CHAPTER III

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING

(Ti-lakkhaṇa).

The three characteristics of being are

Suffering or Misery,¹ Not-self² and Impermanency³.

These are the three corner-stones of Buddhism. They are further the central doctrine of Buddhism and form the core of the Buddhist Philosophy.

Here we propose to discuss the 'Three characteristics of Being.' Dukkha is one of the 'Three Signs of Being. Of the Four Noble Truths the First Truth is Suffering which means the non-fulfilment of one's desire.

Suffering is felt by the people. This suffering may be

1. Dukkha. 2. Anattā. 3. Ānicca.

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¹ Dukkha, ² Anattā, ³ Ānicca.
physical and mental. "Whether Buddha's appear in the world or whether Buddhas do not appear in the world, it remains a fact, an unalterable condition of existence and an eternal law, that all karmic formations are subject to suffering (dukkha). This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and after having discovered and mastered it, he announces, proclaims, preaches, reveals, teaches, and explains thoroughly, that all sankharas are subject to suffering."

Here comes the doctrine of Anattā, one of the 'Three Signs of Being.' Buddha was born in a society ruled predominantly by Brāhmanical ideas. He could not go against the predominant traditions of the contemporary age in a deliberate manner. In the field of belief he

1. Dukkha as already been discussed in the second chapter - Four Noble Truths.
   "sabbe sankhārā dukkha" - Patissambhidamaṇga.
frequently refers to gods and demi-gods such as - Yakṣas, nāgas, etc., mentioned in the Brāhmanical traditions as well as the popular traditions of the contemporary age. Beliefs in these entities was a corollary to the firm belief in the tradition of rebirth. As such he was not far removed from the common traditions of the society ruled by the Brāhmanical thought. He, however, challenged the rights and authority of the people who claimed themselves to be Brāhmīns by birth. Merē birth would not give a person a status of Brāhmin. According to Buddha a Brāhmin could be accepted as a Brāhmin if he possessed the virtues and qualities of a Brāhmin. Thus he was a supporter of the tradition of Kamma which determined the status and position of a living being. Kamma is the cause which determines the birth at a definite level. If a person does good work he is born in heaven and if
he does bad work he is born in a hell. We get an elaborate idea about Vimāna and Peta lokas in the texts called Vimānavatthu and the Petavatthu. A person can attain Vimānaloka for his good deeds but for his bad deeds he visits the Petaloka. According to the Brahmanical concept it is the ātma i.e. soul which transmigrates or is born in a new state after death. Buddha himself was a firm believer in this tradition of rebirth. Tradition holds that Buddha himself had stated that he was born many times before he was incarnated as Siddhattha and had ultimately attained Nibbāna. He, however, did not mention of soul or ātma. This is a crucial element in Buddhist thought. A being is bound to die and obtained a new birth until one is redeemed by obtaining Nibbāna. But the question remains as to who is this being that obtains birth and rebirth.
Anatta is one of the 'Three characteristics of being'. The Anatta doctrine teaches us that neither within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence, nor outside of them, can be found anything as a self-existing real Ego-entity, soul. It is the only really specific Buddhist doctrine with which the Buddhist teachings stands or falls. Like the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, it is a teaching peculiar to Buddhists. The doctrine of Anatta states that there is no permanent ego or self in the five khandhas which make up the personality of a being.

The Anatta doctrine establishes the theory of non existence of soul. It is the opposite of attavada. Anatta means 'Not-self', Non-ego, egolessness, impersonality. Atta means 'Self'. Etymologically, anatta
consists of the negative prefix an plus atta. There are two main Pali forms of the word namely, atta (instr. attanā) and atta (instr. attana). Neither form seems to be used in the plural in the Tipiṭaka. The words atta and atta are used in several senses: 1) Its meaning 'one-self' or one's own, e.g., attahitaya patipanno no parahitaya (acting in one's own interest, not in the interests of others) or attanā va katam sādhu (what is done by one's own self is good); 2) It means one's own person, the personality, both body and mind, e.g., in attabhāva (life), attapatilabhā (birth in some form of life); 3) Self, soul, e.g., atthi me atta (do I have a soul?).

Anattā is soul-less but 'Atta' is used without the negative prefix "an". The word 'Atta' simply means

1. R̄ṣman (vedic Sanskrit).
"self". It may be individual self or individual soul.

Again it may be universal self. The universal self is different from the individual self.

Universal Self and individual Self.

