

The Essentials of Buddha-Dhamma in Practice

Anicca, *dukkha* and *anattā* are the three essential elements in the Buddha's teachings.

If you know *anicca* (impermanence) truly, you know *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) also as a sequel and *anattā* (no-self) as the ultimate truth. It takes time to understand the three together. *Anicca* is, of course, the essential factor which must first be experienced and understood by practice. A mere reading of the books on Buddhism or book-knowledge of the Buddha-Dhamma will not be enough for the understanding of true *anicca* because the experiential aspect will be missing. It is only through experience and understanding of the nature of *anicca* as an ever-changing process within your very self that you can understand *anicca* in the way the Buddha would like you to understand it. This understanding of *anicca* can be developed, as in the days of the Buddha, by persons who have no book-knowledge whatsoever of Buddhism.

To understand *anicca*, one must follow strictly and diligently the Eightfold Noble Path which is divided into the three steps of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*.

Sīla or virtuous living is the base for *samādhi*, that is, control of the mind to one-pointedness. It is only when *samādhi* is good that one can develop *paññā* (wisdom). So, *sīla* and *samādhi* are the prerequisites for *paññā*. By *paññā* is meant the understanding of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* through the practice of Vipassanā.

Whether a Buddha has arisen or not, the practice of *sīla* and *samādhi* is present in the world of mankind. In fact, they are the common denominators of all religious faith. They are, however, not the means to the end—the end of suffering.

In his search for this end of suffering, Prince Siddhattha found this out and he worked his way through to find the Path which leads to the end of suffering. After solid work for six years, he found the way out, became completely enlightened and then

taught men and gods to follow the Path which leads them to the end of suffering.

In this connection I should like to explain that each action, either by deed, word or thought, leaves behind a force of action, *saṅkhāra* (or *kamma*), for everyone, which becomes the source of the supply of energy to sustain life, which is inevitably followed by suffering and death. It is by the development of the power inherent in the understanding of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* that one is able to rid oneself of the *saṅkhāra* which becomes accumulated in one's own personal account. This process begins with the true understanding of *anicca* while further accumulations of fresh actions and the reduction of the supply of energy to sustain life are taking place simultaneously from time to time and from day to day. It is, therefore, a matter of a lifetime or more to get rid of all of one's own *saṅkhāra* or *kamma*. He who has got himself rid of all *saṅkhāra* (or *kamma*) comes to the end of suffering, because by then, there is no remainder of his *saṅkhāra* to give the necessary life energy to sustain him in any form of life. This end of suffering is reached by the Buddha and the Arahats on the termination of their lives, when they pass into Parinibbāna. For us of today, who take to Vipassanā meditation, it should suffice if we can understand *anicca* very well and reach the stage of an Ariya (Noble One): a Sotāpatti-puggala (the first stage of Enlightenment), one who will not live more than seven lives to come to the end of suffering.

This *anicca*, which opens the door to the understanding of *dukkha* and *anattā*, and then leads to the end of suffering eventually, can be encountered only through a Buddha or, after he has passed away, through his teachings for as long as those aspects relating to the Eightfold Noble Path and the 37 Factors of Enlightenment (*bodhi-pakkhiya*) remain intact and are available to the aspirant.

For progress in Vipassanā meditation, a student must keep knowing *anicca* as continuously as possible. The Buddha's advice to monks is that they shall try to maintain the awareness of

anicca or *dukkha* or *anattā* in all postures, whether sitting or standing or walking or lying down. The continuity of awareness of *anicca* and so of *dukkha* and *anattā* is the secret of success. The last words of the Buddha, just before he breathed his last and passed away into Mahā-parinibbāna were:

*Vaya-dhamma saṅkhāra;
Appamādena sampādettha.*

Decay or *anicca* is inherent in all compounded things.
Work out your own salvation with diligence.

