



Concept Of *Tilakkhana* (Three Marks Of Existence) Of Buddhism

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Abstract.

According to Buddhist tradition, a full understanding of these three can bring an end to suffering (*dukkha nirodha*). The Buddha taught that all things conditioned by causes (*saṅkhāra*) are impermanent (*anicca / anitya*) and suffering (*dukkhā / dukkha*) while he said not-self (*anattā / anatman*) characterises all dhammas meaning there is no "I" or "mine" in the conditioned as well as the unconditioned (i.e. *Nibbāna*). The founder and central figure of Buddhism, Siddhartha achieved Nirvana and awakening after much meditation, thus becoming the Buddha Shakyamuni. With the faculty of wisdom the Buddha directly perceived that everything in the physical world (and everything in the phenomenology of psychology) is marked by these three characteristics. In this article I would like to express about the true nature of existence according by Buddhist wisdom.

Key Words: *Tilakkhana, Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta, Impermanent, Not-self, Suffering, Unsatisfactory, Nibbana*

Introduction

The Three marks of existence are an essential Buddhist teaching regarding the nature of experience. A basic teaching of Buddhism, the three marks of existence are three characteristics that all conditioned phenomena share. This means that every sensation, thought, and experience we have is subject to these three marks. An example of a non-conditioned phenomena in Buddhism is full enlightenment or *nibbana*. The three marks of existence are *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, or impermanence, unsatisfactory, and non-self. We grow to know these characteristics through meditation practice, especially with the practice of the Four

Foundations of Mindfulness. All three of these marks may be hard to grasp or even agree with at first, and that is okay. We may even find ourselves aversion to the idea of them. Through meditation practice, we gradually come to know these characteristics.

All Conditioned Things Are In A Constant State Of Flux (*Sabbe Sankhara Anicca*)

Anicca (Sanskrit *anitya*) "inconstancy" or "impermanence" The first of the Three Marks of Existence is *anicca*. *Anicca* is Pali word that literally means inconstant or not continuous. The Buddha's teaching of impermanence points toward the natural changing nature of everything. Nothing we experience is constant and unchanging. Whether is a sound, physical sensation, thought, emotion, or something external, everything changes. This paragraph may seem redundant in its mentioning of change. It's because it really is that important and simple: everything is changing.

Take the body, for example. It is constantly changing. Almost every cell in the body regenerates after a period, meaning that body you have today is not same body you had twenty years ago. Or, you may take a feeling of love you have or somebody. Whether it is child, a parent, a friend, a pet, or a significant other, you may love another



being deeply. Although your love may not wane, it changes. How you loved this being a year ago is not the same way in which you love the being today. The quality of the love changes. The feeling, though patterns, and physical sensations change.

When we look at any of our experiences we can see it changing, sometimes subtly. May be we have chronic pain in meditation practice. Tuning in to the experience, we see that the pain may have a natural moving quality. When we move or shift position, the pain changes. This doesn't mean the pain necessarily goes away, but the intricacies of the experience changes. It's easy to see how some things change, while it is difficult to see how other phenomena are impermanent. One helpful practice is to bring to mind something we consider permanent or unchanging and challenge ourselves to find the impermanence in it. In meditation, we don't necessarily need to look directly for impermanence; if we are truly mindful, the impermanent nature becomes clear.

In reality there is no thing that ultimately ceases to exist; only the appearance of a thing ceases as it changes from one form to another. Imagine a leaf that falls to the ground and decomposes. While the appearance and relative existence of the leaf ceases, the components that formed the leaf become particulate material that may go on to form new plants. Buddhism teaches a middle way, avoiding the extreme views of eternalism and nihilism.

All compounded phenomena (things and experiences) are inconstant, unsteady, and impermanent. Everything we can experience through our senses is made up of parts, and its existence is dependent on external conditions. Everything is in constant flux, and so conditions and the thing itself is constantly changing. Things are constantly coming into being, and ceasing to be. Nothing lasts.

