

What Is Life?

The Five Aggregates of Existence (*pañca-khandha*)

Conditions of Reality

Buddhadhamma looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self (or essence) in all things. When all of the elements composing one's being are divided and separated, no self remains. A simple example that is often employed is that of the "car":¹ When all parts are assembled according to certain specifications, the result is called "car," but if all of those parts are completely separated, the form of the car cannot be found; there are only parts that can be referred to according to their various names.² That is to say, the essence of the car does not exist separately from the composition of its parts; there is only the word "car" for the condition describing the assemblage of those parts. And no self can be found even in parts that consist of the combination of other smaller parts. Therefore, when we say that something exists, we must understand that it exists in terms of a combination of various elements.

When the condition of all things is seen as an integrated form composed of various elements, Buddhadhamma can further inform us regarding the composition of those various elements and their features. Since Buddhadhamma has a special relationship to life, especially in terms of the mind,³ a presentation of the various compositions must include both the physical and the mental aspects, or *rūpa-dhamma* and *nāma-dhamma*, and especially an analysis of the mind.⁴

This presentation could be done in many different ways depending on a specific goal, but, here, a presentation will be done based on the Five Aggregates, which is the popular method found in the Buddhist Suttas.

According to Buddhadhamma, dividing the Five Aggregates entails an analysis of the constituent elements of life, which we call "being" (*satta*) or "person," and so on:

1. Corporeality (*rūpa*) is comprised of the elements of the whole *rūpa-dhamma*, body, and behavior of the body, or matter and material energy, including the qualities and behavior of this matter and energy.⁵
2. Feeling or Sensation (*vedanā*) amounts to the impressions of sukha, dukkha, or indifference that occur by contact with the world through the five senses and the heart/mind (Thai, *chai*).⁶
3. Perception (*saññā*) is that which can be established or known. In other words, it is the establishment of knowledge of conditions and the characteristics of the various features of an object that are the cause for remembering that object.⁷
4. Mental formations, predispositions, or volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*)⁸ are the psychological compositions, or the various qualities that embellish the mind making it good, bad, or neutral, and they have intention (*cetanā*) as their guide. Put very simply, some of these good and bad thoughts are as follows: confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), moral shame (*hiri*), moral fear (*ottappa*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*), equanimity (*upekkhā*),⁹ wisdom (*paññā*), delusion (*moha*), ill-will (*dosa*), greed (*lobha*), conceit (*māna*), perspective (*ditthi*), envy (*issā*), and avarice (*macchariya*), for example.
5. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) involves being aware of sensations via the six senses (that is, the five senses and the mind), such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physically touching, and mentally touching.¹⁰

The Five Aggregates of Existence and The Five Aggregates of Existence as Objects of Attachment, or Life and Life as a Problem

The Buddha's words reveal the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, which serve as a summary of the essence of Buddhism, and there are statements of special interest related to the Five Aggregates of Existence that appear in the Four Noble Truths: The first Noble Truth mentions dukkha or suffering. Very early on, Lord Buddha illustrated the meaning or definition of dukkha by giving examples of various events and occurrences that were readily apparent and common in people's lives. He did this in order to show various types of dukkha. And in the end, Lord Buddha summed this up by saying that when the Five Aggregates are objects of attachment they become dukkha.

Bhikkhus, the following comprise the Noble Truths of dukkha: Birth is dukkha; the aging process is dukkha; death is dukkha; associating with things that one does not love is dukkha; separation from people or things that one loves is dukkha; desiring something without attaining it is dukkha. In short, attachment to the Five Aggregates is dukkha.¹¹

Buddha's words, aside from showing the status of the Five Aggregates of Existence in the Buddhadhamma, also reveal one important point, and that is the meaning of dukkha. In order to make this concept easy to remember and summarize, dukkha simply describes the Five Aggregates of Existence when they have become objects of attachment.

The main thing that must be studied and noticed here is the difference between the Aggregates of Existence and the Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment. Please note the following words of the Buddha:

Bhikkhus, I will explain the Five Aggregates of Existence and the Five Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment.

What are the Five Aggregates of Existence? Body (*rūpa*) . . . sensation (*vedanā*) . . . perception (*saññā*) . . . mental formations (*sāṅkhāra*) . . . and consciousness (*viññāṇa*); any of these that resides in the past, future, or present, is internal or external, far or near, and exists in a crude or refined, inferior or superior manner, are all called the Five Aggregates of Existence.

And what do the Five Aggregates of Existence have to do with attachment? Body, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness, any of these that resides in the past, future or present, is internal or external, far or near, exists in a crude or refined, inferior or superior manner, any of these things that are composed of mental intoxications (*āsava*) are grounds for attachment (*upādāna*) . . . All of these, therefore, are called the Five Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment.¹²

Bhikkhus, I will explain the things that cause attachments and comprise attachments; so, all of you listen carefully.

Body . . . sensation . . . perception . . . mental formations . . . consciousness are the things that can cause attachment. The desire to attach or cling (*chandarāga*) to body, sensation, mental formations, and consciousness constitutes attachment to that thing.¹³

The preceding statement represents one of the most fundamental and important principles for understanding Buddhadhamma.

The Ethical Importance of the Five Aggregates of Existence

Ordinarily, human beings have the tendency to believe that their true self exists in one form or another. Some people take the mind (*citta*) to be the self; and some people believe that there is yet another self that is hidden in the mind and that that self is the owner and operator controlling all of the functions of the body and mind.¹⁴ The explanation of the Five Aggregates aims to show that the things we refer to as “being,” “person,” or “self,” when separated, are really only the above five components. There is nothing left that can be called the self, and even each one of those Five Aggregates is interdependent and unable to exist alone. Each of the Five Aggregates of Existence, therefore, has no self. In other words, the principle of the Five Aggregates itself illustrates the existence of no-self (*anattā*). And this principle explains the following: life is the conjoining or coming together of different components; the combination of these components is not the self; each component itself is not the self; and there is nothing beyond these components that can be said to be the self.¹⁵ When you can realize this, attachment and clinging to the self can be extricated. The principle of no-self can be seen clearly when you understand the function of the Five Aggregates of Existence in the chain of dependent causation (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which will be discussed in detail later.

