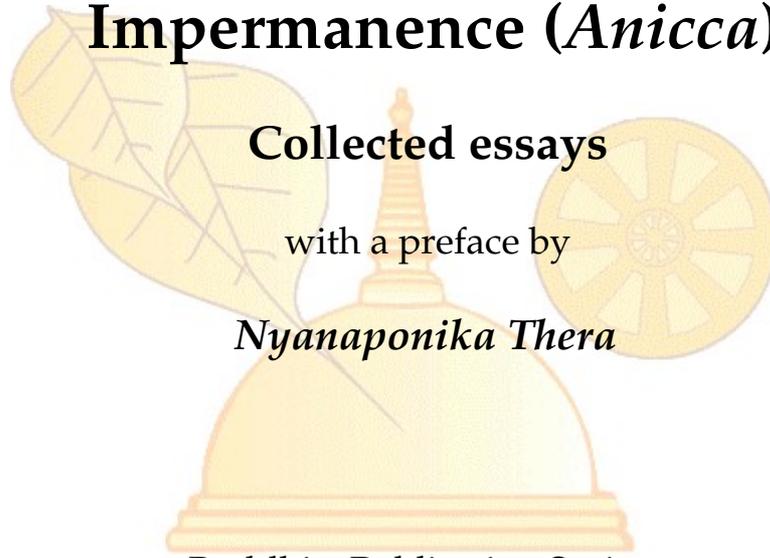


The Three Basic Facts of Existence I: Impermanence (*Anicca*)



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Preface

If we contemplate even a minute sector of the vast range of life, we are faced with such a tremendous variety of life's manifestations that it defeats description. And yet three basic statements can be made that are valid for all animate existence, from the microbe up to the creative mind of a human genius. These features common to all life were first found and formulated over 2500 years ago by the Buddha, who was rightly called "Knower of the Worlds" (*loka-vidu*). They are the Three Characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) of all that is conditioned, i.e., dependently arisen. In English renderings, they are also sometimes called Signs, Signata, or Marks.

These three basic facts of all existence are:

1. Impermanence or Change (*anicca*)
2. Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)
3. Not-self or Insubstantiality (*anattā*).

The first and the third apply to inanimate existence as well, while the second (suffering) is, of course, only an experience of the animate. The inanimate, however, can be, and very often is, a *cause* of suffering for living beings: for instance, a falling stone may cause injury or loss of property may cause mental pain. In that sense, the three are common to all that is conditioned, even to what is below or beyond the normal range of human perception.

Existence can be understood only if these three basic facts are comprehended, and this not only logically, but in confrontation with one's own experience. Insight-wisdom (*vipassanā-paññā*), which is the ultimate liberating factor in Buddhism, consists just of this experience of the three characteristics applied to one's own bodily and mental processes, and deepened and matured in meditation.

To "see things as they really are" means seeing them consistently in the light of the three characteristics. Ignorance of these three, or self-deception about them, is by itself a potent cause for suffering—by knitting, as it were, the net of false hopes, of unrealistic and harmful desires, of false ideologies, false values, and aims of life, in which man is caught. Ignoring or distorting these three basic facts can only lead to frustration, disappointment, and despair.

Hence, from a positive as well as a negative angle, this teaching on the Three Basic Facts of Existence is of such vital importance that it was thought desirable to add here more material to those brief expositions that had already appeared in this series.

Beginning with the present volume on Impermanence, each of the Three Characteristics will receive separate treatment by different authors and from different angles, with a great variety of approach.

Each of these three publications will be concluded by an essay of the late Venerable Ñāṇamoli Thera, in which all important canonical source material on the respective Characteristic is collected, systematised, and discussed. These tersely written articles merit close study and will be found very helpful in the analytical as well as meditative approach to the subject. Regrettably, the premature death of the venerable author prevented him from writing a fourth article planned by him, which was to deal with the interrelation of the Three Characteristics.

These three articles of the Venerable Ñāṇamoli were originally written for the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, and the first one, on *Anicca*, appeared in Volume I, p. 657 ff., of that work. For kind permission to reproduce these articles, the Buddhist Publication Society is much obliged to the

Editor-in-Chief of the *Encyclopaedia*, Dr. G.P. Malalasekera, and to the publishers, the Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo.

Nyanaponika.

Motto

Whatever *IS* will be *WAS*.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

The decisively characteristic thing about this world is its transience. In this sense, centuries have no advantage over the present moment. Thus the continuity of transience cannot give any consolation; the fact that life blossoms among ruins proves not so much the tenacity of life as that of death.

Franz Kafka

Words of the Buddha

“The perceiving of impermanence, Bhikkhus, developed and frequently practised, removes all sensual passion, removes all passion for material existence, removes all passion for becoming, removes all ignorance, removes and abolishes all conceit of ‘I am.’

“Just as in the autumn a farmer, ploughing with a large plough, cuts through all the spreading rootlets as he ploughs; in the same way, Bhikkhus, the perceiving of impermanence, developed and frequently practised, removes all sensual passion ... removes and abolishes all conceit of ‘I am.’”¹

“It would be better, Bhikkhus, if an uninstructed ordinary person regarded this body, made of the four great elements, as himself rather than the mind. For what reason? This body is seen to continue for a year, for two years, five years, ten years, twenty years, fifty years, a hundred years, and even more. But of that which is called mind, is called thought, is called consciousness, one moment arises and ceases as another continually both day and night.”²

¹ SN 22:102.

² SN 12:61.

The Fact of Impermanence

“Impermanent, subject to change, are component things. Strive on with heedfulness!” This was the final admonition of the Buddha Gotama to his disciples.

And when the Buddha had passed away, Sakka, the chief of the deities, uttered the following:

“Impermanent are all component things,
They arise and cease, that is their nature:
They come into being and pass away,
Release from them is bliss supreme.

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā—uppāda vayadhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti—tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho.”³*

Even up to present times, at every Buddhist funeral in Theravada countries, this very Pali verse is recited by the Buddhist monks who perform the obsequies, thus reminding the congregation of the evanescent nature of life.

It is a common sight in Buddhist lands to see the devotees offer flowers and light oil lamps before a Buddha image. They are not praying to the Buddha or to any “supernatural being.” The flowers that fade and the flames that die down, speak to them of the impermanency of all conditioned things.

It is this single and simple word impermanence (*anicca*) which is the very core of the Buddha’s teaching, being also the basis for the other two characteristics of existence, Suffering and No-self. The fact of Impermanence means that reality is never static but is dynamic throughout, and this the modern scientists are realising to be the basic nature of the world without any exception. In his teaching of dynamic reality, the Buddha gave us the master key to open any door we wish. The modern world is using the same master key, but only for material achievements, and is opening door after door with amazing success.

Change or impermanence is the essential characteristic of all phenomenal existence. We cannot say of anything, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, “this is lasting”; for even while we are saying this, it would be undergoing change. All is fleeting; the beauty of flowers, the bird’s melody, the bee’s hum, and a sunset’s glory.

“Suppose yourself gazing on a gorgeous sunset. The whole western heavens are glowing with roseate hues; but you are aware that within half an hour all these glorious tints will have faded away into a dull ashen grey. You see them even now melting away before your eyes, although your eyes cannot place before you the conclusion which your reason draws. And what conclusion is that? That conclusion is that you never, even for the shortest time that can be named or conceived, see any abiding colour, any colour which truly is. Within the millionth part of a second the whole glory of the painted heavens has undergone an incalculable series of mutations. One shade is supplanted by another with a rapidity which sets all measurements at defiance, but because the process is one to which no measurements apply, ... reason refuses to lay an arrestment on any period of the passing scene, or to declare that it is, because in the very

³ Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) In the Mahā-Sudassana *Suttanta* (Dīgha-Nikāya), this verse is ascribed to the Buddha himself; in the Mahā Sudassana *Jātaka* (No. 95), it is ascribed to the Bodhisatta, in his rebirth as King Mahā-Sudassana. In the Theragāthā (v. 1159), Mahā Moggallāna Arahant recites it, after mentioning (in v. 1158) the passing away of Sāriputta Arahant that preceded his own only by two weeks.

act of being it is not; it has given place to something else. It is a series of fleeting colours, no one of which is, because each of them continually vanishes in another.”⁴

All component things—that is, all things which arise as the effect of causes, and which in turn give rise to effects—can be crystallised in the single word *anicca*, impermanence. All tones, therefore, are just variations struck on the chord which is made up of impermanence, suffering (unsatisfactoriness), and no-self nor soul—*anicca, dukkha, and anattā*.

Camouflaged, these three characteristics of life prevail in this world until a supremely Enlightened One reveals their true nature. It is to proclaim these three characteristics—and how through complete realisation of them, one attains deliverance of mind—that a Buddha appears. This is the quintessence, the sum total of the Buddha’s teaching.

Although the concept of *anicca* applies to all compounded and conditioned things, the Buddha is more concerned with the so-called being; for the problem is with man and not with dead things. Like an anatomist who resolves a limb into tissues and tissues into cells, the Buddha, the Analyzer (*Vibhajjavādi*), analysed the so-called being, the *saṅkhāra puñja*, the heap of processes, into five ever-changing aggregates, and made it clear that there is nothing abiding, nothing eternally conserved, in this conflux of aggregates (*khandhā santati*). They are: material form or body; feeling or sensation; perception; mental formations; consciousness.

The Enlightened One explains:

“The five aggregates, monks, are *anicca*, impermanent; whatever is impermanent, that is *dukkha*, unsatisfactory; whatever is *dukkha*, that is without *attā*, self. What is without self, that is not mine, that I am not, that is not my self. Thus it should be seen by perfect wisdom (*sammappaññāya*) as it really is. Who sees by perfect wisdom, as it really is, his mind, not grasping, is detached from taints; he is liberated.”⁵

Nāgarjuna only echoes the words of the Buddha when he says: “When the notion of an Ātman, Self or Soul cease, the notion of ‘mine’ also ceases and one becomes free from the idea of I and mine.”⁶

The Buddha gives five very striking similes to illustrate the ephemeral nature of the five aggregates. He compares material form to a lump of foam, feeling to a bubble, perception to a mirage, mental formations to a plantain trunk (which is pithless, without heartwood), and consciousness to an illusion, and asks: “What essence, monks, could there be in a lump of foam, in a bubble, in a mirage, in a plantain trunk, in an illusion?”

Continuing, the Buddha says:

“Whatever material form there be: whether past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or lofty; far or near; that material form the monk sees, meditates upon, examines with systematic attention, he thus seeing, meditating upon, and examining with systematic attention, would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial and without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in material form?”

The Buddha speaks in the same manner of the remaining aggregates and asks:

“What essence, monks, could there be in feeling, in perception, in mental formations and in consciousness?”⁷

Thus we see that a more advanced range of thought comes with the analysis of the five

⁴ Ferrier’s Lectures and Remains Vol. I, p. 119, quoted in *Sarva-darsana-Saṅgraha*, London, p. 15.

⁵ SN 22:45.

⁶ *Mādhyamika-Kārikā*, xviii.2.

⁷ SN 22:95.

aggregates. It is at this stage that right understanding known as insight (*vipassanā*) begins to work. It is through this insight that the true nature of the aggregates is grasped and seen in the light of the three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), namely: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self.

It is not only the five aggregates that are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without self, but the causes and conditions that produce the aggregates are also impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without self. This point the Buddha makes very clear:

“Material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, monks, are impermanent (*anicca*). Whatever causes and conditions there are for the arising of these aggregates, they, too, are impermanent. How, monks, could aggregates arise from what is impermanent, be permanent?

“Material form ... and consciousness, monks, are unsatisfactory (*dukkha*); whatever causes and conditions there are for the arising of these aggregates, they too are unsatisfactory. How, monks, could aggregates arise from what is unsatisfactory be pleasant or pleasurable?

“Material form ... and consciousness, monks, are without a self (*anattā*); whatever causes and conditions there are for the arising of these aggregates, they, too are without self. How, monks, could aggregates arise from what is without self be self (*attā*)?

“The instructed noble disciple (*sutavā ariyasāvako*), monks, seeing thus becomes dispassionate towards material form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness: Through dispassion he is detached; through detachment he is liberated; in liberation the knowledge comes to be that he is liberated, and he understands: Destroyed is birth, lived is the life of purity, done is what was to be done, there is no more of this to come (meaning that there is no more continuity of the aggregates, that is, no more becoming or rebirth).”⁸

It is always when we fail to see the true nature of things that our views become clouded; because of our preconceived notions, our greed and aversion, our likes and dislikes, we fail to see the sense organs and sense objects in their respective and objective natures, (*āyatanānaṃ āyatanatṭam*) and go after mirages and deceptions. The sense organs delude and mislead us and then we fail to see things in their true light, so that our way of seeing things becomes perverted (*viparīta dassana*).

The Buddha speaks of three kinds of illusion or perversions (*vipallāsa*, Skt. *viparyāsa*) that grip man’s mind, namely: the illusions of perception, thought, and view (*saññā vipallāsa*; *citta vipallāsa*; *ditṭhi vipallāsa*).⁹ Now, when a man is caught up in these illusions he perceives, thinks, and views incorrectly:

He perceives permanence in the impermanent; satisfactoriness in the unsatisfactory (ease and happiness in suffering); self in what is not self (a soul in the soulless); beauty in the repulsive.

