



THE CONCEPTIONS OF VOLITIONAL FORMATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE OF THE SAṆKHĀRAKHANDHĀ IN BUDDHISM

Thuzarta¹, Dr. Yeshpal²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Samrat Ashok Subharti School of Buddhist Studies,
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Subhartipuram, NH-58, Delhi Haridwar Bypass Road,
Meerut -250005, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Language, Samrat Ashok Subharti School of Buddhist Studies,
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Subhartipuram, NH-58, Delhi Haridwar Bypass Road,
Meerut -250005, India.

ABSTRACT

The five sections are separate parts that come together to form a human being. Buddha taught that all people are made of these five elements. It is a matter that is tangible (i.e. can be touched); this section is connected to our five senses (smell, touch, taste, sight and hearing). Holistic mental structures include habits, prejudices, and prejudices. Our will, or will, is also part of the fourth section. They are equanimity, pride, lust, karma, virtue and other kinds of thoughts which are not perfect. Finally, the laws of cause and effect, known as kamma, are the area of the fourth section. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to highlight the conceptions of volitional formation and its importance of the Sankhara-khandha in Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Conceptions of Volitional Formation, Sankhara-khandha, and Society.

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this paper is primarily; to uncover the primary meaning that links the various contexts in which the term appears; and, secondarily, to arrive at a precise interpretation of *saṅkhārakhandhā* and its function concerning the theory of dependent origination. It will not attempt to find one English translation with which to render all the connotations of *Sankhara* since, as we saw above, such an undertaking would be doomed to failure. Instead, It will attempt to adduce an extensive (and, It hopes, comprehensive) explanation of *Sankhara* that will provide an understanding of the word's general meaning by stressing the simultaneous presence of its causal and affective dimensions. To achieve this task, it will first use the fivefold division to analyze the different contexts of the word. It will not discuss *Saṅkhārakhandhā* within the scheme. Once the different contexts have been presented, and the meaning of the term within them has been clarified, it will proceed to discuss the general sense of the term *Sankhara*. Finally, it will examine the specific function of *Sankhara* as one of the *Pancakkhandha*. This methodology will offer us both a general understanding of the term *Sankhara* and the *saṅkhāra-khandhā*.

THE SEMANTIC TERM OF SANKHARA

To know the specific function of *Sanskarkhand*, I will first explore the meaning of the word *Sanskāra* in its broader context. *Sankhara* is one of the Pali words which is highly endowed with philosophical connotations. Stcherbatsky remarks that “words and concept rites play a distinctive role in all Indian philosophical systems”. It usually implies some mystical occult power, which later manifests itself in some powerful fact. In his introduction to, I.B. Homer refers to a passage in the Pali text Society Dictionary of *Samkhara* to emphasize the semantic depth of the word. Mixes perspectives, is so complete that it is almost impossible to master Western terminology. Its meaning lies in the translation. Mrs. Rhys Davids also expresses her nervousness about the significance of the word.

We are only at the threshold of its problems, and it is hence not strange if we find them as baffling as, let us say, our own confused usage of many psychological terms-feeling, will, mind-about which we ourselves greatly differ, would prove to an inquiring Buddhist. If I have not attempted to go into the crux of the *saṅkhārakhandhā* [sic], it is because neither the Manual [the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*] nor its Commentary brings us any nearer to a satisfactory hypothesis.



The exact meaning of this ‘mysterious power’ still remains obscure. As Bandusena Madanayake points out in his doctoral thesis, ‘thirty scholars have put forward as many different meanings’ for this single term. One of the reasons for this diversity of translations might be the fact that within the Pāli language itself, *Sankhara* possesses many meanings. Surendranath Dasgupta explains the polysemy encountered in the Pāli canon by the fact that:

Buddha was one of the earliest thinkers to introduce proper philosophical terms and phraseology with a specific philosophical method, and he often used the same word with more or less different meanings. Thus some philosophical terms are soft when compared with precise and definite definitions of meaning found in later Sanskrit.

