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## THE APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SAṆKHĀRA (MENTAL FORMATION) IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY FOR REDUCING HUMAN SUFFERING IN MODERN LIFE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates the concept of *saṅkhāra* within early Theravāda Buddhist knowledge, addressing gaps in prior studies by Bandusena Wickranmasinghe Dadanayaka and Venerable Nodhiñana, who primarily emphasize the doctrinal and causal aspects of *saṅkhāra* without substantial engagement with its psychological implications. This research focuses on *saṅkhāra*'s role as “mental formations” integral to the cycle of dependent origination, particularly its connections with processes of becoming and rebirth and its profound impact on meditation practices. From a Theravāda Buddhist psychological perspective, the study explores how the concept of *saṅkhāra* contributes to liberating from human suffering, associating with the noble truth of suffering, and examines its practical applications in alleviating mental suffering. This includes a detailed analysis of *saṅkhāra*'s classifications, manifestations, and influence on the mind-body nexus. This comprehensive exploration not only deepens the understanding of *saṅkhāra*'s complexities but also highlights its relevance and applicability in contemporary efforts to mitigate human suffering, aiming to support individuals aspiring to achieve liberation from suffering and the state of an Arahant in the framework of Theravāda Buddhist Psychology.



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## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to elucidate the role of *saṅkhāra* in Theravāda Buddhist psychology, particularly its application in alleviating human suffering in modern contexts. *Saṅkhāras*, understood in the *Vipassī Sutta* of *Saṃyutta Nikāya* as “mental formations,” are pivotal in driving the continuous stream of consciousness that influences rebirth (*paṭisandhi* or *punabbhava*).<sup>1</sup> Notably, the term *saṅkhāra* encompasses various aspects, including volition, planning, and latent tendencies, collectively contributing to the rebirth cycle. The *Natumhāka Sutta* (S II 66) elaborates on these three facets of *saṅkhāra nidāna*, clarifying that while often translated as “mental formations,” bridge a transitional ‘gap’ between lives. Also, they result of actions in the previous life, challenging the misconception of a temporal void at conception. Theravāda Buddhism distinctly rejects the notion of a soul (*ātman*) transitioning between lives, underscoring the nonexistence of a permanent self (*jīva*) or *ātman*.<sup>2</sup> This view starkly contrasts with certain ‘folk Buddhism’ practices observed in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, where it is commonly held that a person’s essence persists for seven days post-mortem. While popular, this belief does not necessarily endorse a permanent self but reflects a cultural interpretation of post-death continuity.

Furthermore, unenlightened mundane persons (*puthujjana*), which include most individuals and even the majority of Buddhists who have not yet achieved the status of noble persons or are not firmly established on the path to stream-entry, often harbor the misconception that phenomena occur by chance without causal interconnection. This is just one of several erroneous views they might hold. Such individuals fail to understand the concept of *saṅkhāra* fully. The question arises: which specific aspect of *saṅkhāra* are they misunderstanding? In some religious doctrines, the soul is perceived as a continuous, unchanging entity, ignoring mental formations’ transformation and influence (*saṅkhāra*) from one life to the next. From the Theravāda perspective, these views are seen as incorrect speculations. Theravadins assert that while superficial characteristics may change, the fundamental nature of existence does not—an assertion that seems to contradict the principle of impermanence. However, it is important to recognize that the cessation of one existence marks the transition to the beginning of another, which may be of a substantially different nature. Thus, this article delves into the concept of rebirth, specifically focusing on the moment of conception, whether in humans or animals, as a critical juncture not addressed in the main body of the text, emphasizing *saṅkhāra*’s pivotal role in perpetuating *samsāric* existences as depicted in Theravāda *Sutta* and *Adhidhamma* texts.

On the one hand, the research focuses on the specific function of the concept of *saṅkhāra*, which occurs notably as the second link in the series conditioned by ignorance (*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*) and becomes the condition for consciousness (*saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇam*) in the *Paṭiccasamuppāda*.<sup>3</sup> In the

<sup>1</sup> S II 7, Iti hidaṃ avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇam ...p... hiti.

<sup>2</sup> Sayadaw Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa, *The Analytical Study of Dependent Origination (Paṭicca-samuppāda in the Perspective of Conditional Relations (Paṭṭhāna))*, (Yangon: Paññābhū University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>3</sup> S II 1.

Theravāda Buddhist psychological viewpoint, sentient beings are essentially composed of formations (*suddha-saṅkhārapuñño*).<sup>4</sup> However, *saṅkhāras* encompass all various kinds of conditioned states that constitute a being, extending beyond mere ‘dispositions’ or volitions. Despite this, beings often misconceive these configured phenomena (*saṅkhāra-dhamma*), erroneously perceiving permanence where none exists. In reality, all *saṅkhāra-dhammas* are impermanent, marked by suffering, and devoid of selfhood, conditioned by *kamma* (action and its consequences), *citta* (consciousness), *utu* (climate), and *ahāra* (nourishment). The, which binds these elements. Furthermore, all beings consist of *nāma-rūpa*, encompassing mental and material elements shaped by various causes and conditions. The pursuit of sensual pleasure, a phenomenon not unique to modern life, often obscures individuals’ understanding of the profound nature of *saṅkhāra-dhammas*. Consequently, individuals experience *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, which encompasses directly experiencing physical or mental pain, painfulness due to change, and subtle painfulness due to being conditioned, as discussed in S IV.259.

