

Lesson Five

Mindfulness of Mental Formation Aggregate (Sankhara)

This is the fifth lesson from our Mindfulness of the 5 Aggregates series.
Here's what the Buddha taught:

*"Bhikhavve Bhikkhu, Iti sankhara
Iti sankharanaya samudayo
Iti sankharanaya atthangamo"*

*(Monks, this is mental formation.
Thus is the arising of mental formation.
Thus is the disappearing of mental formation.)*

This is probably one of the most important Aggregate to understand as this digs deep into what thoughts are, why, how and when they form they way they do. What could we possibly gain from understanding this Aggregate?

Here, we will find out that
thoughts produce feeling.

And how is this knowledge relevant?

Because life is a sum of experiences and choices

And we measure our experiences with feeling. It is our gauge for happiness, sadness and everything in between. By nature, we are emotional beings. Our impulses are driven by feelings most of the time unless we have cultivated other mental states that have different influences.

Feelings, if not watched mindfully in turn produce more thoughts of similar pattern. We'll see thoughts and feelings give rise to and influence each other in many various ways; and how we perceive has a direct influence on our thoughts and feelings. Furthermore why we perceive the way we do is influenced by previous experiences and many other factors. There are so many conditioning at play and this phenomenon is known as "object conditioning". It is like a reactive mode and in this flow, there is without mindfulness and detachment in our mind.

Stopping reactive living and start living with wholesome intentions and choices

The knowledge of why and how thoughts are formed (conditioning phenomenon) is profound as it brings about the understanding of how we can stop the flow of object conditioning at present moment and take the mind into a whole new direction that is skilful and beneficial guided by Wisdom knowledge of Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (suffering) and Anatta (egoless).

Thoughts arising with Wisdom are always accompanied with non-attachment, non-harming and compassion; and also with wholesome pleasant or wholesome neutral feeling, never unpleasant feeling. Never with suffering or any other emotional pain.

When we know how to stop the flow of object conditioning and the way to bring out thoughts with Wisdom, we are presented with choices at those present moments. Isn't this refreshing and empowering?

Knowing the importance of Right Perception and taking action to cultivate it

The most impactful understanding yet is, knowing of the importance of cultivating Right Perception. Right Perception is the key that determines how we take an object. It is a turning point from the flow of object conditioning. What is Right Perception?

Right Perception is the Perception that arises
with Wisdom.

How do we develop Right Perception? I have explained this in the previous chapters. But, to recap in brief, we must train our mind to perceive and recognise ultimate conditioned realities before Wisdom can arise.

Knowing your true 'self', knowing what thoughts really are and see for yourself for what it is worth

Through Mindfulness of Mental Formations, we will perceive how thoughts arise, that is: perceiving all Aggregates coming together and compounded by previous conditioning in each moment. This process is what makes thought and, in essence they are merely mind-made concepts (conventional reality). Also through this, we see that "I", any ego or entity is just one of the concept-thoughts in that process. When we glimpse the true nature of thoughts, our minds begins to liberate itself from the trappings of conventional realities, made up by thoughts.

We can break free from the grip of thoughts, the stories it makes us believe and all the feelings that it produces (especially the unpleasant ones), if and only if we are able to perceive thoughts for what it is, which is really, just the "coming together" of mind and form, ultimately.

That 'coming together' is Mental Formation,
just the 5 Aggregates.

Together with this deep understanding, we realise the profound importance of cultivating Right Thoughts, thoughts that produce happiness and conduces towards liberation, highest happiness. We begin to inquire in our minds the conditions for Right Thoughts and we cultivate that. This is so, because when we stop the flow of reactive or object conditioning, we replace it with the conditions for Right Perception, Right Thoughts and other conditions that are necessary for happiness. What are Right Thoughts? Right Thoughts are thoughts of non-attachment, non-harming and compassion.

These are just some benefits of establishing Mindfulness on the 5 Aggregates culminating to the practice of watching Mental Formations.

Are Mental Formations (Sankhara) thoughts?