He thinks and views in the same erroneous manner. Thus each illusion works in four ways,¹⁰ and leads man astray, clouds his vision, and confuses him. This is due to unwise reflections, to unsystematic attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*). Right understanding (or insight meditation—*vipassanā*) alone removes these illusions and helps man to cognize the real nature that underlies all appearance. It is only when man comes out of this cloud of illusions and perversions that he shines with true wisdom like the full moon that emerges brilliantly from behind a black cloud.

⁸ SN 22:7–9, abridged.

⁹ AN 4:49—see *Aṅguttara Nikāya: An Anthology, Part I* (The Wheel No. 155–158), p. 86.

¹⁰ AN 4:49.

The aggregates of mind and body, being ever subject to cause and effect, as we saw above, pass through the inconceivably rapid moments of arising, presently existing, and ceasing (*uppāda, t̥hiti, bhaṅga*), just as the unending waves of the sea or as a river in flood sweeps to a climax and subsides. Indeed, human life is compared to a mountain stream that flows and rushes on, changing incessantly¹¹ “*nadi-soto viya,*” like a flowing stream.

Heraclitus, that renowned Greek philosopher, was the first Western writer to speak about the fluid nature of things. He taught the *Panta Rhei* doctrine, the flux theory, at Athens, and one wonders if that teaching was transmitted to him from India.

“There is no static being,” says Heraclitus, “no unchanging substratum. Change, movement, is the Lord of the Universe. Everything is in a state of becoming, of continual flux (*Panta Rhei*).”

He continues: “You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.” Nevertheless one who understands the root of the Dhamma would go a step further and say: *The same man cannot step twice into the same river; for the so called man, who is only a conflux of mind and body, never remains the same for two consecutive moments.*”¹²

It should now be clear that the being whom for all practical purposes we call a man, woman, or individual, is not something static, but kinetic, being in a state of constant and continuous change. Now when a person views life and all that pertains to life in this light, and understands analytically this so-called being as a mere succession of mental and the bodily aggregates, he sees things as they really are (*yathābhūta*). He does not hold the wrong view of “personality belief,” belief in a soul or self (*sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*), because he knows through right understanding that all phenomenal existence is causally dependent (*paṭicca-samuppanna*), that each is conditioned by something else, and that its existence is relative to that condition. He knows that as a result there is no “I,” no persisting psychic entity, no ego principle, no self or anything pertaining to a self in this life process. He is, therefore, free from the notion of a microcosmic soul (*jīvātma*) or a macrocosmic soul (*paramātma*).

It is said that through insight meditation (*vipassanā*) one sees things as they really are (*yathābhūta*) and not as they appear to be. Viewing things as they really are implies, as we discussed above, seeing the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and no-self nature of all conditioned and component things. To such a meditative disciple of the Buddha the “world” is not the external or the empirical world, but the human body with its consciousness. It is the world of the five aggregates of clinging (*pañca upādānakkhandhā*). It is this that he tries to understand as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without self or soul. It is to this world of body and mind that the Buddha referred to when he said to Mogharāja, “Ever mindful, Mogharāja, see the world as void (*suñña*); having given up the notion of a self (underlying it)—so may one overcome death (*Māra*); The King of Death sees not one who thus knows the world.”¹³

The sum total of the philosophy of change taught in Buddhism is that all component things that have conditioned existence are a process and not a group of abiding entities, but the changes occur in such rapid succession that people regard mind and body as static entities. They do not see their arising and their breaking up (*udaya-vaya*), but regard them unitarily, see them as a lump or whole (*ghana-saññā*).

It is very hard, indeed, for people who are accustomed to continually think of their own mind and body and the external world with mental projections as wholes, as inseparable units, to get rid of the false appearance of “wholeness.” So long as man fails to see things as processes, as movements, he will never understand the anatta (no-soul) doctrine of the Buddha. That is why

¹¹ AN 7:70.

¹² A.K. Rogers, *A Student's History of Philosophy*, London, 1920, p. 15.

¹³ Sutta Nipāta.

people impertinently and impatiently put the question:

“If there is no persisting entity, no unchanging principle, like self or soul what is it that experiences the results of deeds here and hereafter?”

Two different discourses¹⁴ deal with this burning question. The Buddha was explaining in detail to his disciples the impermanent nature of the five aggregates, how they are devoid of self, and how the latent conceits “I am” and “mine” cease to exist. Then there arose a thought in the mind of a certain monk thus: “Material body is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, mental formations are not self, consciousness is not self. Then what self do selfless deeds affect?”

The Buddha, reading the thought of the monk’s mind, said, “The question was beside the point” and made the monk understand the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self nature of the aggregates.

“It is wrong to say that the doer of the deed is the same as the one who experiences its results. It is equally wrong to say that the doer of the deed and the one who experiences its results are two different persons,” (SN 12:46) for the simple reason that what we call life is a flow of psychic and physical processes or energies, arising and ceasing constantly; it is not possible to say that the doer himself experiences results because he is changing now, every moment of his life; but at the same time you must not forget the fact that the continuity of life that is the continuance of experience, the procession of events is not lost; it continues without a gap. The child is not the same as an adolescent, the adolescent is not the same as the adult, they are neither the same nor totally different persons (*na ca so na ca añño*).¹⁵ There is only a flow of bodily and mental processes.

There are three types of teachers, the first one teaches that the ego or the self is real now as well as in the future (here and hereafter); the second one teaches that the ego is real only in this life, not in the future; the third one teaches that the concept of an ego is an illusion: it is not real either in this life or in the hereafter.

The first one is the eternalist (*sassatavādī*); the second one is the annihilationist (*ucchedavādī*); the third one is the Buddha who teaches the middle way of avoiding the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. (Here the middle way is the doctrine of dependent arising, or causal conditioning—*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

All theistic religions teach that the ego survives after death in some way or other, and is not annihilated. The materialist’s concept is that the ego is annihilated at death. The Buddhist view is that there is no ego, or anything substantial, or lasting, but all things conditioned are subject to change, and they change not remaining the same for two consecutive moments, and that there is a continuity but no identity.

So long as man cherishes the idea of the lasting self or ego it will not be possible for him to conceive the idea that all things are impermanent, that there is, in reality, an arising and a ceasing of things (*samudaya-dhamma, vaya-dhamma*).¹⁶ The understanding of the anatta doctrine, which is exclusively Buddhist, is indispensable in the understanding of the four noble truths and the other principal tenets of Buddhism.

The people of the world today mark the changing nature of life. Although they see it, they do not keep it in mind and act with dispassionate discernment. Though change again and again speaks to them and makes them unhappy, they pursue their mad career of whirling round the

¹⁴ MN 109; SN 22:82.

¹⁵ Milinda Pañha.

¹⁶ Satipaṭṭhāna sutta.

wheel of existence and are twisted and torn between the spokes of agony. They cherish the belief that it is possible to discover a way of happiness in this very change, to find a centre of security in this circle of impermanence. They imagine that although the world is uncertain they can make it certain and give it a solid basis, and so the unrelenting struggle for worldly improvement goes on with persevering effort and futile enthusiasm.

History has proved again and again and will continue to prove that nothing in this world is lasting. All things when clung to fail. Nations and civilizations rise, flourish, and die away as waves upon the ocean, yielding place to new, and thus the scrolls of time record the passing pageant, the baseless vision, and the fading flow that is human history.

Piyadassi Thera

Anicca: The Buddhist Theory of Impermanence— An Approach from the Standpoint of Modern Philosophy¹⁷

“Is the eye ... the shape ... visual consciousness, permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, reverend sir.”

“But is what is impermanent, anguish or happiness?”

“Anguish, reverend sir.”

“Is it right to regard that which is impermanent anguish, and liable to alteration as
‘This is mine, this am I, this is my self?’”

“No, reverend Sir.”¹⁸

Insights and discoveries revealed to human minds 2500 years ago, at the time of the Buddha (or even several centuries before that time), may have caused deep and revolutionary effects in the evolution of existing world views, no less important than the discoveries of Galileo and Copernicus have been for the eventual collapse of the world-view of mediaeval Christian civilization. These latter discoveries, which mark the outset of modern civilization, have become so much a part of commonplace or general information that they can be imparted to children in the lowest grades of elementary education, and are normally absorbed by them without difficulty.

The idea of impermanence and of ceaseless change, due to the never-ending “chain” of causes and effects (the subject which we are attempting to approach in its Buddhist version of *anicca*) has, in its broad meaning, become one of our stereotyped and oversimplified truisms, reduced, both in its formal and substantial significance, to a mere rudiment of conventional word-meaning. As such, it may still have impressed us on the level of nursery rhymes and even of some grammar-school classics in the history of literature. (If I had to choose a deeper adequation¹⁹ founded on a modern poet’s more complex philosophical intuition, I would not hesitate to select the lines from T.S. Eliot’s *Quartets*;

Ash on an old man’s sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave ...
Water and fire succeed
The town, the pasture and the weed.

We might hope to rediscover the original significance and historical purport of such truisms only if we were to look for them purposively, guided by some subjective impressions of individual or particular cases, and by the consequences of their concrete application in actual scientific or philosophical theories. This is what I am about to hint at in a few examples.

One: As a young teacher, when for the first time I tried to explain to children of about twelve

¹⁷ This essay is a reprint from *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 1971, revised and enlarged by the author.

¹⁸ MN 146 and several other texts. Quotations from Pali *suttas* are adapted mainly from the Pali Text Society’s editions of the Translation Series. References in the text are to the *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN), *Dīgha-nikāya* (DN), *Saṃyutta-nikāya* (SN), *Dhammapada* (Dhp).

¹⁹ Editorial note: *Adequation*: (*obsolete*): The act of equalising or making equal or commensurate (OED, 2nd ed.).

years of age the biological process of growing cabbages and potatoes, my emphasis on the importance of dung (I did not use the technical term “fertiliser”) happened to be so impressive that the next day a mother came to complain against my “direct method” and “drastic naturalism” in visual teaching. Her child had been so affected by my discourse as to develop an acute loathing against food. Thus I was impressed how easily our most commonplace truisms about the laws of nature—whose discovery, once upon a time, may have been treated and even punished as revolutionary by respectable and authoritative social institutions—can still reveal themselves unexpectedly in their full overpowering force to the fresh and innocent minds of new generations.

Two: In my own generation of teenagers, between the two wars in Europe, the deadlock between science and religion was so complete that secondary school curricula were bound to provoke in our minds an unavoidable crisis of conscience. Teachers on the whole were totally involved in this struggle of convictions, keen to win us over to one side or the other. The side of science against religion was normally the stronger. Since that time religion, defeated in Europe, has become more and more a prohibited fruit, and has therefore acquired a new attractive force for juvenile minds. This is true not only in the eastern parts of Europe, since science is far from being a privilege of Communism. An anti-scientific tendency in Europe (“continental”) philosophy has even become predominant, on account of the moral catastrophe which still preoccupies the minds of our generation beyond any other problem of “man’s position in the universe.”

The central issue in this conflict between science and religion, at least from our youthful bias at that time, was of course the problem of *anattā* (“no-soul”), to express it by the corresponding Buddhist term. Laws governing *processes* of causes and effects were, however, scientifically explained—or at least so understood by our unripe minds, under the impression of the open dispute between science and (Christian) religion. The explanations were not yet in terms of the scientific equivalent to a pure *annica-vādo* (theory of impermanence), which would imply a denial of the underlying material substantiality of the world. Instead of that, explanations given to us at that time still followed the classical Greek pattern of mechanistic materialism or static atomism, which was the closest to the Buddhist understanding of the *uccheda-vādo* (theory of destruction), whose believers are described in Pali texts in the following terms:

“ ... He then hears the Perfect One expounding the teaching for the removal of all grounds for ‘views,’ of all prejudices, obsessions, dogmas, and biases, for the stilling of all processes, for the relinquishment of all substrata of existence, for the extirpation of craving, for dispassion, cessation, extinction. He then thinks, ‘I shall be annihilated, I shall be destroyed! No longer shall I exist!’ Hence he grieves, is depressed and laments; beating his breast, he weeps, and dejection befalls him. Thus, Bhikkhus, is there anxiety about realities.”²⁰

To this, the only authentic answer is:

“Since in this very life a Tathāgata (in this case generally understood as a human being in the widest sense) is not to be regarded as existing in truth, in reality, is it proper for you to assert: ‘as I understand the doctrine taught by the Exalted One, insofar as a Bhikkhu has destroyed the *āsavas* (life’s “intoxicants” or passions) he is broken up and perishes when body is broken up, he exists not after death.”²¹

The logical possibility of such an answer is excluded by the premise. The same premise, however, excludes also the opposite, affirmative, possibility. (We shall return to this problem, as

²⁰ MN 22.

²¹ SN 22:85.

understood by contemporary philosophy, in section *Five*.)

It is important to underline here that, on the same premise, *uccheda-vādo*, or simply the *materialistic belief* in a substantial “destruction” of any form of being, is the extreme opposite of any authentic *nihilism* in ontology and epistemology (theory of being and theory of knowledge). Only an explicitly idealistic philosophy, “looking upon the world as a bubble, as a mirage”²² can be nihilistic in some respect, while *uccheda-vādo* as a “theory of destruction” necessarily presupposes an existentially rooted belief in material substance.