The important point here is that phenomena arise and cease according to (complex) conditions. In Mahayana Buddhism, a

caveat is added: one should indeed always meditate on the impermanence and transitory nature of compound structures and phenomena, but one must guard against extending this to the realm of Nirvana, where impermanence holds no sway. In this view, the ultimate nature of reality is free from the stains of dualistic thought, and should therefore not be labeled as 'one' or the 'other' (i.e. 'permanent' or 'impermanent').

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche states that in the four seals of the Mahayana, Nirvana should be viewed as "beyond extremes". Furthermore, he states that "In many philosophies or religions, the final goal is something that you can hold on to and keep. The final goal is the only thing that truly exists. But nirvana is not fabricated, so it is not something to be held on to. It is referred to as 'beyond extremes.' "We somehow think that we can go somewhere where we'll have a better sofa seat, a better shower system, a better sewer system, a nirvana where you don't even have to have a remote control, where everything is there the moment you think of it. But as I said earlier, it's not that we are adding something new that was not there before. Nirvana is achieved when you remove everything that was artificial and obscuring."

All Conditioned Things Are Dissatisfaction (*Sabbe Sankhara Dukkha*)

Dukkha (Sanskrit *duhkha*) or dissatisfaction (or "dis-ease"). The second of the Three Marks of Existence is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is most commonly translated into English as "suffering," but "unsatisfactoriness," "disease," or "stress" may convey the meaning of *dukkha* more accurately. *Dukkha*, in general sense, is the natural discomfort we all experience in life. it may come in many forms: anxiety, regret, anger, grief, sadness, clinging, and may more. We experience the pain of loss, the pain of craving more, and the simple pain of living. There is a shared experience of disease.



Although we just offered several different translations of the Pali word *dukkha*, it may just be best to abandon any English word. When we translate *dukkha*, we lose some of its meaning, and it may create confusion about the principle.

As one of the Three Marks of Existence, *dukkha* is the idea that nothing we experience outside *nibbana* causes lasting satisfaction. This is easiest to see with unpleasant experiences we have. When we have pain, hear a sound that we find unpleasant, or find ourselves thinking unpleasant thoughts, we can see that these experiences are not creating happiness. Furthermore, that aversion that arises in response to these stimuli are *dukkha*. With neutral experiences, it is similarly easy. The neutral sensation doesn't create happiness, and the reaction of boredom, confusion, or even aversion certainly aren't *sukkhā* (the opposite of *dukkha*).

The Buddha speaks usually of seven different kinds of suffering or unsatisfactoriness. First the Buddha says that birth is suffering. It is rather significant that our life begins with suffering. The event of birth is certainly physically painful for the mother and the infant. Then the Buddha says that decay in the sense of old age is suffering. Old age has quite a number of disadvantages.

There is physical weakness you cannot get about as you used to; you used to. There is also loss of memory. Sometimes it is quite tragic to see this in old people. All this makes the time of old age, especially extreme old age, despite all modern comforts and amenities, very often a time of suffering.

The sickness is suffering. No sickness is pleasant, whether it is a little toothache or a terrible disease like cancer. Death is suffering. Death is often suffering because people do not want to go. They want to hang on to life. They are very sorry to leave. But even if they do want to go, even if they are happy to pass on to a new life or into they know not what very often the physical

process of dissolution is quite painful. There is much mental suffering connected with it.

There are other forms of suffering. To be joined with what one dislikes is suffering. On the other hand, the Buddha says that to be separated from what one likes is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. We all know the very well because we all like to get what we want. If we are cannot get what we want we feel upset, disturbed, troubled.

The Buddha on those many occasions when he spoke about suffering, trying to get people to see it in perspective, summed up his discourse by saying, in short, that the 'Five Aggregates' (*skandha*) (form, feeling, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness), which make up the totality of conditioned sentient existence, themselves are suffering. Buddhism of course, does not deny that there may be pleasant experiences in life as well as painful ones. But Buddhism does say that even the pleasant experiences are at bottom painful. The pleasant experiences themselves are really only concealed suffering, suffering 'glossed over', the 'honey on the razor's edge'.

According to the Dharma law of *anicca*, nothing lasts. Everything falls apart, not only material possession, but also bodies, relationships, experiences, entire civilizations and cultures. *Dukkha* is not getting what one wants and wanting more than one gets. Not understanding the law of *anicca* leads to *dukkha*, the omnipresent uncertainty and stress and anxiety fluctuating between irritation and despair and arising from the sense that things are not right because I don't have enough, because I can't hold onto what I do have, because what I have doesn't bring lasting satisfaction and that therefore I must persist acquiring and doing rather than being.

