later - always at some other (later) time. I don't truly **know** the nature of impermanence. It is often not until there is a close death or we get the terminal diagnosis that we really begin to investigate impermanence. The second, and related aspect of continuity is the creation of time - the past and... OF COURSE, the future - **my** future. It is the only way the first bit can work. If I had a past, and I am now, then I will most likely have a future. It is this ongoing (ignorant) attempt to sustain, this attempt to substantiate 'me' that is the conditioning factor for the next link-*sankhara*.

In terms of dealing with ignorance - in the context of liberation - we can use a very broad definition of *avijja*: not being familiar with your own mind. It is through this non-familiarity that we confuse our conditioned perceptions of the world, of reality, with the truth - the dhamma. We tend to regard the impermanent as permanent, the unpleasant (*dukkha*) as pleasant and the not-self as self. Part of the problem here is that there is much business in our lives and there is not a lot of stillness, not a lot of time to reflect on the nature of ... well, nature. Too much of our effort to be free of suffering is focussed on attacking the shadow of suffering - we fail to see its actual form. Meditation is an effective technique - stop, look and listen.



still
calm
serene
centered

So, a mind that is centered and still, gives rise to knowledge, wisdom. The cultivation of this knowledge is the path. All the things of this world that come parading before the senses for you to know are potential causes of suffering. Guard the mind against latching onto the preoccupations that appear in relation to those things. Let them be, let them just exist in line with their nature. Put your mind at ease. Don't fasten onto the formations of the mind or suppose these things to be this or that. As long as you suppose your-self, you're suffering, your awareness is obscured; there is *avijja*. When you can truly know this, penetrate this, the transcendent will arise within you -- the noblest good, the most exalted happiness a human being can know. These words of encouragement from Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

"Monks, I don't envision even one other obstruction -- obstructed by which people go

wandering & transmigrating on for a long, long time -- like the obstruction of ignorance. Obstructed with the obstruction of ignorance, people go wandering & transmigrating on for a long, long time." Itivuttaka I.14

- *avijja* is synonymous with *moha* (delusion) the third of the three poisons
- it is one of the *asava* (taints, effluents, corruptions, out-flows)
- one of the *anusaya* (proclivities, inclinations, tendencies)
- one of the *samyojana* (fetters)

and.... needless to say it regularly figures as a prominent 'bad guy' in many other aspects of the teachings.

INTRO	AVIJJA ignorance	SANKHARA formations	VINNANA consciousness	NAMA-RUPA name-form	AYATANA senses	PHASSA contact	VEDANA feeling	TANHA craving	UPADANA grasping	BHAVA becoming	JATI birth	MARANA death
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Check this website out. It will be well-worth the effort. You may get a glimpse into a world which you have never known.

In the paragraphs which follow, we shall continue to cite from this same *Buddhasasana* website on the topic of *sankharas*, but we will be quoting 'outside-the-box,' so to speak.

Incidentally, if you can understand the contents and inter-relations outlined within this **BuddhaMind Website**, you need not read the rest of the present essay.

The next section is on **Volitional Formations – Sankharas**

“Dependent on our spiritual blindness, ignorance, we engage in actions. We activate our will. *Sankhara* means forming, constructing, creating, putting-together and here it refers specifically to mental formations. The factor of *sankhara* is equivalent to *kamma*.

Here, *kamma* means volitional formations or acts of will which are expressed outwardly through the body and speech.

Whenever there is a volitional action that arises in the mind encompassed by ignorance, that action leaves an imprint in the mind, a formation with the capacity to mature, to fructify in the future. It is deposited in the mind as a seed with a **potency**, - [with] a power of germinating in the future and of producing results.

In the context of dependent arising, the most important aspect of volitional formations is their power to generate a new existence in the future, its power to bring about rebirth. These volitional formations, depending on whether they are wholesome or unwholesome volitions, will bring about a good or bad rebirth. Now we come to the next link in the series:

“*Dependent on conditional formations as a condition, consciousness arises.*”

From ignorance, as a requisite condition, come *sankharas* - the second link in the chain. It is one of the most difficult terms in Buddhist terminology and has several different shades of meaning depending on its context. A single word translation presents problems.

We will focus on the specific context of *paticca samuppada* (P.S.) but, as it is a key term in Buddhist doctrine and the implications of *sankhara* in P.S. are not independent of the wider doctrine, we will also explore the full range of meaning. Before we get too involved in that perhaps a broad outline and translation of the term may be useful. Through its general use in the Pali canon *sankhara* can be thought of as 'formation' or, 'determination' or 'fabrication.' The difficulty is that the term can refer either to 'the act of forming' or to the passive state of 'having been formed' or to both. Sankhara has its roots in classical Sanskrit with the early meaning of: "preparation" and "sacrament," also in philosophical literature: "former impression, disposition." The prefix *san* means "together" and the root *kar* means "to make" so the implication is of an aggregate, a combination, or an assemblage - things put together. I will generally use 'formation.'

