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THE NATURE OF SANKHĀRA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT:

In Theravāda Buddhism the term "saṅkharā" is one of the most elusive, yet, interesting Pāli technical terms, which will be extensively discussed in this article. In many cases the term makes learners of Buddhism confused and perplexed. It is very hard to deduce in which sense it is used in the suttas because it has different meanings according to different context. The term 'saṅkhāra' generally means 'things either material or immaterial which are subject to change' although it has particular implication in different connections. The aim of this article is to delve into the meaning of the term and to provide research scholar of Buddhism with useful facts and figures, to some extent. The article is written especially based on Pāli Canons, commentaries and sub-commentaries.



KEYWORDS: Sankhāra, Volition, Dependent Origination, Vasana, Nibbana, ultimate Truth, Assimilation, Metathesis, Five aggregate, Metamorphosis.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the present article concentrates on 'saṅkhāra', one of the most elusive technical terms of Buddhist philosophy. The term 'saṅkhāra' is found almost everywhere in all five *Nikāyas* including commentaries and sub-commentaries. Its meaning, sometimes, is so confused and so complicated that it is unfathomable to decide which denotation is more appropriate with the present theme.

When contextual relationship and etymology of this term is analyzed, it is found that the use of the term 'saṅkhāra' is mainly related to the explanation of *saṅkhārakkhandha* in formulation of aggregates, *abhisankhāra* in Dependent Origination and

saṅkhārupekkhā in Insight Meditation. The meaning of the other compound terms with 'saṅkhāra' is affiliated with the three forms of mode of expression of this term one way or another. The meaning of 'saṅkhāra' is sometimes more specific, sometimes more general depending on the word with which the term is associated. This term has so wide and extensive connotation that it covers from the smallest change of our body up to metamorphosis of system of the universe. Although its meaning is bemused in many cases, it is efficacious word which can fully express the uncertainty and chaotic condition of human life. If someone either practices meditation or learns Buddhist

scriptures, it is unavoidable that he will meet this term. So it is very important to study various implications of the term 'saṅkhāra' either from theoretical point of view or from pragmatic standpoint. In this article, I will reveal etymology of the word 'saṅkhāra' and a brief statement of different forms of 'saṅkhāra' which are found in the five *Nikāyas*. It also makes attempt to explain how the term is used in Buddhist philosophy.

DEFINITION OF SAṅKHĀRA

When Buddhism arose in India about the sixth century before Christ, the other philosophical systems of Brahmanism like *Vaisesika*, *Saṅkhyā* and so on had flourished in that land. It can be

estimated that the religious systems that had grown in India at the time are intertwined culturally and philosophically. It is evident that they would reciprocally employ some religious important terms, for it is found that some technical terms such as *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāna*), *Dhamma* (*Dharma*) were used in the religions of the day.

From the linguistic point of view, it can be assumed that there is a close relationship between Pāli and Sanskrit. For Buddhist terms which are either philologically or etymologically connected to Sanskrit, they can be divided into two kinds; (i) the terms such as *Pathavī* (Skt. *Prthavī*) and *āpo* (Skt. *Apas*) which are used in the same senses in Sanskrit and (ii) the terms such as *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāṇa*) and *Atta* (Skt. *Atman*) which are used in the different senses in Pali. Here it should be noticed that when some terms of Sanskrit is taken on by Pāli, the original form of most Sanskrit words are generally not retained in Pāli. It modifies philologically the form of those terms so that the terms can be easily pronounced. To transform the original form of Sanskrit words, Pāli uses different methods such as the law of assimilation, metathesis and so on.