It is limitless. It is the true nature of all men and beings.¹ This self passes through all creation. In this respect Dr. R. P. Chaudhuri states: "It is indivisible. This universal self is the real self of man. There is no personal distinction between I, you and he - stemming from it. There is not one shred of individuality, no subject-object relationship whatever in the Self. The difference in selves is superficial. The Self that remains after the ego is destroyed is the universal Self."² The Self is the 'I' but the mind and body complex is not the real 'I' or

¹ Sarvabhūtāntarātmā.

When one says 'He is healthy', one identifies the Self with one's body. When one says 'He is worried,' one identifies the Self with one's mind. This identification is universal. Atta forgetting its real nature believes itself to be the ego. The ego arises when the Self may be identified with the Khandhas. Ego and individual self are convertible terms.

According to the Pali canon there are two types of self, the Big Self - Mahātā and the little Self - appātumā. The difference between the Big Self and the Small Self rests in one being the true self and the other being the false self. But in reality there is no truth in the existence of self. The concept about many selves is false and fictitious. They have no existence of their own. The ego self is an imposture or false. The universal self is real self not the individual self.
The doctrine of Dependent Origination is the doctrine of Non-self or absence of soul, which was the subject matter of Buddha's second discourse to his Brahmana companions. According to the Brahmanic thinkers, every living being has a permanent soul which is unaffected by the actions of an individual. It is regarded as the carrier of the effects of karma and is the link between one life and another. "Buddha as a student of Sāṅkhya and other Brāhmaṇic schools of thought, was well acquainted with this doctrine and evidently he could not very well appreciate the Sāṅkhyan stand-point that soul or purusa was an inactive agent while intellect (buddhi) or egoism (ahāṅkāra) which issued out of prakṛti was an active agent. He found some reasoning in the conception of ahāṅkāra but none in that
of Purusa." He declared that "everything worldly, without any exception, must be caused and conditioned, and atman (soul) being a part and parcel of a living being could not be uncaused and unconditioned as upheld by the Upanisadic schools of thinkers. He was also unable to accept the Upanisadic proposition that the individual soul was not different from the Great soul, - the self-conscious reality, the manifestation of which is the phenomenal world. His contention was that a being was composed of five skandhas (mass of elements), and so the soul should be identical with anyone of these five or with all the five taken together, or with something other than the five skandhas."¹ Really speaking, "The soul is the abiding separate, constantly existing and indestructible entity which is generally believed to be

¹ Early Monastic Buddhism - N. Dutt, Page 229-230.
found in man from the moment of his birth up to the time of his death, and to exist after his death in some other place, either heaven or hell, for all eternity.¹

Without a soul, there may not have immorality, and without immorality the life would not be worth living.

The existence of a soul can make sure for each individual. Without this soul there can be no reward in heaven and punishment in hell.

Our body is composed of two main parts, the physical body - rūpa and the mind - nāma. These two components are to be our own. Our body is to be our own and continuous from our childhood. But unfortunately this body of ours cannot be considered to be our own. Because we cannot control it. It grows old and is subject to disease and death. Every part of this body gets

¹. The Buddha and his teachings - G. P. Malalasekera. Page-34.
decayed and ruined with the passage of time. Yet one remains the same person though his body continues to change. The child gradually turns into the youth, the youth grows to become an old man. The mind however exists while the body thus changes from one stage to another. Mind is a compound of thoughts, feelings, consciousness etc. But mind also does not remain static. The mind is also always changing. No soul is however to be found in any part of our body of mind. Life is a phenomenon indeed life is a series of succession of phenomena, produced by the law of cause and effect. A person's existence is not permanent but it is a succession of changing entity that is always passing from one phase into another. The continuity of a person
is always maintained through birth in this life and in many other lives. Our present life is only a link in the chain of existence. The continuity of life is like the flame of a lamp. The lamp is identified with the life. The light appears from the lamp but oil and wick, lamp-holder and the air etc. are always changing. We think that the light is the same, yet it is not the same. An infant which gains a new birth is different from the old man who had died, yet both are called the same. The fire will burn till there is fuel to feed it. The life also continue as long as there is desire. All our action, thoughts and words are produced by this desire or craving.

Life is like the current of a river. When we see a river and stand on the bank of it, we think that the river is the same. But this it is not correct since every drop of water which we see is always flowing away and is
replaced by other. Hence the flow is not the same which was there a moment ago. The beginning and end of a river are not the same though the same water flows through its course. The flow of the stream from life is interrupted at death. Death comes about by the lapse of his natural term of life and by the exhaustion of Kamma. A sudden death is also like a lamp which may go out with the exhaustion of oil or wick or both or by a sudden gust of mind. The cravings of life do not get destroyed at ones death; these cravings call for a fresh new life with its body and mind. The new body and mind are corollaries (the result) of the previous body and mind.