When we see that life is comprised of the interrelationship of the Five Aggregates, we will not misunderstand this to mean nihilism, which is called *ucchedaditṭhi*, nor will we misunderstand this to mean eternalism, which is called *sassaditṭhi*. In addition, when we come to know that all things have no self or essence and are related to and dependent on one another, then we will understand the principle of kamma correctly and know how it works. This process of relations and the interdependency of all things is explained by the principle of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, or dependent origination, as well.

Furthermore, viewing all things as broken down and composed of various elements, like these Five Aggregates, is often used as a method of mental practice or a way of getting in the habit of applying a method for analyzing the truth. That is, when you come into contact with people or things or establish various relationships, the mind does not become

confused and lose its wits, ending up believing something because of its superficial appearances only. This method of perception is a way of getting in the habit of verifying the truth, and most importantly it involves knowing and seeing all things in all their various conditions (that is, being objective). It is a way of seeing things “as they are” that does not lead to attachments based on greed and desire. This type of perception is very different from viewing things according to the way you would or would not like them to be (that is, being subjective). Objectivity leads to an understanding of the aim of Buddhadhamma and the principle of the Five Aggregates, and this understanding entails not clinging or attaching, not relating to all things with craving and attachment, but coming into relationships and handling situations with wisdom.

At any rate, in presenting the Buddhadhamma, the Buddha did not teach the notion of the Five Aggregates in isolation, because the Five Aggregates are only conditions for further consideration; and that consideration tends to go along with other principles of the Dhamma that indicate the nature and function of the Five Aggregates. The Five Aggregates must, therefore, be presented in the context of other principles, such as *anattā* (no-self), which will make the practical importance of the Aggregates much more apparent. Allow me to quit this discussion of the Five Aggregates in order to consider some of these other principles.

Notes

1. In the Pali texts the “car” is a “chariot”—trans.
2. S.I.135.
3. The Thai term for heart and mind is essentially the same (Thai, *chit-chai*, lit. “mind-heart”); therefore, in the minds of the Thai, the Western distinction between the two is usually less clear.
4. These can be broadly defined as mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*) or *nāma-dhamma* and *rūpa-dhamma*; but the Abhidhamma tends to divide these into three: mind (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), and matter (*rūpa*). For further reference, if these are compared to the Five Aggregates, which will be fully explained below, then *citta* = *viññāṇa-khandha*, *cetasika* = *vedanā-khandha*, *saññā-khandha*, and *saṅkhāra-khandha*; and *rūpa* = *rūpa-khandha*.
5. According to the Abhidhamma, *rūpa* can be divided into 28 things: 1) The 4 primary elements (*mahābhūta*): solid element/earth (*paṭhavī-dhātu*); fluid element/water (*āpo-dhātu*); element of heat/fire (*tejo-dhātu*); and the element of motion/wind or air (*vāyo-dhātu*).

2) The 24 aspects of derivative materiality (*upāda-rūpa*):

The five sensitive material qualities (*pasāda-rūpa*)

1. eye (*cakkhu*)
2. ear (*sota*)
3. nose (*ghāna*)
4. tongue (*jivhā*)
5. body (*kāya*)

The four mind-objects (*ārammaṇa*)

6. form (*rūpa*)
7. sound (*sadda*)
8. smell (*gandha*)
9. taste (*rasa*)

The three tangible objects are not counted because they are the same as the three primary elements of earth, fire, and air.

The two material qualities of sex (*bhāva-rūpa*)

10. femininity (*itthatta*)
11. masculinity (*purisatta*)

The physical basis of mind (*hadaya-rūpa*)

12. heart-base (*hadaya-vatthu*)

The material quality of life (*jīvita-rūpa*)

13. vital force (*jīvita-indriya*)

The material quality of nutrition (*āhāra-rūpa*)

14. nutriment (*kabaḷīṅkārahāra*)

The material quality of delimitation (*pariccheda-rūpa*)

15. space-element (*ākāsa-dhātu*)

The two material qualities of communication (*viññatti-rūpa*)

16. gesture (*kāya-viññatti*)
17. speech (*vacī-viññatti*)

The five material qualities of plasticity or alterability (*vikāra-rūpa*)

18. lightness, agility (*lahutā*)
19. elasticity and malleability (*mudutā*)
20. adaptability (*kammaññatā*)

(the latter two are not counted as they are the same as 16 and 17 above)

The four qualities of salient features (*lakkhana-rūpa*)

21. growth (*upacaya*)
22. continuity (*santati*)
23. decay (*jaratā*)
24. impermanence (*aniccatā*)

Please note that the term “*hadaya-vatthu*,” which is taken as the seat of the workings of the mind, was only agreed upon in later texts and did not appear in the Tipiṭaka.

6. Sensation (*vedanā*) can be divided into three types: happiness of the body or mind (*sukha*), physical or mental anguish (*dukkha*), neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (that is, neither-*sukha*-nor-*dukkha*, *adukkhamasukha*, or equanimity, *upekkhā*); or it can be divided into five: physical *sukha*, physical *dukkha*, delight, grief, and equanimity; or they can be divided according to how they are perceived: via sight, via the ears, via the nose, via the tongue, via the sense of touch, or via the mind.

