

MENTAL FACTORS AS CONCOMITANTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Y. KARUNADASA

1. Consciousness, as the basic awareness of an object, does not arise in its true separate condition. It always arises together with a set of mental factors called “cetasikas”, that is, the concomitants of consciousness. It is the mental factors that exercise more specific tasks in the act of cognition.

2. There are in all fifty-two mental factors. They are brought under four headings:

(a) Seven Universal Factors: ethically variable Mental Factors “common to all types of consciousness” (sabba-citta-sadharana).

(b) Six Occasional Factors: ethically variable “miscellaneous” (pakinnaka) Mental Factors occurring only in particular types of consciousness.

© Fourteen Morally Bad (akusala) Mental Factors.

(d) Nineteen Universal Beautiful or Morally Good (sobhana) Mental Factors and Six Non-Universal Beautiful Mental Factors.

3. The Seven Universal Factors: contact (phassa), feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), volition (cetana), one-pointedness (ekaggata), psychic life-faculty (arupa-jivitindriya), and attention (manasikara). These are the basic Mental Factors present in every type of consciousness, whether its ethical quality is wholesome, unwholesome, resultant (vipaka), or functional (kiriya), or in whichever plane of existence, it is experienced. The sequence of their enumeration does not imply a chronological sequence. They all occur simultaneously with the genesis of every consciousness.

4. What led to the theory of the Universal Mental Factors can be traced to early Buddhist Discourses, where it is said that consciousness (vinnana) and mentality-materiality (nama-rupa) are dependent on each other. “Mentality” in mentality-materiality denotes five mental factors, namely, feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), volition (cetana), contact (phassa), and attention (manasikara). “Materiality” in mentality-materiality denotes material phenomena consisting of the four great material elements and the matter that is dependent on them. The analysis of the world of experience cannot go beyond the mutual reciprocity of consciousness and mentality-materiality. If we overlook for the moment the material factors, what is important to remember is that consciousness and the five mental factors are necessarily co-nascent and mutually dependent. The five mental factors referred here occur in the list of Universal Mental Factors in the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma adds two more factors to make it seven, namely, psychic life-faculty (arupa-jivitindriya) and, one-pointedness of mind (citta-ekaggata).

5. The universals perform the most essential cognitive functions in every act of cognition. Among the seven factors, “phassa” or contact connotes sensorial or mental impression. It is defined as the

correlation between the sense-organ, the sense-object, and the sensory awareness (tinnam sangati phasso). It is the initial awareness of the objective presentation, and in this sense it initiates the entire cognitive process. It is the encounter between consciousness and object. The second is feeling. It arises conditioned by contact. Feeling connotes the affective tone in which the object is experienced, as pleasant, painful, or neutral. There cannot be any cognitive act that is not hedonically affected by the object of cognition. Hence, feeling is present in every consciousness. The connection between feeling and the next universal, "perception" (sanna) is shown by "what one feels, that one perceives". Volition (cetana) is the next universal. As a mental factor, it organizes the other mental states on the object of cognition. It represents the volitional aspect of cognition. The next among the universals is one-pointedness of mind. It is the focusing of the mind on the object. The sixth universal is psychic life-faculty. Its role is to infuse life into the co-nascent mental states and thus to sustain them. This brings us to 'attention' (manasikara), the last universal. It is by virtue of this mental factor that the object is made present to consciousness.

"Attention" on the object is necessary for any perception to arise. There are three conditions for the arising of perception: The first is that the sense-organ must be unimpaired. The second is that external objects must come within its range. The third is that there must be an appropriate act of attention. Where any one of these conditions fails to operate, there will be no resulting consciousness.

6. The Occasional Mental Factors: This group consists of six mental factors, namely, initial application (vitakka), sustained application (vicara), resolve (adhimokkha), energy (viriya), zest (piti), and desire to act (chanda). Like the universals, the occasional are also ethically variable. However, unlike the universals they do not occur in every type of consciousness.

7. The first two of the occasional are 'vitakka', the initial application of the mind and, 'vicara', the continuous focusing of thought. The 'vitakka-vicara' combination has a causal connection with vocal expression. In the Buddhist Discourses they are described as "vacī-samkhara", that is, verbal constructions, or sub-conscious operations of the mind preceding vocal utterance. 'Vitakka' and 'vicara' serve as two factors of 'jhana' consciousness. Both are present in the first 'jhana', but they get eliminated in the second 'jhana'. 'Adhimokkha' is the third occasional. Literally it means "a releasing on" of the consciousness and its concomitants toward the object. 'Adhimokkha' is not found among the mental factors mentioned in the Dhammasangani. The Buddhist Discourses use the term as synonymous with 'chanda' (desire to act) and 'viriya' (inception of energy). Next occasional is 'viriya'. Its recognition as an ethically variable appears to be confined to Theravada. Wholesome 'viriya' plays a vital role in Buddhist ethics. It is one of the spiritual faculties. It is defined in the Dhammasangani as "the mental inception of energy, the striving and the onward effort, the exertion and endeavor, the zeal and ardour, the vigour and fortitude, the state of unfaltering effort, the state of sustained desire, the state of unflinching endurance, the solid grip of the burden" (translation: Mrs. Rhys David) As the commentarial exegesis says "right energy should be regarded as the root of all attainments". The next occasional is "piti", zest or pleasurable interest. Piti in the sense of "zest" is different from sukha in the sense of happiness. 'Piti' comes under the aggregate of mental formations, whereas 'sukha' comes under the aggregate of feelings. 'Piti' is not pleasant feeling but, pleasurable interest or zest. It is a volitional factor without any hedonic content. The last occasional is 'chanda', defined as the 'desire to act'. It is different from