In the context of P.S. *sankhara* takes on the active aspect of 'forming' and in this respect is synonymous with *kamma*. It is a conscious and active kammic determination. It covers both wholesome and unwholesome volitional activity and, in this specific sense, *sankhara* could be translated as "kamma-formation."

In relation to the three life model this includes actions of body, speech or mind (in the past). As part of a (this-life) evolving sequence - ending in *dukkha* - *sankhara* is more the dynamic process of mental formation (fabrication, assembling) which arises through the misconceptions of *avijja*. These formations can be considered as rudimentary thought forms, little bubbles.

Many of them survive and take on (or we 'give' them) associative labels, names, values - there is the arising of perception - they assume an identity [see: *nama-rupa*]. As *sankhara* (forming) these 'bubbles' take on the **potential** of being 'formed.'

The things of the world are just as they are; they have no names, no value. When we are born we have no name, no value. Through *avijja* arises *sankhara* and when these *sankharic* 'bubbles' are [closely observed] and given heed - [we see] there is this kamma-forming - the little bubbles don't just go 'pop,' they persist and this persistence conditions the arising of *vinnana* (consciousness.)

The image on the 'wheel of life' [[□](#)] is that of a potter making pots for future use. The implication here is that some choice is available around this forming. For most of us, the "falling out of the tree" image, presented in the introduction [P.S.], is what we usually experience: *avijja* ... **thud** ... *dukkha*. Nevertheless, studying and reflecting on these traditional frames - especially in the context of meditation - establishes a knowledge, a familiarity, with your own mind, that expands the **possibility** of choice.

Here are a few other uses of *sankhara*:

- It is the fourth of the five *khandhas* [[□](#)] and here includes all 'mental formations' whether they belong to 'karmically forming' consciousness or not.

In the *Abhidhamma*, fifty mental formations are distinguished, seven of which are constant factors of mind. As one of the *khandhas*, *sankhara* is sub-divided into three: volition (*cetana*), contact or sense impression (*phassa*), and attention (*manasikara*).

Volition is the principal 'formative' factor here.

- The suggested translation above for *sankhara* as 'kamma-formation' - actions of body, speech and mind are sometimes found used in quite a different sense with body-*sankhara* referring to the function of in-and-out-breathing; the verbal function of thought-conception and discursive thinking; the mental-function of feeling and perception.
- The more usual use of *sankhara* has the active mode of 'forming' but it also has the sense of anything formed and conditioned (or determined or fabricated).

In this context it includes all things in the world, all phenomena of existence - trees, houses, oceans, people, etc.

- *Sankhara* sometimes means 'volitional effort.'

Sankhara has this curious twist as it is not merely a combination of several factors. It is a changing combination of changing factors, since the combination itself is changing. In the broadest sense the term covers all things, physical or mental, fashioned by causes or conditions, **as well as** the forces fashioning them **and** the processes by which they are fashioned.

Jumping a few links in P.S. (but within the general bounds of the term) we can consider that *sankhara* refers not only to matter and properties of matter known as "corporeality" (*rupa*), but also to mind and properties of mind known as "mentality" (*nama*).

There is a well-known passage in Pali that highlights the conditioned or compounded nature of *sankhara*:

sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe sankhara dukkha, sabbe dhamma anatta

It makes clear that all *sankhara* (formations) are impersonal (*anicca*) and subject to suffering (*dukkha*) but it is necessary to introduce the word 'dhamma' to qualify the third condition of existence, '*anatta*,' as dhamma is more complete and all-embracing as regards existence as it includes the unconditioned (the unformed = *asankhata*; the not-*sankhara*), i.e. nibbana. It would be wrong to say that all dhammas are impermanent and subject to change, for the nibbana-dhamma is permanent and free from change. For the same reason, it is correct to say that not only all the *sankharas* (i.e. *sankhata*-dhamma), but also that all the dhammas (including the *asankhata*-dhamma) are *anatta* (not-self) lacking an ego or essential personality.

Sankhara can be conditioned by ignorance (as in the case of P.S.) or not. They can be volitional or not (as in the case of *khandhas*). They can be 'static' or formed. See that

nothing is a unity and nothing is an entity - all arises due to conditions. *Sankhara* arises in the mind and is a persistent factor in the on-going conditioning (*paccaya*) of the mind. *Sankhara paccaya viññana.*” Thus ends the **BuddhaMind** passage on *sankhara*.

The passing of formations into consciousness is another stage in the mental process.

Mahasi Sayadaw explains this in the Yellow Robe Website under the title of ‘Formations to Consciousness.’ Although he writes in impeccable English, the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw assumes his reader will be familiar with Pali Terms, so, in some places, he may prove difficult to follow, but this is no matter.

