

Saṅkhāra: Volitional Conditioning

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 7:38

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato
samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa.*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we're still going through these *khandha*. Just to remind you that *khandha* means heap or aggregate — bits and pieces all stuck together. We started off with *rūpa*, which was the body itself, and really what we were looking at was how the mind experiences the body. That's where we came across these four great elements: fire, earth, water and air. Then we looked at *saññā*, which was basically the perceptual base — how it's turned into little percepts, how labels are put on things, and how later these are the basis for our intellect. Then we looked at *vedanā*, which was the feeling content. There were two types of feelings: those created by the body and those created by the mind. In the body, these will congregate to form our emotions.

So the fourth element is this *sankhāra*. Now *sankhāra* is used in a very wide sense by the Buddha. We chant "*sabbe sankhārā aniccāti*" in the morning chant, "*sabbe sankhārā dukkhāti*", "*sabbe sankhārā anattāti*". All compounded things are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. So this *sankhāra* means all compounded things — it's the phenomenal universe. There's nothing substantial there; it's all made up of bits and pieces which through the magic of the mind take on a certain substantiality.

We know that from our science. You walk into a door, it hurts, but we know it's made up of subatomic particles. In fact, it was the meeting of one set of subatomic particles with another set — as simple as that. But in the *khandhas*, it has a more specialized meaning. It has those *sankhāras* which are within the mind itself. When I say mind here, remember it's the heart and mind, so when I write about this I usually use the word psyche to draw them both together. In our older medieval language, it would have been the soul.

So *sankhāra* there is the passive side, which we can talk about as our habits or dispositions. They are the platform upon which we then behave into the world. When they become activated, they're normally translated as volitional formations. So what we're talking about is our thinking and emotional life. The reason why the Buddha separates this out from all the rest of this psychophysical organism is because here is where the will is active. The rest are given.

Your body gives you the sensations and you can't do much about it. The mind has its own way of perceiving things and you can't do much about it — it's often dependent on our culture, frankly. And feelings just arise because of the makeup of the psychophysical organism. But here with *sankhāra*, this is

the world we're living in in a much more direct way, and it's governed by the will, governed by what we intend to do, through our thoughts, our actions, our speech. That's where we get these volitional conditionings.

Sometimes you get writers trying to find suitable words. Sometimes in its passive sense, I've heard it being translated as preparation, which doesn't quite work for me. And in its active sense, I've heard it translated as concoctions. So it's a difficult word to translate because it has both its passive meaning and active meaning. But from the point of view of our liberation, from the point of view of creating a beautiful world for ourselves, it's the place where the will is active.

In our meditation — just before I say that, remember that the *khandhas* are a snapshot of the psychophysical organism. If you take a moment, this is what you'll find. It doesn't tell us much about the process. The process of the psychophysical organism is expressed in the Wheel of Dependent Origination, and the *sankhāra* are really that middle bit which includes the reaction to things, the *tanhā*, and the grasping of it as "I want," and then the empowerment of it, which there is known as becoming. But here it's included in the understanding of *sankhāra*.

So these *sankhāras* are really where it all happens for us, where we actually experience life. The point of *vipassanā* is to take the unpleasantness out of those *sankhāras*. It's not as though the Buddha doesn't have habits, but he's not governed by them anymore, and they're all beautiful. That's the difference. We also have beautiful *sankhāras*, but there's a lot which aren't so beautiful.

In the Buddha's way of looking at things, a lot of them have to do with our ethical behaviour, so that brings a certain quality of morality to our behaviour too. The whole point of our *vipassanā* is to eradicate everything that's unwholesome within us which is established in these *sankhāras*.

So that brings to the end my little homily on *sankhāra*. I hope it has been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all your negative *sankhāra* sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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