Mental Formations are more than thoughts.

But lets start our understanding with what are thoughts? We can easily identify thoughts.

Thoughts are thinking in words or pictures
or other mental objects.

What other mental objects?

For instance have you dreamt of eating durian assuming you love durian so much you could salivate at the thoughts of it? When we think of our favourite food; durian, it is as if there is durian taste in our mind but we don't actually experience the sensation of taste physically.

All objects that are perceived through the 5 senses become mental object (DhammaAramana) in the mind. In addition, all objects perceivable through those 5 senses are capable of arising from the mind door directly, such as a memory of durian taste or when dreaming of durian, where there is no actual durian taste in the mouth. Not only that, thoughts and other mental phenomena are also perceivable as mental object through the mind door as well.

All thoughts come complete with the mental object as explained above plus Perception, Feeling, Consciousness (Aggregates) and other mental factors, each playing its unique function simultaneously and manifesting accordingly.

Do you know that we actively think all the time, when awake and dreaming? In these active thinking, *concept-thoughts* arise with Mental Formations. In the no-dreams moments while asleep, there are also thoughts too but different kind that we call Bhavanga (Life Continuum), which is passive for lack of better words.

Other times, if our mind is anchored on the ultimate conditioned realities, our mind is mindful, aware, observant and detached from phenomenon. In these moments, there is also thought, but not concept-thought. There is only Mental Formation and 'thought' without concepts. These are wholesome thought moments or wholesome Formations.

There is another instance where concept-thoughts don't arise and that is if the mind is anchored on Samadhi (calmness) as a result of having a developed one-pointedness of mind on meditation object. Again here, there is only Mental Formation, 'thought' without concepts and are wholesome.

Sometimes and especially if we are newbies, concept-thought often arises during meditation. For example in being mindful of the Perception Aggregate, you recognise its characteristics after learning it and instantly, you note: "ah, that is Perception". This thinking or knowing is the 2nd type of knowledge from Patipati (knowledge acquired from practice). Nevertheless it is still a concept-thought. Obviously in reading and understanding the explanation in this book would give rise to a lot of concept-thoughts since these are theory-knowledge (Pariyatti) and it involves learning and analysing. These concept-thoughts are knowledge mental state and are wholesome minds.

Therefore, concept-thoughts cannot be white washed as good or bad. Whether or not it is beneficial, skilful, and wholesome or otherwise depends on whether it is rooted in the wholesome or unwholesome roots. I will go through various examples to explain more later.

What are Mental Formations?

In Abhidhamma, the Buddha taught and distinguished different realities.

Conventional reality (conditioned) vs. Ultimate (conditioned) reality

So, thoughts that are concept-thought are merely conventions. It is a *conventional* reality. For instance when a bunch of metal put together that drives like a car. A car is real in that conventional sense but actually, it is just different types of metals of various shapes, sizes and weight combined to make it function like what we have all learnt and understood to be a 'car'.

Conventional realities are conditioned. It is a reality that we create, make and manifest. Every moment we think; in that moment we feel (happiness, misery & etc...) and we experience that conventional reality that

we created through thoughts. We participate in that conventional reality. This is a very simplified but an overlooked perspective of cause and effect which we experience all the time in our life.

What is the ultimate (conditioned) reality? Mental Formation is the ultimate conditioned reality. It is the coming together of all Aggregates, the formation that is occurring in the mind. Why mind – because experiences are essentially in the mind. Our sense bases are merely doors to the mind for those experiences. Every time when object contacts any one of our sense bases, there occurs a phenomenon called Mental Formation. *And*, concept arises with that formation. The ultimate conditioned reality at the moment is simply, mental formation.

Is watching thoughts the same as Mindfulness on Mental Formations?

Often, it is thought that by watching thoughts, one is watching or being Mindful of the Mind and, some think it is Mindfulness of Mental Formations. Is there a difference?

Mindfulness of the Mind and Mindfulness of Mental Formations have one thread in common that is, we don't get caught up in the contents of the thoughts.

