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The Theory of Impermanence is a Pragmatic Idea to Improve the Quality of One's Existence.

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ABSTRACT:

The spiritual and intellectual underpinnings of applying the doctrinal concept of "impermanence" are studied, and the relevant aspects of this philosophy of impermanence in different worldviews and belief systems are brought to illuminate its valid values, being applied practically to get benefits in the daily life of humanity. This article aims to provide individuals with strategies and techniques for practicing practical mindfulness and adapting the philosophy of impermanence to transform and improve human behavior. This philosophy of impermanence can also be applied to one's life to develop mindfulness, the ability to restore emotions and conduct in life and design each person's life to become better with the roots of a more optimistic outlook in the life they are currently facing. The ultimate aim of this philosophy is to utilize the inherent transformative power of impermanence, harnessing its potential to create positive change and personal growth.

Keywords: Buddha, impermanence, optimistic outlook, improve life, Buddhism, get benefits, mindfulness, and restore emotions.

I. The General Introduction of Impermanence Theory.

The impermanence (*aniccā*) theory is the kind of doctrine that Buddha always taught about the ever-changing phenomena of material and spirit in the world, which is described as one of the basic teachings of Buddhism. According to the Pali-English Dictionary, the adjective *aniccā* (impermanent) is derived from the negative prefix *a-* plus *niccā* (permanent) in modern etymology. So its meaning denies everlastingness because it is not permanent; Thus, it is unapproachable, as a permanent, everlasting state, thus changing.

Therefore, all phenomena are unstable; they constantly change over time. The philosophical theory of *aniccā* is a popular topic; everyone may hear it from different sources. Depending on the personal view of the investigation, they can express the impermanence theory in many forms. Some explain this impermanent teaching pessimistically, while others define it positively. All of them make separate personal statements about this impermanent philosophy.

From an objective point of view, the impermanent doctrine looks very easy to understand with a simple meaning. Everyone can know this impermanent theory because it always happens in all phenomena around us. However, to fully comprehend and apply this theory effectively and thoroughly, we can say, "It is challenging for anyone to apply this teaching to life effectively."

In this topic, we will share some practical thoughts on applying the *aniccā* philosophy to improve morality, convert emotions, transform situations, reduce greed, anger, ignorance, etc. That can make us increase ethics in improving our behavior with other persons. Besides, we can also use this doctrine to broaden the clear vision of life and growth in survival in modern life in the present and future.

II. The Investigation of Impermanence Theory

Buddhist dictionary: Manual of Buddhist terms and doctrines defines *aniccā* 'Impermanence' as: "Impermanence of things is the rising, passing and changing of things, or the disappearance of things that have become or arisen. The meaning is that these things never persist in the same way, but they are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment."¹

Based on Buddhist views, the impermanent (*Aniccā*)² doctrine is one of the Three Marks of Existence (*Tilakkhaṇa*), namely impermanence (*Aniccā*), unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*Dukkha*), and non-self or egolessness (*Anattā*). In the *Mahayana Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra*, four characteristics are described instead of three, namely: impermanence (*Anityākāra*), suffering (*Duḥkhākāra*), emptiness (*Śūnyākāra*), selflessness (*Anātmākāra*)³. We can

¹Ven. Nyanatiloka, 1980, p. 36

²Damien, 2003, p. 15

³Three marks of existence, 2023

find the philosophy of *Aniccā* in the doctrine of *Tilakkhaṇa* of Dhammapada from verses 277-9⁴. We also can find this theory in many canons of five *Nikāyas* of *Theravāda* Buddhism and *Mahayana Sutras*.

We can search online and get more information about this doctrine, especially at the website addresses:

- 1) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impermanence>
- 2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_marks_of_existence
- 3) <https://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel186.html>

.etc.

According to several Buddhist scholars writing about the law of impermanence; they often refer to suffering, emptiness, and non-self. However, Buddha said that no form of all things (material or mental) created in the impermanent world will exist for long.⁵ They can be changed for many reasons and will decay, then disappear.

In which they are continually changing, arising, and then disappearing. These others always replace all phenomena. They depend on each other to exist at present and in the future. Therefore, the theory of impermanence has a close connection with the philosophy of dependence arising:

“This will arise, that will occur; the other appears, then another will arise; Or after this one is destroyed, the other will be destroyed as well; or the other, after it is destroyed, all other related to this matter will be eliminated, too; or this one after destruction, disappears, then arise to form another. Alternatively, when this is after birth, which is a cause, make another destroy because they cannot exist in tandem.”

