

ANICCA

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I

In writing about Buddhism, the Three Characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) or the General Characteristics (*samañña-lakkhaṇa*) are often referred to.¹ Indeed, some scholars like Henry Clarke Warren regard them as so important that they are “placed at the head” of the book.²

The classical and forceful statement of these three characteristics occurs in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (III, 134):

Whether Buddhas appear in the world and whether Buddhas do not appear in the world, it remains a fact, a unalterable condition of existence and an eternal law, that all karmic formations (*saṅkhārā*) are impermanent (*anicca*). 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 *saṅkhāras* are impermanent.

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 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 *saṅkhāras* are subject to suffering.

1. I. B. Horner, *Buddhism: The Theravāda*, in R.C. Zaehner, ed., *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) p. 288; G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Government of Ceylon, 1961) Fascicule: A-Aca, p. 657; Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), Chapter 3; Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* (London: Rider and Company, 1961) p. 66; Rune E. A. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvāna* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969) p. 15 ff.; Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (Penguin Books, 1962) ff.; Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism* (New York: Woodbury, 1968) p. 41, ff.; Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1956); Richard A. Gard, ed., *Buddhism* (New York: George Braziller, 1962) p. 110; Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956) p. 24 ff.; S. G. F. Brandon, ed., *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) p. 617; George Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958) p. 288; etc. Somewhat curiously E. J. Thomas does not seem to refer directly to it [*The History of Buddhist Thought*] New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1971 (first published 1933) (*passim*).
2. Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1970) p. 113.

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 dhammā*) is non-absolute (*anattā*, i.e. without an unchangeable or absolute ego-identity). This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and having discovered and mastered it, he announces, proclaims, preaches, reveals, teaches and explains thoroughly that all that exists is non-absolute (without a permanent ego).

In fact, the ‘Nikāyas and the Agamas abound in statements such as: *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, sabbe dhammā anattā*’³.

Out of these three characteristics only one, namely *anicca*, is selected here for further examination and the rest are by passed unless their relationship⁴ to *anicca* sheds light on *anicca* itself. This selection is by no means arbitrary. In the very first sermon preached by the Buddha the doctrine of *anicca* seems to have figured. For accounts of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* give a dialogue between the Buddha and the monks: ‘What do you think, monks, is matter permanent or impermanent?—Impermanent, sir.—But if it is impermanent is it unhappiness or happiness, having the nature of change, is it proper to envisage it as This is mine, I am this, This is my self (*ātman*)?—It certainly is not, sir.—In this case, therefore, monks, whatever is matter, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far away or in one’s presence, all matter should be seen in its true nature with right understanding as this is not mine, I am not this, This is not my self’. The dialogue continues with the other groups, from sensation to consciousness, substituted for matter, the replies being the same.⁵

And it is well-known that the Buddha’s last sermon contained the following exhortation:

And now, O monks I take leave of you; all the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence.⁶

II

The purpose of this note, however, is not to critically analyze the Buddhist doctrine of *aniccā* from a non-Buddhist point of view—But rather to

3. David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), p. 84.
4. See Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, p. 657; Gard, *op. cit.*, p. 110; Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1949) p. 17; etc.
5. A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970) p. 53.
6. Lucien Stryk, ed., *World of the Buddha—A Reader* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968) p. 45.

present a critical analysis of the doctrine as it is propounded in the Tipitaka. Such an analysis though difficult, can be made simpler by directing it in the directions: (1) what is meant by *anicca*; (2) what aspects of *anicca* represent it and (3) which aspects do not represent *anicca*.

III

What then is meant by *anicca*, most frequently translated as impermanence?⁷ The question being asked here is not what is impermanent but rather, what is impermanence?⁸

“There is no single treatise on the characteristic of impermanence either in the Tipitaka or its commentaries”,⁹ hence a number of sources will have to be employed to grasp the concept. However, on the basis of the various discussions in ancient and modern literature on the subject, three approaches to the nature of the impermanence may be identified. One of these may be constructed out of Buddhaghosa’s Commentaries and his *Visuddhimagga* thus. Therein a distinction is drawn between

the impermanent and the characteristic of impermanence. The five categories are impermanent. Why? Because their essence is to rise and fall and change, and because, after having been, they are not. But the characteristic of impermanence is their state of rise and fall and alteration, or it is their mode-transformation (*ākāra-vikāra*) called non-being after having been; again “the eye (etc.) can be known as impermanent in the sense of its not-being after having been; and it is impermanent for four reasons as well: because it has rise and fall, because it changes, because it is temporary and because it denies permanence”; and “since its destiny is non-being and since it abandons its natural essence because of the transmission (of personal continuity) to a new state of being (or rebirth), it is inseparable from the idea of change, which is simply synonymous with its impermanence.”¹⁰

