

Anicca

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Anicca means impermanence. Nothing is permanent in this world. All objects in the world are constantly changing. All compound objects, all objects that are made of parts, are in a constant state of flux.

It is the first of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) of existence, the other two being *dukkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (not-self).

Three characteristics of all phenomena are impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*). All *saṅkhāras* are impermanent if one sees them with *paññā* (wisdom). The Buddha says in the Dhammapada, “*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccāti, yadā paññāya passati.*” *Saṅkhārā* means all conditioned things, things that have a cause or cause to produce. So, if all *saṅkhārās* are impermanent, they cause *dukkhā* (suffering) because how can any impermanent things give permanent happiness! One may feel happy for some time but when they change, and change they must because they are not stable and eternal, they will produce suffering. The Buddha rightly says in the *Dhammapada*, “*Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhāti, yadā paññāya passati.*”

In the Yadanicca Sutta, the Buddha says, “Bhikkhus, form is impermanent. What is impermanent, is suffering. What is suffering, is non-self. What is non-self, should be seen as it really is, with correct wisdom and thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’” He says the same thing in respect to all the rest of the four aggregates viz. feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness. If all things are constantly changing, how can they give permanent happiness? And how can we call them our self when they are not ours, these are not we, and they are not our self.

The Buddha had a clear realization of this at the experiential level. He saw that *anicca* (impermanence) is an undeniable and incontrovertible fact of life. When this fact of life is thoroughly understood, there is no question of developing a clinging for any worldly object even though they might appear beautiful. Even beautiful objects change. Realization of *anicca*, therefore, is a sure way of developing non-attachment and a sure cure of *dukkha*.

Because our vision is very short, we take things as permanent. We regard all things that we like and love as permanent and crave for them. We do not realize that they are changing every moment. This can be realized if we go a little deeper and see the changes happening to us. A child grows up, becomes a young man, becomes an adult, grows old, his hair once black and shining become grey, his face begins to have wrinkles and ultimately, he grows old. What an unbelievable change in him from a tender little boy to an emaciated old man with wrinkles!

The same kind of change is seen not only in the human world but also in the animal and plant worlds. Animals are born, grow old and die. Plants grow, have luxuriant growth of leaves, flowers and fruits but a time comes when they also grow old. Their leaves fall, their twigs become weak, their roots which supported them for a long time and made them strong to withstand gales and hurricanes become so weak that they become unable to support themselves and fall down. Even in the inanimate world, change is inevitable. We may not realize in our life time that some rocks have undergone changes and they may seem to us to be permanent and unchangeable but they are not. The sun and wind cause changes in them too. And they are also eroded away, slowly and imperceptibly. Nothing is permanent. All things and all phenomena are in a constant state of flux. They appear to be the same but they are not so over the years. Reality is something else. The Buddha wants us to see the difference between appearance and reality.

The Buddha saw this very clearly. He saw everything changing at the experiential level. When a bhikkhu asked the Buddha, “Venerable sir, is there any form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like the eternity itself? Is there, venerable sir, any feeling...any perception...any volitional formations...any consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself?”

The Buddha said that there is nothing, which is stable and eternal. To make it clearer, he took up a little lump of cow dung in his hand and said to the bhikkhu, “Bhikkhu, there is not even this much individual existence that is permanent, stable... just like eternity itself. If there was this much individual existence that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned”¹.

The Buddha said that one discerns the living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering because he finds here nothing that is permanent and eternal. Because he sees things changing, so he feels revulsion towards them and develops non-attachment. Disillusioned as he becomes, he walks on the Noble Eightfold Path to end his suffering.

How all five aggregates, which our personality consists of, are impermanent and changing has been made clear by the Buddha in the following *sutta*. He says,

“Form is like a lump of foam,
Feeling like a water bubble;
Perception is like a mirage,
Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion.”

All these aggregates are hollow and void, without any substance. Understanding their impermanent nature, one should walk on the Noble Eightfold Path to end suffering caused by one’s attachment to them. One should earnestly live a holy life, constantly thinking that one’s head is ablaze.

In the Uppādā Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya, Khandha Vagga, 2.129), the Buddha says that whether the Buddha appears or not, this truth is universal that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent (*aniccā*), suffering (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*). Those who realize this truth at the experiential level, they are sure to develop non-attachment (*nirveda*) to various objects of the world. The knowledge and vision of *anicca* is conducive to develop detachment and to strive for annihilation of suffering and attaining *nibbāna*.

The Buddha also said that it is impossible to find a first cause of the world since everything is changing, interdependent and conditioned as explained by the law of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. Even the so-called first link of *paṭiccasamuppāda* called *avijjā* is not uncaused. T.W. Rhys Davids has beautifully explained how there “...can be no individuality without a putting together.” He says, “In each individual, without any exception, the relation of its component parts to one another is ever changing, so that it is never the same for two consecutive moments. It follows that no sooner has separateness begun than dissolution and disintegration also begin; there can be no individuality without a putting together; there can be no putting together without a becoming; there can be no becoming without a becoming different; and there

can be no becoming different without dissolution, a passing away, which sooner or later will become inevitably complete”.

Thus, it is conclusively proved that everything is impermanent.

Questions:

1. What do you mean by *anicca*? Explain by giving examples.
2. How is *anicca* considered *dukkha*? Elaborate.
3. What is the meaning of ‘*saṅkhāra*’ in ‘*sabbe saṅkhāra aniccāti*’?
4. Bring out the meaning of ‘*paññā*’ in ‘*yadā paññāya passati*’.
5. Why is impermanence suffering? Explain with suitable examples.
6. All aggregates like *rūpa and vedanā* are impermanent. Explain.
7. ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self’— Elucidate its deeper meaning.
8. ‘What is individuality? It is a putting together’. Throw light on this statement.
9. Explain *Paṭiccasamuppāda* — the Law of Dependent Origination.
10. What is the first link of the Law of Dependent Origination? Is this the first uncaused link? Give arguments in support of your answer.