7. Perception (*saññā*) can be divided into six factors according to the six senses above. Here, the term “*ārammaṇa*” will only be used in its Pali Buddhist sense; that is, meaning the things that the mind perceives or things that are known via the six sense-doors; the term *dhammārammaṇa*, mind-object, will not be used as it is commonly understood in Thai as “emotion” or “mood” (*arom*).

8. According to the principles found in the Abhidhamma commentaries, 52 mental states (*cetasika*) can be found; and if we compare them to the Five Aggregates, all of these states are comprised of sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*): that is, feeling is one of these, perception is one, and then there are 50 mental formations, which can be divided as follows:

1) 11 *aññasamānā-cetasika* (mental states that are good and bad)

a) Five *sabbacittasādhāraṇa* (universal mental states): contact (*phassa*), intention (*cetanā*), one-pointedness (*ekaggatā/samādhi*), vitality (*jīvitindriya*), and attention (*manasikāra*);

b) Six *pakiṇṇaka-cetasika* (particular mental states): initial application of thought (*vitakka*), sustained application (*vicāra*), determination (*adhimokkha*), effort (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), and resolve (*chanda*).

2) 14 *akusala-cetasika* (mental states that are unwholesome)

a) Four *akusalasādhāraṇa* (universal unwholesome states): delusion (*moha*), lack of moral conscience (*ahīrika*), shamelessness (*anottappa*), and feeling unsettled (*uddhacca*);

b) Ten *pakiṇṇaka-akusala-cetasika* (particular unwholesome mental states): greed (*lobha*), improper understanding (*ditthi*), conceit (*māna*), ill-will (*dosa*), jealousy (*issā*), stinginess (*macchariya*), worry (*kukkucca*), sloth (*thīna*), torpor (*middha*), and uncertainty (*vicikicchā*);

3) 25 *sobhana-cetasika* (universal excellent mental states)

a) Nineteen *sobhaṇasādhāraṇa-cetasika* (universal beautiful mental states): confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), conscience (*hiri*), moral shame (*ottappa*), non-greed (*alobha*), non-ill-will (*adosa*), equanimity (*tatramajjhataṭā*), tranquillity of the mental body (*kāya-passaddhi*), tranquillity of the mind (*citta-passaddhi*), lightness of the mental body (*kāya-lahutā*), lightness of the mind (*citta-lahutā*), flexibility of the mental body (*kāya-mudutā*), flexibility of the mind (*citta-mudutā*), adaptability of the mental body (*kāya-kammaññatā*), adaptability of the mind

(*citta-kammaññatā*), proficiency of the mental body (*kāya-pāguññatā*), proficiency of the mind (*citta-pāguññatā*), rectitude of the mental body (*kāyujukatā*), rectitude of the mind (*cittujukatā*);

b) Six *pakīṇṇaka-sobhaṇa-cetasika* (particular beautiful mental states): proper speech (*sammāvācā*), proper action (*sammākammanta*), proper livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*)—these three together are often called the “abstinences” (*viratī-cetasika*)—compassion (*karuṇā*), joy in the success of others (*muditā*), and wisdom (*paññā*)—these latter three often being called the “faculty of wisdom” (*paññindriya*).

9. *Upekkhā* is an important dhammic principle that often causes confusion and misunderstanding; we should, therefore, study this term carefully. We should at least divide *upekkhā* into two groups, one related to *saṅkhāra*, which can be equated with *tatramajjhataṭṭā* (mental balance) and another related to *vedanā*, which can be equated with *adukkhamasukha* (a feeling of equanimity, neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant); but this will have to be explained in more detail later on.

10. *Viññāna* can be divided in six ways according to how it arises: eye consciousness (*cakkhu-viññāna*), ear- (*sota-*), nose- (*ghāna-*), tongue- (*jivhā-*), body- (*kāya-*), and mind- (*mano-*). According to the Abhidhamma, the whole *viññāna-khandha* is called “*citta*” and the various *citta* are separated into 89 or 121 spheres:

a) separated according to levels or stages of *citta*: the 54 consciousnesses of the sense-sphere (*kāmvācāra-citta*), the 15 consciousnesses of the form-sphere (*rūpāvacāra-citta*), the 12 consciousnesses of the formless-sphere (*arūpāvacāra-kusala-citta*), and the 8 supramundane consciousnesses (often further divided into 40);

b) separated according to their properties: 12 immoral consciousnesses (*akusala-citta*), the 21 moral consciousnesses (*kusala-citta*, often further divided into 37), the 36 resultant consciousnesses (*vipāka-citta*, often further divided into 52), the 20 functional consciousnesses (*kiriya-citta*). It is not necessary to our discussion here to explain the details of each of these consciousnesses.

11. Vin.I.10.

12. S.III.47.

13. S.III.166.

14. We may note the following passage from the canon: “Bhikkhus, those who do not know any better will take this body, which is composed of the four elements (*mahābhūta*), as the self. This is still better than taking the mind as the self, because the body that is composed of the four elements can last as long as a year, two years, 3–4–5 years, 10–20–30–40–50 years, or even 100 years or more. But the thing we refer to as the mind (*citta*, *mano*) or consciousness (*viññāna*) is constantly arising and passing away, all day and all night” (S.II.94).

15. See S.III.2–4, 16–18 and so on, and 111–115.

What Is the Nature of Existence?

The Three Characteristics of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*)

The Three Natural Characteristics of All Things

The Laws or Conditions

According to the basic principles of Buddhadhamma, all things are born of the conjoining of various elements or take form due to the composition of various elements. This does not simply mean gathering separate parts and putting them together to create a form, such as putting various materials together to make tools. Actually, the statement that all things come into being from the conjoining of various elements is simply an expression to facilitate understanding at a basic level. In reality, all things exist in a constant flow or flux. Each and every component part comes into being due to the break up or disintegration of other component parts; and each of these parts does not have its own essence and arises and passes away one after the other in unending succession, without absolute certainty or stability. This flow continues to evolve or proceed in a way that seems to maintain a form or course because all of the component parts have a connected and interdependent causal relationship and because each component has no essence of its own and is, therefore, in constant in flux.