They forsake to contemplate that existence’s impermanent, suffering, and non-self nature leads to attachments, aversions, and a perpetual quest for gratification, perpetuating a cycle of desire and suffering. In order to alleviate this suffering, individuals must develop a deeper understanding of existence’s nature and the transient nature of phenomena, cultivating insight and wisdom to penetrate the teachings of *saṅkhāra-dhamma*. It is crucial to recognize that such understanding can foster greater peace and contentment, thereby reducing mental suffering. Notably, the term “*saṅkhāra*” possesses multiple meanings, depending on the context. It refers to volition or will within the four mental aggregates and also acts as a karmic formation within the wheel of dependent origination. *Saṅkhāra* encompasses conscious and unconscious activities, such as thoughts, intentions, and emotions, which are influenced by past actions (*kamma*) and, in turn, influence future activities. It is essential to distinguish which sense of *saṅkhāra* is being referred to in specific contexts to grasp its implications in Buddhist teachings fully. The concept of *saṅkhāra* plays a central role in Buddhist philosophy, particularly within the framework of the Four Noble Truths and the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Patīccasamuppāda*). To discuss this idea, let’s first clarify the terms and how they relate to each other in Buddhist teachings. In Buddhism, *saṅkhāra* refers to formations or volitional formations. It is one of the five aggregates (*khandas*) that describe the constituents of a sentient being. *Saṅkhāras* are mental formations or volitional activities that include thoughts, emotions, decisions, and other mental processes that condition future karma. They are essentially all types of mental conditioning that lead to actions.

While *saṅkhāra* is not explicitly mentioned in the Four Noble Truths, it is intrinsically linked to them through the second noble truth, the cause of suffering is craving (*taṇhā*). Craving is influenced by ignorance (*avijjā*) and is a type of *saṅkhāra* because it is a conditioned, volitional activity. The link has been that craving can be seen as a form of *saṅkhāra* under the aggregates, which is critical here. Craving is a product of and a producer of *saṅkhāra*, perpetuating the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*). Understanding the impermanent nature of *saṅkhāra* is not just a theoretical concept in Buddhism but a practical tool for practitioners. *Saṅkhāra*, like all phenomena in Buddhism, is marked by the three

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<sup>4</sup> S I 135.

characteristics of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). By grasping that these mental formations are transient and not an inherent part of one's self, practitioners can actively reduce attachment and aversion, which are directly linked to suffering. The path to liberation (*nibbāna*) involves cultivating insight into the nature of phenomena, including *saṅkhāra*. By meditating and practicing mindfulness, one becomes aware of how *saṅkhāras* arise and cease in the mind. This awareness helps to weaken the bonds of craving and attachment, ultimately leading to the cessation of *dukkha*, as described in the third and fourth noble truths, which are the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

This process of insight and mindfulness is a practical approach practitioners can take in their journey towards liberation. Hence, while *saṅkhāra* is not explicitly listed in the Four Noble Truths, its understanding is a beacon of hope on the pathway towards the cessation of suffering. Recognizing the impermanence of *saṅkhāra* empowers practitioners to detach from these mental formations, moving closer to the ultimate goal of liberation from the cycles of suffering. Furthermore, to mitigate *saṅkhāra*, practitioners should initially apply established mindfulness to observe and gradually release these mental formations. This process not only enhances mindfulness but also deepens insight into the true nature of reality. This exposition aims to investigate the role of *saṅkhārupekkhā* equanimity towards mental formations in meditation and the liberation from *saṅkhāra-dhammas*. Drawing from key Theravāda Sutta and Abhidhamma texts, the paper will elucidate the concept and precise definition of *saṅkhāra*, particularly in the context of achieving *nibbāna* and overcoming the suffering induced by *saṅkhāra*. Additionally, it will address and correct potential pessimistic interpretations, aiming to enhance understanding of *saṅkhāra*'s dynamic role in reducing mental suffering in contemporary life.

## DEFINITIONS OF *SAṆKHĀRA* ACCORDING TO THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

The structure of this portion is to evaluate the *Pāli* term *saṅkhāra*, which is employed in different definitions found with various expositions in modern *Theravāda* scholars. *Saṅkhāra* refers to the “mental formations or volitional actions” that shape our karmic activities and intentions through bodily actions (*kāyasāṅkhāra*), verbal actions (*vacīsāṅkhāra*), mental actions (*cittasāṅkhāra*), meritorious deeds (*puññābhisaṅkhāra*),<sup>5</sup> unmeritorious deeds (*apuññābhisaṅkhāra*)<sup>6</sup> and mental proliferation or the proliferation of thoughts (*neñjābhisaṅkhāra*).<sup>7</sup> Notably, the term *saṅkhāra* in the religious viewpoint of

<sup>5</sup> This refers to beneficial volitions in the [first two] four realms, which are categorised as thirteen volitions of the sense sphere and the delicate material sphere (*kāmāvacarupāvaca kusalacetanā*).

