

The First Noble Truth — The Three Characteristics

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 16:54

The Buddha taught there were three basic characteristics of our human condition. *Dukkha*, often translated as unsatisfactoriness or suffering. *Anicca*, impermanence, transiency, change. And *anattā*, no soul, egolessness or insubstantiality.

When he said that our condition was fundamentally unsatisfactory, he meant not only ordinary aches and pains, emotional and personal problems and the sufferings of old age and death, he also meant it in two other respects which are, in fact, the other two characteristics of our existence: transiency and insubstantiality.

The third characteristic of our human condition, *anattā*, often translated as no soul, but better understood as egolessness or insubstantiality, has to do with how we identify with the wrong things. We take on a mistaken identity. We believe ourselves to be the body and mind, the body and the ego or personality.

He divided the human phenomenon into five categories known as *khandha* or aggregates or less lovingly heaps. The first heap consists of the material body and how mind experiences this. The second, all our sensations. The third, all our perceptions and thinking. The fourth, all our states of mind, which have been produced by our will and are called volitional conditionings or formations. They are all our moods and emotions. The fifth, the knowing of all this, our consciousness.

To understand how this is a mistaken identity it is necessary to investigate the second characteristic of the human condition which is not only applicable to all humans but to the whole of nature. This is the characteristic of change, *anicca*.

Built into the idea of change is the concept of time. It is interesting to see how we use this word. We say we live in time or we've been through bad times. The underlying concept is that time is a tunnel or a container within which we live, in which we act out our lives. Time is somehow separate from us, existing apart from us. Secondly, we seem to think we have some control over this energy or thing called time. We often say, I haven't the time, or I lost time, give me time, even I'll make time. These underlying concepts that time somehow has an independent existence, and that somehow we have some control over it, are what we must investigate to determine the essential quality of change of which time is simply the measure.

One of the rituals in any family gathering is to bring out the photo albums with all the usual comments,

delights and laughter, but one of the interesting things is to observe the tense that people talk in. This is me as a baby. There I am when I was a teenager. This is me at your wedding last year. You can see there's quite a confusion here between the present I am and the past I was. The identity of this I, with the I of the past and with the I in the present, is confused. This I, this ego, this personality conceives itself as being the same, whether in the past, present or indeed in the future. However, the fact is that this is simply not true.

Let us examine the human at the biological level. The body I had as a baby is simply not the body I have now. In fact, it is said the body completely changes every seven years. All that food and drink I have day in and day out go to fuel this process. Cells duplicate and die, all to an internal pattern, no doubt, a preset blueprint, the DNA. But nonetheless, the cells are not so much changing as themselves, but dying while other cells take their place. Even brain cells, which don't actually die, change completely within themselves, so they cannot be called the same cells as the ones we were born with.

This is an important point to grasp. By change, we don't mean that the same thing is simply changing shape. A piece of clay can be moulded into a cup and then into a saucer, so that we can say it is the same piece of clay. But when it comes to the body cells, they reproduce and die. They are not the same cells changing shape.

This came home very strongly to me when I once went to the optician. My left eye, it seems, had got a little better. I was surprised by it. But the optician told me it was surprising that eyesight remained so static, since the actual cornea, the large lens we look through, changes not once in seven years, nor in a year, nor in a month, but once a week. Yes, indeed, every week I'm looking at the world through a new cornea, and I didn't know it. In my blithe ignorance, I thought the body changed all right, but not radically. Now I come to realise that the change is radical. The body I have now is simply not the one I had seven years ago. At all.

In other words, it's the difference between an organisation saying it's going to change the staff, meaning training and redeployment, and another organisation which says it's going to change the staff, meaning it sacks everyone it now employs and takes on a totally new workforce. Our bodies change radically. They're changing radically even now.

When we perceive this, when we realize this, this transiency, this changing nature, then we begin to understand why the body cannot be a substantial me, a permanent ego. The ancient Greeks understood this idea and the philosopher Heraclitus used the image of a river for life. He said no one steps in the same river twice for it is forever changing. The Buddha, I'm sure, would have pointed out that no one steps in the same river with the same foot, for that too is ever-changing.

