

The Essentials of Buddha Dhamma in Meditative Practice

by

Sayagyi Thray Sithu U Ba Khin

With an Essay on U Ba Khin

by

Eric Lerner

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The Essentials of Buddha Dhamma in Meditative Practice

Anicca, dukkha, anattā—Impermanence, Suffering and Egolessness—are the three essential characteristics of things in the Teaching of the Buddha. If you know *anicca* correctly, you will know *dukkha* as its corollary and *anattā* as ultimate truth. It takes time to understand the three together.

Impermanence (*anicca*) is, of course, the essential fact which must be first experienced and understood by practice. Mere book-knowledge of the Buddha-Dhamma will not be enough for the correct understanding of *anicca* because the experiential aspect will be missing. It is only through experiential understanding of the nature of *anicca* as an ever-changing process within you that you can understand *anicca* in the way the Buddha would like you to understand it. As in the days of the Buddha, so too now, this understanding of *anicca* can be developed by persons who have no book-knowledge whatsoever of Buddhism.

To understand Impermanence (*anicca*) one must follow strictly and diligently the Eightfold Noble Path, which is divided into the three groups of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*—Morality, Concentration and Wisdom. *Sīla*, or virtuous living, is the basis for *samādhi*, control of the mind, leading to one-pointedness. It is only when *samādhi* is good that one can develop *paññā*. Therefore, *sīla* and *samādhi* are the prerequisites for *paññā*. By *paññā* is meant the understanding of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* through the practice of *vipassanā*, i.e., insight meditation.

Whether a Buddha has arisen or not, the practice of *sīla* and *samādhi* may be present in the human world. They are, in fact, the common denominators of all religious faiths. They are not, however, sufficient means for the goal of Buddhism—the complete end of suffering. In his search for the end of suffering, Prince Siddhattha, the future Buddha, found this out and worked his way through to find the path which would lead to the end of suffering. After solid work for six years, he found the way out, became completely enlightened, and *then* taught men and gods to follow the Path which would lead them to the end of suffering.

In this connection we should understand that each action—whether by deed, word or thought—leaves behind an active force called "saṅkhāra" (or "kamma" in popular terminology), which goes to the credit or debit account of the individual, according to whether the action is good or bad. There is, therefore, an accumulation of saṅkhāra (or kamma) with everyone, which functions as the supply-source of energy to sustain life, which is inevitably followed by suffering and death. It is by the development of the power inherent in the understanding of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, that one is able to rid oneself of the saṅkhāra accumulated in one's own personal account. This process begins with the correct understanding of *anicca*, while further accumulations of fresh actions and the reduction of the supply of energy to sustain life are taking place simultaneously, from moment to moment and from day to day. It is, therefore, a matter of a whole lifetime or more to get rid of all one's saṅkhāra. He who has rid himself of all saṅkhāra comes to the end of suffering, for then no saṅkhāra remains to give the necessary energy to sustain him in any form of life. On the termination of their lives the perfected saints, i.e., the Buddhas and arahants, pass into *parinibbāna*, reaching the end of suffering. For us today who take to *vipassanā* meditation, it would suffice if we can understand *anicca* well enough to reach the first stage of an Ariya (a Noble person), that is, a Sotāpanna or stream-enterer, who will not take more than seven lives to come to the end of suffering.

The fact of *anicca*, which opens the door to the understanding of *dukkha* and *anattā* and eventually to the end of suffering, can be encountered in its full significance only through the Teachings of a Buddha, for so long as that Teaching relating to the Eightfold Noble Path and the Thirty-Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*) remains intact and available to the aspirant.

For progress in vipassana meditation, a student must keep knowing *anicca* as continuously as possible. The Buddha's advice to monks is that they should try to maintain the awareness of *anicca*, *dukkha* or *anattā* in all postures, whether sitting, standing, walking or lying down. Continuous awareness of *anicca* and so of *dukkha* and *anattā*, is the secret of success. The last words of the Buddha just before He breathed His last and passed away into Mahā-parinibbāna were: "Decay (or *anicca*) is inherent in all component things. Work out your own salvation with diligence." This is in fact the essence of all His teachings during the forty-five years of His ministry. If you will keep up the awareness of the *anicca* that is inherent in all component things, you are sure to reach the goal in the course of time.