<sup>6</sup> This refers to harmful volitional formations that are unwholesome and unskillful, leading to adverse karmic outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> *Neñjābhisaṅkhāra* is a *Pāli* term used in Buddhism that refers to “mental proliferation or “the proliferation of thoughts”. It is also known as “papañca” in some contexts. This term describes the tendency of the mind to engage in excessive thinking, conceptualisation, and elaboration about various experiences and ideas. When the mind encounters an object or experience, it naturally creates stories, judgments, interpretations, and associations around it. This mental proliferation can lead to increased attachment, aversion, and confusion, contributing to the cycle of suffering (*dukkha*) in Buddhism. The practice of mindfulness and meditation aims to observe and understand this process of *neñjābhisaṅkhāra*. One can cultivate a more transparent and balanced perspective on reality by developing an awareness of how the mind proliferates thoughts and emotions. Through mindfulness, individuals can recognise and disengage from unhelpful thought patterns, reducing mental clutter and promoting

contexts is considered the period before and after the time of the Gotama Buddha. Steven Collins, a scholar of Buddhism and the *Pāli* language, has proposed an interpretation of the term *saṃskāra* as “preparing and putting together.”<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is based on the term’s etymology, derived from the roots *saṃ+kar*, which can be interpreted as “to do” or “to make.” Frank J. Hoffman suggests that ‘*saṅkhāra*’ could be interpreted as the formative psychological dimensions of the rebirth process that influence the consciousness of the subsequent individual.<sup>9</sup> The term *saṃskāra* is employed in various contexts within Theravāda Buddhist literature. However, Collins specifically highlights its application in the Vedic tradition, which pertains to the preparation of a sacrifice. In this particular context, *saṃskāra* involves the detailed construction and organization of the sacrificial offerings, ensuring their perfection and readiness for the ritual proceedings. This usage underscores the meticulous and deliberate processes integral to Vedic sacrificial practices.

Besides, Collins confirms that the term *saṃskāra* is used in the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*, where different forms of the verb *samskr* are utilized to signify it. In the Brahmanical tradition, *saṃskāra* refers to the process of creating a person through sacrificial rituals. The idea is that the various body parts are assembled and shaped through performing these rituals, creating a composite person. Collins also points out that two hymns in the Atharva Veda explain the process of constructing the various parts of the body into a composite. These hymns are known as the “*puruṣa sūkta*,” and the “*nāsadiya sūkta*”, and they portray the creation of the universe and human beings through the performance of sacrificial rituals. In *Theravāda* Buddhist viewpoint, *saṃskāra* has a broader meaning, encompassing not only the creation of a person through rituals but also the mental and emotional predispositions that shape our behavior and experiences.

## CLASSIFICATIONS OF SAṆKHĀRA

This section clarifies the term *saṅkhāra*, as depicted in the phrases “*sasaṅkhāra*” (with *saṅkhāra*) and “*asaṅkhāra*” (without *saṅkhāra*). The latter is particularly noted in the context of the term *parinibbāyin* in the *Sasaṅkhārapatipada Sutta* of *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.<sup>10</sup> In this *sutta*, the use of *saṅkhāra* indeed diverges from its other typical contexts. Here, it effectively signifies ‘with and without effort,’ focusing primarily on certain types of volitional activities. This nuanced usage underscores that the term in this specific doctrinal context does not encompass all forms of volitional activities but is selective. Mathieu Boisvert points out that although the terms *sasaṅkhāra* and *asaṅkhāra* appear to have straightforward meanings with and without *saṅkhāra*, respectively their implications in achieving *nibbāna* are not elaborated through direct textual evidence, leaving their exact interpretations somewhat unclear.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the term *asaṅkhāra* in relation to *nibbāna* implies that *nibbāna* is attained while still retaining a form of karmic residue, an inter-

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inner peace and freedom. The understanding and skilful management of *neñjābhisaṅkhāra* are essential for spiritual progress and the path to liberation (*nirvāṇa*) in Buddhism. By breaking free from excessive mental proliferation, one can attain a deeper level of insight and wisdom, transcending the causes of suffering and achieving liberation of the mind.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (UK, London: Cambridge University, 1982) 54.

<sup>9</sup> Frank J. Hoffman, *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>10</sup> A IV 169.

<sup>11</sup> Mathieu Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates: Understanding Theravāda Psychology and Soteriology*, (India, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications A Division of: Indian Books Centre, 1997), 99-100.

pretation that might seem intuitive yet lacks direct support from critical texts such as the Dhs-a (*Dhammasaṅgaṇi* Commentary). It describes *asaṅkhāra* in terms of ‘with an external plan, effort, instigation, expedient, the totality of causes.’<sup>12</sup> This highlights a different facet of *asaṅkhāra*, suggesting that it involves various causes and conditions rather than the mere absence of volitional formations. The significant declaration of similar parallel passages in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* elucidates the varying accomplishments in attaining *nibbāna*: a non-returner can attain *nibbāna* either “with *saṅkhāra*” or “without *saṅkhāra*.”<sup>13</sup> This differentiation underscores the doctrinal subtleties in the path to *nibbāna*, where the specific conditions or efforts (*saṅkhāra*) involved directly influence the nature of its attainment.

According to Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, “*nibbāna*” is central and profoundly nuanced and presents itself in various forms, such as “*nibbāna* with *saṅkhāra*” and “*nibbāna* without *saṅkhāra*.” *Nibbāna* with *saṅkhāra* (*sa-upādisesa-nibbāna-dhātu*) refers to the state of *nibbāna* experienced by an enlightened person (an arahant) while they are still alive. In this state, although the arahant has extinguished the defilements that cause rebirth and suffering, they continue to experience the results of past actions (*kamma*) within the limitations of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness). This form of *nibbāna* involves active engagement in the world through planned efforts (*saṅkhāra*), which are mental formations or volitional activities directed toward maintaining the state of enlightenment without generating new karmic actions. Moreover, *nibbāna* without *saṅkhāra* (*an-upādisesa-nibbāna-dhātu*), on the other hand, is the state of complete *nibbāna* that occurs at the death of the arahant. At this point, there is a cessation of all physical and mental processes (*saṅkhāras*). This state represents the ultimate peace and liberation, with no remaining attachments or mental defilements and, importantly, no further becoming or birth.