We can't say this is my body, because as soon as I say this is my body and thereby identify with it, define myself by it, it's gone, it's changed. It's like trying to grasp water, it just flows out of the hand. Not realising this fact of change causes us to identify with the wrong things, and this in turn is the cause of our suffering.

It never occurs to a young person in any real sense that they're growing old. The first signs of wrinkles on the face, the first grey hairs are traumas. I knew I was growing old, but I didn't think it would happen now. Growing old, losing one's powers, watching the changes on the skin all causes tremendous suffering. We identify so much with our bodies, desiring them to be as we want them to be, that we are forever compensating for the process of change, of growing old, of decay, even to the point of cosmetic operations. And death, of course, every time we have a little brush with it, be it a near accident or close shave or death of another, fills us with terror. Who are we when we have no body? If I am my body, who am I when it dies?

The same critique can be applied to all the other four khandha, the four categories the Buddha divided the human being into. If we observe our sensations, we see they're all changing all the time. They are caused by outside stimuli or stimuli from within the mind itself but everyone is unique, rising and passing away. Others arise that can be similar but not the same ones since the sensations I felt a moment ago have actually passed away.

To see this more clearly we need to return to the concept of time. Time itself doesn't exist. It is just a concept in the mind whereby we order the events that have happened to us. Ten years ago I went to my sister's wedding. Last year I visited them as usual. This year I will see them in December. Although I speak as though all this is real now, in fact nothing's happening at all by way of my sister. Let's say it's now eight o'clock in the evening. 7.45 has come and gone. It no longer exists. In fact, 7.49 has gone, no longer exists. It has collapsed, disappeared, vanished. It is no longer. Now 8.01 has not yet arrived. It too doesn't exist in any way. The only existence, the only real point that I experience in which I am actually alive is this now, this very moment, 8 o'clock.

We live on this knife edge of time. Awareness, what we are developing in meditation, is a faculty that can only exist in the now. We can't be aware of yesterday. Awareness doesn't live there. We can't be aware of tomorrow. Awareness is not born there. Awareness arises only here and now in this minute moment. Awareness and consciousness are simply here and now and at no other time.

The speed of this process, the arising and falling of each and every moment of consciousness is tremendously fast. Nuclear physicists have timed the existence of matter, subatomic particles of which all our bodies are constituted, as a million, million, million, ten thousandths of a second, or one to the power of twenty-three. That's a very small moment of existence indeed. And the Buddha teaches that within that moment of matter existing, seventeen consciousnesses, thought moments, arise.

Let us recap then on time. First, it doesn't exist by way of extension. There is no past whatsoever. It has collapsed into nothingness. There is no future. It's not here. There is only this infinitesimal moment. This is the only existence we have. It arises out of nothing, sustains itself for that infinitesimal length of time and then ceases.

When we watch the breath in meditation, we are observing time in a gross way. The in-breath begins, it is

sustained and then ends. That's it, one in-breath gone. The out-breath begins, sustains and ends. That's it, one out-breath gone. By observing the breath process we are observing, getting to know intimately this passage of moments of time. Each breath outwardly similar, yet a totally different creation from the last. We don't live in or through a time object. Real time is just our actual existence. This existence is here and now. We can't lose it or hold on to it. It can't be repeated. Each moment of existence is unique and total. It arises and passes away.

This transiency, this *anicca*, is a fundamental characteristic of the physical and mental world. It is a fundamental characteristic of the me, the human being.

Just as this is true of our physical bodies and sensations, so it is also true of the third aggregate, our perceptions. We can only perceive what there is now. I can only see a cup when a cup is there, and perceptions of the cup arise and pass away. When these perceptions are purely mental, images, words, ideas, value judgments of good and bad, they also arise and pass away. And they never arise again, but new ones affected by new information arise. So our perceptions, our ideas, our thoughts, are always arising and passing away, always changing.