In most systems of religion or philosophy, the nature of man and his destiny centre mainly round the doctrine of the soul. "Some call it the principle of thought and action in man or that which thinks, wills
and feels, knows and sees and, also, that which appropriates and owns. It is that which both acts and initiates action. Generally speaking, it is conceived as a perdurable entity, the permanent unchanging factor within the concrete personality, which somehow units and maintains its successive activities. It is, also, the subject of conscious spiritual experience. It has, in addition strong religious associations and various further implications, such as being independent of the body, immaterial and eternal."

The word Ātman is found to occur in the earliest Vedic hymns. It means breath which is in the sense of life or is called 'self' or 'soul'. Every human being had in him a part of Brahman called Ātman or the 'little self'. Brahman and Ātman were one and of the same 'substance'.

The ātman was an eternal 'substance'. The Brahmacāla Sutta of the Digha Nikāya holds that the 'self' (attā) and the Universe are to be treated from every point of view - positively, negatively and both. Some doctrines tell us that the self and the Universe are eternal.¹ Some others hold that the self and the Universe are annihilation.² Some again set forth that the self and the Universe have arisen without a cause.³

During the life time of Buddha and before his appearance in this world and thereafter, the Buddhist teaching of Anattā or non-self stood to contradict all these ideas. The Buddha made no concessions to the doctrine of self. He denied that there is in man an ātman or a self that is permanent and unchanging. He is also denied that man is

¹ Sassatavāda, 2, Ucchedavāda, 3, Adhiccasamuppanna.
completely annihilated after death. Man may grow to be
divine by his good thoughts, good words and good deeds.
The characteristic of soullessness is the second discourse
preached by the Buddha after his enlightenment to his five
followers in the Deer-Park at Isipatana near Varanasi.
Preaching of this sermon took place on the full moon day
of Asāḍa. This discourse is declared after the "foundation
of the rule of righteousness."\(^1\) The Anattā-Lakkhana Sutta
tells us that the individual is a psycho-physical
compound constituted of Nāma and Rūpa. It is the
combination of body and mind. Physical and mental elements
always undergo change. Our body is subject to change, so
also our mind. Feelings or sensations\(^2\), perceptions,\(^3\)
mental formations,\(^4\) consciousness,\(^5\) are not permanent

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and not independent. They have no nature of their own and that is why these cannot constitute a permanent entity or soul. All these phenomena are of an impermanent nature and these are also subject to change. These are also painful because of an unfulfilled desire for performance cherished by them. Buddha declared to his disciples that material things are soulless. Feelings are soulless. Perceptions are soulless. Formations are soulless. Consciousnesses are soulless.

The Mahanidana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya tells us that Self is feeling which is of threefold nature pleasant, painful and neutral. They are impermanent.

2. "Vedana anatta". Page-37. Ibid.
and as such pass away. In this Sutta we get that there is a 'descent' of the consciousness into the womb of the mother preparatory to rebirth. There is a continuity of consciousness between the old and the new lives.

According to the Buddha's doctrine, one's consciousness continues without break of identity. Buddha has denied self as belonging to visible form or to mind.

Let us now deal with attā as discussed in the Samyutta Nikāya. The Bhāra Sutta (Burden Sutta) of the Samyutta Nikāya tells us about the burden, the taking of the burden, the grasping of the burden and the laying down of the burden. These five aggregates are burden.¹ The

grasping of the burden is held as the craving which tends to re-birth.

The canonical commentary, the Paṭisambhidāmagga tells us that matter is not Self because it has no core. Feeling, perception, formation and consciousness are soulless. When a person meditates, it is like the flame of a burning lamp. The khandhas Attā - in the Paṭisambhidāmagga and in the Dhammapada. belong to self like a tree and its shadow, although they are separate entity. The khandhas are compared to smell and flower, though they are two separate entities. The khandhas are the container of the self as casket and the jewel. The doctrine of Not-self is a corollary to the teaching of

1. "Vedanā, saṅkhārā, saṅkhāra Viññāṇam, cakkhum......pe..... jaraśāraṇam aniccam khayaṭṭhena, dukkham 'khayaṭṭhena anattā asārakāṭṭhena" - Paṭisambhidāmagga, P.T.S.

Edited by A. C. Taylor, Page-37.
impermanence. Therefore all things are impermanent and so they are subject to death and are without self. Thus, there is no self in things. Impermanent things are fraught with suffering and they are not autonomous. Existence is nothing but it depends on a series of conditions. All things, mental and material have no self-reality. "All the elements of being are non-self. When one by wisdom realizes (this), he heeds not (is superior to) (this world of) sorrow, this is the path of purity, non-self; non-self, have no individuality or permanent being." 