The commentary at Dhs-a.156 provides a nuanced explanation of “*nibbāna* with *saṅkhāra*” emphasizing that while the arahant remains alive, their enlightened activity is still bound by the physical and mental conditions (*saṅkhāras*) of human existence. These conditions, however, are not generative of future suffering or rebirths; they are merely the residual effects of past karma playing out in the life of one who has realized *nibbāna*. In order to illustrate these concepts more vividly, scholars often refer to canonical texts like the “*Suttanipāta*,” where these types of *nibbāna* are discussed in terms of their experiential qualities and implications for the path of practice. For example, in the *Kutuhalasāla Sutta* (SN 44.9), there is a dialogue that probes the nature of an arahant’s experience and existence after death, subtly addressing the nuances between these two types of *nibbāna*. This exposition is characterized not by generating new karmic seeds but by continuously manifesting enlightenment principles in the arahant’s everyday experiences and interactions. Hence, incorporating these scholarly insights and textual examples clarifies the distinction between “*nibbāna* with *saṅkhāra*” and “*nibbāna* without *saṅkhāra*.” It presents “*nibbāna* with *saṅkhāra*” not as a lesser state but as a testament to the practical and ongoing application of enlightenment within the lived world, up until the complete cessation that marks “*nibbāna* without *saṅkhāra*.” This interpretation enriches our understanding of the term “*saṅkhāra*” in its varied contexts and shows the profound depth of the Buddha’s teachings on liberation.

<sup>12</sup> Dhs-a 156: *Tassa attho saha saṅkhārena ti sasaṅkhāro.*

<sup>13</sup> S V 70. A similar passage can also be seen at A I 233.

Moreover, the correlation between *saṅkhāra* and *cetanā* underscores the pivotal role of intentionality in shaping karmic actions and their repercussions. In this way, *saṅkhāra* intricately interacts with perception and feeling, contributing to the subjective experience of reality and influencing emotional responses. The perpetuation of *saṅkhāra* across lifetimes underscores its role in sustaining the cycle of birth and death within the framework of *samsāra*. The function of the term *saṅkhāra* is found in another position of firm resolve interrelationship with the effort that arises in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>14</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* commentary<sup>15</sup> clarifies the *Majjhima Nikāya*,<sup>16</sup> where the Buddha attains the level of meditation identified as ‘sign-less release of mind.’ In this point of context, *saṅkhāra* refers to the prior commitment that a bhikkhu makes, which facilitates him to sustain a particular level of meditation for a specific period that is ascribed as *pubbe abhisāṅkhāra*. The *Visuddhimagga* explains *puppe abhisāṅkhāra* (prior resolve) as *cittassa abhisāṅkhāraṇa* (an act of mental determination) that as prior determinative thought, the monk commits himself to remain in meditation for a certain period. He holds to the thought that ‘I shall get up when the moon or the sun has moved so far in the sky.’

Moreover, the discourse of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination) offers an alternative perspective to deterministic or linear causality models, underscoring the interconnectedness and interdependence of all mental and material phenomena. One can discern how the cycle of rebirth is sustained and perpetuated by comprehending the nature of causality within this framework, specifically the dynamic interplay of various conditions. To break this chain of causality, one must address and extinguish the underlying factors of craving and clinging, thereby paving the way to attain liberation from suffering. Therefore, from the Buddhist point of view, understanding *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is crucial for achieving freedom from *samsāra*, and relying on the notion of a creator God or Brahma as the ultimate explanation for existence is not a viable solution.

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, there is another category of *saṅkhāra* that is mentioned in Buddhist contexts. In the *Āyusaṅkhārossajjana Sutta*, the Buddha’s passing has been described using synonymous terms such as *āyusaṅkhāra*, *jīvitasāṅkhāra*, and *bhavasāṅkhāra*.<sup>17</sup> Notably, both *āyusaṅkhāra* and *bhavasāṅkhāra* refer to specific aspects of the Buddha’s lifespan. On the other hand, *jīvitasāṅkhāra* the mental and physical conditions of the Buddha. However, the term *āyusaṅkhāra* is interpreted as the formation of vitality or life force that sustained the Buddha’s lifespan. The *Sārattha-ppakāsinī*, Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, provides a similar clarification, stating that *āyusaṅkhāra* refers explicitly to the *rūpajīvitindriya*, which means the vital force that sustains the body and prevents decay.<sup>18</sup>

The Pāli term *suññatā* is derived abstractly from ‘*suñña*,’ meaning ‘empty’. In Buddhist philosophy, *suññatā* refers to the meaning of “emptiness or voidness.” This term signifies the absence of intrinsic or independent nature in all phenomena, aligning with the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self). *Suññatā* also encaps-

<sup>14</sup> Vsm 12.

<sup>15</sup> Vsm t III 1662,

<sup>16</sup> M I 296-297.

<sup>17</sup> Ud 64.

