

THE THREE KINDS OF INTRINSIC NATURE (SABHĀVA-DHAMMA) AND ITS COMMON CHARACTERISTIC MARKS (SĀMAÑÑA-LAKKHAṆA) IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

The analyzing the nature of any ultimate reality, there may be some concerned word *sabhāva* or *sabhāva-dhamma* (the intrinsic nature, own character, or individual essence) included in this account of consideration and acquiring to explain specific concepts in terms of the way of practice, particularly the course of developing *vipassanā-bhāvana* (insight meditation). However, rarely found in the *Piṭakas*, it is extensively used for explanatory purposes in the *Visuddhimagga*, leading commentaries, and sub-commentaries.

Keywords: (i) *sabhāva-dhamma* (the intrinsic nature, own nature, or individual essence) (ii) *Anicca-lakkhaṇa*: the characteristic mark of impermanence, (iii) *Dukkha-lakkhaṇa*: the characteristic mark of suffering, (iv) *Anatta-lakkhaṇa*: the characteristic mark of not-self.

INTRODUCTION

The individual essence that forms Dhamma is manifested in the three instances of its existence: arising, presence (= aging), and dissolution. It is from nowhere and goes nowhere, and is borne by the mind. Thus, it can be said that all kinds of formed dhammas with individual essence (*sabhāva-dhamma*) are related to the five aggregates corresponding to the materiality and mentality (*rūpa* and *nāma*), which should be understood for insight development to achieve the attainment of correct understanding, or insight knowledge leading to a state of the "dhammas without individual essence (*asabhāvadhamma*) include the Attainment of Cessation and some concepts." As given clearly in the *Visuddhimagga*: "A dhamma which is an individual essence with a new forming and an end in time, produced by conditions, and marked by the three characteristics, is positively produced. But besides this, what is produced [but not positively-produced] is Dhamma by the taking of a name or by attaining [the attainment of cessation]."

The Difference between *Nāma* and *Rūpa*

With respect to the theoretical aspects of Buddhist meditation, there are a number of teaching principles which should be given a detailed exposition and explanation thoroughly so as to know and understand the concepts of the main axioms based on the practical aspects of Buddhist teachings.

The principles of natural law or the laws of nature have been broadly explained by Buddhist commentators and Buddhist scholars through various modes of relationships, there are five distinct aspects of the natural law (*Niyāma*) regarded as all conditioned things subject to the

law of three existences of intrinsic nature (Sabhāva), and the law of three characteristics (Lakkhana). These are going to be explored and explained respectively. Accordingly these conditioned things in reality are the main buddhist principles quite often found in the Buddhist Texts and other commentaries, and basically they focus upon the law of cause and its effect.

Concept of Sabhāvadhamma

Due to the three periods of time as explained according to the Abhidhamma and based on how to make a mental note or observe the mind's objects in insight meditation practice, sabhāvadhamma plays a vital part in mental states to be attentively noticed and followed by yogis, meditation practitioners. To illustrate the essential aspects of mental observation based on the groups of matter and mind (rūpa and nāma), showing that the lifetime or duration of a citta (consciousness) is measured by three short instants of the distinct features in the arising and passing away of a citta. These are as follows:

- (i) Uppāda: the genetic instant,
- (ii) Thīti: the existing instant,
- (iii) Baṅga: the dissolving instant.

These instances are said to be equal to one moment of the consciousness or conscious moment (cittakkhaṇa), which covers over the three short instants – arising, existing, and dissolving – of the citta called cittakkhaṇa. Regarding rūpa, "the lifetime of rūpa or corporeality is 17 times longer than that of citta." Hence, we can see that "the difference between citta and rūpa is that citta arises one after another whereas rūpa arises by thousands of units at a small instance and goes on appearing incessantly at every small sample. Therefore, rūpa may be piled up into large masses visible to the naked eye, whereas the fleeting stream of consciousness is invisible to the naked eye.

Concept of the three characteristics

The three natural characteristics inherent in all conditioned things (saṅkhata Dhamma) are called the familiar or universal characteristics (sāmañña-lakkhaṇa), which arise in the five aggregates of existence, i.e., the mental and bodily phenomena (nāma and rūpa). Hence, they can be considered the main objects of mental training or mental culture, the 'Insight Meditation (vipassanā bhāvanā).' In other words, these three can be called 'ti-lakkhaṇa' as consisting of three common characteristic marks of all existing things as follows:

- (i) Anicca-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of impermanence,
- (ii) Dukkha-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of suffering,
- (iii) Anatta-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of not-self.