Yet many scholars, such as Hans Wolfgang Schumann, suggest that the rather wide semantic field associated with the word *Sankhara* was nonexistent at the time of the Buddha. According to Schumann, this diversity of meanings resulted from the growth of exegesis in the earlier *Sutta* literature and from the development of an intricate and systematic philosophical system that arose many centuries after the death of the Buddha.

L. B. Horner divides *Sankhara* into four different categories, each having a different meaning. This classification consists of *Sankhara* (1) as one of the aggregates, (2) as of the links of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and (3) as a sort of activity associated with the body, speech, and mind (*kāya, vacī, and citta*) and finally (4) as properties when associated with the term life (*āyu*). Schumann, in his thesis *Bedeutung und Bedeutungsentwicklung des Terminus Sankhara in frühen Buddhismus*, elaborates a similar scheme by classifying the various interpretations of the term into four categories. Using Horner's and Schumann's classifications as a starting point, I have developed a more extensive scheme consisting of five categories: (1) *Sankhara* as a *saṅkhatadhamma*, as a synonym of its cognate form *Sankhara*, (2) as a *paccaya*, (3) as *āyu-Sankhara*, (4) as part of the compounded words *asaṅkhāra* and *Sankhara*, and finally, (5) as one of the five aggregates.

SANKHARA AS SAṅKHATA

Throughout the Pāli canon, the concept of *Sankhara* is closely associated with that of *Sankhara*. The usual definition of the term runs thus: “it is called *Sankhara* because it ‘produces’ *Sankhara*. Because the Pāli word for what I have translated as “to produce” is *abhisatikharoti*, a cognate of *Sankhara*, the deciphering of this definition is rendered more difficult. The *Atthasālini* provides us with a description of *Sankhara* that may clarify the above definition of *Sankhara*. “The *Sankhāra* are made, having been assembled by conditions, and whatever is not *Sankhara* is *asaṅkhata*. S.Z Aung, in his appendix to the translation of the *Abhidhammatasātigāha*, emphasizes that, although the notion of being compounded is implied by the term *Sankhara*, the idea of being conditioned and having been caused

is the closest to the definition of the term. These conditions, or causes, that produce the *saṅkhatadhamma* seem to be *Sankhara* as well.

I do not think that, here, the term *Dhamma* is used in a different sense than *Sankhara*. If the Buddha had said “*Sabbe Sankhara Anatta*” meaning that all the conditioned phenomena are substance less, people might have wrongly inferred that the unconditioned phenomenon (*asaṅkhatadhamma*) must have a permanent entity (*Atta*). The unconditioned phenomenon, which, in the Theravāda tradition, is restricted to a unique component (*Nibbana*), is also devoid of any permanent entity (*Atta*). In order to avoid the misunderstanding that *Sabbe Sankhara Anatta* could potentially imply, the term *Sankhara* is replaced by *Dhamma* in this particular context. Moreover, by stating ‘*Sabbe Dhamma Anatta*,’ the text not only suggests that all the conditioned phenomena are *anana* but that the only unconditioned phenomenon is *Nibbana* is *Anatta* as well. The Commentary on this passage also mentions that *Sankhara* is a synonym of *Sankhara*, the latter referring to any element (*Dhamma*) which has been conditioned.

Therefore, we may affirm that *Sankhara*, as a *Sankhara*, refers to all the principles of existence except *Nibbana* (and other *Dhamma* considered by other traditions as *asaṅkhata*). Stcherbatsky presents an interesting theory as to why the conditioned phenomena are called *Sankhara*: The elements of existence were regarded as something more similar to energies (*samskrta dhamma* [skr. equivalent for *saṅkhatadhamma*]) than to substantial elements. Since the energies [*saṅkhatadhamma*] never worked in isolation but always in mutual interdependence according to causal law, they were called ‘synergies’ cooperators (*samskara* [skr. equivalent for *Sankhara*]).