In being mindful of the mind, we learn to perceive and recognise what type of mind is present at the moment. There are 16 types of mind listed in the Discourse and some of them are common experience. Whereas, being Mindful of Mental Formations, we perceive all the Aggregates (ultimate conditioned realities) simultaneously with the knowing that each is a different component. And, at the same time, we also perceive both concept-thought and ultimate conditioned realities (Aggregates) together with the knowing that they are two different realities although they arise and exist in parallel.

So how do we practise Mindfulness on Mental Formations?

(1) *Minimum pre-requisite in our practice*

Being mindful of Mental Formations requires that we clearly perceive all other Aggregates at the same time. Therefore, having established mindfulness and knowledge of the previous 3 Aggregates is a minimum pre-requisite.

(2) *Perceiving all the Aggregates simultaneously*

- (a) Learn to perceive all the Aggregates (ultimate conditioned realities) simultaneously.
- (b) Perceive and know by experience that each is a different component.

(3) *Perceiving conventional reality and ultimate conditioned reality simultaneously*

- (a) Learn to perceive both concept-thought & all Aggregates (ultimate conditioned realities) simultaneously.
- (b) Perceive and know by experience that they are two different realities that arise, exist and fall away in parallel.

When our perception of all the other Aggregates is developed, only then we can perceive all of them at once. When we perceive all the Aggregates together, that is the start of Mindfulness on Mental Formation.

As explained earlier, Mental Formation is a phenomenon that occurs in the mind, when object contacts any of the sense bases. Arising together with this phenomenon is concept-thought. Therefore in watching Mental Formation, the formation of concept-thought will inevitably becomes clear yet, we are not caught up in its content.

Not getting caught up in its content means, we are aware of it, detached, and know it but, not trapped and carried away by it.

(4) *Mindful, Detached, Mentally Balanced*

Only when we are mindful or aware, and detached, we could perceive concept-thoughts are mind-made and are not ultimate conditioned realities. Thus the knowing of the distinction between Mental Formation and concept-thoughts arise. How do we know that we are aware and not caught up?

One of the few gauges to know that the mind is aware, detached and not caught up in concept-thoughts is that the mind maintains its Mental Balance (Tatamajatra). That means to say, the mind is unaffected; not grasping nor rejecting.

It knows the feeling arises in the concept-thought but not swept away with it. Even if it is pain, the mind does not reject it although it knows that feeling, yet the mind is very balanced (Tatamajatra) and unaffected in that knowing and mindful state.

It is like watching a volcano erupting from afar. You know it's hot and will hurt if you stick your leg into it but you're unafraid because it cannot burn you. It is much like when we watch the physical pain that sometimes could arise from the body in formal sitting. Even though it is excruciating as one meditator described it as rubbing salt onto a huge open wound yet the burning heat pain felt as if it doesn't belong to the meditator, but merely an object that the mind perceives as clear as daylight until it fades into a needle point before it completely vanishes. That is the mind that is alertly aware (mindful), detached (unaffected) and balanced (Tatamajatra). It is mindfully watching, not caught up. This is the same way we should approach concept-thoughts.

And, as we practise further, we should also be mindful of sense consciousness-Aggregate, where Mental Formation originates. But firstly, we begin with Mindfulness of the other Aggregates first before expanding our mindfulness from thereon.

Let us go through some examples of various concept-thoughts to illustrate various concept-thoughts and to discern the difference between conventional and ultimate (conditioned) realities. Also using these examples, I will also share how to practise Mindfulness of Mental Formations.

Example 1

Thought-concept of ego or entity

Lets say we bumped into people whom we have lost touch for a long time and was surprised we could recognise them. The memory or recognition is the Perception's function at play and we know that's the ultimate conditioned reality. That person or James or an old friend or enemy is a thought-concept we ascribed to that external form (Rupa, which is the ultimate conditioned reality). It is a thought-concept of an entity or an ego – James, he, him, his. There is nothing good or bad in the thought-concept of entity or ego. We use concepts all the time to communicate in our world for instance you when introducing James, you will say: 'Jane, meet my friend James'.