Anicca-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of impermanence: the Pāli word Anicca(a+nicca) means the absence of permanence or continuity. The concept of impermanence, transience, inconstancy, or uncertainty exists in other philosophies also, but in Buddhism, it occupies a central and critical position. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus referred to impermanence and the transient nature of things stating "one could not step into the same river twice" since the water in a flowing river does not remain the same in any consecutive moments. Among the three characteristics of existence, impermanence forms the basis for the other two characteristics of suffering and no-self.

Although things appear to be stable on a superficial level, a closer and more profound examination will reveal their very ephemeral nature since no conditioned phenomenon in this universe is unchanging or everlasting. Everything in existence, from microcosmic to macrocosmic, is temporary and changing. They are subjected to constant and continuous rise and fall at such an enormous speed that it creates the illusion of permanency in ignorant minds. This process can be compared to cartoon frames projected onto a cinema screen. Each cartoon frame, or still, is followed by another frame with slightly different content in such rapid succession that it creates a sense of viewing it will see it as a continuous picture and not as separate structures. Nothing in this universe stays the same in any two consecutive moments—everything is in a constant state of flux, arising and ceasing from moment to moment. The Buddha's very last statement to the assembled monks before passing away at the age of 80 years demonstrates the great significance that the Buddha had attached to the factor of the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena: "Vayadhammā Sankkhārā- All formations are subjected to dissolution, Appamādena sampādetha- Attain perfection through diligence."

Dukkha-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of suffering: Suffering is the second universal characteristic of all existing conditioned phenomena and follows directly from the characteristic of impermanence. Suffering is not the precise meaning of the Pāli word Dukkha as it is difficult to translate it into English. Consequently, it has also been described as dissatisfaction, unsatisfactoriness, or stress. The word Dukkha includes not only physical and mental suffering that is generally considered suffering but also feelings of happiness and pleasure since they will eventually lead to suffering due to their transient nature. Every object that one experiences through the six organs of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind depends on antecedent and is subject to change and hence can not bring any lasting happiness.

Suffering is the first of the Four Noble Truths, and, in the first Dhamma to the five former ascetic companions, the Buddha described the following types of suffering: 1. Birth is suffering, 2. Aging is suffering, 3. Sickness is suffering, 4. Death is suffering, 5. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are suffering, 6. Association with what is unpleasant is suffering, 7. Separation from what is pleasant is suffering, 8. Not getting what one wants is suffering, 9. In brief, clinging to the five aggregates is suffering. What is referred to as a person, being or individual consists of the psycho-physical complex (Nāma-rūpa) made up of the five aggregates: 1. Materiality (Rūpa), 2. Feeling (Vedanā), 3. Perception (Sannā), 4. Mental formation (Sankhārā), and 5. Consciousness (Vinnāna). Materiality, or the physical body (rūpa), consists of the four base elements of earth (pathavī), water (āpo), heat (tejo), and air (vāyo). These four base elements represent the qualities of solidity, cohesion, heat, and motion, all of which are transient and subject to change. The mental component consists of feeling (Vedanā), perception (Sannā), mental formation (Sankhārā), and consciousness (Vinnāna) which are also subject to constant change, arising and ceasing from moment to moment, thus causing suffering if their transitory nature is not recognized. In the Dukkha Sutta of the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha has described three types of suffering (Dukkha): 1. Dukkha-dukkha—Actual physical, mental or emotional pain that everybody experiences, 2. Viparināma dukkha—Suffering due to the transient nature of physical and mental pleasures experienced, and 3. Sankhāra dukkha—Suffering due to the transient nature of all conditioned phenomena.

(3) Anatta-lakkhaṇa: the characteristic mark of not-self: the third universal characteristic of not-self (anatta), also known sometimes as egolessness, can be described as one of the hallmarks of the Buddha's teaching. It means no permanent, independent, an absolute, or fixed entity called self, soul, personality, or ego exists in any of the conditioned or unconditioned phenomena, including the Nibbāna. This is perhaps the most difficult to understand unless one profoundly understands the Buddha's teaching. During the time of the Buddha, there were two prevalent doctrines concerning life after life. The first was the theory of eternalism (Sassatavāda), whose adherents believed that there was a permanent and enduring entity—a metaphysical self called the *atta* or soul—which after the death of the physical body, will transmigrate from existence to existence until it reunites with the creator. The second was the theory of annihilationism, nihilism, or materialism (Ucchedavāda) which purported that the body and the soul will both be annihilated at the time of death with nothing remaining. The Buddha rejected these doctrines as both asserted the existence of an enduring and fixed entity or soul on an eternal or temporary basis.

