

**Saṅkhāra in Theory and Practice Sutta  
Study with Meditation Workshop  
(STPW 104 Conclusion of D2)**

**Origination of Each of the Five Aggregates  
and the Process of Their Origination**

**The Nature of Saṅkhārā  
as the Fourth Aggregate**

*by Aggacitta Bhikkhu*

An edited transcript

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## Origination of each of the five aggregates and the process of their origination

When we talk about the five aggregates we actually refer to a sentient being.

### Rūpa

Rūpa here refers to only the body because if you look at the definition of rūpa, the first sutta talks about the four great elements and matter that is derived from the four great elements and then the other sutta talks about why it is called rūpa.

It is rūpa because it becomes deformed due to heat and cold and due to flies and so forth. So you can see very clearly that this refers to the physical body of a sentient being rather than the outside physical matter.

The origin of rūpa, it says, is nutriment. This is very obvious because the very moment rebirth takes place in the womb, in the case of our human existence, then from that very moment the nutriment of that embryo is derived from that of the mother. From the mother that nutriment will flow into the embryo and then the foetus.

When the baby is born then it will need external nutriment. And once the baby is able to stand on his own feet or the child is able to eat by himself then there is volition involved in wanting to take nutriment whenever he feels hungry. Even though he may not be able to feed himself, the child will start to scream or cry and then the poor mother will have to figure out what he is crying for. It could be so many other things. I guess the mother would have the intuition to know that the child is hungry and wants to eat and so if she feeds the child and he stops crying, that means she has gratified his intention of wanting to eat. But if he keeps on crying, that's not what he wants; he wants something else and she has to figure out what he wants.

So the origin of form of course is nutriment; the moment you stop eating then you're going to die very soon. There is a case of a monk during the Buddha's time who was suffering from a terminal illness and then he decided that there's no point continuing to live because he's going to die anyway, so he decided to stop eating and drinking. And you may wonder whether that is breaking the first precept by intentionally taking life, but the Buddha actually allowed the monks to do that. He said that if you are suffering from a terminal illness and you know very well that there's no way you can get cured, you're allowed to starve yourself or stop eating and drinking for death to take its natural cause. So because you stop eating or drinking, you stop providing nutriment for the body. Then automatically all the material elements in the body will deteriorate because there's no nutriment for it to be sustained.

### Vedanā, saññā and saṅkhāra

Now for vedanā, saññā and saṅkhāra (feeling, perception and saṅkhāra), they all depend on contact or sense experience. You see, if none of your senses are working

then you won't have any feeling, perception or volition. Like what somebody pointed out:

- your eyes see something moving
- you recognise it
- you think it's dangerous
- you have fear
- a volition arises to either protect yourself or run away—fight or flee mentality.

So these are all dependent on contact or sense experience. Without the sense experience, none of these will arise.

## Viññāṇa or Consciousness

Now consciousness. The origination of consciousness is nāmarūpa and we saw in the previous section that viññāṇa is actually the origin of nāmarūpa. It's a condition for nāmarūpa to arise but here in this extract about the five aggregates, you see that nāmarūpa is the origin of viññāṇa. As someone pointed out earlier, it is like two blades of grass leaning on one another. They are interdependent. One depends on the other. So you can look at it either way, either this one is the origination of that one or the second one is the origination the first one.

## The nature of saṅkhāra as the fourth aggregate

Okay, now we go on to the second part of discussion topic D2. Here this is the riddle where we talked about how saṅkhāra constructs conditioned form as form.

### How saṅkhāra constructs form

So as I said earlier, there must be an intention to take nutriment. Then when the nutriment is taken additional new rūpa is created. That is why form constructs conditioned form as form. Based on conditioned form then you have an intention to take nutriment and that will create new form. That is how it works.

### How saṅkhāra constructs feeling

Also for feeling, there is an intention to have a certain type of feeling. Let us say you experienced something very pleasant in the past. Maybe it was nice food, some delicious food and then a pleasant memory of that food arises when you are hungry and then there is an intention of wanting to re-experience that nice feeling of eating that food.

So that is how that first intention of wanting to re-experience that past feeling will create a whole new string of intentions to gratify the desire and recreate that feeling. That is how saṅkhāra constructs conditioned vedanā as vedanā by creating a new type of vedanā based on the past.

## How saṅkhāra constructs perception

It is the same with perception. You perceive something of the past and you want to see the thing again. And it is actually linked to feeling because it is a perception or memory of something which you liked then you want to pursue it, you want to recreate the nice feeling. You want to experience that perception again to re-experience the nice feeling.

Also, in the example that was given of that moving object in the garden, if it is really a snake and you perceive it as a snake, that perception is based on the past. This perception creates another new perception that this snake is dangerous and it may bite, although it may not be dangerous but you think it is. So this is a new perception.

## How saṅkhāra constructs intention

Already we saw that if you remember a nice feeling that you had in the past when you experienced something and you want to re-experience that feeling, then there is a whole series of intentions creating one intention after another intention to finally gratify your desire.

Give you another example. It is just like this workshop. A couple of months ago it was broadcasted and when you saw the poster you decided to participate. Now, why? That is because of past experience: maybe you had participated in my workshop before and you found it entertaining, enjoyable and educational. So you decided that you wanted to participate.

There was an intention of wanting to re-experience whatever feeling you had then—a nice feeling or satisfaction—that will lead to a series of other intentions. That first intention of wanting to participate will lead to subsequent intentions to

- click the link to register
- click the link to download the material
- study the material
- get involved in pre-workshop discussions and so forth.

So all these are linked; one intention leading to another intention.

## How saṅkhāra constructs consciousness

*Consciousness must arise together with feeling and perception*

Now, talking about consciousness. First of all, I want to bring your attention to the fact that consciousness cannot arise by itself. This is found in Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN 43) where Āyasmā Māhakoṭṭhita asked Āyasmā Sāriputta about this. He asked him whether feeling, perception and consciousness are conjoined or are they not conjoined. Āyasmā Sāriputta answered that they are conjoined, they are not disjointed and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others.

