

## Dhamma,niyāma Sutta

### The Discourse on the Natural Orders

Also called **Uppāda Sutta** (The Discourse on the Arising)  
 [The characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self]  
 (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.134/1:285)  
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2008

#### 1 The three characteristics

**1.1** Very often, for years, we may take for granted that we have the right understanding of a certain teaching of the Buddha. Then one day, while meditating, listening to a Dharma talk, reading a Buddhist book, or simply being relaxed doing nothing in particular, we suddenly realize that we actually had it all wrong, or at least, the understanding is incomplete. Such a life-changing step into the clear light of the Dharma often comes when we are in touch with living spiritual masters who are themselves in touch with the Dharma.<sup>1</sup>

A case in point is that of the conventional wisdom regarding the famous statement of the three characteristics as, for example, in the Dhammapada:<sup>2</sup>

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| <p><b>1</b> <i>Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ti<br/>yadā paññāya passati<br/>atha nibbindati dukkhe<br/>esa maggo visuddhiyā.</i></p> | <p><u>All formations [samskaras] are impermanent:</u><br/>When one sees this with wisdom,<br/>then, one is revulsed at suffering—<br/>This is the path to purity. (Dh 277)</p> |
| <p><b>2</b> <i>Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ti<br/>yadā paññāya passati<br/>atha nibbindati dukkhe<br/>esa maggo visuddhiyā.</i></p> | <p><u>All formations [samskaras] are suffering:</u><br/>When one sees this with wisdom,<br/>then, one is revulsed at suffering—<br/>This is the path to purity. (Dh 278)</p>   |
| <p><b>3</b> <i>Sabbe dhammā anattā ti<br/>yadā paññāya passati<br/>atha nibbindati dukkhe<br/>esa maggo visuddhiyā.</i></p>   | <p><u>All dharmas [principles] are not self:</u><br/>When one sees this with wisdom,<br/>then one is revulsed at suffering—<br/>This is the path to purity. (Dh 279)</p>       |

A similar, but succinct, statement of the three characteristics is also found in **the Dhamma,niyāma Sutta** (see translation below).

Philosophically this sort of truth statement is said to apply *sub specie aeternitatis*, which according to the Philosophical Dictionary,<sup>3</sup> is Latin for “under the aspect of eternity.” In western philosophy, from Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) onwards, it serves as an honorific expression describing what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence upon the merely temporal aspects of reality. In simple English, *sub specie aeternitatis* roughly means “from the perspective of the eternal.” More loosely or humorously, the phrase is used to describe an alternate or objective point of view.

**1.2** A popular interpretation of *saṅkhāra* is that they are “conditioned things,” that is, the world. The better informed might even regard it technically as “the phenomena of experience as active participants in an ongoing process of cause and effect” (Sujato 2002). Broadly, we can take “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) to refer to all *constructed things*, that is, our mind-made world or the world in a *psychological* sense.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is inspired by Bhante Sujato’s short but important note on “All Dhammas” (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See also **Is there a soul?** = SD 2.16 esp (8).

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophical Dictionary*, <http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/s9.htm>.

The term *dhamma*, according to popular interpretation, has a much broader sense, and includes both conditioned phenomena and the unconditioned, that is, nirvana.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is sometimes translated freely as “things,” that is, *all* things, comprising both our mind-constructed world *and* the temporal-spatial world, the world in the psychological *and* the physical senses.

As such, some scholars and scholarly teachers have this mistaken conclusion: “*Dhamma* can be applied to both conditioned and unconditioned things and states. It embraces both conditioned and unconditioned things *including Nibbāna*. In order to show that even Nibbāna is free from a permanent soul the Buddha used the term *dhamma* in the third verse.”<sup>5</sup> We will see that this is a very flawed notion.