Again, these same arguments pertain to our states of mind, the volitional conditionings, be they moods and emotions of depression, anxiety, anger, or joy, happiness and peace. Whatever the state of mind, it never repeats itself. So which state of mind shall I identify with? Which one shall I call me or mine? If I define myself in my depression, I'm a depressive, what am I when happiness arises? If I say I'm all my moods and emotions, then I fall into the error of believing I is existing yesterday when I was depressed, now when I'm angry, and tomorrow when I will be happy. But this I is only now, and this now passes away. It is a delusion to identify with the past and the future.

The same with the final aggregate, consciousness. Often people will argue, oh yes, I agree I'm not my body and other mental factors, since it's all arising and passing away, I see that now. But my consciousness is steady, I am my consciousness, my knowing of these things. However, in meditation, this last hold onto our false identity begins to evaporate, for we begin to realize there can only be consciousness when there is an object to be conscious of. If I were to enter a space with no objects at all, and the mind itself produced no thinking, no images, what would I be conscious of? Consciousness begs an object. Without an object there is no consciousness, no knowing. Indeed there are times when we are unconscious, not conscious. If I say, I am my consciousness, who am I in deep sleep, or anaesthetised on the operating table, or knocked unconscious?

So here we have investigated the first noble truth and the point of view of the three characteristics of existence. Transiency, *anicca*, unsatisfactoriness, *dukkha*, and egolessness or insubstantiality of the personality, *anattā*.

The Buddha, when he was enlightened, at first thought his discoveries too subtle for people to understand. But persuaded otherwise, he sought out his five former disciples. They had left him a while earlier

because he ate some milk rice, and they thought he was giving up the training of an ascetic and gone soft. But in fact, this meal gave him the energy to reach full enlightenment. When he approached them, they were reluctant at first to receive him. But as he came closer, his presence was all too powerful, and they prepared a seat for him, and he taught the Dharma by way of the Four Noble Truths.

At the end of this first discourse, known as the turning of the wheel of the law, one of the four, Kondanya, was enlightened, or as the scripture says, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dharma arose in him. Later that same day, after they had all shared the food brought in from alms round, he gave the second discourse, in which the three characteristics of existence are taught for the first time.

This is how it ends. When a wise disciple understands that the five aggregates are transitory, unsatisfying and do not constitute a permanent self, non-attachment to the body, sensations, perceptions, emotions and consciousness arises. As non-attachment arises, sense desires and attachments fade away. With the fading away of sense desires and attachments, the heart is liberated. With liberation, the knowledge arises: I am liberated.

This is the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. Through meditation and throughout our daily life, these characteristics should become more and more plain to us. Life is changing. This body, this mind, is not me, not mine. Identifying with it causes me to have wrong expectations, false hopes. This wrong identification is the cause of all my suffering. Not to identify with them is to lose my attachment to them, to be non-attached. These insights lead us to a proper relationship with ourselves and others, and ultimately leads to the experience which is beyond body and mind, Nibbāna.

We can say that the experience of Nibbāna is the discovery of our true identity, and it establishes a new way of relating to ourselves and the world. What is this new relationship? It is simply that since everything arises and passes away, I do not regard it as a me or a mine, a soul or self. I come to realize that when I wrongly identify with all this, it is a cause of suffering. I become non-attached. But let me hasten to add that this is not a cold detachment. Far from it. Because of this perspective, the heart is liberated. We begin to find real wisdom and true compassion.

In conclusion then, the more we become aware of the transient changing, radically changing nature of our lives, the more we realize there is no stopping place, no rest, no stability, no security. The more we accept these facts, the more we live within the flow of living and work within it. Through meditation, coming to terms with the ever-changing nature of our lives, we free ourselves of false fears and frustrations, fearing the loss of what we cannot actually keep, frustrated by not being able to achieve what is actually unachievable. It leads to a greater realism, and in that greater realism we will find the peace and joy we all so dearly seek.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