We need to retain the Pali Terms to be sure we do not change the doctrine in the re-telling, over and over again throughout time. The reader who gets confused can just scan this subsection (to get a general guideline) and go on to the next subsection. The ardent reader may want to come back to study this section later

From: *Dependent Origination-The Subtlest Dhamma - (Patīccasamuppāda Sutta)*

Sankhara Causes

Because of *avijja* there is *sankhara* which in turn causes *viññana*. As the result of the good or bad kamma in the previous life there arises the stream of consciousness beginning with rebirth consciousness in the new life. Evil deeds may, for example, lead to the four lower worlds. After that there arises the stream of *viññana* called *bhavanga-citta* which functions ceaselessly when the six kinds of *vithi* consciousness do not occur at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, eating, touching and thinking.

In other words, *bhavanga* is the kind of subconsciousness that we have when we are asleep. We die with this subconsciousness and it is then called *cutti-citta*. So the rebirth-consciousness, the subconsciousness and the *cuti* or death consciousness represent the mind which results from the kamma of previous life.

The five kinds of consciousness associated with the five unpleasant sense-objects such as unpleasant eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc., are due to unwholesome kamma as are (1) the consciousness that is focussed on these five sense-objects and (2) the inquiring (*santirana*) consciousness. There are altogether seven types of consciousness that stem from bad kamma (*apuññabhisankhara*). As for *aneñjabhi-sankhara*, because of the four *arupakusala*-dhammas there arises the resulting *arupa*-consciousness in the four immaterial worlds in the form of rebirth-consciousness in the beginning, the *bhavanga citta* in the middle and the *cuticitta* as the end of existence.

Similarly because of the five *rupakusala*-dhammas there arise five *rupa vipakacittas* in *rupabrahma* worlds. Then there are eight *mahavipakacittas* corresponding to eight

good kmmas in the sensual sphere. They form the rebirth, *bhavanga* and *cuti citta*s in the human words and six deva-worlds. They also register pleasant sense-objects (*tadarammana*) after seven impulse-moments (*javana*) that occur on seeing, hearing, etc.

Also due to good kamma of the sensual sphere are the five kinds of consciousness associated with five pleasant sense-objects, the registering consciousness, the joyful, inquiring consciousness and the nonchalant, inquiring consciousness. Hence the resulting (*vipaka*) consciousness is of thirty two kinds, viz., four *arupavipaka*, five *rupavipaka*, seven *akusala vipaka* and sixteen *kusala vipaka* in sensual sphere. All these thirty-two *vipaka* are resultants of *sankhara*.

How Sankhara Leads To New Viññana

It is very important but hard to understand how *sankhara* gives rise to rebirth-consciousness. Ledi Sayadaw points out that this part of the teaching on *Paticcasamuppada* leaves much room for misunderstanding. It is necessary to understand the extinction of the last consciousness (*cuti citta*) together with all *nama-rupa* as well as the immediate arising of the rebirth-consciousness (*patisandhi citta*) together with the new *nama-rupa* as a result of good or bad kmmas in the case of living beings who are not yet free from defilements. Lack of this understanding usually leads to the belief in transmigration of souls (*sassataditthi*) or the belief in annihilation after death (*ucchedaditthi*) which is held by modern materialists.

The belief in annihilation is due to ignorance of the relation between cause and effect after death. It is easy to see how *avijja* leads to *sankhara* and how the sense-bases (*ayatana*), contact, sensation, craving, etc form links in the chain of causation for these are evident in the facts of life. But the emergence of new existence following death is not apparent and, hence, the belief that there is nothing after death.

Learned people who think on the basis of faith usually accept the teaching that *sankhara* gives rise to rebirth-consciousness. But it does not lend itself to purely rational and empirical approach and, today, it is being challenged by the materialistic view of life.

The way rebirth takes place is crystal clear to the meditator who has practised *vipassana*. He finds that the units of consciousness arise and pass always ceaselessly, that they appear and disappear one after another rapidly. This is what he discovers by experience, not what he learns from his teachers. Of course, he does not know so much in the beginning. He discovers the fact only when he attains *sammasana* and *udayabbaya* insights. The general idea of death and rebirth mental units dawns on him with the development of *paccaya-pariggaha* insights but it is *sammasana* and *udayabbaya* insights that leave no doubt about rebirth. On the basis of his insight he realizes that death means the disappearance of the last unit of consciousness and that rebirth means the arising of the first unit of consciousness in the manner of the vanishing and arising of consciousness-units that he notes in the practice of *vipassana*.

Those who do not have *vipassana* insight miss the point. They believe in a permanent ego and identify it with the mind. It is rejected by those who have a good knowledge

of *Abhidhamma* but it lingers in some people because of attachment to it in their previous lives. Even the contemplating meditator who is not yet intellectually mature sometimes feels tempted to accept it.” Thus ends Mahasi Sayadaw’s quote.

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What follows now is cited out of the *Fundamentals of Buddhism* series to be found in **BuddhaNet.Net** of the Buddha Dharma Education Association Website in a lecture, by **Dr. Peter D. Santina**, which is useful for its compactness and tight coherence and the way it explains the aggregates (*khandhas*) in plain English.