*Consciousness need not arise together with saṅkhāra*

Alright, so consciousness has to arise together with feeling and perception but it is interesting that in this citation it doesn't say that saṅkhāra must also arise when

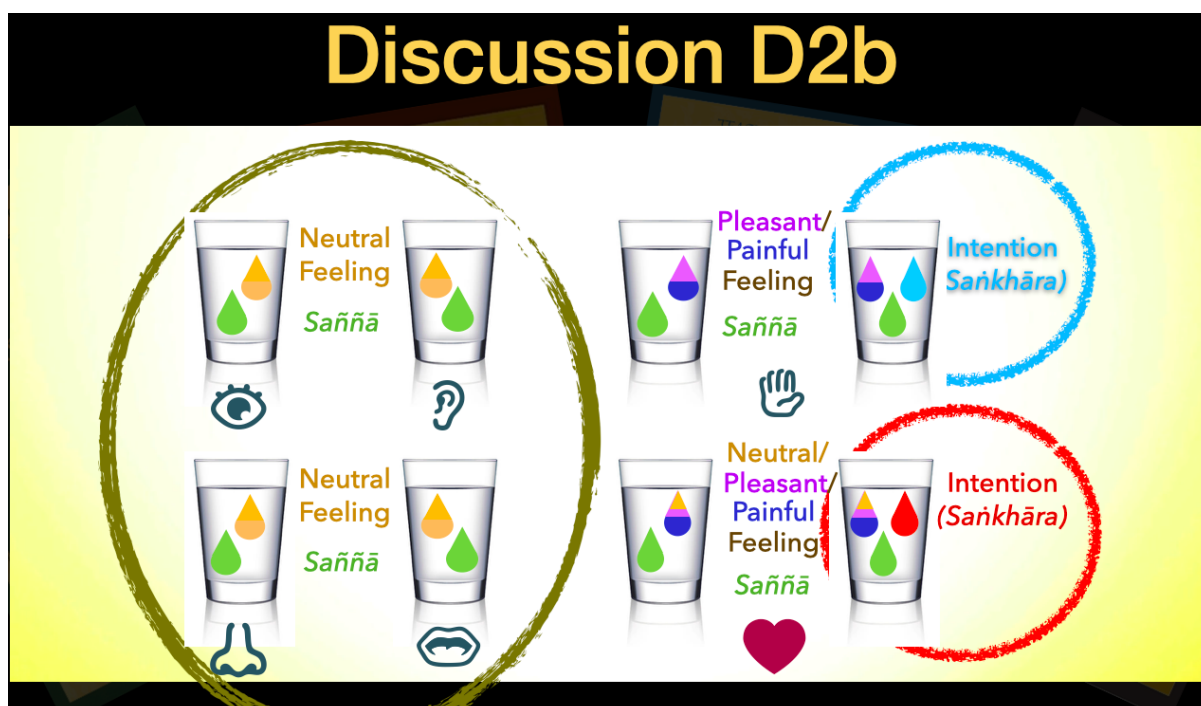
consciousness arises. It only says that feeling, perception and consciousness are conjoined. It doesn't say that saṅkhāra also must be there. So this implies that saṅkhāra is optional. Sometimes it may be there, sometimes it may not be there.

However, saṅkhāra can only arise when there is consciousness. If you want to re-experience a nice feeling that you had in the past, you need to have the intention to do so. That intention also involves consciousness because it arises concurrently, simultaneously with the intention. This is how saṅkhāra constructs consciousness.

## Breakdown of the four mental aggregates in the citta of the respective sense

### The mental aggregates of the 4 senses

Based on the Abhidhamma, the feelings that are related to the cittas of the four senses—the eyes, ears, nose and tongue—are always neutral. There's no good or bad feeling in the citta of any of these four senses. The saññā in the citta associated with the respective sense base is a very rudimentary sort of perception. As you can see, in the sutta it says that it sees colour only, it tastes taste only. It cannot really differentiate whether this is char koay teow or hokkien mee; cannot really differentiate whether this is a man or woman. That's not the job of the saññā in the citta that is associated with the four sense consciousnesses. So the feeling is neutral, the saññā is very rudimentary and there is no saṅkhāra.



Now let's look at this in a practical experiential way. If your sense organs are in good working condition and then their respective sense objects become very prominent, e.g. your nose is in good working condition when somebody comes into the room with a durian, you can't help but smell it. Or like just now when we were

having a presentation; while the presenter was sharing his group presentation we heard some dogs barking. You cannot just isolate the sound and say, “I don't want to hear the dog barking; I just want to hear this presenter.” You have no choice. It is not a matter of choice, so there is no volition involved in these four senses.

On the other hand, for the body sense, the feeling can be pleasant or painful. So either you are comfortable or not comfortable. There is no such thing as neutral. If it is neutral that means you are comfortable. Right? If it is not painful that means it is neutral and that means you are comfortable. So it's either you are comfortable or not comfortable, that's all. There is no in between.

## The mental aggregates of the body sense

But the body sense is more intelligent, far more intelligent than the other four senses.

### *Saññā associated with the body sense is more sophisticated*

The saññā or the recognition may not be so rudimentary because when you eat something and it goes into your mouth the body secretes amylase enzymes to break down the carbohydrates in the food. Then digestion starts to take place. This is only for carbohydrates, not protein. Protein is not digested in the mouth. Digestion starts there but the enzyme for the protein will only be secreted when it reaches the stomach where a very acidic base is required to digest the proteins.

The digestive system is so intelligent that it's able to recognise what sort of food it is: whether it is simple or complex carbohydrate or amino acid or glucose or whatever and once it recognises it then it is able to secrete the relevant enzyme at the right rate to digest that particular food, if the body is in good working order. If the body is not in good working order—some of the organs are malfunctioning, there's some imbalance somewhere—then that's a different matter; it may not be able to digest but what I'm saying is that in terms of the body, there is an intelligence and there is also saṅkhāra.

### *Intelligent saṅkhāra associated with the body sense*

If the body can recognise something and instruct the glands to produce biochemicals at a certain rate, then there must be intelligent saṅkhāra in the body that includes recognition which is saññā, and volition.

It is the same also with the immune system. When bacteria enter the body and they are something that had entered before, the immune system will be able to recognise them and then it will instruct the body to produce the same type of antibodies that were successful in the past in combating that bacteria. So there is saṅkhāra involved. But what if it is something new? For instance the Covid-19 virus goes into your system, upsets everything and makes it go haywire. That's a different story. This virus is cleverer than the human immune system.



