

2. Scriptural Definitions

The teachings on the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) in chapter 1, and on the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) in chapter 2,* emphasize the internal life of human beings. The teaching of the Three Characteristics expands the scope of investigation to cover both the individual person and external objects. It is a study of human beings and the entire world.

*Of *Buddhadhamma*.

The meaning of each of the three characteristics has already been described in a rudimentary way. At this point they will be analyzed in more detail, based on Scriptural teachings.

1. Impermanence

The Paṭisambhidāmagga offers a simple definition for *aniccatā*: something is considered impermanent ‘in the sense that it ceases’ (*khaya-aṭṭhena*).¹ All conditioned things exist momentarily, at a specific time and place, then cease immediately. An object in the past does not exist in the present; an object present now does not exist in the future. Post-canonical texts expand on this definition and offer a range of explanations. For example, at first glance, one sees that a person’s life begins at birth and ends at death. Upon closer inspection, one notices an accelerating rate of birth and decline, of an age period, a year, a season, a month, a day, a few minutes, to the rise and fall of each moment, which is difficult for most people to discern. Modern scientific discoveries, not least in physics, have helped to reveal and demonstrate impermanence. Many scientific theories, say of the birth and death of stars or of atomic disintegration, illustrate the law of impermanence.

The commentaries define *aniccatā* in many different ways. For example, something is considered impermanent ‘because it is uncertain and unstable’ (*aniccantikatāya*), and ‘because it has a beginning and an end’ (*ādi-antavantatāya*).² A common and frequently used definition is: something is considered impermanent in the sense that ‘it has existed and then ceases to exist’ (*hutvā abhāvaṭṭhena*).³ [70/9] Additional text is sometimes added to this phrase, for example: something is considered impermanent ‘because it arises, passes away, and becomes otherwise’ (*uppādavayaññathattabhāvā hutvā abhāvato vā*).⁴

¹ Ps. I. 37; referred to at Vism. 610.

² Vism. 611.

³ Alternatively, ‘it has appeared and then disappears.’ E.g.: Vism. 628.

⁴ Alternatively, ‘it has existed and then ceases to exist’ (Vism. 640).

A detailed list of definitions is as follows. There are four reasons why something is considered impermanent:⁵

1. *Uppādavayappavattito*: because it arises and disintegrates; it rises and ceases; it exists and then ceases to exist.
2. *Vipariṇāmato*: because it is subject to change; it is continually altered and transformed.
3. *Tāvakālikato*: because it is temporary; it exists momentarily.
4. *Niccapaṭikkhepato*: because it is inconsistent with permanence; the changeability of a conditioned object is inherently in conflict with permanence; when one accurately observes the object no permanence is found; even if someone tries to regard it as permanent, it refuses to accommodate that person's wishes.

⁵ Vism. 618; MA. II. 113; VbhA. 48; The VismṬ. Maggāmagga-ñāṇadassana-visuddhiniddesaṅgaṇṇā, Rūpasattakasammasana-kathāvaṅgaṇṇā states that these four definitions refer only to material phenomena, but the Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā shows that they can be used in regard to all conditioned phenomena. See also VinṬ. Mahākhandhakaṃ, Anattalakkhaṇasuttavaṅgaṇṇā.

2. Dukkha

The Paṭisambhidāmagga offers a concise definition for *dukkhatā*: something is considered *dukkha* ‘in the sense that it is subject to danger’ (*bhaya-aṭṭhena*).⁶ *Bhaya* can also mean ‘dangerous’ or ‘frightening.’ All conditioned phenomena invariably disintegrate and dissolve; they therefore offer no true safety, relief or assurance. Any such phenomenon is threatened by destruction and disintegration. The object thus creates danger—both fear and a peril—for anyone who attaches to it. The commentaries elaborate the meaning of *dukkhatā*, including these two frequently used definitions: First, something is considered *dukkha* ‘in the sense that it is under perpetual pressure through arising and disintegration’ (*uppādavaya-paṭipīlanatṭhena*⁷ or *uppādavaya-paṭipīlanatāya*⁸). There is pressure on everything that interacts with that object, and the object itself is under stress from its component elements.⁹ Second, ‘because it is a foundation for suffering’ (*dukkha-vatthutāya*¹⁰ or *dukkha-vatthuto*¹¹). [70/10] An object beset by *dukkha* is a basis for suffering, for example by causing pain. Simply speaking, *dukkha* means to cause pain.

The most complete compilation of definitions for *dukkha* in the commentaries is as follows. Something is considered to be *dukkha* for these four reasons:¹²

1. *Abhiṅha-sampatiṭṭhanato*: because it is continually oppressed; it is subject to constant pressure due to arising and dissolution; there is persistent friction amongst component parts or amongst associated objects.
2. *Dukkhamato*: because it is ‘hard to endure’; it is not durable; it is unable to be sustained in an original state; it is obliged to change, become otherwise, and lose identity, as a consequence of arising and ceasing.¹³

⁶ Ps1. 37; referred to at Vism. 610.

⁷ Vism. 628.

⁸ Vism. 611.

⁹ VismṬ. Maggāmaggañānadassanavisuddhiniddesavaṇṇanā, Cattārīsākāra-anupassana-kathāvaṇṇanā.

¹⁰ Vism. 611.

¹¹ E.g.: Vism. 502.

¹² Vism. 618; MA. II. 113 (the first definition is *santāpa*); VbhA. 48.

¹³ The literal translation ‘hard to endure’ appears to refer to feelings (*dukkha-vedanā*), for example pain or suffering, which can be defined as ‘something that is hard for humans to endure.’ Actually, this Pali idiom meaning non-durable or unsustainable is a characteristic of all formations, as explained above.

3. *Dukkha-vatthuto*: because it is a foundation for suffering; it produces various kinds of affliction, e.g., pain, discomfort and distress.¹⁴
4. *Sukha-paṭikkhepato*: because it opposes and obstructs happiness (*sukha*). Happiness exists only as a feeling. The basic condition is that of *dukkha*—pressure, tension and friction—which is an attribute of all formations. This pressure causes feelings of oppression and stress, which we call ‘pain’ (*dukkha-vedanā*). The reduction of pressure, or the freedom from pain, we call ‘happiness.’ The greater the discomfort (duress, deprivation, yearning, hunger, etc.), the greater the happiness when one is released from the discomfort. For example, a person who moves from the hot sun into the shade feels refreshed and cool. Likewise, a person experiencing great pleasure (*sukha-vedanā*) will experience a similarly strong discomfort (*dukkha-vedanā*) when the pleasurable circumstances are disturbed. [70/11] Even small amounts of discomfort, which are normally not felt as such, may be a torment. A person leaving a comfortably warm room into the cold, for example, may find the temperature extreme, even though those around him are not bothered.

Happiness, or a happy feeling (*sukha-vedanā*), is not an end of *dukkha*. We call an increase or reduction of pressure ‘happiness’ because it creates a feeling of pleasure. But an alteration of this pleasurable tension results in a condition that requires endurance or is intolerable, a condition we call ‘suffering,’ i.e., we feel pain (*dukkha-vedanā*). In truth only *dukkha*—pressure and stress—exists, which either increases or decreases. A similar subject is that of heat and cold. Cold does not really exist; there exists only a feeling of cold. The basic condition is heat, which increases, decreases, or is absent. When one says that one is pleasantly cool, one is referring only to a feeling; actually, one is experiencing a degree of heat. If more or less warm than that degree, then one is not at ease. In this sense, happiness, or to speak in full ‘a feeling of happiness,’ is one level of *dukkha*. Happiness is dependent on pressure and tension, and necessarily changes and vanishes. In other words, *dukkha*, which is the basic condition, prevents happiness from being sustainable.

