

# The concepts of anicca and anatta



The concepts of anicca and anatta make up two thirds of the three marks of existence, which is the fundamental basis for the Buddhist world view, and essentially, it is that everything in our world is conditioned, impermanent, causes suffering and is dependent on everything else. Buddhists believe that people do not really understand and realise that the world is this way and so they believe this ignorance is the root cause of the suffering they endure.

Buddhists believe that in order to achieve enlightenment, individuals must dismantle the ideas they have of the world and themselves so that they may understand how things really are. The Buddhist path relates to freeing yourself from a distorted view of reality and the suffering that it brings.

Anicca is the concept that everything is impermanent and changing and implies that nothing is permanent or stays the same. In Buddhism, anicca is believed to be a fact of life; as soon as something comes into existence, its impermanence is guaranteed.

Although we understand that things change, most of us still believe that there are at least one or two things which are permanent. The Buddha came to the conclusion that there is nothing which is not subject to change and explained that this change, or impermanence, operates on two levels; the gross and the subtle. The gross level of change is obvious physical changes – people aging, day turning to night, the weather changing as well as thoughts and feelings.

This change is what people commonly call change – something that we observe that does not need scientific methods to be discovered. This idea of a gross level of change is important to Buddhists as they believe that change

in this sense is undeniable. The subtle level of change is sometimes called ‘ momentary change’, meaning that everything is constantly changing from moment to moment as the universe is in a constant state of movement.

Despite some objects appearing as if they stay the same, they are in fact continually changing and if observed closely using microscopes, people would be able to see that the atoms and molecules the objects are made from are constantly changing their configuration. Everything is subject to this change process all the time. It is due to this subtle level of change that change eventually appears visibly at the gross level. The visible changes do not happen suddenly but are instead the result of an accumulation of numerous smaller changes. Buddhists explain that momentary change happens as a continuum of linked moments.

Buddhists believe that if individuals realise that everything changes and that everything we experience will eventually come to a natural end, that it will prevent them from hanging onto things and will eventually make things easier when these things happen – accepting that change is a natural part of life will make us happier. The second mark of existence is Anatta, and Anatta is a concept which is unique to Buddhism and it is developed from the idea of radical impermanence, the fundamental idea of which indicates that nothing has an unchanging essence or ‘ self’.

Everything is made up of lots of constantly changing parts and everything is a process. Buddhists believe that everything has an unchanging essence and that change affects only their secondary qualities and so if a branch is chopped off of a tree, the remaining part of the tree is still considered to be a

tree. The concept of anatta is considered to challenge the Hindu notion of there being a permanent and eternal essence found within all living beings as the teachings by the Buddha denied the existence of a permanent self. Anatta is translated as 'no-self' or the illusion of 'self'.

The idea of this concept is linked to the Buddhists understanding of causality – the notion that everything in the universe and even the universe itself, comes into being through the power of certain causes and certain conditions and this is what is meant by conditioned existence. Buddhists believe that nothing ever occurs due to a lone cause, but instead several combined causes and conditions. An example of Anatta is The Chariot Story which is found in The Questions of King Milinda. A monk named Nagasena asks King Milinda the mode of transport he used to travel that day.

The reply was a chariot. Nagasena uses the chariot story to explain the concept of anatta. He asks what a chariot is; is it the pole, the axle, the wheels or the reins? The answer is obviously that it is none of these things and is instead a combination of all of them. The Buddha is believed to have said that everything that is perceived by the senses are not really 'I' or 'mine' and therefore people should not cling to them and therefore it is the individual thought that oneself is 'I', that creates ignorance.

It is believed that once a person stops identifying self, they can free themselves from ignorance. This idea relates to the Skandhas which are the five aspects that establish a human being, the Buddha said that identifying any of the Skandhas as 'self' resulted in dukkha (the final mark of existence). These Skandhas are; Form – the physical world and the material

body, Sensation – individual's abilities to sense feelings and events,  
Perception – how things are seen and reacted to, Mental Formations –  
thought processes and Consciousness – mental awareness.