The Five Aggregates

“In this [lecture] we are going to look at the teaching of the five aggregates (*kandhas*): rupa, vedana, sañña, sankhara and viññana. In other words, we are going to look at the Buddhist analysis of personal experience or the Buddhist analysis of the personality.

Let us first look at the aggregate of matter or form (rupa). The aggregate of form corresponds to what we would call material or physical factors. It includes not only our own bodies, but also the material objects that surround us - the earth, the oceans, the trees, the buildings, and so forth. Specifically, the aggregate of form includes the five physical sense organs and the corresponding physical objects of the sense organs. These are the eyes and visible objects, the ears and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, and the skin and tangible objects.

But physical elements by themselves are not enough to produce experience. The simple contact between the eyes and visible objects or between the ears and sound cannot result in experience without consciousness (viññana). The eyes can be in conjunction with the visible object indefinitely without producing experience. The ears too can be exposed to sound indefinitely without producing experience.

Only the co-presence of consciousness, together with the sense organ and the object of the sense organ, produces experience. In other words, it is when the eyes, the visible object and consciousness come together that the experience of a visible object is produced. Consciousness is therefore an indispensable element in the production of experience.

Before we go on to our consideration of the mental factors of personal experience, I would like to mention briefly the existence of one more set of an organ and its object, and here I speak of the sixth-sense -the mind. This is in addition to the five physical sense organs - eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. Just as the five physical sense organs have their corresponding physical objects, the mind has for its object ideas or properties (*dhammas*). And as in the case of the five physical sense organs, consciousness is present to unite the mind and its object so as to produce experience.

Let us now look at the mental factors of experience and let us see if we can understand how consciousness turns the physical factors of experience into personal conscious experience. First of all, we must remember that consciousness is mere awareness, or mere sensitivity to an object. When the physical factors of experience, as for example the eyes and a visible object, come into contact, and when

consciousness too becomes associated with the physical factors of experience, visual consciousness arises. This is mere awareness of a visible object, not anything like what we could call personal experience. The way that our personal experience is produced is through the functioning of the other three major mental factors of experience and they are the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of perception and the aggregate of mental formation or volition. These three aggregates function to turn this mere awareness of the object into personal experience.

The aggregate of feeling or sensation (*vedana*) is of three kinds - pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent. When an object is experienced that experience takes on one of these emotional tones, either the tone of pleasure, or the tone of displeasure or the tone of indifference.

Let us next look at the aggregate of perception (*sañña*). This is an aggregate which many people find difficult to understand. When we speak of perception, we have in mind the activity of recognition, or identification. In a sense, we are talking about the attaching of a name to an object of experience. The function of perception is to turn an indefinite experience into an identified and recognized experience. Here, we are speaking of the formulation of a conception of an idea about a particular object. Just as with feeling where we have an emotional element in terms of pleasure, displeasure or indifference; with perception, we have a conceptual element in the sense of introducing a definite, determinate idea about the object of experience.

Finally, there is the aggregate of mental formation or volition (*sankhara*). This aggregate may be described as a conditioned response to the object of experience. In this sense, it partakes of the meaning of habit as well. ...A mental formation may be described as the impression created by previous actions, the habit energy stored-up from countless former lives.

Here, as one of the five aggregates also, the aggregate of mental formation plays a similar role. But it has not only a static value, it also has a dynamic value because just as our reactions are conditioned by former deeds, so are our responses here and now motivated and directed in a particular way by our mental formation or volition.

Mental formation or volition therefore has a moral dimension just as perception has a conceptual dimension, and feeling has an emotional dimension. You will notice I use the terms mental formation and volition together. This is because each of these terms represents one half of the meaning of *sankhara* - mental formation represents the half that comes from the past, and volition represents the half that functions here and now. So, mental formation and volition function to determine our responses to the objects of experience and these responses have moral consequences in the sense of wholesome, unwholesome or neutral.

We can now see how the physical and mental factors of experience worked together to produce personal experience. To make this a little clearer, let us take the help of a couple of concrete examples.

Let us say, today, ... you decide to take a walk in the garden. As you walk in the garden, your eyes come into contact with a visible object. As your attention focuses

on that visible object, your consciousness becomes aware of visible object as yet indeterminate.

Your aggregate of perception will identify that visible object as, let us say, a snake. Once that happens, you will respond to that visible object with the aggregate of feeling - the feeling of displeasure, or more specifically that of fear. Finally, you will react to that visible object with the aggregate of mental formation or volition, with the intentional action of perhaps running away or perhaps picking up a stone.

In all our daily activities, we can see how all the five aggregates work together to produce personal experience.

[To take another example,] at this very moment, for instance, there is contact between two elements of the aggregate of form - the sound of my voice and your ears. Your consciousness becomes aware of the sound of my voice. Your aggregate of perception identifies the words that I am speaking. Your aggregate of feeling responds with an emotional response - pleasure, displeasure or indifference. Your aggregate of mental formation or volition responds with a conditioned reaction - sitting in attention, daydreaming or perhaps yawning. We can analyze all our personal experience in terms of the five aggregates.

