

Three Marks of Reality

The basic tenet of Buddhism is that all phenomena (world of becoming)¹ are marked by three characteristics, sometimes referred to as the *Dharma* seals; namely: *Anityatā* (impermanence or transiency), *anātman* (no-self or non-substantiality) and *duḥkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness). They are all interlinked and interdependent.

1. Anityatā

This is the first and most fundamental characteristic which gives rise to the doctrine of *anātman* and *duḥkha*. This mark refers not only to the fact that all conditioned things eventually cease to exist (that is, the transient character of all phenomena), but also that all conditioned things are in a constant state of flux (that is, in the state of becoming). Thus, the mark of impermanence has two aspects: Gross and subtle. The gross mark of impermanence states that everything that arises must at some time pass away, that whatever comes into being must pass out of being, that whatever is put together at some time comes apart, that is, that everything that is conditioned changes. Everything is conditioned (except *nirvāṇa* itself), because it is dependent on other things for its continued existence in a given form, and conditions keep changing. Hence everything is in a constantly changing form, and is made of smaller parts which are constantly changing in relation to each other.² This is evident even in the cosmic process as well

as in the course of our lives. According to Buddhism, cosmic process goes through four stages of development namely: (i) It emerges from a state of undifferentiated matter. (ii) It evolves to a point of maximum differentiation. (iii) It begins to disintegrate. (iv) And then it reaches a stage of total disintegration. Then after sometime, the process repeats itself. In this way every world system arises, evolves and passes away. In the same pattern, in our lives, we are born and grow up; when growth reaches the maximum it is followed by ageing, decay and death. That is the gross or coarse feature of impermanence.

The subtle mark of impermanence indicates that being itself is really a process of becoming. In simple terms it means at cosmic level the destruction of an entity and at the individual level the death of an existent; this did not mean the end of the story, rather it signifies a new beginning in terms of a new entity in the former case and a new birth in the latter case. In this manner continues impermanence as becoming. This analysis of phenomena is intended to demonstrate that there are no static entities, but only dynamic processes, which appear to us to be stable and static only because of our ignorance (erroneous knowledge). Moreover, this radical mark of impermanence applies to every phenomenon without exception, especially to the five aggregates, namely: *Rūpa* (matter), *vedanā* (feelings), *saṃjñā* (perception), *saṃskāras* (latent formations), and *vijñāna* (consciousness).

Further, the impermanence of everything leads to the doctrine of momentariness (*kṣaṇikavāda*), which means that phenomenal reality exists momentarily. The Buddhist doctrine of momentariness tells us that the becoming process of emergence and dissolution of an entity is as rapid as it

would allow phenomena to last only for a moment, which is equated to the duration of thought. In simple words it means that, every phenomenon being impermanent, undergoes constant change in terms of the destruction of the existing state and the emergence of a succeeding state as the replica of a previous state. It is a view that asserts that no entity can last between two moments of time. An entity, while lasting only for a moment, gives rise to another as its replica and in this manner the series as becoming continues. It may be compared to pictures that follow each other in quick succession on a cinema screen. Moreover, no logical or causal connection exists between the two entities, since each entity is seen to be discrete, particular and isolated. Thus, the implication of this understanding of momentariness is that an entity, even if it exists, exists only for a moment.

But, if an entity last only for a moment, then it is difficult to maintain that anything exists. So, in the context of the doctrine of momentariness the questions that confront us are as follow:

1. How can the causal continuity be maintained, if nothing exists but momentariness?
2. If the object exists only for a moment and does not exist for any length of time, how is it possible then to cognize such an object?
3. How can we have knowledge without knowing that about which we want to have knowledge?
4. What would be the content of knowledge?
5. What appears in knowledge?

The early Buddhists, both the Sarvāstivādins and the Sautrāntikas were fully aware about the logical problems that the doctrines of momentariness had given rise to. Regarding the problem of causal

continuity, Sarvāstivādins tried to solve it by making a distinction between the element in itself (*dharma-svabhāva*) and the element in the state of manifestation (*dharma-lakṣaṇa*).³ The Sautrāntika, on the other hand, resorted to the notion of series by maintaining that the moments that follow each other in the continuum of the series are not completely cut off from one another. There exists a kind of continuing link between the subsequent and the antecedent moments.

