

# **Anicca : Impermanence**

Bhante H. Gunaratana

Everything is changing. Changes are astronomical, physical, psychological, and there is no end to it. One form of matter changes into another form. One situation changes into another. One experience changes into another. Some changes are inconceivably rapid and some very slow.

At the blink of your eye an incalculable number of things change all over the universe and all over you. This whole world once was a part of the sun without any living being on it. Then it cooled down and was covered with ice. When the ice melted it was covered with water. When the water level went down a mass of land with mountains and lowlands appeared. This one land mass, through natural changes over millions of years, is divided into continents.

Wet land at one time became dry land at another time. A cold country at one time became a very hot country at another time. A very prosperous green land at one time became a desert at another time. The space once occupied by the sea and sea animals is now full of mountains with many trees and numerous land animals. This process of change in this world is going on forever. One day this world will become unsuitable for living beings. From the beginning of human civilization this change has been accelerating.

If you travel by airplane, within seconds, you could be moving from a 98 degree Fahrenheit temperature zone to a 10 degree Fahrenheit temperature zone. The change of weather directly affects your body and mind. If the weather is hot with polluted air, sticky, muggy,

humid, cold, windy, snowy, rainy, or cloudy, you experience a lot of pain.

The change can take place quickly or slowly and smoothly. As your body and mind are surrounded by the atmosphere, any change in the atmosphere affects your mind and body. It does not matter where the change takes place -- within you or without you; you are changing. Every moment, every second, all the great forces of earth, water, fire and air are changing. At the same speed, they are changing within you. You may not notice any of them.

At every heart beat, arteries in your body carry blood away from the heart and veins carry blood to the heart. Oxygen-rich blood from the lungs is pumped by the heart to the tissues and the returning oxygen-poor blood is sent to the lungs by this process. At any given moment your blood in your body is recycling. Every time you breathe in, you bring oxygen to your lungs. Every time you breathe out, you discharge carbon dioxide from your lungs. Every moment, your body is putting out waste material through the pores of your skin.

Every moment, every cell, every sub-atomic particle in your body is dying out and new particles are born. The food that you consume in solid form or liquid form replaces all the dying minerals, vitamins, protein, iron, calcium, etc. in your body.

While this process is going on with full cooperation of everything else in your body, you are aging, your internal organs are aging, your skin is growing, maturing, forming wrinkles and flaking off.

Through this process of change your hair is turning gray; your teeth are decaying, your eyes are becoming weak, your hearing is becoming weak, your taste buds are becoming weak; your nails are

becoming harder and more brittle, your bones are becoming more porous and weak; and your joints are losing their grease. Millions and millions of activities are going on in your body and mind at any given moment. You can never be aware of all of them.

Similarly, you could not find the feeling you had at the moment you woke up in the morning. The feeling you had ten minutes after you woke up would not be there fifteen minutes later. All your feelings from the moment you woke up till you go to bed change continually. In the same manner, all your perceptions, all your thoughts and all states of consciousness change, as well. At the very moment we are born, we start our journey of change which is known as growing, maturing and dying.

At the very moment you enter into what you call a "happy life of marriage", impermanence begins to hover over your head, reminding you that you will be separated by death, for every union ends up in separation. In this space age, some people may even have to prepare for the inevitable ending of their new "happy life" by divorce due to the fact that their sensual pleasure is subject to the law of diminishing return. Your love changes, your hate changes, your body changes and your mind changes. Nothing remains the same for two consecutive moments.

Any physicist or chemist possesses this knowledge. Pre-Socratic philosophers, like Heraclitus of Ephesus, have spoken of incessant and universal flux. However, the knowledge of change itself does not do any good for you if you do not use it for growing, maturing and understanding the very nature of your own predicament.

You should incorporate your knowledge of change into your life and use it as a means of liberation from suffering. It is not the knowledge

of impermanence itself but the way you handle it or the way you use it that opens your mind to the understanding of reality. When you know things are impermanent you prepare for the reality of impermanence.

Knowledge of constant change should help you realize the danger of clinging to changing objects. When you cling to anything which is subject to change, you experience pain. It is not by deceiving yourself by trying to defy this process of change but by clear understanding and accepting it that you can let go of your hatred and be calm, relaxed and peaceful. Resisting the law of change is the cause of friction and pain. Going with the change is the way to relieve that friction in your own mind.