*“Impermanence of things is the rising, passing, and changing or the disappearance of things that have become or arisen. The meaning is that these things never persist in the same way, but they are vanishing and dissolving momentarily”.*⁶

When we reach the explanation of this meaning, we can understand the concept of impermanence in the expanded connotations of this law in the universe. We should not only understand it with little explanation in four periods of physical: the rising, passing, and changing of things, decay, and cessation of physical or whatever is born that will undoubtedly change over time and destroy.

Impermanence Law can be expressed in two catalogs: material or mental.

It exists in three aspects: 1) Impermanent body, 2) Impermanent mentality, and 3) Impermanent circumstances.

- 1) The impermanent body has four periods: birth, old age, disease (sickness), and death.
- 2) The impermanent mentality has four periods: form mentality, survive, transition, and disappear.
- 3) Impermanent circumstances have four periods: form the things, survive, decay gradually, and disappear.

When faced with the change of material and mental, we will see three cases occur objectively: 1) Suffering, 2) Happy, 3) Not miserable or happy

a) Human suffering is divided into the following eight groups of suffering⁷:

- 1) The Suffering of Birth
- 2) The suffering of old age.
- 3) The suffering of Disease (sickness).
- 4) The suffering of Death.
- 5) Suffering from separation from loved ones (parting with what we love).
- 6) Suffering due to meeting with the uncongenial (meeting with what we hate)
- 7) Suffering due to unfulfilled wishes (unattained aims).
- 8) Suffering due to the raging aggregates (all the ills of the five skandhas).

b) Happy emotion can be divided into three aspects:

- 1) The psychological feeling of happiness depends on external factors that create them from the sense of the body, thoughts, and situation
- 2) The psychological sense of happiness does not depend on external factors such as the body's feelings, thoughts, and situations. They come from practicing meditation and have it. It is called self-control, happiness from within your pure mind.

⁴"Maggavagga: The Path" (Dhp XX), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013

⁵"Atthakanagara Sutta: To the Man from Atthakanagara" (MN 52), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013

⁶Ven. Nyanatiloka, 1980, pp. 36-37

⁷Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion" (SN 56.11), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013

- 3) Living happily and knowing enough, moderation in eating, sleeping, accepting the context of living in the present, no regrets, no sadness, no clinging to what has passed in the past

c) Not miserable nor happy

- 1) The natural transformation of material and the universe through time and time; no sense of human feeling appears inside them.
- 2) The state of narcosis and the loss of people's senses.
- 3) The state of giving up all sensations of thought and body during deep meditation.

Although we know that everything is impermanent, constantly changing, it is just like the water of a river, the flow of a stream continually changing with every moment,⁸ but if we persist, cling, crave something that had happened in the past. We do not accept the result in the present situation in which we have it; whether it is as we want or not as we want it, we will indeed feel sadness, sorrow, disappointment, and suffering.

The Buddha taught that the desire, the clinging is the root of all harmful minds, just like a piece of bone with a bit of blood, like a bundle of embers (torches), borrowed shoulder. Etc. It only gives us more suffering, sorrow, and sadness more and more; the calamity resulting from it will add even more if we persevere in clinging to them, not letting go.⁹

Buddha's teachings said suffering, sorrow, despair, depression, and loss of faith in life. All of them belong spiritually based on greed and grasp at something. If not, as we wish, then we will be angry, disappointed, and sad about these problems that happened in the past, and they have been happening and will happen in our lives.

Therefore, when we mention suffering, we can immediately think of the eight categories of suffering that Buddha always said in his teachings.

All kinds of suffering have affected the physical body and mind of all human and sentient beings. According to the defilements of greed, hatred, craving, and clinging to human beings and sentient beings, they will have different suffering emotions. The soul in that body receives happiness or suffering; Hindu doctrine calls it an infinite soul. Still, in Buddhism, Buddha did not accept the philosophy of a permanent soul in the body.

But the Buddha only accepted it as *Citta*, *Mana*, and *Vijñāna* (mind, thought, perception) are aware of temporary sensory consciousness of joy, wrath, craving, stinging, happiness, or suffering caused by conditions. So, they work as the stream of consciousness of six.

Some scholars who understand the law of impermanence must understand the meaning of Buddha's teachings. They have argued against Buddhism, not accepting the philosophy of what impermanence is suffering. They make some theories that say plants, mountains, rivers, and everything in the universe obey the law of impermanence, but nothing is miserable. Why are they not suffering? Because there is no feeling of happiness or suffering in them.

