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Important of *Saṅkhāra* in Buddhism

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ABSTRACT:

As we all know very well, Buddhist scriptures are classified into three main aspects, namely, *Vinaya Pitaka* (the Basket of Disciplines), *Suttanta Pitaka* (the Basket of Discourses) and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (the Basket of *Abhidhamma*). These three Pitakas are recorded in *Pāli* which is common language at the time of Buddha in India. Later on *Pāli* becomes official language of *Theravāda* School which is considered to keep Buddha's more genuine words, so, claim its adherents. For more than two thousand five hundred years from the time of Buddha to the present day the *Pāli* language has fulfilled its responsibility for preserving all Buddha's teachings without damaging its pristine meaning.

This paper has been 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, *abhisāṅkhāra* in Dependent Origination and *saṅkhārupekkhā* in Insight Meditation. It is the main objective of this paper.

Keywords: Buddhism, Shankhara, Meditation, Nibbana, and Society.

Introduction

As many people know, Buddhist scriptures are classified into three, namely, *Vinaya Pitaka* (the Basket of Disciplines), *Suttanta Pitaka* (the Basket of Discourses) and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (the Basket of *Abhidhamma*). All three *Pitakas* are recorded in *Pāli* which is common language at the time of Buddha in India. Later on *Pāli* becomes official language of *Theravāda* School which is considered to keep Buddha's more genuine words, so claim its adherents. For more than two thousand five hundred years from the time of Buddha to the present day the *Pāli* language has fulfilled its responsibility for preserving all Buddha's teachings without damaging its pristine meaning.

So, it is essential for all concerned to have some knowledge of *Pāli* if they want to delve into *Theravāda* Buddhism, for both *Pāli* and *Theravāda* Buddhism are inseparable. In fact they are two sides of coin. What is more important is to learn the change of meanings of *Pāli* terms according to contextual relationship. In many cases some *Pāli* words like '*Dhamma*' and '*saṅkhāra*' give different connotations in their related subject matter. The meaning of that kind of terms can be understood only through context. When *Pāli* words are translated into English, a single English word cannot convey the meaning of these two terms to their fullest extent, as the same happens in the case of other languages.

It may be assumed that acquirement of deep understanding of Buddhism lies in the knowledge of contextual meaning of the original terms. Although many scholars make ample research on any of particular subjects of three *Pitakas*, still there are a few attempts in direction of analysis of some technical terms. For a true knowledge seeker in Buddhism, the first difficulty he comes across is duplicitous activity of technical terms, which are used in different connotations in different contexts. It is difficult to grasp Buddhist philosophy without knowing the contextual meaning of some important *Pāli* technical terms. If one does not know shade of meaning of the important technical terms, one is easily led to the wrong interpretation of Buddhism, which is so dangerous for a Buddhist that it can destroy even one's potentiality for emancipation from all forms of suffering; in other words, he is definitely far from attainment of *Nibbāna*.

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This paper mainly 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. It is found that the use of the term '*saṅkhāra*' is mainly related to the explanation of *saṅkhārakkhandha* in formulation of aggregates, *abhisāṅkhāra* 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 thesis, the chapter two 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 Hindu philosophy. The extensive description of the word *saṅkhārakkhandha* will be seen in the chapter three. The term '*saṅkhāra*' is in the compound word '*Saṅkhārakkhandhā*' as one of five *khandhas* implies 'excluding the perception and feeling, the remaining fifty mental factors which have *cetanā* as their leader.

The explanation of '*abhisāṅkhāra*' and its related terms will be widely given in the chapter four. But the term '*saṅkhāra*' in the compound word '*Abhisāṅkhāra*' means 'kammic formations which are the twenty-nine volitions associated with the eighty-one mundane wholesome and unwholesome consciousnesses'. In the Dependant Origination the word '*saṅkhāra*' is employed to show the consequence of the ignorance (*avijjā*). It is found out that it occurs in the name of '*abhisāṅkhāra*' in the Dependant Origination. The term '*abhisāṅkhāra*' means 'the wholesome or unwholesome volitions' in this context. There are three classes of *Abhisāṅkhāra* i.e. *Puññābhisāṅkhāra* (wholesome volitional formation), *Apuññābhisāṅkhāra* (unwholesome volitional formation), and *Āneñjābhisāṅkhāra* (imperturbable volitional formation), where *Saṅkhāra* is tantamount to *Sañcetanā*. This threefold division covers *kammic* activity in all spheres of existence; the wholesome volitional formations extend to the sensuous blissful plane and fine material sphere, the unwholesome ones only to woeful plane, and the "imperturbable" only to the fine immaterial sphere.

It is, therefore, important to learn the change of meanings of *Pāli* terms according to contextual relationship. In many cases some *Pāli* words like '*Dhamma*' and '*Saṅkhāra*' give different connotations in their related subject matter. The meaning of that kind of terms can be understood only through context. In some cases, when *Pāli* words are translated into English, a single English word cannot convey the meaning of these two terms to their fullest extent, as the same happens in the case of other languages.

It may be assumed that the acquirement of deep understanding of Buddhism lies in the knowledge of contextual meaning of the original terms, to some extent. Although many scholars make ample research on any of particular subjects of three *Pitakas*, still there are a few attempts in direction of analysis of some technical terms.

For a true knowledge seeker in Buddhism, the first difficulty he comes across is duplicitous activity of technical terms, which are used in different connotations in different contexts. It is difficult to grasp Buddhist philosophy without knowing the contextual meaning of some important *Pāli* technical terms. If one does not know the shade of meaning of the important technical terms, one is easily led to the wrong interpretation of Buddhism, which is so dangerous for a Buddhist that it can destroy even one's potentiality for emancipation from all forms of suffering; in other words, he is definitely far from attainment of *Nibbāna*.

