

On the three characters of existence

As birds need two wings to fly, we also need two qualities to be free, calmness and wisdom, or in other words, tranquility and insight. Although these two aspects of Buddhist practice are inseparable and deeply interconnected, I would like to focus solely on the attribute of wisdom for this article.

Regarding Buddhist wisdom, there are numerous layers and features. However, one of the most profound aspects of Buddhist wisdom, is the recognition of the three characteristics of existence.

The Buddha taught that, 'in order to be free from suffering, we must see things as they truly are.' But what does that mean?

In the material world when our vision is lacking, we use glasses, undertake corrective surgery, or take supplements to improve our eyesight. However, according to the Buddha, unless we develop our wisdom eye, we will never see the true nature of our existence.

If you observe a Buddha statue, you will notice a symbol between the eyebrows. That symbol represents the wisdom eye, which we already possess but have yet to open. With our physical eyes alone, we can only perceive things superficially and how we perceive what we see is clouded by certain delusions.

So, what did the Buddha see through his wisdom eye? He saw the three characteristics of existence: Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and Anatta (no-self). These three fundamental truths are the intrinsic nature of existence.

Everything in the world is marked by these qualities, which cannot be avoided or erased. Any object or phenomenon that exists in the world carries these inherent characteristics throughout its lifespan.

However, just as we are often unaware of our own breath which is always with us, we are mostly unaware of these three universal marks.

Now, let us consider why we should care about these three characteristics. The answer is : without fully understanding these characteristics of existence, we cannot experience true ease and well-being. In other words, our level of ease and well-being depends on our level of understanding of these universal aspects. An awakened individual is someone who has fully comprehended the truth of these three characteristics.

So, what happens to someone who has awakened fully through a complete understanding of these truths? What makes them free and at ease? The answer lies in letting go of craving and attachment to any object or phenomenon. In practical terms, the more we acknowledge these three characteristics, the more we can reduce our cravings and attachments, and thus experience a greater level of ease and well-being.

Let us now try to deepen our understanding on each of the three characteristics, starting with Anicca (impermanence). This means that everything is constantly moving and changing; nothing is stable or fixed. However, we often fail to recognise this deeply. Consequently, we tend to cling to many things and phenomena. For example, when it comes to our bodies, we may have aversion towards old age and sickness, and fear death. But through the wisdom of understanding impermanence, we can recognise that the decaying process is the very nature of having a body. This realisation allows us to drop attachments and be more at peace.

Recently, I heard of some super wealthy people investing excessively in AI development and pressurising AI scientist's developmental timelines, all in the hope of using the A.I to discover a sensational new way to prolong their lives.

However, ease and contentment can only be found by aligning ourselves with the truth, not by seeking external artificial solutions. A deep recognition of impermanence will guide us towards liberation, and with this realisation, we take good steps forward to encountering the condition of Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness and suffering).

To understand the fundamental Buddhist concept of Dukkha, it is helpful to explore its etymology. Dukkha can be understood as "Du" (bad) + "kha" (axle hole of a wheel), which together mean "bad wheel." This suggests that life, by its very nature, is uneven, rough at times and irregular, like driving a car with a crooked wheel. So, what to do in such a situation?

The answer, using wisdom, is quite simple.

Firstly, recognise it.

Secondly, make best out of it.

Here is an example. In our monastery, we sometimes come across piles of cow dung on the pathway, as we dwell in the countryside next to a farm. So, what do we do with this cow dung? The first step is to clearly recognise it, otherwise we may step on it or even stumble. The second step is to make the best out of it, meaning we can put it in the compost bin or use it as fertiliser for our banana trees.

Similarly, we should approach the unsatisfactory conditions of life - Dukkha, in the same manner. Instead of developing an aversion or disgust towards unsatisfactory things, we can embrace these conditions through acknowledgement and understanding. Then, what was once considered a problem or obstacle becomes an opportunity for growth.

Now, let's explore the final characteristic of existence, Anatta (no-self).

Anatta refers to the absence of an independent and separate self. Everything is interdependent, and there is no individual entity that can exist independently.

Moreover, due to the impermanence and continuous change in all things, nothing remains constant and stable. Even those things that appear solid and stable are nothing but empty processes of ongoing change. This applies to you and me as well. Despite the strong sense of self we feel, we are a bunch of aggregates and ever-changing processes.

All craving and grasping arise as by-products of our delusions regarding an independent self.

As we deepen our contemplation and understanding of these three characteristics, we gradually reduce our cravings. As our cravings lessen and eventually become eradicated, the heaviness in our heart is transformed into the lightness of happiness.

So, let us keep trying to understand these three characteristics deeper and deeper.

With metta
Bhante Anuttara