



The Underlying Tendencies

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In this article, I study the concept of the underlying tendencies and their relation to the three types of feeling in particular. Based on this I explore how meditation practice can help to counter the influence of the three underlying tendencies that trigger unwholesome reactions to the three type of feelings.

The Underlying Tendencies

In three previous articles in this journal, I referred to the relationship drawn in the Shorter Discourse with Questions and Answers, the *Cūlavaddalla-sutta* (MN 44), between the three types of feeling and the underlying tendencies. In what follows I further examine this relationship.

The Pāli term for “underlying tendency” is *anusaya*, which conveys a sense of something that “lies latent”, a dormant disposition or proclivity of the mind. As it is used in the early discourses, the term *anusaya* carries invariably negative connotations. Given their dormant nature and unvaryingly negative repercussions, a central question to be addressed in the course of my exploration will be how to go beyond the influence of these unwholesome tendencies.

The term *anusaya* occurs in the discourses with and without further specification.¹ In verses in the *Suttanipāta*, for example, the term occurs on its own and thus

carries a general meaning, without referring to a particular defilement (e.g. Sn 14, Sn 369, Sn 545, or Sn 571).

Elsewhere the discourses mention more specific underlying tendencies. An example is the Greater Discourse to Māluṅkyaputta, *Mahāmāluṅkyasutta* (MN 64), which mentions the underlying tendency to personality view, *sakkāyadiṭṭhānusaya*. This is the tendency of the unawakened worldling to construe a self in relation to the five aggregates of clinging.

The same discourse also mentions the underlying tendency to cling dogmatically to rules and observances, *sīlabbataparāmāsānusaya*. Such dogmatic clinging is not a problem only for those who practice outside of the Buddha's dispensation. A verse in the *Dhammapada* (Dhp 271) enjoins that a Buddhist monastic should not rest content with mere rules and observances (*sīlabbata*) and instead should practice for the destruction of the influxes (*āsava*). This shows that the expression *sīlabbata* can also refer to Buddhist rules and observances.² It follows that the tendency to cling to them dogmatically can be an obstacle for Buddhist practitioners as well.

Like the underlying tendency to personality view, dogmatic clinging to rules and observances will only be uprooted once the corresponding fetter (*saṃyojana*) has been eradicated with the attainment of stream-entry. In this way, although the underlying tendencies are of a latent nature and therefore seem not to be amenable to direct contemplation, the progress of insight eventually leads to their eradication. With full awakening attained, all underlying tendencies no longer are able to influence the mind. In other words, progress to becoming an arahant leads to freedom from them.

The various underlying tendencies mentioned in the discourses eventually became systematized as a set of seven, which are as follows:

- sensual lust (*kāmarāga*)
- aversion (*paṭigha*)
- views (*diṭṭhi*)
- doubt (*vicikicchā*)
- conceit (*māna*)
- passion for becoming (*bhavarāga*)
- ignorance (*avijjā*)

The Operation of the Underlying Tendencies

A discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 12.38) points to the somewhat subliminal nature of the underlying tendencies. It shows that the operation of an *anusaya* is distinct from intentions and planning. The main theme of the discourse is an exploration of the objects through which consciousness is established (in the context of rebirth). The relevant passage proceeds as follows:³

Monastics, what one intends, what one plans, what one has an underlying tendency for, that becomes an object for the establishing of consciousness ...

Monastics, if one does not intend and does not plan, yet one has an underlying tendency, then that becomes an object for the establishing of consciousness ...

Monastics, if one does not intend and does not plan, and one does not have an underlying tendency, then there is no object for the establishing of consciousness ...

According to the second of these three alternatives, consciousness can take as its object what one just has an underlying tendency for. This much suffices, without any need for active intention and planning. The indication given in this way reflects the nature of the underlying tendencies as something latent or subliminal in the mind.

Even without the activation of intentions and planning, an underlying tendency can nevertheless impact consciousness.

According to the Greater Discourse to Māluṅkyaputta, the *Mahāmāluṅkyasutta* (MN 64) already mentioned above, the underlying tendencies are even present in an infant. In the case of the underlying tendency to sensual lust, the relevant passage explains:⁴

A young innocent baby-boy lying on his back does not have [a notion of] ‘sensuality’, so how could he give rise to sensual lust in relation to sensual [objects]? Yet, underlying him is the underlying tendency to sensual lust.

