**The Three Universal Characteristics**

1. The teaching of the three characteristics is the doctrinal contents of wisdom

The subject of this session is the three universal characteristics of existence. This is an important part of the teaching of the Buddha. Like the Four Noble Truths, karma, interdependent origination, and the five aggregates, the teaching of the three characteristics is part of what we might call the doctrinal contents of wisdom. In other words, when we talk about the knowledge and understanding that are implied by wisdom, we have this teaching also in mind.

2. What is a characteristic? - Characteristic is something that is necessarily connected with something else

Before we examine the three characteristics one by one, let us try to come to an understanding of what they mean and in what way they are useful. First of all, what is a characteristic and what is not? A characteristic is something that is necessarily connected with something else. Because a characteristic is necessarily connected with something, it can tell us about the nature of that thing.

An example –heat and fire

Let us take an example. Heat, for instance, is a characteristic of fire but not of water. Heat is a characteristic of fire because it is always and invariably connected with fire, whereas whether or not water is hot depends on external factors--an electric stove, the heat of the sun, and so forth. But the heat of fire is natural to fire. It is in this sense that the Buddha uses the term "characteristic" to refer to facts about the nature of existence that are always connected with existence or always found in existence.

The characteristic "heat" is always connected with fire. We can understand something about the nature of fire from heat. We can understand that fire is hot and therefore potentially dangerous, that it can consume us and our possessions if not controlled. Yet we can also use fire to cook our food, to warm ourselves, and so forth. Thus the characteristic of heat tells us something about fire, what fire is, and what to do with fire.

If we were to think of the characteristic of heat as connected with water, it would not help us understand the nature of water or use water intelligently because heat is not always connected with water. Water cannot necessarily burn us or consume our possessions, nor can we necessarily cook our food with water or warm ourselves with water.

Three characteristics are always present in existence

Hence when the Buddha said that there are three characteristics of existence, he meant that these characteristics are always present in existence, and that they help us understand what to do with existence.

3. The three characteristics of existence: impermanence (anicca) suffering (dukkha) and not-self (anatta) – one develops renunciation by understanding the three characteristics

The three characteristics of existence that we have in mind are (1) impermanence, (2) suffering and (3) not-self. These three characteristics are always present in or connected with existence, and they tell us about the nature of existence. They help us know what to do with existence. As a result of understanding the three characteristics, we learn to develop renunciation, or detachment. Once we understand that existence is universally characterized by impermanence, suffering, and not-self, we eliminate our attachment to existence. And once we eliminate our attachment to existence, we gain the threshold of nirvana.

This is the purpose of understanding the three characteristics: it removes attachment by removing delusion--the misunderstanding that existence is permanent, pleasant, and has something to do with the self. This is why understanding the three characteristics is part of the contents of wisdom.

4. Impermanence (anicca)

Impermanence is the first of the three characteristics of existence. It is from the fact of impermanence that, in most texts, the other two characteristics, suffering and not self are derived. (S XXII, 15; Ud IV, 1)

The insight leading to the first stage of deliverance, stream-entry (sotapatti) is often expressed in terms of impermanence: “Whatever is subject to origination, is subject to cessation (“yam kinci [samudaya](http://www.buddha-vacana.org/gloss.html#samudaya)dhammam, sabbam tam [nirodha](http://www.buddha-vacana.org/gloss.html#nirodha)[dhamma'](http://www.buddha-vacana.org/gloss.html#dhamma)nti” Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) “Impermanency of things is the rising, passing and changing of things or disappearance of things that have become or arisen. The meaning is that these things never persist in the same way, but they are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment.(Vis. VII, 3)”

The fact of impermanence has been recognized not only in Buddhist thought but elsewhere in the history of ideas. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who remarked that one cannot step into the same river twice. This observation, which implies the ever-changing and transient nature of things, is a very Buddhistic one.

