

The Three Moments

A Model for Inner Realization

The Three Moments is a model for describing the process of inner realization on the Buddhist path. T.R.V. Murti first coined the term in his classic work, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.¹ Murti saw the main task of Buddhist training as “purifying the mind and freeing it of the cobwebs and clogs of dogmatism.”² This occurs by examining and, ultimately, deconstructing the artificial edifice on which one’s inner life is built. The result is a refined level of awareness that is the basis for reorienting how we experience and engage the world.

The three moments comprise three states of inner maturation along the spiritual path: dogma, critical analysis, and intuitive wisdom. They can be summarized as follows:

- Dogma: the unquestioned acceptance of what we know.
- Critical analysis: examining what we know.
- Intuitive Wisdom: going beyond what we know.

Dogma: The Unquestioned Acceptance of What We Know

The first moment, or stage, is called dogma. It refers to how—through force of habit—we are bound by conventions, beliefs, or concepts that we rarely question. In the moment of dogma, we take what we know as truth, whether it was learned through someone else, through our own analysis, or through the conventions and customs of our time. We weigh our own version of reality above all others, and we are, generally, unwilling to examine this. Dogma describes the “should be”s, “have to”s and “must be”s of our lives. Murti described dogma as indulgence in the speculative, meaning that we indulge in what appears to be true without stopping to think about it.

Dogma comes to us from many sources—family, church, community, job, and so on. Each weaves a story in our minds about what we should value and believe, who we are, and how we should behave. For example, if we believe

that the world was created in seven days, it is not because we experienced that event firsthand but because we heard it somewhere and we take it as true. Such a belief becomes dogma when we take it as an unquestionable aspect of reality. This principle is not limited to spiritual matters; in fact, it governs many facets of our lives. For example, we have inner stories about who we are—father, executive, accountant, teacher, American, laborer, good girl, dutiful son, important, unworthy, and so on—and we live according to what those stories dictate. These are not objective truths but images, fables and interpretations of our inner and outer worlds that we use in order to function. Thus, dogma is the unquestioned acceptance and perpetuation of conventions, beliefs or concepts that are not as grounded in reality as we think. In the dogma stage, we do not question the proposition; we just live by it.

According to Buddhist thought, giving our inner dogma more weight than it actually possesses creates the means for inner disturbance, dis-ease, or stress as we encounter conflict between our dogmas and the world around us. The antidote to this agitation is to free ourselves from these inner traps. Therefore, examining and unraveling the artificial quality of our inner conventions, beliefs and stories is a vital part of Buddhist training and is the function of the second moment, critical analysis.

Critical Analysis: Examining What We Know

The moment of critical analysis marks the phase of questioning dogma. It is a time of inward examination. This is often triggered when we encounter conflicts between our inner stories and our experience in the world. We may begin to wonder, for example, whether the earth was really created in seven days or how an omniscient god could allow so much suffering. Beyond the domain of religious belief, our self-image may begin to cause us hardship as our efforts to follow our inner stories lead to conflict, or we may find that long-held habits no longer serve us well as we encounter health, relationship or other challenges. In each case, our view and expectation is upset, creating inner disturbance.

The stage of critical analysis is a process of inward examination in which we deconstruct the dogmas by which we live. We see that the principles we once held sacred exist on shakier ground than we previously thought, and we become more aware of the patterns and inner stories that trap us. We may see

how our views about ourselves or those around us create hardship in our relationships, work, or family. For example, we may begin to understand that expectations we have long imposed on others are built on a story about them that is false, existing only in our minds.

The moment of critical analysis is both freeing and challenging because, as the mind opens to new possibilities, it also wants to hold onto familiar ways. We are often more comfortable stretching our dogmas to squeeze in inconsistencies than challenging them outright.

In fact, our dogmas are often so ingrained that it takes an outside force to shake us free of them. Buddhist teachers play an important role here, helping us see beyond day-to-day assumptions and beliefs and giving us the strength and confidence to see for ourselves what previously might have been unclear to us. Meditation and other Buddhist training practices are also important methods in this effort.

As this process continues, it exposes the limits of dogma. We come to see that no idea, convention or concept stands by itself as the ultimate expression of the way things are. By engaging this process, the mind gradually becomes less confined, more open and aware, and enters the third moment, intuitive wisdom.

Intuitive Wisdom: Going Beyond What We Know

When we stop imbuing our world with rigid, preconceived notions of meaning, we open ourselves to new possibilities and change. We no longer have to be trapped by our inner world and self-limiting stories, and we come to understand that no idea, convention or concept stands by itself as the ultimate expression of the way things are. This includes even Buddhist teachings and ideas. We come to see that our intellectual constructs are just models. We use them to function, and in the case of Buddhist ideas we use them to develop our inner lives and grow. That growth includes not grasping our models too tightly. This makes us inwardly free, at ease, and better able to live in harmony with an ever-changing world.

This change in perspective is the third moment of inner realization, intuitive wisdom. Intuitive wisdom goes by many different names, such as wisdom, prajna, or special insight. These all describe an inward state against

which we experience life in a new, fuller and more open way. Intuitive wisdom is not an acquisition of new knowledge but the cessation of old tendencies to create artificial categories that narrow and limit experience. When it is less tainted by narrow and limiting views, experience becomes imbued with openness, awareness, and the capacity for a deeper, freer way of being. We are less absorbed by the confines of our old dogmas and are more able to participate with joy and freedom in whatever is happening. We may participate in similar activities, and encounter similar challenges, but we engage these with a transformed outlook and perspective.

From Rigidity to Freedom

The three moments—dogma, critical analysis and intuitive wisdom—are a model for understanding the key aspects of inner transformation. The moment of dogma is limited and confining, marked by rigidity and agitation. This is often where we find ourselves at the outset of spiritual training.

The moment of critical analysis is transformative, but at the same time could be destabilizing. It is dynamic and energetic, and things can feel out of balance. Through this moment, we need to keep propelling ourselves forward, talking, processing, and enriching our experiences. Here the teacher and path play an important role.

Intuitive wisdom, the third moment, is the result. Things are now lighter, calmer, and more harmonious. We have attained new levels of freedom and spontaneity, and we can engage the world in a more awakened, less rigid manner. We have loosened the grip of preconceptions, and our intuitive energy is free to flow.

The Three Moments thus illustrates the direction of inner realization—a move from the rigid, heavy, and gross to the harmonious, calm, spontaneous and free.

¹ T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal 1955), 140-143

² *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 146