**1.3** In a short but important note entitled “All Dhammas,” **Bhikkhu Sujato** (2002) points out that such an understanding is doubtful since nirvana is never referred to as “not-self” in the suttas. In the **Mahā Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (M 64), for example, we are admonished to reflect the five aggregates in this manner:<sup>6</sup>

Whatever that is therein that consists of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness, he regards those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an illness, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as not self.<sup>7</sup> He turns his mind away from these states.<sup>8</sup>

Having turned his mind away from these states,<sup>9</sup> he directs his mind to the deathfree element, thus:

“This is peaceful, this is sublime,<sup>10</sup> that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.”<sup>11</sup>

(M 64.9/1:435 f) = SD 21.10

The purpose of this reflection is to be revulsed at suffering: we reflect phenomena as “suffering,” “a disease,” “a tumour,” and above all, as “not self.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, *nirvana is not included in such a reflection*.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>4</sup> IB Horner, in her Majjhima tr of the **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35), for example, notes: “*dhammā*. These include, beside the *saṅkhārā* (conditioned things), the unconditioned nibbāna as well.” (M:H 1:281). See foll n.

<sup>5</sup> Narada Thera in Dh:N 4<sup>th</sup> ed 1993: 225 (*italics added*). A similar idea was held by W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1967: 57 f.

<sup>6</sup> See also **Sīlavanta S** (S 22.122/3:168), **Sutavanta S** (S 22.123/3:169); **Dutiya Nānā, karaṇa S** (A 4.124/-2:128), **Dutiya Mettā S** (A 4.126/2:129), **Jhāna S** (A 9.36/4:423).

<sup>7</sup> “Impermanent...not self,” *aniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhatto parato palokato suññato anattato*: as at M 1:500; A 4:422 f; cf A 2:128. Comy says that the marks of suffering are sixfold (*dukkhato rogato gaṇḍato sallato aghato ābādhatto*), the impermanent twofold (*aniccato palokato*), the not self threefold (*parato suññato anattato*) (MA 3:146). This refrain (and the rest) shows the attainment of calm (*samatha*), leading to the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*), or “insight preceded by calm” (*samatha, pubbaṅgamā vipassanā*), ie, on emerging from dhyana, one contemplates on it as an object of insight, reflecting it as having arisen through conditions, esp volition: see **Aṭṭhaka, nagara S** (M 52.4/1:350) = SD 41.2, where Comy says that this is *samatha, pubbaṅgamā vipassanā*; see **(Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā S** (A 4.170/2:157) = SD 41.5. In **Kūṭa, danta S** (M 74), this formula is applied to the body, so that we are not attached to it (M 74.9/1:499) = SD 16.1.

<sup>8</sup> Comy: “He turns his mind away” (*cittam paṭivāpeti*) from the 5 aggregates included in the dhyana, which he has seen to be marked with the 3 characteristics (of impermanence, suffering, not-self) (MA 3:146). He goes on to regard the dhyana or attainment, thus: “This is peaceful...nirvana” (see below).

<sup>9</sup> Comy: That is, from the five aggregates, all of which are marked by the 3 characteristics. (MA 3:146)

<sup>10</sup> *Paṇītaṃ*, as at M 2:235, 263; A 4:423, 5:8, 110, 320, 322, 354 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Etam santam etam paṇītam yad idam sabba, saṅkhāra, samatho sabbūpadhi, paṭinissaggo taṇha-k, khayō virāgo nirodho nibbānan ti*, as at M 1:136.

<sup>12</sup> In **Sīlavanta S** (S 22.122), it is stated that such a reflection if done consistently done makes us a stream-winner, and its continued practice progressively makes us a once-returner, a non-returner, and an arhat respectively (S 22.122/1:167).

<sup>13</sup> “It has been pointed out, however, that nirvana is referred to as “not-self” in the Vinaya Parivāra [V 5:86]. This late compendium of monastic discipline is an odd place indeed to find such a statement, but at least this shows

That nirvana is not included is obvious: it cannot be categorized as “existing” (which entails eternalism) nor as “non-existing” (which entails annihilationism).<sup>14</sup>

One reason for the popularity of the view that “all dharmas” includes nirvana is probably to counter the opinion of some prominent scholars that nirvana is a kind of higher “Self.” As Sujato notes:

The persistence of such ideas is quite astonishing in light of the Buddha’s consistent and unsparring condemnation of all doctrines of self, and the total lack of any hint that Nibbana is a “self.” However, it does not necessarily follow that the statement “all dhammas are not-self” refers to Nibbana. In fact, it’s a weak argument. One should never rely on a disputed interpretation of an ambiguous term to buttress one’s position in a debate.

