

The Three Universal Characteristics

Venerable Tsang Hui

Translated by Kong Chan

We are definitely suffering living in this world. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, everything is impermanent and always changing. Secondly, everything is empty - that is, conditional. Because of these conditions we feel suffering.

Why are we suffering? Because we don't have any control over anything ! We cannot control our health, our wealth, our parents, family, friends, pets, let alone the weather ! Our houses fall down, our expensive car will rust, and our favourite toys will slowly wear out and break down before our very eyes !

We always have to compromise our expectations, just to adapt to the vagaries of life. We always feel we are forced to do such common, trivial things just to maintain our lifestyle.

Even if we want to be healthy, even if we have every wish and all the support of medical doctors, we still cannot keep our health. Under these changing conditions, we evolve emotional problems because our mind is not in a steady state.

Being unable to control our destiny, we develop feelings of attachment, greed, and anger. But these feelings are the sources of worldly ignorance. We cling to things, even though our situation and life is not under our control. We don't realise life for what it is.

This lack of understanding means we develop greater attachment to the self which means our suffering will be greater. If we gain wisdom, and have less attachment to our self and ego, then we will have less suffering.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha taught so that others could benefit from his knowledge. He taught that we should try to observe the truth about nature, and contemplate the phenomena occurring around us. If we want to understand the truth, we should practice according to his teachings.

The Buddha developed many concepts and methods to help gain enlightenment. These included meditation, praying, and chanting, all to help us calm the mind and allow it to concentrate on nature. All these methods are appropriate in relative situations. When your mind experiences the truth, you will know it!

Chanting Amitabha Buddha is one of the methods that may help you concentrate your mind. Meditation is also a great help, but sometimes you may stagnate. When this happens, a Master or Venerable can be of great guidance to you. Meditation can lead to a very peaceful mind, but after a while, you may become too attached to this peaceful mind and forget its original true purpose!

After practising meditation, it is helpful for you to contemplate on Amitabha Buddha. While doing this you should ask yourself who is chanting. Then you can question yourself,- or this person we call "you". Who is this person? What is this body that is chanting? After practising meditation and contemplation in this way many times, you may begin to understand that this self, our person, is conditional.



Another method that will help you gain better understanding of your existence is to contemplate on your body as unclean and decaying... Everyday you sweat, go to the toilet, watch your hair fallout, and feel your skin grow old. You may also contemplate how your body will decompose after your death. After thinking about this for a while, and observing these changes, you will clearly comprehend that your body is continuously changing!

My friend Mok Chung, the girls say you look so handsome... Yet I know when you wake up in the morning your breath is so bad and your hair dishevelled! You look in the mirror each morning with horror, then quickly try to groom yourself back to respectability!

Unfortunately we develop so much attachment to appearances. Here is a contemplation we monks are trained to do. It is skeletal contemplation. We train ourselves to visualise everybody as a skeleton. - You may think people may look nice, but their skeleton ?? This is a very good way for you to discourage your attachment to appearance!

Buddha used two methods to teach people wisdom. The first method he used was to explain things to people in terms of Worldly Truth. Worldly Truth means explaining events in terms of Socratic/Pythagorean hypotheses. Examples of Worldly Truth, are information gained through studying subjects like physics, medicine, maths etc.

The second method the Buddha used was to teach people the Absolute Truth by studying the dhamma directly. Studying the dhamma will also give us insights on Worldly Truth. Worldly knowledge is always based on a hypothesis.

One hypothesis leads to another continuously. For example, if $x=5$, then $x+3 > 7$ \Rightarrow TRUE. However there is a limit, a boundary beyond which there is no more truth. For example, for the cosine, $0 \leq \cos q \leq 1$, the maximum is restricted by q° .

Another example is when you see three branches of a tree moving side to side. What is happening? The hypothesis is that you know that the wind must be blowing to create the condition of the three branches moving! As we grow up, our mind is conditioned to make this deduction.

But all things in existence are conditional. By conditional, we mean that there is cause, and there is effect. The branches could not move without the wind blowing. The wind is caused by the sun and uneven temperature and pressure gradients on the surface of the earth, and so on...