<sup>18</sup> S-a II 227: Āyusaṅkhāraṇa ti rūpajīvit indriyaṇ saṅdhāya vuttaṃ.

ulates the spiritual goal of achieving *nibbāna*, which is the ultimate state of liberation characterized by freedom from lust (*rāga*), ill-will (*dosa*), and dullness (*moha*).<sup>19</sup> The term *saṅkhāra-suññatā* refers explicitly to the concept of emptiness or voidness of conditioned phenomena. This notion underscores that all conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*), which arise from interdependent causes and conditions, lack an intrinsic nature and are, therefore, ‘empty’ of an autonomous essence. This perspective is essential in Buddhist philosophy, as it addresses the transient and interdependent nature of all composite entities, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of impermanence and the interconnectedness of existence. It is identified in three ways in the early Theravāda discourses of *Mahāsuññata Sutta* MN, specifically as a meditative dwelling, as an attribute of objects, and as a category of awareness-release.<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the emptiness of all phenomena can support one in letting go of attachments and overcoming suffering. It is important to note that emptiness is not a pessimistic or nihilistic concept but rather a liberating insight that provides a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all things.

## THE APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF *SAṆKHĀRA* FOR REDUCING MENTAL SUFFERING IN MODERN LIFE

The foundational idea of this section is the inherent relationship between *saṅkhāra* (conditioned phenomena) and *dukkha* (suffering). In Theravāda Buddhist psychology, *saṅkhāra* is considered one of the five aggregates and a conditioned phenomenon. It encompasses the formations experienced by an individual engaging in bodily, verbal, and mental activities with attachment (*sa-upādāna*), often leading to suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*). Not all *saṅkhāras* contribute to suffering; some, skillful and wholesome, exist without attachment. Thus, spiritual growth involves transcending mental suffering (*cetasika dukkha*) by contemplating these phenomena. It is crucial to understand *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, the suffering associated with conditioned phenomena, as characterized by impermanence and devoid of inherently pleasant or unpleasant feelings. This type of suffering encompasses all conditioned mental and physical experiences, including attachment, highlighting that attachment itself is also conditioned.

In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha instructs his disciples that all felt experiences, whether perceived as positive or negative, inherently possess characteristics that lead to mental suffering. He clarifies that not all feelings are direct forms of suffering; instead, their impermanent and transient nature renders them unsatisfactory, often resulting in discomfort or distress. This teaching underscores the fundamental Buddhist concept of impermanence and its integral role in the experience of suffering.<sup>21</sup> Hence, spiritual development must transcend *saṅkhāra-dukkhas*, shedding light on the interconnectedness of suffering, impermanence, and the concept of *saṅkhāra* (formations). One should contemplate the distinction of pleasant feelings, which can evoke distress when they vanish, causing even greater fear and anguish than the suffering of conditioned phenomena. Once it is comprehended that pleasant and unpleasant feelings

<sup>19</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (eds.), *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, Part VIII (A)*, 8 Vols. Set, (London: PTS, 1924), 717.

<sup>20</sup> M III 109-112.

<sup>21</sup> S IV 217, Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, (USA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1271.

are impermanent and conditioned, they can no longer be perceived as permanent or satisfying. Instead, they are recognized as sources of fear and distress.

In modern life during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals experienced losing loved ones or businesses; however, those who truly comprehend the concept of *saṅkhāra* discover an unwavering strength within themselves. Even in the face of numerous setbacks in life, their minds remain unshaken. In Theravāda Buddhist teachings, the term *saṅkhāra* has multiple layers of meaning. Primarily, it refers to all conditioned phenomena, capturing the broad spectrum of experiences subject to cause and effect. More specifically, *saṅkhāra* also denotes mental formations, one of the five aggregates that constitute human experience. These mental formations are critical for understanding Buddhist insights into suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). To illustrate, imagine a business person who trades by transporting goods from one location to another. Should a disaster occur in his shipment, such as his ship sinking, he would likely face significant mental distress upon learning of this loss from his employees. Initially, he may not know how to manage this distress. However, by applying the principles of Theravāda Buddhism, particularly the understanding of *saṅkhāra* as manifestations of impermanence and the sources of suffering, he can begin to mitigate his anguish and find mental relief. This example underscores how Buddhist teachings offer practical approaches to life's inevitable challenges.

Furthermore, different human beings and cultures may hold diverse beliefs and approaches to these concepts. While these ideas are insights into the human condition, it is helpful to recognize that human experiences and responses to life's challenges can vary significantly on an individual level. In this regard, meditators may occasionally experience a sense of being out of control concerning their bodies' sensations when they practice contemplation. The body becomes susceptible to aging and illness, while emotions such as happiness and sorrow arise beyond their control. Mental suffering may be experienced with every alternating change of mind, and these causes are beyond human beings' control. For example, if the weather is scorching, human beings may suffer, prompting them to seek refuge in an air-conditioned room.

However, as a result, they may frequently find the temperature too cold, leading to another form of suffering. In reality, there is no single phenomenon in the universe that one can completely control, as all are conditioned phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) and are constantly changing. Realizing that what is beyond one's control causes fear and suffering becomes apparent. Meanwhile, unable to patiently cope with the hardships of life without complaint, a human being may become disenchanted with modern life itself. They may even psychologically desire for life to cease, but *taṇhā* (craving) or *avijjā* (ignorance) continues to propel them forward. Since the causes that led to their rebirth as human beings have yet to be exhausted, they must patiently bear the burden. This is what is referred to as mental suffering due to the conditions of *saṅkhāra-dukkha*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mahāsi Sayadaw, *Manual of Insight*, translated by Vipassanā Mettā Foundation, (USA: Wisdom Publications, 2016), p. 229, Attachment (*taṇhā*) is technically not considered suffering because it is regarded as the origin of suffering.

