

# The Concept and Role of *Anusaya* from Early Buddhism to Mahāyanā



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## ABSTRACT

This article would like to convey the reality of nature on Buddhist teaching concerning with how to develop and practice the latent dispositions. The writing of this Article needs to understand how Early Buddhism and Mahāyanā is practicing by comparison. The focus of the philosophical and psychological investigation of the Buddha is the predicament of human suffering *Dukkha*. More precisely the Buddhist doctrine is concerned with the reasons and factors that create human dissatisfaction, tension, misery, anxiety and all types of afflictions in general. In the second Noble Truth, the Buddha describes the cause of *Dukkha* with the Pali word “*Taṇhā*”, which means craving, or a constant “thirst” which lays at the bottom of all human motivations and desires either conscious or unconscious. And what is the origin of suffering? It is craving, which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering. (*Sammāditthi Sutta* M I 46) *Taṇhā*, is depicted as conscious motives into further three unwholesome roots, also called Noxious-trio (*akusala mūla*): “*lobha*” greed, lust which generates all kind of desires, “*dosa*” aversion, hatred, resentment, rejecting what we do not like or want, “*moha*” is creating confusion and delusion in the mind, also named ignorance or not understanding the reality as it is.

**Keywords:** Mahāyanā, Anusaya, Early Buddhism

The focus of the philosophical and psychological investigation of the Buddha is the predicament of human suffering *Dukkha*<sup>1</sup>. More precisely the Buddhist doctrine is concerned with the reasons and factors that create human dissatisfaction, tension, misery, anxiety and all types of afflictions in general.

In the second Noble Truth<sup>2</sup>, the Buddha describes the cause of *Dukkha* with the Pali word “*Taṇhā*”, which means craving, or a constant “thirst” which lays at the bottom of all human motivations and desires either conscious or unconscious.

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The unconscious motives are: the desire to perpetuate, to be, to exist again and again; the desire to avoid death; the desire for pleasures and the aversion to pain. These motives, though unconscious, play a pivotal role in human behaviors and determines our present and futures experiences. The desire to exist again and again, clinging to any possible life, is the chief among these unconscious tendencies which bases is modus operandi over a false concept of a self existing “I”.

Buddhism does not deny individuality, which is analyzed into five *Khandhas* (*P.*)<sup>3</sup>, but he posited that neither of these phenomenas have inherent existence; they are constantly interacting together and none of them exist independently. This profound, although, quite

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<sup>1</sup>Represent the mental and physical perceptions of: sorrow, suffering, pain, misery, tension, sadness, frustration, unhappiness, dissatisfaction and unrest which pervade the human beings experiences

<sup>2</sup>The four Noble Truths are : existence is *Dukkha*, cause of *Dukkha*, Truth of Cessation and the True Path leading to Nirvana

<sup>3</sup>Matter, sensations, perceptions, volitional formations and consciousness ; this is the psycho-physical composition of the person .

simple statement, is elaborate by the Buddha in his formulation known as “Interdependent Origination” (*pratītyasamutpāda S. paṭiccasamuppāda P.*)

*When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (Extract from Assutava Sutta SN 12.61).*

As the famous *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* Sutra says:

*“Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness. Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are empty; without characteristic; unproduced, unceased; stainless, not without stain; not deficient, not fulfilled.” (www.fpmt.org, translated by Gelang Thubten Tsultrim, 1999, Dharamsala)*

This points out that all phenomenas are conditioned and impermanent ; there is no any unchanging, everlasting, absolute substance, like soul, self, I, secret entity, hidden power or any type of phenomenas which rises without any causes and remain unchanged.

*“All phenomenas are empty, empty of what? Empty of any inherent existence” (Geshe Ngawang Sherap Dorje, Lecture on Heart Sutra, Santiago de Chile 2004)*

This “Ego” that we think to be solid and independent, is just the result of interrelations of causes and effects. We think “we are this I”, doing so we create the misunderstanding which brought up the sense of me, my, mine. Consequently we develop: I like, I want, I do not like it, I hate it. Then different types of desires, craving, attachment, hatred; then this distorted vision of the reality brings up confusion, illusion generated by ignorance, which colored our actions and are the causes of our suffering.

The Buddha called our world *kāma loka* (*P.*)<sup>4</sup> or desire world, because the majority of the actions we performed are meant to pursue objects of desires that trigger pleasant feelings and reject unpleasant, protecting and feeding up our “Ego” needs of sensuous gratification and self preservation.

