Impermanence (Pāli: अनिच्छा anicca; Sanskrit: अनित्य anityā; Tibetan: ལྷེ་བོད་དེ་བཞིན་་འདི། mi rtog pa; Chinese: 無常 wúcháng; Japanese: 無常 mujō; Korean: 무상 musang; Thai: อันติค anitchang, from Pali "aniccaŋ") is one of the essential doctrines or three marks of existence in Buddhism.

The term expresses the Buddhist notion that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is in a constant state of flux. The Pali word anicca literally means "inconstant", and arises from a synthesis of two separate words, 'Nicca' and the "privative particle" 'a'.[1] Where the word 'Nicca' refers to the concept of continuity and permanence, 'Anicca' refers to its exact opposite; the absence of permanence and continuity.

Anicca or impermanence is understood by Buddhists as one of the three marks of existence, the others being dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and anatta (non-selfhood).[2] All things in the universe are understood by Buddhists to be characterised by these three marks of existence. According to the impermanence doctrine, human life embodies this flux in the aging process, the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara), and in any experience of loss.

This is applicable to all beings and their environs including devas (mortal gods). The Buddha taught that because conditioned phenomena are impermanent, attachment to them becomes the cause for future suffering (dukkha).

Conditioned phenomena can also be referred to as compounded, constructed, or fabricated. This is in contrast to the unconditioned, uncompounded and unfabricated nirvana, the reality that knows no change, decay or death.

Impermanence is intimately associated with the doctrine of anatta, according to which things have no fixed nature, essence, or self. For example, in Mahayana Buddhism, because all phenomena are impermanent, and in a state of flux, they are understood to be empty of an intrinsic self (shunyata).[3]

One method Buddhists use to cultivate awareness of the true nature of reality is that of vipassana meditation. The practice of vipassana meditation involves the development of a heightened state of awareness whereby one is able to understand clearly the true nature of reality.

Here, 'true nature' refers to an understanding of the three marks of existence (see above), the true nature of impermanence, the true nature of unsatisfactoriness and the true nature of insubstantiality or the non-self or soul.

The contemplation of impermanence (anicc'-anupassana) refers to seeing conditioned phenomena arising and passing away while observing their individual characteristics. According to the Visuddhimagga, one should understand three aspects of this contemplation: impermanence (anicca), the characteristic of impermanence (anicca-lakkhana), and the contemplation of impermanence (anicc'-anupassana). The commentaries say that we should know three things regarding the contemplation of impermanence (anicc'-anupassana): 'Three aspects regarding the contemplation of impermanence'; life is life.

“Nothing endures but change.”
— Heraclitus
The Practice of Looking Deeply Using Three Dharma Seals: Impermanence, No Self and Nirvana

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that by looking deeply we develop insight into impermanence and no self. These are the keys to the door of reality.

All authentic practices of the Buddha carry within them three essential teachings called the Dharma Seals. These three teachings of the Buddha are: impermanence, no self and nirvana. Just as all-important legal documents have the mark or signature of a witness, all genuine practices of the Buddha bear the mark of these three teachings.

If we look into the first Dharma Seal, impermanence, we see that it doesn’t just mean that everything changes. By looking into the nature of things, we can see that nothing remains the same for even two consecutive moments. Because nothing remains unchanged from moment to moment it therefore has no fixed identity or a permanent self. So in the teaching of impermanence we always see the lack of an unchanging self. We call this “no self,” the second Dharma Seal. It is because things are always transforming and have no self that freedom is possible.

The third Dharma Seal is nirvana. This means solidity and freedom, freedom from all ideas and notions. The word “nirvana” literally means “the extinction of all concepts.” Looking deeply into impermanence leads to the discovery of no self. The discovery of no self leads to nirvana. Nirvana is the Kingdom of God.

Impermanence

The practice and understanding of impermanence is not just another description of reality. It is a tool that helps us in our transformation, healing and emancipation.