According to the website wikipedia.org, Hindu philosophy also accepts the law of impermanence: "*Buddhism and Hinduism share the doctrine of Anicca or Anitya, that is nothing eld, everything is in a constant state of change*"¹⁰ but do not accept the *anatta* (non-soul) philosophy. Still, they get the *atman* (soul) philosophy. They believe there is an entity to enjoy happiness or suffer; this soul always remains, not destroyed.

In Theravada tradition, it said: what is impermanent is suffering, what is impermanent, that is, the meaning of its nature is non-self; it exists due to the combination of many factors. This theory is called the theory of causation (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), commonly translated as dependent origination or dependent arising. This theory is a fundamental principle in Buddhist teachings, which states that all dharma ("phenomena") appears in dependence upon other dharma: "If this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist."

Everything arises from conditions, and not being spontaneous and self-contained has no separate and independent nature. Therefore, all phenomena in the world do not have a permanent existence in the same shape, but this is the transformation process from one form to another, depending on the environment in which they exist.

In the Sutta, the Buddha said the philosophy of impermanence implies this meaning. Therefore, once mentioning suffering, Buddha also mentioned impermanence. There is always an implication of an interactive element of craving, attachment, anger, ignorance, and afflictions, which lead people to suffer. When faced with impermanent cases, accept the current situation if we do not crave affection and negativity and always have a happy mind. We will have no anger, sadness, suffering, or regret with some past happens. Even though the circumstances we exist in are constantly changing.

Therefore, in the face of the impermanence of the mind and the situation or the body, people have three kinds of emotion: happy and suffering and not both - no sorrow and no happiness. But in the case of not feeling grief, there are 2 cases: 1) The changes that arise and pass away, the constant change of nature of all physical phenomena, has nothing to do with the perception of the consciousness, and 2) The autonomy of the mind, not being dominated by the biological material, the circumstances, the body.

1) No mental factors are involved when we only talk about material things. Precisely because there is no spiritual element to interfere, it is like the corpse of a human; when the warmth has left the body, there is no feeling of the eyes, hands, nose, tongue, or body anymore. The same as the inanimate

⁸The famous saying of Heraclitus: "No man ever steps in the same river twice", see: https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/heraclitus_107157

⁹Cowell, E. B. (editor); Francis Cowell (HT (translator); & Neil, RA (translator)), 1897, pp. 132-133

¹⁰Impermanence, 2023

objects of mountains, trees, earth, rocks, water, wind, fire, or the tiny cells, atoms, molecules, etc. that make up a material. Although everything of phenomenal physical matter continually changes. They do not have the feeling of suffering or happiness. For this reason, some philosophers of dialectical materialism do not accept the concept of "What is impermanent to suffering."

This argument is correct but not exhaustive of the theory of Buddha's teachings. In these teachings, Buddha taught not only this impermanent theory but also introduced to people some different concepts relative to this theory.

Suppose we need to understand what Buddha wanted to teach. If we only use this concept to evaluate the entire teaching of the Buddha, that is, we are wrong. It is like a person who takes one part of an elephant's leg, tail, or head of an elephant, but we state that it is the whole elephant's body. That is a one-sided standpoint, which is a wrong view, wrong thought, persisted in that problem, could not let go, always think our investigation is correct, other thinking is false. This one-sided standpoint is different from insight, not having a wide vision when considering some concepts of an event.

2) When there is the feeling element of the spirit interfering with those impermanent of all things, whenever our mind is not attached, and not possess the sensation, and is not dominated by the external circumstances and the body, we always are in the self-control of the six senses, and having the enjoyment of the deep bliss of meditation, get over the influencing factors to us. Therefore, we accept the present life as pure; we will have no sorrow or suffering and live happily.

These matters are complex cases for ordinary people because people live dependent on emotions. In good situations, people feel happy; instead, in dire situations, they fall sad; or when it has a pleasant feeling, they like it; on the contrary, in unpleasant feelings, they will be distraught when harmed in body or mind. Alternatively, something beneficial to them makes people happy; something detrimental to people will generate hatred and resentment.

Nevertheless, it will be easy for practitioners to practice Buddha's teachings. There were, and will be, many practitioners in Buddhism and other religions that can overcome the suffering of body and mind in the past, present, and future. They have achieved or will achieve the unwavering response while facing the change of impermanence of situations and body and mind when they correctly practice the Dharma taught by the Buddha or other Great Masters of their religion.