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<sup>4</sup>Tiloka or three worlds or spheres : Kama loka or desire world, Rupa loka world of form and Arupa loka or world of formlessness

The Buddha concentrate his attentions on impulses with a strong psychological orientation and he makes a clear difference between needs and wants; when basic needs (normal sexual marital life e.g.) become obsessions “wants” (sexual infatuations searching new sensations, changing partners all time and wanting more), these repeated patterns of behaviors, these drives, which spring out from the three poisons (desire, hatred and ignorance) are the source of all our misery and dissatisfaction .

These impulses arise due to stimuli in the sensory field, through the senses consciousnesses <sup>5</sup> which excites a person’s feelings (*Vedanā P.*); in reality feelings is what drives us not the object itself.

Pleasant feelings (*Sukhavedanā P.*) and painful feelings (*Dukkhavedanā P.*) are affective reactions to sensations.

*“While contact is merely a reaction to stimuli, the emergence of the hedonic tone only appears at the level of feelings with the emergence of craving and grasping we discern the transition from the state of a feeling into the experience of an emotion” ( An introduction to Buddhist Psychology, page 73).*

Due to this excitation, an impression is produced through the correspondent organ impinged; pleasant feelings trigger the drives towards desirable objects for sensuous gratification, establishing desires of perpetuate its in the future and unpleasant feelings toward undesirable object with the rise of resentment, anger, rejection, aggression and annihilation.

When we look for enjoyment or pleasures, we think that it comes from getting what is pleasurable, so we try to get whatsoever we believe are the causes of our happiness. But we do not realize that our real pursue is for the sensation (emotions) we got obtaining the object of pleasure, not in the objet itself.

If it wasn’t so, what need do we have on buying and wanting new things, new situations, new friends, new partners all the time?

So these pleasurable and unpleasant sensations are responsible of our unending searching for happiness and stopping suffering.

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<sup>5</sup>eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mental consciousnesses

The idea of unconscious characters habits which extends not only one life span, but also continues through others, is a very characteristic of Buddhism doctrine and beside Hindu and Jain tradition<sup>6</sup>, is almost uncommon to other philosophies, religions or psychology systems.

Our present reactions to oncoming contacts (*Sparsā S. Phassa P.*)<sup>7</sup> have been formed in the past and brought up to the present, life after life, rooted in a dynamic personality of unconscious traits, imprints, drives, like mental habits patterns which lead us to a particular direction.

In the Early Buddhist texts these unconscious habit patterns are defined as: *saṃskāra* and *anusaya*. The word *saṃskāra* means “put together”, more specifically: that which has been put together and that which puts together.

The first passive sense refers to all conditioned phenomena generally, but specifically to all mental “dispositions mental imprints”, “determination, mental fabrications” or “volitional formations” because they are formed as a result of past volitions and because they are the causes of the arising of future intentional actions.

The second active sense refers to the form-creating modus operandi of mind; is the second link of Interdependent Origination and in this context is karmically active volition which generates rebirth and the cycle of old age and death, also called *karma* (*S.*)<sup>8</sup> imprints. *Saṃskāra* in this case is equivalent to *karma* including intentional actions of the body, speech and mind.

To better understand the *saṃskāra* functions, we can use the analogy of a river as Prof. Peter della Santina illustrates:

*“As rain falls on a hillside, that rain gathers into a rivulet, which gradually creates a channel for itself and grows into a stream. Eventually, as the channel of the stream is deepened and widened by repeated flows of water, the stream becomes a river, with well-defined banks and a definite course.”*

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<sup>6</sup>Concepts as *karma*, reincarnation and *saṃskāra* are also present in these traditions

<sup>7</sup>It is defined as the coming together of three factors : the sense object, the sense organ and corresponding sense consciousness.

<sup>8</sup>Means “action”: is the moral law of cause and effect which put emphasis on the intentionality or volition of the action itself.

*In the same way, our actions become habitual. These habits become part of our personality, and we take these habits with us from life to life in the form of what we call volition, mental formation, or “habit energy.” (The Three of Enlightenment, page 123).*

Our actions creates habits, which in turn creates tendencies ; the first cigarette, which might be unpleasant, leads to another and another and slowly the addiction is sets up.