Here comes self as in the *Milindapañha*, a non-canonical text. *Milindapañha* states that among

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2. The *Milindapañha* - P.T.S. Page-86.
the five khandhas, viññāṇa is more identified with attā.

In this text, "the illustration is elaborated in great detail and it is pointed out that when a person is indicated by giving him a name, it does not denote a soul but is merely an appellation for the five aggregates which constitute the empirical individual."¹

Notice can next be taken about self as discussed in the Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu and in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In the Abhidharmakośa it is stated that anātman is synonymous with skandha, āyatana and dhātu. The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā holds that "The Buddhas have made known that there is the Self (ātman), they have taught that there is not-self (anātman),

they have also taught that there is neither the self nor the not-self. Impermanent things are suffering, what suffering is non-Soul or not-Self.

Some hold that the soul exists as a conscious entity after death. According to others it is unconsciousness. Some say that the individual ceases to exist after death and is annihilated. The Self in the Upaniṣads bear out a doctrine of the Self. The Upaniṣads maintain that there exists a self in one's personality. This Self is free from death and sorrow. Sometimes the self is identified with the physical personality. Sometimes the self is identified with the

1. The Basic conception of Buddhism - Vidyushekhar Bhattacharyya. Page-34.

self in the dream-state or in the stage of deep sleep.
The soul has a form because it appears in its own form.
Some Upanisads hold that the soul may be separated from
the body like the sword from its scabbard. Thus the soul
may be separated from the body. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad
is famous for the concept of 'not this, not this' doctrine establishing the unknowableness of the self by
any process of reasoning. According to Śaṅkara, the self is
known through argument and reasoning. In the works on
Vedanta we frequently come across the term for soul i.e.
'Ātman'. In the Vedanta the word has not been used as
without a soul. Śaṅkarācārya wrote a book entitled
"Anātmaśāri Vigarhanapakaraṇa" and also another book
named "Ātmānātmanavikṣeka". Some of his conceptions about of
Anātman are given thus - 'this universe upto the

1. neti neti.
unmanifested is non-Self. According to the Sāṅkhya system of philosophy the soul is held as having a plurality of existence. It is held as a unique, eternal pervasive, substantial matter.

Many Jains and the Ājīvakas were contemporaries of Buddha. According to them, the soul is identified with life. Human beings and everything in this Universe are held as being in possession of souls. According to Mahāvīra, one of the founders of Jainism, the body is identified with the soul as also different from it. It is same from one point of view and it is different from another point of view. Jainism believes in the existence of souls in every object. The soul was also considered by the Jains to be intrinsically omniscient.

1. Visvam avyaktaparyantam idam hyanātma.
Buddhism is unique among all religious systems as far as the concept of existence and soul are concerned. The psycho-physical empirical categories have been denied the character of soul in early Buddhism. Buddha is an anattavādi. According to Him, existence transmigrates at first as a anatta and then it has changed into nothingness or sūnya. But according to Brahmanical systems, existence transmigrates from existence to existence till it merges into a State of eternity called Brahmā. According to the Brahmanical systems, existence is positive but according to Buddhism existence is negative. This is the one doctrine which separates Buddhism from all other religious, creeds and systems of Philosophy known in this world. The Buddha did not deny the reality of the Atman but pointed out that it was wrongly identified with what was not Atman.
"Whether Buddhas appear in the world or whether Buddhas do not appear in the world, it remains a fact, an unalterable condition of existence and an eternal law, that all that exists (sabbe dhamma) is non-absolute (anattā i.e., without an unchangeable or absolute ego entity). This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and after having discovered and mastered it, he announces, proclaims, preaches, reveals, teaches and explains thoroughly, that all that exists in non-absolute (without a permanent ego)."\(^1\)

Impermanence is one of the three characteristics of all existence. We know that everything is subject to the law of cause and effect. Impermanency of things is the rising, passing and changing of things or the disappearance

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of things. The things in the world do not persist in the same way but they are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment. A man who performs an action at one moment does not remain the same at the next moment. The pessimistic view of worldly existence and Impermanence (Anicca) possessions is based on impermanence. Buddha repeatedly reminded his disciples that all things are impermanent and subject to origin and decay. According to the Buddhists impermanence stands as the same with momentariness. The phenomenal objects are subject to change every moment. Anicca is treated as the basis for the other two, - dukkha and anatta.

The word 'anicca' means impermanent. It is derived from the negative prefix a plus nicca (permanent). 'Ni' means

Derivations of the word 'anicca'.