As you develop in the understanding of *anicca*, your insight into "What is true of nature" will become greater and greater, so much so that eventually you will have no doubt whatsoever of the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. It is then only that you will be in a position to go ahead for the goal in view. Now that you know *anicca* as the first essential factor, you would try to understand what *anicca* is with real clarity as extensively as possible so as not to get confused in the course of practice or discussion.

The real meaning of *anicca* is that Impermanence or Decay is the inherent nature of everything that exists in the Universe—whether animate or inanimate. The Buddha taught His disciples that everything that exists at the material level is composed of "*kalāpas*." *Kalāpas* are material units very much smaller than atoms, which die out immediately after they come into being. Each *kalāpa* is a mass formed of the eight basic constituents of matter, the solid, liquid, calorific and oscillatory, together with color, smell, taste, and nutriment. The first four are called primary qualities, and are predominant in a *kalāpa*. The other four are subsidiaries, dependent upon and springing from the former. A *kalāpa* is the minutest particle in the physical plane—still beyond the range of science today. It is only when the eight basic material constituents unite together that the *kalāpa* is formed. In other words, the momentary collocation of these eight basic elements of behavior makes a man just for that moment, which in Buddhism is known as a *kalāpa*. The life span of a *kalāpa* is termed a moment, and a trillion such moments are said to elapse during the wink of a man's eye. These *kalāpas* are all in a state of perpetual change or flux. To a developed student in vipassanā meditation they can be felt as a stream of energy.

The human body is not, as it may appear, a solid stable entity, but a continuum of matter (*rūpa*) co-existing with mentality (*nāma*). To know that our very body is tiny *kalāpas* all in a state of change is to know the true nature of change or decay. This change or decay (*anicca*) occasioned by the continual breakdown and replacement of *kalāpas*, all in a state of combustion, must necessarily be identified as *dukkha*, the truth of suffering. It is only when you experience impermanence (*anicca*) as suffering (*dukkha*) that you come to the realization of the truth of suffering, the first of the Four Noble Truths basic to the doctrine of the Buddha. Why? Because when you realize the subtle nature of *dukkha* from which you cannot escape for a moment, you become truly afraid of, disgusted with, and disinclined towards your very existence as mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*), and look for a way of escape to a state beyond *dukkha*, and so to Nibbāna, the end of suffering. What that end of suffering is like, you will be able to taste, even as a human being, when you reach the level of sotāpanna, a stream-enterer, and develop well enough by practice to attain to the unconditioned state of Nibbāna, the peace within. But even in terms of everyday, ordinary life, no sooner than you are able to keep up the awareness

of anicca in practice will you know for yourself that a change is taking place in you for the better, both physically and mentally.

Before entering upon the practice of vipassanā meditation, that is, after samādhi has been developed to a proper level, a student should acquaint himself with the theoretical knowledge of material and mental properties, i.e., of rūpa and nāma. For in vipassanā meditation one contemplates not only the changing nature of matter, but also the changing nature of mentality, of the thought-elements of attention directed towards the process of change going on within matter. At times attention will be focused on the impermanence of the material side of existence, i.e. upon anicca in regard to rūpa, and at other times on the impermanence of the thought-elements or mental side, i.e., upon anicca in regard to nāma. When one is contemplating the impermanence of matter, one realizes also that the thought-elements simultaneous with that awareness are also in a state of transition or change. In this case one will be knowing anicca in regard to both rūpa and nāma together.

All I have said so far relates to the understanding of anicca through bodily feelings of the process of change of rūpa or matter, and also of thought-elements depending upon such changing processes. You should know that anicca can also be understood through other types of feeling as well. Anicca can be contemplated through feeling:

1. by contact of visible form with the sense organ of the eye;
2. by contact of sound with the sense organ of the ear;
3. by contact of smell with the sense organ of the nose;
4. by contact of taste with the sense organ of the tongue;
5. by contact of touch with the sense organ of the body and
6. by contact of mental objects with the sense organ of the mind.

One can thus develop the understanding of anicca through any of six sense organs. In practice, however, we have found that of all the types of feeling, the feeling by contact of touch with the component parts of the body in a process of change covers the widest area for introspective meditation. Not only that, the feelings by contact of touch (by way of friction, radiation and vibration of the kalāpas within) with the component parts of the body is more evident than other types of feeling and therefore a beginner in vipassanā meditation can come to the understanding of anicca more easily through bodily feelings of the change of rūpa or matter. This is the main reason why we have chosen bodily feeling as a medium for quick understanding of anicca. It is open to anyone to try other means, but my suggestion is that one should be well established in the understanding of anicca through bodily feeling before any attempt is made through other types of feeling.