It is, sometimes, necessary to analyze some Pāli technical terms from etymological standpoint to enhance the appreciation of those terms. The aim of this article is to comb through Sanskrit for different meanings of the term '*saṅkhāra*' and to describe a brief statement of the connotation of '*saṅkhāra*' mentioned in Pāli. According to Pāli Text Society's Pāli-English Dictionary the term '*saṅkhāra*' is composed of '*saṃ*+/*kar*+*a*' (*saṃ*-well, /*kar*-to do or to make). It gives various meanings of this term such as 'preparation, constituent potentiality, composition, aggregate and essential conditions'.¹

Saṅkhāra and Vāsana

The *Abhidhanappadīpikā* describes the word '*vāsana*' as synonyms with '*saṅkhāra*'.² The word '*vāsana*' is usually translated as 'that which remains in the mind, tendencies of the past and former impression'.³ It is not acceptable to say that '*vāsana*' and '*saṅkhāra*' have similar connotations. '*Vāsana*' signifies 'behaviors of one who has not eradicated defilements or behaviors resulting from defilements'.⁴ The other commentators too point out that the word '*vāsana*' connotes 'that which remains in mind after uprooting defilements or tendencies produced by defilements'.⁵

For the *Abhidhānappadīpikā-tikā* the word '*vāsana*' implies 'a special capacity as a remainder left by defilements'. It is divided into three classes; (i) Wholesome *vāsana*, (ii) Unwholesome *vāsana* and (iii) Indeterminate *vāsana*. But Unwholesome *vāsana* is subdivided into two kinds; (i) *vāsana* which is the cause of some bodily and verbal behaviours and (ii) *vāsana* which is the cause of being born in Woeful State. From these authentic statements it can be concluded that '*vāsana*' is not a kind of Volition (*cetanā*), which is just 'a remainder as tendency left by the occurrence of defilements'. In other words, it can be compared with an echo of sound which reverberates in a cave. According to the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* '*vāsana*' is not included in any kind of consciousness or mental factors. So it is not appropriate to state that the meaning of '*saṅkhāra*' is similar to that of '*vāsana*' in some aspects.

General Survey of Saṅkhāra

Although the meaning of '*saṅkhāra*' is mystified in many cases, it plays an important role in Buddhism for it serves as '*abhisāṅkhāra*' an important factor in the Dependent Origination, as '*saṅkhārakkhandhā*' in *khandha* system and as '*saṅkhāradukkha*' (of *dukkha-sacca*) in fourfold Noble Truths. In addition to these particular uses, it can be found that the term performs the task of giving different meanings in different contexts. This term can be used not only in the philosophical system but also in the meditational practice. Buddhism accepts four Ultimate Truths, namely, consciousness (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), matter (*rūpa*) and *Nibbāna*, which represent all phenomena that really exist within reach of human knowledge or beyond human knowledge. The term '*saṅkhāra*' is so remarkable that it can indicate three Ultimate Truths except *Nibbāna*.

¹ Thein Maung, U, Division of Four Discourses, pp.664-5

² MahāBuddhaghosa, Baddhanta, Dhammapada-Atthakathā, P. 65

³ T.W Rhys Davids and willian stede, Pāli English Dictionary, p. 610

⁴ Ariya, U, Gpne Taw Ayatha, p. 82

⁵ Dhammapāla, Bhandattanta, Udāna- Atthakathā, P, 157

The use of two terms '*saṅkhata*' and '*saṅkhāra*' may lead some readers to bewilderment. Although they have different suffixes (i.e., the suffix '*ta*' of the former has passive meaning and the suffix '*a*' of the latter has active), these two terms refer to all mental and material phenomena which are subject to the arising and disappearing.

To the Buddhism there are two regions i.e. the region of "*saṅkhata*" and the region of "*Asaṅkhata*." Everything in the world, good or bad is included in the domain of "*Saṅkhata*," which represents "*Anicca*" (impermanence), "*Dukkha*" (suffering), and "*Anatta*" (no-soul). "*Asaṅkhata*" means "outside the *Saṅkhata*" i.e. "*Nibbāna*." When someone transcends the domain of *Saṅkhata*, it is said that he attains *Nibbāna* or he liberates from all the sufferings. It is noteworthy to state that both *Saṅkhata* and *Saṅkhāra* are sometimes used as synonyms because these two terms indicate a similar meaning in many places.