All of this goes in accordance with nature and depends upon the relationship of combined and dependent effects; there are no other forces coming into play dependent on a creator or mysterious power. For purposes of simplicity, let us refer to this as natural law.

There are two major dhammic principles pertaining to natural law that are believed to have been set down by Lord Buddha: the Three Characteristics of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*) and dependent origination (*paṭṭicasamuppāda*). Actually, these two concepts are the same principle, but they are presented in different ways in order to reveal the same truth.

The Three Characteristics explain the features of all things in order to reveal them as they are (as proceeding in a related and interdependent manner, as connected causal factors following the principle of dependent origination). Dependent origination aims at pointing out the interrelated condition of all things, as the continuous flow of relationships between causal factors, until these factors can be seen as the Three Characteristics of Existence.

These natural laws are *dhammadhātu*, normal conditions (of cause and effect); they are *dhammatthiti*, enduring; and they are *dhammaniyāma*, natural restrictions independent of a creator or mysterious power or the existence of any religion or religious teacher!⁶ These natural laws show that, according to Buddhism, the role of teacher or adept is one of a discoverer of these various laws, a revealer who can point the way and explain them to the people in this world.

The Buddha has explained the Three Characteristics of Existence in the following way:

Whether an enlightened Tathāgata¹⁷ were to appear in this world or not, this principle would still prevail as an enduring aspect of the natural order:

1. All compounded things (*saṅkhāra*)¹⁸ are impermanent. . .
2. All compounded things are [subject to] dukkha. . .
3. All dhamma are without essence or self (*anattā*). . .

A Tathāgata, having achieved enlightenment, understands this principle. He declares it, teaches it, and sets it down as a model to reveal, explain, and facilitate an understanding that “All *saṅkhāra* are impermanent. . . all *saṅkhāra* are dukkha. . . and all dhammas are without essence or self (*anattā*). . .”¹⁹

The Three Characteristics of Existence are also referred to as the “Universal Characteristics,” or, in other words, common to all things.

To put this more simply, let me state The Three Characteristics of Existence very briefly:

1. *Aniccatā* means impermanence, instability, and uncertainty, a condition, which having already arisen, gradually breaks down and fades away.
2. *Dukkhatā* is a state of suffering, a condition of pressure that arises and passes away, a condition of resistance and conflict, due to the

fact that something that was created or fashioned in one way changes to become something else, making it impossible for it to exist in that incomplete or deficient condition, not allowing for complete fulfillment of desires or cravings and causing dukkha for the person who desires things with attachment.

3. *Anattatā* means that all phenomena are not the self, and that there is no real essence, soul, or self (*anattā*).

All things that exist, exist within this flow or current, which is comprised of various related and interdependent causes arising and passing away in a constant and unending series. Arising and passing away with uncertainty, things exist according to dependent causal factors, experience pressures and conflicts, and exhibit their own deficiencies. With all things proceeding along in this flow, they are really nothing in and of themselves, and they are unable to maintain any kind of personal self or essence.

Living things are distinguished by being composed of merely the Five Aggregates of Existence; there is nothing else besides the Five Aggregates of Existence—and this settles the problem of the existence of an independent self. If you consider each of these Aggregates independently, you will see that each element is impermanent. Being impermanent, they are subject to dukkha. Therefore, anyone who clings to these Aggregates exists in a state of pressure. Conflict or dukkha is not the self; we can say that dukkha is not the self because each of these Aggregates arises depending on causal factors that also have no self or essence, and these Aggregates and factors are not subject to the power nor the ownership of living beings. (If a person were the real owner of the Five Aggregates, then he could exercise control over these elements as he willed and not allow them to veer from a desired course or an ideal form that he would like them to maintain, such as desiring not to grow old nor to ever become ill.)²⁰

One prominent example in which the Buddha mentioned the Three Characteristics of Existence in the context of the The Five Aggregates of Existence is the following:

Bhikkhus, body (*rūpa*) . . . sensation (*vedanā*) . . . perception (*saññā*) . . . compounded things (*saṅkhāra*) . . . consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are without self (*anattā*).²¹ If body. . . sensation . . . perception . . . compounded things . . . consciousness were to have a self, then they would not become ill, and furthermore, one could obtain whatever one wished relating to body. . . sensation . . . perception . . . compounded things . . . consciousness saying: “May my body. . . my

sensation . . . my perception . . . my compounded things . . . and my consciousness all exist according to my wishes and not any other way.” But because body . . . sensation . . . perception . . . compounded things . . . and consciousness are not the self, they are subject to illness and disease and no one can have his own way with these things. No one can implore or control these Aggregates.

So, bhikkhus, what do all of you think? Is the body permanent or impermanent? (Lord Buddha asks about each Aggregate.)

Impermanent, Lord.

So, if something is impermanent, is that thing dukkha or sukha?

It is dukkha, Lord.

So, if something is impermanent and is by nature subject to dukkha and change, should we view that thing as our own, or associate ourselves with it, or see it as our self or essence?

We should not view it that way, Lord.