Example 2

Thought-concept of ego & other thought-concepts that are mixed with wholesome roots

I went pass an elderly woman sitting alone by the stairs, eating some simple food. I thought she looked like a cleaning lady and concluded that she was poor. Compassion arose and I gave her what I had in my hand, a drink. If

I were to start practising mindfulness on the Aggregates, where or how do I begin?

One way is, to start by recognising the ultimate conditioned realities that appears clear to me. So as a newbie, I would ask, which Aggregate is clear now? This of course requires that we have the necessary and right information about what such ultimate conditioned realities are. In this example, upon seeing an elderly person – I note, that is merely an external Form (Rupa). The Perception (Sanna) just perceives it. How do I feel? Is it clear? Note the Feeling Aggregate. Decision followed by action to give – that is generosity, a manifestation of detachment mental state. Where did this formation originate? Seeing consciousness (Vinnana).

As a newbie, you needn't go through all the Aggregates all the time, as that would be tiring and confusing. Start with one that is clear. Then, as you can recognise it clearly, move on to practise on another Aggregate and then another.

Once you have gone through at least Form, Perception and Feeling Aggregates for a period of time, you may start to go through all three of them in quick succession every time you direct your mind to an experience. This will train the mind to perceive the Aggregates (ultimate conditioned realities) all at once.

Everything else, such as she's a cleaner and she's poor, is concept. We needn't be caught up in it.

We only need to note whatever concept-thoughts formed, are merely concepts. By noting this, we train the mind to distinguish between the ultimate conditioned realities and concepts.

However, for understanding purposes – 'elderly' is a concept, we don't actually think we are young or old in our experience. We merely experience and the idea of old arises if we feel weak sometimes, but that is just concept-thought. The reality is feeling. So is the 'man, woman, child, being, entity, ego – she, her, hers, I me and my' – these are concepts. The real experience in ultimate conditioned reality is what is the feeling, what is the perception and so on. So is the idea of poor or rich. Hunger too is a concept (feeling stomach pains is the reality of Feeling Aggregate).

What would be interesting to understand in this example also is that the concept-thought of 'I' arose with compassion followed by generosity and it wasn't problematic. In fact, this thought is wholesome, beneficial and skilful. It brought instant happiness to the mind during and after the giving. It created happiness for myself (and her) as wholesome thoughts can only arise with either happiness, or neutral feeling, the latter if the thought isn't strong or if the mind is used to it.

Example 3

Thought-concepts mixed with unwholesome roots

Lets take the example of fear of growing old, fear of being alone, fear of having not enough (money), no home to stay in, no one to care for us, no food to eat. These are common and occurring especially more often as we age. How can we deal with this or what are the ways?

Of course there are many ways to handle with this situation but for purposes of this book, I would like to focus only from the perspective of Mindfulness of the Aggregate.

In this sort of moments, we are just gripped by the emotions of fear and loneliness. We also go through a whole bunch of other secondary emotions that comes as buddies to this kind of situation, such as longing, bitterness from rejection, grumpiness, self-deprecation etc.

Negative (unpleasant) feelings can condition an increasing series of negative (illwill) concept-thoughts. Negative thoughts come with more negative feelings. They nurture one another and grow stronger every time we fail to detach from it.

So we end up feeling confused and lost as to what was our main problem. We just feel a mass of pain. There is no way we are even aware or accept that these are realities that we created by ourselves. Yet we have a pain we need to cure. So where do we begin?

Obviously, pain. That is the Feeling Aggregate. Don't just stop there. When we feel detached enough, we can add 'where did this Feeling come from'? But first of all, how do we know if we are detached enough from Feeling just as explained earlier about being detached, and not caught up in the contents of concept-thoughts?

Know that measurement is a concept that we put up to help ourselves to move along the practice. There are many ways to measure. You can measure the Feeling with feeling its intensity. You may also measure by how long are the intervals of pain, as pain come and go. You can measure by how quickly pain passes away the moment you start to note it.

