

nirvana, by this principle: "When this exists, that exists; this arising, that arises" – indicating the origin of suffering: the world (loka); "when this does not exist, that does not exist; this ceasing, that ceases" – indicating the cessation of suffering: nirvana.

Therefore, **emptiness** is based on **conditioned genesis** to link with the compounded: the world (loka), the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra), and with the unconditioned: **nirvana**. Thus, conditioned genesis is a principle of both the compounded and the unconditioned.

1.4. The Recognition of Emptiness

As stated in 1.3, the discourses in the Pāli and Chinese versions record that the Buddha used conditioned genesis to point the way to nirvana, and stated that both conditioned genesis and nirvana are profound, connected with emptiness. The two versions also show he indicated that one should first realise the dharma (the nature of phenomena) of conditioned genesis, and then one will come to have the wisdom of nirvana. For example, at SN 12. 70 and SA 347 he says:

Susīma, first [one comes to have] *knowledge of dharma-status* (the nature of phenomena), afterwards [one comes to have] *knowledge of nirvana*. (pubbe kho Susīma dhammatṭhitiññāṇaṃ pacchā nibbāṇe ñāṇanti).⁸⁵

"Knowledge of dharma-status" (P. dhamma-ṭhiti-ñāṇa, Skt. dharma-sthiti-jñāna) refers to knowledge of the dharma of conditioned genesis.⁸⁶ According to both the Pāli and the Chinese texts (SN 12. 70 and SA 347), a person who attains this "knowledge of dharma-status" is called "one who is

wisdom-liberated" (P. paññā-vimutta, Skt. prajñā-vimukta), so a person who attains "knowledge of nirvana" (P. nibbāna-ñāṇa, Skt. nirvāṇa-jñāna), which comes after having the "knowledge of dharma-status", is called "one who has twofold-liberation" (P. ubhatobhāga-vimutta, Skt. Ubhayato-bhāga-vimukta).⁸⁷ Both "wisdom liberation" (P. paññā-vimutti, Skt. prajñā-vimukti) and "twofold liberation" (P. ubhatobhāga-vimutti, Skt. ubhayatobhāga-vimukti) entail first knowing the dharma of conditioned genesis, and then knowing the dharma of nirvana.

Consequently, realising the dharma of conditioned genesis is a first step to comprehending the profound dharmas of conditioned genesis and nirvana, which are empty; however, since there are various levels on which to understand the "emptiness" of conditioned genesis in early Buddhist texts, to observe the meaning of emptiness it is necessary to look at it both from the viewpoint of impermanence (P. anicca, Skt. anitya), and from the viewpoint of the middle path (P. majjhimā paṭipadā, Skt. madhyamā pratipadā). In other words, conditioned genesis is connected with emptiness by virtue of both "impermanence" and the "middle way".

1.4.A. Emptiness from the Viewpoint of Conditioned Genesis as Impermanence

The Buddha's path to liberation (vimutti) begins with recognising suffering in the nature of life. In terms of the "four noble truths" (cattāri ariyasaccāni)⁸⁸ one must achieve full knowing (pariññeyya)⁸⁹:

- (1) knowledge (pariññā) of suffering (dukkha),
- (2) elimination (pahāna) of the arising of suffering (dukkha-samudaya⁹⁰),

- (3) attainment (sacchikiriyā) of the cessation of suffering (dukkha-nirodha⁹¹) and,
 (4) development (bhāvanā) of the way leading to the cessation of suffering (dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-
 paṭipadā⁹²).