It was just in this sense, in the midst of the battle-ground between science and religion, and on the eve of a world war, that the children of the first half of the 20th century had to face the fatality of a physical and moral destruction, scientifically and infallibly precalculated, as experience was about to prove. Yet just over the edge of our intellectual horizon was dawning a time, for science at least, of acquiring a completely different position vis-a-vis the problem of impermanence and relativity as affecting the deepest subatomic structure of the world—a position considerably closer to the Buddhist idea of *anicca*.

Three: Since 1927, Bertrand Russell’s book, “*An Outline of Philosophy*,” has been widely quoted as one of the best popular presentations of the radical change in the scientific world-view stemming from Einstein’s theory of relativity and of the resulting development of nuclear physics. I shall try to elicit from Russell’s statements, as far as the present draught of pointers to our essential problem may permit, the rejection of the *substance-view* by modern science, because it is the rejection of the *substance-view* that constitutes the core of the Buddhist *anicca-vādo* as a foundation (at least in the *ti-lakkhaṇa* scheme) of both *dukkha* and *anattā*.

To start with, let us define the idea of physical “substance” by means of its basic description and philosophical implication as stated in the *Sutta-piṭaka* sources. The problem of substance, as defined by scientific (*lokā-yata*) theories at the time of the Buddha, finds its classical formulation, categorical delimitation, and solution in concise terms in his concluding answer to Kevaḍḍha:

“Where do earth, water, fire, and wind; long and short; fine and coarse; pure and impure, no footing find?

Where is it that both name and form die out, leaving no trace behind?

When intellection (*viññāṇa*) ceases they all cease, too.”²³

For the categorical relation of mind and matter (or “name and form,” *nāmarūpa*, as implied in the foregoing formulation), the following statement of the Buddha is the most adequate and also the best-known in connection with our subject:

“It would be better, Bhikkhus, for the unlearned worldling to regard this body, built up of the four elements, as his self rather than the mind. For it is evident that this body may last for a year, for two years, for three, four, five or ten years ... or even for a hundred years and more. But that which is called thought, or mind, or consciousness, continuously, during day and night, arises as one thing, and passes away as another thing.”²⁴

Now, let us get a few quotations from Bertrand Russell.²⁵ First, as regards substance-matter, he says:

²² Dhp 170.

²³ DN 11.

²⁴ SN 12:61.

²⁵ Quotations from *An Outline of Philosophy*, 3rd impression. London, Allen and Unwin, 1941, pp. 309, 290, 304, 294, 290, 5, 287, 288, 289, 291, 292, 296, 297, 11, 300, 14.

“In former days, you could believe it on a philosophical ground that the soul is a substance and all substances are indestructible ... But the notion of substance, in the sense of a permanent entity with changing states, is no longer applicable to the world.”

“A wave in the sea persists for a longer or shorter time: the waves that I see dashing themselves to pieces on the Cornish coast may have come all the way from Brazil, but that does not mean that a “thing” has travelled across the Atlantic; it means only that a certain *process of change* has travelled.”

“(Einstein’s theory of relativity) has philosophical consequences which are, if possible, even more important. The substitution of space-time for space and time has made the category of substance less applicable than formerly, since the essence of substance was persistent through time, and there is now no one cosmic time.”

“We found that matter, in modern science, has lost its solidity and substantiality; it has become a mere ghost haunting the scenes of its former splendour ... The notion of matter, in modern physics, has become absorbed into the notion of energy.”

“We cannot say that ‘matter is the cause of our sensations’... In a word, ‘matter’ has become no more than a conventional shorthand for stating *causal laws concerning events*.”

Thus we are committed to causation as an *a priori* belief without which we should have no reason for supposing that there is a “real” chair (or any *thing*) at all.

Next, as regards the *theory of events*, we note that the idea of fixed and static elements of “matter” has been replaced by that of undeterminable “events” corresponding to the quantum electro-dynamic field theory in nuclear physics, which comes very close to the conception of a non-physical but purely phenomenological idea of *dharmā*, implied in its primitive significance by *khaṇika-vādo*, or theory of momentariness, of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. (This latter aspect, explicitly philosophical, will be sketched in chapter *five*, below.) Of this Russell writes:

“Everything in the world is composed of ‘events.’ ... An ‘event’ is something occupying a small finite amount of space-time ... Events are not impenetrable, as matter is supposed to be; on the contrary, every event in space-time is overlapped by other events.”

“I assume that every event is contemporaneous with events that are not contemporaneous with each other; this is what is meant by saying that every event lasts for a finite time ... Time is wholly relational.”

“Space-time order, as well as space-time points, results from the relations between events.”

Compare with this last statement, and with those that follow, the assertion of Buddhaghosa in *Atthasālinī*: “By time the sage described the mind, and by mind described the time.”

Lastly, Russell says of *mental events*:

“An important group of events, namely percepts, may be called ‘mental.’”

“Mentality is an affair of causal laws, not of the quality of single events, and also, mentality is a matter of degree.”

“What is mind? ... Mind must be a group of mental events, since we have rejected the view that it is a single simple entity such as the *ego* was formerly supposed to be ... Its constitution corresponds however to ‘the unity of one “experience.””

As a result of these considerations, Russell concludes that “first of all, you must cut out the word ‘I’: the person who believes is an inference, not a part of what you know immediately.”

Finally, the logical possibility of an *uccheda-vādo* (theory of destruction) “heresy” is explicitly eliminated even on this level of merely scientific considerations: “Is a mind a structure of material units? I think it is clear that the answer to this question is in the negative.”

We can conclude this survey by accepting without any further reserve Russell’s statement: “The problems we have been raising are none of them new, but they suffice to show that our everyday views of the world and of our relations to it are unsatisfactory.”

Four: Recently, field theory, as a replacement for the abandoned substance theory in physics, has found increasing application—at least as a hypothetical analogy—in other spheres of scientific thought, and even more in philosophical speculations limited to possible (and sometimes to impossible) extensions of “special sciences.” Its application to parapsychology is of particular interest, for the extension of the subject in which we are interested is beyond the strictly physical sphere of being.

It is Gardner Murphy who has given us the most consequent and exclusive elaboration of a parapsychological analogy of field theory, as far as I know. A summarised recapitulation of his thesis is as follows:

The action of living matter on living matter is never a case of single cell acting only on single cell. The structural whole or field is always involved. The field principle may hold in psychics as well as in physics, and a psychic field may extend backwards and forwards in time as well as onwards in space. The question, “Does personality survive death?” is therefore in Murphy’s view not a reasonable question to ask. If any psychical *activity* survives, it will become an aspect of different fields and will thus take on new qualities and new structural relationships. It is evident that for him “all personal activities are constantly changing context and interacting with those of others, and it may be that each one becomes part of the cosmic process.”²⁶

Another worker in the field of parapsychology, C.G. Broad, investigating *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* from the standpoint of a possible “survival” of the “PSI component,” draws the conclusion, from the same basic analogy with physics, that “we need no longer suppose that, although a surviving *PSI* component may be bodiless, it is necessarily unextended and unlocalized, for we are nowadays well accustomed to such phenomena as electro-magnetic fields which cannot be called bodies in the ordinary sense but which still have structure and definite properties and dispositions. We must not think of it (i.e., of the surviving *PSI*-component) as something on which an experience makes an impression as a seal does on a ball of wax. On the contrary, such a substanceless theory implies a greater degree of survival than the mere persistence of an inactive *PSI* component.”²⁷

Exponents of the same parapsychological theory also maintain that their hypothesis might offer a more adequate basis for explanation of subconscious phenomena investigated by psychoanalysis, particularly Jung’s archetypes, than the initial Freudian attempts, which have been characterised since the first as a scientifically untenable Platonic analogy with “pigeon holes” as the basic structure of the soul.

All these more or less *ad hoc* analogies with the field theory in physics can be brought down as well to an earlier metaphysical hypothesis, formulated on a broader philosophical basis already by William James, in his *Pluralistic Universe* (1909).²⁸ Speaking of the structure of “our

²⁶ Quoted according to R. Heywood, *The Sixth Sense, an Inquiry into Extra-Sensory Perception*, London, Pan-books, 1959, pp. 205–210.

²⁷ See also his book, *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, and R. Heywood, *op. cit.*, pp. 219–222.

²⁸ The following quotations are from *Classic American Philosophers*, General Editor M.H. Fisch, New York, Applenton-Century-Crofts, 1951, pp. 163, 164.

inner life," James says:

"Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self ... May not you and I be confluent in a higher consciousness, and confluently active there, though we now know it not? ... The analogies with ... facts of psychical research, so called, and with those of religious experience, establish ... a decidedly formidable probability in favour (of the following pluralistic hypothesis:)

"Why should we envelop our many with the 'one' that brings so many poisons in its train? ... (instead of accepting) along with the superhuman consciousness the notion that it is not all-embracing; the notion, in other words, that there is a God, but that he is finite, either in power or in knowledge, or in both at once."

This is exactly the basic distinction between the Vedāntic and the Buddhist conception of God, or gods, implying also the reason why James, in some respects, was in favour of a polytheistic conception, as a "result of our criticism of the absolute," in the same context.

Five: Such adaptation of hypotheses borrowed *ad hoc* from heterogeneous fields of science could and should be ultimately verified and explained only by proper philosophical investigation, using autonomous methods and established on its own, purely anthropological ground. Since the beginning of the 20th century this has indeed been done, always more clearly and explicitly. The results have been considerable, at least as far as the problem of our primordial concern is involved: the human value aspect of *anicca*, its fundamental significance in connection with both *dukkham* and *anattā*.

The proper philosophical attitude was defined, not as pertaining to the physical but rather to the *historical* world-view, as early as the end of the 19th century, by Wilhelm Dilthey, founder of the modern philosophy of culture:

The final pronouncement of the historical world-view is that human accomplishment of every sort is relative, that *everything is moving in process and nothing is stable*.

And yet this historical orientation has not maintained a position of predominant importance in 20th century European philosophy. The most prominent philosopher of culture in the middle of this century, Karl Jaspers, in discussing the priority of the question "What is man?" (as formulated by Kant) points out that this priority "does not mean that the knowledge of being is to be replaced by the knowledge of man. Being still remains the essential, but man can approach it only through his existence as a man," i.e., through his historicity.²⁹

Following Edmund Husserl, who established the most widely adopted logical and epistemological platform for European or continental philosophy in this century, the problem of *being* has acquired and sustained a role of central importance. In order to avoid its gross misunderstanding it is necessary, especially from our Buddhist standpoint, to note that Husserl's basic postulate, "Back to the things themselves," does not in any way imply a substantialist meaning of "things" in the classical, physically oriented ontology or theory of being, which has been rejected by modern physics. The significance of "being" has been radically changed with the achievement of a deeper insight into both its physical and historical structure. This is revealed very clearly in the analysis of being by Nicolai Hartmann who, more than Husserl and his closer followers, concentrated on implications of the ontological problem in the natural sciences.

In this respect the standpoint of A.N. Whitehead in Anglo-American philosophy comes closest to that of N. Hartmann. Russell's theory of infinitesimal "space-time events" was not much more than an attempt to reduce to a pale rationalised scheme Whitehead's metaphysical

²⁹ K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, ed. By R. Hart-Davis, London, 1962, p. 320.

conception of “actual occasions” and “throbbing actualities,” understood as “pulsation of experience” whose “drops” or “puffs of existence” guided by an internal teleology in their “concrecence” (analogous to the Buddhist *saṅkhāra* in karmic formations) join the “stream of existence” (*bhavaṅga-soto*).

The core of the *abhidhamma* conception of the “stream of existence” consists in its “theory of momentariness” *khaṇika-vādo*. Its modern analogy has found its first and best formulation in plain terms in the philosophy of William James, especially in his essay “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” where the “stream of consciousness” or “stream of thinking” (which, “when scrutinised, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing”) is elicited from his basic theory of “pure experience,” defined as “the instant field of the present ... this succession of an emptiness and fullness that have reference to each other and are of one flesh”—succession “in small enough pulses,” which “is the essence of the phenomenon.” In the same connection, as “the result of our criticism of the absolute,” the metaphysical and metapsychical idea of a “central self” is reduced by James to “the conscious self of the moment.”³⁰ The well-known Buddhist thesis of “no-self” (*anattā*), or of a soul-less psychology, is based on the same background of the “theory of momentariness.”

This is also one of the points—and the most significant one—on which the philosophical conception of James coincides with Bergson. Terminologically at least, Bergson’s designation of the same “stream” as “*flux du vecu*,” the word “*vecu*” (“lived”) seems to come closest to the meaning of the Pali *bhavaṅga*, suggesting the “articulated” (*aṅgo*) texture of life-experience.

In Husserl’s interpretation, “things” are simply taken to mean “whatever is given,” that which we “see” in consciousness, and this “given” is called phenomenal in the sense that it “appears” to our consciousness. The Greek word “phenomenon” does *not* necessarily indicate that there is an unknown thing behind phenomena (as in Kant’s philosophy or in the Vedānta), or a “back-stage” being, as Nietzsche ironically exposed it. From our standpoint, it is important to emphasise that Husserl’s phenomenological method “is neither deductive nor empirical, but consists in *pointing to* what is given and *elucidating* it.”³¹ It claims, in other words, to be *yathā-bhūta*, or “adequate to (actual) being.”