### *Bodily movement caused by intelligent saṅkhāra associated with the body sense*

Another interesting phenomenon is also found in yogis. When some yogis meditate and their minds and bodies become calm and relaxed, then the body might start to move. Some of them might sway very gently, some might shake very vigorously in various ways. And for some, the body might be positioned such that it is normally impossible to balance but it could still balance by itself. This is not caused by the intention of the mind but by the intention of the body, the saṅkhāra that is associated with the body consciousness.

### *Qi philosophy*

We Chinese believe in qi therapy and according to qi philosophy the reason why we have all these bodily ailments is the qi is not moving smoothly. It is blocked in some places and the philosophy states that when the body and mind become relaxed then the qi will move naturally by itself to unblock the blockages.

### *Healing during meditation*

But if the mind and the body are tense, the conscious mind is too dominant, tries to be too clever, thinks of too many things, or is trying to control the body, the ability of the qi is undermined and it cannot move naturally in order to heal itself, to unblock the blockages. If your meditation teacher does not believe in qi therapy then he will ask you to stay absolutely still because there is one idea that when you are meditating you must stay absolutely still. Indeed there are also cases of people who stay absolutely still and deliberately focus on the pain until it completely disappears in a very dramatic way that could actually heal a long standing physiological problem.

### *Healing using focused mindfulness*

So there are actually two ways of approaching it, of healing when you are doing vipassanā meditation. One way is by focusing on the pain, provided your samādhi is strong. The reasoning behind this is that when the samādhi is strong then the body produces cittajarūpa or mind-made matter which is so pure that it can somehow get rid of those things that make you suffer. I think modern science has found out that when the mind is in samādhi then it produces a biochemical called endorphin which is equivalent to morphine and is able to suppress all this pain in the body. That is why samatha yogis can sit very long without any pain, but once they get out of that, of course, the pain will come.

### *Healing by allowing qi-induced bodily movement*

The other way of healing is if you are meditating under a teacher who understands and believes in qigong therapy, he will ask you to go ahead and move, allow the body to move by itself but then be mindful, be aware. In that case the body will move and sometimes very vigorously, but you will find that after that session you

feel very much better. There are cases of yogis who have been healed through this sort of meditative qigong therapy. So this is the intention of the body but the intention of the mind can actually override that of the body.

For example, in the first case in which the yogis are asked not to move and to keep on noting the pain until it disappears, that is the intention of the mind overriding that of the body. In the second case of applying qigong therapy during meditation, this is allowing the body's intention to move by itself.

*Saṅkhāra associated with the body sense will not generate results in future lives*

Now, although there is intention in the body, this intention does not constitute kamma in the sense of creating a potential energy for giving results in a future life. Well, kamma is created because there is volition but that kamma is only restricted to this lifetime as long as there is this same body there, this related group of five aggregates which will expire at the moment of death. So this does not constitute the saṅkhāra in the Law of Dependent Origination. Now, it can be the saṅkhāra in the five aggregates but not in the Dependent Origination because the saṅkhāra in the Dependent Origination is all about future rebirth.

*The mental aggregates in the citta associated with mind consciousness*

Then we come to the mind. The citta that is associated with mind consciousness contains three types of feelings; it can be painful, it can be pleasant, it can be neutral. The saññā of course is more complex and that's what is involved when making a mental construct of an object that is perceived through any of the five senses. The four senses actually only receive raw data, which are like the zeros and ones in the computer. They have no software to interpret that. The body sense is special, it has a special software to process this raw data within its own scope.

This is saññā in the mind that is able to recognise the object that one sees in the eyes as a snake. And also the memory of a snake being a dangerous animal is also arising in the mind, the citta associated with mind consciousness. It does not arise in the citta associated with seeing consciousness.

The saṅkhāra or intention that rises in the mind is the one that constitutes kamma. There are two types of kamma: the kamma for this very lifetime and the kamma that will give rise to future rebirth.

## **The difference between the saṅkhāra in the five aggregates and that in the Law of Dependent Origination**

So the saṅkhāra in the scheme of the five aggregates can refer to the volitional formations or the constructions of arahants and non-arahants. Whereas in the Law of Dependent Origination the saṅkhāra there is only in reference to non-arahants

because the Law of Dependent Origination starts with avijjā. The five aggregates are already here because of past avijjā but once it is here and you become an arahant, there is no more avijjā but still because there is cetanā, it will give results. So the results will be in this very life, it will not be carried forward to the next whereas for non-arahants they create kamma that will have results in this present life as well as in future lives. Any questions?

## Questions & Answers

Q: What is the difference between the intention in red colour vs blue colour?

*Bhante, in the last slide, there is the intention with the blue colour and the intention with the red colour. Can you please explain the difference again?*

The difference is that the intention in blue colour will only give results in this present life, not in a future life. Whereas the one in red (in the mind), for arahants it will give rise to results only in this present lifetime but for non-arahants, the results could be for this present lifetime as well as future lifetimes.

*So Bhante, does it mean that if the intention is from the mind, the kammic effect is actually stronger?*

Of course, it definitely is. Remember that in the Law of Dependent Origination we have this mental volitional formations and then verbal volitional formations and bodily volitional formations? I said that all of these actually stem from the mind, and are expressed bodily or verbally, otherwise they remain expressed within the mind itself.

Q: Can we know the intention in kāyasaṅkhāra?

*Bhante, in terms of kāyasaṅkhāra versus cittasaṅkhāra or manosaṅkhāra, does it mean that kāyasaṅkhāra can never be known in terms of intentions when our body digests the food? So we will never know what is the intention that causes the body to move vigorously when we meditate. We can only experience the effect but that intention can't be known, unlike the intention of the mind when we want to do something,*

Where do you get these terms kāyasaṅkhāra, manosaṅkhāra and cittasaṅkhāra? In which context are you using them?