These four noble truths apply an easier way of comprehending the principle of conditioned genesis to show how suffering arises, and how it can be made to cease; but it is easy to overlook the fact that suffering ("the world") and nirvana (the supramundane) are based on the same principle. Seeing the nature of phenomena, developing the wisdom (paññā) that is connected with the ending of suffering or with mind free from "affliction-flow" (anāsavaccittassa), is identified as noble, supramundane "right view" (sammādiṭṭhi);⁹³ and this right view is said to be the leader or forerunner (pubbaṅgama) on the way to the cessation of suffering, to liberation.⁹⁴

Consequently, how to see and know compounded nature as suffering is a significant observation in Buddhist thinking. Conditioned genesis indicates that all compounded things are impermanent (anicca), and because they are impermanent they are also suffering. For example, at SN 12. 20, following an explanation of conditioned genesis, the Buddha says:

And what, monks, is the dharma of "arisen by condition" (paṭiccasamuppanna)? Aging-and-death (and birth, becoming, attachment, craving, feeling, contact, the six sense-spheres, name-and-material form, consciousness, activities, ignorance) are **impermanent** (aniccam), compounded things (or conditioned things, saṅkhatam), arisen by condition (paṭiccasamuppannam), have perishable nature, (khayadhammam), the nature of decay (vayadham-

mam), fading way (virāgadhammam), cessation (nirodha-dhammam).⁹⁵

Hence, conditioned genesis indicates that compounded things "arisen by condition" are impermanent, and so have perishable nature, the nature of decay, fading away, and cessation.

The notion that "that which is impermanent is suffering" can be seen in many texts of both the Pāli Saṃyutta-nikāya and the Chinese Saṃyuktāgama. For example, SN 36. 11 and its counterpart SA 474 state there are three kinds of feeling,⁹⁶ but "whatsoever is felt is within suffering" (yaṃ kiñci vedayitam taṃ dukkhasmin). The reason that whatsoever feeling a person experiences is within suffering is stated by the Buddha at SN 36. 11:

... Monk! Concerning (sandhāya) the impermanence of compounded things (saṅkhārānaṃ yeve anicca-taṃ), I have said that whatsoever is felt is within suffering. Monk! Concerning the perishable nature (khayadhammatam) of compounded things, their nature of decaying (vayadhammatam), fading way (virāgadhammatam), ceasing (nirodhadhammatam), changing for the worse (vipariṇāmadhammatam), I have said that whatsoever is felt is within suffering.⁹⁷

The corresponding SA 474 states:

The Buddha said to Ānanda: Because all compounded things (行 Skt. saṃskārāḥ) are impermanent (無常 Skt. anitya), all compounded things are changing by nature (變易法), I have said all feelings are suffering (諸所有受悉皆是苦). Also Ānanda, because of the gradual cessation of compounded things, the gradual calming of

compounded things, I have said all feelings are suffering.⁹⁸

Thus, although the two versions differ in wording, they share a common view that compounded things are impermanent (*anicca*); therefore, all feelings are suffering (*dukkha*).

This teaching of suffering is stated from the viewpoint of the “impermanence” of compounded nature: one must see that impermanence is suffering in the nature of life. In other words, to know suffering in the nature of life is also to know that the “five aggregates”,⁹⁹ “six sense-spheres”,¹⁰⁰ or “eighteen elements”¹⁰¹ of conditioned genesis (compounded nature) are impermanent, and that is the suffering of aging, death, sorrow, distress, depression, and affliction. These are the reality of the body and mind of sentient beings. The connection between impermanence and suffering is particularly in the sense that sentient beings unawares and unconsciously attach to the impermanent nature of compounded things as mentally projecting a permanent entity (absolute substance) belonging to “my self”; therefore, when the compounded phenomena of attachment change or become different constantly, the suffering of grief, lamentation, pain, depression, and despair comes to exist.¹⁰² In other words, impermanence is suffering when one attaches to (whether within or beyond) the compounded phenomena as a self (entity) or as belonging to my self. This teaching of why impermanence is suffering to sentient beings is common to the Pāli and the Chinese versions of early Buddhist canon.

Consequently, there is no question that impermanence is suffering in early Buddhist thinking, since there are many statements in early Buddhist texts that “impermanence is suffering”.