All your experiences are unsatisfactory because they are impermanent. Everything, without exception, is changing all the time. No one can stop it. Seeing with wisdom the impermanence of all things is a way to purification of the mind [1]

In the same vein we read, "Whenever one reflects on the rise and fall of all the aggregates, one enjoys peace and joy comparable to that of immortality." [2]

"That which is impermanent is unsatisfactory" [3] is one of the most fundamental axioms in the Buddha's teaching. The First Noble Truth is directly related to this eternal Dhamma. "Whether Buddhas appear or do not appear, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma. All that is conditioned is impermanent, unsatisfactory and all Dhammas are without self. To this a Buddha fully awakens and fully understands. So awakened and understanding, He announces, points out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies it: all that is conditioned is

impermanent, unsatisfactory and all Dhammas are without self." [4]

When you read this it may occur to you, "Oh! yes, when my pain changes I experience pleasure and joy right then and there. When I think of it, I experience joy and happiness." Well, it is not that simple. There is much more to it. The change of pain to pleasure is certainly a pleasant experience. If that pleasant experience remains unchanged, you would be very pleased and joyful for the rest of your life. Unfortunately things don't happen that way.

When you were young, you were healthy, vigorous, active and free from obligations. Almost all of us have felt that way. That was the time you perhaps wishfully thought that only others become old, but you would remain young. Only they become sick but you would remain healthy forever.

"Did you never see in the world a man, or a woman, eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, frail, crooked as a gable-roof, bent down, resting on crutches, with tottering steps, infirm, youth long since fled, with broken teeth, gray and scanty hair or none, wrinkled, with blotched limbs? And did the thought never come to you that you also are subject to decay, that you also cannot escape it?"

"Did you never see in the world a man, or a woman who, being sick, afflicted, and grievously ill, wallowing in his own filth, was lifted up by some and put to bed by others? And did the thought never come to you that you also are subject to disease, that you also cannot escape it?"

"Did you never see in the world the corpse of a man, or a woman, one or two or three days after death, swollen up, blue-black in color, and full of corruption? And did the thought never come to you that

you also are subject to death, that you also cannot escape it?" [5]

As you grow older and older you lose your youthfulness, health, vigor, and agility. Then you begin to see impermanence face to face, very vividly, and you may not like it. Because of your memory of doing things with some agility and flexibility, you build up your courage. Because of your strength and pride, you may think that you could be able to perform everything much better and faster when you are young.

When you are older, because of your accumulated experiences in life, you might understand things much faster and more easily than when you were young. Nevertheless, the body and mind do not cooperate with your wishful thinking or desire.

You wish to be consistent in your abilities of hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, speaking, movements, thinking and so on. Soon, you begin to realize, however, that your body and mind have changed, even though you may like to think that you are still young in heart and spirit.

Because of your past good kamma, you even wish to defy change, growth and decay. You wish to learn more and more new things and retain what you have learned. Notwithstanding your pride of youth, health, and strength, you humbly surrender to the truth of Dhamma and learn from your mature experience to meet it face to face.

You may know some very healthy people, at the age of 70 or 80, who say "I will live 120 years." A few days or a couple of weeks later, they may drop dead. Sometimes people say "If you think young, you never grow old and live forever." Unfortunately, the reality of impermanence hits them very hard at a most unexpected

moment in life, despite their positive thinking.

This reminds me of a story of somebody who went to a very remote and primitive part of the world and found a very old-looking man. This sophisticated and most ambitious visitor asked this man "How old are you?" He said, "130". He asked him, "What is the secret of living so long?" He said, "I always think young." This ambitious man returned to his rocket-age society and started giving lectures; telling people, "If you think young, you will never die. I met 130-year-old people in such and such a region. The secret of their long life is that they always think young."

Another more realistic visitor happened [however] to be in the same vicinity and he found out that people in that region do not keep their birth records. When he asked another very old-looking man how old he was, he got a similar reply. While he was interviewing this man he saw a younger man laughing, holding his stomach. He approached him and asked him why he was laughing. He said "This is my uncle and he is only 70 years old. He does not know his birthday". Everybody in that region thinks that they are twice as old as they really are because they do not know their birth day.

Absolutely no one has ever been able to defy the truth of impermanence, which exists eternally. All beings are subject to the same law of impermanence. All who have lived on earth in the past have obeyed and surrendered to this sacred law. What you cherish today in your memories are the most insignificant fraction of some of the thoughts, words, deeds, events and things left behind by a smallest fraction of beings that lived in the past. You have no knowledge of those who have not left any record.