The analysis of the original meaning of the Greek term “phenomenon” has been performed in masterly fashion by Martin Heidegger.³² The word “phenomenon” (from the verb *phainesthai*, “let see,” which is similar to the Pali *ehi-passiko*) has two meanings relevant for philosophy. The first is “to show itself,” the second, “to seem as.” Contemporary phenomenological philosophy uses it in the first sense, as “merely letting something be seen, letting entities be perceived.” The secondary meaning, indicating something which seems to “remain hidden, or which relapses or gets covered again, or shows itself only ‘in disguise,’” points to the *historical process* of constructing theories and “views” (Greek *doxa*, Sanskrit *dr̥ṣṭi*, Pali *diṭṭhi*) by which the primordially “uncovered” phenomena are rather concealed again, or kept in disguise.

The same basic idea is adopted by Nicolai Hartmann: “That a being is ‘in-itself’ means to say that it exists actually and not only for us ... Being-in-itself does not need to be proved, it is given as the world itself is given.”³³ Hartmann’s most valuable contribution, however, is his entrance into the profound analysis of what was above called the secondary meaning of the philosophical term “phenomenon.” His analysis distinguishes “spheres” and “levels” of being: Broadly, there

³⁰ Quotations from *Classic American Philosophers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160, 155, 161, 163 n.

³¹ Cf. II. Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy*, Univ. of California Press, 1961, p. 136 (also for bibliography).

³² The English translation of his main work, *Being and Time*, was published by Harper, New York, 1962. My references are from the 7th German ed., Tübingen, M. Niemeyer Verlag, 1953, pp. 28 ff.

³³ Cf. Bochenski, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

are two primary spheres, designated as real and ideal being. In the sphere of the real, four structural levels are distinguished: matter, life, consciousness, and mind.

In contexts eliciting such statements, it appears more and more obvious, from a Buddhist standpoint, how closely the meaning of the term phenomenon, as used in contemporary philosophy, approximates the basic meaning of *dhamma* in the *Abhidhamma* theory. (The last instance quoted from Hartmann may remind us even more specifically of the *khandhā structures*.)

However, beyond the possibility of extending this analogy of phenomenon as disclosure of “being-in-itself” understood as a process, it is felt more and more by several contemporary European philosophers (just as was the case in the original Buddhist counterpart) that the ontological purport of being, thus understood as phenomenon or *dhammo*, must still be limited by a critical principle of essentially deeper significance. This principle has found its first—and until now its clearest—logical formulation in the *cātu-koṭīka* (tetralemma) rule by the Buddha, as he regularly applies it to the *avyākatāni* or “not-designated” problems, or “dialectical antinomies”³⁴ of speculative thought: “Neither being, nor non-being, nor both being-and-non-being, nor neither-being-nor-non-being” can express the existential purport and content of human reality. The word “being,” or any other derivate from the verb “to be,” cannot adequately express the immediate intuition (*vipassanā*) of existence, or the essence of actuality (as *paramattho*).

This deficiency of the basic ontological term “being” has been subtly analysed by Heidegger in his “*Introduction to Metaphysics*.” Yet with him the philosophy of existence (or human actuality) has taken a prevalently ontological direction (as a phenomenological analysis of being). It has become a philosophy of our human being-in-the-world, and consequently a philosophy of “anguish” or *dukkha*, even though it was soon felt that this ontological turning does not, and cannot, adequately reflect either the primordial motives or the ultimate scope of existential thinking. Without entering into the historical background of such inner divergences in contemporary philosophy, I should like to point out a few symptomatic objections which can be compared in their radically anti-ontological attitude with the principle of the Buddha as formulated above.

According to the Buddha, the person reaping the fruits of good and bad actions (in a future life) is neither the same one who has committed these actions nor a different one. The same principle applies to the structural identification of a person in any other respect and circumstance, in the stream of one single physical life.

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, discussing the problem of the structural unity of human personality, comes (at least on the basic level) to the conclusion that “the relation between my body and myself cannot be described as either ‘being’ or ‘having’: I *am* my body and yet I cannot identify myself with it.”³⁵ “Existing” does not mean being an object. On this supposition, Marcel develops his critical analysis of the two inadequate extreme terms of existence in his main work, *Being and Having*.

Another representative of the same trend in French philosophy, Jean Wahl, seems to approximate more nearly the actual meaning of the Buddha’s *avyākatāni* (specified above), not from formal logical or even linguistic considerations, but rather out of an essentially congenial

³⁴ An astonishingly close analogy between the formulation of the four antinomies of the dialectical reason by Kant and the same basic structure of the four groups of “views” (*diṭṭhi*) in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) has been singled out in my papers, “*Dependence of punar-bhava on karma in Buddhist philosophy*,” and “*My Approach to Indian Philosophy*,” in *Indian Philosophical Annuals*, vols. I and II, 1965, 1966, under my lay name Chedomil Velyachich.

³⁵ Cf. Bochenski, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

understanding of the deeper problem: “We are concerned with questions which, strictly speaking, belong to solitary meditation and cannot be subjects of discourse.”³⁶

Nicolas Berdyaev, an explicitly religious philosopher close to the same group, has given one of the clearest formulations of the point under discussion:

“The problem which faces us is: Is *being* a product of objectification? Is not the concept of being concerned with being *qua* concept, does being possess existence at all? ... Why is ontology impossible? Because it is always a knowledge of objectifying existence. In an ontology the idea of being is objectified and an objectification is already an existence which is alienated in the objectification. So that in ontology—in every ontology—existence vanishes ... It is only in subjectivity that one may know existence, not in objectivity. In my opinion, the central idea has vanished in the ontology of Heidegger and Sartre.”³⁷

In agreement with Dilthey’s principle, quoted above, establishing the historical world-view of the cultural sciences independently from the scientific investigation of essentially objective physical nature, Heidegger has limited his inquiry on “time as the horizon for all understanding of being.” Against that background, he has criticised and abandoned the old substantialist ontology. For him, “temporality is the very being of human reality.” The relation time-mind, as quoted above from Buddhaghosa’s *Atthasālinī*, is for Heidegger also exhaustive for both terms. And yet Berdyaev, like the other anti-ontologist philosophers mentioned here, criticises even this essential turning in contemporary “anthropological ontology,” as at least a partial failure to understand authentic existential experience: “As a man Heidegger is deeply troubled by this world of care, fear, death, and daily dullness.” Despite this, and beyond that sincerity, his philosophy “is not existential philosophy, and the depth of existence does not make itself felt in it.”³⁸

The reason for this was stated clearly and explicitly by Karl Jaspers, who was the first to criticise and abandon the ontological position in contemporary European philosophy, at the same time that Heidegger undertook his essential reform of its fundamental conception. In the view of Jaspers, “the ideal followed by ontologies is the perfection of the rational structure of the objectified world. Technical sciences have to help us bring about engineered existences.” Jaspers was, from the very beginning of his philosophical critique (about 1930), extremely aware of the danger of such scientific technicalization of human existence: “As an attempt to bind us to objectified being, ontology sublates freedom.” In his view, it is only “as potential existence that I am able to lift myself up from bondage. My chains will thus become the material of being ...” The opposite way of an “engineered” civilization will transform me into a slave of that “material” and this actually is the typical form of suffering, of *dukkha*, by which “man in the modern age” is oppressed.³⁹

In his advanced years, Jaspers has discovered the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna as one of the most congenial minds,⁴⁰ while Heidegger, when reading D. T. Suzuki’s *Essays on Zen Buddhism*, confessed that this was exactly what he had tried to express all his life long.

Six: It was doubt of the material substance of the world which, to a considerable extent, provoked the problem of verifying the very idea of being, of the “selfhood” of the world, both in

³⁶ Jean Wahl, *A Short History of Existentialism*, N.Y., The Philosophical Library, 1949, p. 2.

³⁷ N. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, Harper Torchbooks, 1957, p. 92. See also discussion contained in J. Wahl’s book (previous note).

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 116 f.

³⁹ K. Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 2nd ed. Berlin, Springer, 1948, pp. 814, 813. *Man in the Modern Age* is the title of one of Jaspers’ books in English translation (London, 1959).

⁴⁰ In his history of *The Great Philosophers*, the chapter on Nāgārjuna is not included in the selection quoted above (note 8) in English translation.

its exterior aspect and in that which is interior to the human being-in-the-world. What “doubt” was at the outset of critical philosophy in the period of its substantialist and objectifying orientation (following Descartes), *disappointment*, the “unsatisfactoriness” of the world, has become for the actual, subjectively oriented or introverted, humanistic philosophy of existence.

One of the best expressions of this turning can be found in some of the statements of Gabriel Marcel, who, by the way, defines his religious philosophy as a “doctrine of hope.” Its basic postulate is that philosophy must be “transobjective, personal, dramatic, indeed tragic. ‘I am not witnessing a spectacle’; we should remind ourselves of this every day.”⁴¹ The Buddhist implication of this basic attitude may be pursued still further in the earlier formulation by Kierkegaard: “Life is a masquerade ... Your occupation consists in preserving your hiding place ... In fact you are nothing; *you are merely a relation to others*, and what you are, you are by virtue of this relation ... When the enchantment of illusion is broken, when existence begins to totter, then too does despair manifest itself as that which was at the bottom. Despair itself is a negativity, unconsciousness of it is a new negativity ... This is the sickness unto death.”⁴²

It is only by abandoning the attitude of fascination for the “spectacle” of the statically staged “Being” of the world that man becomes sufficiently movable that he is fit to plunge into the stream of existence, no longer attached to some stage-prop or “remainder.” Is only then that he can really start swimming along that stream of *saṃsāro*, realising that it is pure and simple *aniccam* or impermanent flux, and that he can eventually become aware of the advantage of “crossing” it.

This is the point which contemporary European philosophy seems to be about to realise. It is essential for this realisation that the principles of *aniccam* and *dukkham* be inseparably reconnected through the intuition of their immediate interaction. In the actual situation, it will no longer even be necessary to deduce explicitly the idea of *anattā* as the dynamic resultant of the confrontation of the first two principles. Just like *aniccam*, *anattā* has already become a truism for most Europeans, whom a standardised mental training, both scientific and philosophical has carried beyond the God and Soul dogma.⁴³ The phantom of the Western version of a materialistic *uccheda-vādo* is likewise about to be dispelled. The critical missing link has only been between impermanence (*aniccam*) and suffering (*dukkham*). Due to the objectifying nature of scientific thinking, this link could never be revealed by a philosophy of nature subservient to science, not even of the type of Russell’s popular literary criticism quoted above. It is obvious that only an existential experience of *dukkham*, suffering, or “anguish,” could bring about this realisation.

Today we have to thank, for this realisation, the catastrophic results, and further consequences, still being suffered, of two world wars in the 20th century. That is why a new philosophy, already nascent on the eve of the Second World War, has emerged in Europe explicitly as a philosophy of *conscience* rather than of mere *consciousness*. It should appear equally obvious that in such a philosophy there is no longer any place for the stubborn false dilemma: philosophy *or* religion. This last problem, which concerns “philosophical faith,” is more important for Buddhism than for any other religion. It has found its best diagnostic expression in several essays of Karl Jaspers, from which we extract a few hints:

“It is questionable whether *faith* is possible *without religion*. Philosophy originates in this

⁴¹ Cf. Bochenski, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁴² Cf. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, edited by R. Bretall, Princeton Univ. Press, 1951, p. 99 (from “*Either-Or*”) and p. 346 (from *The Sickness Unto Death*).

⁴³ Cf. Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*, London, Watts, 1967, an analysis characteristic for the necessary elimination of elements which an up-to-date definition of religion should not any longer postulate as essential.

question ... Man deprived of his faith by the loss of his religion is devoting more decisive thought to the nature of his own being ... No longer does the revealed Deity upon whom all is dependent come first, and no longer the world that exists around us; what comes first is man, who, however, cannot make terms with himself as being, but strives to transcend himself ... The unsheltered individual gives our epoch its physiognomy ... (Formerly) the authority of the church sheltered him and sustained him, gave him peace and happiness ... Today philosophy is the only refuge for those who, in full awareness, are not sheltered by religion."⁴⁴

Obviously, "faith" is here no longer understood as a belief in any revelation, but as reasonable trust in a qualified spiritual guide whose moral and intellectual capacities have to be carefully tested in each single case by a sound and mature criterion (*apaṇṇako dhammo*) such as was established by the Buddha in his critical discourses on religion, *Apaṇṇaka-sutta* and *Caṅki-sutta*,⁴⁵ in order to exclude empty and blind transmission of religious traditions "as a basket handed over from one to the other," or in "a string of blind men." "One oneself is the guardian of oneself; what other guardian could there be?"⁴⁶

Jean-Paul Sartre is another philosopher who, though himself not religious, realises the tremendous importance of the religious problem from the bias of our critical age, and still more specifically from the bias of the deepest metaphysical implications of the idea of *anicca*, as non-substantiality, undermining the scientific foundation of 19th century materialism: The tragic situation of human reality in the world consists in the fact that due to his karmic "freedom" man "is not what he is, man is what he is not." This statement, whose implications have scandalised many conservative Christian minds, nevertheless corresponds to the gist of St. Augustine's thought as rendered by Jaspers out of a different deeply religious concern with the undeniable facticity of the same existential situation: "I am myself, but I can fail myself. I must put my trust in myself, but I cannot rely on myself."⁴⁷

As for Sartre, his first deduction from this basic realisation of *anicca-anattā* is that as such "man is a useless passion." "Human reality is the pure effort to become God without there being any given substratum for that effort ... Desire expresses this endeavour ... Fundamentally *man is the desire to be.*" As such, he is always only a "project"—ceaselessly "catapulted" from the past to the future (as Ortega y Gasset has formulated it), without a natural possibility of finding poise in his own present. This is the tragedy of his "temporalization," whose ultimate meaning is *anicca*. This is how "the existence of desire as a human fact is sufficient to prove that human reality is a lack." How, then, is a possibility of ultimate escape or "liberation" conceivable? It is because human reality "is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in the form of a project of being." On this basis only, "We can ascertain more exactly what is the being of the self: it is value."⁴⁸

He who wants to delve deeper into such possibilities, it would seem, should follow the advice of Gabriel Marcel or of Berdyaev, and try to cross beyond the possibilities expressed in any philosophy of being. The Buddhist fitting, or "raft," though considerably larger in its basic frame, is readily adaptable to their explicit requirements: "Neither being, nor non-being, nor both being-and-non-being, nor neither-being-nor-non-being."