What concerns us here is how impermanence (and therefore suffering) is connected with emptiness. As noted above, in early Buddhism “emptiness” has not-self as its main meaning, and nirvana as its ultimate meaning. Thus, the relationship between impermanence and emptiness is as stated at SA 270:

One who practises the perception of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*) can establish the perception of not-self (*anatta-saññā*). The mind of a noble disciple who abides in the perception of not-self is aloof from self-pride (*asmi-māna*), and will go on to nirvana. (無常想者，能建立無我想，聖弟子住無我想，心離我慢，順得涅槃。)¹⁰³

The corresponding Pāli text, SN 22. 102, says:

Thus developed and practised, monks, the perception of impermanence (*aniccasaññā*), exhausts all desire for sensuality (*kāmarāgam*), exhausts all desire for material form (*rūparāgam*), exhausts all desire for becoming (*bhavarāgam*), exhausts all ignorance (*avijjam*), removes all self-pride (*asmimānaṃ*). (Evam bhāvitā kho bhikkhave *aniccasaññā* evam bahulīkatā, sabbamaṃ *kāmarāgam* pariyādiyati, sabbamaṃ *rūparāgam* pariyādiyati, sabbam *bhavarāgam* pariyādiyati, sabbam *avijjam* pariyādiyati, sabbam *asmimānaṃ samūhanūti*)¹⁰⁴

Similarly, another Pāli discourse, AN 9. 3 states:

Meghiya, the one who thinks on impermanence establishes the perception of not-self; thinking on not-self, uprooting self-pride, he attains nirvana in this very life. (*Aniccasaññino Meghiya anattasaññā*

saṅṭhāti, anattasaññī asmimānasamugghātaṃ
pāpuṇāti diṭṭh' eva dhamme nibbānan ti)¹⁰⁵

Hence, both the Chinese and the Pāli versions record in common that there is a close relationship between the thought of impermanence and the understanding of not-self (removing self-pride) and nirvana.

Self-pride (asmi-māna¹⁰⁶) is pride that attaches to "I am"; it is egotism. Its removal is based on the insight of not-self (anatta). The exhausting of all desire for sensuality, material form, and becoming, and of all ignorance is the wisdom of liberation (vimutti). Seeing (passati) the nature of things as "impermanent" (= suffering) leads to removal of the view of self, and so to the realisation of nirvana. This is, then, for early Buddhism, a major way of "insight" (vipassanā)¹⁰⁷ leading to liberation. Insight into the compounded nature of the "five aggregates" or the "six sense-spheres" as impermanent is therefore called "right view" (sammādiṭṭhi) in early Buddhism.¹⁰⁸ And to see that "compounded nature is impermanent, what is impermanent is suffering, what is suffering is not-self" is also regarded as "right insight" or "right wisdom" (sammappaññā).¹⁰⁹

There are, in early Buddhist texts, two formulations of these characteristics to be observed in compounded things:

- (1) impermanent (anicca), suffering (dukkha), not-self (anatta).
- (2) impermanent, suffering, empty (suñña), not-self.

The first formulation is most common in both the Chinese *Saṃyuktāgama* and the Pāli *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. The two versions contain frequent references to the attainment of liberation or nirvana through insight into the "five aggregates" or the "six sense-spheres" as "impermanent, suffering, and not-self".¹¹⁰

"Not-self" is also expressed as "not-belonging-to-self" (anattaniya) or "not-self-and-not-belonging-to-self" (anattan-anattaniya).¹¹¹ It is also defined in the Pāli *Saṃyutta-nikāya* as "this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self" (n'etam mama, neso 'ham asmi, na m'eso attā).¹¹² The counterpart of this three-phrase expression in the Chinese *Saṃyuktāgama* is: "this is not self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self" (非我, 不異我, 不相在).¹¹³ The set of three phrases – "this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self" or "this is not self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self" – is frequently seen in the two versions.¹¹⁴ Thus, comparing the two traditions, it is clear that this three-phrase expression in early Buddhist texts has the same meaning as "not-self-and-not-belonging-to-self", "not-belonging-to-self", or just "not-self"; "impermanent, suffering, not-self" can be used as a set of principles for observing compounded nature.

