

Dhamma Talk 9: The Universal Law of Existence – Tilakkhaṇa

1. Opening

- *Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa* (x3)
- “Dear friends in the Dhamma, today we will reflect on the **Three Universal Characteristics – Tilakkhaṇa**. These are not just Buddhist ideas; they are universal truths of life. The Buddha did not create them, he discovered them – just as Newton discovered gravity. Whether we believe or not, whether we are Buddhist or not, these truths still hold:
 1. Everything is **impermanent (anicca)**.
 2. Everything conditioned is **unsatisfactory (dukkha)**.
 3. Everything, without exception, is **not-self (anattā)**.

These three are like the laws of nature. Let us explore them one by one.”

2. First Stanza – Impermanence (Anicca)

Pali:

Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, yadā paññāya passati, atha nibbindati dukkhē, esa maggo visuddhiyā. (Dhp 277)

Meaning:

“All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with suffering. This is the path to purity.”

Story 1 – The Broken Glass

A Thai forest master, Ajahn Chah, once held up a glass and said:

“To me, this glass is already broken. I enjoy it when it holds water, when it reflects the sunlight. But when it slips and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ Because in my mind, it is already broken.”

- That is impermanence. We suffer when we expect permanence in what is by nature temporary.

Sutta Support

Aniccasaññā Sutta (AN 7.46) – “When a monk frequently contemplates impermanence, he uproots conceit, ‘I am,’ and attains liberation.”

3. Second Stanza – Dukkha

Pali:

Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, yadā paññāya passati, atha nibbindati dukkhē, esa maggo visuddhiyā. (Dhp 278)

Meaning:

“All conditioned things are suffering. When one sees this with wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with suffering. This is the path to purity.”

Story 2 – The King’s Sorrow

There was once a great king who had everything: wealth, power, armies. But his favorite horse died. He wept uncontrollably. His ministers asked: “Why do you suffer so much for just a horse?” The king replied: “Because no matter how great I am, I cannot stop loss.”

- This is dukkha. Not because life is always painful, but because nothing can give permanent satisfaction.

Sutta Support

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) – The Buddha taught: “Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, union with what is disliked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering.”

4. Third Stanza – Anattā

Pali:

Sabbe dhammā anattā, yadā paññāya passati, atha nibbindati dukkhē, esa maggo visuddhiyā. (Dhp 279)

Meaning:

“All phenomena are non-self. When one sees this with wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with suffering. This is the path to purity.”

Story 3 – The Chariot (from Milindapañhā)

King Milinda asked the monk Nāgasena: “What is the self?”

Nāgasena asked: “O King, is the chariot the wheels, or the axle, or the yoke, or the reins? Or is it all of these together?”

The king said: “It is just a convention – when these parts are together, we call it a chariot.”

Nāgasena replied: “So too with the body and mind. There is no permanent self – only a collection of changing parts. ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are only conventions.”

Sutta Support

Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59) – The Buddha said: “Form is not-self, if form were self, it would not lead to affliction. But since form is not-self, it leads to affliction.” The same is true for feelings, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

5. Differences Between the Three

1. **Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā** – All conditioned things are impermanent. (Focus: change)
2. **Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā** – All conditioned things are suffering. (Focus: because of change, they can’t satisfy us)
3. **Sabbe dhammā anattā** – All phenomena, conditioned or unconditioned, are not-self. (Focus: there is no “I” in anything, not even in Nibbāna)

6. Modern-Day Examples

- **Impermanence:** Your phone today is new, tomorrow outdated.
- **Dukkha:** You enjoy ice cream, but if you eat too much, it brings stomach pain.
- **Anattā:** Can you stop your hair from turning gray? Can you order your body: “Don’t age”? If it were truly self, you could. But you cannot.

7. Zen Reflection

A Zen master asked: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

This riddle is not about logic, but about letting go of self. When we search for “I,” we find nothing solid. Like the sound of one hand, the self is just an illusion.

8. Closing

- “Friends, these three universal truths are not negative. They are liberating.
 - By seeing **anicca**, we learn not to cling.
 - By seeing **dukkha**, we understand the danger of craving.
 - By seeing **anattā**, we dissolve the illusion of ego.
- Together, they open the door to **Nibbāna – the peace beyond conditions.**”

May we all see clearly impermanence, suffering, and non-self. May we let go of clinging and walk together on the path to purity.