SANKHARA AS PACCAYA

Within the complex theory of dependent origination, *Sankhara* is inserted as a link between ignorance (*avijja*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). This means that on account of ignorance, *Sankhara* comes into being and generates a consciousness. It seems that within the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the term *Sankhara* has a meaning radically different from the one previously ascribed to “*Sankhara* as a *Sankhāra*” since there is no explicit textual evidence of conditioned phenomena producing consciousness.

The *Vibhanga* defines *Sankhara* produced by ignorance (and implicitly generating a future consciousness) as volition (*cetanā*). The *Sutta* literature also has a similar definition of *Sankhara*: the *Samyutta Nikaya* equates the term with the six groups of volition, which are defined therein with respect to the six sense doors.

Volition is clearly explained in the *Aliguttaranikāya*, where the Buddha states that what he calls volition (*cetanā*) is simply *kamma* and that one who ‘cetanizes’ is one who generates *kamma* either by the body, words, or mind: ‘Monks, I



say that volition is action. Having ‘cetanized,’ one acts by deed, word or thought. Another example of the relation between *saṅkhāra* (or volition) and *kamma* is symbolically exemplified in the *Rathakāravagga* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*. In this *Sutta*, a ‘wheel-maker’ explains to the king that the wheel (and by analogy, the *kamma*-concept) ‘kept rolling as long as the impulse that set the motion (*abhisāṅkhārassagati*) lasted. It then circled and fell to the ground. The term *abhisāṅkhara* is a synonym of volition and refers here to the dynamism and momentum usually associated with *kamma*. For this reason, Padmasiri de Silva points out that *Sankhara* are often considered synonymous with the concept of volition or *kamma*. These pieces of textual evidence support the relationship that the Burmese meditation teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin drew between *kamma* and *Sankhara*.

In this connection, we should understand that every action, either by deed, word, or thought-leaves behind a force of action, *Sankhara* (or *kamma* in popular terminology), which goes to the credit or debit account of the individual, due to whether the action is good or bad. There is an accumulation of *Sankhara* (or *kamma*) with everyone, which functions as the supply source of energy to sustain life that is inevitably followed by suffering and death.

The *Vibhanga* further states that *Sankhara* produced by ignorance are threefold: meritorious *Sankhara* (*puññābhisāṅkhāra*) non-meritorious *Sankhara* (*apuññābhisāṅkhāra*) and ‘unshakable’ *Sankhara* (*āneññābhisāṅkhāra*). Meritorious *Sankhara* are defined as being profitable volitions *kamma* that will yield their results either in the sensual sphere or in the fine material sphere; these meritorious ‘actions’ (of body, speech, and mind) consist of charity, morality, and meditation. The non-meritorious *Sankhara* are explained as being unprofitable *kamma*, the results of which will be reaped only in the sensual sphere. The unshakable *Sankhara* are said to be wholesome *kamma* producing a result in any of the four immaterial spheres. This division of *Sankhara* into meritorious, non-meritorious, and unshakable further stresses the relation between *Sankhara* and *kamma* since the *Vibhanga* states that these three divisions constitute the entire field of the *kamma* process.

The *Vimohavinodanī* elucidates the meaning of *Sankhara* as threefold: there are *Sankhara* of body, speech, and mind. The *Sankhara* of the body is initiated by the body and expressed through it. The *Sankhara* of speech and mind are initiated by speech and the mind and express themselves through them. According to the *Yamaka*, the *Sankhara* of the body are said to originate from breathing in and breathing out; the *Sankhara* of speech, from reflection and investigation which “denote the whole mental process of thinking the mental *Sankhara*, from *saññā* and *Vedana* or, in other words, all the principles associated with the mind except reflection and investigation. I do not believe that body *Sankhara* (*kāyasāṅkhāra*) arises from the mere function of respiration, but since breathing is essential for the subsistence of the body and

the performance of any other action, it is considered to be the precursor of any further body *Sankhāra*.

