

# The Three Characteristics

(ත්‍රිලක්ෂණය)

The most valuable thing in our life is wisdom (or intelligence - පඤ්ඤා), which is the understanding of the reality of our life. According to Buddhism, our success and real happiness completely depend on how much we have practiced and developed wisdom. Therefore, Buddhism always encourages us to develop wisdom to the maximum level possible during the life time. Wisdom is the most important thing that leads us to see the world's reality of overcoming ignorance. That is why Buddhism explains that wisdom is like the dawn of light to the dark world. There is no light like wisdom (නන්ථි පඤ්ඤා සමා ආභා). Wisdom is the priceless gem of men (පඤ්ඤා නරානං රතනං). Wisdom gains purification (පඤ්ඤාය පරිසුඡ්ඤාති). The understanding of three characteristics (ත්‍රිලක්ෂණ) that are impermanence (අනිච්ච), unsatisfactoriness (දුක්ඛ) and non-self (අනත්ත) determines the extent to which we have gained wisdom.

It is unfortunate that the very thing that some people take for granted as means of overcoming suffering turns out to be the cause of more suffering due to their ignorance. Influenced by ignorance or perversion (*vipallasa* - විපල්ලාස), for the purpose of getting rid of suffering, men learn mundane subjects, earn money, get married, feed children and do all things wishing happiness. It is true that these things help achieve temporary happiness in life. However, it is also true that this temporary happiness is followed by a lot of unavoidable suffering as well. This happiness is called temporary because we are happy as long as those things and the individuals are with us. When we depart from them or they depart from us we become unhappy again. The supreme Buddha who realized the world's truth by himself pointed out the real solution to get rid of unsatisfactoriness. The first thing we got to do in overcoming suffering is to correct our view. Then we need to tread the path based on this correct view. As the people who are gifted with the ability of thinking, it's up to us to realize this truth in our life and to determine to develop more wisdom and mindfulness.

We get all experiences through our senses such as eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. When these internal senses and external objects (forms, sounds, smell, taste, touch and mind objects) come into contact with the mind, we experience about the world. Whatever the experience or ideas we may have in our life such as relatives, friends, education, jobs, properties and wealth, all these are received in this way through our senses. We have no any experience except these six senses and six objects. If we can see this experience wisely according to the Buddha's message, we are able to understand the world and to overcome unsatisfactoriness.

All Buddhist doctrines focus on to develop wisdom to the highest level. Wisdom can be divided into two. The very first step is the understanding of the Karmic Law. According to this understanding, we know that when we do something with wicked mind, we will have the bad results. Similarly, if we do something with pure mind, we will have the fruitful results in this life and here after. The main force behind our life is the Karmic energy that we acquired in the past. If we know about the Karmic law, we always try to overcome unwholesome activities and to develop wholesome things purifying the mind. If we are on this path, we are able to overcome suffering gradually. The second step of wisdom is the understanding of the world's reality in terms of three characteristics. They are impermanence (අනිච්ච), unsatisfactoriness (දුක්ඛ) and non-self (අනත්ත). If we can completely realize these three things, this understanding is the compulsory way to achieve purification. Living with the understanding of the three characteristics show how much we have achieved intelligence.

If we have any kind of experience through our senses, it means five aggregates arise at the moment. Five aggregates are forms (රූප), feelings (වේදනා), perception (සංකල්පනා), mental formations (සංඛාර) and mind (විඤ්ඤාණ). These five aggregates arise together at the moment when the conditions are together, and they cease when the conditions separate instantly. These five things appear behind any kind of experiences in our life, but they are invisible. We can see only experiences. We have to see these five aggregates by intelligence. The nature of these five aggregates is arising and ceasing at the moment remaining nothing. Not being occurred (in the past) comes to an occurrence. The most valuable and interesting explanation in Buddhism is impermanence. It says in Buddhism; **Not being occurred (in the past) comes to an occurrence. Being occurred (at the present) would not come to (the future) occurrence.** (අනුත්ථා සම්භවං හුත්ථා න භවිස්සති). This is the nature of impermanence that Buddhism illuminates. This is not the Buddha's creation; it is one of the Buddha's discoveries by himself. Whether a Buddha appeared or not in the world, this reality is forever. However, because of our ignorance we think that our past experience continues. This, unknowing of impermanence, is the cause of suffering. When we think about some previous experience, we go to the past and we live with that experience. We suffer or enjoy in this way. We mostly live in the past or future in delusion. Because of this wrong view, we lose the fortune of living at the present moment. Also we miss our real happiness. To overcome this misconception, Buddhism always advises us to practice mindfulness and wisdom.

If we have an ability to understand all our experiences as the result of arising five aggregates, that understanding causes to decrease ignorance. It means our desire and anger also cease gradually as much as we have this understanding. Then our suffering also reduces little by little. Our real happiness increases day by day if we are on this path. When we see the results, we hurry to go on this way practicing virtue, tranquility and wisdom.