*It could be my personal interpretation.*

You have to see in which context these terms are used. Well, you cannot give a blanket meaning to kāyasaṅkhāra, vacīsaṅkhāra and manosaṅkhāra and use it as you wish. You see in the context of the Dependent Origination, as I said earlier, all these stem from the mind. It is called kāyasaṅkhāra because it is expressed physically, bodily, and it is called vacīsaṅkhāra because it is expressed verbally. But it all stemmed from the mind. If it only

happens in the mind and is not expressed physically or verbally then it is manosaṅkhāra. Get it? But in the case of the five aggregates, it is different. In the case of the five aggregates, is there anything mentioned of kāyasaṅkhāra? No, right? In the extract of the suttas that was given, it mentioned volition connected with form, volition connected with sound and so forth, isn't it? Right? There is nothing mentioned about kāya-, vacī- and manosaṅkhāra in the five aggregates. So you have to be careful how it is used.

*So that is more like the intention that causes bodily action or verbal action rather than from the perspective of dependent origination.*

Correct. Now, when I talk about the body swaying and all that, actually you can see the intention. It is because you can see the intention, although you do not know the cause of the intention, you can see the intention arising and then if you want to override it, the mind can override. If I say, "Don't move," then it won't move. I mean to say, you go against that intention, override it with another intention of the mind which says "Don't move," then it won't move because the mind can override the intention of the body.

**Q: What does it mean by "see things as they are" in vipassanā meditation?**

*Bhante, in your summary you mentioned seeing a stick and it appears as a snake in the mind. That is where all the kammic intentions will arise: how you react to the snake instead of the stick. Now, we were told in vipassanā meditation to see things as they are, and not what you want them to be. And the other thing is we have always been told to be in the present moment. When we meditate, we have to be in the present moment. Our mind must be in the present moment, but when we see things and recognise them, the perception is based on our memory of the past. So we use our memory to project what we want to see in the mind; we don't see it as a stick but as a snake because of our past experience. Then we have this intention of wanting to do something about it. This seems to stretch from the past and drags on us to the future instead of staying in the present. So how can we ever be in the present when we are always thinking of the past and then going into the future? We are never in that position right in the middle where there's no suffering because when we are in the past and then in the future, we regret the past, we fear the future, that's where all the suffering comes about. I would like Bhante to give some comments on this. Sādhu!*

I could give a whole Dhamma talk on what you asked [Laughter]. So many things inside there that need clarification. But anyway there is one thing that I just want to bring your attention to. Actually when you said if you see a stick as a snake then you are in the past but if you see a stick as a stick then you are in the present. You said something like that, right?

Yes, yes.

That is not right, that is also in the past. How do you know it is a stick? It is based on a past experience, right?

*Not our present experience. Last time we saw something like that, it was a stick. But when we see the stick now we think that it is a snake though that snake was what we saw last time.*

So, it's still the same. The stick that you recognise now is also based on your perception of something that looks like that which was also a stick. This is the same; it is based on past perception. That is why it is called recognition: re-cognising something that you had already known before in the past. Saññā is a resultant; there is no volition involved in saññā. When you see something and then automatically label it, recognise it, then that is the product of past conditioning, but how you react to it—that is what will make your new kamma. Right?

*Yeah, yeah.*

Anyway the other things that you talked about—being in the present and all that—I will have to give a whole Dhamma talk to answer those questions. I cannot do it in this short ten minutes.

**Q: Do arahants still produce kamma since they have cetanā?**

*Because arahants still have cetanā, it will still produce kamma but pertaining only to this life, right?*

Right, correct.

*I just want to clarify this because more often we say arahants will not create further kamma; so that particular kamma is related to rebirth?*

Yes, it will not create any kamma that will give rise to rebirth in a future life. It is very obvious, isn't it? An arahant also needs to go to the toilet, right? Isn't that kamma? When he gets there and relieves himself he feels relief. An arahant needs to eat when he is hungry, right? So, the kammic result is that it will keep on sustaining his body.

**Q: Does kamma that is supposed to ripen this life cease once I die?**

*You mentioned that some kamma will ripen this lifetime and some can be brought forward to other future lives. My question is: If I pass away and there is still quite a lot of kamma that is supposed to ripen in this life, will it cease when I die and not be brought forward to my future lives?*

No, this one is also something not easy to explain but according to the Abhidhamma, when you create kamma, when the intention of doing something arises, it repeats for 17 so-called thought moments (citta moments of discrete mental events) and out of these 17, there are 7 towards the end that are kammic in nature. The rest are not kammic, some of them are resultants, some of them are just neutral. Out of these 7, the first one will give rise to effects in this present life only, otherwise it will become defunct. The last one, #7, can give rise to results in the next life

only, otherwise it will also become defunct. The rest in between (the remaining 5) can give rise to results anytime between the next life until you attain parinibbāna. For example, if you study very hard for exams, the results of that kamma will not be brought forward to the next life, right? What is supposed to ripen in this life, if it doesn't ripen in this life is called defunct kamma. It won't give results anymore. But the other five in between, they can still give results depending on conditions.

**Q: Is it okay to decide for the dying person whether or not to continue nutriment?**

That will depend on the advice given by the doctor. Because the doctor might tell you: “We have already monitored this patient. Although he’s on a life support machine, all the organs are not functioning. He is only kept alive by all these apparatus.” The doctor might advise you that there’s no point hooking that person to the life support machine and ask you to take the patient home. Based on the advice of the doctor you can do that because this is a natural process. But it is different in the case of euthanasia, when the person is still alive but is suffering and his organs are still functioning. Because the person is suffering a lot, you purposely disconnect the life support machine or you purposely administer something to shorten the person's life—then that is different. If it is a natural process, it is okay but with the prior consent of the patient. If not then you can also make the decision based on the doctor's advice.

**Q: Is rebirth intentional?**

Yes, of course rebirth is intentional. It is because of this desire to continue living. Craving is the cause for rebirth. The cause for craving is ignorance, not knowing that having any form of rebirth, as long as there are the five aggregates, will always be suffering. So because you don't know this then you have this desire of wanting to exist. That's why this will create rebirth.

**Q: Is this desire for rebirth very subtle?**

*Say now we are practising already, and we don't want to come back. Yeah, but we don't really know whether our desire is still there or not.*

Of course, it is there. If not, you are already an arahant.