Impermanence is a basic feature of all conditioned phenomena, be they material or mental, coarse or subtle, one’s own or external: “All formations are impermanent (sabbe sankhara anicca M. 35, Dhp 277). That the totality of existence is impermanent is also often stated in terms of the five aggregates (khandha) the twelve sense bases (ayatana) etc. Only Nibbana which is unconditioned and not a formation (asankhata), is permanent (nicca, dhruva). The Buddha before his parinibbana reminded his monks of the impermanency of existence, and asked them to work with diligence: “behold now, bhikkhus, I urge you, Formations are bound to vanish, strive earnestly!’ (vayadhamma sankhara, appamadena sampadetha D. 16)”

Some similes

In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that the world is impermanent like autumn clouds; that birth and death are like a dance, and that human life is like a flash of lightning or a waterfall. All these are compelling images of impermanence which help us understand that all things are marked or characterized by impermanence.

Impermanence is a fact that is verified by direct and immediate observation

If we look at ourselves, we find that our bodies are impermanent and subject to constant change. We grow thin. We grow old and gray--our teeth and hair fall out. If you need any proof of the impermanence of the physical form, you need only look at the photograph on your driver's license or passport over the years. Similarly, our mental states are impermanent. At one moment we are happy, and at another moment sad. As infants, we hardly understand anything; as adults in the prime of life, we understand a great deal more; in old age, we lose the power of our mental faculties and become like infants.

This is true also of the things we see around us. Not one of the things we see around us will last forever--not the apartment buildings, the temples, the rivers and islands, the mountain chains, or the oceans. We know for a fact that all these natural phenomena-- even those that appear to be the most durable, even the solar system itself - will one day decline and cease to exist.

This process of the constant change of things--personal and impersonal, internal and external--goes on constantly even without our noticing it, and affects us intimately in daily life. Our relations with other people are subject to the characteristic of impermanence and change. Friends become enemies; enemies become friends. Enemies even become relatives, while relatives become enemies. If we look closely at our lives, we can see how all our relationships with other people are marked by impermanence. Our possessions are also impermanent. All the things that we dearly love--our homes, our automobiles, our clothes--are impermanent. All of them will decay and eventually be destroyed. In every aspect of our lives--whether it is mental or material, whether it is our relationships with others or our possessions-- impermanence is a fact that is verified by direct, immediate observation.

5. Importance of understanding impermanence: a) in daily lives

Understanding impermanence is important not simply for our practice of the Dharma but also in our daily lives. How often do friendships deteriorate and end because one of the two persons involved fails to notice that his or her friend's attitudes and interests have changed? How often do marriages fail because one or both parties fail to take into account the fact that the other partner has changed? It is because we lock ourselves into fixed, artificial, unchanging ideas of the characters and personalities of our friends and relatives that we fail to develop our relations with them appropriately and hence often fail to understand one another. Similarly, in our careers or public life, we cannot hope to succeed if we do not keep abreast of changing situations, such as new trends in our professions or disciplines. Whether in our personal lives or in our public ones, understanding impermanence is necessary if we are to be effective and creative in how we handle our personal and professional affairs.

An antidote to attachment and ill-will; an aid to the practice of the Dharma, the ultimate nature of things

Although understanding impermanence yields these immediate benefits here and now, it is particularly effective as an aid to our practice of the Dharma. The understanding of impermanence is an antidote to attachment and ill-will. It is also an encouragement to our practice of the Dharma. And, finally, it is a key to understanding the ultimate nature of things, the way things really are.

6. To remember death - the impermanence of this personality

Remembering death, especially, is said to be like a friend and a teacher to one who wishes to practice the Dharma. Remembering death acts as a discouragement to excessive attachment and ill-will. How many quarrels, petty disagreements, lifelong ambitions and enmities fade into insignificance before recognition of the inevitability of death? Throughout the centuries, Buddhist teachers have encouraged sincere practitioners of the Dharma to remember death, to remember the impermanence of this personality.