*Digha-nikāya, Sutta 16*¹

This is in fact the essence of all his teachings during the forty-five years he taught. If you will keep up the awareness of *anicca* that is inherent in all compounded things, you are sure to reach the goal in the course of time.

In the meantime, as you develop in the understanding of *anicca*, your insight into “what is true of nature” will become greater and greater. So much so that eventually you will have no doubt whatsoever of the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. It is only then that you are in a position to go ahead for the goal in view.

Now that you know *anicca* as the first essential factor, you should try to understand what *anicca* is with clarity and as extensively as possible—so as not to get confused in the course of practice or discussion.

The real meaning of *anicca* is impermanence or decay—that is, the inherent nature of impermanence or decay in everything that exists in the universe, whether animate or inanimate.

To make my work of explanation easy for the present-day generation, I might draw attention to the opening sentences of the chapter “Atomic Contents” in the book *Inside the Atom* by Isaac Asimov and also to a portion of the contents on page 159 of the

¹*Dialogues of the Buddha*, II, p. 173.

book about chemical reactions going on at the same time in all parts of the body of a living creature such as a human being.

This should be sufficient to bring home the point of view that all things, different as they are, are made of tiny particles called “atoms.” These atoms have been proved by science to be in a state of arising and dissolution or change. We should accordingly accept the concept of the Buddha that all compounded things are subject to change, decay or *anicca*.

But in expounding the theory of *anicca*, the Buddha started with the behaviour that makes matter, and matter as known to the Buddha is very much smaller than the atom that the science of today has discovered. The Buddha made it known to his disciples that everything that exists in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, is composed of *kalāpas* (very much smaller than atoms), each dying out simultaneously as it comes into being. Each *kalāpa* is a mass formed of the eight nature elements, namely, *paṭhavī*, *āpo*, *tejo*, *vāyo*, *vaṇṇa*, *gandha*, *rasa*, *ojā* (solid, liquid, heat, motion, colour, odour, taste and nutriment). The first four are called material qualities which are predominant in a *kalāpa*. The other four are merely subsidiaries which are dependent upon and born out of the former. A *kalāpa* is the minutest particle in the physical plane—still beyond the range of science of today.

It is only when the eight nature elements (which have merely the characteristics of behaviour) are together that the entity of a *kalāpa* (the tiniest particle of matter in the physical plane) is formed. In other words, the co-existence for a moment of these eight nature elements of behaviour makes a mass, just for that moment, which in Buddhism is known as a *kalāpa*. The size of a *kalāpa* is about 1/46,656th part of a particle of dust from the wheel of a chariot in summer in India. The life span of a *kalāpa* is a moment, there being a trillion such moments in the wink of an eye of a human being. These *kalāpas* are all in a state of perpetual change or flux. To a developed student in Vipassanā meditation they can be felt as a stream of energy. The human

body is not an entity as it seems to be, but a continuum of an aggregate of matter (*rūpa*) with the life force (*nāma*) co-existing.

To know that our very body is composed of tiny *kalāpas*, all in a state of change, is to know what is true of the nature of change or decay. This nature of change or decay (*anicca*) occasioned by the continual breakdown and replacement of *kalāpas*, all in a state of combustion, must necessarily be identified with *dukkha*, the truth of suffering. It is only when you experience impermanence (*anicca*) as *dukkha* (suffering or ill) that you come to the realization of the Truth of Suffering of the Four Noble Truths, on which so much emphasis has been laid in the teachings of the Buddha. Why? Because when you realize the subtle nature of *dukkha* from which you cannot escape for a moment, you will become truly afraid of, disgusted with, and disinclined to continue your very existence of *rūpa* and *nāma* and look out for a way of escape to a state beyond—that is, beyond *dukkha*, and so to the end of suffering. What that end of suffering would be like, you will be able to have a taste of, even as a human being, when you reach the level of a Sotāpatti and are developed well enough by practice to go into the unconditioned state of the Peace of Nibbāna within.