Bhikkhu Ñāṇajīvako

⁴⁴ *Man in the Modern Age*, p. 142 ff., and *The Great Philosophers*, p. 221.

⁴⁵ MN 60 and 95.

⁴⁶ Dh 160.

⁴⁷ Cf. *The Great Philosophers*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, London, Methuen, 1966, pp. 615, 576, 565, 87, 92.

A Walk in the Woods

Come with me for a walk in the woods. It is hot, silent, and nearly midday but there are patches of shade here and there where we may sit. Around us trees of forty years are only twenty feet high, so great is the struggle to survive. Many die young and never mature. You can see their young skeletons being relentlessly devoured by the termites. Taller trees are scattered here and there, battered survivors of a continuous fight for life. Many of their limbs have been torn off in sudden monsoon squalls, or else they have rotted away by fungus and disease and finally fallen off. You see that “sawdust” about this tree? Its top will soon fall as some grub is eating away its heartwood. Look over there at that young tree all askew—its roots have been attacked by some predator and so it has been blown over. And there, do you see that large tree, its bark covered with mud-plaster? The termites are under that gnawing away its green wood and when they succeed in ringing it all round then, in a single day, all its leaves will turn yellow and sixty years of growth comes to an end.

Above us, young leaves of translucent green match their brilliance against the startling blue sky. Even these young tender leaves are full of holes, delicacies for the great beetles that bumble about in the evening air. Lower down these trees, the more mature leaves are ragged and lend to the forest a threadbare look. Though they must be tough still it seems they are the food of some insect. Here and there you can see at the base of branches and round the lower parts of the trees yellow leaves hanging, stiffly awaiting, as it were, the executioner who will come as a breath of wind and bring them down. Parted, they are disjoined forever—one changing process from another changing process. They fall with a crash among the undergrowth. There they join hundreds of thousands which fell before them and litter all the ground with a crackly layer of decay. But they do not just decay slowly at their own speed. Their decay is quickened by a myriad of ants, termites, worms, and funguses, all ready for food and fighting to get it, a fearsome underground jungle in miniature.

A bird calls and is still. Far away the bells on the necks of the water-buffalo at work in the rice-fields jingle. Insects drone by. You see, insects are always either looking for food or avoiding becoming the food of others. A breeze sways the trees and a huge round wasps’ nest at the top of a slender sapling looks most insecure. Danger! Flies hum and buzz, perching on a bamboo swinging in constant motion. Cicadas tick, click, and whir far and near as though they were counting the seconds of their own—and everyone else’s—lives. Seconds and minutes fly into days and months towards death. A ground lizard darts for its prey, catches it, and chews the living insect with great relish. Another death in this round where death goes unremarked because it is everywhere.

Ants swarm everywhere in lines, parties, or armies, in all shapes and sizes, according to their species. They play a great part in the change of this forest for they are the scavengers. They have only to scent death and they will be there ready to undertake the dismemberment of the corpse. Sometimes it is still alive. No decay is uninteresting to them, it is their livelihood, and they are always busy for beings never cease decaying and dying.

Spiders too are found in great variety, all of them ready to pounce on and bite to death unwary small creatures that become entangled in their shimmering webs. They hang them, iridescent in the sunlight everywhere and it is a wonder that anything can fly and yet escape them. But even spiders do not escape death, usually from the stings of their enemies, the hunting wasps. Though the swaying bough of bamboo is most graceful it has been marked as part of this menacing world by a spider’s web hung among its leaves. And bamboos are cut down by men for their usefulness. Everything, the beautiful and the ugly is subject to impermanence.

Clouds pass across the sky bringing coolness to us here below. Their shapes change from minute to minute. Not even one second the same. They look very solid yet we know how insubstantial they are. They are just like this present time ... changing ... changing ...

Look over here in the forest, a pile of ashes and a few burnt-out logs rotting away, and look: here is another older heap nearly dispersed. And other piles are roundabout with occasional carved wooden posts set in the ground, all smouldering. What are they? These mark the ends of men and women. This forest at the back of the Wat⁴⁹ is used for cremation. Some days, if you go in the late afternoon you will find a group of villagers, and a very simple open-topped coffin. Everyone can see the body there clothed as he or she died and looking, as corpses do unless interfered with, quite repulsive. The day of cremation is the day on which the person died, or the very next day at the latest. Change sets in fast and hideously in a body kept in the hot countries. A big pile of logs has been made and without ceremony and with no pretentious solemnity the coffin is hoisted on top. Bhikkhus having viewed the corpse are then asked to chant and some gifts are given and dedicated for the good of the dead man. Then without more ado paraffin is splashed over the pile and it is set alight. Some stay to see it burn. You can soon see the body roasting through the flames when the thin-walled coffin has burnt out ... until amidst the embers there are only some charred pieces of bone ... "*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā ...*"

Now the sun, "the eye of the day," has changed his position, or we have changed ours and our short walk in the woods is nearly over. What have we seen that does not pass away? Even though I may say that I look out of the windows of my hut every day and see the same trees, how near to truth is this? How can the trees be the same? They are steadily changing they are unstable and certain to come to an end in one way or another. They have had a beginning and they must have an end.

And what about this "I" who sees these trees, the forest, the burning ground and so on? Permanent or impermanent? Everyone can answer this question, for we have seen the answer in the forest. When "I" feel depressed and look at the trees they seem stark, ugly moth-eaten specimens. But when "I" am glad and look upon them, see, how beautiful they are! If, while on our walk, we looked only at the impermanence "out there," now is the time to bring the lesson home to the heart. Everything that I am is impermanent, unstable, sure to change and deteriorate.

If impermanence meant change all the time towards better and happier states how excellent our world would be! But impermanence is allied with deterioration. All compounds break down, all made things fall to pieces, all conditioned things pass away with the passing of those conditions. Everything and everybody—that includes you and me—deteriorates, ages, decays, breaks up, and passes away. And we, living in the forest of desires, are entirely composed of the impermanent. Yet our desire impels us not to see this, though impermanence stares us in the face from every single thing around. And it confronts us when we look within—mind and body, arising and passing away.

So don't turn on the TV, go to the pictures, read a book, seize some food, or a hundred other distractions just to avoid seeing this. This is the one thing really worth seeing, for one who fully sees it in himself is *Free*.

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⁴⁹ *Wat* is the Thai word for a Buddhist monastery.

The Buddhist Doctrine of Anicca (Impermanence)

The Buddhist doctrine of *anicca*, the transitoriness of all phenomena, finds classical expression in the oft-recurrent formula: *Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*, and in the more popular statement: *Aniccā vata saṅkhārā*. Both these formulas amount to saying that all conditioned things or phenomenal processes, mental as well as material, that go to make up the saṃsāric plane of existence are transient or impermanent. This law of impermanence is not the result of any kind of metaphysical inquiry or of any mystical intuition. It is a straightforward judgment arrived at by investigation and analysis, and as such its basis is entirely empirical.

It is in fact for the purpose of showing the insubstantiality and impermanence of the world of experience that Buddhism analyses it into a multiplicity of basic factors. The earliest attempts at explaining this situation are represented in the analysis into five *khandas*, twelve *āyatanas*, and eighteen *dhātus*. In the Abhidhamma we get the most detailed analysis into eighty one basic elements, which are introduced by the technical term, *dhammā*. These are the basic factors into which the empiric individuality in relation to the external world is ultimately analysed. They purport to show that there does not exist a “unity,” “substance,” “*atta*,” or “*jīva*.” In the ultimate analysis the so-called unity is a complex of factors, “one” is really “many.” This applies to both mind and matter equally. In the case of living beings there is no soul or self which is immortal, while in the case of things in general there is no essence which is ever-perduring.

These basic factors, according to Buddhism, do not imply an absolute unity (*ekatta*). They are not fractions of a whole, but a number of co-ordinate ultimates. Although real they are not permanent. Nor are they mutually unconnected. As such they do not imply a theory of absolute separateness (*puṭhutta*) either. A good example of this kind of world-view is that of Pakudha Kaccāyana, who seeks to explain the composition of the world with reference to seven eternally existing and mutually unconnected substances. This reduces the world to a concatenation of separate and discrete entities, with no inter-connection, with no inter-dependence. The Buddhist view of existence does not amount to such an extreme, for according to Buddhism the basic factors are inter-connected with laws of causation and conditionality. Thus the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is based both on analysis and synthesis. It is through analysis that the empirical world is reduced to a multiplicity of basic factors, and it is through causality that they are again synthesised.

That existence does not consist of an eternal substance, mental or material, but is composed of a variety of constantly changing factors is the conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis into *khandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus*, and *dharmas*. On the impermanence of the five *khandhas* that make up the empiric individuality, we find this statement in the Saṃyuttanikāya: “There is no materiality whatever, O monks, no feeling, no perception, no formations, no consciousness whatever that is permanent, ever-lasting, eternal, changeless, identically abiding forever.” Then the Blessed One took a bit of cow-dung in his hand and he spoke to the monks: “Monks, if even that much of permanent, ever-lasting, eternal, changeless individual selfhood (*attabhāva*), identically abiding forever, could be found, then this living of a life of purity (*brahmacariya*) for the complete eradication of Ill (*dukkhakkhaya*) would not be feasible.”⁵⁰

What is revolutionary about the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is that it is extended to include everything, including consciousness, which is usually taken to be permanent, as the soul or as one of its qualities. The Majjhima Nikāya records how Bhikkhu Sāti misunderstood the Buddha’s teaching to mean that consciousness is a permanent entity, which passes from one existence to another, like the *nirāśraya viññāṇa* of the Upanishads. This led the Buddha to

⁵⁰ SN 22:96.

formulate the well-known principle: *Aññatra paccayā natthi viññāṇassa sambhavo*—There is no arising of consciousness without reference to a condition. This is further explained to mean that consciousness comes into being (*sambhoti*) in dependence on a duality.

What is that duality? It is eye, which is impermanent, changing, becoming-other, and visible objects, which are impermanent, changing, and becoming-other: such is the transient, fugitive duality (of eye-cum-visible objects), which is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other. Eye-consciousness too is impermanent. For how could eye-consciousness arisen by depending on an impermanent condition be permanent? The coincidence, concurrence, and confluence of these three factors which is called contact and those other mental phenomena arising as a result are also impermanent. (The same formula is applied to the other sense-organs and the consciousnesses named after them.)⁵¹

It is in view of the impermanence and insubstantiality of consciousness that Buddha has declared:

“Better were it Bhikkhus that the uneducated many-folk should conceive this four-element-made body, rather than *citta*, to be soul. And why? The body is seen to persist for a year, for two, three, four, five, ten or twenty years, for a generation, even for a hundred years or even for longer, while that which is called consciousness, that is mind, that is intelligence, arises as one thing, ceases as another, both by day and night.”⁵²

Because of its acceptance of this law of universal impermanence, Buddhism stands in direct opposition to *sassatavāda* or eternalism, which usually goes hand in hand with *ātmavāda*, i.e., belief in some kind of immortal soul. The Brahmajāla Sutta of the Dīghanikāya alone refers to more than ten varieties of eternalism, only to refute them as misconceptions of the true nature of the empirical world. But this refutation of eternalism does not lead to the acceptance, on the part of Buddhism, of the other extreme, namely *ucchedavāda* or annihilationism, which usually goes hand in hand with materialism. The Buddhist refutation of both these extremes finds classical expression in the following words of the Buddha:

“This world, O Kaccāyana, generally proceeds on a duality, of the ‘it is’ and the ‘it is not.’ But, O Kaccāyana, whoever perceives in truth and wisdom how things originate in the world, for him there is no ‘it is not’ in this world. Whoever, Kaccāyana, perceives in truth and wisdom how things pass away in the world, for him there is no ‘it is’ in this world.”⁵³

This statement of the Buddha refers to the duality (*dvayatā*) of existence (*atthitā*) and non-existence (*natthitā*). These are the two theories of eternalism and annihilationism which find expression in many forms in various types of religion and philosophy. The former implies belief in a permanent and changeless substance or entity, whether it is conceived as a plurality of individual souls as in Jainism, or as a monistic world-soul as in Vedānta, or as a deity of some kind as in most of the theistic religions. The latter, on the other hand, implies a belief in the temporary existence of separate souls or personalities which are entirely destroyed or dissolved after death. A good example of this kind of philosophy is the one advocated by Ajita Kesakambali which finds mention in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta.

