

## Three *marks* of existence (1)

### Preamble

Although we have all sorts of physical and psychological needs, according to Buddhism our most fundamental need is to make spiritual progress - to discover who we are on the deepest level - to become wiser, kinder and free of mental fetters. It's said our experience will never be fully satisfying until we are spiritually mature. This is why spiritual teachings and practices are so highly regarded - they're the means for meeting our deepest need.

Of course many people would say that spiritual teachings and practices are a waste of time, and that it's arrogant of others to say what their real needs are. In most social situations there's no point in trying to insist that what people need most are spiritual teachings and practices. And in any case, such teachings and practices wouldn't be of any help without the motivation to make use of them.

One way of seeing the process of spiritual growth is in terms of understanding the nature of our minds and the world more and more deeply - not just intellectually. So this brings us to the question: "what's the nature of existence?" According to every school of Buddhism, all things, whether on the physical and mental planes, have the characteristics or *marks* (*lakshana*) of being:

1. impermanent (*anitya*)
2. unsatisfactory (*duhkha*)
3. insubstantial (*anatman*), in the sense of not having an unchanging self-essence.

Take, for instance, the case of a motor boat. It's impermanent because it ages, and will eventually break up. It's "unsatisfactory" in the sense that it's incapable of providing complete and lasting bliss. (Even when we are on the water it won't necessarily make us blissfully happy because other factors will come into play. Maybe on one occasion we'll have a toothache, and another time we might have financial worries distracting us.) And the boat is "insubstantial" in that it's just a product of various causes at work in the wider world - such as there being a market for such boats, and the fibreglass and technology to make them. It's also "insubstantial" in the sense that it's made up of various parts - a steering wheel, the parts of the engine, the propeller, different sections

of the hull etc, etc. So it's just a conglomerate of parts each of which can be broken down into smaller parts.

This week we'll have an initial look at each of the three *marks*. Next week we'll focus on impermanence and unsatisfactoriness (the first and second *marks*), and the following week on insubstantiality (the third one).

### First *mark*: impermanence

Impermanence, the first characteristic, is perhaps the easiest to rationally understand. In a way it's obvious. And through close observation we can see that everything is changing: the birdsong, the tree that we can see from our window, our passing thoughts, and the prevailing attitudes of the society we live in.

#### Language encourages us to think of things as fixed

When we name something or somebody we attach a verbal label. For example if we say: *the person drinking tea in the corner of the room is John*, we have attached the label "John" to the ever changing being that was drinking tea at that time and place. Attaching a label, and continuing to use the same label, subtly reinforces the notion that the thing or person has an unchanging essence.

Of course it's useful and necessary to label things and peoples with words (i.e. to use nouns). It makes it possible to read these notes and to function in the world. But a wise person has a continuous sense that language and ideas are only an approximation to the truth. They have no problem discarding labels when they no longer seem useful.

### Second *mark*: unsatisfactoriness

Critics sometimes say the Buddha taught that all life is suffering, and that he was therefore a pessimist. But this is a misrepresentation. The Buddha didn't say every experience is miserable from all points of view. What he said was:

- our experience will always have some discomfort associated with it; and
- in comparison with the bliss of Enlightenment (*nirvana*), all other pleasures are insignificant.

In relation to the second of these bullet points, even relatively happy people sometimes feel that the ordinary pleasures they experience (whether in relation to sex, art, food, or anything else) aren't in themselves enough. Their heart yearns for

some deeper meaning and significance that only the “transcendental” (*lokottara*) can satisfy.

### **Third *mark*: insubstantiality**

The teaching of insubstantiality says that nothing in our experience:

- is outside the process of change, or
- stands apart from the rest of life.

#### *The teaching of insubstantiality doesn't mean our experience is non-existent*

Obviously we do have experiences. Each of us experience our bodies, our desires, ambitions, thoughts, memories etc. We experience what Sangharakshita calls an “empirical self”. Although all aspects of our “empirical self” change over time, there’s usually a lot of similarity between them from one day to the next day. We don’t wake up in the morning to find that our nose is a centimetre longer, that our preferred foods have changed, that suddenly we have a brilliant analytical mind, or that we can spontaneously speak Hebrew.