Bhikkhus, because each and every Aggregate—including body . . . sensation . . . perception . . . compounded things . . . and consciousness—whether in the past, the future, or the present, whether internal or external, coarse or detailed, crude or refined, far or near, all of you must view them with proper insight in the following way: “It is not mine; I am not it; it is not my self.”²²

Many Hindu sages and Western philosophers have tried to explain the reason why Lord Buddha did not reject the notion of self (*attā*) or *Ātman* at the highest level but only rejected some phenomena, such as those found in the above passage. These philosophers suggest that Lord Buddha rejected the Five Aggregates and all other phenomena as the self because the *attā* that really exists is not composed of the Five Aggregates. Accordingly, these thinkers have cited many other statements in order to demonstrate that Lord Buddha only rejected some phenomena as the self, but he did accept a notion of self (*attā*) at the highest level, and they have attempted to explain that nibbana (nirvana) is the same state as this self or *Ātman*—that is, at the highest level nibbana is *attā*. While this matter may be worthy of a larger philosophical discussion, I would just like to turn to a brief consideration of the ethical importance of this: Common people, especially those who have been educated to believe in *Ātman*, will have the inclination to cling to or grab at any notion or form of self (*attā*)

in order to fulfill a desire that is hidden and deeply imbedded in the mind. When people are introduced to these principles and discover that they must lose the latent sense of a self (at the level of the Five Aggregates), they try to create or build something new to cling to. But according to Buddhist principles, a person should not let go of one thing only to cling to something else—you should not free yourself only to become the slave of something else. In other words, things that have a self do not exist; and things that exist, are without self.

The existence of all things in a state of flux or as a flowing current, all interrelated and interdependent, each the related cause of the other, each impermanent, subject to dukkha, and without a self (*anattā*), must be clarified by an explanation of the principle of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

The Ethical Importance of the Three Characteristics of Existence

Aniccata

The principle of impermanence (*aniccatā*) relates to the arising, the existence, and the passing away of all things, including the most minute and detailed matters, as well as physical (*rūpa-dhamma*) and psychological phenomena (*nāma-dhamma*). The impermanence of these small, intricate things—when they appear in a larger or conglomerate shape or form that can be seen—is called change; and people tend to feel as if there were a self behind all of this. This is a kind of false understanding, a cause of clinging and attachment. This way of thinking can lead a person to become tied up with thoughts that do not match the facts. When your life continues in a way that cannot keep pace with the conditions confronting you, then you will be dragged down, disturbed, and grasp at false illusions you have built up, only to deceive yourself in the end. Living like this is called slavery; but if you can keep pace with surrounding conditions, live freely, and take advantage of natural law, then the principle of impermanence can be very useful to ethics and morality.

Impermanence is neutral, neither good nor bad; but when it is related to the existence of human beings, it is designated as one kind of change—progress—and yet another kind—degeneration. Whatever kind of change takes place depends upon the relevant causal factors present. In the case of conduct, the principle of impermanence is used to teach the natural way of understanding degeneration and progress, stating that things that

have already developed are also subject to degeneration, and vice versa. Furthermore, things that have already developed may continue to develop depending on various causal factors—and with all of these causal factors human beings can play a very important role as the creator of other causal factors. In this sense, progress and degeneration are not, therefore, things that go whichever way the wind blows; rather they are phenomena made and created through the involvement of human beings according to the progress and degeneration over which they can exercise some control (*yathākamma*).²³ This means that human beings can get involved and play a significant role in various matters without having to wonder about the intervention of other supernatural factors—because other supernatural factors do not really exist. So, in terms of ethics, impermanence or change is a natural law that gives human beings hope. Because natural laws are usually neutral, the outcome of a given situation depends on the causal factors that brought it into being. It is possible, then, for people to alter their circumstances, to bring about improvements in the world. It does not matter if it is material or mental progress, such as making a dull-witted person intelligent, making common people become enlightened beings (arahants), or correcting, transforming, and improving yourself in every way—an understanding of relevant causal factors can lead to enlightenment.

In summary, impermanence, understood at the level called change, teaches us that this progress can degenerate, resulting in a regression. To avoid degeneration, you must be careful to elude and eliminate the causes of degeneration and try to cultivate or nurture the causes that will lead to changes that sustain progress. Those who succumb to regression can correct and improve themselves by throwing off the causes of degeneration and backsliding and creating new causes that will result in further improvement. Moreover, changes for the better that have already taken place are able to promote further progress by increasing progress-related causal factors. At the same time, a person must not be too heedless or overexuberant about this progress to the point of not seeing the likelihood of regression and, thereby, missing the various causes that might reverse this process. At this point, I would like to mention a most important principle that serves as a tool for linking the truth (*saccadhamma*) with ethics (*cariyadhamma*): in order to have wisdom, from the very beginning you must know what real degeneration and progress are all about and understand their root causes. The principle of impermanence, therefore, can play an especially valuable role in terms of ethics: it offers hope for

increased progress, supports the principle of kamma (which relates to the effects of human deeds), and emphasizes the importance of education and training in order to bring about wisdom that is able to change things for the better.

In terms of internal aspects or direct psychological benefits, the principle of impermanence helps us to live with a mind that can keep pace with the truth. At the same time, in the external realm, we are able to employ wisdom to avoid degeneration and make various kinds of internal psychological progress, so that we can live with freedom and not fall into the enslavement of *both* degeneration and progress. We can also learn how to take advantage of natural laws and deal with them without feeling as if we are at their mercy and are being pushed around in a drifting and dazed manner. Being helplessly caught in an undertow without knowing the current is of no help to yourself or other swimmers.

A person with a free mind knows and understands all things according to the truth and does not attach or cling to things with craving (*taṇhā-upādāna*). This person, therefore, knows real degeneration and real progress. And here I do not mean the kind of progress that collectively drags people down and binds them to further slavery; the person with a free mind is able to realize the full benefits of this present state of progress and act responsibly to help others.

