

# Saṅkhāra in Theory & Practice Sutta Study with Meditation Workshop

Online with Āyasmā Aggacitta

## Review of Day 1 Conclusions

This is an edited transcript of a video production of “Saṅkhāra in Theory and Practice Sutta Study with Meditation Workshop” with clips from Seremban Sudhamma Buddhist Society (25-27 December 2020), Subang Jaya Buddhist Association (20-21 March 2021) and Bandar Utama Buddhist Society (27-28 March 2021) respectively.

### Review of Discussion Topic D1a

What do you understand by “contact” as a translation of phassa?

Yesterday’s first discussion was on phassa. What is phassa? If you translate phassa as contact, then it could give rise to a misunderstanding that it’s a linear process.

Actually, phassa is a confluence of these three elements—sense as in sense base, sense object, and sense consciousness. Even though the sense consciousness has the faculty or the ability to be able to be conscious of its respective sense object, it cannot do so unless the other two elements are present. In practical terms, phassa means sense experience. It is sense contact in the sense that there is an experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing or cognizing with the mind.

### Review of Discussion Topic D1b

How is the sutta definition of nāmarūpa different from what is popularly translated as “mind and matter”? How does this difference affect your understanding of the term nāmarūpa?

We also discussed about the difference in the understanding of nāmarūpa that is being defined in the context of the Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta (SN 12.1)—the Law of Dependent Origination. It seems that during yesterday’s presentation, different people have different understanding of mind and matter. In the commentary, nāmarūpa refers to all the four mental aggregates as: feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), volitional formations (saṅkhārā) and consciousness (viññāṇa). Rūpa has the same interpretation whether it is in the commentary or sutta.

However, in the context of Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta, nāma refers to the five elements, three of which correspond with that in the commentary but not the last two. In place of consciousness, they have phassa (sense experience or sense contact) and attention. The reason for this is, in the Law of Dependent Origination, viññāṇa or consciousness is already there and therefore not necessary to put it here again. Yesterday, I pointed out that the links in the Law of Dependent Origination need not necessarily have to be linear. They are related but not necessarily in a linear way. They could arise simultaneously or synchronously. For example, consciousness can only arise together with feeling and perception, and sometimes with mental volition. When we say viññānapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ or viññāna is a condition for nāmarūpa, it doesn't mean that viññāna arises first and then followed by nāmarūpa. They arise simultaneously as in a simile given by Āyasmā Sāriputta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It says that it's like two sheaves of grass leaning on one another, so they are interdependent and simultaneous. Phassa, although it is under namā, it is actually a confluence of three elements—sense base, object and consciousness. If we are referring to the five senses, there are two material elements there. However, phassa itself is a mental experience, the experience of seeing something mentally, although it needs the presence of the other two material elements in the case of the five senses. In the case of the sixth sense, it could be material or it could be immaterial. It could be the objects of the five senses or it could be concepts.

## **Review of Discussion Topic D1c**

How do you understand “volitional formations” as a translation of Saṅkhāra in the context of the Law of Dependent Origination?

In Discussion Topic D1c, we talked about how we understood saṅkhāra in the context of the Law of Dependent Origination. In the Law of Dependent Origination, saṅkhāra is defined as mental, verbal and bodily volitional formations. These three volitional formations actually stem from the mind. If it is expressed physically, we will call it bodily volitional formation. If it is expressed verbally, it is called verbal volitional formation. If it is not thus expressed and it is only in the mind, then it is called mental volitional formation. This constitutes the kamma that can lead to rebirth. However, this does not include the bodily volitional formation that arises independently of the mind. Yesterday I gave you an example of the digestive process that is going on in the mind, the immune system and also about the spontaneous and natural movements that can occur during meditation when both the mind and body are relaxed.

There is a particular sort of qigong that is called Natural QiGong. It doesn't have any fixed patterns. The movement of the qigong practitioner depends on each person's physiological condition. If there is some sort of blockage in the body, then that particular person will move in his own way according to the intelligence of the qi and

not through the mind. The mind's job is only to allow that bodily volition to continue. The volition of the mind can actually override it. An example, which I've also talked about in one of my earlier books called Dhamma Therapy, is when you are not supposed to move but supposed to sit absolutely still. If there are any painful sensations, you focus on those sensations until they disappear. That could also result in healing. Whereas in the qigong therapy, you allow the body to move of its own accord, according to the intelligence of the qi and that could also lead to healing. This sort of healing is not done through the mind door, it is done through the body door. This sort of volition is not under the saṅkhāra of the Law of Dependent Origination because the latter is concerned about the future rebirth only.

## **Review of Discussion Topic D2a**

What is the origination of each of the five aggregates and how do you understand the process of their origination?