Nothing found in the physical world or even the psychological realm can bring lasting deep satisfaction. Whatever is impermanent is subject to change. Whatever is subject to change is subject to suffering. Whatever we choose to call it its distinctive characteristic



is that it cannot be satisfied by anything; it can be satisfied only by the Unconditioned. Therefore, to come back to the Buddha's conclusion, all conditional things, whether actually or potentially are unsatisfactory. That unsatisfactoriness is a basic characteristic of all forms of conditioned existence, especially sentient conditioned existence.

All Phenomena are not, or are without, a permanent self (*Sabbe Dhamma Anatta*) The final of the Three Marks of Existence, *anatta*, is at the centre of much confusion and debate. Often translated as 'no-self' people get the impression that the Buddha taught there is no self. There is no you reading this, and there is no me writing it. However, that is not what *anatta* means. Gil Fronsdal often points out that *Anatta* is more appropriately understood as "not-self". It is just a one letter difference, but an important one. The teaching here is not that there is no self; it is experience is not self. So what does this mean?

Let's start with the sensation of your feet on the ground. We can see the *anatta* in this experience by looking closely at what is happening. We may not be aware of this always, but it happens quite often. The foot is in contact with the ground, and the sensation reaches the brain. The mind sees it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The mind has a response or reacts (clinging, boredom, aversion, etc.) By itself, the sensation of the foot on the ground is nothing. It cannot exist by itself. It is a process, dependent upon the mind, the ground, the food, feeling tone, and much more. So *anatta* may be understood as; no phenomena exists inherently by itself. The same may be said for sounds, emotions, thought, tastes, and smells. They lack an inherent self; they are processes dependent upon other processes.

Next, we can consider a physical object. Let's take a wooden coffee table. When we look at or feel, we sense a coffee table. *Anatta* here isn't that the table doesn't exist. Rather, it is that the table is dependent upon so

many things, it is only our perception of it as a table that makes it a table. Think of everything that had to happen to bring that table to fruition, a tree had to grow, it had to receive sun and water, somebody had to cut down, it had to be shipped somewhere to be made into a table, it was cut and assembled, somebody shipped it to a store, and you walked in and bought the table with money you earned from working. If we went more in depth, we would see an infinite number of causes and conditions for the table to be present. When we look at the table we see all of the effort, time, and different materials used to make it by itself, is a combination of these causes and conditions. Once we perceive it as a table, it becomes a table.

Finally, let's consider our own being. When we look at ourselves, we can disassemble our experience. The mind is similar to a mirror, just reflecting whatever experience is occurring. Think of a mirror sitting in a hallway, and numerous people walking past it. The mirror stays a mirror, but its content changes. Every moment a new person walks by it and a new image is reflected. It is similar with the mind. We hear a noise or have a thought, and the composition of the mind changes. You have notice by simply closing your eyes and noticing the thoughts that arise. Our own experience is a process, this is the key. We are not stable beings. We are ever-changing processes, with the mind reflecting what is occurring.

Anatta (Sanskrit *anatman*) or "non-Self" is used in the suttas both as a noun and as a predicative adjective to denote that phenomena are not, or are without, a permanent self, to describe any and all composite, substantial, phenomenal and temporal things, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic, be it matter pertaining to the physical body or the cosmos at large, as well as any and all mental machinations, which are impermanent.

In Indian philosophy, the concept of a self is called *ātman* (that is, "soul" or metaphysical self), which refers to an unchanging, permanent essence conceived by virtue of



existence. This concept and the related concept of Brahman, the Vedantic monistic ideal, which was regarded as an ultimate *ātman* for all beings, were indispensable for mainstream Indian metaphysics, logic, and science; for all apparent things there had to be an underlying and persistent reality, akin to a Platonic form. The Buddha rejected all concepts of *ātman*, emphasizing changeability not permanence. He taught that all concepts of a substantial personal self were incorrect, and formed in the realm of ignorance. The Buddha criticized conceiving theories even of a unitary soul or identity immanent in all things as unskillful in the Great Discourse on Causation. In fact, according to the Buddha's statement in Khandha Samyutta, all thoughts about self are necessarily, whether the thinker is aware of it or not, thoughts about the five aggregates or one of them.