**Q: Is saṅkhāra the one that will create a new life?**

Of course, in the Law of Dependent Origination the second link is saṅkhāra; the first one is avijjā: avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā (because of ignorance there is saṅkhāra) and because of saṅkhāra then there is viññāṇa and this is supposed to be the paṭisandhiviññāṇa or the rebirth linking consciousness.

Q: What should we do with the saṅkhāras that appear during our meditation?

Which saṅkhāra?

*All the phenomena will come one by one by one. What are we to do with them?*

*Do we just let them pass like peeling onions?*

Well, you are supposed to develop wisdom which is a sort of kamma; if you walk the Noble Eightfold Path, that is the kamma that will lead you out of kamma. That is the kamma that will end kamma. If you are not walking the Noble Eightfold Path, whatever wholesome deeds that you do, if it is not part of the Noble Eightfold Path, they will not lead to liberation but will keep you going on in samsara. Wholesome deeds will give you wholesome results. You can get rebirth as a human being or be reborn in the heavens and there you can enjoy pleasures of the senses. So your job as a yogi is to just observe things as they arise and pass away in terms of anicca, dukkha, anatta; impermanence, suffering, not self and conditionality and then get totally disenchanted with all of them. It is because of our innate ignorance and not recognising that nothing is worth running after, nothing is worth craving for, nothing is worth clinging to, that we are doing it. We are craving for new pleasure, we are clinging on to things that we already have. So the purpose of vipassanā meditation is to look at everything in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta so that we can become totally disenchanted. Then that will lead to dispassion and liberation.

Q: How both open and focused awareness practices can lead to composure or serenity

*When we are doing this defocused meditation, would it not be better if the meditator is doing a repeated movement for example the ancient art of woodturning or juggling? Then the movement would not require thinking, thus leaving the mind to keep track of the five senses: Anchor mind, Touch and Go? The second question, would this be the opposite of kasiṇa meditation?*

I explained in this morning's guided meditation that open awareness practice is opposite to focused awareness practice. When you try to focus on something in particular, for example your breath, then you do so to the exclusion of every other thing and you try to hold on to that breath as your main object of focus. In open awareness, it is the opposite because we try not to hold on to anything: Free and Easy, Touch and Go. As soon as you are aware of something, then ask your mind "What else?" and let it go on to something else. So actually both of these can bring about serenity or composure because the mind is object-dependent. If you don't anchor the mind to a fixed object or to changing objects of the five senses then it will naturally get lost in thoughts about the past or the future or imagination. So you keep the mind busy with fixed objects like your breath or the objects of

the five senses. The five senses cannot think, they are just aware of what is happening at the five senses. So that is why, as a first step we try to disengage the mind from compulsive or obsessive thinking. That is only the first step, you know. After that we have to go further to investigate how the sixth sense reacts or responds to what is happening at all the six senses.

*Movement is good then at that point like juggling.*

Yes. I also conduct mindful hiking retreats. People go hiking in the forest and stream-hiking along the stream. That is a very good way of composing the mind, but that is only one aspect of it.

*Something like woodturning and juggling?*

Yes, you can also do painting, or whatever that keeps you occupied with your senses and not get caught up in thoughts.

*Opposite of kasiṇa?*

Yeah, kasiṇa is focused awareness, here is open awareness.

*Thank you.*

**Q: What are the five aggregates in the formless plane?**

In the formless plane there are no five aggregates, there are only four. There is no rūpa because it is formless, so no form.

**Q: Is cetanā always active?**

*My understanding of dependent origination actually changed a lot. I find that the nāmarūpa in this case doesn't even include saṅkhāra; it's actually cetanā, right?*

Yeah.

*If it included saṅkhāra, I would think it was passive and active but when it comes to cetanā, it is always active, right?*

Saṅkhāra in the context of the Law of Dependent Origination and in the context of the five aggregates are always active.

*Always active?*

Yes, they are volitional.

*That is why I find that is good because consciousness has to arise because of some active things. Cetanā has to be there as part of nāmarūpa to cause consciousness to arise and also contact and also you need to have attention. Like you said if there is no attention your consciousness won't arise. If you don't pay attention then how can the link continue?*

No, you see, they all arise simultaneously.

*But if you lack one of them, it won't arise right? If you don't have attention, you can't get the consciousness.*

No, because you see, phassa is sense experience. Sense experience cannot occur by the sense consciousness itself. There must also be a working sense base and also an obvious sense object. When the sense object, the sense base and the sense consciousness come together then only there is sense experience. But then consciousness does not arise independently. It arises



together with the other mental factors like phassa, vedanā and saññā, for example. Feeling and perception must always accompany consciousness. Saṅkhāra is different; it may or may not, depending on which sense it is related to. I pointed out just now that when eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness and tongue consciousness arise, they don't arise with saṅkhāra. There is no cetanā. You don't have to pay attention when there is a loud sound; automatically you have to hear it, correct or not? You don't have to pay attention, you just cannot help but hear it.

*What about the Abhidhamma distinguishing between a minor object and a great object? For instance, sometimes when people are talking, you don't comprehend what they are saying.*

Yeah but you still hear.

*We are not listening. Sometimes we are talking to someone but he is not listening to us.*

Yeah I know, but the ear is still aware of the sound, it is just that the mind is not aware of it. The mind is not paying attention to what the ear is hearing but what the ear is hearing does not involve volition at all; it is uncontrollable.

*Ear consciousness?*

Yeah, that is why I said that the four sense consciousnesses of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting arise without intention. For example, there is a loud sound. Even if you are not paying attention, you also have to hear it; you can't say you don't want to pay attention, correct?

Okay.

So that is what I am saying. The intention or saṅkhāra need not necessarily accompany the consciousness related to the four senses, okay? Get it?

*In the context of how name-and-form causes the arising of consciousness in dependent origination on page 6, it says that with the arising of name-and-form, there is the arising of consciousness. So here there must be the arising of cetanā also because nāma includes cetanā and manasikāra. So by deduction if there is no cetanā then there may be no consciousness in the context of dependent origination, but maybe there are other ways of giving rise to consciousness.*

Yeah, that is true. This is an issue that is difficult to resolve.

Okay.

The way we understand, cetanā is supposed to be active, right?

Yes.

But then as I said in terms of experience, the four senses don't seem to be related to active intention.

*Vipāka arises by itself.*

Yeah.