If you can see beyond the Worldly Truth you will be able to see the Absolute Truth. You will be on the way to enlightenment, and it will help you to break your attachment to self and your rebirth cycle.

The Buddha said that the dhamma should be explained in terms of the people's faith. - A doctor must prescribe something that is suitable medicine for the sick people. Dhamma is like a set of rules for learning Absolute Truth.

For example, exercise is good for us, but you cannot prescribe the same exercise for the young as for the old and weak. Also, if someone has internal bleeding because of a stomach ulcer, you cannot operate immediately. You must check their blood pressure before operating, otherwise they might die !



In teaching dhamma practice, the Buddha usually led people according to their level of ability. Likewise, if you find some dhamma talks with ridiculous explanations, then you may understand this talk has been developed by the monks for the superstitious people.

Our ignorance of this world grows like a tree. The branches represent avarice, delusion, anger, hatred, and greed. The tree trunk itself represents attachment. But the roots of the tree represent attachment to our self or our ego.

If you want to step on the way to enlightenment you should start with the roots. If you can get rid of your attachment to self, then you will make great progress in chopping down the tree of ignorance!

Becoming selfless means non-attachment, and giving up our ego, not non-existence.

Some people follow Buddha's teaching in order to gain merit. They help others to gain merit rather than wisdom. An enlightened person does not respond differently to a man or woman, nor to people that are either pretty or ugly, tall or short....

For the ordinary person, $-3 \neq 3$. But for the enlightened person, $|-3| = |3|$! Preferring to see in Absolute terms, the enlightened person treats everybody equally, be they poor, wealthy, ugly or attractive.

My friend Wai Loon, you have such a nice watch... Ji-Yeon, your baby is so nice, perhaps she will be a good singer... But can you both share the feelings of possession, accomplishment and success without owning them?

Some people wear spectacles for social status, to appear as a scholar, or to hide bodily defects. Already the word "spectacles" deviates from its original meaning. We have this, which we call "chalk" in English, but say "fen bi" in Mandarin. So which is it?

This cup is plastic, but previously, all cups were made from ceramic. But ceramics are made from clay, so should we not call the cup clay instead?

Our mind starts becoming attached as we learn the language as a baby. - This is a bag or cup and it is used for this or that purpose. We develop the mind and attach emotions and feelings to the words of the language.

For example, some people ask me what these (worry beads) are ?... I say it depends on the definition.

We may define a thing in three ways. Firstly, we may define it according to its name. Let's say a cup. - But the name "cup" is not permanent and may change. Some people may begin to call it a mug.

Secondly, we may define something according to its use. - A cup is for holding water which we can drink, but then this too may also change when we begin to use it to hold our pencils and pens !

Thirdly, we may define something according to its basic components. The material (of the cup) is perhaps composed of hydrogen, carbon, and silica atoms, neutrons, protons, and electrons.

Although this last definition is closer to the dhamma truth (or permanent), even atoms may be impermanent ! Mass may be converted to energy as Einstein showed us with $E=mc^2$!

What is more, the cup only exists through human effort and desire. The cup is not absolute nor permanent. It depends on others to create it.

Questions and Answers

Q1. Venerable what is the definition of a kind heart?

A1. What is a kind heart? To be kind, you need to have a peaceful heart and be generous to others. If you were to donate money, is that being generous ?

Giving money is just an act. You have to look at the intention of the act. After looking at the intention of the act, then we have to look at whether it will bring good to others. After you do the action, are you happy to do it? Do you feel peace in your heart? Will the action bring harm to you ? Are you donating with the idea of becoming famous (attachment to ego) ? What are the results and outcomes?

This afternoon, we have been discussing the Three Universal Characteristics of Existence, that is impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Whatever is impermanent causes suffering, and whatever is impermanent and suffering is without an independent self. Those who realise the truth of these three facts will be able to overcome suffering because their minds will be freed from the delusions of permanence, pleasure, and the self.

May you all be well and happy.

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