As quoted above, the Paṭisambhidāmagga defines *dukkha* in the context of the Three Characteristics as ‘subject to danger.’ In the section explaining the Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*), it defines *dukkha*—the first of the Noble Truths—in four ways. Something is identified as *dukkha* in the sense that it is oppressed (*pīḷanaṭṭha*),

¹⁴ The commentaries and sub-commentaries describe an object marked by *dukkha* as a basis for the 3 *dukkhatā* (see below) and for *saṃsāra-dukkha*; e.g., VinṬ. Mahākhandhakam, Anattalakkhaṇa-suttavaṇṇanā; VismṬ. Maggāmagga-ñānadassana-visuddhiniddesavaṇṇanā (Cattārisākāra-anupassanakathāvaṇṇanā & Rūpasattaka-sammasanakathāvaṇṇanā).

constructed (*saṅkhataṭṭha*), burns (*santāpaṭṭha*), and changes (*vipariṇāmaṭṭha*).¹⁵ These four definitions of *dukkha* can also be used in the context of the Three Characteristics. Definitions one and four (*pīlanaṭṭha* and *vipariṇāmaṭṭha*) have already been described;* here are the other two:

*Definition 1 of *dukkha* and definition 2 of impermanence above, respectively.

5. *Saṅkhataṭṭha*: ‘in the sense that it is fashioned (*saṅkhata*)’; it is constructed by conditioning factors; it depends on such factors; it is inconstant.
6. *Santāpaṭṭha*: ‘in the sense that it burns’; it burns up, ending in decay and destruction; moreover, it burns someone with defilements, who grasps and clings to the object, causing torment and agitation.¹⁶

A. The Three Characteristics and the Four Noble Truths

Dukkha appears in three key teachings:

1. On feeling/sensation (two versions):

a) Three *vedanā*: Painful (*dukkha*), pleasant (*sukha*), and neutral (*adukkham’asukha* or *upekkhā*).

b) Five *vedanā*: *Dukkha*, *sukha*, *domanassa*, *somanassa* and *upekkhā*.*

*This second version distinguishes physical and mental feeling, both painful and pleasant.

Its complete name in this context is *dukkha-vedanā*. [70/12]

2. In the Three Characteristics: *Anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. In this context its complete name is *dukkha-lakkhaṇa*.

3. In the Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha*, *samudaya* (origin), *nirodha* (cessation) and *magga* (path). Its complete name is *dukkha-ariyasacca*.

¹⁵ Ps. I. 19; Ps. II. 104; referred to in *Vism.* 494; *VbhA.* 83; *MA.* II. 113 classifies *santāpa* as the first of the four meanings above.

¹⁶ This is the author’s definition; for the commentarial and sub-commentarial explanation see: *PsA.* I. 100, 102; *VismṬ.* *Indriyasaccaniddesaṅṅaṇṇā*, *Saccavittihāra-kathāvaṅṅaṇṇā*.

The definitions of *dukkha* in these three groups overlap; they are different aspects of one truth. The *dukkha* with the broadest meaning and is all-inclusive is *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics, also referred to as *dukkha-lakkhaṇa* or *dukkhatā*. This is the condition of instability, the inability to be sustained in an original shape, due to the pressure, stress and friction from rising and disintegration, as explained above. It is a characteristic of all conditioned phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), encompassing the same range as impermanence: whatever is impermanent is also *dukkha* (*yad’aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*).

The *dukkha* with the most restricted meaning, and is simply a consequence of the *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics, is *dukkha* as feeling, called *dukkha-vedanā*: a feeling of pain. It is a feeling occurring when pressure reaches a certain level in relation to a person’s body and mind.¹⁷ This pain is included in the *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics, as is all other feeling, both pleasant and neutral. All kinds of feeling—painful, pleasurable, and neutral—are *dukkha* as determined by the Three Characteristics.

Dukkha in the Four Noble Truths (*dukkha-ariyasacca*) is one aspect of *dukkha* in the Three Characteristics, but it is limited to things that cause problems for human beings. All formations are under pressure, which is the *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics. These formations (not all of them and not always) oppress human beings; this oppression is the *dukkha* of the Four Noble Truths. (These phenomena are oppressive, however, because they themselves are subject to stress.) *Dukkha-ariyasacca* refers specifically to matters concerning the five aggregates of clinging (*upādāna-khandha*).* Technically, the *dukkha* of the Four Noble Truths refers specifically to the suffering arising on account of the sense bases (*indriya-baddha*). It excludes pressure independent of the sense bases (*anindriya-baddha*), which is classified as *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics but not of the Noble Truths. (Note that *dukkha-ariyasacca* is *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics. *Samudaya* (the cause of suffering)** and *magga* (the eightfold path) are as well, but they are not *dukkha-ariyasacca*.)

**Upādāna-khandha*, the five groups of clinging, are identical to the five aggregates (*khandha*) mentioned earlier, but this term highlights the aggregates as the objects identified with and clung to by human beings, and which consequently give rise to suffering.

**I.e., *taṇhā*—craving.

The scope of *dukkha* in the Four Noble Truths is determined as follows:

1. *Dukkha* as the first noble truth is associated with human life and human problems. It arises as a result of the sense faculties (*indriyabaddha*); it does

¹⁷ See item four above: *sukhapaṭikkhepato*.

not include *dukkha* independent of the sense faculties (*anindriyabaddha*). It is not the *dukkha* mentioned in the passages ‘all conditioned phenomena are *dukkha*’ (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), and ‘whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*’ (*yad’aniccam taṃ dukkham*), which refer to the all-inclusive *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics. [70/13]

2. It originates from a person’s intentional action and defilement (*kamma-kilesa*). It is a result of *dukkha-samudaya*;^{*} it is a result of craving—*taṇhā*. It refers specifically to matters concerning the five aggregates of clinging (*upādāna-khandha*).

^{*}‘The origin of suffering’—the second noble truth.

3. It is the focus of the duty (*kiicca*) relating to the first noble truth: *pariññā-kicca*. *Pariññā* is comprehension or knowledge of things as they truly are. To acquire knowledge of and to fully understand personal problems is our responsibility vis-à-vis *dukkha* of the Four Noble Truths. *Dukkha* here is confined to this subject of understanding human suffering.
4. It emphasizes the meaning of the origin of suffering (*dukkha-vatthutāya*) rather than the meaning of the pressure, tension and friction of arising and falling (*udayabbaya-paṭipīlanatṭhena*), which is the essential meaning of *dukkha* in the Three Characteristics.¹⁸

B. Types of *Dukkha*

The *dukkha* most often analyzed in the scriptures is *dukkha* of the Four Noble Truths, because it concerns human beings directly. We should reflect upon this suffering, to be released from it through Dhamma practice. As for the all-inclusive *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics, it is illustrated just enough for accurate understanding of reality. The chief, most frequently mentioned groups of *dukkha* in the scriptures are listed below:

- 1) The 3 *Dukkhatā*:¹⁹ This is a key group, which includes the meaning of *dukkha* in the Three Characteristics:

¹⁸ The important sources for research in this matter are: Yam. I. 174-5; PañcA 167; Vism. 510-13; VismṬ. Indriyasaccaniddesavaṇṇanā, Magganiddesa-kathāvaṇṇanā.