COMMENTARIAL CLASSIFICATION OF SAṅKHĀRA

It is important to state that the *Vibhaṅga* commentary gives general survey of *saṅkhāra* (formation); it is classified into four, namely, (i) *Saṅkhata-saṅkhāra* (the formation consisting of the formed), (ii) *abhisāṅkhata-saṅkhāra* (the formation consisting of the kamma-formed), (iii) *abhisāṅkharaṇaka-saṅkhāra* (the formation consisting of the act of kamma-forming) and (iv) *payogābhisāṅkhāra* (the formation consisting of momentum).⁶

Saṅkhata-saṅkhāra means '*saṅkhāra* which is conditioned by causes'. It manifests itself in the words like '*aniccā vata saṅkhāra*'.⁷ The term '*saṅkhāra*' in this connection refers to 'mental and material phenomena that are occasioned by causes'. The commentary states that there is nothing which is not included by the *saṅkhata-saṅkhāra*. *Abhisāṅkhata-saṅkhāra* applies to material and immaterial states generated by *kamma*. The sub-commentary of the *Visuddhimagga* states that it means 'mundane resultant consciousnesses and material phenomena born of *kamma*'.⁸

Abhisāṅkharaṇa-saṅkhāra is the wholesome and unwholesome volitions of the three planes (*tebhāmakakusalākusalacetanā*). The word '*saṅkhāra*' in the sentence '*avijjāgatoyaṃ bhikkhave purisapuggalo puññe saṅkhāraṃ abhisāṅkharoti*' is used in the sense of '*abhisāṅkharaṇa-saṅkhāra*'.⁹ (This man, bhikkhus, in his ignorance forms by *kamma* a formation of merit).¹⁰

Payogābhisāṅkhāra is the bodily and mental energy (*kāyikacetasiṅgaṃ vīriyaṃ*). The *saṅkhāra* of that kind appears in the following sentence; *Yāvatikā abhisāṅkhārassa gati, tāvatikaṃ gantvā akkhāhataṃ maññe atthāsi* (Having gone as far as its momentum carried it, it stood as though it were fixed),¹¹ (Tikanipāta, Rathakāravagga, Sacetanasutta).

CONNOTATION OF SAṅKHĀRA IN PATICCASAMUPPĀDA, KHANDHA AND VIPASSANĀ

But based on its miscellaneous usages in the text, '*saṅkhāra*' can be mainly divided into three kinds; (i) '*Saṅkhāra*' in the *Patīccasamuppāda*, (ii) '*saṅkhāra*' in aggregates and (iii) '*saṅkhāra*' in *Vipassanā* (insight meditation). In the *Patīccasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination) it is used in the name of '*abhisāṅkhāra*'. The term '*abhisāṅkhāra*' represents *Puññābhisāṅkhāra* (formation of merit), *Apuññābhisāṅkhāra* (formation of demerit) and *āneñjābhisāṅkhāra* (formation of the imperturbable). These three kinds primarily refer to volition (*cetanā*). Depending on consciousness with which volition is associated, its kinds become varied. When volition is associated with thirteen wholesome consciousnesses, it is said that there are thirteen formations of merit. When it is associated with twelve unwholesome consciousnesses, formation of demerit becomes twelve kinds. When it occurs together with four imperturbable consciousnesses, it is stated that there are four imperturbable volitions.

It is quite clear that '*saṅkhāra*' in the Dependent Origination refers to volition, one of fifty-two mental factors. So it is necessary to reconsider again that the word '*saṅkhāra*' is rendered as 'formation' in all cases. The word '*saṅkhāra*' should be translated exactly according to context. According to some commentators, the term *saṅkhāra* in the Dependent Origination exactly means '*kamma* or *kammic* force'.