Be that as it may, for everyday life, no sooner are you able to keep up the awareness of *anicca* in practice, than you will know for yourself that a change is taking place in you, both physically and mentally, for the better.

Before entering into the practice of Vipassanā meditation, that is, after *samādhi* has been developed to a proper level, a student should first be acquainted with the theoretical knowledge of *rūpa* (matter) and *nāma* (mind and mental properties). If he has understood these well in theory and has come to the proper level of *samādhi*, there is every likelihood of his understanding *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* in the true sense of the words of the Buddha.

In Vipassanā meditation, one contemplates not only the changing nature (*anicca*) of *rūpa* or matter, but also the changing nature (*anicca*) of *nāma*, thought-elements of attention projected

towards the process of change of *rūpa* or matter. At times the attention will be on the *anicca* of *rūpa* or matter only. At times the attention may be on the *anicca* of thought-elements (*nāma*). When one is contemplating the *anicca* of *rūpa* or matter, one realizes also that the thought-elements arising simultaneously with the awareness of the *anicca* of *rūpa* or matter are also in a state of transition or change. In that case you are knowing the *anicca* of both *rūpa* and *nāma* together.

All I have said so far relates to the understanding of *anicca* through the body-feelings, to the understanding of the process of change of *rūpa* or matter, and also of the thought-elements depending upon such changing processes. You should know also that *anicca* can be understood through other types of feeling as well.

Anicca can be developed through feeling

- (i) by contact of visible form with the sense organ of the eye,
- (ii) by contact of sound with the sense organ of the ear,
- (iii) by contact of smell with the sense organ of the nose,
- (iv) by contact of taste with the sense organ of the tongue,
- (v) by contact of touch with the sense organ of the body,
- (vi) by contact of thought with the sense organ of the mind.

In fact, one can develop the understanding of *anicca* through any of the six organs of sense. In practice, however, we have found that, of all types of feelings, the feelings of the contact of touch with the component parts of the body in a process of change covers a wide area for introspective meditation. Not only that, but the feeling by contact of touch (by way of the friction, radiation and vibrations of the *kalāpas* within) with the component parts of the body is more tangible than other types of feeling, and therefore a beginner in Vipassanā meditation can

come to the understanding of *anicca* more easily through body feelings of the nature of change of *rūpa* or matter. This is the main reason why we have chosen the body feeling as a medium for the quick understanding of *anicca*. It is open to anyone to try other means, but my suggestion is that one should have oneself well established in the understanding of *anicca* through body feelings before an attempt is made through other types of feeling.

There are ten levels of knowledge of Vipassanā, namely:

- (i) *Sammasana*: the appreciation of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* by close observation and analysis, of course, theoretically.
- (ii) *Udayabbaya*: knowledge of the arising and dissolution of *rūpa* and *nāma*.
- (iii) *Bhaṅga*: knowledge of the fast-changing nature of *rūpa* and *nāma*—as a swift flow of current or a stream of energy.
- (iv) *Bhaya*: knowledge of the fact that this very existence is dreadful.
- (v) *Ādīnava*: knowledge of the fact that this very existence is full of evils.
- (vi) *Nibbidā*: knowledge of the fact that this very existence is disgusting.
- (vii) *Muccitu-kamyatā*: knowledge of the urgent need to escape from this very existence.
- (viii) *Paṭisankhā*: knowledge of the fact that the time has come to work with full realization for salvation with *anicca* as the base.
- (ix) *Saṅkhārupekkhā*: knowledge of the fact that the stage is now set to get detached from *saṅkhāra* and to break away from ego-centrism.
- (x) *Anuloma*: knowledge that would accelerate the attempt to reach the goal.

These are the levels of attainment that one gets through during the course of Vipassanā meditation, which in the case of those who reach the goal in a short time can be known only in

retrospect. With progress in the understanding of *anicca*, one gets through these levels of attainment; subject, however, to adjustments or help at certain levels by a competent teacher. One should avoid looking forward to such attainments in anticipation, as this will distract one from the continuity of awareness of *anicca* which alone can and will give one the desired reward.