Thus impermanence is seen here as characterized by :

- (1) not being after having been;
- (2) rise and fall;
- (3) because of change;
- (4) because of its temporariness;
- (5) by the denial of permanence.

7. See Malalasekera, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 657.

8. For etymological derivations, see *ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 658.

10. *Ibid.*

A closer look suggests that it is really the idea of change which is so critically associated with impermanence. Impermanence implies change.

A second way in which the nature of impermanence can be identified is elaborated by Ñānamoli. He identifies three aspects as the “necessary and interlocking constituents of impermanence, namely (i) change, (ii) formation (as “this, not this” without which no change could be perceived), and (iii) a recognizable pattern in a changing process (also called “specific conditionality”—*idappaccayatā*—which pattern is set out in the formula of dependent origination—*paṭicca-samuppāda*”.¹¹ This position may be summed up in the statement that “to be impermanent is to have a beginning and an end, to have rise and fall”.¹²

A third attempt to identify the nature of *anicca* or impermanence has been undertaken by Conze:

In its simple, untechnical meaning *impermanence* simply means that everything changes all the time. This thesis, which is held to be indisputable, is further developed by (1) an analysis of the process of change, (2) the determination of the duration of an event, and (3) reviewing of the practical consequences which should be drawn from the fact of the impermanence.

Ad 1, we are urged to see things as they “come, become, go”, and to distinguish the three phases of rise, fall and duration. Ad 2, we are taught things and persons last very much shorter than we usually suppose. An almost Herakleitean statement reminds us that “there is not a moment, not an inkling, not a second when a river does not flow”. On closer investigation a factual event (*dharma*) turns out to last for just one moment, and as Th. Stcherbatsky put it, “instantaneous being is the fundamental doctrine by which all the Buddhist system is established ‘at one stroke’.” Ad 3, everything that is transient should for that very reason be rejected. The impermanent is automatically ill and should be dreaded. For “what is impermanent, that is not worth delighting in, not worth being impressed by, not worth clinging to. The above three points constitute the minimum definition of “impermanence”, which led to further developments in-hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, alike.¹³

If these three attempts at identifying the nature of *anicca* are surveyed synoptically the following essential sense seems to emerge: impermanence implies change which implies a beginning and an end in point of time. It implies a duration without implying the idea of enduring forever.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

The implications of this understanding of *anicca* need to be carefully noted:

(1) existence is not denied.¹⁴ The issue is not one of existence versus non-existence, but of permanence versus impermanence;

(2) the fact, however, that a thing exists does not mean that it has or will exist forever;

(3) the fact that a thing exists makes it appear as stable but further analysis challenges this stability. It is undergoing a process of change;

(4) the idea of a beginning and an end when applied to objects generates the concept of spatial limitation, when applied to an event it generates the concept of temporal limitation, of duration. In this sense Buddhism chooses to look upon experience as constituted of *events* rather than objects;¹⁵

(5) the fact that events are interconnected creates a semblance of *continuity*¹⁶ just as the pressure of objects creates the semblance of stability. This again tends to obscure the fact of *anicca*, "For it is not through the connectedness of dhammas that the characteristic of impermanence becomes apparent to one who observes rise and fall, but rather the characteristic becomes properly evident through their disconnectedness (regarded) as if they were iron darts".¹⁷

This prepares the ground for a proper understanding of the doctrine of *anicca* as not implying annihilationism in the well-known *kaccāyana-vāda Sutta*,¹⁸ wherein the Buddha avoids the extremes of *sassatavāda* or eternalism and *ucchedavāda* or annihilationism. As A.K. Warder points out:

This text is a difficult one, but when taken in the light of the various aspects of the doctrine as set out in the texts already considered its meaning seems clear. There are no permanent or eternal phenomena in the world, or even phenomena which having come into existence

14. Note that "exist" can be "used in two senses: (1) to occur at one time at one time after arising and before ceasing; and (2) to exist at all times without beginning and end" (Richard H. Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion* [Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1970], p. 30). Thus existence=occurrence or=eternal occurrence. In this statement the word existence is used in the former sense.