Later Buddhist traditions struggled to reconcile the portrayal of the underlying tendencies, in the way it emerges in this passage, with the notion that wholesome and unwholesome qualities could not coexist in a single mind state.⁵ How can something decidedly unwholesome be in some form continuously present in the mind, even when no unwholesome mental condition is manifest and the mind is in a wholesome state?

Yet, the Greater Discourse to Māluṅkyaputta clearly shows that, from an early Buddhist perspective, the underlying tendencies are already found in an infant, even though that infant is unable to entertain the corresponding thoughts and reactions.

From a practical viewpoint, the resultant presentation points to the ingrained nature of the underlying tendency and their continuous presence even in the absence of activation. Once interest shifts from such pragmatic concerns toward creating a comprehensive map of mental states and qualities, however, this type of presentation becomes problematic. The problem lies not so much in the presentation itself, but rather results from

the demands involved in the constructing of such maps. At the same time, it does highlight an issue of practical relevance: If an underlying tendency can all the time be present without necessarily having a noticeable impact on the otherwise wholesome condition of the mind, how to counter and remove these unwholesome tendencies?

The Underlying Tendencies and Feeling

For exploring this question, in what follows I take up three out of the standard set of seven underlying tendencies, namely those that relate directly to the three types of feeling (*vedanā*).

The Discourse on the Six Sixes, the *Chachakka-sutta* (MN 148), depicts the conditioned arising of these three underlying tendencies in relation to visual experience as follows:⁶

Monastics, in dependence on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The conjunction of these three is contact. In dependence on contact there arises what is felt as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

The underlying tendency to lust underlies one who, on being touched by pleasant feeling, delights in it, welcomes it, and persists in holding on to it.

The underlying tendency to aversion underlies one who, on being touched by painful feeling, sorrows, becomes miserable, is aggrieved, wails beating the breast, and becomes bewildered.

The underlying tendency to ignorance underlies one who, on being touched by neutral feeling, does not understand as it really is the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the disadvantage, and the release in regard to that feeling.

The Discourse on the Six Sixes continues by highlighting that, without overcoming these three underlying tendencies, it will not be possible to reach liberation.

Only when awakening has been attained and the three underlying tendencies have been overcome will the reactions depicted in the Discourse on the Six Sixes no longer arise. With the occurrence of pleasant feelings, there will no longer be any delighting and holding on to them. Similarly, the arising of painful feelings will no longer result in misery and grief, and any tendency to ignore neutral feelings is replaced by understanding and insight.

Clearly, surmounting these underlying tendencies is a matter of considerable importance. Yet, the question mentioned above remains: How can we overcome something which we cannot directly observe, something that we can only know through its repercussions on the experience of these three types of feeling?

The problem is that our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling by way of lust, aversion, and ignorance are not something we intentionally decide to do. We just react in a somewhat automatic manner and often enough only realize subsequently that we have been under the influence of one of these three underlying tendency. Therefore, some kind of meditative training of the mind appears to be required in order to emerge from such automatisms. Fortunately, discourses in the *Samyutta-nikāya* provide information regarding the type of meditative insight that needs to be cultivated for this purpose.

The Underlying Tendencies and Insight

A discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 35.58) connects the overcoming of the underlying tendencies to the cul-

tivation of insight. In the case of visual experiences, this takes the following form:⁷

Monastic, on knowing and seeing the eye as impermanent, the underlying tendencies are abandoned. On knowing and seeing forms as impermanent, the underlying tendencies are abandoned. On knowing and seeing eye-consciousness as impermanent, the underlying tendencies are abandoned ... On knowing and seeing as impermanent whatever has arisen in dependence on eye-contact and is felt as pleasant, painful, and neutral, the underlying tendencies are abandoned.

According to this passage, the overcoming of the underlying tendencies requires establishing insight into impermanence. Such insight involves an appreciation of the changing nature of every dimension of what is being experienced. In the case of visual experience, this includes the sense, its object, the corresponding type of consciousness and other facets of that experience, in particular its hedonic tonality in terms of the three types of feeling. It appears to be such comprehensive appreciation of impermanence that helps to prevent immediate reaction to the feeling tone of that visual experience.

In this way, the instinctive mode of reacting to feeling by wanting what is pleasant, pushing away what is unpleasant, and ignoring what is neutral can be countered. Seen as impermanent, feelings are divested of a considerable part of their reactive potential. Given that they will change anyway, the apparent need to take action becomes diminished. Such insight counters the impact of the underlying tendencies, which otherwise operate outside the range of our conscious control. By learning to withstand the instinctive push to react on the spot, the ability of these three underlying tendencies to trigger

unskillful reactivity in response to the three types of feelings can be gradually undermined.