The study of the present thesis 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, *abhisāṅkhāra* 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.

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 *Pathavi* (Skt. *Prthavi*) and *āpo* (Skt. *Apas*) which are used in the same senses in Sanskrit and (ii) the terms such as *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāna*) and *Atta* (Skt. *Atman*) which are used in the different senses in *Pāli*. 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 chapter 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 '*san+*/*kar+a* (*san*-well, */kar-* to do or to make). *Pāli* Text Society's *Pāli-English Dictionary* gives various meanings of this term such as 'preparation, constituent potentiality, and composition, aggregate and essential conditions'.

Sanskāra as Sacred Ceremony in the Hindu Culture

The term '*saṅskāra*', the Sanskrit equivalent of *Pāli* '*saṅkhāra*', is formed in the same way with *Pāli*. In Sanskrit the meaning of '*saṅskāra*' is quite different from that of *Pāli* term '*saṅkhāra*'. In the day-to-day experience of Hindus it refers to 'sacred ceremony or twelve ceremonies which purifies from the taint of sin contracted in the womb and leading to regeneration'.

These twelve ceremonies are; (1) *garbhadhāna* (a ceremony performed before conception or after menstruation to ensure conception), (2) *pun-savana* (male-production rite, performed in the third month of gestation and before the period of quickening), (3) *simantonnayana* (a ceremony observed by women in the fourth, sixth or eighth month of pregnancy), (4) *jātakarman* (a birth ceremony consisting in touching a new-born child's tongue thrice with ghee after appropriate prayers), (5) *nāma-karman* (the ceremony of naming a child after birth), (6) *nishkarmaūa* (the ceremony of taking a child for the first time out of the house in the fourth month after birth to see the sun), (7) *anna-prāsana* (putting rice into a child's mouth for the first time),

(8) *cūdā-karman* (the ceremony of tonsure performed on a child in the first or third year), (9) *upanayana* (ceremony in which a *Guru* draws a boy towards himself and initiate him into one of the three twice born classes in which the boy is invested with the sacred thread and thus endowed with second or spiritual birth and qualified to learn the Veda by heart), (10) *kesanta* (a ceremony of cutting off the hair finally as a religious ceremony performed upon Brahmans at 16 years of age, *kshatriyas* at 22 and *Vaisyas* at 24), (11) *samāvartana* (the return-home of a *Brahmacārin* or young Brāhman student of the Veda who has returned home after completing his studies in the houses of a preceptor) and (12) *vivāha* (a ceremony of marriage).

Connotation of Sanskāra in Hindu Philosophy

But from philosophical point of view the term means the impression which exists sub-consciously in the mind of the objects experienced. *Smuti* and *sanskāra* help each other to accomplish their work. '*Smuti*' (memory) serves as a mental factor which transforms sub-consciousness into consciousness. All experiences whether cognitive, emotional or conative exist in sub-conscious states and may under suitable conditions be reproduced as memory.

According to the *Sāṅkhya*, *buddhi* contains within it *sanskāra*. But *buddhi* itself cannot stand alone which has to be associated with *purusa*. Here it is necessary to know the function of *buddhi* for it is helpful to understand the meaning of *sanskāra* in Hindu philosophy. When '*buddhi*' (mind) and '*purusa*' (pure self) are united together, there arises '*avidyā*' (non-knowledge) which is the root of all experience and misery. When the *avidyā* of a person is rooted out by the rise of true knowledge, the *buddhi* fails to attach itself to the *purusa* and is forever dissociated from it, and this is the state of *mukti*. *Vijñāna Bhikṣu* says that the *buddhi* directly comes into touch with the external objects through the senses. At the first moment of touch the perception is indeterminate, but at the second moment it becomes clear and determinate. The *buddhi* is spread all over the body, as it were, for it is by its functions that the life of the body is kept up. Apart from the perceptions and the life-functions, *buddhi*, or rather *citta* as *Yoga* describes it, contains within it the root impressions (*sanskāras*) and tastes and instincts or tendencies of all past lives (*vāsanā*).

These *sanskāras* are revived under suitable associations. Every man had had infinite numbers of births in their past lives as man and as some animal. In all these lives the same *citta* was following him. The *citta* has thus collected within itself the instincts and tendencies of all those different animal lives. The *sanskāra* represents the root impression by which any habit of life that man has lived through, or any pleasure in which he took delight for some time, or any passions which were engrossing to him, tend to be revived. They have molded and given shape to the *citta*. So the *citta* could try to reproduce them by its own nature even without any effort in our part. Roots which already are left in the form of *sanskāras* can be eradicated by the formation of the habit of a contrary tendency.

Different Connotations of Sanskāra

As mentioned above, it can be taken that Sanskrit '*sanskāra*' has three meanings mainly; (i) impression, (ii) sacred ceremony (iii) improving things, aggregation, adornment. But the word '*sanskāra*' in *Vaizeshika* has many senses. It means inertia, elasticity, collection (*samavāya*), production (*udbhava*) and not being overcome (*anabhibhava*). The *Pāṇini* used the word '*sanskāra*' in three different meanings; (1) improving a thing as distinguished from generating a new quality, (2) conglomeration or aggregation, and (3) adornment. It can be said that the use of the term is related to worldly matter rather than spiritual thing. Moreover, it is extremely important to perceive that the use of the word *sanskāra* in Hindu philosophy lay an emphasis on the idea of 'Atman or Soul which is permanently rejected by Buddhism. It can be concluded that the meaning 'root impression' of *sanskāra* is produced by the concept of Atman.

Conclusion

As the analysis of *saṅkhāra* mention 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 *Sutras*, 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*'.

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