

## Three Marks of Existence

If we contemplate even a minute sector of the vast range of life, we are faced with such a tremendous variety of life's manifestations that it defeats description. And yet, *three basic statements* can be made that are valid for all animate existence, from the microbe up to the creative mind of a human genius.

These three features, common to all life, were first found and formulated over 2500 years ago by the Buddha, who was rightly called "Knower of the Worlds" (*loka-vidu*). They are the Three Characteristics (*ti-lakkha.na*) of all that is conditioned, that is, dependently arisen. In English renderings, they are also sometimes called Signs, Signata, or Marks.

These three basic facts of all existence are:

1. Impermanence or Change (*anicca*)
2. Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)
3. Not-self or Insubstantiality (*anatta*).

The three marks are common to all that is conditioned, even to what is below or beyond the normal range of human perception.

Existence can be understood only if these three basic facts are comprehended, and this *not only logically*, but in confrontation with one's own experience. Insight-wisdom (*vipassanaa-pa~n~naa*) which is the ultimate liberating factor in Buddhism, consists just of this experience of the three characteristics applied to one's own bodily and mental processes, and deepened and matured in meditation.

To "see things as they really are" means seeing them consistently in the light of the three characteristics. Ignorance of these three, or self-deception about them, is by itself a potent cause for suffering – by knitting, as it were, the net of false hopes, of unrealistic and harmful desires, of false ideologies, false values and aims of life, in which man is caught. Ignoring or distorting these three basic facts can only lead to frustration, disappointment, and despair.

### Source:

"The Three Basic Facts of Existence: I. Impermanence (Anicca)", with a preface by Nyanaponika Thera. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013,

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel186.html> .