As Upul Nishanta Gamage<sup>9</sup> using his unconventional but clear and concise language says:

*“We are habits, prisoners our our own habits, we make up our Ego out of our habits. We use thoughts as raw materials to build up stories, which in turn build up walls, cells and finally we became prisoners of ourselves and our Ego is bossing us in a fake constructed reality which is the cause of our suffering” (Mindfulness retreat, 5-10 February 2018, Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Center, Sri Lanka).*

In other words, we are disposed to respond to certain kind of stimuli in certain habitual ways. That particular predisposition represent a potentiality for that affliction to arise in response to the specific kind of feeling with which it is associated.

These latent dispositions are defilements which “lay along with” (*amusement P.*) the mental process to which they belong, rising to the surface as obsessions, whenever they meet with the suitable conditions.

The Buddha named these deep-rooted and dormant proclivities as “*Anusaya*”.

*Anusaya* is a Pāli term, derived from the prefix “*anu*” meaning: following, persisting or subsequent and the root √*si*, to lie, to sleep. It is often translated into English as: obsession, inheritance, proclivities, bent, bias, the persistence of a dormant or latent disposition, predisposition, tendency.

The Buddha spoke about *anusaya* in different *Nikāyas*<sup>10</sup> of the Pali Canon:

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<sup>9</sup>is the main teacher at the **Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Centre**, situated near Kandy in Sri Lanka. Besides teaching at Nilambe, is also frequently teaches meditation in hospitals, prisons, schools, monasteries and at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy and regularly invited to teach and give talks at Hong Kong, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden.

<sup>10</sup>*Nikāya* is a Pāli word meaning “volume”. It is often used like the Sanskrit word *āgama* to mean “collection,” “assemblage,” “class” or “group” in both Pāli and Sanskrit. It is most commonly used in reference to the Buddhist texts of the Sutta Piṭaka.

*“Monks, what one intends, and what one plans, and whatever one has a tendency towards (anuseti): this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is a basis, there is a support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and has come to growth, there is a descent of name-and-form....Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. ...*

*But, monks, when one does not intend, and one does not plan, and one does not have a tendency toward anything, no basis exists for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is no basis, there is no support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is unestablished and does not come to growth, there is no descent of name-and-form. ... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering. (Cetana Sutta,extract SN 12.38)*

*“Monks, with the abandoning and destruction of the seven obsessions, the holy life is fulfilled which seven?*

- 1.- Lust for sense pleasure ( Kamarāgānusaya)*
- 2.- attachment to existence ( bhavarāgānusaya)*
- 3.- aversion ( pathinganusaya)*
- 4.- Conceit ( mānānusaya)*
- 5.- Doubt ( Vivikicchānusaya)*
- 6.- wrong views ( diṭṭhīanusaya )*
- 7.- Ignorance ( avijjānusaya )*

*with the abandoning and destruction of these seven obsessions, the holy life is fulfilled. (Anusaya Sutta,extract: Obsessions (2) AN 7.12)*

Anusaya are basically dormant passions which become excited into activities by suitable stimuli; because of their strong pertinacity they provide the base for the emergence of greed, anger and pride. The term “latent dispositions” highlights the fact that the defilements are liable to arise so long as they have not been eradicated.

As is explained in the scheme of Interdependent Origination, the cognitive processes involving contact (*phassa*) and feeling (*vedanā*) give rise to craving (*taṇhā*) and grasping (*upādāna S.*), this is the way how *anusaya* establish the essential connection between the arising of sense consciousness, with its affective responses, and the new afflictive karmic activities that these latter provoke. This is why craving is considered the a very important point of the twelve links chain, if we are able to stop it, automatically, becoming, birth and death are eliminated and freedom is reached.

All defilements are in a sense *anusaya*, compared to dangerous microbes infesting the body, which though in a latent state, may become active at any moment when the suitable causes and conditions trigger them.

In the Early Buddhist texts, there is not an explicit reference to a concept of unconscious mind; all this changed with the describing in the Abhidharma of momentary realities, which its show us the full power of the soteriological and transcendent teachings of the Buddha.

In Theravāda Abhidhamma the minds processes are explained according the theory of moments<sup>11</sup> and the conception of *Bhavaṅga*<sup>12</sup> consciousness, which is classified into active and passive mode. The first it refers to the senses consciousness activities and the second to the process-free consciousness, also defined as the unconscious activity of the mind.