¹⁹ Also known as the ‘3 *Dukkha*’; D. III. 216; S. IV. 259; S. V. 56; Vism. 499; VbhA. 93; VinṬ. Dhammacakkappavattana-suttavaṇṇanā; VismṬ. Indriyasaccaniddesavaṇṇanā, Dukkhaniddesakathāvaṇṇanā.

1. *Dukkha-dukkhatā*:²⁰ Physical and mental pain, as generally understood, for example aches, discomfort and fatigue; in other words, ‘painful feeling’ (*dukkha-vedanā*).
2. *Vipariṇāma-dukkhatā*: *Dukkha* resulting from or inherent in change. This refers to pleasurable feeling (*sukha-vedanā*), which in truth is a degree of *dukkha*. Pleasure is equal to concealed pain, or always has pain furtively in pursuit. Once a feeling of pleasure changes, it transforms into a feeling of pain. In other words, the fundamental inconstancy of pleasure produces pain. (Another explanation is that pleasure is pain, of a particular degree.)
3. *Saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*:²¹ *Dukkha* that is inherent in conditioned phenomena, inherent in everything that originates from causes. In other words, the five aggregates are *dukkha*; they are of the nature to be pressured and coerced by the rising and decay of opposing factors, preventing them from remaining in a stable, original state. This third *dukkha* comprises the *dukkha* of the Three Characteristics. [70/14]

2) The 12 *Dukkha*: This group elucidates the meaning of *dukkha* in the Four Noble Truths:²²

1. Birth (*jāti*): Birth is suffering because it is a basis for various kinds of affliction:
 - A. *Gabbhokkantimūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering of confinement in the womb: a foetus dwells in a dark, stifling place, full of repugnant substances.
 - B. *Gabbhapariharaṇamūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering of carrying the womb. Whenever the mother moves, or eats hot, cold, or spicy food, it affects the child in the womb.
 - C. *Gabbhavipattimūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering from misfortunes of the womb, for example ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth or Caesarean operation.
 - D. *Vijāyanamūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering of childbirth, including the pounding, twisting, squeezing and severe pain while exiting the narrow canal.

²⁰ Also known as *dukkha-dukkha*.

²¹ Also known as *saṅkhāra-dukkha*.

²² E.g.: D. II. 305; S. V. 421; Vism. 498-501; VismT. Indriyasaccaniddesavaṇṇanā (from Saccavittthārahakathāvaṇṇanā to Pañcupādānakkhandaniddesavaṇṇanā). The divisions of birth’s afflictions, #1 a-g, are from the commentaries.

- E. *Bahinikkhamanāmūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering of emergence into the outside world. The newly born infant, whose skin is sensitive as a wound, feels acute pain when handled and washed.
- F. *Attupakkamāmūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering that results from self-inflicted actions, for example suicide, extreme asceticism, refusing to eat due to resentment, or other self-injurious acts.
- G. *Parupakkamāmūlaka-dukkha*: The suffering caused by others' deeds, for example being assaulted, murdered or imprisoned.
2. Ageing (*jarā*): Ageing weakens the organs. The faculties, for example the eyes and ears, function defectively, vitality wanes, and agility is lost. The skin wrinkles; it is no longer fair and lustrous. Memory becomes incoherent and faulty. A person's control, both internal and external, weakens, causing great physical and mental distress.
 3. Death (*maraṇa*): If one has committed bad deeds during the course of one's life, they appear as mental images (*nimitta*) at the time of death. One must be separated from cherished people and things. The constituent parts of the body cease to perform their duties, there may be intense physical pain, and one is impotent to remedy the situation.
 4. Grief (*soka*), for example from the loss of a relative.
 5. Lamentation (*parideva*), for example keening at the loss of a relative.
 6. Physical pain (*dukkha*), for example wounds, sprains and sickness.²³
 7. Distress and anguish (*domanassa*), which cause, for example, crying, beating one's breast, and committing suicide. [70/15]
 8. Frustration and despair (*upāyāsa*), for example the torment of unmitigated grief.
 9. The association with disagreeable people or things (*appiya-sampayoga*), for example the need to engage with a person whom one detests.

²³ Note that this group of *dukkha* does not include illness (*byādhi*), which normally would follow ageing. The commentaries explain that illness is not an inevitable form of suffering: many people have illness, but some may not. Also, illness is included in this item (#6) of physical suffering (*VismṬ. Indriyasaccaniddesaṅṅaṇā, Saccavittāra-kathāvaṅṅaṇā*). In some places of the Canon, however, illness is listed separately in this group of *dukkha*; for such cases see the explanation at *VinṬ. Dhammacakkappavattanasuttavaṅṅaṇā*.

10. The separation from cherished people or objects (*piya-vippayoga*), for example separation from loved ones or the loss of possessions.
11. Not obtaining what one wants; disappointment (*icchitālābha*).
12. The five aggregates, which are the foundation for clinging (*upādāna-khandhā*). All of the aforementioned suffering stems from the five aggregates as objects of clinging. To sum up, one can say that suffering is the five aggregates of clinging.

3) The 2 *Dukkha* (A):²⁴

1. *Paṭicchanna-dukkha*: Concealed, not clearly manifest suffering, for example a latent ear- or tooth-ache, or the mind smouldering with the ‘fires’ of lust and anger.
2. *Appaṭicchanna-dukkha*: Overt suffering, for example being pricked by a thorn, whipped, or cut by a knife.

4) The 2 *Dukkha* (B):²⁵

1. *Pariyāya-dukkha*: Indirect or implicit *dukkha*, that is, every form of *dukkha* mentioned above excluding painful feeling (*dukkha-vedanā*).
2. *Nippariyāya-dukkha*: Explicit *dukkha*, which is also called *dukkha-dukkha*: the feeling of pain.

The Mahāniddeśa and the Cūḷaniddeśa offer many additional categories of *dukkha*.²⁶ For matter of simplicity, they can be sorted into the following groups:

- A. Suffering as birth (*jāti-dukkha*), ageing (*jarā-dukkha*), illness (*byādhi-dukkha*), death (*maraṇa-dukkha*), sorrow, lamentation, pain, anguish and despair (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsa*).
- B. The suffering of hell-beings (*nerayika-dukkha*), of animals (*tiracchānayanika-dukkha*), of ghosts (*pittivisayika-dukkha*), and of humans (*mānusaka-dukkha*).

²⁴ Vism. 499; VbhA. 93; PañcA. 167; VinṬ. Dhammacakkappavattana-suttavaṇṇanā; VismṬ. Indriyasaccaniddeśavaṇṇanā, Dukkhaniddeśa-kathāvaṇṇanā.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Nd. I. 17-18, 45-47; Nd. II. 7, 14, 54.

- C. The suffering experienced from taking birth in a womb (*gabbhokkantimūlaka-dukkha*), from living in a womb (*gabbhethitimūlaka-dukkha*), and from exiting a womb (*gabbhavuṭṭhānamūlaka-dukkha*); the suffering inherent in one who is born (*jātassūpanibandhika-dukkha*); the suffering of one who is born, due to being dependent on others (*jātassaparādheyyaka-dukkha*); self-inflicted suffering (*attūpakkama-dukkha*); and suffering inflicted by others (*parūpakkama-dukkha*).
- D. Pain (*dukkha-dukkha*), the *dukkha* of formations (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*), and *dukkha* inherent in change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*). [70/16]
- E. Various kinds of diseases, for example eye and ear diseases; thirty-five kinds of diseases are mentioned.
- F. Illness resulting from eight causes, including bile, phlegm and wind, or a combination of these causes; illness resulting from changes in the weather and irregular exercise; afflictions due to other people's actions—for example being murdered or imprisoned, and the effects of personal actions.
- G. Suffering owing to cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, urination, wind, sun, flies, mosquitoes and crawling creatures.
- H. Suffering resulting from the death of one's mother, father, brother, sister or child.
- I. Suffering due to loss of relatives, loss of possessions, loss through sickness, loss of moral conduct, and loss of cherished views and opinions.

