

Anicca, Anatta and Interbeing

The Coming and Going in the Ocean of Karma



Three Marks of Existence

1. Discontent (*dukkha* or *duhkha*)
2. Impermanence (*anicca* or *anitya*)
3. No self (*anatta* or *anatman*)



Impermanence (*Anicca*)

- Everything in samsara is in a constant flux of change. Everything is impermanent.
- Whatever exists is a stream of becoming. This point is often illustrated by a beautiful but fragile blossom.
- All is passing; trying to hold on to things that are fleeting would lead to *dukkha*.



No Self (Anatta or Anatman)

- The prefix “an-” means “no”. So “an-atman” means “no atman”, “no self”.
- If everything is impermanent, then there cannot be a permanent, unchanging being that is one’s true self.
- Instead of seeing oneself as a being existing in time and changing over time, Buddhism suggests that one learn to see oneself as a changing process.
- A process is a sequence of states. The “I” at the present moment is simply a collection of mental and physical states.



What Do You See?



Five *Skandhas*

A person is just a collection of five *skandhas* (five aggregates):

1. the physical body
2. the feelings
3. the perceptions
4. the inherent impulses (dispositions)
5. the consciousness

The *skandhas* give rise to the illusion of a self.



Human Soul and Personal Identity

Suppose a person = the physical body
+ the feelings
+ the perceptions
+ dispositions
+ the consciousness
+ the soul

but without the five *skandhas*, there is no way to distinguish one soul from another.



The Clinging to Individual Existence

- Why even talk about personal identity?
- The desire to be a self is a clinging to individual existence.
- The notion of an individual human soul as an entity can be regarded as one way of extending individual existence.
- If we see one's soul as one's states of being, then the soul would be a succession of states of *skandhas*.



Self and Desires

- The desire to be a self is the root of all cravings.
- To rid of discontent and suffering, one needs to realize that one has no self, that is, one needs to see interbeing.
- Not seeing ourselves as individual beings, but as interbeing would help us avoid discontent and envy, and promote compassion.



Interbeing

- Seeing interbeing (a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh) helps us grasp dependent arising (*pratityasamutpada*) and break away from seeing reality as consisting of individual beings.
- Reality is a process of becoming. It is the constant flux of dependent arising.
- At a given moment, reality is a collection of states. Each state is contingent upon other concurrent states and previous states.
- This interbeing is the basis for the Buddhist teaching of compassion.



Dependent Arising

- Buddhas “see that all things arise together.” (p. 145)
- “When this arises, that becomes.” (p. 146)
- “Nothing appears by itself; everything we experience appears in a context and against a backdrop of other things that are dependent on and conditioned by each other.” (p. 154)
- Buddha “spoke of things as they have come to be in *this moment*, dependent upon other things.” (p. 154)
- All “things” (quotation marks added) come intimately joined. (p. 154)



Interbeing and *Anatta*

- Reality is the flux of coming and going.
- A person can be seen as series of physical and psychological states intertwined together. The series are part of the flux.
- At any given moment the bundle of states called “I” are shaped by previous states and concurrent states in the flux.
- The idea of a separate, individual self is just an illusion—a way of seeing.
- Seeing reality as interbeing helps us develop loving kindness, and avoid the merit/blame game—the game of who-deserves-what.



Shunyata (Void or Emptiness)

- Buddhism uses the idea of the Void (or Emptiness) to help us avoid clinging to misconceived reality.
- Void means the absence of own-being or the absence of self-subsistent substance or entities.
- Unlike Hinduism, which talks about Brahman and Atman as Self and the true self, Buddhism talks about no self.
- Buddhism urges us to *see* reality as interconnected and constantly changing. The downside of conceiving reality as consisting of individual beings is that such a conception leads to the clinging to individual existence.



Anatta and Rebirth

- If there is no self, what goes through rebirth?
- One's life is just a segment of a stream of changing states.
- No substance or soul-entity gets passed from one life to the next.
- A rebirth is the reassembling of the scattered *skandhas*, or the reoccurring of a bundle due to dependent arising.
- “My” rebirth results from the karma of the “I” bundle as well as the karma of all the other bundles in the flux.
- Rebirth is the rippling effect of karma in the ocean of life.



Rebirth as re-embodiment

A person is a living example of certain characteristics. We use them to distinguish and identify a person. At death, a person passes away, but those characteristics scattered in the sense that we can find them in other people. For example, suppose Nancy is tall, witty, kind and so on. After Nancy passes away, we can find the characteristic of being tall in some people, the characteristic of being witty in others, and so on. One day, if we run into someone, who is tall, witty, kind and so on, that is, who has most of the characteristics that distinguish Nancy from others, then we can say that we have seen Nancy's rebirth. In this sense, a spiritual Christian is a rebirth of Jesus, and a compassionate Buddhist is a rebirth of the Buddha. So a spiritual person is a living Buddha *and* a living Christ.