There is one point that has to be remembered regarding the nature of the five aggregates, and that is that each and all of them are in constant change. The elements that constitute the aggregate of form are impermanent and are in a state of constant change - the body grows old, weak, sick and so forth.

The things around us are also impermanent and change constantly. Our feelings too are constantly changing. We may respond today to a particular situation with a feeling of pleasure. To-morrow, we may respond to that same situation with the feeling of displeasure.

Today we may perceive an object in a particular way. At a later time, under different circumstances, our perception will change.

In semi-darkness we perceive a rope to be a snake. The moment the light of the torch falls upon that object, we perceive it to be a rope. So our perceptions like our feelings and like the material objects of our experience are ever changing and impermanent.

So too, our mental formations are impermanent and ever-changing. We alter our habits. We can learn to be kind and compassionate. We can acquire the attitudes of renunciation and equanimity and so forth.

Consciousness too is impermanent and constantly changing. Consciousness arises dependent upon an object and a sense organ. It cannot exist independently. As we have seen, all the physical and mental factors of our experience like our bodies, the physical objects around us, our minds and our ideas are impermanent and constantly changing. All these aggregates are constantly changing and impermanent. They are processes, not things. They are dynamic, not static.

What is the use of this analysis of personal experience in terms of the five aggregates? What is the use of this reduction of the apparent unity of personal experience into the various elements of form, feeling, perception, mental formation or volition, and consciousness? The purpose of this analysis is to create the wisdom of not-self.

What we wish to achieve is to arrive at a way of experiencing the world which is not constructed upon and around the idea of a self. We want to see personal experience in terms of processes, in terms of impersonal functions rather than in terms of a self and what affects a self because this will create an attitude of equanimity, an attitude which will help us overcome the emotional disturbances of hope and fear.

We hope for happiness, we fear pain. We hope for praise, we fear blame. We hope for gain, we fear loss. We hope for fame, we fear infamy. We live in a state of alternating between hope and fear. We experience these hopes and fears because we understand happiness and pain and so forth in terms of the self. We understand them as personal happiness and pain, as personal praise and blame, and so forth. But once we understand them in terms of impersonal processes, and once through this understanding we get rid of the idea of the self, we can overcome hope and fear. We can regard happiness and pain, praise and blame and all the rest with equanimity, with even-mindedness, and we will then no longer be subject to the imbalance of alternating between hope and fear.” Thus ends the *Buddha Dharma* citation.

Note: We have taken the liberty of changing the Sanskrit-renderings, in the above-quoted text from in the **Buddha Dharma** Website to conform with the Pali wording which has been used consistently throughout the rest of our present essay on “Penetrating the Body-Mind.” We hope that we may be pardoned for our taking such literary license.

Next, let us go to the Website of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, where we can read the text of a talk given by **Ajaan Brahmavamso**, which speaks about dependent arising and body-sensations and does not depend on too many Pali renderings:

The Five *Khandhas* (or aggregates)

“As long as these human bodies are alive and their senses are operating, we have to be constantly on our guard, alert and mindful, because the force of habit to grasp the sensual world as a self is so strong.

This is very strong-conditioning in all of us. So the way the Buddha taught is the way of mindfulness and wise reflection. Rather than making metaphysical statements about your True Natures or Ultimate Reality, the Buddha's teaching points to the condition of **grasping**. That's the only thing that keeps us from enlightenment.

Buddha wisdom is an understanding of the way things are through observing oneself rather than just observing how the stars and planets operate. We don't go out looking

at the trees and contemplating nature as if it were an object of our vision but we're actually observing nature as it operates through this personal formation.

What we take ourselves to be can be classified as five aggregates or *khandhas*: *rupa*, form; *vedana*, feeling; *sañña*, perception; *sankhara*, mental formation or thought process; *viññana*, sense consciousness.

They provide a skilful means of seeing all sensual phenomena in groups. The easiest to meditate on is *rupa khandha*, the form of your own body, because you can sit here - it is stuck to the ground, heavy, it's gross. It's a slower moving thing than mental phenomena - *vedana*, *sañña*, *sankhara* or *viññana*. You can actually reflect on your own body for long periods of time, meditate on the breath rather than on consciousness, because breathing is something within our ability to concentrate on. Ordinary kinds of people can contemplate their own breath.

You can contemplate the feeling of your own eyes. They have sensations. Contemplate the tongue, the wetness of the mouth or your tongue touching the palate in your own mouth. You can contemplate the body as a sense organ, giving you the sensations of pleasure and pain, heat and cold. Just observe what the feeling of cold or heat in the body is like; you can contemplate that because it is not what you are. It's an object you can see, easily observe as if it were something separate from yourself.

If you don't do that then you just tend to react. When you're too hot you try to get cooler, and take off your jumper. And then you get cold and you put it back on again. You can just react to those sensations of pleasure and pain in the body. Pleasure: 'Oh isn't that wonderful,' try to hold onto that, have more pleasure. And the pain: 'Oh - get rid of that, run away from anything uncomfortable or painful.' But in meditation we can see these sensations, and the body itself is a sensual condition that has pleasure, pain, heat and cold.

