



Aniccā Vata Saṅkhārā

Aniccā vata saṅkhārā—"Impermanent, alas, are all formations!"—is the phrase used in Sri Lanka and other Buddhist lands to announce the death of a loved one. Here, however, I have not quoted this line in order to begin an obituary, but simply to introduce the subject of this essay, the word *saṅkhārā* itself. Sometimes a single Pali word has such rich implications that merely to sit down and draw them out can bring as much insight into the Dhamma as a long expository article. This is indeed the case with the word *saṅkhārā*. The word stands squarely at the heart of the Dhamma, and to trace its various strands of meaning is to get a glimpse of the Buddha's own vision of reality.

The word *saṅkhārā* is derived from the prefix *saṃ*, meaning "together," joined to the noun *kāra*, "doing, making." *Saṅkhāras* are thus "co-doings," things that act in concert with other things, or things that are made by a combination of other things. Translators have rendered the word in many different ways: formations, confections, activities, processes, forces, compounds, compositions, fabrications, determinations, synergies, constructions. All are attempts to capture the meaning of a philosophical concept for which we have no exact parallel, and thus all English renderings are bound to be imprecise. I myself use "formations" and "volitional formations," aware this choice is as defective as any other.

However, though it is impossible to discover an exact English equivalent for *saṅkhārā*, by exploring its actual usage we can still gain insight into how the word functions in the "thought world" of the Dhamma. In the suttas the word occurs in three major doctrinal contexts. One is in the twelvefold formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), where the *saṅkhāras* are the second link in the series. They are said to be conditioned by ignorance and to function as a condition for consciousness. Putting together statements from various suttas, we can see that the *saṅkhāras* are the kammically active volitions responsible for generating rebirth and thus for sustaining the onward movement of *saṃsāra*, the round of birth and death. In this context *saṅkhārā* is virtually synonymous with *kamma*, a word to which it is etymologically akin.

The suttas distinguish the *saṅkhāras* active in dependent origination into three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. Again, the *saṅkhāras* are divided into the meritorious, demeritorious, and "imperturbable," i.e., the volitions present in the four formless meditations. When ignorance and craving underlie our stream of consciousness, our volitional actions of body, speech, and mind become forces with the capacity to produce results, and of the results they produce the most significant is the renewal of the stream of consciousness following death. It is the *saṅkhāras*, propped up by ignorance and fuelled by craving, that drive the stream of consciousness onwards to a new mode of rebirth, and exactly where consciousness becomes established is determined by the kammic character of the *saṅkhāras*. If one engages in meritorious deeds, the *saṅkhāras* or volitional formations will propel consciousness towards a happy sphere of rebirth. If one engages in demeritorious deeds, the *saṅkhāras* will propel consciousness towards a miserable rebirth. And if one attains the formless meditations, these "imperturbable" *saṅkhāras* will propel consciousness towards rebirth in the formless realms.

A second major domain where the word *saṅkhāras* appears is among the five aggregates. The fourth aggregate is the *saṅkhāra-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional formations. The texts define the *saṅkhāra-khandha* as the six classes of volition (*cha cetanākāyā*): volition regarding forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and ideas. Though these *saṅkhāras* correspond closely to those in the formula of dependent origination, the two are not in all respects the same, for the *saṅkhāra-*

khandha has a wider range. The aggregate of volitional formations comprises all kinds of volition. It includes not merely those that are kammically potent, but also those that are kammic results and those that are kammically inoperative. In the later Pali literature the saṅkhāra-khandha becomes an umbrella category for all the factors of mind except feeling and perception, which are assigned to aggregates of their own. Thus the saṅkhāra-khandha comes to include such ethically variable factors as contact, attention, thought, and energy; such wholesome factors as generosity, kindness, and wisdom; and such unwholesome factors as greed, hatred, and delusion. Since all these factors arise in conjunction with volition and participate in volitional activity, the early Buddhist teachers decided that the most fitting place to assign them is the aggregate of volitional formations.