The Theravada commentaries offer conflicting opinions on this point—a sure sign that the teachers of old were not unanimous. One explanation has it that “sankharas” here means the “aggregate of sankharas” (ie various mental factors headed by volition), while “dhammas” means all five aggregates. I find this interpretation too arbitrary to do justice to the context. Elsewhere the commentaries suggest that “dhamma” includes “concepts” along with conditioned phenomena. This is interesting, but it rests on philosophical premises more characteristic of later strata of Buddhist thought, namely the distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth.

The main problem with all the above theories is that they lack sutta support. Ideally we should like [to find] an important sutta dealing directly with the three characteristics which refers to something as a “dhamma” while stating or implying that that “dhamma” is neither impermanent nor suffering. (Sujato, “All Dhammas,” 2007)

The safest thing we can say here is that the statement “All dharmas [principles] are not self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) means that no abiding entity called a “soul” or whatever is found either *within* the five aggregates (our mind-body being) or *outside* of it, such as the view that “the self is the world” (*so attā so loko*).<sup>15</sup> In other words, we can only conclude that *sabbe dhammā anattā* means that “all dharmas (phenomena *and* the principles behind their conditionality) are not self.”<sup>16</sup> Nirvana, as we will see, does not fit anywhere in such a notion.

## 2 Dhamma,niyāma

**2.1 According to the Dhamma,niyāma Sutta (A 3.134),** the fact that all saṃskaras are impermanent and suffering, and that all dharmas are not self, is that “this element remains [this principle is stable], the fixedness of things, the order of things,” which the Buddha discovers and declares to the world (see translation below). What Sujato has to say here is very instructive and reproduced in full:

The idea is that the principles of the dhamma are always true. Things are impermanent. In the past they were impermanent. In the future, too, they will be impermanent. While the sutta [A 3.134] stops short of such a bold statement as “impermanence is permanent,” still the terms “stability” and “lawfulness” are virtually the opposite of “impermanence.”

If the principles of the dhamma cannot be regarded as impermanent, neither, it would seem, should they be regarded as suffering. They are not mentioned in the usual descriptions of suffering, nor do they fall into the threefold analysis of suffering as the suffering of painful feeling, the suffering of saṃkharas, and the suffering of change.

So the principles of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness are the “dhamma” which is not impermanent or suffering; yet it seems plain enough that such principles are not-self. This is con-

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that such ideas were considered orthodox by the emerging Theravada school.” (Sujato 2007). The Parivāra was written in Sri Lanka (1st cent BCE, according to Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983:26).

<sup>14</sup> See eg **Kaccā(ya)na,gotta S** (S 12.15/2:16 f) = SD 6.13.

<sup>15</sup> See **Pāṛileyya S** (S 22.81.25/3:99) & SD 6.1 Intro (4); **Attā Loko S** (S 24.3/3:204 f).

<sup>16</sup> See also **Saṅkhāra** = SD 17.6 (6) & **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35.4/1:228) = SD 26.4 n.

firmed in a related discourse,<sup>17</sup> which uses similar phrases such as the “stability of dhamma” in the context of dependent origination. While the factors of dependent origination, the “dependently originated phenomena” headed by ignorance, are impermanent, the causal relationship between the phenomena remains fixed. Whenever there is ignorance, that will always give rise to conceptual activities, and so on. And it is precisely this consistent manner in which experience operates which creates the illusion of “self,” of a permanent essence or core underlying the transient fluctuations of experience. To see through this illusion, the Buddha taught us to make the conditional relation itself a focus of our investigation, to see experience neither as a random meaningless chaos, nor as diverse surface manifestations of a hidden inner unity, but as a flow of transient phenomena governed by natural laws.