Meditation on death is extremely beneficial. We all need to remember the certainty of our own deaths. From the moment of birth, we move inexorably toward death. Remembering this--and remembering that, at the time of death, wealth, family, and fame will be of no use to us--we must turn our minds to practice of the Dharma. We know that death is absolutely certain. There has never been a single living being who has escaped it. And yet, although death itself is certain, the time of death is uncertain. We can die at any moment. It is said that life is like a candle in the wind, or a bubble of water: at any moment it may be snuffed out, it may burst. Understanding that the time of death is uncertain, and that we now have the conditions and opportunity to practice the Dharma, we ought to practice it quickly, so as not to waste this opportunity and precious human life.

7. Understanding impermanence is an aid to understanding of the truth about the nature of things – directly related to the characteristic of not-self

Finally, understanding impermanence is an aid to understanding the ultimate truth about the nature of things. Seeing that all things are perishable and change every moment, we also begin to see that things have no substantial existence of their own--that in our persons and in the things around us, there is nothing like a self, nothing substantial. In this sense, impermanence is directly related to the last of the three characteristics, the characteristic of not-self. Understanding impermanence is a key to understanding not-self.

8. Whatever is impermanent is suffering (dukkha):

As the first noble truths and the second of the three characteristics of existence the term dukkha is not limited to painful experience which may be physical or mental. It refers to the unsatisfactory nature and general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena which on account of their impermanence are all liable to suffering and this includes also pleasurable experiences. Hence the first truth does not deny the existence of pleasurable experience as it is sometimes wrongly assumed. This is illustrated by the following: “ If there were not satisfaction to be found in the world, beings would not be attached to the world…If there were not misery to be found in the world, beings would not be repelled by the world….If there were no escape from the world, beings could not escape therefrom. “ (A. III. 102)

The Buddha said that whatever is impermanent is suffering, and whatever is impermanent and suffering is also not-self (yad aniccam tam dukkham; yam dukkhanm tam anatta SN iii 22). Whatever is impermanent is suffering because impermanence is an occasion for suffering. Impermanence is an occasion for suffering rather than a cause of suffering because impermanence is only an occasion for suffering as long as ignorance, craving, and clinging are present.

How?

How is this so? In our ignorance of the real nature of things, we crave and cling to objects in the forlorn hope that they may be permanent, that they may yield permanent happiness.

Failing to understand that youth, health, and life itself are impermanent, we crave them and cling to them. We long to hold onto our youth and prolong our life, yet because they are impermanent by nature, they slip through our fingers. When this occurs, impermanence is an occasion for suffering.

Similarly, we fail to recognize the impermanent nature of possessions, power, and prestige, so we crave and cling to them. When they end, impermanence is an occasion for suffering.

Suffering of the gods is greater than of beings in the lower realms

The impermanence of all situations in Samsara is a particular occasion for suffering when it occurs in the so-called fortunate realms. It is said that the suffering of the gods is even greater than the suffering of beings in the lower realms because the gods see that they are about to fall from the heavens into those lower realms of existence. Even the gods trembled when the Buddha reminded them of impermanence. Thus because even those pleasant experiences we crave and cling to are impermanent, impermanence is an occasion for suffering, and whatever is impermanent is suffering.

9. The characteristic of not- self (anatta)

“The Anatta-lakkhana Sutta, the discourse on the characteristics of not-self was the second discourse after Enlightenment taught by the Buddha to his first five disciples, who after hearing it attained perfect holiness (arahatta)

While in the case of the first two characteristics, it is stated that ‘all formations (sabbe sankhara) are impermanent and subject to suffering, the corresponding text for the third characteristics states that “all things are not-self” (sabbe dhamma anatta M. 35, Dhp. 279) this is for emphasizing that the false view of an abiding self or substance is neither applicable to any “ formation” or conditioned phenomena nor to Nibbana, the unconditioned element (asankhata dhatu)

The anatta doctrine teaches that neither within the body or mental phenomena of existence, nor outside them, can be found anything that is in the ultimate sense could be regarded as a self existing real Ego entity, soul or any other abiding substance. This is the central doctrine of Buddhism, without understanding of which a real knowledge of Buddhism is altogether impossible.