There are ten levels of knowledge in vipassanā, namely:

1. *Sammasana*: theoretical appreciation of anicca, dukkha and anattā by close observation and analysis,
2. *Udayabbaya*: knowledge of the arising and dissolution of rūpa and nāma by direct observation.
3. *Bhaṅga*: knowledge of the rapidly changing nature of rūpa and nāma as a swift current or stream of energy; in particular, clear awareness of the phase of dissolution,
4. *Bhaya*: knowledge that this very existence is dreadful,
5. *Ādīnava*: knowledge that this very existence is full of evils,

6. *Nibbidā*: knowledge that this very existence is disgusting,
7. *Muñcitukamyatā*: knowledge of the urgent need and wish to escape from this very existence,
8. *Patisaṅkhā*: knowledge that the time has come to work for full realization of deliverance, with anicca as the base,
9. *Saṅkhārupekkhā*: knowledge that the stage is now set to get detached from all conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*) and to break away from egocentricity,
10. *Anuloma*: knowledge that would accelerate the attempt to reach the goal.

These are the levels of attainment which one goes through during the course of vipassanā meditation; in the case of those who reach the goal in a short time they can be known only in retrospect. Along with one's progress in understanding anicca, one may reach these levels of attainment, subject, however, to adjustments or help at certain levels by a competent teacher. One should avoid looking forward to such attainments in anticipation, as this will distract from the continuity of awareness of anicca, which alone can and will give the desired reward.

Let me now deal with vipassanā meditation from the point of view of a householder in everyday life and explain the benefit one can derive from it—here and now—in this very lifetime.

The initial object of vipassanā meditation is to activate the experience of anicca in oneself and to eventually reach a state of inner and outer calmness and balance. This is achieved when one becomes engrossed in the feeling of anicca within. The world is now facing serious problems which threaten all mankind. It is just the right time for everyone to take to vipassanā meditation and learn how to find a deep pool of quiet in the midst of all that is happening today. Anicca is inside of everybody. It is within reach of everybody. Just a look into oneself and there it is—anicca to be experienced. When one can feel anicca, when one can experience anicca, and when one can become engrossed in anicca, one can at will cut oneself off from the world of ideation outside. Anicca is, for the householder, the gem of life which he will treasure to create a reservoir of calm and balanced energy for his own well-being and for the welfare of the society.

The experience of anicca, when properly developed, strikes at the root of one's physical and mental ills and removes gradually whatever is bad in him, i.e. the causes of such physical and mental ills. This experience is not reserved for men who have renounced the world for the homeless life. It is for the householder as well. In spite of drawbacks which make a householder restless in these days, a competent teacher or guide can help a student to get the experience of anicca activated in a comparatively short time. Once he has got it activated, all that is necessary is for him to try and preserve it; but he must make it a point, as soon as time or opportunity presents itself for further progress, to work for the stage of *bhaṅgañāna*—the third level of knowledge in vipassanā. If he reaches this level, there will be little or no problem because he should then be able to experience anicca without much ado and almost automatically. In this case anicca will become his base, to which all his physical and mental activities return as soon as the domestic needs of daily life for such activities are over. However, there is likely to be some difficulty for one who has not reached the stage of *bhaṅga*. It will be just like a tug-of-war for him between anicca within, and physical and mental activities outside. So it would be wise for him to follow the motto of work while you work, play while you play. There is no need for him to be activating the experience of anicca all the time. It should suffice if this could be confined to a regular period, or periods, set apart in the day or night for the purpose. During this time, at least, an attempt must be made to keep the attention focused inside the body, with awareness devoted exclusively to anicca; that is to say, his awareness of anicca should go on from moment to moment so continuously as not to allow for the interpolation of any discursive or distracting

thoughts which are definitely detrimental to progress. In case this is not possible, he will have to go back to respiration-mindfulness, because samādhi is the key to the contemplation of anicca. To get good samādhi, sīla (morality) has to be perfect, since samādhi is build upon sīla. For a good experience of anicca, samādhi must be good. If samādhi is excellent, awareness of anicca will also become excellent. There is no special technique for activating the experience of anicca other than the use of the mind, adjusted to a perfect state of balance, and attention projected upon the object of meditation. In vipassanā the object of meditation is anicca, and therefore in the case of those used to focusing their attention on bodily feelings, they can feel anicca directly. In experiencing anicca in relation to the body, it should first be in the area where one can easily get his attention engrossed, changing the area of attention from place to place, from head to feet and from feet to head, at times probing into the interior. At this stage, it must clearly be understood that no attention is to be paid to the anatomy of the body, but to the formations of matter- the kalāpas—and the nature of their constant change.