At the basic levels of ethics, the principle of impermanence teaches us to know the common nature of all things. This knowledge keeps dukkha within limits when degeneration or loss takes place; it also helps to check carelessness and overexuberance related to any progress made. At higher levels, the principle of impermanence teaches us to gradually attain truth until the principle of no-self (*anattā*) is reached; it allows us to live with a free mind, free from attachments and dukkha. This is called living with total and true mental health.

The principle of impermanence is often used as a means of calming yourself or others when disaster, suffering, or loss occurs. It can be more or less consoling. Employing the principle of impermanence in this way is somewhat beneficial when the circumstances happen to be right; it may be especially useful for instilling mindfulness (*sati*) in those who have not been very aware of this principle in the past. But if you often employ this principle in this way in daily life, then it becomes more of a danger than a benefit, because you allow yourself to become a passive slave to worldly processes. Using impermanence as a rationalization actually goes against

the principle of kamma and runs contrary to efforts toward self-improvement that aim at achieving the goals of Buddhaddhamma and bettering your life.

Dukkhatā

In the principle of *dukkhatā*, there are two significant points that indicate the importance of ethics.

As all things arise due to the composition of various small elements—each in flux, in a condition of arising, and changing and passing away according to the principle of impermanence—the composition of each those elements is actually another composition of various changes and conflicts that exists with a latent possibility of breaking down or degenerating at any time. This being the case, in order to control these various small compositions and shape them into something desirable, or to direct these changes in a certain way, a person must apply energy and use a method of organization that will, out of necessity, become a part of these compositions; the greater the number of small elements and the complexity of these elements, the greater the amount of energy and care is required to change them. In order to change the course of something, any action carried out toward it must be done in accordance with the true cause of that thing and with a knowledge of the result of that action and the means by which mistakes, once committed towards it, may be corrected. This is a way of acting toward all things in a free manner, without encumbering yourself and causing dukkha. But contrary to this is acting out of desire and attachment, which will lead to becoming tied up and pressured by those things. Desire and attachment not only result in personal dukkha, they steer you away from positive results.

According to the principles of action put forth in the Noble Truths, responding to dukkha takes exact knowledge (*pariññā*), which means taking note of conditions or coming to understand them. This correct response to dukkha is extremely important but is often overlooked. Buddhaddhamma teaches us to react to dukkha with a knowledge of what is what and a knowledge of what constitutes dukkha; this means knowing your own problems, not for the purpose of dukkha but for the purpose of correctly responding to dukkha and eliminating it—or, to put it simply, for the purpose of experiencing true sukha. In yet another sense, the principles for action in the Noble Truths teach that whatever is problematical must first be studied, known, and clearly understood before you begin to solve that problem. Studying a problem does not mean that you create a problem

or that you set out in search of trouble—it is a method for alleviating problems. A person who does not know the principles of action in the Noble Truths might react to dukkha in a mistaken, aimless, or distorted way, and this will only increase personal dukkha, resulting in a pessimistic outlook.

When you know these two main points, then, according to the principle of dukkha, the following ethical values can be stipulated:

1. All things are subject to pressure that cause them to arise, develop, and pass away, which results in further pressure, conflict, and an inability to maintain a constant condition. This condition shows that all things have a deficiency, an incompleteness in themselves, and this deficiency or incompleteness will increase according to the amount of time that passes and any external and internal changes that occur. This being the case, all things that try to maintain their condition or expand to a state of completeness have to constantly fight and struggle. Maintaining a good life and directing life towards progress and completeness means that you must be constantly correcting and improving yourself.
2. When conflict and struggle arise (from either internal or external causes) resulting in further change, and there is an ignorant resistance to change (whether on the part of things, people, or institutions), then the result tends to be bad rather than good, as in the case of culture change making a turn for the worst, for example. Knowing how to adjust and improve yourself is, therefore, very important, and once again I want to emphasize the necessity of wisdom, especially in terms of principles of conduct, so that you can keep pace with and manage all things according to their actual causes.
3. Sukha and things that bring about sukha, as they are more commonly understood in this world, fall under this principle of truth as well. These kinds of sukha tend to have an incompleteness about them: any state of sukha or search for sukha must change, and so this state cannot provide complete satisfaction. Mindlessly basing your hopes on this type of sukha is tantamount to making yourself one and the same with that incompleteness or throwing yourself into the current of change and being dragged, oppressed, and pressured in a manner beyond self-control, depending on how things change or how much hope you have invested. When change, flux, or disappointment occur, the power of dukkha will increase

by that amount. Seeking after this kind of sukha is like selling yourself into slavery or putting your life at stake in a bet. Those who seek sukha in a more intelligent way, while still delighted with seeking happiness from things in flux, must still keep pace with the truth and enjoy sukha with clear comprehension (*sampajañña*). The people who really know that the impermanent nature of sukha can instill fear are shaken up the least. To put this another way, whatever happens, you should maintain freedom of mind the best you can.

4. There are two kinds of sukha that can be divided according to their values: one fulfills the needs of the five senses and is a response to various drives or thoughts; the other is the result of a mental condition that is clear, free from difficulties and obstacles, and limitations of thought, such as feelings of anxiety, restrictions, and other impairments that entangle the mind.

The first kind of sukha depends on external causes, such as material goods and thoughts, for fulfilling various wants. The mind that is caught up in this kind of sukha is a mind that is grasping, struggling, and agitated; secondly, this type of sukha is accompanied by attachments, narrowness, greed, and getting caught up in yourself. All of these symptoms are very important in terms of ethics, because they are related to clinging, desiring, or selfishness, and when these things are not brought under control, various problems arise. These kinds of thoughts and behaviors depend on external causes, therefore, it is common for this kind of sukha to make people overdependent and become the slaves of various external factors. The fluctuation of these external factors, in turn, shakes these people up. According to the Dhamma, this kind of fulfillment is referred to as *sāmisasukha*—a kind of sukha that attempts to fill a lack or feeling of deficiency and is dependent on the allurements of material things (*āmisā*).