The third and the last universal characteristic of existence, the characteristic of not- self, impersonality, or insubstantiality is one of the really distinct features of Buddhist thought and of the teaching of the Buddha. It is the only really specific Buddhist doctrine with which the entire structure of the Buddhist teachings stands or falls. All the remaining Buddhist doctrines may, more or less, be found in other philosophic systems and religions, but the anatta doctrine has been clearly and unreservedly taught only by the Buddha. That is why the Buddha is known as the anattavadi or teacher of Impersonality.” During the later development of religion and philosophy in India, Hindu schools became increasingly similar to the teaching of the Buddha in their techniques of meditation and in some of their philosophical ideas. Thus it became necessary for Buddhist masters to point out that there was still a distinctive feature that set Buddhism apart from the Hindu schools that so closely resembled it. That distinctive feature is the teaching of not-self.

The teaching of not-self is a cause of confusion – (rejection of the name or term "I" that stands for a substantial, permanent, and changeless reality)

Sometimes, this teaching of not-self is a cause of confusion because people wonder how one can deny the self. After all, we do say, "I am speaking" or "I am walking," "I am called so and so" or "I am the father (or the son) of such and such a person." How can we deny the reality of that "I"? (To clarify this, I think it is important to remember that the Buddhist rejection of the "I" is not a rejection of this convenient designation, the name or term "I." Rather, it is a rejection of the idea that this name or term "I" stands for a substantial, permanent, and changeless reality. When the Buddha said that the five factors of personal experience were not the self and that the self was not to be found within them, he meant that, on analysis, this name or term "I" does not correspond to any essence or entity.)

Examples of a chariot and a forest

“When all constituent parts are there,

The designation ‘cart’ is used;

Just so, where the five groups exist,

Of ‘living being’ do we speak” S. V. 10

The Buddha used the examples of a chariot and a forest to explain the relation between the name or term "I" and the components of personal experience. The Buddha explained that the term "chariot" is simply a convenient name for a collection of parts that are assembled in a particular way. The wheel is not the chariot; nor is the axle, nor is the carriage, and so forth. Similarly a single tree is not a forest nor is a number of trees. Yet there is no forest apart from individual trees, so the term "forest" is just a convenient name for a collection of trees.

10. Rejection of the name or term "I" that stands for a substantial, permanent, and changeless reality

This is the thrust of the Buddha's rejection of the self. His rejection is a rejection of the belief in a real, independent, permanent entity that is represented by the name or term "I." Such a permanent entity would have to be independent, would have to be sovereign in the way a king is master of those around him. It would have to be permanent, immutable, and impervious to change, and such a permanent entity, such a self, is nowhere to be found.

11. Self/soul (atta) is nowhere to be found either in the body or the mind - analysis

The Buddha applied the following analysis to indicate that the self is nowhere to be found either in the body or the mind: (1) The body is not the self, for if the body were the self, the self would be impermanent, would be subject to change, decay, destruction, and death. Hence the body cannot be the self. (2) The self does not possess the body, in the sense that I possess a car or a television, because the self cannot control the body. The body falls ill, gets tired and old against our wishes. The body has an appearance which often does not agree with our wishes. Hence in no way does the self possess the body. (3) The self does not exist in the body. If we search our bodies from the tops of our heads to the tips of our toes, we can nowhere locate the self. The self is not in the bone or in the blood, in the marrow or in the hair or spittle. The self is nowhere to be found within the body. (4) The body does not exist in the self. For the body to exist in the self, the self would have to be found apart from the body and mind, but the self is nowhere to be found.

