

The Three Signata

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Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, in *The Word of the Buddha* (1967) translates what the Blessed One said about the three essential truths of impermanence, suffering and non-self:

The Three Characteristics of Existence

(ti-lakkha a)

A. III. 134

“All formations are ‘transient’ (*anicca*); all formations are ‘subject to suffering’ (*dukkha*); all things are ‘without a self’ (*anatta*).”

S. XXII, 59

“Corporeality is transient, feeling is transient, perception is transient, mental formations are transient, consciousness is transient. And that which is transient, is subject to suffering; and of that which is transient and subject to suffering and change, one cannot rightly say: ‘This belongs to me; this am I; this is my Self’.”

“Therefore, whatever there be of corporeality, of feeling, perception, mental formations, or consciousness, whether past, present or future, one’s own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near, one should understand according to reality and true wisdom: ‘This does not belong to me; this am I not; this is not my Self’.”

(Nyanatiloka 14)

The Anatta Doctrine

Venerable Nyanatiloka explains,

“Individual existence, as well as the whole world, are in reality nothing but a process of ever-changing phenomena which are all comprised in the five Groups of Existence. This process has gone on from time immemorial, before one’s birth, and also after one’s death it will continue for endless periods of time, as long, and as far, as there are conditions for it. As stated in the preceding texts, the five Groups of Existence—either taken separately or combined—in no way constitute a real Ego-entity or subsisting personality, and equally no self, soul or substance can be found outside of these Groups as their ‘owner’. In other words, the five Groups of Existence are ‘not-self’ (anatta), nor do they belong to a Self (anattaniya). In view of the impermanence and conditionality of all existence, the belief in any form of Self must be regarded as an illusion.

“Just as what we designate by the name of ‘chariot’ has no existence apart from axle, wheels, shaft, body and so forth: or as the word ‘house’ is merely a convenient designation for various materials put together after a certain fashion so as to enclose a portion of space, and there is no separate house-entity in existence: in exactly the same way, that which we call a ‘being’ or an ‘individual’ or a ‘person’, or by the name ‘I’, is nothing but a changing combination of physical and psychical phenomena, and has no real existence in itself.

This is, in brief, the Anatta Doctrine of the Buddha, the teaching that all existence is void (suñña) of a permanent self or substance. It is the fundamental Buddhist doctrine not found in any other religious teaching or philosophical system.

“To grasp it fully, not only in an abstract and intellectual way, but by constant reference to actual experience, is an indispensable condition for the true understanding of the Buddha-Dhamma and for the realization of its goal. The Anatta-Doctrine is the necessary outcome of the thorough analysis of actuality, undertaken, e.g. in the

Khandha Doctrine of which only a bare indication can be given by means of the texts included here.”

(Nyanatiloka 15)

S. XXII. 95

“Suppose a man who was not blind beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges as they drove along, and he watched them and carefully examined them; then after he had carefully examined them they would appear to him empty, unreal and unsubstantial. In exactly the same way does the monk behold all the corporeal phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and states of consciousness—whether they be of the past, or the present, or the future, far or near. And he watches them, and examines them carefully; and, after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, void and without a Self.”

S. XXII. 29

“Whoso delights in corporeality, or feeling, or perception, or mental formations, or consciousness, he delights in suffering; and whoso delights in suffering, will not be freed from suffering.
Thus I say.”

Dhp. 146-48

“How can you find delight and mirth
Where there is burning without end?
In deepest darkness you are wrapped!
Why do you not seek for the light?
Look at this puppet here, well rigged,
A heap of many sores, piled up,
Diseased, and full of greediness,
Unstable, and impermanent!
Devoured by old age is this frame,
A prey to sickness, weak and frail;

To pieces breaks this putrid body,
All life must truly end in death.”

(Nyanatiloka16)

Old Age, Sickness and Death

A. III. 35

“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, grey 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?”

Samsara

S. XV. 3

“Inconceivable is the beginning of this *Samsara*; not to be discovered is any first beginning of beings, who obstructed by ignorance, and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths.”

Venerable Nyanatiloka further explains:

“Samsara—the wheel of existence, lit, the ‘Perpetual Wandering’— is the name given in the Pali scriptures to the sea of life ever restlessly heaving up and down, the symbol of this continuous process of ever again and again being born, growing old, suffering, and dying. More precisely put: Samsara is the unbroken sequence of the fivefold Khandha-combinations, which, constantly changing from moment to moment, follow continually, one upon the other, through inconceivable periods of time. Of this Samsara a single life time constitutes only a tiny fraction,

Hence, to be able to comprehend the first Noble Truth, one must let one’s gaze rest upon the Samsara, upon this frightful sequence of rebirths, and not merely upon one single life time, which, of course, may sometimes be not very painful.

The term ‘suffering’ (dukkha), in the first Noble Truth refers therefore, not merely to painful bodily and mental sensations due to unpleasant impressions, but it comprises in addition everything productive of suffering or liable to it. The Truth of Suffering teaches that, owing to the universal law of impermanence, even high and sublime states of happiness are subject to change and destruction, and that all states of existence are therefore unsatisfactory, without exception carrying in themselves the seeds of suffering.

(Nyanatiloka 17)

“Which do you think is more: the flood of tears, which weeping and wailing you have shed upon this long way— hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths, united with the undesired, separated from the desired—this, or the waters of the four oceans? Long have you suffered the death of father and mother, of sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters. And whilst you were thus suffering, you have

indeed shed more tears upon this long way than there is water in the four oceans.”

S. XV. 13

“Which do you think is more: the streams of blood that, through your being beheaded, have flowed upon this long way, these, or the waters of the four oceans? Long have you been caught as robbers, or highway men or adulterers; and, through your being beheaded, verily more blood has flowed upon this long way than there is water in the four oceans. But how is this possible? Inconceivable is the beginning of this *Samsara*; not to be discovered is any first beginning of beings, who, obstructed by ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths.”

S. XV. 1

“And thus have you long undergone suffering, undergone torment, undergone misfortune, and filled the graveyards full; truly, long enough to be dissatisfied with all the forms of existence, long enough to turn away and free yourselves from them all.”

(Nyantiloka 18)

We must understand the nature of impermanence, suffering and non-self--anicca, dukka and anatta--if we are to be liberated from our ignorance.

Reference

Nyanatiloka, Mahathera. 1967. *The Word of the Buddha*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.