Instead, the Buddha taught the dependent origination (Paticca-samuppāda) as the Middle Way, which explains that, while there is no permanent entity called the soul or self that transfers from one life to the next, there is a conditioned becoming from one existence to the next based on the natural law of cause and effect. This process has been compared to one candle being lit by another. While the flame of the first candle is the cause of the flame in the second candle, no substance or entity transfers from one candle to the other. The flame in the second is not the same as the flame in the first, yet it is not a complete different one either.

The characteristic of impermanence is the mode of rising and fall and change, reaching non-existence after having come to be. The element of suffering is the mode of being continuously oppressed by rising and falling. Finally, the characteristic of non-self is the mode of being insusceptible to exercise mastery; that is, one cannot exercise complete control over the phenomena of mind and matter.

According to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, it was clearly stated that whether a Tathāgata appears or not appears in the world, it remains a firm condition, an immutable fact, a fixed law or causal law of nature, namely: "This fact that all phenomena are impermanent, all phenomena are subject to misery, and all phenomena are not the self."

On the five aggregates (pañcakkhandha) of existence in terms of the three common characteristics (ti-lakkhaṇa) in the three times, the Buddha said as follows:

Bhikkhus, form is the impermanence, both the past and the future, nor the present. Thus, bhikkhus, the instructed disciple, is indifferent towards past forms; he does not seek delight in the future; he is practicing hatred towards the present state for its fading and cessation. "Feeling..., Perception..., Volitional formations..., Consciousness..."

So, Bhikkhus, form is suffering, both of the past and the future, not to speak of the present. Thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple, is not different from the form of the past; he does not seek delight in the future, and he practices hatred towards the present state for its fading and cessation. "Feeling..., Perception..., Volitional formations..., Consciousness..."

Bhikkhus, form is non-self, both of the past and the future, not to speak of the present. Thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple, is not different from the form of the past; he does not

seek delight in the future, and he practices hatred towards the present condition for its fading and cessation. "Feeling..., Perception..., Volitional formations..., Consciousness..."

In a well-illustrated conversation between Soṇa, a householder's son, the Buddha gave again an obvious expounding on five aggregates concerning the three universal characteristic marks, which should be clearly understood and noticed:

What do you think, Soṇa, is formed [feeling, Perception, volitional formations, consciousness] the permanence or impermanence?"– "the impermanence, venerable sire."– "Is impermanent suffering or happiness?"– "Suffering, venerable sir."– "Is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this myself?'"– "No, venerable sir."

Therefore, Soṇa, any form [feeling, Perception, volitional formations, consciousness] whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all forms should be seen as really is with correct wisdom.

On the other hand, according to the Dhammapada:

Sabbe saṅkharā aniccā: all formations are subject to impermanence,

Sabbe saṅkhāra dukkhā: all formations are subject to suffering,

(iii) Sabbe dhammā anattā: all things are without self or no soul.

CONCLUSION

The three universal characteristics of existence are the cornerstone of Buddhist doctrine; hence, anyone committed to practicing Buddhist teaching to attain liberation from suffering must contemplate these three concepts as one experiences them subjectively and objectively. These three main aspects of Buddha-dhamma have played a vital role in vipassanā practice. When one of these characteristics is realized clearly in terms of pure insight, one achieves detachment from Dukkha, the immense suffering of life. Its authentic practice leads one to the total liberation, Nibbāna. A proper experiential understanding or insight into the fundamental nature of these universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self through insight meditation (Vipassanā-bhāvanā) is essential for one to eliminate one's suffering, which is the third Noble Truth, and attain Nibbāna or the liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Understanding the three universal characteristics will also help improve the quality of one's personal, family, social and working life by developing a more realistic attitude towards one's possessions, relationships, and events in life.

The Trio of Lakkhaṇas:

Note at the very moment,

Only then the Sabhāva Lakkhaṇas are sure to be known. Only when Sabhāva Lakkhaṇas are seen the Saṅkhata Lakkhaṇas will become evident. Only when Saṅkhata Lakkhaṇas become evident the Sāmañña Lakkhaṇas will be seen. Only Sāmañña Lakkhaṇas are seen, Vipassanā ñāṇa arises. Only Vipassanā Ñāṇa matures, the Magga Ñāṇa realizes. Only Magga Ñāṇa realizes, that Nibbāna is seen. Only when Nibbāna is seen, one is delivered from Apāya.

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