Besides, “*dukkha*” is identified as the subtlest aspect of physical suffering. This encompasses dominant forms of pain, affliction, and trauma that can be easily visualized, such as a broken leg, stomachache, flu, and feelings of frustration, as well as the universal reality of suffering encountered by all beings. Some may mistakenly view *Theravāda* Buddhism as a pessimistic religion that encourages human beings to resign themselves to physical and mental suffering. However, this view is inaccurate, as there is a clear example that dispels such doubts. It can be considered as an instance of the analogy of a physician examining a patient and informing them of a disease. The physician is not labeled a pessimist for delivering this diagnosis; instead, a pragmatic remedy is sought to formulate a treatment plan for the patient.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, it is essential to clarify that this type of suffering is often used interchangeably with the terms *kāyikā-dukkha* (bodily suffering) and *cetasika-dukkha* (mental suffering). In this respect, the Buddha expounded characteristic classifications of suffering in various *Suttas* such as the *Dukkhaṇṇhā Sutta*, *Dukkhatā Sutta* of *Saṃyutta Nikāya*,<sup>24</sup> and *Saṅgīti Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya*.<sup>25</sup> Within these teachings, the Buddha revealed *saṅkhāra-dukkha* as one of the three categories of *dukkha*: 1. *Dukkha-dukkha* (intrinsic suffering or pain), 2. *saṅkhāra-dukkha* (suffering of conditioned phenomena), and 3. *Viparināma-dukkha* (suffering of change). Moreover, manifold forms of suffering become apparent for individuals who maintain sufficient mindfulness to attentively perceive the body as an impermanent entity undergoing constant changes within the *saṅkhāra* realm. Consider, for instance, a half-hour session of seated meditation, during which discomfort may manifest in various body parts. The practitioner may feel compelled to alter their posture as the intensity of the pain escalates.

However, this adjustment does not guarantee relief, as fresh discomfort may arise in a different bodily region, prompting further modifications to mitigate the persistent unease. This physical encounter vividly exemplifies mental suffering, portraying the inherent suffering intrinsic to painful experiences. After an hour of seated meditation, the meditator may opt for walking meditation; however, this transition does not necessarily alleviate discomfort, as unease may persist during ambulation. Continuing in practice for one to two hours, the meditator will likely confront an array of aches and pains, each serving as a manifestation of mental and physical pains. At this juncture, the individual may decide to recline and rest. Nevertheless, even in the horizontal position, one may realize that true comfort remains elusive, underscoring the pervasive nature of inherent suffering of body and mind.

Furthermore, the practitioner who engages in standing meditation may contend with pressure in their feet and a pervasive stiffness throughout their body, constituting an additional facet of suffering. It can be seen that irrespective of the selected posture, protracted adherence inevitably unveils the intrinsic suffering inherent in the physical body. The divergence in the perception of this inherent suffering between ordinary life and a meditation retreat can be attributed to individuals’ habitual inclination to alter their

<sup>23</sup> Frank J. Hoffman, *Rationality and Mind in Early Buddhism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Press, 1987, 1992, 2002), 43.

<sup>24</sup> S IV 459, S V 56: *Tisso imāvuso dukkhatā, dukkhadukkhatā saṅkhāradukkhatā viparināmadukkhatā, imā kho āvuso dukkhatāti*. It *Pāli* passage can also be seen in *Vism*, 499.

<sup>25</sup> D III 38.

postures continually. Unconsciously, one shifts positions in response to any hint of discomfort, effectively dissipating bodily pain. However, the distinctive feature of meditation lies in the recommendation for practitioners to maintain a static posture without movement, thereby laying bare the authentic nature of physical suffering. This particular strain of suffering also encapsulates one dimension of mental suffering.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of Theravāda Buddhism, the term *saṅkhāra* has a significant meaning. It refers to formations or conditioned phenomena encompassing all things that arise and pass away due to conditions. This concept is a cornerstone in comprehending the impermanent and interdependent nature of all experiences and phenomena, a fundamental principle in Buddhist philosophy. Reaching the state of *saṅkhārupekkhā ñāṇa*, the insight and knowledge of equanimity toward *saṅkhāra*, is a transformative experience.

It provides a profound understanding of *saṅkhāra*, as it directly observes how these formations arise and pass away without attachment or aversion. At this level of insight, the practitioner witnesses the continuous arising and cessation of all conditioned phenomena at a very subtle level. This direct observation leads to an experiential understanding that all *saṅkhāras* are transient, not self-sustaining, and do not constitute a permanent self. This insight fosters a balanced mental state of tranquillity, where one remains undisturbed by the phenomena changing nature. Thus, understanding and experiencing *saṅkhārupekkhā ñāṇa* allows one to truly comprehend the essence of *saṅkhāra*, transcending intellectual understanding and moving towards a profound realization of the nature of reality as taught in Buddhism. This realization can significantly reduce suffering, as one no longer clings to inherently unstable and unsatisfactory phenomena. The term '*saṅkhārupekkhā ñāṇa*' can be understood as the knowledge of equanimity toward mental formations, which in this context refers to the various volitional activities and processes within the mind. This knowledge is also described as the knowledge of equanimity towards formations, a broader category that encompasses both mental and physical phenomena affecting one's meditative practice. This distinction underscores its crucial role in insight meditation within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition.