In contrast, according to Buddhism, everything is the product of antecedent causes and therefore of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppanna*). These causes themselves are not everlasting and static, but simply antecedent aspects of the same ceaseless becoming. Every event is the result of a concatenation of dynamic processes (*saṅkhāra*). Neither Being nor non-Being is the truth. There is only Becoming, happening by way of cause, continuity without identity,

⁵¹ SN 35:93.

⁵² SN 12:61.

⁵³ SN 12:15.

persistence without a persistent substance. “He who discerns origin by way of cause he discerns the Dhamma, he who discerns the Dhamma he discerns origin by way of cause.”

Thus by accepting the theory of causation and conditionality, Buddhism avoids the two extremes of *sabbaṃ atthi* (everything is) and *sabbaṃ natthi* (everything is not) and advocates *sabbaṃ bhavati*, “everything becomes,” i.e., happens by way of cause and effect. It is also because of this theory that Buddhism could avoid the two extremes of *niyatīvāda* (determinism) and *ahetu-appaccaya-vāda* (indeterminism). According to the former everything is absolutely pre-determined, according to the latter everything happens without reference to any cause or condition. According to both there is no room for free will and as such moral responsibility gets completely ruled out. By its theory of causation Buddhism avoids both extremes and establishes free will and moral responsibility.

The second basic characteristic of the world of experience, namely *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) is but a logical corollary arising from this law of universal impermanence. For the impermanent nature of everything can but lead to one inescapable conclusion: As everything is impermanent, it cannot be made the basis of permanent happiness. Whatever is transient is by that very fact unsatisfactory—*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*. Since every form of saṃsāric existence is impermanent, it is also characterised by unsatisfactoriness. Thus the premise: “*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*” leads to the conclusion: “*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*.”

As indicative of a general characteristic of phenomena, the term *dukkha* should not be understood in a narrower sense to mean only pain, suffering, misery, or sorrow. As a philosophical term it has a wider connotation, as wide as that of the term *anicca*. In this wider sense, it includes deeper ideas such as imperfection, unrest, conflict, in short, unsatisfactoriness. This is precisely why even the states of *jhāna*, resulting from the practise of higher meditation and which free from suffering as ordinarily understood, are also included in *dukkha*. This is also why the characterization *dukkha* is extended even to matter (*rūpa*). The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa recognises these wider implications of the term when it explains it as three-fold, namely *dukkha-dukkha* (*dukkha* as suffering), *vipariṇāma-dukkha* (*dukkha* as change), and *saṅkhāra-dukkha* (*dukkha* as conditioned state).

As a direct and necessary corollary of this fact of *dukkha*, we come to the third basic characteristic of all phenomena, namely *anatta*, which finds expression in the well-known statement: *Sabbe dhammā anattā*. For the unsatisfactory nature of everything should lead to this important conclusion: If everything is characterised by unsatisfactoriness, nothing can be identified as the self or as a permanent soul (*attā*). What is *dukkha* (by that very fact) is also *anatta*. What is not the self cannot be considered as I am (*ahaṃ ti*), as mine (*mamaṃ ti*), or as I am that (*asmī ti*).

According to Buddhism the idea of self or soul is not only a false and imaginary belief, with no corresponding objective reality, but is also harmful from an ethical point of view. For it produces such harmful thoughts of I, me, and mine, selfish desires, attachments, and all other unwholesome states of mind (*akusalā dhammā*). It could also be a misery in disguise to one who accepts it as true:

“Do you see, O Bhikkhus, such a soul-theory in the acceptance of which, there would not arise grief, lamentation, suffering, distress, and tribulation?”

“Certainly not, Sir.”

“Good, O Bhikkhus, I too, O Bhikkhus, do not see a soul-theory, in the acceptance of which there would not arise grief, lamentation, suffering, distress, and tribulation.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ MN 22.

This brings into relief the close connection between the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence and Buddhist ethics: If the world of experience is impermanent, by that very fact it cannot be made the basis of permanent happiness. What is not permanent (*anicca*) and therefore what is characterised by unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) cannot be considered as the self (*anatta*). And what is not the self (*atta*) cannot be considered as one's own (*saka*) or as a haven of security (*tāṇa*). For the things that one gets attached to are constantly changing. Hence attachment to them would only lead to unrest and sorrow. But when one knows things as they truly are (*yathābhūtaṃ*), i.e., as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, one ceases to get agitated by them, one ceases to take refuge in them. Just as attachment to things is to get fettered by them, even so detachment from them is to get freed from them. Thus in the context of Buddhist ethics, the perception of impermanence is only a preliminary step to the eradication of all cravings, which in turn has the attainment of Nibbāna as its final goal.

It will thus be seen that the Buddhist doctrine of *anicca*, on which is also based the doctrine of *dukkha* and *anatta*, can rightly be called the very foundation of the whole edifice of Buddhist philosophy and ethics. This explains why the Buddha has declared that the very perception of this fact, namely that whatever comes into existence is also subject to dissolution (*yaṃ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*) is indeed the very arising of the stainless Eye of the Doctrine (*dhamma-cakkhu*).

The Theory of Momentariness

The Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, as explained in the canonical texts, does really amount to a theory of momentariness, in the sense that everything is in a state of constant flux. This becomes clear from a passage in the Aṅguttara Nikāya,⁵⁵ where the three *saṅkhata-lakkhaṇas* (the characteristics of that which is compounded) are explained. Here it is said that that which is *saṅkhata* (compounded) has three fundamental characteristics, namely *uppāda* (origination), *vaya* (dissolution), and *ñhitassa aññathatta* (otherwiseness of that which is existing). From this it follows that the Buddhist doctrine of change should not be understood in the ordinary sense that something arises, exists for some time in a more or less static form, and dissolves. On the contrary, the third characteristic, i.e., *ñhitassa aññathatta* shows that between its arising and cessation, a thing is all the time changing, with no static phase in between. Thus the Buddhist doctrine of change does really amount to a theory of universal flux.

As far as the application of this theory of change is concerned, there is nothing to suggest that early Buddhism had made any distinction between mind and matter. However, some schools of Buddhism, notably the Mahāsaṅghikas, Vātsīputriyas, and Sammitīyas, while recognising the momentary duration of mental elements, assigned a relative permanence to matter. Others, such as the Sarvāstivādins, Mahīsāsakas, and Sautrāntikas objected to introducing any such distinction and declared that all elements of existence, mental as well as material, are of momentary duration, of instantaneous being.

The Theory of Moment (kṣaṇa-vāda)

In the various schools of Buddhism the early Buddhist doctrine of change came to be explained on the basis of a formulated theory of moments. This theory is based on the three *saṅkhata-lakkhaṇas* which we referred to earlier. It is in fact on the interpretation of the third *saṅkhata-*

⁵⁵ AN 3:47.

lakkhaṇa, namely *ṭhitassa aññathatta* that the different schools of Buddhism differ widely, as if to justify the very meaning conveyed by these two words.

The Vaibhāsika School of Buddhism interpret *sthityanyathātva* (= *ṭhitassa aññathatta*) as *jaratā*, postulate another characteristic called *sthiti*, and thus increase the number of *saṅkhata-lakkhaṇas* to four: (i) *jāti* (origination), (ii) *sthiti* (existence), (iii) *jaratā* (decay), (iv) *anityatā* (extinction). All elements, mental as well as material, characterised by them are *saṃskṛta* (= *saṅkhata*). Only *ākāsa* (space) and *Nirvāna* escape from their inexorable sway. At every moment (*ksaṇa*) all mental and material elements are affected by them. A moment is defined as the time during which the four characteristics accomplish their operation. The Vaibhāsikas also maintain that these characteristics are not only distinct from, but also as real as the things which they characterise—showing thereby a strong predilection to naive realism. And in keeping with this theory, it is also claimed that they are in turn characterised by secondary characteristics (*anulaksanās*).

The Sautrāntika School of Buddhism does not agree with this interpretation of the Vaibhāsikas. In their view, the four characteristics apply not to one but to a series of momentary elements: “The series itself is called *sthiti* (subsistence), its origin is called *jāti*, its cessation is *vyaya*, and the difference in its preceding and succeeding moments is called *sthityanyathātva*.”⁵⁶ A momentary element, so they argue, cannot have a phase called *sthiti* or *jaratā*, for whatever that originates has no time to subsist or decay but to perish. They also point out that these four characteristics are mere designations with no objective reality. They criticise the recognition of secondary characteristics on the ground that this would lead to the fallacy of infinite regress (*anavasthā*). For if the four characteristics require a set of secondary characteristics to account for their origination, etc., then these secondary characteristics will in turn require another set of secondary characteristics to account for their origination, etc., and in this manner the process could be stretched indefinitely. This problem does not arise—so runs the argument—if the characteristics are not recognised as real as the things they characterise.

How the Theravādins developed the doctrine of impermanence, and how they interpreted the *saṅkhata-lakkhaṇas* can be understood clearly when the subject is unfolded against this background.

The most striking feature of the Theravada theory is that the fact of momentariness is explained in quite a different way: Each dhamma (element of existence) has three moments, namely *uppādakkhaṇa*, the moment of origination; *ṭhitikkhaṇa*, the moment of subsistence; and *bhaṅgakkhaṇa*, the moment of cessation. These three moments do not correspond to three different dhammas. On the contrary, they represent three phases—the nascent, the static, and ceasing—of one “momentary” dhamma. Hence the statement that dhammas are momentary means that a given dhamma has three momentary phases or stages. It arises in the first moment, subsists in the second moment, and perishes in the third moment.

Like the Sautrāntikas, the Theravādins too accept the fact that a momentary dhamma has no phase called *jaratā* or decay. According to the argument of both schools, the attribution of *jaratā*, which implies some kind of change or transformation, to a momentary dhamma is to accept *pariṇāmaavāda*, according to which the essence, the substance remains the same while its modes undergo change. Change, as it came to be finally defined in the schools of Buddhist logic, is not the transformation of one and the same dhamma from one stage to another, but the replacement of one momentary dhamma by another. The following argument in the *Abhidharmakoṣa*, which is directed against the Vaibhāsikas who admit *jaratā* of one momentary dhamma, clarifies this situation: “But how can you speak of *jaratā* or change in respect of one momentary dhamma? What is called *jaratā* or change is the transformation or dissimilarity between two stages. Is it possible to say that a dharma becomes different from itself. If it remains unchanged it cannot be

⁵⁶ *Abhidharmakoṣa*, III, 78.

another. If it is transformed it is not the same. Therefore the transformation of one dhamma is not possible."⁵⁷

Hence the Sautrāntikas and the Theravādins apply the characteristic of *jaratā* only to a series of momentary dhammas. In their opinion what is called *jaratā* is the difference between the preceding and the succeeding moments of a series. There is, however, this difference to be noted: Unlike the Sautrāntikas, the Theravādins do not deny the static phase (*thiti*) of a momentary dhamma. The Theravada argument in support of their accepting the static phase is as follows: It is true that a dhamma that originates should also cease to exist. But before it could cease to exist, there should be at least a moment when it turns towards its own cessation (*nirodhābhimukhāvattthā*). It is this moment when a dhamma is facing its own cessation that we call the static phase. The logic of this argument is that a dhamma that arises cannot cease to exist at the same time, for otherwise existence and non-existence would become co-existent!

One logical development of this theory of moments is the denial of motion. For, if all the elements of existence are of momentary duration, they have no time to move. In the case of momentary elements, wherever appearance takes place there itself takes place disappearance (*yatraivotpattiḥ tatraiva vināsaḥ*). In keeping with this theory, motion is given a new definition. According to this definition, motion has to be understood, not as the movement of one material element from one locus in space to another (*desāntara-saṅkrānt*), but as the appearance of momentary elements in adjacent locations (*desāntarotpatti*), creating a false picture of movement. The best example given in this case is the light of the lamp. The so-called light of the lamp, it is argued, is nothing but a common designation given to an uninterrupted production of a series of flashing points. When the production changes place one says that the light has changed. But in reality other flames have appeared in another place.

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⁵⁷ *Abhidharmakoṣa*, III, 56.

Anicca (Impermanence) According to Theravada

According to the Theravada, *anicca* is the first of what are often called in Buddhist literature the “Three Characteristics” (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) or the “General Characteristics” (*sāmañña-lakkhaṇa*). *Anicca* is usually treated as the basis for the other two, though *anattā*, the third, is sometimes founded on *dukkha* alone.

The normal English equivalent for *anicca* is “impermanent.”

Derivations

The adjective *anicca* (impermanent) is derived in modern etymology from the negative prefix *a-* plus *nicca* (permanent: cf. Vedic Sanskrit *nitya* from prefix *ni-* meaning “onward, downward”). The *Paramatthamañjūsā* (commentary to the *Visuddhimagga*) and also the *Porāṇa-ṭīkā* (one of the three commentaries to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*) agree that “Because it denies everlastingness, it is not permanent, thus it is impermanent” (*na niccan ti aniccam*).⁵⁸ The *Vibhāvīnī-ṭīkā* and *Saṅkhepavaṇṇanā* (the other two commentaries to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*) prefer a derivation from the negative prefix *an-* plus root *i* to go: “Cannot be gone to, is unapproachable, as a permanent, everlasting state, thus it is impermanent” (... *na iccam, anupagantabban ti aniccam*).