⁶ Dhammapāla, Battanta, *Vibhaṅga-Atthakathā*, pp. 127 – 128

⁷ MahāBuddhaghosa, *Dīghanikaya-Atthakathā*, pp. 129 –161

⁸ MahāBuddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga -Mahātīkā*, p. 252

⁹ *Sanyuttapāli*, p. 310

¹⁰ Nānamoli, *The Dispeller of Delusion*, Vol.I, p. 167

¹¹ *Ānguttapāli*, p. 110. Dhammapāla, *Vibhaṅga-Atthakathā*, p. 128

'*Saṅkhāra*' in aggregates especially belongs to 'formation aggregate' (*saṅkhārakkhandha*). The *khandha* system adopted by Buddhism divides all mental or material phenomena into five categories, namely, form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness. 'Form aggregate' means 'twenty-eight matters', 'feeling aggregate', 'a mental factor 'feeling', and 'perception aggregate' 'a mental factor 'perception'. 'Formation aggregate' connotes 'fifty mental factors led by volition. 'Consciousness aggregate' represents 'eighty-nine consciousnesses'. The connotation of '*saṅkhāra*' in *khandha* system is a little different from that of '*saṅkhāra*' in the Dependent Origination. While the term *saṅkhāra* in the Dependent Origination lay an emphasis on volition only, the term in *khandha* system stresses not only on volition but also the remaining forty-nine mental factors.

'*Saṅkhāra*' in Insight Meditation especially applies to '*saṅkhārupekkhā*' (equanimity about formations). Here '*saṅkhāra*' in '*saṅkhārupekkhā*' means 'the changes of things experienced by a yogi when he contemplates on the nature of mental and material phenomena'. The yogi has to try to understand conditioned things from ten perspectives which are described in a way '*uppādo saṅkhārā*' and so on, and then as a result of his constant effort, he involuntarily deserts liking or disliking of those conditioned things (*sankhara*), which is called *sankharupekha*.

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of *saṅkhāra* has been mentioned in this article, it can be seen that the knowledge of *saṅkhāra* is an important factor that provides a clear insight of Buddhist philosophy. The comprehension of this term is indispensable key to open the treasury of Buddhist wisdom and to attain *Nibbāna*, the emancipation of all forms of suffering. From the previous explanations of *saṅkhāra*, it can be concluded that when either formulation of aggregates or Dependent Origination or all forms of mental and material phenomena are described in Buddhist scriptures, the term which is widely put into use by *Suttas*, commentaries and sub-commentaries is '*saṅkhāra*'. The nature of '*saṅkhāra*' practically can be found 'things around us which we can see, smell, hear, taste, touch and feel' although its meaning seems rather complicated from the academic point of view.

It is more understandable to put each kind of *saṅkhāra* into the structure of four Ultimate Truths, namely, (i) consciousness (*citta*), (ii) mental factors (*cetasika*), matter (*rūpa*) and (iv) *Nibbāna*. Nothing escapes from these four Ultimate Truths which divide all phenomena into four categories. When '*saṅkhāra*' is stated as aggregate, it means 'fifty mental factors except feeling and perception. From this aspect the term *saṅkhārakkhandha* especially signifies 'mental factors', not 'consciousness', 'matter' and '*Nibbāna*'.

For the *Patisambhidāmagga*, there are two kinds of wisdom, such as '*sutamaya-ñāṇa*' and '*bhāvanāmayā-ñāṇa*'. Mere information on Buddhist literature is '*sutamayañāṇa*' (knowledge of what consists in the heard). '*Sutamayañāṇa*' is just data collection, compared with a road map. As long as one does not tread on the path, one cannot reach anywhere and cannot accomplish anything. Based on the information he collects, he exercises them in his daily life. It is called '*bhāvanāmayāñāṇa*' (knowledge of what consists in the development).

The principal aim of the article is to promote not only '*sutamaya-ñāṇa*' but also '*bhāvanāmayā-ñāṇa*' and to provide with necessary information of '*saṅkhāra*' one who leads his life to attain the emancipation of suffering. It cannot be admitted that in this article data and facts of '*saṅkhāra*' are complete, but it is probable to say that to some extent it will be helpful to one who will make research on this subject matter in the future.

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