Okay, thank you Bhante.

Q: When the mind is in equanimity, how does it affect the meditator?

*Bhante, when the mind is starting to become of subtler formation, how will this affect the meditator?*

What do you mean by the mind becoming subtler?

*Subtler when we are in equanimity?*

When you are in equanimity then the saṅkhāra should be very subtle. That means there will not be a reaction to anything that is desirable or undesirable: whatever happens is okay and you are able to observe whatever happens in terms of anicca, dukkha, anatta if you are doing vipassanā. No proliferations. If there are proliferations, then it is not equanimity.

*It doesn't have proliferations. Do you have any choice, I am asking?*

Do you have any choice? Yeah, you have a choice, you have a choice of how you want to respond to what has been observed, right?

*The choice is there.*

Yeah, the choice is there.

*Okay, thank you very much.*

Q: What is the role of saṅkhāra in Dhamma therapy?

*Bhante, earlier you talked about the mind overriding the body saṅkhāra. I was just wondering about those miraculous cases of healing in the booklet Dhamma Therapy that you compiled. Is that the citta or is it also the manosaṅkhāra and how does it work? Is it through the purification process? How does the mind overcome the pain of illness?*

Mahāsī Sayādaw wrote a short thesis on how he understood Dhamma therapy. It says that when the mind becomes composed then it is free from the hindrances and unwholesome states. So, when the mind is in a wholesome state then we have what we call cittajarūpa, matter born out of the mind. There is mind-born matter all the time. Modern scientists have verified that whatever mental state you are in will produce or stimulate the glands in your body to produce certain biochemicals. If you have unwholesome mental states like anger or stress or depression then they will produce certain biochemicals in the body that make you feel miserable, and that can be the cause of illness as well. Conversely, when the mind is in a very wholesome state then it also produces wholesome biochemicals. In other words, the wholesome states of mind stimulate the body to produce beneficial biochemicals that will heal the body. That is how he explained it. In Burma, they don't believe in qigong, so I don't know whether they would instruct the yogi to sit absolutely still or to allow the body to sway but from what I read in Mahāsī Sayādaw's instructions, he never asked people to stop swaying. He said, "When the body is swaying, know that it is swaying, be

aware that it is swaying.” That was what he said. So if it is allowing the body to sway, then according to qigong therapy, this is allowing the qi in the body to unblock itself and self-heal. Hope that answers your question. That is it.

*So the manosaṅkhāra is overriding the body saṅkhāra?*

Okay, let's put it this way. He was not using the terms in the same way as I do. He said that when the mind is in a wholesome state then it will produce biochemicals which are beneficial to the body and which contribute to healing. What I was saying just now is that the mind saṅkhāra can override the body saṅkhāra when it wants to move: if the mind says, “Don't move,” then it won't move. So if you prevent it from moving then the qi will not be able to unblock itself and the ailment may not be healed. That is a different explanation from what Mahāsī Sayādaw said. That is as best as I can help you.

**Q: Does body saṅkhāra create any kamma?**

*Referring to your explanation just now, I just want to clarify my understanding. You said that when it is the mind saṅkhāra, it creates kamma, and when it is body saṅkhāra, it is making our body function, right? So this doesn't create any kamma. Is my understanding correct, Bhante?*

It doesn't create kamma in the sense of bringing it forward to the next life.

**Q: Is the body saṅkhāra controllable?**

*Okay, so when this body functions, it is automatic and is not controllable, right?*

As I said just now you can. The mind can override the body saṅkhāra, the mental volition can override the body volition. Like I said during meditation sometimes the body starts to sway because the qi in the body wants to heal itself. But then if you try to be too clever and then you override it with your mental volition and say, “Don't move,” then it is interfering with the body's natural ability to heal itself.

*So let's say I'm sick and my mind says, “I want to get well.” I just want to use the example of fighting the virus. I want to get well but my body may not be able to get well. So how does that work in this context?*

Yeah, it is sometimes like that. The body has certain limitations in its ability to heal itself. Sometimes the virus or the bacteria may be overwhelming and the body cannot deal with it. Sometimes it can, so it depends.

*So in this sense then the body saṅkhāra is basically uncontrollable, right?*

Yeah it's not controllable. It's working on its own but you can help it. You can assist it by allowing it to move in the case like I said just now and in other cases, for example, you have to take medication to help it heal itself.

*So basically what Bhante said is we willingly try to control the uncontrollable.*

Yeah, yeah.

**Q: Is the feeling associated with the four senses neutral?**

*You said that the feeling associated with the four senses (eye, ear, nose and tongue) is neutral; there's no positive or negative feeling. But let's say you hear a loud sound or encounter something more dramatic. Consciously we will have a negative feeling when we perceive that as danger or bad and then we want to run away or something like that. So how can that feeling be neutral? I thought that feeling should be negative.*

No, that feeling is found in the mind, the mind reacting to what the four senses perceive.

*Okay. So then when the four senses come into contact with their objects the accompanying feeling is actually neutral.*

Right.

*Then the mind is the one creating the positive and negative feelings.*

Yes.

*Okay, thank you.*

That is very obvious. At one time we were having a retreat in Mitraville Meditation Centre, Kundasang. It was very high up, about 2,000 meters above sea level, so it had a very scenic view from the top of the mountain early in the morning. I got all the yogis to sit at the balcony facing the very scenic view. You could see valleys in a sea of clouds and then the sun was just rising. I asked them to just practice open awareness. Maintain a defocused gaze and look at what is happening to your mind. When you maintain a defocused gaze, and you practise Free and Easy, Touch and Go without allowing your mind to proliferate, there is no sense of beauty because the sense of beauty comes from the mind. So beauty does not lie in the eyes of the beholder but in the mind of the beholder.

**Q: When can we interchange saṅkhāra and cetanā?**

*When can we interchange saṅkhāra and cetanā? In dependent origination and five aggregates, we can interchange both saṅkhāra and cetanā, is it?*

Yeah, because in the five aggregates, it is specifically mentioned that saṅkhāra is rūpañcetanā, etc. isn't it? It is cetanā related to form, related to sound and so forth.

*From the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, there is saṃkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā, right?*

Right.