*The momentary mental events do not occur in the mind, rather, the momentary mental events themselves are the mind. (Theravāda Abhidhamma, Page 138).*

The *Bhavaṅga* passive mode, ensures the uninterrupted continuity of person's mind, through the duration of any single life. Whenever the process-consciousness is interrupted as, in coma state or deep sleep e.g., *Bhavaṅga* supervenes, preventing the possibility of any gap in the continuous flow of consciousness. Beside, it also acts as the last mind moment of present life or death-consciousness (*cuti-citta P.*) and as rebirth-linking consciousness (*patisaṅkhi-citta P.*) of the first mind moment to occur at the moment of future rebirth.

A new being's mind first moment is conditioned by the last mind moment of the preceding life, hence this functions provides the unconscious psychological continuity. This last conscious moment before death operates as a kind of summing up of that life ; whatever has been most significant in such life, it will tend to play the principal role in determining the nature of the subsequent rebirth, assuring karma efficacy.

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<sup>11</sup> Is the stream of succeeding of mind moments which provides a continuity of the mind in absence of a permanently abiding "self or atman", which Buddhism denies. It also establishing the casual relation among the past, present and future moments

<sup>12</sup> Means "factor of existence" or "the necessary condition of existence".

In Sarvāstivāda<sup>13</sup> Abhidharma, the concepts like *kleśa*, *anusaya*, *prāpti* and *aprāpti*, play an important role in the contest of repetitive patterns behaviors.

The word for defilements or impurities in Sanskrit is *Kleśa*, meaning ‘disturbance’ or ‘molest’ in the sense that they are disturbing emotions which do not allow the mind to stay balanced, at peace and equanimous, creating a kind of grey clouds, curtain or thick smoke, that contaminating mind’s surface, impeding the rising of the mind real nature.

Along with *kleśa* we have *anusaya* which indicates the subtlety and tenacity of the defilement ; is a force which adheres, attach and grows along his corresponding defilements, creating *anusayana*, which has the function of growing or intensifying the defilement connected to his corresponding object.

*Anusaya* have a subtle mode of existence, difficult to perceive . They adhere and nourish themselves (*anuserate*) in two ways : from the object and from the defilement along which they are associated and continually bound . The *anusaya* are the causes through which, the beings are attaching and clinging. They fix ‘seat’, they are thus called ‘cankorous influences (*asravas*) ; cause beings to be attached, thus called yoga or yokes; they seize, thus they are called *upadana* or clinging .

*Anusaya* induces the *prāpti* of the defilements ; *prāpti* means “conjunction, obtainment or acquisition”, is the most important *viprayukta-samskara-dharma*<sup>14</sup> in the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* and play a very important role in spiritual attainment.

*‘It is a force the that links a dharma to a particular series, is comparable to a shadow that follows its object and Aprāpti ‘disjunction’ is another real entity whose functions and nature are just opposed to those of Prāpti ensuring that a given dharma is delinked from the individual series’ ( S A, page 379).*

For example: if someone has envy, it is because of the coming together of all necessary causes and conditions for inducing the rising of it . In the same time his corresponding *prāpti* arises and by consequence the envy is linked to that person. *Prāpti*’s

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<sup>13</sup> Savāstivāda, ‘sarvam asti’ meaning essentially ‘everything exist ‘ or ‘all is’. In their view not only present dharmas exist but also past and future ones. In such way they explain how past karma affects the present and present the future. Past and future exist but in a non-active way. All dharmas have a specific “own-nature”(svabhāva) unique defining characteristic to it, for example a “ person “ is that of the cluster of dharmas that the conceptual label ‘person’ applies to. Own characteristics it does not mean they have their own intrinsic nature or self-generated.

<sup>14</sup> Conditionings disjointed from thoughts ; dharma or phenomena neither material nor mental

envy will be present from moment to moment, even if the mind is engaged with a different virtuous thought, contaminating all others dharmas, till the time a counteragent or antidote is generated that will be able to delink it . At this moment the *prāpti* of cessation of envy arises together with the *aprāpti* which induce the delinking.

*Prāpti* plays the indispensable role to obtain liberation, more over, a practitioner can attain Nirvana only by virtue of *prāpti* that links the cessation to him . In this sense is considered an indispensable soteriological tool in the process of the mind complete purification state.