The third major domain in which the word saṅkhāra occurs is as a designation for all conditioned things. In this context the word has a passive derivation: it denotes whatever is formed by a combination of conditions; whatever is conditioned, constructed, or compounded. In this sense it might be rendered simply “formations,” without the qualifying adjective. As bare formations, saṅkhāras include all five aggregates, not just the fifth. The term also includes external objects and situations such as mountains, fields, and forests; towns and cities; food and drink; jewellery, cars, and computers.

The fact that saṅkhāras can include both active forces and the things produced by them is highly significant and secures for the term its role as the cornerstone of the Buddha’s philosophical vision. For what the Buddha emphasises is that the saṅkhāras in the two active senses—the volitional formations operative in dependent origination, and the kammic volitions in the fourth aggregate—construct the saṅkhāras in the passive sense: “They construct the conditioned; therefore they are called volitional formations. And what are the conditioned things that they construct? They construct the body, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness; therefore they are called volitional formations” (SN 22:79).

Though external inanimate things may be due to purely physical causes, the saṅkhāras that make up our personal being—the five aggregates—are all products of the kammically active saṅkhāras that we engendered in our previous lives. In the present life as well the five aggregates are constantly being maintained, refurbished, and extended by the volitional activity we engage in now, which again becomes a condition for future existence. Thus, the Buddha teaches, it was our own kammically formative saṅkhāras that built up our present edifice of personal being, and it is our present formative saṅkhāras that are now building up the edifices of personal being we will inhabit in our future lives. These edifices consist of nothing other than saṅkhāras as conditioned things, the conditioned formations comprised in the five aggregates.

The most important fact to understand about saṅkhāras, as conditioned formations, is that they are all impermanent: “Impermanent, alas, are formations.” They are impermanent not only in the sense that in their gross manifestations they will eventually come to an end, but even more pointedly because at the subtle, subliminal level they are constantly undergoing rise and fall, forever coming into being and then, in a split second, breaking up and perishing: “Their very nature is to arise and vanish.” For this reason the Buddha declares that all saṅkhāras are suffering (*sabbe saṅkhāra dukkhā*)—suffering, however, not because they are all actually painful and stressful, but because they are stamped with the mark of transience and thus cannot provide stable happiness and security.

To win complete release from suffering—not only from experiential suffering, but from the unsatisfactoriness intrinsic to all conditioned existence—we must gain release from saṅkhāras. And what lies beyond the saṅkhāras is that which is not constructed, not put together, not compounded. This is Nibbāna, accordingly called the Unconditioned—asaṅkhata—the opposite of what is saṅkhata, a word which is the passive participle corresponding to saṅkhāra. Nibbāna is called the Unconditioned precisely because it’s a state that is neither itself a saṅkhāra nor constructed by saṅkhāras; a state described as visaṅkhāra, “devoid of formations,” and as *sabbasaṅkhāra-samatha*, “the stilling of all formations.”

Thus, when we put the word *saṅkhāra* under our microscope, we see compressed within it the entire worldview of the Dhamma. The active *saṅkhāras* consisting in kammically active volitions perpetually create the *saṅkhāras* of the five aggregates that constitute our being. As long as we continue to identify with the five aggregates (the work of ignorance) and to seek enjoyment in them (the work of craving), we go on spewing out the volitional formations that build up future combinations of the aggregates. These aggregates—impermanent, unreliable, and deceptive—are the suffering from which we need deliverance.

When, however, we take up the practice of the Dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of *saṅkhāras*. We learn to see the true nature of the *saṅkhāras*, of our own five aggregates: as impermanent, prone to suffering, and devoid of a substantial self. Thereby the engine driven by ignorance and craving is arrested at its root and the process of kammic construction, the production of active *saṅkhāras*, is effectively deconstructed. By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asaṅkhata-dhātu*, the unconditioned element. This is Nibbāna, the Deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore our verse concludes: “The subsiding of formations is blissful!”

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

From Other Publishers

- *The Mission Accomplished: A Study of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Ven. Pategama Gnanarama. 239 pp. U.S. \$8.00; SL Rs. 325.
- *Piyadassi: The Wandering Monk*. Kirthi Abeysekera. 200 pp. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 150.
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- *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in 20th Century Thailand*. 410 pp. U.S. \$???.??; SL Rs. 1500.