If start with Feeling Aggregate first, it is likely that you will notice when concept-thoughts arise, they produce Feeling.

Here is where you can start noting, ah that is just concept, let it go. Don't grasp it, don't buy it, don't believe it, don't let it grow, don't entertain it – it is nothing more than thoughts, a mind-made reality. This is a good start to tackle emotional (mental) pain when it seems overwhelming.

Distinguishing in our mind, what is real ultimately and what is made up by the mind. What is real is merely Feeling Aggregate. Concept-thoughts are merely made up. Know this, and know the difference by experience.

The knowing of concept-thought as mind made by experience is a profound and powerful mental state. It has the ability to bring out strong detachment that immediately cuts-off, detaches or let go of what is mind-made along with the pain that arose with that mind made concept-thought.

And even though Feeling is real ultimately, it is still an Aggregate that comes and goes, unsatisfactory and not an ego or entity nor does it belong to an ego or entity. Its existence, presence and absence are subject to conditions.

Of course, we could add more into the practice until we are able to perceive all the Aggregates simultaneously. But I would like to go through another example to illustrate how to do that.

Example 4

Another example of thought-concepts mixed with unwholesome root & Learning to perceive all Aggregates together

More frequent than you know, people are always looking for life partners or a 'soul mate', although as we practise we will understand there is no soul, no entity or ego other than the coming together of the Aggregates. There is essentially no soul mate! Pun intended, although ultimately that is true. But, we look and want because of attachment root. And some continue to look even though they are already attached. This kind of longing and attachment results in a feeling of emptiness.

While some are still grieving the loss of loved ones, be it sister, brother or anyone whom they are very attached to and loved dearly. This also gives rise to deep loneliness. Then there are trailblazers; entrepreneurs and others who choose a path less travelled who also feel deeply lonely. They wish for a companion whom they could relate to and sometimes for guidance.

However the void came about, the feeling of loneliness, disconnectedness and emptiness is a very painful emotion primarily due to our attachment to the ego or entity, both internally and externally.

And, very often it leads to other frustrations, making the person depressed or grumpy at other matters that are merely triggers but not the underlying primary source of pain. So, where do we start if we are dealing with this kind of pain?

Just as mentioned in *Example 3* above, we will focus on Mindfulness of Aggregate. We could start with the Feeling Aggregate as described above, if that Aggregate is clear. After perceiving the clearest, we go on to train the mind to recognise and perceive the other Aggregates.

When dealing with longing and loss, the object is no longer physical. It is usually a memory of the person that we recall. If mental object is clear, we could note it as merely a mental object (Dhamma Aramana). This was explained in the Form (Rupa) lesson and that is it, ultimately.

There isn't 'loved one', 'someone', 'anyone' or any ego or entity in any mental object. It is merely an object that the mind perceives, which is the role of Perception (Sanna) within the mind.

'Loved one', 'someone', 'anyone' or any ego or entity is what we made them to be. It is a concept. And, part of the function of Sanna is also to associate objects with previous experiences and concepts formed previously. As a result, old memories come flooding in. So, we should note those memories as merely Perception (Sanna). That is all there is ultimately.

There isn't anyone or anything in the
Perception (Sanna) Aggregate either.
It is merely playing a function.

Sometimes it is the seeing or hearing something physical that brings out the memory of the person. Here instead of starting with the Feeling Aggregate, we can start with noting the physical object first, the colour as earth element (Rupa) or sound as air element (Rupa). 'Loved ones, someone, anyone' are what we ascribed to that Form, whom we have enjoyed good times with. So we should note memories as merely Perception (Sanna) and concepts as concepts without going into or be caught up in its content.

They brought to fore through Perception, by
way of association, one of many conditions for
the arising of formations.

If these concept-thoughts arose from seeing or hearing consciousness, (Vinnana), be mindful of those sense doors. Note that they are merely receiving information such as colour or sound and that is all there is, ultimately.