The three characteristics themselves are really little more than another perspective for examining conditionality. The suttas often treat “impermanent” as a virtual synonym for “dependently originated.” So in the end we can summarize like this. “Sankharas” means “conditioned phenomena,” while “dhammas” encompasses the conditioned phenomena as well as the principles of conditionality.

This is useful. It reminds us that insight is not just “bare awareness” of transient phenomena, but must lead to an act of understanding, an intuitive realization of their fundamental nature. Seeing that “this thought is impermanent,” “this feeling is suffering,” “this idea is not-self,” we can let go of that thought, that feeling, that idea. But only when we see that “all thoughts are impermanent,” “all feelings are suffering,” “all ideas are not-self” can we let go of all thoughts, all feelings, all ideas.

The key to thus universalizing the particulars of one’s own experience is conditionality. Again and again and again one sees thoughts arising when certain conditions are present; and again and again and again one sees that when those conditions are absent, thoughts do not arise.

One bright day it clicks: one understands. This inner event is really quite mysterious. No-one can say how or when it will occur; and yet we can point out how to bring it about. When it happens, one has no thought of identifying or clinging to the passing parade of phenomena, the Mardi-gras of the mind, for one understands: all dhammas are not-self.

(Sujato, “All Dhammas,” 2002; emphases added)

**2.2** The key phrase, **“this element remains [is fixed], the fixedness of things, the order of things”** (*sā dhātu dhamma-ṭ,ṭhitatā dhamma,niyāmatā*), of the Dhamma,niyāma Sutta, needs some explanation. The Sutta’s Commentary explains “things” (*dhamma*) as “the intrinsic nature of things” (*sabhāva*) (AA 2:380), but this reflects a post-Buddha Abhidhamma philosophy, which however is helpful if we do not get too involved with philosophical discussion at the cost of understanding it for the sake of spiritual practice.

The Commentary to **the Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.20) is more helpful,<sup>18</sup> saying that both *dhamma-ṭ,ṭhitatā* and *dhamma,niyāmatā* refer to conditions (*paccaya*). **“This element”** (*sā dhātu*), that is, the intrinsic nature of the conditions (*paccaya,sabhāva*), simply persists. It is never the case that birth is not a condition for decay-and-death. For, on account of a condition, the conditionally arisen phenomena persist (*paccayena hi paccay’uppannā dhammā tiṭṭhanti*); therefore, the condition itself is called **the fixedness of things** (*dhamma-ṭ,ṭhitatā*). The condition determines [fixes] the state (*paccayo dhamme niyameti*), therefore, it is called **the order of things** (*dhamma,niyāmatā*).

This is the natural order of the universe and life itself: *that all formations are impermanent and suffering, and all things are not self.* That is to say, all phenomena arise by way of conditions, a network of causes and effects, which in turn proliferate further networks of causes and effects. All this is imperma-

<sup>17</sup> Evidently, **Paccaya S** (S 12.20/2:25-27) = SD 39.5.

<sup>18</sup> S 12.20/2:25-27 = SD 39.5. Comy: *Ṭhitā’va sā dhātū ti ṭhito’va so paccaya,sabhāvo, na kadāci jāti jarā,marañassa paccayo na hoti. Dhamma-ṭ,ṭhitatā dhamma,niyāmatā ti imehi pi dvīhi paccayam eva katheti. Paccayena hi paccay’uppannā dhammā tiṭṭhanti, tasmā paccayo’va dhamma-ṭ,ṭhitatā ti vuccati. Paccayo dhamme niyameti, tasmā dhamma,niyāmatā ti vuccati* (SA 2:39)

nent and suffering, and both these impermanent and suffering phenomena, together with the principle (*dhamma*) behind them, are not self. This universal fixed order of things always exists in the universe and our lives, even before or after the arising of Buddhas. The Buddha does not create or invent all this, but merely discovers it, and declares in to the world.<sup>19</sup> As such, **Bhikkhu Bodhi** points out that