*The five aggregates subject to clinging are dukkhā. And one of the things that people cling to is saṅkhāra, so I was thinking thoughts is saṅkhāra because people cling to their thoughts as I and mine.*

Not necessarily. In the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the Buddha asked the monks whether any of the five aggregates, not just saṅkhāra, is anatta. All of them are anatta, not just saṅkhāra.

*Correct, but I would think that people cling to their thoughts as I and mine.*

They can cling to anything. You can cling to feelings, you can cling to forms. Some people look into the mirror every day and think, "I look so beautiful. I look so handsome." They are clinging to form.

*Okay, correct. Thoughts would be categorised under saṅkhāra, correct? Or under the five aggregates?*

Thoughts are based on what you perceive in the senses. In fact, as long as we are dependent on the five senses for our perception of what's happening in the world, all our thoughts are based on that.

*Yes, but the thoughts can also arise on their own.*

Yeah, but thoughts arise in terms of concepts, of words and all those concepts and words are based on objects of the senses.

*Okay, because I was thinking cetanā is a subset of thoughts, is it not?*

Yes, it is. Thoughts include saññā (perception), saṅkhāra, vedanā and consciousness. You can't have any thoughts without consciousness, so thought is a very imprecise term that involves all the four mental aggregates.

## Q: Why is volition needed?

*My next question is: Why is volition needed? It is because of volition that form arises, that perception arises, that consciousness arises. One of the examples just now was: it is because of the intention of eating nutriment that is why form arises, correct?*

That is why this form continues to be there.

*Even without volition, taking nutriment itself will result in the form going on.*

How can you take nutriment without volition?

*Let's say a baby needs to be given food.*

Correct, the baby will also start to cry if he is hungry, right?

*But then that would mean that hunger is the cause of rūpa, not intention is the cause of rūpa.*

No, if he was just hungry, the intention is to make noise so that somebody can be alerted. As though saying, "I want to eat something so that I won't be hungry."

*But the baseline is hunger, not intention.*

No, it is the intention of wanting to eat to satiate hunger. If there is no intention to eat you can feel hungry and die then your body won't function. Even if you are hungry and you have the intention to eat but there is nothing to eat, you'll die, right?

Yes.

Q: Why is rūpa defined as such: it is deformed; that's why it's called form?

*In the Khajjanīyasutta, it is said: "Why bhikkhus do you call it form? It is deformed, that is why we call it form. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, deformed by heat, deformed by hunger, deformed by thirst, deformed by contact with flies, etc. It is deformed, therefore it is called form." I don't really understand this.*

Oh, this shows that the Buddha is referring to the physical body. Note that he is using conceptual terms to define something which most people say is ultimate. Deformed in the sense of destroyed or damaged or less than what it originally was. Actually it's a play on the Pāli verb *ruppati* which means "deformed". It says: *ruppati ruppātiti rūpaṃ*. *Rūpa* is the noun of *ruppati*. So Bhikkhu Bodhi is trying to maintain that play of words by using the word "form" as a definition of rūpa. That's why he translates it as "deformed, deformed; that is why it is called form."

Okay, thank you Bhante.

Q: How to relate saṅkhāra in the context of dependant origination vs five aggregates?

*What is the meaning of saṅkhāra? In Discussion D1 you introduced saṅkhāra through the sutta on dependent origination where it is says that there are three types of saṅkhāra: the bodily, the verbal and the mental volitional formation. And now in Discussion D2, you are talking about it in the context of the five aggregates. Then how do you relate this to D1 because D2 talks about the six types of volitional formation as saṅkhāra? Surely there must be some harmonious relationship between the first saṅkhāra that Buddha mentioned in dependent origination and the second one in five aggregates.*

Okay, I already touched upon it earlier. I said that saṅkhāra in the context of the dependent origination means all volitions that will give results in a future rebirth. So the Law of Dependent Origination is not applicable to an arahant because it starts off with ignorance. An arahant doesn't have ignorance so the whole view stops occurring. But the five aggregates are different. The five aggregates are applicable to everybody whether you are an arahant or not, and if you are an arahant, the saṅkhāra involved in the five aggregates will only help to maintain and sustain this body for this life and it will not go beyond that to produce another five aggregates in the future. That is for arahants. For non-arahants, the saṅkhāra will sustain the body in this lifetime as well as create the kammic force for the generation of future aggregates in the future existence. Can you get it?

Okay, now when you bring in arahant and non-arahant then only you can explain these two contexts, is that it?

Yeah.

*So without bringing in the arahant, they have to be read separately; they have to be understood separately.*

It looks like it. Or else, it does not make sense.

*It doesn't make sense to this mind. So I just want to make sure that I understand correctly so that I don't try and attempt to ...*

Yeah, yeah. As I said, you must always look at things or understand things in context.

*And then in D1 and D2, nāmarūpa seems to be common to both the dependent origination and the five aggregates. So I would like to know the nāmarūpa relationship with saṅkhāra, combining these two suttas together.*

I think one of the presenters has already pointed out that in one sutta (Naḷakalāpī Sutta, SN 12.67), Āyasmā Sāriputta said that they are like two sheaves of reeds leaning against one another. They are interdependent; that is why in the paṭicca-samuppāda or Law of Dependent Origination formula, you have consciousness as the condition for nāmarūpa, whereas in the explanation for the five aggregates, it is nāmarūpa that is a condition for consciousness. And so to reconcile these two, the other sutta was quoted where it is said that these two are interdependent.

*Yes, that I understand. My understanding is there is a turning back when you come to nāmarūpa and then it turns back to consciousness. So I do understand it in that sense but I would like to understand nāmarūpa with saṅkhāra. What is the relationship?*

Nāma also includes cetanā, right? Cetanā is saṅkhāra.

*Okay, so only from that fact. Because saṅkhāra seems to be such a big word, bigger than cetanā. Cetanā seems to be like can understand but saṅkhāra seems to be like, wow so huge.*

In the Law of Dependent Origination, after consciousness, we have nāmarūpa followed by the six sense bases followed by phassa (contact or sense experience). So it seems that cetanā at that point is not so significant and it becomes significant only after sense experience when there is feeling (whether pleasant feeling or unpleasant) followed by craving. And that's where the saṅkhāra will start again.