Notes and News

John D. Ireland. We regret to announce, somewhat belatedly, the death from emphysema of John Ireland, one of our esteemed authors, on 29 October 1998. Born in North London in 1932, Jack (as he was known to his friends) became a Buddhist at the age of 18, after reading Christmas Humphries' paperback, *Buddhism*. He immediately recognised his affinity with the Dhamma and soon began studying Pali. Jack was associated with the BPS from an early period and already in the 1960s had contributed essays to the Bodhi Leaves series. His translations of Pali suttas have appeared in the Wheel series, his most recent contribution being *Vaṅgīsa: An Early Buddhist Poet* (Wh 417/418). His best-known work, however, is his combined translation, *The Udāna and The Itivuttaka*. With reference to this work, shortly before his death, Jack wrote to a friend: “I feel I could die contented in the knowledge that I have done something to repay the great happiness the Buddha-Dhamma has brought me in this life.” By the merits of his service to the Dhamma, may he attain Nibbāna.

The Greatest Gift. The Buddhist Book Trust, based in Kandy, made a very generous donation to the Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project, enabling us to present over a hundred two-volume sets of *The*

Long Discourses and *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* to schools, Buddhist societies, and libraries throughout Sri Lanka. We wish the members of the Trust, established in memory of the late Rim Conrad, deep joy and satisfaction as a fruit of this magnanimous donation.

BPS's New Telephone Number. Please note that BPS now has a new telephone number: 0812 237 283. This replaces 08 223679, now reserved for our fax.

Translations.

Recently, a spate of BPS titles have found their way into other languages. *The Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* has appeared in a beautiful Spanish edition published by El Colegio del Mexico under the title *Compendia del Abhidhamma*. The same work has also been published in a Chinese translation, intended for free distribution from Malaysia. Nyanaponika Thera's classic *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* has appeared in Dutch translation (Asoka, Nieuwerkerk a/d IJssel). The same author's *Life of Sāriputta* has been published in Chinese translation (Luminary Publishing, Taiwan), while a selection from our *Lives of the Disciples* series has been issued in Hindi (Institute of Spiritual Culture, Chakulia, Bihar). Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path* recently appeared in a Greek translation (Editions Kyveli, Athens), one of the very first books on the Dhamma to be published in the cradle of Western philosophy.

The Buddha's Teaching As It Is. A ten-cassette course on the Buddhist teachings, prepared and recorded by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (in 1981), is available from: Lavis Marketing, 73 Lime Walk, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AD, tel.: 01865 767 575; fax: 01865 750 079; E-mail: lavismarkt@aol.com. The cassettes cover the following topics: the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Marks of Existence, Dependent Origination, Karma & Rebirth, Nibbāna, the Noble Eightfold Path, Meditation, the Sangha, and the Social Dimensions of the Dhamma. The cost is £38 including VAT.

Book Review

What Buddhists Believe. Elizabeth J. Harris. Oxford: Oneworld, 1998. 216 + viii pages, UK £9.99; US \$14.95.

Amidst the flood of introductory works on Buddhism already available, this book occupies a niche of its own by reason of its innovative and unique style of presentation. The author, Elizabeth Harris, has based the book on a radio series called "The Way of the Buddha" that she prepared for BBC, first aired in 1996. In both the radio series and the book, she draws together interviews with Buddhists both in Asia and the West intended to elicit from them their own views on the basic beliefs and practices of their religion. By arranging the material in accordance with a carefully planned structure, Harris manages to include just about all the essential information on Buddhism that an inquirer might wish to know. But by using interviews as her raw material she gives her readers something more memorable than simple information: a fascinating and stimulating mosaic that shows how Buddhists perceive their own religion and apply their beliefs to their lives in the present-day world.

To collect material for the radio series—and thus the book—Harris travelled to Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia to interview prominent Buddhist leaders and practitioners. While funding did not allow her to visit any countries where Mahayana Buddhism prevails, back in Britain she spoke to representatives of the Mahayana schools as well as to people actively engaged in forging new forms of Western Buddhism. The subjects of her interviews included monks and nuns; professors, meditation teachers, and community leaders; social reformers and hermits. She adopted this direct approach on the premise, too long ignored by many Western scholars, that to understand a religion the study of texts alone is not enough, but one must also share the perspective of the

practitioners, learning to see their religion, and life itself, from their point of view. My one caveat about her approach is that almost all her interviewees were fluent in English and strongly influenced by Western liberal modes of thought. If she had interviewed (through interpreters) more traditional practitioners, greater diversity might have resulted.