The two expressions, *dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā*, must thus have a meaning that is common to *both* dependent origination *and* the three characteristics, and it therefore seems unfitting to explain them here, as [the SA Ṭīkā] does, in a way that is specifically tied to conditionality. Moreover, it is more likely that here *dhamma* means the principle or lawfulness that holds sway over phenomena, not the phenomena subject to that principle. (S:B 742 n51)

Hence, the paraphrased three-characteristic formula would read thus:

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|------------------------------|---|
| <i>sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā</i> | all phenomena are impermanent;  |
| <i>sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā</i> | all phenomena are suffering;  |
| <i>sabbe dhammā anattā</i>   | all dharmas (phenomena <i>and</i> the principles behind their conditionality) are not self. |

On a philosophical level, the key third line means that both constructed or projected reality *as well as* things as they are (that is, how the fully awakened mind would know them) are not self. Nirvana does not fit into either category: *nirvana is neither self nor not-self*.

This discourse should be studied with **the Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.20), which presents dependent arising as the natural order of things.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See SAṬ:VRI 2:42, but cf S:B 741 n51.

<sup>20</sup> S 12.20/2:25-27 = SD 39.5.

## The Discourse on the Natural Orders

(A 3.134/1:285)

1 Bhikshus, whether there is the arising of Tathagatas [Buddhas Thus Come] or not, this element remains [is fixed], the fixedness of things, the order of things, that<sup>21</sup>

***sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* all formations [samskaras] are impermanent.**

A Tathagata fully awakens to this truth, realizes it.<sup>22</sup> Having fully awakened to it and realized it,<sup>23</sup> he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies that<sup>24</sup> “all conditioned things [samskaras] are impermanent.”

2 Bhikshus, whether there is the arising of Tathagatas [Buddhas Thus Come] or not, this element remains [is stable], the fixedness of things, the order of things, that

***sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā* all formations [samskaras] are suffering.**

A Tathagata fully awakens to this truth, realizes it. Having fully awakened to it and realized it, he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies that “all conditioned things [samskaras] are suffering.”

3 Bhikshus, whether there is the arising of Tathagatas [Buddhas Thus Come] or not, this element remains [is stable], the fixedness of things, the order of things, that

***sabbe dhammā anattā* all dharmas [formations and principles] are not self.<sup>25</sup>**

A Tathagata fully awakens to this truth, realizes it. Having fully awakened to it and realized it, he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies that “all things [dharmas] are impermanent.”

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<sup>21</sup> *Uppādā vā bhikkhave tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ thitā’va sā dhātu dhamma-ṭṭhitatā dhamma-niyāmatā.*

<sup>22</sup> *Taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti.*

<sup>23</sup> *Abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā.*

<sup>24</sup> “He tells...clarifies,” *ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānikaroti*: Comys say that although these are syns, they differentiate their usages thus: as an indication (*uddesa*) they “say” (*ācikkhanti*); as a description (*niddesa*) they “teach” (*desenti*); as a restatement (*paṭiniddesa*) they “proclaim” (*paññāpeti*); by laying down the meaning in one way or other they “establish” (*paṭṭhapenti*); when showing the reason for a certain meaning they “reveal” (*vivaranti*); when showing the classification of a detail they “analyse” (*vibhajanti*); in order to do away with what is inverted or profound, or when creating a basis for their audience’s knowledge, they “clarify” (*uttānikaroti*); and when abolishing their audience’s ignorance and blindness in all these ways, they “make known [declare]” (*pakāseti*) (VbhA 371; briefly at SA 2:40). On the ability to “instruct, inspire, rouse and gladden” one’s audience, see SD 6.1 & SD 11.4 Intro (4).

<sup>25</sup> This line means that no abiding entity called a “soul” or whatever is found either *within* the five aggregates (our mind-body being) or *outside* of it, such as the view that “the self is the world” (*so attā so loko*).<sup>25</sup> In other words, we can only conclude that *sabbe dhammā anattā* means that “all dharmas (phenomena *and* the principles behind their conditionality) are not self.”<sup>25</sup> Nirvana, as we will see, does not fit anywhere in such a notion. See Intro.