

Sankhara, & Our Salvation

You may remember in the first newsletter I wrote about the meaning of the word 'dhamma' which represents all the objects and phenomenon in the world. Dhamma is the biggest, most prominent and wide ranging term in the Buddhist worldview. Sankhara is viewed as the the second most prominent term central to Buddhist belief, and like dhamma, has various meanings according to the context it is used in. Sankhara means 'formations' or 'that which has been put together' and 'that which puts together'.

It can be translated as condition, conditioned, conditioning, referring in a general sense to all the conditioned phenomena in the world or in cases where it is translated as volition, fabrication, formation or mental formation, it can be seen as referring specifically to all manner of mental or cognitive formations.

To capture the basic meaning of Sankhara directly, here I will give a simple equation which arose in my mind

dhamma = Sankhara + Nibbana
(Conditioned)+(Unconditioned)

Sankhara = dhamma - Nibbana

In this instant I am using just one translation of the term Nibbana because it is most relevant to gaining an understanding of Sankhara. Nibbana, in this instant, means 'The Unconditioned.'

The Buddha taught that all saṅkhāras are impermanent and substancelessness. Did you ever heard Buddha's final words just before he passed?

He said,

'vayadhamma Sankhara
appamadena sampadetha'

Meaning,

"All the Sankhara are bound to decay. Practise diligently for your own salvation."

Almost all the objects and phenomenon of our lives are nothing but Sankhara which are conditioned. Due to that very conditionality, our lives are characterised by impermanence and selflessness (substancelessness). And, it is inherently dukkha, due to it's instability and illusiveness.

In one of his discourses, Buddha mentioned this illusiveness when he said, 'our body and mind is like foam, bubble, mirage, pithless tree or magician's trick.' SN 22:95

Knowing clearly about three characteristics of life - impermanence, no-self and dukkha, we aspire to find the path to be free from the bondage of Sankhara. And, through understanding these three characteristics deeper, we begin to liberate ourselves from ignorance, (wrong view) and craving, (wrong action). This is the path to freedom!

This crucial point is expressed by Buddha through his first exclamation just after his own enlightenment.

He said,

"The mind has become freed from conditioning;
the end of craving has been reached."

'Visankhara gatam cittam
Tanhanam khayam ajjhaga.'

Can you hear the Buddha's compassionate and earnest message for us who are bounded in Sankhara?

'Please be free from Sankhara, and gain the state of unconditioned (= visankhara, asankhara).'

This is the message which keeps resonating 2600 years after first being delivered by Buddha.

And again, let us remember his final words for conclusion.

"All the conditioned things are bound to decay.
Practise diligently, for your own salvation."

With metta

Bhante Anuttara