In contrast to the typical introductory survey of Buddhism, Harris has not divided the religion up into separate schools and systems, to be compared and contrasted one against the others. She has chosen to treat Buddhism as an organic whole—a whole in which differences serve to provide functional variety rather than confrontational opposition. By systematic organisation of her material, she brings to light the subtle variations in doctrine and practice spread out across the Buddhist world, but she also reveals the high degree of accord that underlies the different Buddhist traditions. Instead of disclosing a close alignment of specific schools with particular attitudes and ways of practice, her interviews show, somewhat surprisingly, that different concerns and emphases cut clear across the schools and are more closely connected to personal temperament and social context than to doctrinal orientation. To take but one example: While academic textbooks generally portray Theravada Buddhism as advocating a private quest for salvation and aloofness from society, Harris's fieldwork showed Theravadins to be just as actively engaged in social welfare projects as their Mahayana cohorts, perhaps even more so.

Harris has arranged the book into six chapters. The first three deal with topics covered in most primers on Buddhism—the life of the Buddha; the basic teachings of Buddhism; and meditation as “the way to enlightenment.” What distinguishes the treatment here from that found in your standard primer is, again, the freshness and conviction of the voices. Her own text, which deftly and unobtrusively ties together the material selected from the interviews, indicates that one of her underlying concerns in preparing the book has been to dispel the prejudices that have distorted the Western perception of Buddhism. Thus she stresses that the Buddha's focus on suffering does not make Buddhism a negative and pessimistic philosophy of life. She shows that Buddhist morality advocates the practice of positive virtues such as love and compassion as much as an ethic of restraint; she contends that equanimity means balance and impartiality, not apathy and indifference; she presents meditation, not as a way of escaping from life's problems, but as a means of developing the wisdom to deal with them more effectively.

In the last three chapters Harris launches into areas that have gained heightened relevance from the meeting of Buddhism with the modern world: Buddhism and social engagement, the place of women in Buddhism, and Buddhism in relation to contemporary culture. In this last chapter a theme that is commonly voiced in the interviews is that, to meet the challenge of modernity, the ways of teaching the Dhamma must change. The old language and ritualised expressions of Buddhism must give way to fresh embodiments and new applications suited to present conditions.

Although this book might offer too much variety for a prospective reader completely new to Buddhism, for one who has already gained a basic knowledge of the Dhamma and wants to see how Buddhists themselves understand their own tradition I cannot think of a livelier, more sensitive, more stimulating work than this one. The book is to be commended, not merely for its coverage of standard introductory topics, but especially for its revealing insights on how Buddhists are responding to a truly global world culture very different from the one that has nurtured it throughout history.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Review: The Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (continued.) The Buddha demonstrates that a sentient being comes into existence and subsists in dependence on nutriment and ceases with the cessation of nutriment.

Having stressed in various ways the importance of seeing for oneself how sentient existence depends on nutriment, the Buddha next gives the monks a crucially valuable piece of advice. He tells them that even this view of conditionality, “so pure and bright, should not be adhered to, played with, treasured, and appropriated.” Rather it should be used like a raft, for crossing the stream of suffering and reaching the far shore of safety, Nibbāna. Here the Buddha alludes to the famous simile of the raft he had introduced in the Alagaddupama Sutta (MN 22). In that sutta he compares a person who learns his teachings without putting them into practice to a man who crosses a lake by means of a raft, and then, out of gratitude to the raft, carries it around on his head wherever he goes. Here, in the Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, the Buddha gives the simile a slightly different twist by emphasising that the very purpose of the raft is for crossing the lake, not for holding on to. Thus if one simply grabs hold of the raft and carries it around without ever using it to cross the lake, one has failed to understand the purpose of a raft. By the same token, if one merely gains an intellectual grasp of the Dhamma but does not use this view to cut away attachment, one has failed to understand its purpose.