“kamacchanda”, the sensual desire and also from “lobha”, which is greed. ‘Chanda’ is ethically variable whereas, ‘kamacchanda’ and ‘lobha’, are invariably unwholesome.

8. Unwholesome (akusala) Mental Factors: There are in all 14 unwholesome mental factors, namely, (1) delusion (moha), (2) moral shamelessness (ahirika), (3) moral fearlessness (anottappa), (4) restlessness (uddhacca), (5) greed (lobha), (6) wrong view (ditthi), (7) conceit (mana), (8) hatred (dosa), (9) envy (issa), (10) avarice (macchariya), (11) worry (kukkucca), (12) sloth (thina), (13) middha (torpor), and (14) doubt (vicikiccha). Among the fourteen the first four are always associated with every unwholesome consciousness.

9. Beautiful (sobhana) Mental Factors: This category includes 25 mental factors. Among them 19 occur in all beautiful consciousness, namely, (1) faith (saddha), (2) mindfulness (sati), (3) moral shame (hiri), (4) moral fear (ottappa), (5) non-greed (alobha), (6) non-hatred (adosa), (7) neutrality of mind (tatramajjhata), (8) tranquility of mental factors (kaya-passaddhi), (9) tranquility of consciousness (citta-passaddhi), (10) lightness of mental factors (kaya-lahuta), (11) lightness of consciousness (citta-lahuta), (12) malleability of mental factors (kaya-muduta), (13) malleability of consciousness (citta-muduta), (14) wieldiness of mental factors (kaya-kammannata), (15) wieldiness of consciousness (citta-kammannata), (16) proficiency of mental factors (kaya-pagunnata), (17) proficiency of consciousness (citta-pagunnata), (18) rectitude of mental factors (kayujjukata), (19) rectitude of consciousness (cittujjukata).

10. The other mental factors do not necessarily arise with every beautiful consciousness. These are: (1) right speech (samma vaca), (2) right action (samma kammanta), (3) right livelihood (samma ajiva), (4) kindness (karuna), (5) appreciative joy (mudita), and (6) non-delusion (amoha). These are not universals but variable adjuncts not necessarily occurring in all beautiful consciousness. Among them the first three are called abstinences (virati). They are called so because they are the three mental factors responsible for the deliberate abstinence from wrong speech, wrong action, and wrong livelihood. They refer to three mental factors corresponding to right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech is abstinence from false speech, calumny or slander, harsh speech, and frivolous talk. Right action is abstinence from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Right livelihood is abstinence from dealing in poisons, intoxicants, weapons, slavery, and animals for slaughter, or any other means of livelihood that is morally reprehensible though materially rewarding.

11. If the three abstinences represent three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, what about the other five? To state briefly: Right view (samma ditthi) is represented by non-delusion or wisdom, which is the last in the list of beautiful factors. Right thought (samma samkappa) and right effort (samma vayama) are represented by ‘vitakka’ and ‘viriya’. Right mindfulness (samma sati) is represented by the mental factor called “sati” (mindfulness). Right concentration (samma samadhi) is represented by mind’s one-pointedness (ekaggata). In this manner the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path are represented in the list of mental factors in four of its sub-divisions: universal mental factors, occasional mental factors, beautiful universal mental factors, and beautiful occasional mental factors.

12. The next two occasional adjuncts of beautiful consciousness are kindness (karuna) and appreciative joy (mudita). They are two of the four sublime states called 'non-limitable' (appamanna), the other two being compassionate love (metta) and equanimity (upekkha). These two are not mentioned here because they are two modes of the two mental factors called non-hatred (adosa) and neutrality of mind (tatramajjhata). This does not mean that non-hatred and neutrality of mind always arise as two of the sublime states. It means that the two mental factors have the potentiality to be elevated to the level of sublime states. On the other hand, kindness (karuna) and appreciative joy (mudita) are not elevated states of other mental factors. They appear as mental factors in their own right. While non-hatred (adosa) and neutrality of mind (tatramajjhata) occur in all beautiful consciousness, kindness and appreciative joy are present only on occasions.

13. The last in the list of beautiful mental factors is 'non-delusion' (amoha), also called "wisdom" (panna), or "knowledge" (nana). It means knowing things as they truly are. Its mention here as an occasional adjunct of beautiful consciousness shows that, unlike the other two, it does not necessarily occur in all beautiful consciousness.