According to the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *saṅkhārupekkhā* is recognized as one of the ten types of insight knowledge that pave the way to achieving the understanding of the path and fruition.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, *saṅkhārupekkhā* in Theravāda Buddhist psychology facilitates the cultivation of wholesome mental formations. This insight stage emerges through meditation and fosters stability in response to the arising and passing of mental formations. This stage is considered pivotal in liberating oneself from the cycle of suffering. The emancipation from the *saṅkhāra* realm is also known as the realm of the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). This realm transcends conditioned existence and represents the ultimate aspiration in *Theravāda* Buddhism. Attaining the *asaṅkhata* realm signifies liberation from all forms of mental suffering and realizing true peace and freedom.

<sup>26</sup> Mahāsi Sayadaw, *Manual of Insight*, Translated by Vipassanā Mettā Foundation Translation Committee, Forewords by Joseph Goldstein and Daniel Goleman (USA: Wisdom Publication, 2016), 228.

<sup>27</sup> *Paṭis-a* I 269.

The act of inhaling and exhaling (*assāsa-passāsa*) is integral to the sustained vitality of the human body, contributing to the enduring nature of human life. From birth, when individuals first exhale and inhale, this rhythmic process persists until the inevitable cessation of life, marking a continuous cycle of inhalation and exhalation throughout their existence. When individuals contemplate inhalation and exhalation, they gain insight into the impermanence inherent in the arising and ceasing of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra-dhamma*). This practice allows them to discern the true nature of these phenomena as they authentically exist, fostering wisdom and understanding. The below process diagram integrates Training in Buddha’s concept of *saṅkhāra* as a meditation mode for reducing mental suffering in modern life:

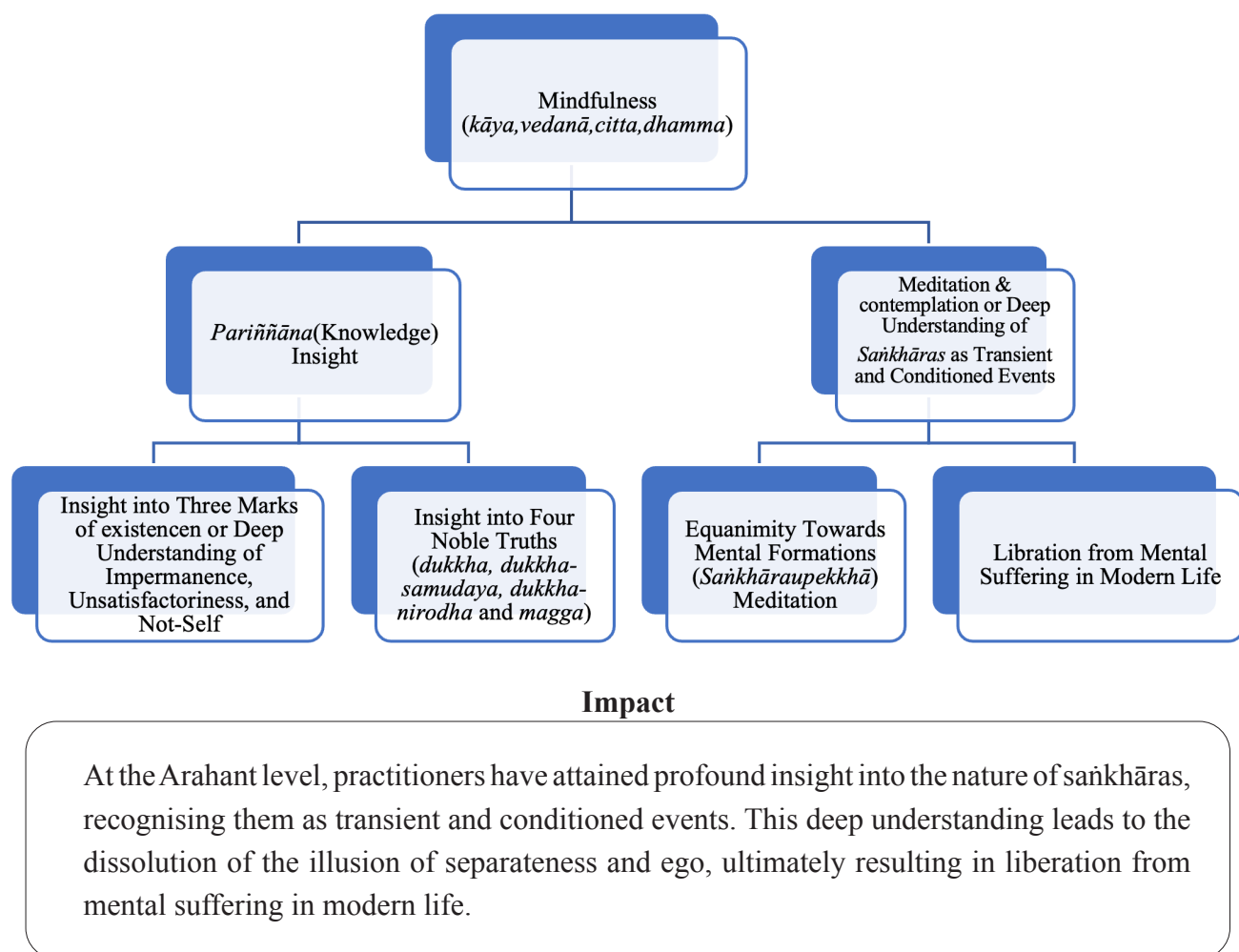


Figure 1: Buddha’s *Saṅkhāra* Concept as a Meditation for Reducing Mental Suffering