In later Buddhist literature, “clinging to views” is almost always interpreted to mean clinging to erroneous views. It is tacitly assumed that right view is inherently exempt from clinging, that one cannot adhere to a view whose objective content derives from the Buddha’s teaching. The present sutta, however, does not allow such an exemption. The Buddha’s injunction clearly implies that even a subtle and profound right view like that of conditionality can be wrongly grasped—grasped as a plaything of thought, as a pillar of personal pride, as a weapon to be used in argument and debate. In such cases, it is being misapplied, applied contrary to its intended purpose, which is the abolition of clinging.

This does not mean that right view is dispensable or that the ideal attitude for the practitioner to take is that of not entertaining any views at all. Holding right view is essential because right view, even as a conceptual formulation, guides one to a correct understanding of actuality. It protects one from the insidious influence of wrong views, inspires constructive practice, and indicates what one has to see with insight. But the finger should not be mistaken for the moon. The role of right view is instrumental: it is part of the Noble Eightfold Path, the way leading to the extinction of suffering. Right view indicates what we must see and how we should see it, but at the end of the road right view must be used to cut away attachment even to itself. Since clinging lies at the base of suffering, clinging even to right view must be discarded. It is only with complete freedom from clinging, including the clinging to views in all their diversity, that the doorway opens to complete release from suffering.

Following this brief admonition on not clinging to views, the Buddha returns to the theme of nutriment, this time to specify the four nutriments on which life depend: “There are, monks, these four nutriments for the maintenance of beings that have come into being and for the support of those about to come into being. What are the four? Material food, gross or subtle, is the first; contact is the second; mental volition the third; and consciousness the fourth.” In order for the life-process to begin, even from the moment of conception the newly arisen being must have access to a ready supply of nutriment, and this supply must be maintained during the entire course of life. While this is obvious in the case of material food, the Buddha expands our understanding of the role of nutrition by pointing out that there are four nutriments on which sentient existence depends. (For a selection of relevant texts and commentaries, see Nyanaponika Thera, *The Four Nutriments of Life*, Wh 105/106.)

A nutriment (*āhāra*) is explained by the commentaries to be a strong support for the continuity of life (*ajjhattika-santatiyā visesappaccaya*). As we know, the Buddha teaches that a living organism is an

assemblage of five aggregates: bodily form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. These five aggregates are sustained by the four nutriment, each of which makes its own distinctive contribution. Material food is the decisive support for the physical body, and since the four other mental aggregates depend on the body, material food also indirectly contributes to their sustenance too.

Contact (*phassa*) is the coming together of consciousness with an object via a sense faculty. Whenever consciousness encounters an object, the resulting contact inevitably gives rise to a feeling, a perception, and a volitional response. Of these, feeling is singled out as the factor specially nourished by contact. What we seek in our encounters with the world around us is the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and both pleasure and pain are feelings rooted in contact.

Mental volition (*manosañcetanā*) is said to be the nutriment for rebirth itself. For volition is kamma, and following death, when all the conditions for rebirth are complete, conception comes about when a past kamma propels the stream of consciousness towards the particular destination where rebirth is due to take place. Once rebirth has occurred, throughout life mental volition continues to operate behind the scenes, motivating and sustaining all our activities. All actions of body, speech, and mind are expressions or congelations of volition. These actions in turn leave behind kammic deposits with the potential to generate still another rebirth in which volition will operate still again.

The last nutriment is consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which serves as the special condition for “name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpa*), the psychophysical organism. For the life-process to begin, the stream of consciousness of a deceased being must “descend” into the mother’s womb, where it turns the ovum into the germ of a living body. Together with its own arising, consciousness brings along “name,” the main collaborators of consciousness in the process of cognition: contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention. None of these can exist or function without consciousness, and therefore consciousness is spoken of as their nutriment. Throughout the embryonic period, as the foetus develops, it must be sustained by consciousness. And after birth, as we grow up and go about our daily activities, it is again consciousness that enables us to do so. Consciousness quickens the mass of tissues, organs, and fluids in which it is lodged and makes them function as a living body. Consciousness also nourishes contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention so they can participate in cognition. If consciousness departs, the body collapses into a heap of dead matter and all mental activity stops. It is in these respects that the Buddha speaks of consciousness as a nutriment.

(to be continued)

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