The second kind of sukha is a happiness that does not depend on external causes to fulfill desires. This sukha is a mental condition that allows the mind to be itself—with nothing disturbing it. This condition can be described in the following ways: clean, because there are no unwholesome tendencies (*kilesa*)²⁴ present to stir it up and muddy it; bright, because it is constituted with wisdom that sees things as they really are, far and wide, without limitations, with correct understanding, and is ready to acknowledge and

consider things objectively; peaceful, because there is no agitation, worry, frustration, and gullibility, only relaxation and calm; independent, because one is free, since there are no limitations placed on thought, no obstructions, and no attachments—the mind is light, wide open to expressing love, good intentions, and kindness towards humans and animals, acknowledging the suffering of others with compassion, and participating in the happiness, prosperity, and success of others with sympathetic joy; complete, because there is no feeling of a lack or deficiency or loneliness, only freshness and openness. If this mental state is compared with the body it is equivalent to being physically fit. This kind of complete mind has the following important qualities: freedom—there is no attachment or slavery; and wisdom—there is knowledge and understanding according to the truth. These two qualities are visible in a condition of mind called equanimity (*uppekkhā*), a condition of calmness and neutrality that allows involvement with things in an objective manner, following pure reason. This kind of sukha has the highest importance for ethics and is called *nirāmisasukha*, a spiritual happiness that is problem-free, allowing a person to assist others with their difficulties; it is a condition that is refined and deep, beyond what we normally refer to as sukha. It is, therefore, simply referred to as being free from dukkha, because it is beyond deficiencies and fluctuations.

Most people are usually caught up in the search for the first kind of sukha; it is impossible for them to fulfill their desires at all times and sustain this type of sukha, because it is subject to external causes and changes in accordance with natural law. It is necessary, therefore, for people to establish a state of mind similar to the second type of sukha, so that this sukha may be a foundation for living in the world with comfort and true happiness, with the least amount of dukkha; and this means knowing how to respond to the first type of dukkha so that it will no longer create problems for yourself or others. This state of mind can be created by seeing things as they are so that you might live without attachments, keep pace with the true principles of nature, and finally attain the level of understanding called no-self (*anattā*).

5. In the search for the first type of sukha that is dependent on external causes, you must accept the fact that this will involve at least a relationship between two sides or elements; for example, if two

people, or one person and one material thing, come into contact and each side has dukkha, conflict, and deficiencies coming along with it, then this can only increase the amount of conflict and violence between them in accordance with their own improper behavior. To give you a very simple example for the sake of convenience, we might say that one side is the consumer of sukha and the other the consumed; both sides have deficiencies and conflicts within themselves already. For example, the consumer is not prepared to constantly consume according to his desire, and, at the same time, the consumed is not prepared to be constantly taken advantage of. In this state of affairs, it is impossible that each side can gain unless they are both willing to give up something. When either side or both sides do not fully realize or accept this truth and only hold on to their respective desires, there will be disagreement and conflict arising between these two sides beginning with a dislike for one other.

Furthermore, when the consumer wants something from the consumed, this often extends to wanting that object of desire forever. But these feelings are opposed to the natural process that flows along according to various causal factors; such feelings, therefore, obstruct the smooth flow of the natural process. When a person lives without understanding this truth, clinging only to craving and attachments—that is, *tanhā* and *upādāna*—this can be called living with resistance and ignorance that will cause collisions, conflicts, pressures, and repercussions to manifest and create various types of dukkha.

Moreover, aside from two parties being elements relating to one another in a natural process, there may be another factor—a third party—that is involved; for example, there may be another person who wants to share in the consumption. Obstructed desire or attachment will inevitably cause a reaction between each party involving certain kinds of conflict, such as, competition, discord, and fighting—all of which are forms of dukkha. The more problems are resolved with desires and attachments, the more violent the dukkha becomes; but the more problems are solved with wisdom, then the sooner they fade away.

Accordingly, ignorance (*avijjā*) or delusion (*moha*) consists of not knowing things for what they are, and this causes selfish desire or greed (*lobha*). When this desire is obstructed or left unfulfilled

and a person does not possess the kind of wisdom that can keep pace with the circumstances, ill-will (*dosa*), frustration, and destructive tendencies arise. From the roots of these three unwholesome tendencies (*kilesa*), other tendencies and habits soon follow, such as developing a miserly disposition, envy, paranoia, irrationality, anxiety, fear, feelings of vengeance, laziness, and so on. This conglomeration of unwholesome tendencies causes conflicts that lead to an obstruction of and separation from the harmony of the natural process. Any conflict with nature will have bad repercussions, resulting in pressures that amount to a form of natural punishment. This form of “natural dukkha” or the natural build-up of dukkha (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*) can be felt for yourself:

- Causing narrow-mindedness, darkness, melancholy, anxiety frustration, and repression;
- Causing mental and physical disturbances, disorders, and disease;
- Causing normal physical suffering, such as pain during sickness, to redouble because of attachment to craving;
- Causing others to suffer conflict, narrow-mindedness, melancholy;
- When the majority of people in society increase their unwholesome tendencies (*kilesa*) and cut themselves off from each other with selfishness, various kinds of conflicts increase; society falls apart and finds itself in trouble because of people’s collective (mis)deeds (*kamma*).

This is a cumulative process that leads to feelings of dukkha (*dukkha-vedanā*) or real dukkha (*dukkhadukkha*). This dukkha is the result of dealing with things in an ignorant manner, resisting the natural process, and letting yourself become a slave to this cycle. In short, all of this can be attributed to clinging and attachment.