As the result of practicing this teaching, we see the natural three things which are the three characteristics or signs (*Tilakkhana*) in our life. They are;

1. Impermanence (*Anicca* - අනිච්ච)
2. Unsatisfactoriness (*Dukkha* - දුක්ඛ)
3. Egolessness or selflessness, non-self (*Anatta* - අනන්ත)

Understanding of these three things is interrelated. If we have real understanding of impermanence, we are able to understand unsatisfactoriness. If we have clear knowledge of unsatisfactoriness through the understanding of impermanence, we are ready to emphasize the non-self. Non-self or egolessness means we have nothing in our control. That is why we are subject to go to sick, old age and dead. If we have something in our control in our life, we would have overcome sickness, old age and death.

If we can reflect on these three phenomena about everything, we have nothing to attach or get angry. *Anicca* means every experience arises and ceases every moment. *Dukkha* means unsatisfactoriness in our experience because of impermanence. *Anatta* means there is nothing which is in our control. If we have this investigation perfectly, nothing can disturb our peace of mind because our mind is very pure, calm and strong with understanding of impermanence. We are like a lotus which rose from mud in the pond. Even though we live in the society with the people who have defilements, we have no lust in our mind. Day by day we go forward on the path of purification.

Here we see that every moment the world or our experience arises and ceases with the conditions. When conditions are together, we have experience. When conditions go away, experience ceases. When we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think, the internal world arises. When experience ends, our internal world ceases. The real world that we have in our experience is instant. The world is always fresh. Because of our delusion, we think the world is old. That is our fault. If we can reflect the real world as fresh and renew, our mind is also fresh and pure without any defilement. Buddhism always guides us to gain this understanding. We may try to practice this teaching, achieve the results and get rid of suffering in this life itself.

On this way we have to develop our confidence in The Buddha's enlightenment, knowledge, reflection according to knowledge, and meditation. Day by day we have to go forward fast taking the maximum use of time.

සබ්බෙ සංඛාරා අනිච්චානි යදා පඤ්ඤාය පස්සති,  
අථ නිබ්බන්දති දුක්ඛෙ ඒස මග්ගෝ විසුද්ධියා.

“*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*”ti yadā paññāya passati;  
*Atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā.*

“All conditioned things are impermanent”—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

සබ්බෙ සංඛාරා දුක්ඛානි යදා පඤ්ඤාය පස්සති,  
අථ නිබ්බන්දති දුක්ඛෙ ඒස මග්ගෝ විසුද්ධියා.

“*Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*”*ti yadā paññāya passati;*  
*Atha nibbindati dukkhe esa maggo visuddhiyā.*

“All conditioned things are unsatisfactory (suffering)”—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

සබ්බෙ ධම්මා අනන්තානි යදා පඤ්ඤාය පස්සති,  
අථ නිබ්බන්දති දුක්ඛෙ ඒස මග්ගෝ විසුද්ධියා. (ධම්මපද, මග්ගවග්ග)

“*Sabbe dhammā anattā*”*ti yadā paññāya passati;*  
*Atha nibbindati dukkha esa maggo visuddhiyā.* (Dhammapada-Maggavagga)

“All things are not-self”—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

Every experience we receive through our senses is impermanent. Also, it is unsatisfactoriness. Because we can't keep it as permanent, we worry when it changes. If we have full awareness about our experience as it is, we can overcome suffering. We can face any kind of good or bad experience without big attachment or anger. It means we are free from suffering. The Buddha's effort was pointing out this path to the world. If we practice this path and get rid of suffering, that is the real way to respect to the Buddha. That is the only thing that the Buddha expected from us.

With the understanding of purification, to be permanent this experience, we have to follow a path that is the noble eightfold path. It is,

- |    |                     |                            |               |
|----|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. | Right Understanding | ( <i>Sammā Ditthi</i> )    | සම්මා දිට්ඨි  |
| 2. | Right Thoughts      | ( <i>Sammā samkappa</i> )  | සම්මා සංකප්ප  |
| 3. | Right Speech        | ( <i>Sammā Vācā</i> )      | සම්මා වාචා    |
| 4. | Right Action        | ( <i>Sammā kammantha</i> ) | සම්මා කම්මන්ත |
| 5. | Right Livelihood    | ( <i>Sammā ājiva</i> )     | සම්මා ආජීව    |
| 6. | Right Effort        | ( <i>Sammā Vāyāma</i> )    | සම්මා වායාම   |
| 7. | Right Mindfulness   | ( <i>Sammā sati</i> )      | සම්මා සති     |
| 8. | Right Concentration | ( <i>Sammā samādhi</i> )   | සම්මා සමාධි   |

If we can conduct our all activities according to this path, we go forward towards the purification day by day. Also we can see the results reaching real happiness overcoming suffering.

(Tuesday Dhamma Discussion of Los Angeles Buddhist Vihara in Pasadena. 03/17/2015)