

(Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta The Discourse on Pacetana's Chariot-maker

[The nature of *abhisāṅkhāra*]
(Aṅgūta Nikāya 3.15/1:110-113)
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Saṅkhāra, abhisāṅkhāra and kamma

One of the best known of pithy Buddhist sayings is this definition of karma:

Intention, monks, is karma, I say. Having intended, one creates karma through the body, through speech, through the mind.

Cetanā'haṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā.

(A 6.63.11/3:415)

In the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta, we find the term *abhisāṅkhāra* being used in the same sense, where a wheel is said to roll on as long as “its momentum lasted” (*abhisāṅkhārassa gati*) [§2]. The chariot-maker obviously represents the doer of karma. Here, we see the term *abhisāṅkhāra* as “a synonym of volition and refers here to the dynamism and momentum usually associated with *kamma*” (Boisvert, 1995:96).

The Buddhist Dictionary defines *abhisāṅkhāra* as being “identical to the 2nd link of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, ie *saṅkhāra* or karma-formations.” This synonymity is clearly attested by suttas as **the Kukku-*ra,vatika Sutta*** (M 57),¹ **the Parivimāṃsana Sutta** (S 12.51),² and **the Khajjani Sutta** (S 22.79),³ where we see *saṅkhāraṃ abhisāṅkharoti* (“he creates karma-formations”) or a similar expression, which shows the function of *saṅkhāra* as *abhisāṅkharoti*.

Modern scholars, such as Shwe Zan Aung,⁴ Padmasiri de Silva,⁵ and M Boisvert,⁶ too, have pointed out that *saṅkhāra* is often taken as the synonym of intention or karma. The well known Burmese layman meditation teacher, U Ba Khin, notes this close connection between karma and *saṅkhāra*:

In this connection, we should understand that each action—either by deed, word, or thought—leaves behind a force of action, *saṅkhārā* (or *kamma* in popular terminology), which goes to the credit or debit account of the individual, according to whether the action is good or bad. There is, therefore, an accumulation of *saṅkhāra* (or *kamma*) with everyone, which functions as the supply-source of energy to sustain life, which is inevitably followed by suffering and death.

(U Ba Khin, 1991:31)

Here in the (Pacetana) Ratha,kāra Sutta Sutta, we see the term *abhisāṅkhāra* used in a broader sense to include the karma of the three doors: the body, speech and the mind.

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¹ M 57.8/1:389 f.

² S 12.51.12/2:82 SD 11.5.

³ S 22.79.8/3:87.

⁴ *Compendium of Philosophy*, Abhs:SR 274,

⁵ Padmasiri de Silva, *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology*, 1973:117.

⁶ Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates*, 1995:96.

The Discourse on Pacetana's Chariot-maker

(A 3.15/1:110-113)

1 At one time the Blessed One stayed in the deer park near Benares.

There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:

“Bhikshus.” [111]

“Venerable sir,” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent. The Blessed One said this:

Pacetana's chariot-maker

“Once upon a time, bhikshus, there was a rajah [king] named Pacetana. Now, bhikshus, the rajah Pacetana addressed the chariot-maker thus:

‘Master chariot-maker, six months from now I will go into battle. Can you make a new pair of wheels for me, master chariot-maker?’

The chariot-maker, monks, then answered the rajah in assent, thus:

‘I can, your majesty.’

Then, monks, when six month, less six days, had passed, the chariot-maker finished but one wheel.

Then, bhikshus, the rajah Pacetana addressed the chariot-maker thus:

‘Master chariot-maker, six days from now I will go into battle. Have you completed the new pair of wheels for me?’

‘Your majesty, during these six months, less six days, only one wheel is completed.’

‘But, master chariot-maker, will you be able to complete the second wheel in six days’ time?’

The chariot-maker, monks, then answered the rajah in assent, thus:

‘I can, your majesty.’

2 Now, bhikshus, the chariot-maker, having completed the second wheel in six days, approached the rajah Pacetana. Having approached the rajah Pacetana, he said this:

‘Here, your majesty, are your new pair of wheels completed.’

‘But, master chariot-maker, I see no difference at all between this wheel completed six months ago, and this wheel completed in six days!’

‘There is a difference, your majesty. Let your majesty look.’

Then, bhikshus, the chariot-maker set rolling the wheel completed in six days. It kept rolling as long as [112] its momentum lasted,⁷ then circled around, and fell to the ground.

Then he set rolling the wheel completed in six months. It kept rolling as long as its momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle!⁸

3 ‘But, master chariot-maker, what is the cause, what is the condition, that this wheel completed in six days kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, then circled around, and fell to the ground? And, master chariot-maker, what is the cause, what is the condition, that *this* wheel kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle?’

‘Your majesty, as regards the wheel completed in six days, its rim is crooked, full of faults, full of flaws. The spokes, too, are crooked, full of faults, full of flaws. The hub, too, is crooked, full of faults, full of flaws.

On account of the crooked, faulty and flawed rim, the crooked, faulty and flawed spokes, and the crooked, faulty and flawed hub, it kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, then circled around, and fell to the ground.

Your majesty, as regards the wheel completed in six months, less six days, its rim is not crooked, faultless, flawless. The spokes, too, are not crooked, faultless, flawless. The hub, too, is not crooked, faultless, flawless. On account of the uncrooked, faultless and flawless rim, the uncrooked, faultless and

⁷ *Abhisāṅkhārassa gati*, which Comy explains as “the exertion applied” (*payogassa gamanāṃ*) (AA 2:181).

⁸ *Akkhāhataṃ maññe aṭṭhasi*.

flawless spokes, and the uncrooked, faultless and flawless hub, it kept rolling as long as the momentum lasted, and then stood still, as it were you might say, firmly fixed to the axle.

Abandoning crookedness of the three doors

4 You might think, bhikshus, that the chariot-maker at that time were someone else. But do not see it thus, bhikshus. At that time, I was that chariot-maker.

Then, bhikshus, I was skilled in regards to wood that was crooked, to wood faulty or flawed. Now, bhikshus, I, as an arhat, fully self-awakened one, am skilled

in regards to crookedness of body, bodily fault and flaw;
in regards to crookedness of speech, verbal fault and flaw;
in regards to crookedness (*vāṅkam*) of mind, mental fault and flaw.

5 Bhikshus, in whichever monk or nun,
crookedness of body, bodily fault and flaw, have not been abandoned,
crookedness of speech, verbal fault and flaw, have not been abandoned,
crookedness of mind, mental fault and flaw, have not been abandoned, [113]
so is their falling⁹ just like that of the wheel completed in six days.

Bhikshus, in whichever monk or nun,
crookedness of body, bodily fault and flaw, have been abandoned,
crookedness of speech, verbal fault and flaw, have been abandoned,
crookedness of mind, mental fault and flaw, have been abandoned,
so is their standing¹⁰ just like that of the wheel completed in six months, less six days.

Therefore, bhikshus, you should train yourselves thus:

‘We will abandon crookedness of body, bodily fault and flaw;
we will abandon crookedness of speech, verbal fault and flaw;
we will abandon crookedness of mind, mental fault and flaw.’

Thus, bhikshus, you should train yourselves.”

— evaṃ —

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⁹ *Papatitā*.

¹⁰ *Patiṭṭhitā*.