We are the same, and we can do it; we can control any situations we face, such as unpleasant feelings - the pleasant feeling of body, mind, or prosperity - decline, praise - disparagement, getting something, and losing something, etc.

III. The Application of the impermanent theory to improve the positive conduct of lifestyle

All phenomena of constant physical, mental, and situational change are called the *aniccā* doctrine. Furthermore, community social behavior, human ideas, and senses constantly change from time to time. This natural influence on life and ethics thought of humans. It can quickly transform the community's social behavior between people with different circumstances of ethical conduct or lousy behavior, hate or love, compliment or decry, help or harm each other, etc.

From that, they dominate us and produce feelings of sadness - joy, happiness, and suffering. Therefore, people's mentality constantly changes in each moment; each time is different.

Whenever they feel loved and like being cared for, they will help each other. Unfortunately, however, sometimes jealousy and hatred appear, or because of greed, the desire to lose the reason of human nature, one can harm the other.

However, we use our wisdom to check all situations with different aspects. In that case, we will get many benefits from the constant change in each case, which will help us broaden our clear vision and increase our experiences about the events in the world we are facing.

We should know that whatever happens in this life has its causes, but we probably do not know those reasons. For example, if someone harms us and causes hatred against us, there are some causes for it. Therefore, in this case, based on the knowledge of impermanent law, we should not be in a hurry to hate those who have unintentionally or intentionally harmed us. Instead, we should proactively apply the law of impermanence to transform the enemy's mentality by actively sowing good deeds to them. That way, we can turn lousy karma between them and us into good karma and develop this good karma well in the future. In this way, we can gradually improve our excellent relationship with them and progressively reduce the resentment and hatred between us with them. With time and the exemplary conduct, we made, we can convert them from hate to love, from enemy to friend, from the harmer to become helper.

Suddenly, I remembered that Dhammapada said:

*"For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule. The world does not know that we must all come to an end here; but those who know it, their quarrels cease at once."*¹¹

In these verses, everyone may know the truth; a person who is emotionally minded and full of hatred cannot take feelings of aversion to dispel or diminish the hatred of others. It looks like the torch whenever this torch burns big, and when we put it near other torches, it only makes fire through the torch quickly. This torch cannot reduce or extinguish another torch. That is not possible.

¹¹Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 10: The Dhammapada and Sutta Nipata, Translated from pāli by Max Müller and Max Fausböhl, 1881, p. 5

Human anger, sadness, and resentment can only be soothed by love, compassion caring for them, understanding, and sympathy for them, and we are ready to help them when they need us or when they encounter difficulties in life; no one helps them; they need us to help them with love, understanding, and sympathy.

Suppose we are courageous enough to alleviate others' anger or sadness about ourselves or someone, but we do not know the causes of this anger, and neither do we understand their temperament; how can we sympathize with them and initiate compassion in the right way and know how to resolve and encourage them to alleviate their sadness and anger in a manner effective.

Similarly, we need the rain of compassion, love, and understanding and compassion to be able to approach, comfort, and ease the sadness of those who are angry and sad.

According to the gaze of Buddhism, we know well that all things are impermanent. Everything can change¹², whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. So is human anger, which can be caused by something, and according to the law of impermanence, the anger and sadness will cool down gradually over time and disappear.

Besides, from the view of impermanent philosophy, we know that life's circumstances are constantly changing; sometimes, our lives are prosperous and wealthy, but we have an unfortunate case that leads to a failed business, resulting in bankruptcy and poverty. The body is the same; sometimes, they are very healthy, but sometimes, the body becomes weak because of some diseases. Although, in behavioral life, too, sometimes we can be independent and turn things around by our abilities, we will never need anyone to help. Nevertheless, life is impermanent; everything may be changed.¹³ Still, sometimes we will be helpless, unable to help ourselves, including personal hygiene, to serve ourselves because, at that time, we were seriously ill in difficulty, and people may contact us. At that time, we appreciated all the help from others. In this situation, we desperately need the help of someone concerned about us. So am I, are you, and so is everyone.

So, based on our experience and a positive view of the law of impermanence, we can say:

- One may misbehave with us today, which does not mean they will continue to misbehave with us tomorrow if we can convert the lousy karma between them and us.

- Moreover, we can have a good life with all the beautiful materials; being healthy and lucky today does not mean we will be good forever. We should not think that we will not need help from others in the future. Therefore, we need to be kind to people so that whenever we fall into an unfortunate case of an accident or sickness, people will help us.

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¹²Bodhi, 2000, p. 282

¹³Bodhi, 2000, p. 282