And, so this is the way we go through all the Aggregates until we are able to perceive them simultaneously while separating these ultimate conditioned realities from the concept-thoughts clearly.

If only we could see that 'I' along with the other concept-thoughts are merely mind made, the loneliness, pain, grief and hurt will disappear the moment we bust the mind made realities.

This is a powerful and effective way to overcome pain, grief, lamentation, and despair as it goes directly into perceiving Anatta (egolessness).

Example 5

Our feelings are affected by concept-thoughts and how we perceive

For example if we perceive and think 'no one' cares about 'me' or perceive being alone is lonely, then we will feel lonely and miserable. These are concept-thoughts mixed with illwill root like loneliness, rejection, loss, sadness, remorse and so on. When mixed with illwill, we will unavoidably experience pain, grief, lamentation and despair depending on its intensity. But what if we condition the mind to think in being alone one could get some peace and quiet? Some even think that as the most precious 'me' time.

On the flip side, if concept-thoughts arise mixed with attachment, it brings pleasure or neutral feeling but these don't hurt. For instance, I will be seeing my son tonight who is coming back from Australia. What will I cook for him? I will have 1 million to spend when I get my EFP monies tomorrow. I am going for a holiday! These concept-thoughts don't hurt the mind. It does not bring emotional pain.

Concept-thoughts and how we perceive affect our feelings. We must learn to prompt wholesome, beneficial concept-thoughts and learn Right Perception for purposes of happiness and liberation.

Example 6

Thought-concepts related to views or opinions

There are concept-thoughts that we identify as views or beliefs or belief systems. We have a lot of these ranging from daily operations to bigger subjects such as life.

Concept-thoughts whether it is view or opinions or ego or entity or anything are not good or bad by itself. It depends whether it is mixed with wholesome or unwholesome roots.

For instance, I hear people say, it is my 'right of way' and they would just drive by very quickly regardless of others on the road. Sometimes the other driver may not have seen us, or they are impatient and decide to come out from the side lane anyway or simply reckless. Regardless, there is bound to be an accident if we still hold fast to the 'righteous' view (concept-thought mixed with attachment) and there will be financial damage as well as emotional stress, which is painful. Is it so important to be right or is it more important to maintain peace of mind, safety (and save some money and time)?

Yet there are some people who think that being vegetarian is a good cause and will reduce the killing of animals in the world. Whether or not this will ultimately result in such an outcome is irrelevant. The reality is, such concept-thought is mixed with compassion and abstinence mental state and that makes the concept-thought wholesome at that moment. Then again if this person becomes angry with others that do not fit into their views so, even though one may be a vegetarian for those lofty reasons, but at that moment of anger that view or concept-thought is mixed with illwill therefore making it unwholesome. We cannot generalise everything but must understand how formations come to be at the each juncture.

When mixed with unwholesome roots they bring harm and suffering not only to oneself but also to others. For example, one believes that we are only saved through killing and sacrificing animals or other living beings. This kind of concept-thought brings much suffering to others and to ourselves as there is illwill mental state involved for all parties participating in the killing. As you know, illwill arises with only pain.

Some people believe that one can only be saved by higher power. This concept-thought is rooted in ignorance and relinquishes our opportunity and ability to cultivate Wisdom. There are many more concept-thoughts that do not lead us to liberation, but more confusion and prolong Samsara (rounds of rebirth). These are concept-thoughts that directly oppose the universal nature of Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (suffering) and Anatta (egolessness). These should be abandoned to prevent delay in our spiritual progress. Particularly, the Buddha listed 62 types of wrong views in the Brahmajala Sutta (The Discourse on All Embracing Net of Views), which I will not go through here.

Formal & Daily Life Practice

In the above examples, I have illustrated how to perceive both conventional and ultimate conditioned realities. This perception needs to be developed for Mindfulness of Mental Formations. This can be done in daily life and also formal practice.

Now I will answer a few frequently asked questions.

[Q+A include:

Must we stop thinking? Is that the aim of meditation?

Is thinking bad/disturbing?

I want to get rid of thinking, or reduce thinking.]