You can reflect on the forms that you see. Just look at something beautiful, like flowers. Flowers are probably the most beautiful things on the earth, and so we like flowers. So when you look at a flower, note how you're drawn to it, and want to keep looking at it - being attracted to what is pleasing to the eye.

Or, let's say, something that is unpleasant to the eye. Looking at, let's say, excrement. When you see excrement, cow dung on the path, you politely ignore it, but look at your own excrement. We produce it ourselves and yet it's something that we don't really want to go round showing other people. It's something we'd rather nobody ever saw us producing. You don't really feel drawn to go looking at it like you would a flower, do you? And yet we're quite willing to wear flowers, carry flowers around [or] have flowers on our shrine.

It's not that you should find excrement attractive. I'm just pointing out that you can meditate on this force of the sensory world. It's a natural force. It's not bad or wrong but you can meditate on it to see how one tends to react to the sensory experiences.

When you hear beautiful sounds or horrible ones, pleasant odors or stinking ones, pleasant tastes or unpleasant ones, pleasurable physical sensations or painful ones, heat and cold - meditate on these things. Look and see these things as they are: all

rupa is impermanent. Beautiful flowers are only beautiful for a while; then they become repulsive. So we're observing this natural transformation from what is fresh and beautiful to what is old, ugly.

Myself, I was a lot prettier when I was twenty. Now I'm old and ugly. An old human body is not very beautiful, is it? But it's the body, following what it's supposed to do. I'm glad it's not getting prettier. It would be embarrassing if I was.

Now the mental *khandhas* also operate on that same principle. *Vedana* is a mental state, the feeling you have of attraction and aversion around the physical things that you hear, see, smell, taste, touch. The sensation of pain is just as it is, but then there's the reaction of liking or disliking. Or not even that, but just a moving toward or away from it.

You can be aware of the feelings, the moods. Note the heat that comes from anger, the dullness that comes from doubt and sloth-torpor. Note the feeling when you're jealous. You can witness that feeling. Watch, instead of just trying to annihilate jealousy. When jealousy conditions your mind rather than reacting to it or trying to get rid of it because you don't like it, you begin to reflect on it. When you're cold, what is coldness? Do you like it? This coldness, feeling cold, is that something terribly unpleasant or do you just make a lot out of it. Hunger, what is hunger like? When you're feeling hungry, meditate on that physical feeling that you tend to react to by trying to get something to eat.

Or meditate on the feeling of being alone or separate, the feeling that people look down on you. If you feel, 'I don't like you.' - meditate on that feeling. Or that, 'You don't like me!' Meditate on that. Bring this into consciousness now. Not analytically, trying to figure out whether I really do; or that your relationship to me is a dependent childlike relationship that you shouldn't have; or getting caught-up in Freudian psychology or whatever. But just observe the doubting uncertain state of mind in your relationships to others - not to analyse but just to observe the kind of feelings of confidence or lack of confidence, aversion or attraction. That is *vedana*. This is a natural thing. We're all sensitive beings, so there's attraction and repulsion operating all the time. It's a condition in nature, not a personal problem - unless we make it so.

Sañña khandha is the perception *khandha*. To **grasp** a perception means **to believe in the way things appear** in the present as if it's a kind of permanent quality. That's how we tend to operate in our lives.

So I might think, for example, 'Venerable Viradhammo is this way.' It's a perception I have whether I'm here sitting next to Venerable Viradhammo, or I'm alone, or he's helping me, or he's angry with me. I have this fixed view. A fixed perception is not all that conscious, but I tend to operate from that particular fixed position if I believe in my perception. In that way when I think of him it's as if his personality is fixed and constant rather than being the way it is at this time. My perception of him is just a perception of the moment; it's not a soul that carries through time, not a fixed personality. So *sañña* is to be meditated on.

Sankhara are mental formations. There are perceptions of the mind (*sañña*) and we operate from them (*sankhara*). So the assumptions you have about yourself - from

childhood, parents, teachers, friends, relatives and all that; whether you perceive yourself as good and positive or in a negative way or a confused way - it's all the *sañña/sankhara khandhas*.

Memories come up, or the kind of fears you have about what you might be lacking. You can worry that there might be a serious flaw in your character or some repressed horrible desires that might be lurking way down deep in your mind - which might come up in meditation and drive you crazy! That is another mental condition, that not knowing of what we are, so sometimes we imagine the worst possible things. But what we can know is that whatever we believe ourselves to be is a condition of the mind: it arises, it passes away. It's impermanent.

If we come from certain fixed perceptions of ourselves then we conceive all kinds of things. If you operate from the position 'I am a man' and then that perception of yourself is what you are, you assume that. So you never investigate that perception, you just believe that 'I'm a man' and then conceive 'manhood' as being a certain way - 'what a man should be'. Then you compare yourself to what the ideal for manhood is and when you don't live up to those high standards of manhood, you worry. Something wrong! You start feeling upset or hating yourself, or guilty because of the basic assumption of being a man. On a conventional level this might be true - men are this way and women are that way. We're not denying the conventional reality, but we're no longer attaching to it as a personal quality, a fixed position to take at all times in all places.

