

EDUQAS AS Component 1D: An Introduction to Buddhism - Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 2A The Nature of Ultimate Reality – The three lakshanas: dukkha, anicca and anatta

Key concepts

- Lakshana can be understood as sign/mark/characteristic: the three lakshanas are considered to be marks of existence or universal truths with their possible origins in the Four Sights.
- The lakshanas are seen as being interconnected and as being a development of the Four Noble Truths. Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) is key: anicca (impermanence) and anatta (not-self) can be viewed as developments of dukkha.

- The Buddha's first sermon after his Awakening/Enlightenment is recorded in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta where he outlines the Four Noble Truths with the first being dukkha.
- Dukkha can be understood in a variety of ways (frustration/stress/ill/pain/that which is difficult to endure/general insecurity) and can be seen as arising when a person is aware of anicca with everything/everyone subject to change and impermanence and when a person sees that they too are impermanent and are in reality anatta.

- Anicca may be understood in the context of the first Three Sights: old age, sickness and death: here in a person, there is nothing static, that stays the same.
- Anicca can be seen as a law of the universe in terms of physics, when at the sub-atomic level particles are in a constant of flux despite giving the appearance of solidity and permanence.
- Through meditation a person can understand the truth of obvious and hidden anicca and understand that it is nirvana alone that is not subject to anicca.

- The Milindapanha (Questions of King Milinda) dates from c. 100 BCE and describes how the Greek King (probably Menander) comes to question an assembly of bhikkus before whom Nagasena appears to take up the challenge.
- The King asks his name and Nagasena responds by giving his name but concludes that his name is only a "designation" because there is no permanent individuality of soul.
- The King questions what can then be identified as "Nagasena" and goes through all the possible physical and mental attributes to identify him.

- Nagasena has tried to make the King see that he is not being a nihilist in denying he is this or that but is saying what a person 'is' needs analysing.
- Nagasena asks the King about what he travelled in and the King replies "a chariot". Nagasena identifies different parts of the chariot and asks whether each part is "the chariot", to which the King has to answer "no".
- Nagasena says it is the same when talking about a person – the name is a designation given to a collection of physical and mental properties.
- Buddhism rejects the soul/spirit/atman/metaphysical "self" as being sunnata (emptiness) but accepts the empirical self which consists of five skandhas: (form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) arising/combining/changing all the time.

Key quotes

'Even the most beautiful experience has a melancholy undertone simply because we know it can't last. So, dukkha touches everything that exists.' (Snelling)

'Without deep insight into the impermanence and insubstantiality of all phenomena of existence there is no attainment of deliverance.' (Nyanatiloka)

'Belief in one's own identity is a form of selfish clinging that leads to suffering and anxiety.' (Bartley)

'According to Buddhism, mind is nothing but a complex compound of fleeting mental states... Here there is no identical being, but there is an identity in process.' (Narada Thera)

Key words

Lakshana	dukkha	anicca	anatta	Nagasena
Milindapanha	sunnata	skandhas	Dhammacakkappavattana	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the three lakshanas as simply being a development of dukkha.

Others focus on the three lakshanas are containing fundamental truths about the human condition.

Key questions

How far do the three lakshanas represent life as experienced today?

Is the concept of anatta coherent particularly alongside the concept of rebirth – what is reborn?