In the Mahādukkhakkhandha and the Cūḷadukkhakkhandha suttas, the Buddha described many examples of the 'mass of suffering' (*dukkha-khandha*), the plights afflicting humans because of sense desire.²⁷ They are summarized as follows:

- A. The hardship or even loss of life due to one's occupation.
- B. The disappointment experienced when one's labour is in vain.
- C. The suffering in trying to protect acquired wealth.

²⁷ M. I. 83-90, 91-95.

- D. The grief that ensues when such protection is unsuccessful and wealth is lost, for example to thieves or fire.
- E. The disputes and violence between rulers, between householders, between parents and children, between siblings, and between friends, leading to death or serious injury.
- F. The slaughter and severe agony of war.
- G. The injury and death resulting from invasion.
- H. The committal of crimes, for example burglary or adultery, followed by arrest and conviction, and ending in torture and execution.
- I. The performance of physical, verbal and mental misdeeds, leading after death to states of deprivation, perdition and hell.

More references to *dukkha* are located throughout the scriptures and commentaries. In some places the descriptions have no specific name (as in the examples of the Mahā- and the Cūḷadukkhakkhandha suttas mentioned above), while in others *dukkha* is identified by special terms such as *saṃsāra-dukkha*,²⁸ *apāya-dukkha*, *vaṭṭamūlaka-dukkha* or *āhārapariyeṭṭhi-dukkha*,²⁹ to list just a few.³⁰ [70/17] It would be possible to elaborate much more on this subject of suffering, since human

²⁸ E.g., Vism. 531; VbhA. 145, 149; In some places of the Cūḷaniddesa printed in Thai script, e.g., Nd. II. 7, one finds *saṃsāra-dukkha*, but these are misprints; it should read *saṅkhāra-dukkha*.

²⁹ These last three kinds of suffering are mentioned frequently in the eight subjects that prompt a sense of urgency (*saṃvega-vatthu*), e.g., at Vism. 135; DA. III. 795; MA. I. 298; SA. III. 163; etc.); *āhārapariyeṭṭhi-dukkha* (suffering resulting from the search for food) corresponds to item (A) above. The other two terms are included in the descriptions above, if not directly then indirectly.

³⁰ Somdet Phra Mahāsamaṇa Chao Krom Phraya Vajirañāṇavarorasa, in the *Dhammavicāraṇa* (Mahāmakuta University Press, 1958), pp 14-19, lists various kinds of *dukkha*, from different sources, into ten groups. Some of the groups are given new names by the author. They are as follows: 1) *sabhāva-dukkha*: *dukkha* inherent in conditioned phenomena, i.e., birth, ageing and death; 2) *pakiraṇaka-dukkha* or *dukkha-cara*: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (including association with the disagreeable, separation from the loved, and the non-acquisition of the desired); 3) *nibaddha-dukkha*: continual or resident suffering, i.e., cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and the need to defecate and urinate; 4) *byādhi-dukkha* (illness) or *dukkha-vedanā* (pain); 5) *santāpa-dukkha*: the burning and agitation of the heart due to the ‘fires’ of defilement; 6) *vipāka-dukkha*: the fruits of actions, i.e., remorse, punishment and the fall into states of perdition; 7) *sahagata-dukkha*: concomitant suffering; the suffering accompanying mundane, agreeable conditions, e.g., the suffering of needing to protect material possessions; 8) *āhārapariyeṭṭhi-dukkha*: the suffering of seeking food; the same as *ājīva-dukkha*—the suffering resulting from making a living; 9) *vivādamūlaka-dukkha*: suffering caused by disputes, e.g., fear of losing an argument or lawsuit; and 10) *dukkha-khandha*: the entirety of suffering, i.e., the five aggregates as objects of clinging are suffering.

beings encounter so many problems, including the afflictions faced by all living creatures, and suffering specific to certain time periods, regions and circumstances, but it is not necessary to offer a drawn-out explanation. More important is to realize that the many scriptural descriptions exist to promote an understanding of the true nature of suffering. With this understanding we can respond correctly to suffering. We acknowledge that we must engage with suffering, rather than resort to evasion, self-deception, or to the denial that either suffering does not exist or that it can not affect us. Such deception only creates more complex problems and more severe affliction. Our responsibility is rather that of facing and understanding suffering (*pariññā-kicca*), to have victory over it, and to be freed from it: this is the practice of walking the path leading to suffering's cessation, a cessation both temporary and permanent.

3. Anattā: The Characteristic of Nonself

A. Scope

As explained earlier the quality of nonself (*anattatā*) has a broader application than the qualities of impermanence and *dukkha*. One sees the difference clearly in the Buddha's presentation:

1. *Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*: All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.
2. *Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*: All conditioned phenomena are subject to pressure.
3. *Sabbe dhammā anattā*: All things are nonself.

This teaching indicates that conditioned phenomena (and all conditioned phenomena) are impermanent and *dukkha*. But something exists apart from such phenomena, which is neither impermanent nor subject to stress. All things without exception, however, are *anattā*: they are nonself. Nothing exists which is a self or possesses a self.

The definition of *dhamma* encompasses all things. As *dhamma* includes all things it can be subdivided without end. One can, however, classify things into groups and categories. The division pertinent to this discussion is into conditioned things (*saṅkhata-dhamma*) and the Unconditioned (*asaṅkhata-dhamma*).

Saṅkhata-dhamma refers to things created by conditioning factors (*paccaya*). These things can be simply called *saṅkhāra*, and include all materiality and mentality, constituting the five aggregates. *Asaṅkhata-dhamma*, the Unconditioned,

is neither created nor supported by conditioning factors; it is also called *visaṅkhāra*: the state transcending the five aggregates, or Nibbāna.

One can describe this law of nature in more detail as follows:

1. All conditioned things (the five aggregates) are impermanent.
2. All conditioned things (the five aggregates) are *dukkha*.
3. All things, both conditioned things and the Unconditioned, are nonself.

B. Basic Definition

Anattā can be translated as ‘not-self,’ ‘selfless,’ or ‘nonself.’ As *anattā* is a negation of *attā*, to comprehend the characteristic of nonself we must first understand the meaning of *attā*. *Attā* (Sanskrit—*ātman*) refers to an eternal self or substance, which is the purported essence or core of any particular thing, residing permanently in an object. It is both owner and controller, the essential recipient of experience and agent of action. It is that which lies behind all phenomena, including all life, able to direct things in conformity with its needs and desires.

Some religions elaborate by claiming that a superior ‘Self’ or ‘Spirit’ lies behind all worldly phenomena, reigning over the souls or substance of all living beings and inanimate objects. They claim that this supreme Spirit creates and governs all things, or that it is the source and destination of all things and all life. In Hinduism, for example, it is called *Brahmā* or *Paramātman*.

The gist of the teaching on *anattā* is the negation of this fixed abiding self, both mundane and transcendent; it asserts that this self is simply an idea stemming from a misapprehension by unawakened human beings, who do not see the true nature of the world. People create a (concept of) self and superimpose it on reality; this (concept of) self then obstructs them from seeing the truth. A clear understanding of nonself dispels the misapprehension and dissolves the obscuring (idea of) self. The teaching of nonself bids us to discern with wisdom that all things, all components of reality, exist and proceed in conformity with their own nature. No hidden, abiding self exists as owner or director; things are not subservient to an internal or external control.