In the same way, (1) the mind is not the self because, like the body, The mind is subject to constant change and is agitated like a monkey. The mind is happy one moment and unhappy the next. Hence the mind is not the self because the mind is constantly changing. (2) The self does not possess the mind because the mind becomes excited or depressed against our wishes. Although we know that certain thoughts are wholesome and certain thoughts unwholesome, the mind pursues unwholesome thoughts and is indifferent toward wholesome thoughts. Hence the self does not possess the mind because the mind acts independently of the self. (3) The self does not exist in the mind. No matter how carefully we search the contents of our minds, no matter how carefully we search our feelings, ideas, and inclinations, we can nowhere find the self in the mind and the mental states. (4) The mind does not exist in the self either because again the self would have to exist apart from the mind and body, but such a self is nowhere to be found.

12. There is no self…. apart from the ever-changing, interdependent, physical and mental factors of personal experience,

There is a very simple exercise that any one of us can perform. If we all sit quietly for a brief period of time and look within our bodies and minds, without fail we find that we cannot locate a self anywhere within the body or the mind. The only conclusion possible is that "the self" is just a convenient name for a collection of factors. There is no self, no soul, no essence, no core of personal experience apart from the ever-changing, interdependent, impermanent physical and mental factors of personal experience, such as our feelings, ideas, habits, and attitudes.

13. We benefit by rejecting the self on a mundane level - an aid to living

Why should we care to reject the idea of a self? How can we benefit by rejecting the self? We can benefit in two important ways. First of all, we can benefit on a mundane level, in our everyday lives, in that we become more creative, more comfortable, more open people. As long as we cling to the self, we will always have to defend ourselves, our property, our prestige, opinions, and even our statements. But once we give up the belief in an independent and permanent self, we will be able to relate to other people and situations without paranoia. We will be able to act freely, spontaneously, and creatively.

14. Understanding not-self is a key to enlightenment

“Whosoever has not penetrated this impersonality of all existence, and does not comprehend that in reality there exists only this continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate Ego entity within and without this process, he will not be able to understand Buddhism, i.e., the teaching of the four noble truth in the right light. He will think that it is his ego, his personality that experiences the suffering, his personality that performs good and evil actions and will be reborn according to these actions, his personality that will enter into Nibbana, his personality that walks on the eightfold path. Thus it is said in the Visuddhimagga XVI.

Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found;

The deeds are, but no doer of the deed is there;

Nirvana is, but not the man that enters it;

The path is, but no traveler on it is seen.”

Secondly, and even more important, understanding not-self is a key to enlightenment. The belief in a self is synonymous with ignorance, and ignorance is the most basic of the three afflictions. Once we identify, imagine, or conceive of ourselves as an entity, we immediately create a schism, a separation between ourselves and the people and things around us. Once we have this conception of self, we respond to the people and things around us with either attachment or aversion. In this sense, the self is the real villain of the piece.

Seeing that the self is the source and the cause of all suffering, and that rejection of the self is the cause of the end of suffering, why not do our best to reject and eliminate this idea of a self, rather than trying to defend, protect, and preserve it? Why not recognize that personal experience is like a banana tree or an onion--that when we take it apart piece by piece, examining it critically and analytically, we will find that it is empty of any essential, substantial core, that it is devoid of self? When we understand--through study, consideration, and meditation--that all things are impermanent, are full of suffering, and are not-self, and when our understanding of these truths is no longer merely intellectual or academic but becomes part of our immediate experience, then the understanding of the three universal characteristics will free us of the fundamental errors that imprison us within the cycle of birth and death--the errors of seeing things as permanent, happy, and having to do with the self. When these delusions are removed, wisdom arises, just as, when darkness is removed, light arises. And when wisdom arises, we experience the peace and freedom of nirvana.

We have confined ourselves to looking at personal experience in terms of body and mind. Next, we will look more deeply into the Buddhist analysis of personal experience in terms of the elements of our physical and mental universe.