Although, *Sarvāstivāda* explains important elements of the unconscious mind process, it was unable to deliver a clear depiction of how these tendencies move from one life to another.

If there is no self or atman, who transmigrates? Who goes around in Samsara? Where memory and karma are stored ?

Others Abhidharmika schools called *Samkrantivada*, *Samīitīya* and more precisely the *Sautrāntika* came out with a theory that karma does not rise from past karma in a temporal sequence but from karmic efficacy which is continuously passed down from karmic seeds<sup>15</sup>, as latent dispositions, that manifest themselves when proper causes and conditions arise .

As Vasubhandu says:

*The sleeping kleśa is the non-manifested kleśa, in the state of being a seed; the awakened kleśa is the manifested kleśa, the kleśa in action. And by “seed” one should understand a certain capacity to produce the kleśa, a power belonging to the person engendered by the previous kleśa . (ABK, page 770)*

These schools formulate similar stances which try to give an explanation about the preservation of the karmic efficacy, the transmigration of memory and meditational experiences, positing the existence of some kind of mind storage which transmigrate from one existence to another carrying on the karmic impressions, described as seeds (*bija*) along with their corresponding tendencies ( *anusaya* ) which in turn creates the pattern of behavior of the person.

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<sup>15</sup> *bija*

This theory strongly influenced the *Ālayavijñāna*<sup>16</sup> doctrine of the Yogācārā philosophy, which sustain the eight consciousnesses thesis: the five sense consciousnesses, supplemented by the mental consciousness (*mano-vijñāna*), the seventh defiled mental consciousness (*kliṣṭa-manas*), and finally the fundamental store-house consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), which is the basis of the other seven. This eighth consciousness is said to store the latent *anusaya* and impressions (*vāsanā*) of previous experiences, which form the seeds (*bija*) of future karma in this life and in the next after rebirth, keeping ongoing the tendencies which in turn creates the pattern of behavior of the person.

In Buddhism mind is not conceived as simple reservoir of informations, or just a brain mechanism, but to be the individual moment of knowing, which impact and sway over our actions and by consequence is shaping our present and future existences through the creation of *karma*. Understanding how mind it works and his functions, is essential to comprehend Buddhism in both its theoretical and practical aspects.

*Pure in his essential nature, the mind is stained by adventitious defilements (ākasmika-mala S.), the result of having misapprehended from beginning-less time the actual nature of phenomenas (Mind in Tibetan Buddhism, page 11 ).*

The complete purification of the mind from all adventitious defilements is the aim of Buddhist praxis. It has a supremacy role because, inherently, it will free us from *Dhukka* and all its related boundaries that characterized the samsaric existence.

As *anusaya* are latent dispositions of non manifested defilements (*kliṣṭa*), the process of their purification is fundamental if we wish to remove the habitual patterns behaviors which, eventually, will pave the way to Enlightenment.

*“Bhikkhus, if wanders of other sects ask you: thus: ‘For what purpose, holy life is lived under the Gautama?’ Then you should answer them for the uprooting of the anusayas. (The abandoning of the fetters, Etc, Extract, S N 42(2)-48(8), page 1542 ).*

In Tibetan the word “Dharma” has been rendered into Chö གཞི་ which means transformation.

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<sup>16</sup>Its literal meaning is “all ground” which suggests a foundation or basis often translated as : substratum, store or storehouse

What the Buddhism teaches has the power of transformation; from one side we have the passive role, the semantic of the word itself which means “transformation” and from the other side the active role when we put in practice the “Dharma”, it becomes a powerful tool in the path to liberation, providing us the understanding of the mind’s processes and the techniques needed for his transformation and purification.

*Mind is an impermanent phenomena which nature is pure and luminous and has the object of knowing . If we expose it to afflictions, the mind retain the impure experience of suffering . By the contrary, if we expose it to positive experience the mind yield the pure experience of transformation. (Geshe Ngawang Sherap Dorjey, March 2006, Kathmandu - Nepal)*

I hope this work could help the reader to better understand the *anusaya* and the psychological dynamics of the repetitive behavioral patterns, which this pivotal Buddhist concept clarifies.

In the same time, is my aspiration, that eventually, the knowledge drew from the reading, can be used by the practitioner as a practical device in his every day life prospective, providing the necessary changes to transform his mind and live a peaceful existence.

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