Definitions

Principal definitions given in the Sutta Piṭaka are as follows. “Impermanent, impermanent’ it is said, Lord. What is impermanent?”—“Materiality (*rūpa*) is impermanent, *Rādha*, and so are feeling (*vedanā*) and perception (*saññā*) and formations (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).”⁵⁹ This statement is summarised by a Canonical commentary thus: “What is impermanent? The five categories (*khandha*) are impermanent. In what sense impermanent? Impermanent in the sense of rise and fall (*udaya-vaya*).”⁶⁰ Again, “All is impermanent. And what is the all that is impermanent? The eye is impermanent, visual objects (*rūpā*) ... eye-consciousness ... eye contact (*cakkhu-samphassa*) ... whatever is felt (*vedayita*) as pleasant or unpleasant or neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant, born of eye-contact is impermanent. (Likewise with the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind)”⁶¹ or, quite succinctly, “All formations are impermanent”⁶² and “Whatever is subject to origination (*samudaya*) is subject to cessation (*nirodha*).”⁶³ The Canonical commentary adds “Materiality (etc.) is impermanent in the sense of exhaustion (*khaya*).”⁶⁴

For reasons given below, impermanence in strict Abhidhamma treatment appears, along with continuity (*santati*), etc., only as one of the secondary (derivative) constituents of the materiality category,⁶⁵ of which the commentary says “Impermanence of materiality has the characteristic of complete break-up. Its nature is to make instances of materiality subside. It is manifested as

⁵⁸ Vism-mhṭ 125.

⁵⁹ SN 23:1.

⁶⁰ Paṭis *Ānāpānakathā*/I 230.

⁶¹ SN 35:43/S IV 28.

⁶² MN 35/M I 230.

⁶³ MN 56/M I 380.

⁶⁴ Paṭis *Nāṇakathā*/I 37.

⁶⁵ See e.g., Dhs § 645.

their exhaustion and fall. Its footing is materiality that is completely breaking up.”⁶⁶ A section of the Vibhaṅga, however, which does not follow the strict Abhidhamma method, extends impermanence to the highest kinds of heavenly existence, beyond those with fine-materiality (*rūpa*) to the immaterial (*arūpa*) where there is perception only of infinity of space, infinity of consciousness, nothingness, or reduced perception of nothingness (*Dhammahadaya-Vibhaṅga*).

The commentaries of Ācariya Buddhaghosa elaborate the Sutta definitions further, distinguishing between “the impermanent and the characteristic of impermanence. The five categories are the impermanent. Why? Because their essence is to rise and fall and change, and because, after having been, they are not. But the characteristic of impermanence is their state of rise and fall and alternation, or it is their mode-transformation (*ākāra-vikāra*) called non-being after having been;”⁶⁷ again “The eye (etc.,) can be known as impermanent in the sense of its non-being after having been; and it is impermanent for four reasons as well; because it has rise and fall, because it changes, because it is temporary, and because it denies permanence,”⁶⁸ and “Since its destiny is non-being and since it abandons its natural essence because of the transmission (of personal continuity) to a new state of being (on rebirth), it is ‘subject to change,’ which is simply synonymous with its impermanence.”⁶⁹

Treatment in the Suttas and Commentaries

Having dealt with derivations and definitions, we can now turn to the Suttas and commentaries again in order to see how this subject is handled there; for in this article we shall be mainly concerned with quotations, leaving discussion to other articles.

But at this point, it is convenient to approach the doctrine of impermanence first from the point of view of it as a description of what actually is (*yathā-bhūta*), leaving till later the point of view of it as a basis for evaluation and judgment, which is the reason and justification for the description.

Impermanence is observable empirically and is objectively and publicly evident, always if looked for, and from time to time forcing itself upon our notice. Externally it is found in the inconstancy of “things,” which extends even to the periodical description of world-systems;⁷⁰ and in one self it can be observed, for instance, in the body’s inadequacy (*ādīnava*) because it ages, is prone to sickness, dies, and gradually decays after death;⁷¹ life is short.⁷² But “it would be better for an untaught ordinary man to treat as self (*attā*) this body, which is constructed upon the four great entities (*mahā-bhūta*), then cognizance (*citta*). Why? Because this body can last one year, two years, ... even a hundred years; but what is called ‘cognizance’ and ‘mind’ (*mano*) and ‘consciousness’ (*viññāna*) rises and ceases differently through night and day, just as a monkey ranging through a forest seizes a branch, and, letting that go, seizes another.”⁷³

Nevertheless observance of empirical impermanence might not alone suffice for the radical position accorded by the Buddha to this characteristic. This is established, however, by discovery, through reasoned attention, of a regular structure in the subjective-objective process of its occurrence: “This body (for example) is impermanent, it is formed (*saṅkhata*), and it is

⁶⁶ Vism XIV, p.450.

⁶⁷ Vism XXI, p. 640.

⁶⁸ Vibh-a 41; cf. M-a. *ad*, MN 22/M II 113.

⁶⁹ Vibh-a 49.

⁷⁰ See e.g., MN 28; SN 15:20; AN 7:62.

⁷¹ See MN 13.

⁷² AN 7:70.

⁷³ SN 12:61/S II 94–5.

dependently-arisen (*paṭicca-samuppanna*).⁷⁴ Here, in fact, three aspects are distinguished, three necessary and interlocking constituents of impermanence, namely (1) change, (2) formation (as “this, not that,” without which no change could be perceived), and (3) a recognisable pattern in a changing process (also called “specific conditionality” (*idappaccayatā*), which pattern is set out in the formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). We shall take these three aspects in order.

(1)

There is no single treatise on the characteristic of impermanence either in the *Tipiṭaka* or its commentaries, and so we shall have to bring together passages from a number of sources. We may also bear in mind that the Buddha does not confine descriptions of a general nature such as this to the observed alone, but extends them to include the observer, regarded as actively committed in the world he observes and acting on it as it acts on him, so long as craving and ignorance remain unabolished. “That in the world by which one perceives the world (*loka-saññī*) and conceives concepts about the world (*loka-mānī*) is called ‘the world’ in the Ariyas’ Discipline. And what is it in the world with which one does that? It is with the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.”⁷⁵ That same world “is being worn away (*lujjati*), that is why it is called ‘world’ (*loka*).”⁷⁶ That impermanence is not only appropriate to all of any arisen situation but also to the totality of all arisen situations:

“Bhikkhu, there is no materiality whatever ... feeling ... perception ... formations ... consciousness whatever that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, that will last as long as eternity.”

Then the Blessed One took a small piece of cow-dung in his hand he told the Bhikkhu: “Bhikkhu, if even that much of permanent, everlasting, eternal individual selfhood (*attabhāva*), not subject to change could be found, then this living of a life of purity (*brahmacariya*) could not be described as for the complete exhaustion of suffering (*dukkhakkhaya*).”⁷⁷

And again:

“Bhikkhus, I do not dispute with the world (the ‘world’ in the sense of other people), the world disputes with me: no one who proclaims the True Idea (*dhamma*) disputes with anyone in the world. What wise men in the world say there is not (*natthi*), that I too say there is not; and what wise men in the world say there is (*atthi*), that I too say there is ... Wise men in the world say there is no permanent, everlasting, eternal materiality not subject to change, and I too say there is none. (And likewise with the other four categories.) Wise men in the world say that there is impermanent materiality that is unpleasant and the subject to change, and I too say there is that.”⁷⁸

Impermanence, it is pointed out in the commentaries, is not always evident unless looked for.

The characteristic of impermanence does not become apparent because, when rise and fall are not given attention, it is concealed by continuity ... However, when continuity is disrupted by discerning rise and fall, the characteristic of impermanence becomes apparent in its true nature.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ SN 36.7/S IV 211; cf. SN 22:21/S III 24.

⁷⁵ SN 35:116/S IV 95.

⁷⁶ SN 35:82/S IV 52.

⁷⁷ SN 22:96/S III 144.

⁷⁸ SN 22:94/S III 138–9.

⁷⁹ Vism XXI, p. 640.

“When continuity is disrupted” means when continuity is exposed by observation of the perpetual alteration of dhammas as they go on occurring in succession. For it is not through dhammas’ connectedness that the characteristic of impermanence becomes apparent to one who rightly observes rise and fall, but rather the characteristic becomes properly evident through their disconnectedness, (regarded) as if they were iron darts.”⁸⁰

(2)

This leads us to the second of the three aspects, that of the formation mentioned above; for to be impermanent is to have a beginning and an end, to have rise and fall. “Bhikkhus, there are three formed characteristics of the formed: arising is evident and fall is evident and the alteration of what is present (*thitassa aññathatta*) is evident.”⁸¹ And one who possesses the Five Factors of Endeavour (*padhāniyaṅgāni*) “has understanding, possesses understanding (*paññā*) extending to rise and disappearance.”⁸²

Ācariya Buddhaghosa makes use of the empirically observable in order to arrive at the radical concept of rise and fall. A cup gets broken,⁸³ the asoka tree’s shoot can be seen to change in the course of a few days from pale to dark red and then through brown to green leaves, which eventually turn yellow, wither, and fall to the ground.⁸⁴ The illustration of a lighted lamp is also used; where it goes to when its oil and wick are used up no one knows ... But that is crudely put; for the flame in each third portion of the wick as it gradually burns away ceases there without reaching the other parts ... That is crudely put too; for the flame in each inch, in each half-inch, in each thread, in each strand, will cease without reaching the other strands; but no flame can appear without a strand.⁸⁵ By regarding seeming stability in ever shorter periods and minuter detail, a momentary view is arrived at. Anything whatever, first analysed into a five-category situation, is then regarded as arising anew in each moment (*khaṇa*) and immediately dissolving, “like sesame seeds crackling when put into a hot pan.”⁸⁶ This is further developed in the commentary to the *Visuddhimagga*:

“Formed (*saṅkhata*) dhammas’ arising by means of cause and condition, their coming to be after not being, their acquisition of individuality (*attabhāva*), is their rise. Their instantaneous cessation and exhaustion when arisen is their fall. Their other state through ageing is their alteration. For just as when the occasion (*avattā*) of arising dissolves and the occasion of dissolution (*bhaṅga*) succeeds it, there is no break in the basis (*vatthu*) on the occasion facing dissolution, in other words, presence (*thiti*), which is what the term of common usage ‘ageing’ refers to, so too it is necessary that the ageing of a single dhamma is meant, which is what is called ‘momentary (instantaneous) ageing.’ And there must, without reservation, be no break in the basis between the occasions of arising and dissolution, otherwise it follows that one (thing) arises and another dissolves.”⁸⁷

Ācariya Buddhaghosa, though not identifying being with being-perceived rejects the notion of any underlying substance—any hypostasis, personal or impersonal—thus:

“(One contemplating rise and fall) understands that there is no heap or store of unarisen mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpa*) (existing) prior to its arising. When it arises, it does not come

⁸⁰ Vism-mhṭ. 824.

⁸¹ AN 3:47/A I 152.

⁸² DN 33/D III 237.

⁸³ Vibh-a 49.

⁸⁴ Vism XX, p. 625.

⁸⁵ Vism XX, p. 622.

⁸⁶ Vism XX, pp. 622, 626.

⁸⁷ Vism-mhṭ 280.

from any heap or store; and when it ceases, it does not go in any direction. There is nowhere any depository in the way of a heap or store, prior to its arising, of the sound that arises when a lute is played, nor does it come from any store when it arises, nor does it go in any direction when it has ceased,⁸⁸ but on the contrary, not having been, it is brought into being by depending on the lute, the lute's soundboard, and a man's appropriate effort, and immaterial (*arūpa*) dhammas come to be (with the aid of specific conditions), and having been, they vanish."⁸⁹

The transience and perpetual renewal of dhammas is compared in the same work⁹⁰ to dewdrops at sunrise, a bubble on water, a line drawn on water,⁹¹ a mustard seed on an awl's point, and a lightning flash,⁹² and they are as coreless (*nissāra*) as a conjuring trick,⁹³ a mirage⁹⁴ a dream,⁹⁵ a whirling firebrand's circle (*alāta cakka*), a goblin city (*gandhabba-nagara*), froth⁹⁶ a plantain trunk⁹⁷ and so on.

Before leaving the aspect of rise and fall, the question of the extent (*addhāna*) of the moment (*khaṇa*), as conceived in the commentaries, must be examined (The Abhidhamma mentions the *khaṇa* without specifying any duration). A Sutta cited above gave "arising, fall, and alteration of what is present" as three characteristics of anything formed. In the commentaries this is restated as "rise, presence, and dissolution" (*uppāda-ṭhiti-bhaṅga*),⁹⁸ which are each also called "(sub-) moments" (*khaṇa*). These sub-moments are discussed in the *Vibhaṅga* commentary:

To what extent does materiality last? And to what extent the (mental) immaterial? Materiality is heavy to change and slow to cease; the immaterial is light to change and quick to cease. Sixteen cognizances arise and cease while (one instance of) materiality lasts; but that ceases with the seventeenth cognizance. It is like when a man wanting to knock down some fruit hits a branch with a mallet, and when fruits and leaves are loosed from their stems simultaneously; and of those the fruits fall first to the ground, the leaves later. So too, just as the leaves and fruits are loosened simultaneously from their stems with the blow of the mallet, there is simultaneous manifestation of materiality and immaterial dhammas at the moment of relinking (*paṭisandhi*) at rebirth ... And although there is this difference between them, materiality cannot occur without the immaterial nor can the immaterial without materiality: they are commensurate. Here is a simile: there is a man with short legs and a man with long legs; as they journey along together, while long-legs takes one step short-legs takes sixteen steps; when short-legs is making his sixteenth step, long-legs lifts his foot, draws it forward and makes a single step; so neither out-distances the other, and they are commensurate.⁹⁹

Elsewhere it is stated that the sub-moments of arising and dissolution are equal for both materiality and cognizance, only the presence sub-moment of materiality being longer. The *Mūla-Ṭīkā*, however, puts the mental presence sub-moment in question, commenting as follows on the passage just quoted: "Now it needs investigating whether there is what is here called 'presence sub-moment' of a cognizance or not." It cites the Citta Yamaka as follows "Is it, when arisen, arising? At the dissolution sub-moment it is arisen but it is not not arising" and "Is it,

⁸⁸ cf. SN 35:205/S IV 197.