A basic definition of selflessness, both in regard to conditioned phenomena and the Unconditioned, is that all things exist in compliance with their nature, and are not subordinate to an external authority. To elaborate on this definition one must examine the distinction between conditioned phenomena and the Unconditioned. The Unconditioned, or Nibbāna, on the one hand, is an absolute truth (*dhamma-dhātu*)*, existing independent of conditioning factors. It is neither a being, nor a consciousness, nor a self (*nissatta-nijjīva*); it cannot be possessed or controlled; nor does it act in any sort of creative role. Compounded phenomena, on the other hand, are dependent on and conform to those factors which act as

catalysts or creative agents. These phenomena are void of an inner substance that experiences the formative process or controls the five aggregates, commanding them to follow desire independent of the laws of cause and effect.

*Literally 'elemental truth.'

C) Implied Definition

Before proceeding, one needs to understand that the Buddhist teaching refers to a self solely on a conventional level: the self is a relative truth; it is not believed to be absolute. This is made clear by the Buddha's statement that a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha does not establish a self as part of his doctrine; he does not regard the self as real:

*The teacher who does not declare a self as real or true, either in this world or the next, is called the Perfectly Enlightened Buddha.*³¹

Consequently, the Buddhist teachings do not concern themselves with the existence of self or engage in a diagnosis of self. Moreover, the Buddha stated:

*It is impossible for a person endowed with right view (i.e., a stream-enterer) to grasp any thing (dhamma) as self.*³²

With the realization of the supreme state, no reason remains for an arahant* to contemplate a self. This is substantiated by the Buddha's designation of an arahant as one who has 'abandoned the self' or 'discarded the self' (*attañjaho/attañjaha*):³³ an arahant has abandoned the belief in a self, the view of existing as or possessing a self. Some passages describe an arahant as 'having abandoned the self, not clinging to anything' (*attam pahāya anupādiyāno*).³⁴

*A fully awakened person.

Although a self does not truly exist, most people embrace a notion of a fixed self. The Buddha rejected the validity of such a notion, and encouraged people to abandon the attachment to self. In Buddhism, a substantial self is of no importance; it is not a matter requiring speculation. Buddhism focuses on the attachment to self or on the concept of self that is the object of such attachment. Buddhism teaches

³¹ Kvu. 68; Pug. 38.

³² A. III. 438.

³³ Sn. 155.

³⁴ Sn. 157.

people to release the attachment. With its release one's responsibility is fulfilled, and a fixed stable self no longer has relevance.

To summarize, once a person understands that conditioned things are selfless, the topic of self versus nonself is over. A person who has realized the Unconditioned no longer identifies with anything as a self. Furthermore, any explanation for the selfless nature of the Unconditioned, Nibbāna, becomes redundant. To elaborate on Nibbāna as *anattā* is unnecessary for the following reasons:

- The only things that people attach to and are able to attach to as self are conditioned phenomena or the five aggregates.
- All that unawakened people recognize, know, and think about lies within the confines of the five aggregates. Even when speaking of Nibbāna, the Nibbāna they refer to is not the real Nibbāna, but part of the five aggregates.
- The duty of a teacher in this context is only to prompt people to know and then abandon their misunderstanding which leads them to grasp conditioned things as self.
- Once people are aware, abandoning erroneous views and ceasing to grasp the five aggregates as self, they do not search for anything else to cling to as a self, because they have clearly realized Nibbāna, which transcends the five aggregates along with all belief in self. Those who have realized Nibbāna discern by themselves the selfless quality of the Unconditioned; there is no further need to discuss this matter. Transcending the state of an ordinary person (from the level of stream-entry upwards) results in the end of clinging and doubting; the necessity to discuss the selfless nature of the Unconditioned vanishes automatically.

The standard scriptural explanations of *anattā* therefore refer to conditioned phenomena, which are of everyday relevance to people and comprise all things that ordinary unawakened people are able to conceive of from experience.

D) Scriptural Explanation

As stated above, the common scriptural explanations of *anattā* focus on conditioned things because these teachings are presented to ordinary people and touch upon everyday issues. Furthermore, those things that ordinary unawakened people are able to conceive of as self are limited to conditioned things (*saṅkhāra*) or limited to the five aggregates. Therefore, the explanations of nonself concentrate exclusively on the five aggregates. This corresponds with the Buddha's words:

Monks, whichever ascetics and brahmans who regard self in various ways all regard the five aggregates subject to clinging, or a certain one among them. What five?

Monks, the uninstructed, ordinary person ... regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He regards feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self ... or self as in consciousness. This way of regarding things thus becomes his fixed belief that 'I exist.'³⁵

In other words, (belief in) a self only exists where the five aggregates exist, and exists because of clinging to these aggregates, as explained by the Buddha:

Monks, when what exists, by relying on what, by adhering to what, does such a view as this arise: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?...

When there is form, monks, by relying on form, by adhering to form, such a view as this arises: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self.' When there is feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, by relying on consciousness, by adhering to consciousness, such a view as this arises: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self.'³⁶

At this point let us examine some of the numerous scriptural explanations of nonself. The Paṭisambhidāmagga defines something as *anattā* in the sense that it is 'insubstantial' (*asāraḱṭṭhena*).³⁷ Insubstantial means to be without essence, to be without a core, and to possess nothing that is truly stable or enduring.

Insubstantial means the absence of an essential, nuclear self (atta-sāra), which is thought of as a self (attā), an abider (nivāsī), an agent (kāraḱa), an experiencer (vedaka), or an autonomous master (sayarṅvasī). [70/18] For whatever is impermanent is dukkha; it is unable to prevent its transience or its oppression from rising and falling. How then can it exist as a doer, and so on? Hence, the Buddha said: 'Monks, if this physical form, for example, were self, surely it would not be subject to affliction.'³⁸

Note that this definition of non-essence or selflessness includes the absence of a creative role or a lack of intrinsic control. If one were to possess a stable enduring self as a core, then one could resist change; one would not be subject to change. Similarly, if one were master over things, one could manipulate possessions according to desire. Reality, however, is not this way. A distinctive feature of the absence of an abiding self is the inability to dominate conditions, and their opposition to desire. (Note that Buddha-Dhamma considers even Brahmā, God, or whichever supreme creator deity to exist within the conditioned world, to be confined to the five aggregates, and thus wielding restricted power.) In this sense,

³⁵ S. III. 46.

³⁶ S. III. 203-4.

³⁷ Ps. I. 37, 53; Ps. II. 200; referred to at Vism. 610.

³⁸ Vism. 610.

the commentaries prefer to define *anattā* as ‘the inability to control’ or ‘not subject to control’ (*avasavattanaṭṭhena* or *avasavattanato*).³⁹ Likewise, they explain that no one can force formations into subservience, in defiance of cause and effect, by demanding that arisen phenomena not exist, that existent phenomena not age, and that ageing phenomena not perish.⁴⁰ They quote the Buddha’s words:

A person cannot in regard to physical form obtain (as wished for): ‘May form be this way, may form not be that way.’ [Same with the other aggregates.]⁴¹

When one thoroughly examines the nature of all things, one finds that no fixed and permanent self exists, as is implied by giving things particular names. There is merely a natural process (*dhamma-pavatti*)—a process of conditionality—or a process of materiality and mentality (*khandha-pavatti*), which originates from the confluence of manifold constituents. All of these constituents arise and cease in a continual, inter-causal relationship, both within a single isolated dynamic, and within all creation. This being so, we should take note of four significant points:

1. There is no true, enduring self within any phenomenon, existing as an essence or core.
2. All conditioned things arise from the convergence of components.
3. These components continually arise and disintegrate, and are co-dependent, constituting a specific dynamic of nature. [70/19]
4. If one separates a specific dynamic into subordinate dynamics, one sees that these too are co-dependent.