The opposite course of action involves living in a way that keeps pace with truth, that is, knowing the way of all things and how to relate to them with wisdom; practicing with the knowledge that dukkha is part of the natural process; knowing that the formation of dukkha is still there but does not create conflict or danger any more than it should; and remembering that you can take advantage of dukkha if you know it for what it is. If you do not cling to dukkha with craving, then you do not become attached, live with resistance,

build up unwholesome tendencies, restrict yourself, and become the cause of conflict. You should know how to live in harmony with nature by acting virtuously: with *mettā*—love and good intentions for others; *karuṇā*—helpful intentions; *muditā*—joy in the success of others; *upekkhā*—equanimity and even-mindedness, judging all events according to true causes and conditions; *sāmaggī*—unity and cooperation; helping, bringing benefits to others, sacrificing, being composed, patient, modest, respectful, and having critical faculties that do not make you gullible. All these qualities are related to openmindedness; they are opposite to the unwholesome tendencies that cause conflict and narrow-mindedness: such as hatred, vengeance, envy, repression, division, competition, selfish want, self-indulgence, abruptness, stubbornness, pride, fear, paranoia, laziness, indifference, depression, delusion, over-exuberance, and foolish belief.

This is the way to live in harmony with nature, to be able to benefit from natural law or use natural law in a beneficial way without losing your freedom. According to a Buddhist proverb: Living without attachments or living with wisdom is held to be most excellent (*paññājīvin jīvitamāhu seṭṭham*).²⁵

Anattatā

The principle of no-self (*anattatā*) has important value in terms of ethics.

At a basic level, when examined in terms of craving (*taṇhā*), the principle of no-self will decrease selfishness. It does not allow you to cling to your own gains and makes you see them in a broader perspective, without having a self as an obstructing or limiting factor.

Furthermore, all things exist in a condition of no-self due to the conjoining of various elements, which exist according to a variety of causal factors. All things, in whatever form they may appear, depend on the make-up and the creation of causal factors that link relationships to a purpose within the scope of their capabilities. Accordingly, it should be emphasized that a person should act with a free mind that is able to respond to the causal factors present. This is the best method for achieving success and avoiding craving and attachments.

At an intermediate level, with respect to a person's outlook or biases (*dittṭhi*), the principle of no-self will broaden the mind, making it able to

get involved, consider, and solve problems by not letting the self, selfish wants, and attachments become obstructions. Instead, the unbiased mind can consider and solve those problems according to their nature and causal factors. In other words, a person can establish equanimity (*uppekhā*), consider things in the light of truth, avoiding autocratic tendencies, and practice “dhamma-critically.”

At a higher level, knowing the principle of no-self amounts to knowing the actual way of all things, that is, knowing the true principles of nature at the highest level. Total knowledge at this level can shake off attachments to the point of attaining complete freedom or enlightenment. This is the final goal of Buddhadhamma. A clear understanding of the principle of no-self, however, depends on an understanding of dependent origination (*paṭṭicasamuppāda*) and practicing according to the Noble Eight-fold Path, which will be explained in due course.

In general, the principle of no-self (*anattatā*), together with the principle of impermanence (*aniccatā*) and being subject to dukkha (*dukkhatā*), all attest to the truths that support other principles of conduct, especially the principle of kamma and other practices leading to true liberation (from dukkha and attachments). For example, because all things have no self, their various forms come into being according to a flow of related and dependent causal factors; and because this is so, kamma exists. And because all things have no self, true liberation is possible. At any rate, now all of this must still be considered further in terms of the principle of dependent origination.

Notes

16. In the commentary to the Abhidhamma, *niyāma* or natural law is divided into five types:

1. physical inorganic order (*utu-niyāma*), which pertains to natural laws concerning temperature, weather, the seasons and the environment surrounding human life;
2. physical organic order (*bīja-niyāma*), which pertains to natural laws concerning the continuation of species and genetics;
3. order of act and result (*kamma-niyāma*), which pertains to natural laws concerning human behavior and the progression of the results of actions (the law of kamma);
4. order of the norm (*dhamma-niyāma*), which pertains to natural laws concerning relationships and interdependent causality;

5. psychic order (*citta-niyāma*), which pertains to natural laws concerning the working of the mind (DhsA.272; see also DA.II.11).

17. Another name for a Buddha or enlightened one, literally a “thus-gone one” (or “thus-come one”) or, in looser, more modern terms, one who has “gone the [spiritual] distance”—trans.

18. The meaning of *saṅkhāra* can differ according to contexts. In the context of the Five Aggregates of Existence (*khandha*), *saṅkhāra* tends to mean bad thoughts that a person harbors, and so its sense is psychological; but in the context of the Three Characteristics of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*), *saṅkhāra* tends to mean all compounded things, be they physical or psychological—in other words the whole of the Five Aggregates of Existence.

19. A.I.286.

20. See, for example, Vism.618, 628, 640.

21. Which translates as “no-self” or “not-self.”

22. S.III.66–68.

23. Here, the term *yathākamma* is used in its more canonical sense and not according to common Thai usage, which tends to mean fate or chance.

24. In much of Buddhist literature, the term *kilesa* is rendered as “defilements,” which I have avoided here; in fact, the author asked me if there were some word other than defilements that we could use to describe this Pali term. I have chosen “unwholesome tendencies” or “bad habits” to express this concept. In other words, practices, behavior, and ways of thinking that are not conducive to accomplishing the goal of Buddhism. More literally, however, *kilesa* can mean a stain, soil, or (mental) impurity. In ethical terms, it tends to refer to vices and behavior that can be attributed to our “lower nature,” and in Thai this term has come to bear this more ethical sense, referring to inappropriate wants, desires, and lust—trans.

25. Sn. p. 33.