The teaching of insubstantiality doesn’t say our experience is completely non-existent. If someone misunderstands the insubstantiality teaching in this way they’re likely to end up in a mess. For instance someone may cease making an effort to become a better person on the grounds that nothing is real, so there’s no point.

If we do take our experience seriously, and work to purify our “empirical self”, we become a finer person. By analogy it’s like the process of taking a lump of clay and shaping and firing it to produce a beautiful art work. The art work has a meaning beyond being just a piece of porcelain.

#### *Confusion in the use of the word “self”*

Even having recognised that we do have a self (i.e. an “empirical self”), it’s easy to get tangled in confusion, because in common parlance the word “self” is used in such different ways.

For example spiritual life is spoken of as the process of becoming selfless (in the sense of becoming more aware of our inter-connectedness with all of life). And yet, putting a different spin on the word “self”, spiritual life can also be spoken of as the process of making oneself strong. When talking of spiritual life in terms of making the self strong, it is understood that a strong self is someone with genuine self-confidence, someone who’s not emotionally dependent on the approval

of others, who’s able to think for themselves and take initiatives, and who’s not emotionally constipated.

When we use the word self with a negative connotation (as when we speak of someone being “selfish”), the implication is that the person is functioning narrow-mindedly. They’re constricted by a sense of anxiety, craving or some other destructive emotion. And when the word is used positively (as when we speak of someone having “self-esteem”), the implication is that the person is experiencing wholesome emotions, such as genuine confidence and kindness. It’s so easy to get misled by the multiple meanings of a single word!!

If we are seeing spiritual life in terms of making the self strong, an important element is the process of becoming more “integrated”. This is explained in **annex 1**.

### **The three *marks* are all inter-related**

All three *marks* are inter-related. For instance because things are impermanent, the pleasures we derive from any particular item or situation won’t endure, and so can’t be absolutely satisfying. And because every person and thing is impermanent, they or it have no fixed self-essence. In other words they or it are “insubstantial”.

### **The value of reflecting on each of the three *marks***

There’s a big difference between a theoretical understanding and a full appreciation of the three *marks*. With a full appreciation we wouldn’t need to remind ourselves of them on the rational level. Being awareness of their truth would be part and parcel of who we are, and our emotional responses to almost everything would be different. Although we’d continue to enjoy things of the world, we wouldn’t cling to them in an unhelpful way. And we wouldn’t be fazed when surprises occur that spoil our plans. We’d be spontaneously kind, and wouldn’t become entangled with anxiety or craving.

Reflecting on the three *marks* helps bridge the gap between a purely theoretical understanding and a deeper wisdom.

## **Annex 1: Becoming more “integrated”**

We are un-integrated on account of conflicting emotions and impulses within us. When we feel like a number of different selves in conflict with one another, rather than a single harmonised person, this is because we aren't integrated. A couple of simple examples illustrating a lack of integration are:

- deciding to be nice to a certain person because we believe kindness is a good thing, but a few days later criticising them behind their back,
- making a decision to get up early the next morning to meditate, but when the next morning arrives deciding to stay on in bed because it's so comfortable.

These examples show how having ideals that we are trying to live up to tends to create a division between how we would like to be and how we actually are. The ideals therefore tend to make us less integrated. However, if our ideals are noble ones, when we have succeeded in integrating ourselves with them we'll be a finer, richer person.

Being un-integrated tends to weaken us, because our energies are pulling in different directions. So it's very worthwhile examining our different urges and ideas and trying to reconcile them. The process of reconciling our various ideas, drives and aspirations is a gradual process. Even a relatively mature individual may have some blind spots that are inconsistent with their ideals.

Sangharakshita uses the term “horizontal integration” to refer to the process of reconciling different sides of our nature that are within our everyday awareness; and the term “vertical integration” for the process of harmonising parts of ourselves that we aren't normally aware of. An example of vertical integration is having a significant dream that brings new perspectives within our range of experience and thereby enriches us.