In a number of major Mahayana sutras (e.g. the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, the Srimala Sutra, among others), the Buddha is presented as clarifying this teaching by saying that, while the skandhas (constituents of the ordinary body and mind) are not the self, there does truly exist an eternal, unchanging, blissful Buddha-essence in all sentient beings, which is the uncreated and deathless Buddha-nature ("Buddha-dhatu") or "True Self" of the Buddha himself. The "tathagatagarbha"/Buddha nature does not represent a substantial self; rather, it is a positive language expression of "sunyata" (emptiness) and represents the potentiality to realize Buddhahood through Buddhist practices; the intention of the teaching of tathagatagarbha (Buddha nature) is soteriological rather than theoretical.

This immaculate Buddhist Self (atman) is in no way to be construed as a mundane, impermanent, suffering "ego", of which it is the diametrical opposite. On the other hand, this Buddha-essence or Buddha-nature is also often explained as the potential for achieving Buddhahood, rather than an

existing phenomenon one can grasp onto as being me or self.

Anatta is discussed in the Questions of King Milinda, composed during the period of the Hellenistic Indo-Greek kingdom of the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. In this text, the monk Nagasena demonstrates the concept of absolute "non-Self" by likening human beings to a chariot and challenges the Greek king "Milinda" (Menander) to find the essence of the chariot. Nagasena states that just as a chariot is made up of a number of things, none of which are the essence of the chariot in isolation, without the other pieces, similarly no one part of a person is a permanent entity; we can be broken up into five constituents – body, sensations, ideation, mental formations and consciousness – the consciousness being closest to the permanent idea of "Self", but is ever-changing with each new thought according to this viewpoint.

According to some thinkers both in the East and the West, the doctrine of "non-Self", may imply that Buddhism is a form of nihilism or something similar. However, as thinkers like Nagarjuna have clearly pointed out, Buddhism is not simply a rejection of the concept of existence or meaning, but of the hard and fast distinction between existence and non-existence, or rather between being and no-thingness. Phenomena are not independent from causes and conditions and do not exist as isolated things as we perceive them to be.

The lack of a permanent, unchanging, substantial Self in beings and things does not mean that they do not experience growth and decay on the relative level. But on the ultimate level of analysis, one cannot distinguish an object from its causes and conditions or even distinguish between object and subject (an idea appearing relatively recently in Western science). Buddhism thus has much more in common with Western empiricism, pragmatism, anti-foundationalism, and even post structuralism than with nihilism.



In the Nikāyas, the Buddha and his disciples commonly question or declare "Is that which is impermanent, subject to change, subject to suffering fit to be considered thus: 'This I am, this is mine, this is my self'?" The question which the Buddha poses to his audience is whether compounded phenomena are fit to be considered as self, to which the audience agrees that it is unworthy to be considered so. And in relinquishing such an attachment to compounded phenomena, such a person gives up delight, desire and craving for compounded phenomena and is unbounded by its change. When completely free from attachments, craving or desire to the five aggregates, such a person experiences then transcends the very causes of suffering.

Conclusion

All conditioned things, without exception, are suffering (*dukkha*), impermanent (*anitya*), and devoid of self (*anatman*). These are the three characteristics of conditioned existence. They are of central importance, not just in Buddhist philosophy, but in the Buddhist spiritual life. according to the Buddha, we do not really see conditioned experience until we learn to see it in these terms. If we see anything until else, that is just an illusion, a projection. Once we start seeing the conditioned in these terms, then little by little we get a glimpse of the Unconditioned, and that glimpse guides us on our way. In this way, the insight wisdom or *prajñā* of non-Self gives rise to cessation of suffering, and not an intellectual debate over whether a self exists or not. It is by realizing (not merely understanding intellectually, but making real in one's experience) the three marks of conditioned existence that one develops *prajñā*, which is the antidote to the ignorance that lies at the root of all suffering.

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