

Three Marks of Existence

Though the first sermon emphasizes *dukkha*, this is in fact only one of three related characteristics or 'marks' of the five *khandhas*. These fundamental 'three marks' (*ti-lakkhana*, Skt *tri-laksana*) of all conditioned phenomena are that they are impermanent (*anicca*, Skt *anitya*), painful (*dukkha*, Skt *duhkha*), and non-Self (*anatta*, Skt *anatman*). (S.III.44-5; S.IV.46-7; S.IV.133-5)

Buddhism emphasizes that change and impermanence are fundamental features of *everything*, bar *Nirvana*. Mountains wear down, material goods wear out or are lost or stolen, and all beings, even gods, age and die (*M.II.65-82*; *BW.207-13*; *EB.3.2.1*).

The gross form of the body changes relatively slowly, but the matter which composes it is replaced as one eats, excretes and sheds skin cells. As regards the mind, character patterns may be relatively persistent, but feelings, moods, ideas, etc. can be observed to constantly change.

The ephemeral and deceptive nature of the *khandhas* is expressed in a passage which says that they are 'devoid, hollow' as: 'Material form is like a lump of foam, and feeling is like a bubble; perception is like a mirage, and the constructing activities are like a banana tree [lacking a core, like an onion]; consciousness is like a [magician's] illusion' (S.III.142; *BW.343-5*; *SB.220-2*).

It is because of the fact that things are impermanent that they are also *dukkha*. Because they are impermanent and in some sense painful, moreover, they are to be seen as *anatta*, non-Self. When something is said to be *anatta*, the kind of 'self' it is seen not to be is clearly one that would be permanent and free from all pain, however subtle – so as to be happy, self-secure, independent. While Pali and Sanskrit do not have capital letters, in English it is useful to signal such a concept with a capital: Self . . .

The important teaching on this was introduced by the Buddha in his second sermon, the *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta* (*Vin.I.13-14*; S.III.66-8; *BS.I.118*; *BW.341-2*). Here he explained, with respect to each of the five *khandhas*, that if it were truly Self, it would not 'tend to sickness', and it would be totally controllable at will, which it is not. Moreover, as each *khandha* is impermanent, *dukkha* and of a nature to change, it is inappropriate to consider it as 'This is mine, this am I, this is my Self'.

Source: Excerpted, with minor edits, from Harvey, P. (2013) *An introduction to Buddhism: teachings, history and practices*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Pages 57-58.)