The manifestation and transformation of a dynamic is determined by the relationship of its components. The dynamic proceeds without the intervention by a ‘self.’ No separate self exists, neither an internal enduring self that resists cause and effect and is able to direct the activity according to its wishes, nor an independent external agent.

Human beings confer names to many of these assemblies and formations, for example ‘person,’ ‘horse,’ ‘cat,’ ‘ant,’ ‘car,’ ‘shop,’ ‘house,’ ‘clock,’ ‘pen,’ ‘Mr. Jones,’ and ‘Miss Smith.’ These names, however, are simply conventional labels, established for convenience of communication. The entities do not really exist: they do not have a real self, a separate identity distinct from their collective components. Upon analysis of these entities what remains is each unit or part with its own specific

³⁹ Vism. 628, 640; occasionally one finds *avasavattito*.

⁴⁰ Vism. 618; VinṬ. Mahākhandaḥakaṃ Anattalakkhaṇasuttavaṇṇanā.

⁴¹ VbhA. 49; VinṬ. Mahākhandaḥakaṃ Anattalakkhaṇasuttavaṇṇanā refers to the Buddha’s sermon in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (S. III. 66).

name. It is not possible to find a self within such entities, no matter how deeply one searches. By giving names to things one creates a provisional self that is superimposed on the true condition. It is superimposed randomly, without any direct relationship to, control over, or affect on that particular dynamic, except when one clings to the conventional designation (clinging is then one component of the process). If names are just conventional labels, arbitrarily superimposed, then it is self-evident that they are powerless.

When elements convene and manifest as particular forms, we assign agreed upon names to these forms. As long as the components are conjoined, they sustain the particular shape which corresponds to a conventional identity. When the components split up, however, or the surrounding conditions are unsupportive, the form disappears. For example, when temperature rises above a certain level, ice melts; the entity called 'ice' vanishes, with water remaining. With a further increase in temperature, water evaporates, turning to steam; that entity of 'water' ceases to be. Likewise, when paper is burned, only ashes remain; the entity called 'paper' is no longer found.

The dynamics of nature occur in line with cause and effect; they do not obey desire, and they are not influenced by these randomly established identities. They do not obey desire because, speaking accurately, desire does not serve an autonomous self; desire is one component within a causal process, and it is not the agent that accomplishes a deed. Desire is only able to produce results when it acts as an impetus, affecting subsequent conditions like effort or action, in conformity with cause and effect.

A distinct, independent self cannot exist; were it to exist, it would not be subject to causality—it would be fixed. It would impede the causal flow, rendering all other elements dispensable. Any fluent dynamic would be nullified. Such a self could interfere with and modify conditions, causing a deviation from causality. In truth, however, all conditioned things proceed according to cause and effect. A separate self does not truly exist, either within a dynamic or externally. [70/20] The only self that exists is the conventional self, which needs to be understood or else it ends up deceiving and oppressing people.

The basic meaning of *anattatā*—that all things arise as a composition of interrelated parts following cause and effect, are void of an enduring self, and are without a fixed creative agent—is confirmed by many references in the scriptures, for example:

Just as when a space is enclosed by timber, twine, clay and thatch, it comes to be called a 'house,' so too, when a space is enclosed by bones and sinews, flesh and skin, it comes to be called a 'body' (rūpa).⁴²

Māra* asked Vajirā Bhikkhunī:

⁴² M. I. 190.

*The 'Evil One,' the 'Tempter,' personified as a deity.

Who created this being (person)? Where is the creator of beings? Where does a being originate? Where does a being cease?

Vajirā answered:

Māra, do you believe in a being? Do you hold (such) a view? This is purely a mass of formations; here, no being can be found. Just as with the combination of various parts, the term 'wagon' ensues, so too, with the five aggregates the conventional term 'being' ensues. Indeed, there is only dukkha that arises, abides and passes away. Nothing but dukkha comes to be, nothing but dukkha ceases.⁴³

Māra asked the same question to Selā Bhikkhunī, who answered:

No one fashioned this shape; no one created this being. Dependent upon causes, it has arisen; with the ending of causes, it ceases. Just as seeds when sown on a field will sprout, owing to both the nutrients in the soil and the moisture within the seeds, so too, these aggregates, elements, and six senses arise dependent upon causes, and cease with the dissolution of those causes.⁴⁴

A collection of soldiers, vehicles and weapons is called an army. We call a group of buildings, houses, people and enterprises a city. A hand with fingers placed in a certain position is called a fist. [70/21] Uncurl the fist and only a hand with fingers remains. Similarly, when one separates a hand into ancillary parts, then it too no longer exists. One can continue to subdivide, but one will be unable to find any static units or elements. The suttas contain only teachings of materiality and mentality (*nāma-rūpa*); there is no mention of a fixed 'being' or 'person.'⁴⁵

There are four principal definitions of *anattā* compiled by the commentators. Something is considered nonself for the following reasons:⁴⁶

1. *Suññato*: because it exists in a state of emptiness; it is without a self as essence or core (*atta-sāra*). It is void of a real identity as 'person,' 'I,' 'him,' or 'her.' There is no occupant, agent or experiencer apart from the causal process, or apart from provisional designations. Things exist independently from their assigned identities, for example 'man,' 'woman,' 'I,' 'you,' 'object A' or 'object B.'

⁴³ S. I. 135.

⁴⁴ S. I. 134.

⁴⁵ See Vism. 593-5.

⁴⁶ Vism. 618; MA. II. 113; VbhA. 48; See also VinṬ. Mahākhandaḥkaṃ Anattalakkhaṇa-suttavaṇṇanā; VismṬ. Maggāmaggañāṇadassana-visuddhiniddesavaṇṇanā, Rūpasattaka-sammasana-kathāvaṇṇanā.

2. *Assāmikato*: because it is ownerless; it does not belong to a person or to a self. No separate self exists that possesses phenomena; there is merely a natural causal process.
3. *Avasa-vattanato*: because it is not subject to control; it does not depend on anyone. A related term used is *anissarato*, translated as ‘non-ruler’ or ‘powerless.’ We have no absolute power over things; we must concur with causes. In some places one finds the term *akāmakāriyato*, translated as ‘unable to do as one pleases.’ Things do not obey desires; the mind of desire cannot dictate things. If one wants things to be a certain way, then one must conform to or bring about the proper causes and conditions. Things depend on causes, not on someone’s power or desire. For example, it is impossible to order something that has arisen to disappear, or to not change, or to not deteriorate.
4. *Atta-paṭikkhepato*: because it is inconsistent with or opposes a self. The causal process of interrelated components is inherently incompatible with a separate, autonomous self, which would dictate or interfere with that process. [70/22] Such an isolated self cannot exist. If it were to exist, a causal dynamic could not occur; the course of events would necessarily follow the dictates of self. Furthermore, the law of causality is intrinsically complete; it does not require a controlling agent to intervene.