The southern tradition (Pāli Buddhism) emphasises only "impermanent, suffering, and not-self", whereas the northern tradition prefers the second formulation with four terms, "impermanent, suffering, emptiness, not-self". This is evident from the fact that the four terms are frequently found together as a set in the Chinese texts,¹¹⁵ but are not found together in the Pāli except in conjunction with other terms, as discussed below.

The four terms do sometimes occur in corresponding Chinese and Pāli texts. For example, SA 259 states that the five aggregates should be seen thus:

... as sickness, as swelling, as arrow, as pain; as **impermanent**, as **suffering**, as **emptiness**, as **not-self** (wuchang 無常, ku 苦, kong 空, wuwo 無我).¹¹⁶

And the corresponding Pāli, SN 22. 122, says they should be seen thus:

... as **impermanence**, as **suffering**, as sickness, as swelling, as arrow, as pain, as illness, as alien, as decay, as **emptiness**, as **not-self** ... (... aniccato dukkhato ... suññato anattato ...) ¹¹⁷

In both versions the basic set of four terms "impermanence, suffering, emptiness, not-self" is accompanied by extra words – four in the Chinese, seven in the Pāli – which graphically indicate the concreteness of suffering. The extra terms are also differently placed in the two texts; however, "emptiness" is clearly part of the standard set: "impermanence, suffering, emptiness, not-self".

Thus, the two formulations listed above, whether of three terms or four, are found in both traditions in teachings relating to "insight".

Here it is necessary to examine the inclusion of "emptiness" in the four-term set: "impermanence, suffering, emptiness, not-self". Do these different formulations represent significant differences in meaning? What is the significance of the word-order, with emptiness preceding not-self? And do "emptiness" and "not-self" really have the same meaning or not?

In this connection, the EA version states that "impermanence is suffering; suffering is not-self; not-self is emptiness;" ¹¹⁸ "emptiness is this-is-not-my-self/this-is-not-mine, self-is-not-in-this/I-am-not-this," ¹¹⁹ or "emptiness is neither-existence-nor-non-existence, meaning also not-self." ¹²⁰ Thus, the sequence of the four-term set in the EA tradition is: "impermanence, suffering, not-self, emptiness"; "not-self" comes before "emptiness", and "emptiness" is mainly defined as "not-self" (referring also "this-is-not-my-

self, self-is-not-in-this," "neither-existence-nor-non-existence").

Also, as noted above, "not-self" or "not-belonging-to-self" is a key meaning of "emptiness", while "nirvana" is its ultimate meaning. In early Buddhism, to see the nature of compounded things is to see "what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is not-self." "Impermanence, suffering, not-self" is the basic way, perhaps the only way, of insight leading to nirvana. It follows that the adding of "emptiness" alongside "not-self", to yield the four-term set, is based on the narrow or basic meaning of "emptiness", not on the ultimate meaning. Emptiness here means only "not-self" and "not-belonging-to-self" or it means the three-phrase set: "this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self" / "this is not self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self". Therefore, the four-term expression, with "emptiness" preceding "not-self", says no more than the three-term expression. The meaning is simply: "impermanence, suffering, not-self".

In conclusion, to realise "emptiness" by seeing the nature of compounded things – the "five aggregates", the "six sense-spheres", etc. – as "impermanent" focuses on understanding of "suffering" in the nature of life that is not permanently or absolutely self. This leads to aloofness from "suffering" by destruction of self-attachment (craving), and then to nirvana – the ending of suffering – by the ceasing of self-attachment. Thus, "impermanence" is an important notion for understanding the meaning of emptiness in early Buddhism.