Change is not a feeling, but pain is. Therefore change itself is neither

pleasant nor unpleasant nor neutral. Your mind shifts from one feeling to another, depending upon your mood. When you have a pleasant feeling, for instance, you cling to it with greed, for you are unaware of the fact that the pleasant feeling will change. When it changes you become unhappy.

If you experience the pleasant feeling with mindfulness, the change of the pleasant feeling does not make you unhappy, for you are aware of the change and you anticipate the change of the pleasant feeling. If your attitude toward the feeling is guided by your mindfulness, then the change of one feeling or another does not make you unhappy.

You are often unaware that it is your desire for permanent pleasure from impermanent things that causes your unsatisfactoriness. How can you have permanent pleasure from impermanent experience? Any change is painful. When a pleasant feeling -- whether physical or mental -- arises, you wish that it would not change at all or you wish that it would change as slowly as possible. You wish the unpleasant feeling would change as fast as possible.

Unfortunately, change does not obey your wish. Everything, pleasant or unpleasant, within you or without you, things near to you or far away from you, gross or subtle, is changing. When change goes on defying your wish and crushing everything under its most powerful weight, you experience very unpleasant feelings of not getting what you wish.

You know that the sameness of anything is dull and boring; you need a change. Then, you change it, and the new situation changes as well. Then, you change it again, hoping "This time I will be happy for ever." The change does not make any concession or



discrimination. It remains fair and square with everything, everybody and all the time, and continues to change everything.

Nothing in your body and mind remains the same for two consecutive moments. The change is absolutely necessary for your improvement, growth, maturity, understanding, courage determination, knowledge and wisdom; in short, even for your existence. Even the attainment of enlightenment is not possible without the process of psychological changes.

However, you do not experience any physical or mental pain directly as [the] cause of change in your body, feeling, perception, thoughts or your consciousness. Then, why is it said, "Change causes pain?" As you may notice, this axiom does not say that you experience pain while the change is taking place. What it says is "That which is subject to change is painful." If the pleasure is subject to change, it necessarily and intrinsically is also subject to pain. "But how?" is our question.

It is not the change itself that creates pain, but your desire for the things you enjoy. It is your desire for permanent enjoyment from impermanent experience that causes pain. When pain changes, you experience pleasure. You welcome it. When pleasure changes, you experience pain. The change of pain into pleasure is more desirable. You go through this yo-yo experience or pendulum experience, between pain and pleasure.

When you practice mindfulness of change in your body and mind, you will not be affected by the change. You endure cold and heat, hunger and thirst, wind and sun, attacks by gadflies, mosquitoes and reptiles. [6] Those who are capable of seeing this simple truth are the ones who are really peaceful and happy.

The knowledge you gain from this experience of change of pleasure and pain helps you grow and mature. You remember this monotonous and repetitious occurrence in your life from your youngest days. This memory of change of things in the past makes it easy for you to face and accept whatever comes up in your life.

In a much deeper and more complete sense, you understand change when you mindfully watch all your activities in life. You do only three things in your entire life-- have thoughts, words and deeds. All of them have changed in the past, are changing now and will change in the future. There is no way that anybody can stop this constant flux of activities in your life. Therefore, you can say without hesitation that no person can do the same activity twice in the same manner. As life is like a river, nothing remains stagnant. If you cannot penetrate into the depth of this simple truth, this constant flow or constant change may make your life very painful.

Natural change is known as evolution and forced change is called revolution. The underlying truth in both is pain. You may try to resist change. When you have perfected your mindfulness to remain the same under all circumstances, then, you will not react to any change.

This, of course, is impossible for someone who has not attained enlightenment. The enlightened beings have the same experience as anybody else. However, they do not suffer because they have eliminated both the desire for pleasure and the resentment for displeasure. Desire and ignorance are the causes of suffering.

He who binds himself to joy  
Does the winged life destroy

But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

-- William Blake

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- [1] "*sabbe sankhara aniccati -- yada pannaya passati; atha nibbindati dukkhe -- esa maggo visuddhiya*" (Dhp. Vs. 277).
- [2] "*Yato yato sammāsati -- khandhanam udayabbayam; labhati piti pamojjam - amatam ta vijānatam*" (ibid Vs. 374).
- [3] "*yad aniccā tam dukkham*".
- [4] Abbreviated from Dhammaniyama Sutta.
- [5] SN. XXII, 29; "The Word of the Buddha," by Nyanatiloka, Wheel Publication, Fifteenth edition, 1971 pp. 13-14.
- [6] MN. I. 119, "The Word of the Buddha," by Nyanatiloka, Wheel Publication, Fifteenth edition, 1971 p.67.

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