
Notes on Dhamma :: Shorter Notes :: SANKHÁRA

A full discussion of this key word is given in A NOTE ON PATICCASAMUPPADA. It is there maintained that the word sankhara, in all contexts, means 'something that something else depends on', that is to say a determination (determinant). It might be thought that this introduces an unnecessary complication into such passages as

Vayadhammā sankhārā appamādena sampadetha To disappear is the nature of determinations; strive unremittingly
and Aniccavata sankhārā uppavayadhammino Impermanent indeed are determinations; to arise
disappear is their nature.

(D+gha ii,3 <D.ii,156&7>). Why, instead of telling us that things (dhammā) are impermanent and bound to disappear, should the Buddha take us out of our way to let us know that things that things depend on are impermanent and bound to disappear? The answer is that the Dhamma does not set out to explain, but to lead—;it is opanayika. This means that the Dhamma is not seeking disinterested intellectual approval, but to provoke an effort of comprehension or insight leading to the abandonment of attavāda and eventually of asmimāna. Its method is therefore necessarily indirect: we can only stop regarding this as 'self' if we see that what this depends on is impermanent (see DHAMMA for more detail). Consider, for example, the Mahāsudassanasuttanta (D+gha ii,4 <D.ii,169-99>), where the Buddha describes in detail the rich endowments and possessions of King Mahāsudassana, and then finishes:

Pass'anda sabbe te sankhārā atthā niruddhā viparinatā. Evam aniccho nāda sankhārā, evam addhuvā kho nāda sankhārā, yavañ c'idaṃ nāda ālamā eva sabbasankhāresu nibbinditum, ālamā virajjitum, ālamā vimuccitum. See, nāda, how all those determinations have passed, have ceased, have altered. So impermanent, nāda, are determinations, so unlasting, nāda, are determinations, that this, nāda, is enough for weariness of all determinations, enough for dispassion, enough for release.

This is not a simple statement that all those things, being impermanent by nature, are now no more; it is a lever to prize the notion of 'selfhood' out of its firm socket. Those things were sankhārā: they were things on which King Mahāsudassana depended for his very identity; they determined his person as 'King Mahāsudassana', and with their cessation the thought 'I am King Mahāsudassana' came to an end. More formally, those sankhārā were namarūpa, the condition for phassa (D+gha ii,2 <D.ii,62>[9]), upon which sakkāyaditthi depends (cf. D+gha i,1 <D.i,42-3> together with Citta Samy. 3 <S.iv,287>).