This is a way of freeing ourselves from that binding quality to unsatisfactory conditions. Because if you believe yourself to be a man or a woman, as your true identity and your soul, then that is always going to take you to a depressing state of mind. All these are perceptions we have. We create so much misery over perceiving ourselves to be black or white or members of a certain nationality or class. In England people suffer because of this perception of belonging to a certain class; in America we suffer from not having any perceptions of class, from the perception that we're all the same, we're all equal. It's the attachment to any of these, even to the highest, most egalitarian perception, that takes us to despair.

Investigating these 'five heaps' [the literal meaning of *khandhas*] as being aggregates or groups, you begin to see them. You can know them as objects because they're *anatta*, not-self. If they were what you are, then you wouldn't be able to see them. You'd only be able to be them. You'd have no way of witnessing them or detaching from them, you'd just be caught into them all the time without any ability to detach and observe them. But being men, women, monks, nuns, Italian, Danish, Swiss, English, American, Canadian, or whatever, is only a relative truth, relative to certain situations.

Yet we can operate our lives from fixed positions, of being 'I'm American' and 'We're this way.' Throughout the world we have those national prejudices and racial prejudices. These are just perception and conception (*sañña/sankhara khandhas*) that we can observe. When you have a fixed view about somebody - 'One thing I can't stand is Hondurans' - you can observe that in your mind, can't you? Even if you have strong prejudices and feelings and you try to get rid of them, that comes from assuming that you shouldn't have any prejudices at all and you shouldn't have any bad

feelings towards anybody and you should be able to accept criticism with an equanimous mind and not feel angry or upset.

That's another very idealistic assumption, isn't it? You see that as a condition of mind and keep observing. Rather than hating ourselves or hating others for being prejudiced, we're observing the very limitations of any prejudices or perceptions and conceptions of the mind. We're meditating on the impermanent nature of perception. In other words, we're not trying to justify or explain or get rid of or change anything. We're just trying to observe that all things change - all that begins ends.

Then we meditate on the *viññana khandha*, the consciousness, the sensory consciousness of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind - on how one thing goes to the other, aware of the movements of consciousness of the senses. Looking at something, hearing something - it changes very rapidly.

All these five *khandhas* are *anicca*, impermanent. When we chant: *rupam aniccam, vedana anicca, sañña anicca, sankhara anicca, viññanam aniccam*, this is very profound. Then: *sabbe sankhara anicca*. *Sankhara* means 'all conditioned phenomena,' all sensory experience - the sense organs, the objects of the sense organs, the consciousness that arises on contact - all this is *sankhara* and is *anicca*. All is conditioned. So *sankhara* includes the other four: *rupa, vedana, sañña, viññana*.

With this you have a perspective from which the conditioned world is infinitely variable and complex. But where do you separate *sañña* from *sankhara* and *sankhara* from *viññana* and all that? It's best not to try to get precise divisions between these five aggregates, they're just convenient means for looking at things, helping you to meditate on mental states, the physical world and the sensory world.

We're not trying to fix anything so this is permanently *sankhara* and that is definitely *sañña*, but we're just using these labels to observe that the sensory world - from the physical to the mental, from coarse to refined - is conditioned, and all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. Then you have a way of seeing the totality of the conditioned world as impermanent, rather than getting involved in it all. In this practice of insight meditation we're not trying to analyse the conditioned world, but to detach from it, to see it in a perspective. This is when you really begin to comprehend *anicca*; you insightfully know: *sabbe sankhara anicca*.

So any thoughts and beliefs you have are just conditions. But I'm not saying that you shouldn't believe in anything, I'm just pointing out a way to see things in perspective so you're not deluded by them. We won't grasp the experience of emptiness or the Unconditioned, the Deathless, as a personal attainment. Some of you have been grasping that one as a kind of personal attainment, haven't you? 'I know emptiness. I've realised emptiness' - patting yourselves on the back. That's not *sabbe dhamma anatta* - that's grasping the Unconditioned, making it into a condition. Me' and Mine.' When you start thinking of yourself as having realised emptiness, you can see that also as a condition of the mind.

Now *sabbe dhamma anatta*: all things are not-self, not a person, not a permanent soul, not a self of any sort. That's very important to contemplate also, because *sabbe*

dhamma includes all things, the conditioned phenomena of the sensory world and the Unconditioned, the Deathless.

Notice that Buddhists make no claim for Deathlessness as being a self either! 'I have an immortal soul, or God is my true nature!' The Buddha avoided any statements of that nature at all. Any possible conceiving oneself as anything at all is an obstacle to enlightenment, because you attach to an idea again, to a concept of self as being part of something. Maybe you think there's a piece of you, a little soul, which joins the bigger one at death. That is a conception of the mind - isn't it? - that you can 'know' or 'think you know.' We're not saying it's untrue, or false, but we're just being the knowing, knowing what can be known. We don't feel compelled to grasp that as a belief, we see it as only something that comes out of the mind, a condition of the mind, so we let even that go.