If these instructions are observed, there will surely be progress, but the progress depends also on Pārami (i.e. on one's dispositions for certain spiritual qualities) and the devotion of the individual to the work of meditation. If he attains high levels of knowledge, his power to understand the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anattā will increase and he will accordingly come nearer and nearer the goal of the Ariya or noble saint, which every householder should keep in view.

This is the age of science. Man of today has no Utopia. He will not accept anything unless the results are good, concrete, vivid, personal, and here-and-now. When the Buddha was alive, He said to the Kālāmas:

“Now look, you Kālāmas. Be not misled by report or tradition or hearsay. Be not misled by proficiency in the scriptural collections, or by reasoning or logic or reflection on and approval of some theory, or because some view conforms to one's inclinations, or out of respect for the prestige of a teacher. But when you know for yourselves: these things are unwholesome, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise, these things when practiced and observed, conduce to loss and sorrow—then you reject them. But if at any time you know for yourselves: these things are wholesome, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the intelligent; these things, when practiced and observed, conduce to welfare and happiness, then, Kālāmas, do ye, having practised them, abide.”

The time-clock of vipassanā has now struck—that is, for the revival of Buddha-Dhamma vipassanā in practice. We have no doubt whatsoever that definite results would accrue to those who would with an open mind sincerely undergo a course of training under a competent teacher—I mean results which will be accepted as good, concrete, vivid, personal, here-and-now, results which will keep them in good stead and in a state of well-being and happiness for the rest of their lives.

May all beings be happy and may peace prevail in the world.

—U Ba Khin

U Ba Khin: An Appreciation

by

Eric Lerner

Over the centuries Theravāda Buddhist teachings have been preserved by and large in a monastic tradition. The requisite for the 'true practice' has been the renunciation of worldly existence for a life behind walls or in the forest. Householders were left with the observances of morality, almsgiving, and worship to accrue merit for future lives when they could actually embark on the formal path to liberation. As the sūtras themselves reveal, however, this was not the case at all when the Buddha was alive and preaching. Vast numbers of householders received the teaching and the practice as well, and attained high levels of spiritual development.

In the past few decades in the Theravada Buddhist countries there has been a general revival of interest in insight meditation among the robed Sangha, and with it a spreading of the practice outside the monastery walls. This has in a sense revived the whole outlook toward meditation, practicalizing it, in a way, by focusing on two important aspects. First, how can a man who does not have his entire life to devote to silence and contemplation approach meditation? And second, what role can the meditative discipline play in worldly life?

These problems were dealt with in great detail and with remarkable strength of imagination by one of the most important meditation masters of modern day Burma, Thray Sithu U Ba Khin. He was well known within his country as an important Government servant, for many years the Accountant General of the Union of Burma as well as the chairman of a number of important boards and commissions. At one time he held four such posts simultaneously, was the father of six children and found the time to teach meditation at the International Meditation Center in Rangoon, which was established under his guidance in the early 1950s.

The unique characteristics of his spiritual teaching stem from his situation as a lay meditation master in an orthodox Buddhist country. It was not appropriate for him to instruct monks, so all of his practice was geared specifically to lay people. He developed a powerfully direct approach to vipassanā meditation that could be undertaken in a short period of intensive practice and continued as part of householding life. His method has been of great importance in the transmission of the Dhamma to the West, because in his twenty five years at the Center he instructed scores of foreign visitors who needed no closer acquaintance with Buddhism *per se* to quickly grasp this practice of insight. Since U Ba Khin's demise in 1971, several of his commissioned disciples have carried on his work, both within and outside of Burma. Hundreds of Westerners have received the instruction from S.N. Goenka in India, Robert Hover and Ruth Denison in America and John Coleman in England. In addition, several of U Ba Khin's closest disciples still teach at the Center in Rangoon.