*Okay, and as to your last question for group discussion, "How do you understand the nature of saṅkhāra?" there is a view that simplistically put, saṅkhāra seems to be like a construction worker. Whatever mental factors that come into its space it would want to construct. It constructs conditioned mental factors including itself, and some other conditioned things too, is that it?*

Yeah, correct.

*Okay, thank you.*

**Q: What is the difference between cetaṇā and saṅkhāra in nāmarūpa?**

I just explained it. I just said that cetaṇā is also found in the nāmarūpa as a link after consciousness in the Law of Dependent Origination, but it doesn't seem to be significant because prior to that there is saṅkhāra that causes viññāṇa, right? That is the so-called rebirth consciousness which then settles into the womb, into the foetus, where nāmarūpa is generated. That is because once it takes root in the foetus, then based on what is already produced by the mother and father it will contribute to more nāmarūpa. What enters the womb is only the mind consciousness, not the other five sense consciousnesses. So probably after it enters into the womb, then with the help of what is already produced by the mother and father, the other sense consciousnesses arise. Okay?

*Thank you.*

**Q: Is cetaṇā bigger than saṅkhāra or vice versa?**

*My question is related to the same confusion about the cetaṇā and saṅkhāra. Are they overlapping or is saṅkhāra bigger than cetaṇā or cetaṇā is bigger than saṅkhāra?*

I think they are overlapping. In sutta on the five aggregates, saṅkhārā is defined as volition related to form (rūpasañcetaṇā), related to sound (saddasañcetaṇā), related to smell, related to taste, related to touch, related to mind objects. So it seems that cetaṇā is also part of saṅkhārā but the interesting thing is that while the rest of the five aggregates (meaning the other four aggregates) are all in the singular, saṅkhārā is in the plural. Some scholars say that is why the commentary took this opportunity to dump everything else that is not covered by vedanā, saññā and viññāṇa (feelings, perception and consciousness) under saṅkhārā because it is in the plural whereas the other three are all in the singular. If such is this case, then you could say that cetaṇā is a subset of saṅkhārā. Okay, so there is an overlap.

*Alright.*

**Q: Please clarify your usage of “volition”.**

*When you gave the example of the virus attacking the body, you mentioned “volition oblivious to the mind”. I think you are referring to the body function itself. To me volition is something that I know. When I search the dictionary, volition means “to review the decision”. So can you please clarify that one? Thank you.*

Like I said, the body has its own volitions. For example, when bacteria enter the body, the body consciousness accompanied by saññā will be able to recognise that bacteria and it will know, “Oh these guys came in before and in the past the body had used a certain type of antibody to combat them.” Having recognised that and remembering what they did in the past then the



body consciousness accompanied by volition will instruct the related glands to produce the right type of antibody at a certain dosage to combat this bacteria and it will also instruct the other body systems, the other organs in the body to behave in a certain way to help in the overall battle against this intruder. Okay?

*Just want to clarify. So it is correct that volition can be oblivious to the mind.*

Volition that is accompanying the body consciousness.

*Okay, but how about volition accompanying verbal activity? Then no, right?*

Yeah.

**Q: Is thought the initial and sustained application as explained in the mental factors?**

*Just now Bhante mentioned that thought is a complex thing. I heard other people suggest that thought actually is the initial and sustained application, as explained in the mental factors. Can Bhante please comment on that?*

Yeah, you can also look at it that way but the way we understand thought is a bit different. When you say you are thinking, it is not just the activity of initial application or sustained application of your mind, but you are involved in concepts and perceptions. Correct or not? So it is not just the activity of initial application but it involves also a host of other mental factors.

*So is that why Bhante mentioned the word thought actually is a complex thing just now?*

Yeah.

**Q: Is the Law of Dependent Origination to be interpreted as sequentially or concurrently linked?**

*One last question about paṭiccasamuppāda. In our group presentation earlier, we mentioned two interpretations of paṭiccasamuppāda: one related to rebirth and the other to momentary occurrence where all the twelve links of dependent origination happen together concurrently. Is this kind of explanation right or wrong, Bhante?*

I don't know because this is not a sutta study workshop on the Law of Dependent Origination. I know that in the canonical Abhidhamma, there are many pages devoted to explaining the paṭiccasamuppāda in terms of a single moment rather than in terms of three lives. I have not read it though but I have read somewhere, some scholar who said that.

*But what is your position, Bhante? Do you use paṭiccasamuppāda for rebirth?*

Right now for this workshop, I have been using it in that way but I have not really studied it very comprehensively because it is too complicated.

*Okay, thank you.*

I believe that it is not necessary to understand all the twelve links in order for one to make progress in the path. If you look in the Sutta Nipāta, there is one particular sutta that's called Dvayatānupassanā Sutta, The

Contemplation of Dualities or Dyads, where you just have to contemplate the dependent origination in a pair and then that itself could lead to liberation—a single pair out of sixteen pairs, any one of the sixteen pairs can also lead to liberation. The first one is the Four Noble Truths. Okay, look that up: Dvayatānupassanā Sutta (KN 5.38 / Sn 3.12).

**Q: Is “the one who knows” related to consciousness thus generating rebirth?**

*Often when we talk about mind, people associate it with the one who knows. Is it any indifferent compared to the consciousness that brings about rebirth?*

I mentioned earlier a modern simile of a glass of water. Consciousness is like the pure distilled water. What colours that glass of water are the other solutes that are put in. Water is a solvent. So consciousness is like a solvent; it is colourless but the other things that are put into the glass of water representing perception, feelings and the saṅkhāras—these will determine what is happening in the mind. So the sense of I is not created by consciousness. Consciousness is only the solvent; it is created by wrong view, saññā, perception and saṅkhāra, volition.

**Q: Do animals also have volition and therefore create kamma?**

*In that case what is the difference between the five aggregates of a human being compared to those of animals like a dog or a cow: do they also have volitional formations?*

Yeah of course, they have volitional formations, e.g. in the sense of making sounds, like dogs bark and tigers growl, don't they? So that is a verbal volitional formation and then if they attack some prey, that is a bodily volitional formation, correct?

*And that generates kamma as well?*

Of course, that is why the Buddha said that once you become an animal, the possibility of coming back as a human is very, very slim.