Further, regarding the problem of the cognition of an object, the early Buddhists tried to solve it by showing the reconciliation between the object and its cognition. The so-called reconciliation is more external than internal. Thus the inner contradictions still remain intact, which lead Buddhism to have opted for subjective idealism. The idealist overcomes the problem of cognition by saying that knowledge is not dependent upon an object. For them knowledge, as it were, determines itself. The similarity between the image and the object is considered as a form of consciousness itself. The Buddhist counter it by saying that the object between the two moments exists in terms of similarity and it is due to similarity between the object that has disappeared and the object that has emerged that makes cognition possible. Besides, we have this similarity because the nature and constitution of mind is such that it is incapable of distinguishing discrete data when they flow in quick succession (*bhedāgraha*). The crux of the problem lies in our cognitive failure; we are not able to see the difference between the two. We stop at this point and it would be quite appropriate to discuss this point at a greater length in the chapter of perception.

2. Anātman

This characteristic of phenomena is intended to demonstrate that neither the individual beings nor entities enjoy any kind of ontological status, which is to say that none of them is rooted in or constituted by an eternal and there by permanent self or substratum. Even though destitute of permanent self, the individual out of ignorance (erroneous knowledge) thinks that he has a permanent self, and accordingly clings to it. Usually this so called self is identified with the body, which is expressed through such utterances as I am fat, I am thin, etc. In the process of this erroneous identification the individual existent experiences pain in one form or the other. And in order to get free from this, we have to break out of the clinging to the idea of self by maintaining the mark of *anātman*.

Moreover, to grasp the exact meaning of this mark, we have to discriminate between what this mark denies and what it does not deny. We can approach this task by distinguishing the different meanings of the word 'self'. The word self can be used in three senses: (a) With a reflexive meaning, as when we speak of myself, yourself, oneself. (b) To refer to one's own person, to refer to the compound of body and mind. (c) A substantial ego entity, a lasting subject existing at the core of the psycho-physical personality.⁴ Out of these three meanings, Buddha accepts the first two and denies the last one that the person exists as a self, as a lasting simple ego-entity. He does not deny the existence of the person taken as a psycho-physical complex.

But now the question arises: If individual beings are destitute of a permanent self, then what is the state of an individual being?

For the Buddhists an individual is a complex of ever-changing five aggregates such as: form (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), latent formations (*saṃskāras*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). And none of the factors belongs to, or are identical with the self. So to say that a person exists is to say that this unified compound of the five aggregates exists. And to say that a person is *anātman* is to say that no inner nucleus of selfhood can be found within or behind the personality made up of the five aggregates. For the Buddha the self, being a metaphysical postulate, has no empirical basis and so should be considered as non-existent like the sky-flowers or a barren women's son. Further, the existence of self is notional, it means that it has its basis in matter and has only a sensible identity. The process that is involved in giving birth to the notion of the notional self runs like this: The idea of a self or of a person comes to be when the five factors jointly give rise to the body as well as to the senses. The factors of consciousness become functional when the senses relate themselves to their respective objects. In this manner, consciousness becomes conscious of the object with which the senses have established contact. This becoming conscious of the object is interpreted in terms of 'I' that is conscious. It is this notional self to which the attribute of being conscious is ascribed. Hence the statement: I know the object because I am conscious of it.⁵

One vital point to be noted is that Buddha discards the existence of an empirical self as being permanent. In so far as the transcendental self is concerned, the Buddha has neither affirmed nor denied its existence, but preferred to take a middle course by opting the doctrine of 'becoming' in terms of mutual conditioning as to how phenomena arise.⁶ And in this, the empirical self exists as a phenomenal category and not as an eternal entity,

which is to say that it is as impermanent and nonsubstantial as are other phenomenal categories. In this manner is substantiated the impermanent and insubstantial character of the self. Thus, any metaphysical interpretation of the self is not acceptable to the Buddhists.