1. Skt. - anitya,
onward, downward and 'i' means to go.

Buddha declared to his first five disciples that everything in this creation was impermanent. This is the first seal of Buddhism. At the same time He held that everything was suffering. He got over this problem of suffering when He realised the transient character of reality. But the two propositions 'that everything is suffering and that everything is impermanent' are inter-related.

Three types of momentariness, impermanence is a fact which is bound to a causal law and changes into another. This law depends on cause and some conditions. This impermanence is of three kinds:
a) Impermanence of life period;

Impermanences are of three kinds.

b) Momentary Impermanence;

c) The principle of Impermanence.

Impermanence of the life period may be explained by stating that when a man is born and he gradually grows in age, his life period changes every moment. A man's hair and nails grow with time and may be clipped at intervals; yet we think that we have the same hair and nail that we had before. The things are destroyed every moment. The flame of a candle and the water of a stream always change and do not remain the same. Yet it is thought the light in the flame or water in the stream is the same. Though changing every moment yet we think that all these are as before. Our bodies consisting of external objects and our mental or internal objects are withering or undergoing change every moment.
This impermanence also presupposes momentory impermanence. Everything is undergoing change every moment. A thing is an aggregate of what and changes. Impermanence of life period gives us immediate experience of duration and momentary experience gives us an experience of flow. Our particular body is only changing. A being of a past moment has lived but a being of a present moment will not live as in the past. Momentary impermanence, according to Buddhism, is the principle of impermanence or Šūnyata known as a doctrine of void. This doctrine does not hold śūnyata synonymous with nothingness. It denotes the principle of perpetual change which is happening at every moment in this world. It is to be stated that the principles of impermanence must be permanent or Universal. Universal Impermanence of life
and momentary Impermanence are to be from the point of time temporal in Nature and the principle of impermanence is to be temporal in Character. Samsāra which is illusory stand as a phenomena of ceaseless change. That which is suffering is impermanent.¹

Human body is a continual phenomena of flowing in and flowing out. Dead skin in the human body is constantly being removed and new skin is formed; old cells are worn out and new cells produced. In human body there is a slow change from infancy to childhood, through youth and adolescence to maturity and old age. Human body is built upon four great entities.² Therefore, this body can last

2. Mahābhūtas.
one year, two years, even a hundred years. But there is always a slow change through day and night. Therefore it can be said that this body is impermanent. It is formed but it is not independent. The five sense organs of man are not permanent. The eye is impermanent. It is changing and becoming, and the visible objects are also impermanent. Eye-consciousness is impermanent, changing and becoming. For this cause and condition i.e. eye cum visible objects arise eye-consciousness which is impermanent and is always changing. Eye-contact is also impermanent. Ear cum sounds, nose cum odours, tongue cum flavours, body cum tangibles and mind cum ideas are all impermanent. Materiality is impermanent. Feeling or perception, formation or consciousness is also impermanent. The same idea is

indicated in the Samyutta Nikāya which states that materiality is impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. Materiality is non-soul, Feeling, Perception, Formations and consciousness is also non-soul. 1 All dhammas are impermanent, all dhammas are non-soul. Buddha declared that all that is impermanent. All that reasoning - All is impermanent. 2 All things are impermanent. "All created things are impermanent (transitory) when one by wisdom realizes (this) he needs not (is superior to) (this world of) sorrow, this is the path to purity. All creation is possessing. It is all suffering. It is all unreal. By recalling men to these principles, the Buddha summons the toiling." 3


In this connection, Prof. Dasgupta observes:

"Buddhism holds everything to be momentary, so neither cause nor effect can abide. One is called the effect because its momentary existence has been determined by the destruction of its momentary antecedent called the cause. There is no permanent reality which undergoes the change, but one change is determined by another and this determination is nothing more than 'that happening, this happened'."

Evidently Buddhism lays great emphasis on the aspect of non-permanence. The logic that has been discussed above had led the Buddhist savants to seek for an unassailable conclusion which would give a proper direction to the endeavours that could be recommended for

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the speaker of the truth. Indeed, truth is the most illusory element in the entire comprehension and Buddhism had made every effort to get through the mantle of illusion and arrive at what could be held as the illumination of truth. Endeavour has been made in all that has been stated above to gain an idea as to how the mind of the Buddhists was working to reach this ultimate truth. This was in their own way a solution that they had arrived at. This logic has been examined by quite a number of scholars and the inherent strength of the arguments could not be invalidated though there may be found many draw-backs and lacumal in the argumentation of the critiques. However, it cannot be denied that the Philosophy evolved by the Buddhists in their concept of Tilakkhana (Dukkha, Anattā, Anicca) had certainly elements leading to conclusions through clarity of thinking and soundness of argumentation.