In Discussion 2a, we look into saṅkhāra in the context of the five aggregates. In the earlier discussions, it was the Law of Dependent Origination but now it is in the context of the five aggregates. There are various originations for the five aggregates. The suttas mentioned that nutrients are the origin of rūpa. From the very moment that life takes place in the womb, as in human existence, the nutrients from the mother will nourish that embryo and nurture it until full maturity when the baby is born. From that point onwards, then it is the volition of the baby to want to consume food in order to maintain, sustain and the growth of the body.

We shall now discuss the next three aggregates—feeling, perception and volitional formations, which originate from sense experience or contact. If there is no sense experience, then there is no feeling, perception or volitional formations as these are all dependent on sense experience. If you are fast asleep at night and not conscious of what is happening to the senses, then there is no saṅkhāra related to any of the senses but still you might have dreams. When you are in a deep, dreamless sleep, then saṅkhāra is not there. According to the Abhidhamma even when one is in a dreamless sleep, there is still the bhavāṅga (life continuum) because there can never be a break in the consciousness. The object of this consciousness is something from the past that is carried forward to this present existence. It is not something material but it is something intangible. It is a concept of something that was done in the past.

If there is a break of the bhavāṅga state, two things can happen. You've either achieved nirodha-samāpatti, the cessation of feeling and perception (which means the temporary suspension of all consciousness and mental activities), or you have reached parinibbāna, when all of the five aggregates are already extinguished.

We have discussed earlier that nāmarūpa is the origination of viññāṇa, not necessarily in a linear form but in terms of interdependence and simultaneity.

## Review of Discussion Topic D2b

How do you understand the nature of saṅkhāra as the fourth aggregate?

Most of you did not understand this extract which says that saṅkhārā construct, constructed form as form, constructed feeling as feeling, constructed perception as perception and constructed consciousness as consciousness. For example, there is the intention of wanting to participate in this workshop. From that initial intention, you will construct other intentions that will lead to the construction of feeling, the construction of perception and the construction of more and more intentions. Even so is the construction of consciousness, because consciousness arises together with feeling, perception and volition. According to this extract from Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN 43), feeling, perception and consciousness are conjoined and they are not disjointed. They must always arise together but not necessarily with volition.

In the case of the four senses, there is no volition. In the case of the fifth sense which is the body, there is volition most of the time which the mind is not aware of. As discussed earlier, the volition does not arise in the four senses but it arises mostly in the body sense. The intention that arises in the body still constitutes kamma because it is a cause which will have an effect. If you are hungry and you eat food, the effect is that you will continue to nourish and maintain the body. If you stop eating food, then all the matter in your body will start to deteriorate and eventually disintegrate. This is kamma too but it is only confined to the present existence. This applies for both non-arahants and arahants. The intention that occurs together with body consciousness will give effects only in this present life. It will not be carried forward to future rebirth. This sort of volition is not included in the saṅkhāra of the Law of Dependent Origination but it is still saṅkhāra in the sense of the five aggregates.

In the case of the saṅkhāra in the mind, it is the forerunner of moral actions. Whatever you think, speak or do that comes from the mind, then there will be moral consequences, whether in this life or in future life.

## Review of Discussion Topic D3a

How does the usage of saṅkhāra in this section differ from that in the earlier two sections?

The first part of the question is, what is the difference between saṅkhārā in Section 3 and saṅkhārā in Sections 1 and 2? In fact, it's not even the word vipassanā, it's the verb of the noun vipassanā, which is vipassati or vipassitabbaṃ in Pāḷi. In English, it is translated as “How are saṅkhāras to be distinctly seen?” This “distinctly seen” is the verb of vipassanā. So vipassanā is actually “distinct seeing” or “clear seeing”.

## Discussion D3a

Saṅkhārā in Sections 1 & 2		Saṅkhārā in Section 3
<i>Dependent Origination</i>	<i>Five Aggregates</i>	<i>Development of Vipassanā</i>
Volitional formations leading to rebirth only	Volitional formations leading to rebirth or not	All conditioned phenomena regardless of whether they are volitional or not

In the context of the Dependent Origination, saṅkhāra refers to volitional formations leading to rebirth only and because the Law of Dependent Origination starts with avijjā, it is not applicable to arahants who have already extinguished or uprooted avijjā.

In the context of the five aggregates, saṅkhāra or volitional formations can either lead to rebirth or no rebirth.

In the context of vipassanā, saṅkhāra here refers to all conditioned phenomena, whether they are volitional or not. Now the first two saṅkhāras, in the Law of Dependent Origination and the five aggregates, although they are volitional, they are also constructed, also conditioned phenomena.