The key element in this respect appears to be a slowing down of mental reactivity. Instead of reacting on the spot, sufficient time is allowed for the complete picture of the situation to emerge, in particular for the crucial insight into the impermanent nature of all aspects of the present experience to have its full impact. From this more informed vantage point of observation, it becomes possible to diminish and eventually overcome the reactivity triggered by the underlying tendencies in relation to the three types of feeling.

The next discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 35.59) offers basically the same perspective on overcoming the underlying tendencies, with the difference that, instead of impermanence, it brings in the topic of not-self.

Just as every dimension of what is experienced is impermanent, so it is empty of a self. In fact, it is precisely because it is impermanent that no permanent essence can be found in it that could be taken as a self.

This rounds off the cultivation of insight described above in that, through weakening and eventually eroding our identification with the feelings experienced, the instinctive reactivity to them can be eradicated. In this way, impermanence and not-self can make their combined contribution to extinguishing unwholesome ways of reacting to feelings—ways that usually take place at a level of the mind not directly amenable to conscious control.

The Underlying Tendencies and Mindfulness

In this respect, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation appears to be of particular relevance. According to the

instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10), the task of mindfulness in regard to feelings is, first of all, a clear recognition of their affective quality. When experiencing a pleasant feeling, for example, we should clearly recognize this as if saying to ourselves: ‘I am experiencing a pleasant feeling’. The same holds for the other two types of feeling.

In addition to the distinction between pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* further differentiates each of these into worldly and unworldly occurrences. In the case of pleasant feelings, a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* explains that worldly pleasant feelings are those related to sensuality (SN 36.29). Such sensual pleasant feelings are of course related to the underlying tendency to sensual lust, as stipulated in the Shorter Discourse with Questions and Answers, the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (MN 44). An example for unworldly pleasant feelings given in the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse is the happiness of absorption. According to the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (MN 44), such happiness is not connected to the underlying tendency to sensual lust.

In this way, the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* for contemplating feelings as worldly or unworldly can be understood to point to the need to recognize not only the affective tone of a particular feeling but also its potential relationship to an underlying tendency.

Building on this understanding is an instruction found in the section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* that I like to refer to as the ‘refrain’. According to this instruction, any feeling should be contemplated in terms of its nature to arise and to pass away. This points to impermanence, the insight that, according to the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse mentioned above, can lead to an overcoming of the underlying tendencies.

In this way, the cultivation of mindfulness can serve as a tool to overcome the operation of the underly-

ing tendencies that trigger impulsive reactions to the three types of feeling.

Abbreviations:

Dhp: *Dhammapada*

MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*

SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*

Sn: *Sutta-nipāta*

¹ Rhys Davids, T.W., and William Stede 1921/1993: *Pali-English Dictionary*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 44 s.v. *anusaya*.

² See note 12 page 220 in Anālayo 2003: *Satipatṭhāna, The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham: Windhorse.

³ SN II 65: *yañ ca kho, bhikkhave, ceteti yañ ca pakappeti yañ ca anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā ... no ce, bhikkhave, ceteti no ce pakappeti, atha ce anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā ... yato ca kho, bhikkhave, no ceva ceteti no ca pakappeti no ca anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ na hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā.*

⁴ MN I 433: *daharassa hi ... kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyya-kassa kāmā ti pi na hoti, kuto pan' assa uppajjissati kāmesu kāmacchando? anuseti tvev' assa kāmarāgānusayo.*

⁵ See Karunaratne, Upali 1965: “Anusaya”, in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, G.P. Malalasekera (ed.), Sri Lanka: Department of Buddhist Affairs, 1.4: 775–777.

⁶ MN III 285: *cakkhuñ ca, bhikkhave, paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā. so sukhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati; tassa rāgānusayo anuseti. dukkhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno socati kilamati paridevati urattāliṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati; tassa paṭighānusayo anuseti. adukkhamasukhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno tassā vedanāya samudayañ ca atthaṅgamañ ca assādañ ca ādīnavañ ca nissaraṇaṃ ca yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti; tassa avijjānusayo anuseti.*

⁷ SN IV 32 (part of the quote is abbreviated in the original): *cakkhuṃ kho, bhikkhu, aniccato jānato passato anusayā pahiyanti; rūpe aniccato jānato passato anusayā pahiyanti; cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ aniccato jānato passato anusayā pahiyanti ... yam p'idaṃ cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā tam pi aniccato jānato passato anusayā pahiyanti.*