3. Duḥkha

Duḥkha means both pain and suffering and also the general unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence. A fundamental reason as to why people in general undergo suffering is because of the erroneous search for the permanent in that that inherently is impermanent. This impermanence that is the characteristic of the world, including existence therein, is because of flux, which is to say that nothing is stationary, stable but, everything is moving on in terms of which birth and death are explained. This fluxional aspect of the material universe has eventuated because of its nonsubstantial mark that is; nothing in this world is substantial. Thus, whatever is impermanent and nonsubstantial is subject to change and whatever is subject to change is subject to suffering. Besides, we crave for a world where everything that we value and love will remain forever, but when it changes we undergo suffering. The five aggregates themselves are impermanent. We would like to preserve them, to dominate them with our will but they escape from our grasp, then we meet up with dissatisfaction. Moreover, *duḥkha* has the meaning of ‘oppression by rise and fall’, when we contrast the rise and fall with our desires for peace and stability, and then the process seems oppressive.

According to Buddhism, *duḥkha* can be analyzed into three types according to their relationship with *duḥkha* alone, *anityatā* or *anātman*.⁷

1. *Duḥkha- duḥkha* (pain of pain) - suffering in its straightforward form, because of old age, illness, death, etc.
2. *Vipariṇāma- duḥkha* (pain of alteration) - suffering caused by change example, violated expectations, the failure of happy/pleasant moment to last.
3. *Sanḅhāra-duḥkha* (pain of formation) - the unsatisfactoriness that we experience due to nonsubstantiality.

At this juncture, the pertinent question which arises is that – Can the teaching of the trilogy lead to liberation?

The Buddha teaches that the way to the end of *duḥkha* is through understanding. It is due to not understanding the real nature of existence that we remain tied to *duḥkha*. Because of our craving, clinging and attachment, we cling to body and mind, because we see them as permanent, pleasurable and self. We interpret them as I, mine and myself. From these erroneous notions all sorts of defilements arise. Greed arises as the drive to acquisition. We want to grab hold of more power, more pleasure, and higher status. The deluded notion of self gives rise to anger and hatred towards what opposes us. It causes the arising of selfishness, jealousy, and pride, etc. At the deepest level the ideas of permanence, pleasure, and selfhood sustain the round of *samsāra*. The Buddha points out that liberation lies precisely in the realization of these three marks of existence. When we stop identifying ourselves with the five aggregate, we see them as not mine, not I and not self. Then we become detached from the five aggregates and with detachment there comes liberation. That is the end of *duḥkha*, the goal of teaching.

Concluding Remarks

From the preceding discussion it is evident that according to Buddhism the nature of reality is that of continuous becoming which means it is dynamic. This fluxional aspect of reality is equated to impermanence, which with regard to phenomenality at least denotes non-substantiality.

Notes and References

1. All conditioned things which are arisen due to mutual dependence of conditions and causes (*praīityasamutpāda*).
2. The purpose of the causal theory of co-production is to explain that the phenomena are neither other-caused nor self-caused, but are occasioned due to the mutual dependence of conditions and causes. This dependent version of causality makes it clear that all phenomena are conditioned, that is interdependent. And this interdependence is explained through causal formula: ‘When this, then that; when not this, then not that’.
3. According to the Sarvāstivādins, all elements exist on two different planes, the real essence of the element and its momentary manifestation. The first exists always in the past, present, and future. It is not eternal because eternality means absence of change, but it represents the potential appearance of element into phenomenal existence, and its appearance as well. The potentiality is existing forever (*sarsadā asti*). Stcherbatsky, Th. (1974), p. 34.
4. Williams, Paul, (2000), pp. 56-62.
5. For details see Conze, Edward, (1967), ch. 3, p. 34.
6. According to this theory, the arising of entities occurs due to the mutual dependence of causes and conditions. Whatever entity there be, it comes into being in dependence upon the various causes and conditions. There is, thus no entity that is self-existent, that is, the cause of itself. It means that entities, having arisen dependently, are conditioned, and so subject to change which constant fluxional

becoming occasions. This changing aspect of the dependently arisen entities is reflected in their mutability, impermanence and nonsubstantiality. It is a doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* that reduces the entire phenomenal world and the existents therein to a state of nonsubstantiality in terms of which everything is made so transient as to last only for a moment. This shows that Buddhists main concerns are towards the phenomenological description of existence rather than the questions that are ontological in orientation.

7. Verdu, Alfonso, (1995), ch. 1, pp.11-19.