



*Impermanent are all component things,  
They arise and cease, that is their nature:  
They come into being and pass away,  
Release from them is bliss supreme.  
Anicca vata sankhaaraa — uppaada  
vaya dhammino  
Uppajjitvaa nirujjhanti — tesa.m vuu-  
pasamo sukho.*

— Mahaa-Parinibbaana Sutta (DN 16)[1]

Is life all a sad story? There are variations with regard to this observation even within different schools of thought in Buddhism. I feel impelled to examine this as a statement of reality. I am encouraged by the Buddha's own exhortation to us not to accept what we have heard but to test even his Dhamma "as gold is tested with fire."

The best test I can recall is one that the famous Karl Popper suggested, namely to try and see how a proposition can be falsified. Karl Popper is a philosopher of science and he was focused on scientific methodology as truth-bringers.

The cited extract is from an Early Buddhist Sutta. I venture to agree with the first three lines in the Sutta. This is about two of the three marks of existence according to Buddhism, namely, impermanence (anicca, in Pali) and soullessness (anatta). Here, anatta is hidden but implied in the concept of anicca. "Dukkha," is also implied by the expressed desire to release oneself from this conditioned existence. Since anicca is true, anatta follows. On the other hand, it is difficult to accept that dukkha is a defining mark of life in the manner the other two phenomena are. By the same logic I cannot accept the need to find release (nibbana or liberation) from a samsaric life presumably dominated by dukkha or sorrow. The Buddhist hope for release is either for a possibly better life in the next birth or for a total emancipation from samsaric existence, altogether.

Impermanence and passing away is the nature of things (yathaa bootha). In this day, it is a truism for all of us. The ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides, many years after

could not have meant something broader than 'suffering.' Mind you, we have to realise that Sakyamuni Buddha never put down any of his vast teachings into writing. It took 500 years after his passing away to do that. The game called Chinese Whispers will tell us how an original message can be misinterpreted in a short chain of communication. How much more in such a period of half a thousand years! In interpreting Buddhism, one has to bear in mind this adamant reality and the attendant consciousness that one may be inaccurate in a given interpretation. The Abhidhamma itself was a product of scholastic Buddhism as were the argumentation of St Thomas Aquinas in Middle ages Christendom.

Buddhist scholastics argue that by dukkha, Sakyamuni Buddha would have meant a mental state that is something more inclusive that encompasses anguish, disappointment, self-conflict and so on. In short, it meant the existential crisis or predicament of men and women. Or the concept may even include what existentialists like Albert Camus called 'absurd,' or devoid of real meaning. Camus remarked that life is absurd in that that events and phenomena behave randomly and without any pattern or sensible explanation.

That is the broadest notion one can get to. What it all tells us is that life is something negative and unsatisfactory, which impels us to find a way of release. The Abrahamic religionists, too, said the same thing and looked forward to an "eternal happiness," out of "this mess," in heaven.

While it is easy to accept anicca and anatta as marks of existence, dukkha presents a problem. For anything to be a mark of existence it must be something intrinsic to the nature of existence. Dukkha isn't. It is, rather, a response relationship we develop with external happenings, situations and events. It is a reaction in our mind to our reading of an external tragedy. Attitudes to loss, failure or tragedy will depend from person to person. Some will simply breakdown; others may be unruffled. The Stoic philosophers wouldn't bother at negative events. One Stoic philosopher is reported to have expressed thrill and enjoyment while being burnt. That is an extreme example; but it dramatises a point. The problem is not out there objectively in the external situation but in our response to it. In his best seller, "The Power of Now," Eckhart Tolle expressed the point very tersely: "The primary cause of unhappiness is never the situation but the thought about it. Be

aware of the thoughts you are thinking. Separate them from the situation, which is always neutral. It is as it is." Two things in negative external events can help us stoically accept them namely that such occurrences are in the nature of things and, secondly, that they all eventually pass away.

The Buddha himself emphasised these points. A good illustration is found in a story in the Dhammapada Commentary about Kisagothami who came weeping remorselessly to the Buddha when her child had died. The Buddha gave her an exercise. He asked Kisagothami to go searching for a house that has not had or herd of death. That exercise assuaged Kisagothami. Kisagothami had been administered a kind of cognitive therapy to deal with her crisis. There is also something within human nature that almost instinctually sets us in the direction of reversing misfortunes and restoring the balance. It is a resilient mechanism. British philosopher AC Grayling put it this way: "ordinary human nature is full of surprisingly deep courage, not least of the



## IS LIFE ALL DUKKHA?

kind that makes hope and a return to happiness possible." (The Meaning of Things.)

We commonly hear a false notion that anicca or impermanence necessarily conditions sorrow. A heap of gorgeous garden roses or 'a host of daffodils' would be a delight to the eyes. We all know the roses

of beauty and happiness that life does offer despite its ephemeral nature. Bertrand Russell made the point when he said, "Life offers none-the-less true happiness although not everlasting." (Conquest of Happiness). There is a simple test for all of us: Undertake a survey of normally healthy individuals and find out how many of them would say that life is bitter and how many of them

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and the daffodils wouldn't last. Yet, the fact is that their beauty and happiness-giving is real until it lasts. Something giving permanent happiness may be boring. The same could be said of the beautiful body of a young woman. So is a loving relationship or a work of art.

"Pemato Jayati Soko  
Pemato Jayati Bhayan  
Pemato Vippanuttassa  
Natti Soko Kutho Bhayan?" (Pali)

This is from a Sarchchandra drama. "Love begets sorrow. Love begets fear. In the absence of love, what sorrow; what fear?" Love is a wonderful and beautiful experience as long as it lasts. Permanent love bores one. Love derives its joy in a temporary context. As long as one can cultivate love it, love brings wonderful joy and as long as one expects it may be torn apart and adjusts one's expectations to such a situation love doesn't bring such tragic sadness; nor fear.

Likewise, the moment of birth of a child can be an expansive and exhilarating joy to its parents.

In this way, it is easy to point out so much

would like to terminate it? How many would like never to be born again? How many would like to be born again in better circumstances? I doubt you getting any significant number that would opt for the first mentioned opinion. If one believes in rebirth one would like to be reborn in happier circumstances. The latter implies satisfaction in existence as one knows it. Since the numbers in our imaginary statistical survey who say life is not worth living would evidently be trivial, then the need for striving to end an assumed Sansara would be a pointless exercise.

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Skayamuni Buddha, famously stated, "one cannot step into the river twice; for fresh waters will flow against us." That was, perhaps, a more dramatically expressed statement of the same truth in the Mahaa-parinibbana Sutta. I read the second characteristic of nature, anatta, as an extension of anicca. If everything passes away from moment to moment then it means there isn't anything in nature including ourselves that is substantial. The doctrine of a permanent soul embedded within us that travels across several births in a samsara was in the Upanishads and it constitutes a core belief in Hinduism. The Abrahamic religions-Christianity, Islam and Judaism- have a similar core belief. The latter do not believe in several other births. They believe that at the end of our current existence the unchanging entity in us called the soul will head either to God in heaven God or go to interminable hell or to some transit realm. Buddhism rejects all these notions and justifiably so.

On the other hand, what about the third mark of existence: dukkha? This has been interpreted in myriad ways. It is likely that dukkha