There are two additional definitions of *anattā*, which, although included within the four points mentioned above, are particularly important and should thus be distinguished. They highlight the dynamic nature of phenomena:

5. *Suddha-saṅkhāra-puñjato* or *suddha-dhamma-puñjato*: Things exist purely as a mass of formations, or as a mass of phenomena (*dhamma*), that is, materiality (*rūpa-dhamma*) and/or mentality (*nāma-dhamma*). Another term used is *aṅga-sambhārato*, meaning that things exist as a composition of subsidiary parts. They arise from the gathering together of such parts. They are not absolute enduring ‘units’ or ‘entities.’ There is no real ‘being,’ ‘person’ or ‘self’ over and above these components. (This definition is already stressed in point 1 above.)
6. *Yathāpaccaya-pavattito*: Things exist following causes and conditions. They exist as a collection of interrelated and co-dependent parts. Things do not follow a person’s desires, and no self exists, either as an internal essence or as an external agent, which resists or directs the process. (All four of the above points include this definition, especially points 3 and 4.)

To sum up, all things exist according to specific causes. If the determinant causes exist, a phenomenon originates in conformity with these causes. If these

causes cease, the phenomenon ceases (to exist in that way). Things do not obey supplication or desire. They are not ‘entities’ or ‘things’ as commonly identified, and they do not belong to anyone. As explained earlier, these definitions of *anattā* presented here focus on conditioned phenomena.

One of the major misunderstandings for people is the belief that a ‘thinker’ exists apart from thinking, a ‘planner’ exists apart from volition, a ‘feeler’ exists apart from feelings, or an ‘actor’ exists apart from actions. This misunderstanding has trapped many of the great philosophers, who were therefore unable to realize the truth and be free from the enshrouding influence of self-view. René Descartes, the famous French philosopher, is an example, who after much consideration, postulated, ‘I think, therefore I am.’⁴⁷ [70/23] The belief in a distinct self or soul is common to unenlightened beings everywhere. This belief seems true and logical through ordinary awareness, but once one thoroughly investigates the premise of self, contradictions appear.

People often posed questions about the self to the Buddha, for example: *Who makes contact (who cognizes)? Who feels? Who craves? Who clings?* The Buddha answered that these are unsuitable questions, which stem from a false assumption; they are not consistent with reality. Appropriate questions are: *What is the condition giving rise to contact? What is the condition giving rise to feeling? What are the conditions giving rise to craving and clinging?*⁴⁸

Just as thought, intention, desire, and feeling are components of a physical and mental process, so too the experience of a ‘thinker’ or a ‘designer’ is a component of this process. All of these components exist in an intercausal relationship. There is simply thought and an experience of a ‘thinker’ (i.e., a false belief in a thinker—a thinker does not exist) arising within a single dynamic. The experience of a thinker is actually a thought pattern; it is one instant in the thought process. The erroneous belief in a thinker arises due to a person’s inability to distinguish the related parts, and to distinguish each momentary event within the continuum. At the time of thought, there is no experience of a ‘thinker’; and at the instant of experiencing a ‘thinker’ there is no (other) thought. While thinking of a certain subject, one does not reflect upon a ‘thinker’; and while reflecting upon a ‘thinker,’ one does not think about that previous subject of consideration. Thinking of a subject and experiencing a ‘thinker’ (thinking of a ‘thinker’) are actually different moments of thought, which exist in the same dynamic. The ‘thinker’ is just a mental fabrication, which then becomes an object for further thought during another instant of time.

The fallacy mentioned above results from a lack of thorough attention (*ayoniso-manasikāra*) and is classified as one of the six views mentioned in the Buddha’s teaching:

⁴⁷ *Cogito, ergo sum* (R. Descartes, 1596-1650).

⁴⁸ S. II. 13-14.

When that unenlightened being attends unwisely in this way, one of the six views arises in him: There arises in him the (fixed) view, as true and established, that ‘I have a self’ ... ‘I do not have a self’ ... ‘I know the self by way of the self’ ... ‘I know nonself by way of the self’ ... ‘I know the self by way of nonself’; or else he has some such view as this: ‘It is this self of mine that dictates, feels, and experiences here and there the fruit of good and bad actions.’⁴⁹

It was mentioned earlier how a name assigned to a particular entity is a contrived and arbitrarily superimposed self, which, unless clung to, has no relationship to or affect on the causal dynamic. [70/24] Although such a self does not truly exist, clinging to that idea of self creates problems. This is because the clinging becomes a part of the dynamic, determining other components, and affecting the dynamic as a whole. Clinging is an unwholesome factor since it stems from ignorance; it contaminates other elements of the process, interfering adversely with the causal stream.

One effect of clinging is that it produces a conflict within the dynamic, resulting in a feeling of oppression or suffering. People who hold tightly to the conventional self as real are afflicted by this grasping. Those who fully comprehend conventional labels, on the other hand, do not cling to the idea of a self, seeing merely a causal continuum. These people use whichever term is commonly assigned to a particular object, but they can enhance the dynamic as they please, by acting in harmony with its determining factors. They do not allow craving and clinging to oppress them, thus avoiding the consequent suffering. Such people know how to benefit from conventional labels without suffering the harm of attaching to them.

Another detrimental effect of clinging to a self is the production of unwholesome mind states, known as ‘defilements’ (*kilesa*). In particular, these include:

Taṇhā: Craving; selfishness; the lust for gratification.

Māna: Conceit; self-judgement; the yearning for personal power.

Diṭṭhi: The firm grasping to personal opinions; the stubborn, unyielding belief that one’s views represent the truth.

These three defilements intensify both internal and external discord. People who do not see through conventional labels cling to randomly established identities as the truth and allow these defilements to dictate their behaviour, compounding misery for themselves and others. Those who penetrate the relative truth of conventional labels, however, do not cling to them, and are freed from the influence of these defilements. They are not deceived by such thoughts as ‘this belongs to me,’

⁴⁹ M. I. 8.

‘I am this way,’ or ‘this is who I am.’ They conduct their life with wisdom. A clear understanding of conventional labels, and action in harmony with causes and conditions, is the basis from which true safety and freedom from suffering extends.

Another error that tends to entangle people is vacillation from one extreme opinion to another. Some people strictly believe in the self as real and permanent; they think that the self makes up the essence of a human being, and that it is not just a conventional entity. Each person, they say, has a real, stable, eternal self; even when a person dies the soul/self/spirit (*ātman/attā*) continues unchanged: the self does not disappear or disintegrate. Some believe that this soul reincarnates, while others believe that it awaits judgement from the highest God for eternal salvation or damnation. Such views fall under the category of eternalism (*sassata-ditṭhi* or *sassata-vāda*): the belief that the self or soul is real and everlasting. Another group of people believe that such a self exists, that a person exists as a definite identity, but that this self is temporary: it disintegrates. [70/25] At death, they claim, the self breaks apart and ceases. This view is called annihilationism (*uccheda-ditṭhi* or *uccheda-vāda*): the belief that the self or soul is impermanent; it exists temporarily and then breaks up and vanishes.

Scholars of Buddhist studies may also embrace one of these views if they lack clear understanding. Those who study the law of kamma (Sanskrit—*karma*) in connection to the round of rebirth (*saṃsāra-vaṭṭa*) may hold an eternalist view, regarding the self as permanent. Those who misapprehend the teachings of *anattā*, on the other hand, may hold an annihilationist view, believing that nothing exists after death. The common point of misunderstanding for proponents of these two extremes is the belief that a being or person exists as a real, fixed entity. One party believes that this entity is constant and eternal, while the other believes that this entity breaks up and vanishes at death.