The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* conveys twelve meaningful aspects of the Buddha’s teaching on the nature of suffering and the path to its cessation. These aspects begin with recognizing the existence of suffering (*dukkha*), which must be fully understood (*pariññeyya*).<sup>28</sup> Contrary to an incomplete description, this understanding encompasses all three aspects: recognizing suffering, its origin, and its cessation. The sutta does not merely instruct one to ‘learn to suffer thoroughly’; instead, it outlines the process of

<sup>28</sup> S V 422.

comprehensively understanding (*pariññāta*) the nature of suffering. Furthermore, it details the need to understand the arising of suffering (*samudaya*) and the imperative to abandon this origin (*pahātabba*), followed by the actual abandonment of these causes (*pahīna*). It also covers recognizing the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and realizing its significance (*sacchikātabba*), leading to the actual realization of this cessation (*sacchikata*). The sutta highlights how discernment of the impermanent (*anicca*) and unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) nature of all mental formations (*saṅkhāras*) and the non-substantiality of all phenomena (*sabbe dhamma*) fosters a disenchantment with suffering.<sup>29</sup> This understanding is crucial as it marks the beginning of the path towards purity. Hence, the sutta emphasizes the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering, noting the necessity to develop this practice fully (*bhāvetabba*) and confirming that such practice has been completely cultivated (*bhāvita*). These twelve aspects, presented in sequential order, collectively guide one on the path towards liberation from suffering, aligning with the core teachings of the Buddha on the Four Noble Truths.

These categories of actions, however, do not give rise to further consequences in the next life, not because *Arahants* lack volition (*cetanā*) but because they are free from craving (*taṇhā*). Craving, known as *ponobbhavikā*, is the defilement that generates or gives birth to a new life. The *Udumbarika Sutta* of the *Dighanikāya* suggests how *Arahants* are liberated from a new life, indicating that their actions cannot result in consequences in a new life.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the sub-commentary<sup>31</sup> refers to the actions performed in the past by *Arahants* before attaining *arahatship* as “*ahosi-kamma*,” where “*ahosi*” is the aorist form of “*hoti*,” the meaning was or has been. This terminology refers explicitly to the past wholesome and unwholesome actions.[<but *Arahants* still experience karmic results of pre-*Arahant* actions] As mentioned, the actions performed after attaining *arahatship* are called “*kiriya*.”<sup>32</sup> This signifies that the potentiality of those actions to yield results has ceased, and they no longer possess the potential to produce any result in future life.<sup>33</sup> However, it is essential to clarify that the actions of *Arahants* still have consequences in the present life.<sup>34</sup> These consequences may manifest as non-karmic results, influencing their current experiences and circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of *saṅkhāra* provides a profound framework for understanding and mitigating mental suffering in modern life. Rooted in Theravāda Buddhist psychology, *saṅkhāra* is not merely a theoretical construct but a practical guide for addressing the universal challenges of impermanence and suffering. By

<sup>29</sup> Dhp. 40: Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, dukkha, sabbe dhamma anattā, yadā paññāya passati, atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā.

<sup>30</sup> The same passages are found in D III 57 and D II 308.

<sup>31</sup> Abhidh. v. 1989. V. p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> Vism. 601. XIC. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Na tassa vipdka ahosi, na atthi na bhavissati ca evaṇ vatabbam kammam ahosi kammam – Ahosi kamma is called because it did not have, does not have, and will not have a consequence (in the future life).

<sup>34</sup> Abhidh. V 1989, It says: pavattivipākamattam ahetukaphalam deti – Ahosi kamma gives a rootless consequence at this very present time.

recognizing all phenomena's transient and conditioned nature, individuals can cultivate equanimity and transcend the habitual attachments and aversions that perpetuate *dukkha*. The teachings on *saṅkhāra-dukkha* elucidate how conditioned phenomena inherently lack permanence and satisfaction, making them unsuitable bases for lasting happiness. Through insight meditation and mindfulness, individuals gain an experiential understanding of these truths, leading to profound mental stability and liberation from the cycle of suffering. This transformative process culminates in the realization of *saṅkhārupekkhā ñāṇa*, fostering an unwavering equanimity toward mental and physical formations.

In modern contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the principles of *saṅkhāra* offer resilience against life's uncertainties, enabling individuals to face loss and change with unshaken minds. By applying these insights, people can clearly navigate mental suffering and develop a balanced perspective on the impermanent and interdependent nature of all experiences. Ultimately, the practical application of *Saṅkhāra* principles, as illuminated by the Buddha's teachings, provides freedom from mental anguish. It reveals that by understanding the nature of conditioned phenomena and transcending their influence, one can achieve true peace and liberation, a goal relevant in ancient times but deeply applicable to the challenges of modern life.

It has been comprehended that the intricate relationship between *saṅkhāra* and other factors in dependent origination is paramount for grasping the mechanisms governing karma and rebirth. Moreover, *saṅkhāra* is a foundational element of human psychology, influencing cognitive processes and molding individual consciousness. It has drawn from Theravāda Buddhist psychology insights; individuals can utilize mindfulness and insight practices to alleviate mental suffering and cultivate inner peace. In this account, the teachings of the Buddha offer profound wisdom and practical guidance for addressing the root causes of mental anguish and achieving enduring liberation. By comprehending the diverse forms and expressions of mental suffering, individuals can devise specific strategies to alleviate and transcend it.

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