⁸⁹ Vism XX, p. 630.

⁹⁰ Ch. XX, p. 633.

⁹¹ AN 4:37.

⁹² *Mahā Niddesa*, Nidd I 42.

⁹³ SN 22:95/S III 142.

⁹⁴ Dhp 46.

⁹⁵ Sn 807.

⁹⁶ Dhp 46.

⁹⁷ SN 22:95/S III 141.

⁹⁸ See e.g., Vism XX, p. 615.

⁹⁹ Khandha-Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā, Vibh 25–6.

when not arising, not arisen? At the dissolution sub-moment it is not arising, but it is not unarisen¹⁰⁰ and two similar passages from the same source,¹⁰¹ pointing out that only the dissolution sub-moment is mentioned instead of both, that and the presence sub-moment, as might be expected, had the Yamaka regarded the presence sub-moment as having valid application to cognizance. For that reason, the *Mūla-Ṭīkā* concludes:

“(The) non-existence of a presence sub-moment of cognizance is indicated. For although it is said in the Suttas “The alteration of what is present is evident,”¹⁰² that does not mean either that a continuity alteration which is evident cannot be called “presence” (*ṭhiti*) because of absence of any alteration of what is one only, or that what is existent (*vijjamāna*) by possessing the pair of sub-moments (of arising and dissolution) cannot be called “present” (*ṭhita*).”¹⁰³

(3)

The third aspect of impermanence, that of the pattern or structure of specific conditionality, still remains. It is briefly stated thus “that comes to be when there is this; that arises with the arising of this, that does not come to be when this is not; that ceases with the cessation of this,”¹⁰⁴ or in the words that first awakened the two Chief Disciples: “A Tathāgata has told the cause of dhammas that have come into being due to a cause, and that which brings their cessation too: such is the doctrine preached by the Great Samaṇa.”¹⁰⁵ In more detail we find: “Consciousness acquires being (*sambhoti*) by dependence on a duality. What is that duality? It is eye, which is impermanent, changing, becoming-other, and visible objects, which are impermanent, changing, and becoming-other: such is the transient, fugitive duality (of eye-cum-visible objects), which is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other. Eye-consciousness is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other; for this cause and condition (namely, eye-cum-visible objects) for the arising of eye-consciousness being impermanent, changing, and becoming-other, how could eye-consciousness, arisen by depending on an impermanent condition be permanent? Then the coincidence, concurrence and confluence of these three impermanent dhammas is called contact (*phassa*); but eye-contact too is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other; for how could eye-contact, arisen by depending on an impermanent condition, be permanent? It is one touched by contact who feels (*vedeti*), likewise who chooses (*ceteti*), likewise who perceives (*sañjānāti*); so these transient, fugitive dhammas too (namely, feeling, choice, and perception) are impermanent, changing, and becoming-other.” (The same treatment is accorded to ear-cum-sounds, nose-cum-odours, tongue-cum-flavours, body-cum-tangibles, and mind-cum-ideas).¹⁰⁶ By further development we come to the formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*); but that is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰⁰ Yam II 13.

¹⁰¹ Yam II 14.

¹⁰² AN 3:47/A I 152.

¹⁰³ Vibh-a 21–2.

¹⁰⁴ MN 38, vol. i, 262–4.

¹⁰⁵ Vin I, Mahāvagga ch. I.

¹⁰⁶ SN 35:93/A IV 67–68.

Impermanence as a subject for Contemplation and basis for Judgement

The Buddha's last words were:

*“Handa dāni bhikkhave āmantayāmi vo: vāyadhammā sañkhārā, appamādena sampādettha—Indeed, Bhikkhus, I declare to you: All formations are subject to dissolution; attain perfection through diligence.”*¹⁰⁷

A little earlier he had said:

*“Has it not already been repeatedly said by me that there is separation, division, and parting from all that is dear and beloved? How could it be that what is born, come to being, formed and is liable to fall, should not fall? That is not possible.”*¹⁰⁸

There are, besides these, countless passages where this exhortation is variously developed, from which only a few can be chosen.

*“Bhikkhus, when a man sees as impermanent the eye (and the rest), which is impermanent, then he has right view.”*¹⁰⁹

*“Bhikkhus, formations are impermanent, they are not lasting, they provide no real comfort; so much so that that is enough for a man to become dispassionate, for his lust to fade out, and for him to be liberated.”*¹¹⁰

*“What is perception of impermanence? Here, Ānanda, a Bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to a room that is void, considers thus: “Materiality is impermanent, feeling ... perception ... formations ... consciousness is impermanent.” He abides contemplating in this way impermanence in the five “categories affected by clinging.”*¹¹¹

*“What is perception of impermanence in the world of all (all the world)? Here, Ānanda, a Bhikkhu is humiliated, ashamed, and disgusted with respect to all formations.”*¹¹²

*“Perception of impermanence should be maintained in being for the elimination of the conceit “I am,” since perception of not-self becomes established in one who perceives impermanence, and it is perception of not-self that arrives at the elimination of the conceit “I am,” which is extinction (*Nibbāna*) here and now.”*¹¹³

And how is perception of impermanence maintained in being and developed so that all lust for sensual desires (*kāma*), for materiality (*rūpa*), and for being (*bhava*), and also all ignorance are ended and so that all kinds of the conceit “I am” are abolished? *“Such is materiality, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, ... perception, ... formations, ... consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.”*¹¹⁴

*“Here, Bhikkhus, feelings ... perceptions ... thoughts (*vitakka*) are known to him as they arise, known as they appear present, known as they disappear. Maintenance of this kind of concentration in being conduces to mindfulness and full awareness ... Here a Bhikkhu*

¹⁰⁷ DN 16/A V 156.

¹⁰⁸ DN 16/A V 144.

¹⁰⁹ SN 35:155/A IV 142.

¹¹⁰ AN 7:62/A IV 100.

¹¹¹ AN 10:60/A V 109.

¹¹² AN 10:60/A V 111.

¹¹³ Ud 4.1/Ud 37.

¹¹⁴ SN 22:102/S III 156–7.

abides contemplating rise and fall in the five categories affected by clinging thus: “Such is materiality, such its origin, such its disappearance, (and so with the other four).” Maintenance of this kind of concentration conduces to the exhaustion of taints (*āsava*).¹¹⁵

“When a man abides thus mindful and fully aware, diligent, ardent, and self-controlled, then if a pleasant feeling arises in him, he understands “This pleasant feeling has arisen in me; but that is dependent not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this body. But this body is impermanent, formed, and dependently originated. Now how could pleasant feeling, arisen dependent on an impermanent, formed, dependently arisen body, be permanent? In the body and in feeling he abides contemplating impermanence and fall and fading and cessation and relinquishment. As he does so, his underlying tendency to lust for the body and for pleasant feeling is abandoned.” Similarly, when he contemplates unpleasant feeling, his underlying tendency to resistance (*paṭigha*) to the body and unpleasant feeling is abandoned; and when he contemplates neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling his underlying tendency to ignorance of the body and of that feeling is abandoned.”¹¹⁶

“When a Bhikkhu abides much with his mind fortified by perception of impermanence, his mind retreats, retracts, and recoils from gain, honour, and renown, and does not reach out to it, just as a cock’s feather or strip of sinew thrown on a fire retreats, retracts, and recoils and does not reach out to it.”¹¹⁷

“When a Bhikkhu sees six rewards it should be enough for him to establish unlimitedly perception of impermanence in all formations. What six? ‘All formations will seem to me insubstantial; and my mind will find no relish in the world of all (all the world); and my mind will emerge from the world of all (from all the world); and my mind will incline towards extinction; and my fetters will come to be abandoned; and I shall be endowed with the supreme state of a recluse.’”¹¹⁸

“When a man abides contemplating impermanence in the bases for contact (the eye and the rest), the outcome is that awareness of repulsiveness in contact is established in him; and when he abides contemplating rise and fall in the five categories affected by clinging, the outcome is that awareness of repulsiveness in clinging is established in him.”¹¹⁹

“Fruitful as the act of giving is ... yet it is still more fruitful to go with confident heart for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and of the Saṅgha and undertake the five precepts of virtue ... Fruitful as that is ... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain loving kindness in being for only as long as the milking of a cow ... Fruitful as that is ... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain perception of impermanence in being for only as long as the snapping of a finger.”¹²⁰

“Better a single day of life perceiving how things rise and fall than to live out a century yet not perceive their rise and fall.”¹²¹

“It is impossible that a person with right view should see any formation as permanent.”¹²²

¹¹⁵ DN 33/D III 223.

¹¹⁶ SN 36:7/S IV 211–212.

¹¹⁷ AN 7:46/A IV 51.

¹¹⁸ AN 6:102/A III 443

¹¹⁹ AN 5:30/A III 32.

¹²⁰ AN 9:20 A V 392–6 abbr.

¹²¹ Dhṃ 113.

¹²² MN 115/M III 64.

The *Visuddhimagga*¹²³ relies principally on the canonical commentary, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, in its handling of the contemplation of impermanence. There that contemplation introduces the first of what are called the “eight knowledges” (a classification peculiar to the *Visuddhimagga*), namely, the knowledge of contemplation of rise and fall (*udayabbayānupassanā-ñāṇa*). Also perception of impermanence heads the “18 principal insights” (*mahā-vipassanā*), which make their initial appearance as a group in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (the first seven being also called the “seven perceptions” (*satta-saññā*)).¹²⁴ In this connection it is stated as follows:

“One who maintains in being the contemplation of impermanence abandons perception of permanence ...”

and

“the contemplation of impermanence and contemplation of the signless (*animittānupassanā*) are one in meaning and different only in the letter.”

since

“one who maintains in being the contemplation of the signless abandons the sign (of permanence, etc.).”¹²⁵

The contemplation of what is impermanent, or contemplation as “impermanent,” is “contemplation of impermanence”; this is insight (*vipassanā*) that occurs in apprehending impermanence in the three planes (*bhūmi*).¹²⁶ The *Visuddhimagga* adds:

“Having purified knowledge in this way by abandoning perception of permanence, etc., which oppose the contemplation of impermanence, etc., he passes on ... and begins ... contemplation of rise and fall.”¹²⁷

The following passage is then quoted:

“How is it that understanding of contemplating the change of presently-arisen dhammas is knowledge of rise and fall? Presently-arisen materiality is born; the characteristic of its generation is rise, the characteristic of its change is fall, the contemplation is knowledge. Presently-arisen feeling ... etc.”¹²⁸

and

He sees the rise of the materiality category in the sense of conditioned arising thus: (1) With the arising of ignorance ... (2) with the arising of craving ... (3) ... action ... (4) with the arising of nutriment (*āhāra*) there is the arising of materiality; (5) one who sees the characteristic of generation sees the rise of the materiality category. One who sees the rise of the materiality category, sees these five characteristics.¹²⁹

Cessation and fall are treated in parallel manner, and this treatment is applied to the four remaining categories but substituting contact for nutriment in the cases of feeling, perception, and formations, and mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpa*) for nutriment in the case of consciousness.

Lastly, a Sutta passage emphasises a special relation with faith (*saddhā*):

¹²³ Chs. XX and XXI.

¹²⁴ see *Paṭisambhidāmagga* i, 20.

¹²⁵ *Vism* XX, p. 628.

¹²⁶ *Vis. A.* 67.

¹²⁷ *Vism* XX, pp. 629–30.

¹²⁸ *Paṭisambhidāmagga* /i, 54.

¹²⁹ *Paṭis* I 55.

“Materiality (and the rest) is impermanent, changing, becoming other. Whoever decides about, places his faith in, these dhammas in this way is called mature in faith (*saddhānusāri*). He has alighted upon the certainty of rightness ... Whoever has a liking to meditate by test of experiment with understanding upon these dhammas is called mature in the true idea (*dhammānusāri*). He has alighted upon the certainty of rightness ... Whoever has a liking to meditate by test of experiment with understanding upon these dhammas is called mature in the true idea (*dhammānusāri*). He has alighted upon the certainty of rightness ...”¹³⁰

This connection between faith and impermanence is taken up by the *Visuddhimagga*, quoting the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*:

“When one gives attention to impermanence, the faith faculty is outstanding” and in the cases of attention to the unpleasant and not-self the faculties of concentration and understanding are respectively outstanding. These three are called the “Three (alternative) gateways to liberation (*vimokkha-mukha*), which lead to the outlet from the world.”¹³¹

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

¹³⁰ SN 25.1–10/vol. iii, 225 f.

¹³¹ Vism xxi/pp. 657 ff., quoting Paṭis *Vimokkhakathā*/vol. ii, 58.

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