Impermanence means that everything changes and nothing remains the same in any consecutive moment. And although things change every moment, they still cannot be accurately described as the same or as different from what they were a moment ago.

When we bathe in the river today that we bathed in yesterday, is it the same river? Heraclitus said that we couldn’t step into the same river twice. He was right. The water in the river today is completely different from the water we bathed in yesterday. Yet it is the same river. When Confucius was standing on the bank of a river watching it flow by he said, "Oh, it flows like that day and night, never ending."

The insight of impermanence helps us to go beyond all concepts. It helps us to go beyond same and different, and coming and going. It helps us to see that the river is not the same river but is also not different either. It shows us that the flame we lit on our bedside candle before we went to bed is not the same flame of the next morning. The flame on the table is not two flames, but it is not one flame either.

Impermanence Makes Everything Possible

We are often sad and suffer a lot when things change, but change and impermanence have a positive side. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is possible. If a grain of corn is not impermanent, it can never be transformed into a stalk of corn. If the stalk were not impermanent, it could never provide us with the ear of corn we eat. If your daughter is not impermanent, she cannot grow up to become a woman. Then your grandchildren would never manifest. So instead of complaining about impermanence, we should say, "Warm welcome and long live impermanence." We should be happy. When we can see the miracle of impermanence our sadness and suffering will pass.

Impermanence should also be understood in the light of inter-being. Because all things inter-are, they are constantly influencing each other. It is said a butterfly’s wings flapping on one side of the planet can affect the weather on the other side. Things cannot stay the same because they are influenced by everything else, everything that is not itself.
Practicing Impermanence

All of us can understand impermanence with our intellect, but this is not yet true understanding. Our intellect alone will not lead us to freedom. It will not lead us to enlightenment. When we are solid and we concentrate, we can practice looking deeply. And when we look deeply and see the nature of impermanence, we can then be concentrated on this deep insight. This is how the insight of impermanence becomes part of our being. It becomes our daily experience. We have to maintain the insight of impermanence in order to be able to see and live impermanence all the time. If we can use impermanence as an object of our meditation, we will nourish the understanding of impermanence in such a way that it will live in us every day. With this practice impermanence becomes a key that opens the door of reality.

We also cannot uncover the insight into impermanence for only a moment and then cover it up and see everything as permanent again. Most of the time we behave with our children as though they will always be at home with us. We never think that in three or four years they will leave us to marry and have their own family. Therefore we do not value the moments our child is with us.

I know many parents whose children, when they are eighteen or nineteen years old, leave home and live on their own. The parents lose their children and feel very sorry for themselves. Yet the parents did not value the moments they had with their children. The same is true of husbands and wives. You think that your spouse will be there for the whole of your life but how can you be so sure? We really have no idea where our partner will be in twenty or thirty years, or even tomorrow. It is very important to remember every day the practice of impermanence.

Seeing Emotions Through the Eyes of Impermanence

When somebody says something that makes you angry and you wish they would go away, please look deeply with the eyes of impermanence. If he or she were gone, what would you really feel? Would you be happy or would you weep? Practicing this insight can be very helpful. There is a *gatha*, or poem, we can use to help us:

*Angry in the ultimate dimension*
*I close my eyes and look deeply.*
*Three hundred years from now*
*Where will you be and where shall I be?*

When we are angry, what do we usually do? We shout, scream, and try to blame someone else for our problems. But looking at anger with the eyes of impermanence, we can stop and breathe. Angry at each other in the ultimate dimension, we close our eyes and look deeply. We try to see three hundred years into the future. What will you be like? What will I be like? Where will you be? Where will I be? We need only to breathe in and out, look at our future and at the other person’s future. We do not need to look as far as three hundred years. It could be fifty or sixty years from now when we have both passed away.

Looking at the future, we see that the other person is very precious to us. When we know we can lose them at any moment, we are no longer angry. We want to embrace her or him and say, "How wonderful, you are still alive. I am so happy. How could I be angry with you? Both of us have to die someday and while we are still alive and together it is foolish to be angry at each other."