

Lecture 3: The True Nature of Existence (part 1)

(Notes on Bhikkhu Bodhi's introductory lectures, "The Buddha's Teaching as It Is", <http://www.buddhanet.net/audio-lectures.htm>).

The Buddhist path is essentially a path of understanding, specifically the nature of our own existence and experience, the five aggregates.

Two steps: (1) looking into the elements that make-up of our being, how they work and (2) examining their universal characteristics.

The five aggregates (Pali: *khandha* / Sanskrit: *skandha*)

Together these make up the instrument of our experience of the world. Each *khandha* is a category of phenomena, and together they capture the whole experiential processes, or the whole psycho-physical organism – there is nothing left outside of them.

1. Form (*rūpa*). This includes all material phenomena including our bodies. Matter is traditionally decomposed into four elements: earth (property of extension in space), water (property of cohesion), fire (property of heat), air (principle of isolation/motion). Material things are understood to be made up of all four elements in different proportion. There is also 'derivative' matter, which includes the sense faculties.
2. Feeling (*vedanā*). The affective quality of experience: pleasant, painful or neutral.
3. Perception (*saññā*). The factor that grasps the object's distinguishing features.
4. Mental formations (*saṅkhāra*). Includes a wide range of mental phenomena, the most important being volition. Also includes all sorts of desires, emotions, and the roots of both wholesome and unwholesome actions.
5. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The 'light of awareness' that makes experience possible. There is consciousness associated with all five senses plus mind (mind consciousness experiences mental objects such as ideas).

Three characteristics of existence

The aggregates are to be seen in terms of the 'three characteristics'.

1. Impermanence (*annica / anitya*)
2. Suffering (*dukkha*)
3. Selflessness (*anattā / anātman*)

These characteristics are difficult to see in their full depth because of ignorance (*avijjā / avidyā*), which has covered the minds of all sentient beings through beginningless time. It conceals the true nature of phenomena and distorts the entire process of consciousness.

The Buddha mentions four such distortions:

1. Regarding the unattractive as attractive.
2. Regarding the unsatisfactory as pleasurable.
3. Regarding what is impermanent as permanent.
4. Regarding what is not-self to be self.

These give rise to all the other defilements – craving, hatred, wrong views and all the rest.

The three characteristics are understood first intellectually, but then transformed into direct realisation.

Impermanence

The basis for the other characteristics according to Bhikkhu Bodhi. Two levels:

1. Gross impermanence: Everything that comes together eventually disintegrates: world systems, civilisations, our bodies, possessions, relationships, and so on.
2. Subtle impermanence: Nothing is static even for a moment. The appearance of static objects is illusory – there are only ‘bundles’ of dynamic events. Even between arising and perishing, things are in flux. Our whole being – mental and physical - consists of dynamic streams of events, shifting moment-by-moment.