Now let me deal with Vipassanā meditation from the point of view of a householder in everyday life and explain the benefit one can derive from it, here and now, in this very lifetime.

The initial object of Vipassanā Meditation is to activate *anicca* in one's own self or to experience one's own inner self in *anicca* and to get eventually to a state of inner and outer calmness and balance. This is achieved when one becomes engrossed in the feeling of *anicca* within.

The world is now facing serious problems—threatening mankind. It is just the right time for everyone to take to Vipassanā meditation and learn how to find a deep pool of quiet in the midst of all that is happening today. *Anicca* is inside everybody. It is with everybody. It is within reach of everybody. Just a look into one's own self and there it is—*anicca* to be experienced. When one can feel *anicca*, when one can experience *anicca* and when one can become engrossed in *anicca*, one can at will cut away from the world of ideation outside. *Anicca* is, for the householder, the gem of life which he will treasure to create a reservoir of calm and balanced energy for his own well-being and for the welfare of society. *Anicca*, when properly developed, strikes at the root of one's physical and mental ills and removes gradually whatever is bad in one, that is, the sources of such physical and mental ills. In the lifetime of the Buddha there were some seventy million people in Sāvatti and places around, in the kingdom of Pasenadi Kosala. Of them, about fifty million were Ariyas who had passed into the stream of Sotāpatti. The number

of householders who took to Vipassanā meditation must therefore have been more.²

Anicca is not reserved for men who have renounced the world for the homeless life. It is for the householder as well. In spite of drawbacks that make a householder restless in these days, a competent teacher or guide can help a student to get *anicca* activated in a comparatively short time. Once he has got it activated, all that is necessary would be for him to try and preserve it, but he must make it a point, as soon as time or opportunity presents itself for further progress, to work for the stage of Bhaṅga—the third level of knowledge in Vipassanā. If he reaches this level, there will be little or no problem because he should then be able to experience *anicca* without much ado and almost automatically. In this case *anicca* shall become his base, for return thereto as soon as the domestic needs of daily life, all physical and mental activities, are over. There is likely, however, to be some difficulty with one who has not as yet reached the stage of Bhaṅga. It will be just like a tug-of-war for him between *anicca* within and physical and mental activities outside the body. So, it would be wise for him to follow the motto of “Work while you work; play while you play.” There is no need for him to be activating *anicca* all the time. It should suffice if this could be confined to the regular period or periods set apart in the day or night for the purpose. During this time at least, an attempt must be made to keep the mind/attention inside the body with the awareness exclusively of *anicca*, that is to say, his awareness of *anicca* should be from moment to moment, or so continuous it does not allow for the interpolation of any discursive or distracting thoughts which are definitely detrimental to progress. In case this is not possible, he would have to go back to respiration mindfulness, because *samādhi* is the key to *anicca*. To get good *samādhi*, *sīla* has to be perfect, since *samādhi* is built

²See the commentary on the Dhammapada (I, 4) [*Buddhist Legends*, I, 147]. The commentary says twenty million people did not attain the state of an Ariya.

upon *sīla*. For good *anicca*, *samādhi* must be good. If *samādhi* is excellent, awareness of *anicca* will also become excellent.

There is no special technique for activating *anicca* other than the use of the mind set to a perfect state of balance and attention projected to the object of meditation. In Vipassanā the object of meditation is *anicca* and therefore in the case of those used to drawing back their attention to body feeling, they can feel *anicca* directly. In experiencing *anicca* on or in the body, it should first be in the area where one can easily get his attention engrossed, changing the areas of attention from place to place, from head to feet and from feet to head, at times probing into the interior. At this stage, it must be clearly understood that no attention is to be paid to the anatomy of the body but right to the formation of matter (*kalāpas*) and the nature of their constant change. If these instructions are observed, there will surely be progress, but the progress depends also on one's *pāramīs* (Perfections) and the devotion of the individual to the work of meditation. If he attains high levels of knowledge, his power to understand the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* will increase and he will accordingly come nearer and nearer to the goal of Ariya—which every householder should keep in view.