Keep that formula: All conditions are impermanent, all things are not-self' for reflection. And then in your life as you live it, whatever happens you can see *sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe dhamma anatta*. It keeps you from being deluded by miraculous phenomena that might happen to you, and it is a way of understanding other religious conventions. Christians come along and say: Only through Jesus Christ can you be saved. You can't be saved through Buddhism. Buddha was only a man, but Jesus Christ was the son of God'. So you think, 'Oh, I wonder, maybe they're right.' After all when you go to one of these 'born again' meetings everybody's radiating happiness; their eyes are bright and they say, 'Praise the Lord!'

But when you go to a Buddhist monastery and you just sit there for hours on end watching your breath, you don't get high like that. You start doubting and you think, 'Maybe that's right, maybe Jesus is the way'. But what you can know is that there's a doubt. Look at that doubt, or the feeling of being intimidated by other religions when they come on strong, or feeling averse to them, or having prejudices against religions. What you can know is that these are perceptions of the mind: they come and go and change.

Keep a constant cool reflection on these things rather than trying to figure it out, or feel that you have to justify yourself being a Buddhist. Christians start saying, 'You don't do anything for the third world,' and you say, 'We...we...we...chant! We share merit and we radiate loving-kindness'. Comes out pretty weak in a situation where you're talking about malnutrition and starvation in Africa!

But now, at this time, there's this opportunity to understand the limits of what you can do. All of us, if we could, would definitely do something about starvation in Africa, if we felt that there was something one individual could do here and now at this time. Reflect on this – 'What is the real problem at this time?' Is it the problem of starvation in Africa, or is it human selfishness and ignorance? Isn't starvation in Africa the result of human greed, selfishness, and stupidity?

Therefore we open our minds to the Dhamma. We wisely reflect on it and then realise it. Truth is to be realised and known within the context of personal experience. But the practice is a continuous one - after eighteen years I still practise all the time. Things change: people praise and blame, the world goes on. One just keeps reflecting on it by *sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe dhamma anatta*. When you recognise the

conditioned and the Unconditioned, then, you have what is called the ability to develop the Path, and there's no more confusion about that.

The goal now is to realise Nibbana, or the Deathless, or non-attachment and realise what it's like to be not attached to the five *khandhas*. Realise that when you're sitting here and you're really at peace. There's no attachment to the five *khandhas* then, but you might make a perception out of that peacefulness and attach to that and always try to meditate in order to get peaceful again according to a perception. That's why it's a continuous letting go rather than an attainment.

Sometimes on these retreats when you get calm, you can have a very peaceful mind. And you attach. So then you meditate in order to attain that blissful state. But insight meditation means looking into the nature of things, of the five *khandhas*, seeing them as *anicca* - impermanent; as *dukkha* - unsatisfactory. None of these *khandhas* have the ability to give you any kind of permanent satisfaction. Their very nature is unsatisfactory and *anatta*.

Start to investigate and wisely consider *sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe dhamma anatta* rather than think you've attained something or that you've got to hold on to that attainment and start to resent anybody that gets in your way. Note what attachment is. When your mind is really concentrated, let go of it. Rather than just indulging in that peaceful feeling, attach to something. Worry about something. Deliberately do it so that you begin to see how you go out and grasp things, or worry about losing it.

In your practice, as you begin to understand and experience letting go, you begin to realise what Buddhas know: *sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe dhamma anatta*. It's not just the words - even a parrot can say the words - but that's not an enlightened parrot, is it?

Insight is different from conceptual knowledge. But now you're penetrating, going deep into this, breaking through the illusion of self as being anything at all or nothing. If you believe that you don't have a self - that's another belief. I believe I don't have a self. We believe in no self. You see that the Buddha pointed to the way between those two extremes: of believing you have a self and believing that you don't have a self.

You cannot find anything in the five *khandhas* which is a permanent self or soul: things arise out of the Unconditioned; they go back to the Unconditioned. Therefore it is through letting-go rather than through adapting any other attitude that we no-longer seek to attach to mortal conditions." Thus ends Ajaan Brahm's talk on the five *khandas* or aggregates.

We hope that this essay has given the reader some insight into how the Internet may be used for Dhamma studies beneficially.

In conclusion, we may note that,

While, On the one hand,

We realize that it is impossible to tie everything up, concretely-together, within a world where everything is in a continual process of coming-together and falling-apart;

We also note that,

On the other hand,

It is remarkable how the above-cited scholars and teachers all seem to be saying the same thing, based (i) on the guidelines of the teaching and (ii) applied through direct experience, to gradually-develop insight and wisdom, through the process of Vipassana Meditation Practise.

The ultimate cause of their ‘common-knowing’ of the ‘emptiness of experience’ is that ‘There is only one Dhamma.’