

‘Explain the Importance for Buddhists of the 3 Marks of Existence’

Introduction

The 3 marks of existence is the fundamental basis for the Buddhist world view, it is essentially that everything that exists in our ordinary world is conditioned, impermanent, causes suffering and is dependant on everything else. Buddhists feel the 3 marks of existence are so important because people do not usually realise that the world is like this, and it is this basic ignorance that is the root cause of their suffering. To attain enlightenment and realise the unconditioned, we need to dismantle our false ideas so that we understand how things really are. We have to see through the false images we have of ourselves and connect with who we truly are. The entire Buddhist path is about freeing oneself from a distorted view of reality and the suffering it brings. Teachings present the 3 marks of existence in a systematic way. The marks of existence are:

Anicca

The Buddha taught that everything in the world is impermanent and changing, which implies that there is nothing whatsoever that is permanent. We could say that change (anicca) is a fact of life, for example as soon as a piece of paper comes into existence, its impermanence is guaranteed. Matter is composed of different parts, and all things that are composed must have a beginning middle and end. Compounded things must be put together (produced), and at some point the compound will naturally fall apart and not exist anymore. The Buddha came to the conclusion that there is nothing that is not subject to change. He explained that change, or impermanence, operates on two levels – the gross and the subtle. The gross level is the obvious physical level of change we see everyday – things we experience like the people around us and the changing seasons. This gross level also applies to all areas of life and the world. This is what we call change – what we observe that does not need special scientific methods to be discovered. This level of change to Buddhists is important as they feel it is undeniable. Momentary change means that everything is constantly changing from moment to moment. Somethings may appear not to be changing to the human eye, but if observed closely we can see that there are atoms and electrons constantly changing their configuration. This change is all the time. Visible changes result from millions and millions of accumulated smaller changes. Many buddhists compare momentary change to the frames of a film going through the projector at just the right speed to give us an illusion of a continuous sequence.

Dukkha

Humans do not want certain changes and cannot let go of our desire and craving. We do not see the changing nature of things around us and these changes cause us pain and suffering. Dukkha is a Pali word and means suffering, pain, sorrow or misery.

There are types of dukkha for a Buddhist:

Ordinary suffering includes experiences that human beings identify as obvious, even if they don't follow a religion – such as illness, disease and old age. The common characteristic of these is that they are painful. This suffering includes the distress of not getting what we want, and also the pain of watching loved ones suffer. Suffering of change includes many types of distress and anxiety that results from changes in our life situation. Because humans cannot accept everything is impermanent, we suffer when things change beyond our control. Positive and happy feelings do not last

forever, so when they end it brings suffering. Suffering of change includes things like divorce and bereavement. Often it is ourselves that change and not the situation – for example we might once like a film but not anymore and therefore we look for another film to bring pleasure in an endless cycle of frustration and lust. Advertising feeds the cycle on the impermanence of things we like or dislike. This is the reason why some people who appear to have many things, like money, are actually unhappy. The suffering of condition existence refers to the basic dissatisfaction humans have with life, something which arises from things like insecurity and frustration of human limitations. The fact that we die might make life itself seem pointless.

Anatta

Anatta is unique to Buddhism and is developed from the idea of impermanence. The fundamental idea of permanence indicates that nothing has an unchanging self. Everything is process, and everything is simply made up of a lot of constantly changing parts. If we believe that things have an unchanging essence and that change affects only their secondary qualities, then if we chop a branch off a tree we still say the tree is a tree. Similarly, if our moods and feelings change over time we still think we are the same person. Many people feel identity is not dependant on particular states of mind. Many Buddhists and people in general differ in opinion on how many changes must occur before the identity of the object has changed.