Besides these two, there is another group with an even more extreme view, believing that the absence of self means that nothing at all exists. If no one exists, then no one experiences results. Therefore, actions have no consequences, actions are insignificant, and there is no accountability regarding actions. Speaking simply, there is no kamma. One can divide this kind of belief into three categories. One faction believes that actions are meaningless, or that actions bear no fruit. This is called the doctrine of the inefficacy of action (*akiraya-ditṭhi* or *akiriya-vāda*). Another faction believes that things occur haphazardly, by chance, without any causes. This is called the doctrine of non-causality or accidentalism (*ahetuka-ditṭhi* or *ahetuka-vāda*). The third faction believes that absolutely nothing exists: nothing exists with any value or meaning. This is called nihilism (*natthika-ditṭhi* or *natthika-vāda*).

Since all things exist as a causal continuum, originating from the merging of components, there is no self which either endures or disintegrates. In this very instant no ‘person’ or ‘self’ exists; where can one find an enduring or dissolving self? This teaching negates both eternalism and annihilationism. Since the dynamics of nature consist of interrelated, causally dependent components, how can one claim that nothing exists, or that things occur haphazardly and by chance?

The teaching negates the doctrines of nihilism and non-causality. As dynamics change according to inherent causal factors, each agent within a dynamic produces an effect; none is void of effect. Moreover, results ensue without a need for a 'receiver' of such results; results are intrinsic to the dynamic. Notionally, one can say that the dynamic itself is the recipient. These results are more certain than if a stable self were to exist as the receiver, since the self could reject unwelcome results. As the law of causality exists, how can one claim that actions are meaningless or have no results? The teaching negates the doctrine of the inefficacy of action. [70/26]

The following passages from the Visuddhimagga corroborate the explanations presented above:

Truly, in this world there is only mentality and matter. But here there is no being or person to be found. This mentality and matter is empty. It is fashioned (by conditioning factors) like an instrument—just a mass of instability (dukkha) like grass and sticks.⁵⁰

Suffering exists, but no sufferer can be found. Actions exist, but no agent. Nibbāna exists, but no one who is quenched. The Path exists, but no wayfarer.⁵¹

There is no doer of a deed, or one who reaps the deed's results; phenomena alone flow on. This is right view. While kamma and fruition (vipāka) thus causally maintain their round, as seed and tree succeed in turn, no first beginning can be known. Nor in the future round of births (saṃsāra) can an absence of this cycle of kamma and fruition be discerned. Adherents of other sects, not knowing this, have failed to gain self-mastery [asayaṃvasī—they are dependent on others because of wrong view]. They assume a being (satta-saññā), viewing it as eternal or annihilated. They adopt the sixty-two kinds of views, each contradicting the other. The stream of craving bears them on, the mesh of views entangles them. And as the stream thus bears them on, they are not freed from suffering. A disciple of the Buddha, with direct knowledge of this fact, penetrates this deep and subtle void conditionality.

There is no kamma in fruition, nor does fruition exist in kamma; though they are empty of one another, no fruit exists without the act. Similarly, fire does not exist inside sunlight, a (magnifying) glass, or in cow dung (used for fuel), nor yet outside them, but is generated by their conjunction. So neither can fruition be found within kamma, nor without; nor does kamma still persist (in the fruit it has produced). Kamma of its fruit is void; no fruit exists yet in an act. And still the fruit is born of kamma, dependent on

⁵⁰ Vism. 595.

⁵¹ Vism. 513.

*kamma. For here there is no Creator God, no Creator of the round of births; phenomena alone flow on, dependent on the marriage of conditions.*⁵²

Natural phenomena arise wholly from causes, are subject to pressure, impermanent, unstable and inconstant. All things arise from other things in mutual dependence. There is no personal or external self within this continuum.

*Phenomena give rise to other phenomena, by the union of causes and conditions. [70/27] The Buddha taught the Dhamma for the cessation of causes. With the cessation of causes, the cycle (vaṭṭa) is broken, and revolves no more. The sublime life (brahmacariya) exists to end all suffering in this way. When no being can be found, there is neither annihilation nor eternity.*⁵³

To summarize, the teaching of *anattā* confirms the following points:

- A. It negates both the doctrines of eternalism and annihilationism.
- B. It negates the belief in a supreme God who created the world and governs the destiny of human beings, i.e., theistic determinism (*issara-nimmita-vāda*).
- C. It is consistent with the teaching of *kamma* as defined by Buddha-Dhamma, at the same time negating the following doctrines: The claim that actions have no results (doctrine of the inefficacy of action); the doctrine of past-action determinism (*pubbekatavāda*), for example of the Nigaṇṭha Order (Jainism); the doctrine of *kamma* involving a soul or a caste system (for example of Hinduism); the claim that things occur by chance, without causes (accidentalism); and the doctrine of nihilism.
- D. It reveals the supreme state, the final goal (*parama-dhamma*) of Buddhism, which differs from the goal of religions that profess a soul (*attavāda*).

Summary

The three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are linked; they are three facets of the same truth, as is seen in the Buddha's frequent teaching: *Whatever is impermanent is dukkha; whatever is dukkha is nonself (yad'aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad'anattā)*. This passage is often followed by the statement: *Whatever is nonself should be seen with correct wisdom, as it truly is thus: 'This is not mine, I am not this,*

⁵² Vism. 602-3; based on Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's translation.

⁵³ VismṬ. Paññābhūminiddesaṇṇanā, Bhavacakkakathāṇṇanā.

*this is not my self.*⁵⁴ The relationship is also evident in the frequent exchange of questions and answers:

'Is material form, etc., permanent or impermanent?'

'Impermanent.'

'Is what is impermanent pleasant or painful?'

'Painful.'

*'Of that which is impermanent, painful and of the nature to change, is it proper to consider thus: "This is mine, I am this, this is my self?"'*⁵⁵

A brief explanation of the relationship between the three characteristics, and of the fact that they are three aspects of the same truth, can be formulated thus: All things originate by the union of component parts. Each of these parts arises, is sustained, and disintegrates, acting in turn as a condition for the other parts, in perpetual transformation. [70/28] One can refer to this composite as a 'causal continuum,' which has the following characteristics:

- 1) The arising and disintegration of components; the instability of the components or of the entire process: *aniccatā*.
- 2) The pressure on the components or on the entire dynamic by rise and decline, their being subject to alteration, and their inability to remain in an original state: *dukkhatā*.
- 3) The absence of a fixed 'core' that governs the collection of components, and the requirement for the components to accord with causes and conditions; the characteristic of nonself: *anattatā*.

By observing these three characteristics simultaneously, any object conventionally referred to as a single entity is seen as a composite of myriad clustering constituents. These constituents are unstable, continually rising and ceasing. They split up and disperse subject to reciprocal stress and friction, resulting in transformation. They depend upon the relationship of causes and conditions, which control and give form to the particular continuum. None of the components exists as a self; they proceed in line with causality, not in compliance with desire.

Although that which is impermanent is *dukkha*, and that which is *dukkha* is nonself, the converse is not always true, that whatever is nonself must be

⁵⁴ E.g., S. IV. 1.

⁵⁵ E.g., S. III. 68.

impermanent and *dukkha*. All conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*) are impermanent, subject to pressure, and selfless, yet all things (*dhamma*), both conditioned things and the Unconditioned (*visaṅkhāra*), although nonself, need not invariably be impermanent and *dukkha*. Something exists which is permanent and free of *dukkha*. The Unconditioned (Nibbāna), although selfless, is beyond both impermanence and *dukkha*. In this sense, the definitions of the three characteristics as facets of one truth apply to conditioned phenomena, following the explanation of nonself mentioned earlier. Similarly, the selfless quality of the Unconditioned should be understood in conformity with the implied definition described above.