

# THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

## Mental Formations

The third establishment is mindfulness of the mind (*chitta*) in the mind. To be aware of the mind is to be aware of the mental formations (*chitta samskara*).

"Formations" (*samskara*) is a technical term in Buddhism. Anything that is "formed," anything that is made of something else, is a formation. A flower is a formation. Our anger is a formation, a mental formation. Some mental formations are present all the time and are called "universal" (contact, attention, feeling, perception, and volition). Some arise only under particular circumstances (zeal, determination, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom). Some are uplifting and help us transform our suffering (wholesome, or beneficial, mental formations), and others are heavy and imprison us in our suffering (unwholesome, or unbeneficial, mental formations).

There are mental formations that are sometimes wholesome and sometimes unwholesome, such as sleepiness, regret, initial thinking, and developing thought. When our body and mind need rest, sleep is wholesome. But if we sleep all the time, it can be unwholesome. If we hurt someone and regret it, that regret is wholesome. But if our regret leads to a guilt complex that colors whatever we do in the future, that regret can be called unwholesome. When our thinking helps us see clearly, it is beneficial. But if our mind is scattered in all directions, that thinking is unbeneficial. There are many beautiful aspects of our consciousness, like faith, humility, self-respect, non-craving, non-anger, non-ignorance, diligence, ease, care, equanimity, and nonviolence. Unwholesome mental formations, on the other hand, are like a tangled ball of string. When we try to untangle it, we only wind it around ourselves until we cannot move. These mental formations are sometimes called afflictions (*kleshas*), because they bring pain to ourselves and others. Sometimes they are called obscurations because they confuse us and make us lose our way. Sometimes they are called leaks or setbacks (*ashrava*), because they are like a cracked vase. The basic unwholesome mental formations are greed, hatred, ignorance, pride, doubt, and views. The secondary unwholesome mental formations, arising from the basic ones, are anger, malice, hypocrisy, malevolence, jealousy, selfishness, deception, guile, unwholesome excitement, the wish to harm, immodesty, arrogance, dullness, agitation, lack of faith, indolence, carelessness, forgetfulness, distraction, and lack of attention. According to the Vijñānavāda School of Buddhism, altogether there are fifty-one kinds of mental formations, including feelings. Since feelings is, by itself, the second establishment of mindfulness, the other fifty fall into the category of the third establishment of mindfulness.

Every time a mental formation arises, we can practice mere recognition. When we are agitated, we just say, "I am agitated," and mindfulness is already there. Until we recognize agitation as agitation, it will push us around and we will not know what is going on or why. To practice mindfulness of the mind does not mean not to be agitated. It means that when we are agitated, we know that we are agitated. Our agitation has a good friend in us, and that is mindfulness.

Even before agitation manifests in our mind consciousness, it is already in our store consciousness in the form of a seed. All mental formations lie in our store consciousness in the form of seeds. Something someone does may water the seed of agitation, and then agitation manifests in our mind consciousness. Every mental formation that manifests needs to be recognized. If it is wholesome, mindfulness will cultivate it. If it is unwholesome, mindfulness will encourage it to return to our store consciousness and remain there, dormant.

We may think that our agitation is ours alone, but if we look carefully, we'll see that it is our inheritance from our whole society and many generations of our ancestors. Individual consciousness is made of the collective consciousness, and the collective consciousness is made of individual consciousnesses. They cannot be separated. Looking deeply into our individual consciousness, we touch the collective consciousness. Our ideas of beauty, goodness, and happiness, for example, are also the ideas of our society. Every winter, fashion designers show us the fashions for the coming spring, and we look at their creations through the lens of our collective consciousness. When we buy a fashionable dress, it is because we see with the eyes of the collective consciousness. Someone who lives deep in the upper Amazon would not spend that amount of money to buy such a dress. She would not see it as beautiful at all. When we produce a literary work, we produce it with both our collective consciousness and our individual consciousness.

We usually describe mind consciousness and store consciousness as two different things, but store consciousness is just mind consciousness at a deeper level. If we look carefully at our mental formations, we can see their roots in our store consciousness. Mindfulness helps us look deeply into the depths of our consciousness. Every time one of the fifty-one mental formations arises, we acknowledge its presence, look deeply into it, and see its nature of impermanence and interbeing. When we practice this, we are liberated from fear, sorrow, and the fires burning inside us. When mindfulness embraces our joy, our sadness, and all our other mental formations, sooner or later we will see their deep roots. With every mindful step and every mindful breath, we see the roots of our mental formations. Mindfulness shines its light upon them and helps them to transform.