Under the five aggregates section, saṅkhāra is defined as that which constructs other things, as well as itself. As pointed out yesterday, your intention to join this workshop is not a free choice, it is a product of causes and conditions.

In Section 3, when you are doing vipassanā, saṅkhāra refers to all things that are the products of causes and conditions, regardless of whether they are volitional or not.

### Review of Discussion Topic D3b

In the last two citations above (from Dhp277-9 and MN 35) the terms saṅkhārā and dhammā are contrasted. What do you understand about the difference?

The second part of Discussion D3 is about saṅkhārā and dhamma. We have both active and passive saṅkhāras. All these saṅkhāras, whether active or passive are products of

causes and conditions. The active saṅkhāra involves volition, whereas passive saṅkhāra does not involve volition.

Someone was using this simile of a potter to illustrate the difference between passive and active saṅkhāras. The potter is like an active saṅkhāra because the potter is the one that is turning the wheel and shaping the clay to make it into a pot. The pot is the passive saṅkhāra, it is the product of causes and conditions. When the pot is finally made and fired, it is passive saṅkhāra. Even though it has no volition, it can also be the cause and condition for other volitional and non-volitional active or passive saṅkhāras. If someone goes window shopping, sees and likes the pot then it is the cause for that person to have this intention of wanting to buy the pot. So that passive saṅkhāra is also the cause for an active saṅkhāra to arise. When this person buys and brings it home, and then makes use of it to boil water or puts water into it to make it into a vase to put some flowers, that pot now becomes the cause for water to be contained inside it. All products of causes and conditions are also intricately interlinked and interdependent. This is how active and passive saṅkhāras are interacting all the time.

You can also see that in your guided meditation, when you are exposed to the videos and the different background sounds. You can see that all these background sounds which are actually passive saṅkhāras, once they come into contact with you, once you have sense experience, you can see how the mind reacts differently according to the different stimuli. You can see the interaction between the active and passive saṅkhāras.

All of these actually come under dhamma. That's the reason why in the quotations, they say that all saṅkhāras are impermanent and suffering. But all dhammas, all things are not self. One of the quotations also says that the five aggregates are impermanent, suffering and not self. Yet in another quotation, it didn't say about not self individually for the five aggregates. It only says at the end, all things are not self. These things refer to saṅkhāras as well as non-saṅkhāras.

Non-saṅkhāras are things which are not the products of causes and conditions. This includes Nibbāna which is the unconditioned and the laws of nature, for example, the five Niyāmas. All the sciences are based on the laws of nature because when we understand the law of nature thus we can design ways to overcome certain limitations. For example, when we understand the law of gravity and aerodynamics, we can defy the law of gravity by making use of the law of aerodynamics.

# Discussion D3b

## 5 Orders (Niyāmas)



The commentary gives an example of these sorts of laws of nature—one is the order of seeds. Naturally, a durian seed will only sprout a durian tree and produce durian fruits. Once we understand the law of how the genes work and how they influence the DNA, we can then modify the genes and make the DNA work in such a way that it produces something else. For example, now we have seedless guava or have things that are genetically modified, so the fruits produced are mutated. They are not what they were originally. When we go and meddle with the laws of nature, then what happens is that when human beings eat those mutated GMO foods, the body system cannot handle them because they are unnatural, they're man-made. It could also be a cause for a lot of diseases and illnesses, and physiological problems because we are meddling with the laws of nature.

Utu-Niyāma is the order of seasons, and weather changes according to so many factors and variables, but the law of nature is still there. The law of nature doesn't change, only the variables change.

Kamma-Niyāma is the moral law of cause and effect. Whereas the first two Niyāmas are the physical laws of cause and effect,

Dhamma-Niyāma refers to natural laws regarding the nature of the mind-body process. For example, an arahant who has attained liberation will no longer be able to commit any unwholesome deeds; he will be free from rebirth; these are all cut off. This is the natural order of the dhamma. The sotāpanna, the stream enterer, who has had a glimpse of Nibbāna, will never again have more than seven life times and will not be reborn in the lower realms. This is the order of the dhamma.

The order of the mind is that the mind, for example, is different from matter or material things. The mind has the faculty of consciousness, of being able to be aware of things, to be conscious of things. Whereas with material things, which are not sentient, don't have consciousness. For example, we had discussed how consciousness must arise together with its mental factors. They cannot be separated, for there is no feeling or perception without consciousness. Take for example, the simile of the cup of water without the solvent. Without putting in the solvent, you cannot get a solution. The solute is just the particles of dye which will not be dissolved and give you the solution if there's no water in the cup. They must arise together with consciousness. That is the order of the mind.