What is the goal of Insight Meditation? And does it differ in any way for the man whose whole life is devoted to its practice and the man who earns a living and supports others? In the broadest sense there is no difference. The end of suffering is the goal. The experience of Nibbānic Peace within, as U Ba Khin referred to it, is the aim of the practice; but also the end of suffering each moment; harmony among beings, the end of internal tension, the manifestation of loving-kindness, the ability to perform one's daily tasks free from anger, greed and anxiety. For

the lay person and the monk it is the same. The way to proceed, however, differs, at least at the outset.

U Ba Khin understood that unlike the monk, his students faced severe limitations of time to devote to their practice. Furthermore, they had to function in a completely uncontrolled environment generally hostile to proper moral conduct and good concentration, the requisites for insight. Thus he gave them a method that could withstand that pressure. In the short span of ten days, most of his pupils could experience at least a glimpse of the reality within and continue expanding their awareness with two hours daily of formal meditation after they left the Center.

This technique has three distinctive qualities to it. First is its emphasis on the development of sufficient one-pointed concentration. Concerning this, U Ba Khin wrote:

"Samādhi (concentration) is a way of training the mind to become tranquil, pure and strong and therefore forms the essence of religious life ... It is, in fact, the greatest common denominator of all religions. Unless one can get the mind freed from the impurities and develop it to a state of purity, he can hardly identify himself with Brahma or God. Although different methods are used by people of different religions, the goal for the development of mind is the same, viz. a perfect state of physical and mental calm. The student at the Center is helped to develop the power of concentration to one-pointedness, by encouraging him to focus his attention to a spot on the upper lip at the base of the nose, synchronizing the inward and outward motion of respiration with the silent awareness of in-breath and out-breath ... In the Ānāpānasati meditation technique (i.e. that of respiration mindfulness), which is followed at the Center, one great advantage is that the respiration is not only natural, but also available at all times for the purpose of anchoring one's attention to it, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. With a determined effort to narrow down the range of thought waves, firstly, to the area around the nose with respiration mindfulness and gradually, with the wave length of respiration becoming shorter, to a spot on the upper lip with just the warmth of the breath, there is no reason why a good student of meditation should not be able to secure the one-pointedness of mind in a few days of training.

(The Real Values of True Buddhist Meditation, pp. 5–6.)

The reason for the necessity of good concentration, he felt, was that with only a limited period of time available, one's mind had to have a degree of penetrating power to really experience the inner reality on more than a conceptual level. He departed from the most traditional monastic view that concentration had to be developed to very high states requiring great time and isolation. But neither did he agree with the approach that began with little specific concentration training. He was interested in a sufficient level for the work of real insight.

The second quality of his teaching was its focus on the characteristic of *anicca*, impermanence. The Buddha described reality as having three marks, or characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the absence of a real "I" or self. In the practice of mindfulness, observance of just what is, focusing the attention of these true marks of reality breaks down false view and weakens attachment. U Ba Khin taught that the most direct access to understanding the process of life was through awareness of impermanence, *anicca*. He felt that *anicca* is the most apparent and readily comprehensible of the three marks and that its understanding leads naturally to the others. So the observance of change, or the alteration of all phenomena at increasingly subtler levels, was the real object of his vipassanā technique.

The method itself was the systematic awareness of physical sensation in the body. As the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta of the Buddha makes clear, the process of life is identical in every aspect of

the mind-body continuum. Choose whichever you like and observe it closely enough and all of reality unfolds. U Ba Khin found that the unfolding is most dramatic and rapid in the physical sensation within the body. His students were directed to place their concentrated attention on that and become sensitive to the process of change observable in the tactile reaction of heat, cold tingling, pain, numbness, pressure or whatever was there. Simply observe the changing nature of the phenomenon within you, he taught.

Continued practice of the method, as he points out in the following articles, yields spiritual and worldly results as well. He maintained that a householder could enjoy the fruit of the Nibbānic experience in this life time. And he encouraged men not to be content with ritual practice of simple book knowledge of the teachings. In addition, the practice, as his disciple S.N. Goenka terms it, is an art of living. So convinced was U Ba Khin of the power of this method for clearing the mind that he insisted that all of his employees in the Accounts Department take a course of meditation from him and that a portion of the office be set aside for a meditation space. Mr. Robert Hover recounts the story that his teacher told him. Sometimes U Ba Khin, attending particularly unfocused meetings of government with men of more biased minds, would in the midst of heated argument rise from his chair and stand for some moments gazing out of the window before returning to the conference table. His colleagues thought he was watching the world outside. In fact, U Ba Khin explained, he was busy within, re-establishing mindfulness to deal with the demands of life.

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Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679