This is the age of science. Men today have no utopia. They will not accept anything unless the results are good, concrete, vivid, personal and here-and-now.

When the Buddha was alive, he said to the Kālāmas:

Now look, you Kālāmas. Be not misled by report or tradition or hearsay. Be not misled by proficiency in the collections, nor by reason or logic, nor after reflection on and approval of some theory; nor because it conforms with one's inclination nor out of respect for the prestige of a teacher.

But Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves, these things are unwholesome, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent; these things, when practised and observed, conduce to loss and sorrow; then do

you reject them. But if at any time you know for yourselves, these things are wholesome, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the intelligent; these things when practised and observed are conducive to welfare and happiness; then Kāḷāmas should you, having practised them, abide therein.

The time clock of Vipassanā is now struck—that is, for the revival of the Buddha-Dhamma, Vipassanā in practice. We have no doubt whatsoever about definite results accruing to those who would with open mind sincerely undergo a course of training under a competent teacher. I mean results which will be accepted as good, concrete, vivid, personal, here-and-now, results which will keep them in good stead and in a state of well-being and happiness for the rest of their lives.

**MAY ALL BEINGS BE HAPPY,
AND MAY PEACE PREVAIL
IN THIS WORLD.**

EXTRACT from *Inside the Atom* by Isaac Asimov

Chapter 1: *Atomic Contents, What All Things Are Made Of.*

There are so many things in the world that are so completely different from one another that the variety is bewildering. We can't look about us anywhere without realizing that.

For instance, here I sit at a desk, made out of wood. I am using a typewriter made out of steel and other metals. The typewriter ribbon is made of silk and is coated with carbon. I am typing on a sheet of paper made of wood pulp and am wearing clothes made of cotton, wool, leather, and other materials. I myself am made up of skin, muscle, blood, bone, and other living tissues, each different from the others.

Through a glass window I can see sidewalks made of crushed stone and roads made of a tarry substance called asphalt. It is raining, so there are puddles of water in sight. The wind is blowing, so I know there is an invisible something called air all about us.

Yet all these substances, different as they seem, have one thing in common. All of them—wood, silk, glass, flesh and blood, all of them—are made up of small, separate particles. The earth itself, the moon, the sun, and all the stars are made up of small particles.

To be sure, you can't see these particles. In fact, if you look at a piece of paper or at some wooden or metallic object, it doesn't seem to be made of particles at all. It seems to be one solid piece.

But suppose you were to look at an empty beach from an airplane. The beach would seem like a solid, yellowish stretch of ground. It would seem to be all one piece. It is only when you get down on your hands and knees on that beach and look closely that you see it is really made up of small, separate grains of sand.

Now the particles that make up everything about us are much smaller than grains of sand. They are so small, in fact, that the strongest microscope ever invented could not make them large

enough to see, or anywhere near large enough. The particles are so small that there are more of them in a grain of sand than there are grains of sand on a large beach. There are more of them in a glass of water than there are glasses of water in all the oceans of the world. A hundred million of them laid down side by side would make a line only half an inch long.

These tiny particles that all things are made of are called atoms.

Extract from page 159:

... Chemists now have a new tool with which to explore the chemistry of living tissue. (This branch of science is called biochemistry.) In any living creature, such as a human being, thousands upon thousands of chemical reactions are all going on at the same time in all parts of the body. Naturally, chemists would like to know what these reactions are. If they knew and understood them all, a great many problems of health and disease, of life, ageing, and death, might be on the way to solution. But how are all those reactions to be unraveled? Not only are they all going on at the same time, but there are different reactions in different parts of the body and different reactions at different times in the same part of the body.

It is like trying to watch a million television sets all at once, each one tuned to a different channel, and all the programs changing constantly.