Similarly, reflection and investigation are not inherently speech *Sankhāra* (*vacīsaṅkhāra*), but because these functions precede all verbal activities, they are regarded as the foundation that allows a person to speak and thereby generate speech *Sankhāra*. Since the mental *Sankhara* are said to arise from *saññā* and *Vedana*, *Sankhara* as a *paccaya* is not simply deeds but also physical, vocal, or mental actions that will yield certain consequences in the future. Both of these, the karmically charged action and the future consequences are *Sankhara* in the sense of conditioned phenomena, but only the former can be classified under *Sankhara* as a *paccaya*.

CONCLUSION

The Common Meaning of the Word Sankhara

Now that we have looked at the meaning of *Sankhāra* within the first four divisions of our fivefold classification, it will attempt to extract the essence of the term and underline the general meaning of this puzzling concept. We have seen that *Sankhāra*, as a *Sankhara*, refers to all the principles of existence, i.e., everything that exists except, of course, for *Nibbana*, which is considered to be an unconditioned phenomenon. In this context, *Sankhāra* is a synonym for conditioned phenomena since all of them are, by definition, conditioned. As mentioned before, this particular definition of *Sankhāra* means ‘the entire universe,’ within and without; this includes the individual microcosm made up of the five aggregates and the macrocosm of the entire phenomenal world we live in. In short, *Sankhāra* as a *Sankhara* refers to everything that causes and that is caused.

Sankhara as a *paccaya* was defined in terms of two divisions. First, we examined the various *Sankhāra* divided into *Punna*, *apuñña*, and *āneñña*, each being respectively described as meritorious *Kamma*, unprofitable *Kamma*, and wholesome *Kamma* producing a result in any of the four immaterial spheres. Then, the word was described in terms of *kāyo*, *vacī*, and *citta*, referring to physical, verbal, and mental actions. In this context, *Sankhāra* seems to mean any action that will ultimately bring about a result; here, *Sankhāra* is not different from volition, which is often equated with *kamma*. *Sankhara* as a *paccaya* is the initiating action (mental, vocal, or physical) and the kammic force that will yield an effect. However, this effect, although not included in *Sankhāra* as *paccaya*, falls under the definition of *Sankhāra* as a *saṅkhata*, for the result of a particular *Sankhāra* (or *kamma*) is nothing but a conditioned phenomenon.

Sankhara, as it appears in the compounds *Sankhāra* and *asaṅkhāra*, is interpreted slightly differently in the *Sutta* and *Abhidhamma* literature. In the former, these compounds are described mainly as attributes of the state of *parinibbāna*, while in the latter; they do not only qualify that state but any conditioned phenomena as well. Although the qualified term varies depending on the *Pitaka*, the meaning of the qualifier remains the same. *Asaṅkhāra* refers to that which has arisen



effortlessly as a result of an individual's inner tendencies. On the other hand, *Sankhara* points to something brought about by effort or striving. The meaning of *Sankhara* in these compounds is "conscious effort or instigation.

Sankhara means with effort or instigation, hence produced by. When used as a qualifier to *parinibbāyin*, it means that someone has attained *parinibbāna* through conscious effort. *Sankhara* means the opposite. Within this context, the actual meaning of *Sankhāra* implies production, whether it is *Nibbana* or a conditioned phenomenon.

Although these two meanings are distinct, our discussion of the four previous categories of *Sankhāra* could be combined and shaped to form a general meaning that *Sankhara* (as a producing force) generates other *Sankhāra* (conditioned phenomena). Yet, these conditioned phenomena can, in turn, become a producing force and create more conditioned phenomena. Whenever these conditioned phenomena are associated with the four other aggregates (i.e., when the conditioned phenomena are mental states and not external objects), they may very well become active or productive *Sankhara*. But, if independent from the four aggregates, these conditioned phenomena will remain passive *Sankhara*.

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