15. "Thus according to Buddhism, when we for instance say 'It thinks, or, it is white', we mean by the 'it' nothing more than when we say 'it rains'" (M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* [London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932] p. 140).

16. One might thus even say that what one observes is "something ever changing, an endless series of processes, lacking not continuity but stability" (Rune Johanson, *op. cit.*, p. 15).

17. Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

18. *Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 16-17.

remain in existence. On the other hand there is not a total absence of phenomena, or even the total destruction of all phenomena one after another without leaving a trace of their ever having existed. The real nature of the universe is that it consists of temporary phenomena, which cease to exist, but not without serving as conditions for further temporary phenomena, without continuity. As opposed to this continuity of a permanent entity, "is-ness" and transient phenomena disappearing without any continuity, "is-not-ness".¹⁹

IV

One important point, however, remains to be resolved. Words like "world" and "universe" were used in the above passages. And claims about the nature of phenomena therein were made. These should be carefully distinguished from claims made in early Buddhism about the impermanence of the *universe itself* as distinguished from the phenomena within it. For if such distinction is not drawn, then how is one to account for the Buddha's reluctance to elucidate the theories to Māluṅkyāputta which the "Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected—that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal."²⁰ It should be noted that the Buddha is shown not as replying that the world is neither but rather as declining to answer the question on the ground that the;

religious life, Māluṅkyāputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Māluṅkyāputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain, Māluṅkyāputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing.²¹

In this context the following points need to be borne in mind:

(1) the notion of the world in the Pali texts is often narrower than we are liable to understand. The "world" there often really refers to our experience of the world. Thus the *Samyutta Nikāya* (IV. 95) states:

That in the world by which one perceives the world (*loka-saññi*) and conceives concepts about the world (*loka-māni*) is called "the world" in the Ariyas' discipline. And what is it in the world with which one does that? It is with the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

19. Warder, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

20. Warren, *op. cit.*, 119.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

In other words much of what Buddha says²² really applies to *samsāra* rather than *jagat* per se.

(2) the word *saṅkhārā* may refer not only to dispositions in the world of experience but also to the objects of the world of experience. Thus as Kalupahana points out:

The term *saṅkhārā*, when it refers to a psychological fact, certainly means "disposition". But there are occasions when it is used in a very broad sense to refer to everything in this world. One prominent example is from the *Mahā-Sudassana-suttanta* where, referring to the glories of the famous king of the past, Mahā-Sudassana, his cities, treasures, palaces, elephants, horses, carriages, women, etc., the Buddha says: "Behold, Ananda, how all these things (*saṅkhārā*) are now dead and gone, have passed and vanished away. Thus impermanent, Ananda, are the *saṅkhāras*; thus untrestworthy, Ananda, are the *saṅkhāras*. And this, Ananda, is enough to be weary of, to be disgusted of, to be completely free of, such *saṅkhāras*."²³

(3) Thus the experiences per se are impermanent, the objects to which they relate are impermanent, and even the realness in which they occur are impermanent as the accounts of dissolution of the world-cycles indicate.²⁴

(4) Thus the experiences in the world are *anicca*, the objects to which they relate are *anicca*, and the agents of these experiences, be it man²⁵ or Brahmā²⁶ are *anicca*.

22. I. B. Horner offers a useful correction to the view that the characteristic of *anicca* applies to the "universe" (A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* [New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1967] p. 272) largely in its external sense, as is often supposed to a greater or lesser degree (Christmas Humphreys, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81). All phenomenal life, all that is constructed, structured or effected has three characteristics: It is impermanent, transient or unresting (*anicca*); it is anguish, suffering, painful (*dukkha*); and it is insubstantial (*anatta*), owing to the absence of anything that in an ultimate sense could be called "self". Everything constructed is impermanent because it is dependent or caused; its uprising is to be seen in its decaying, and also alteration in it while it persists (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* i, 152). What is impermanent is anguish for the very reason that it is not permanent; and what is impermanent, anguish and of the nature to change is not-self. These three marks are features of everything we apprehend through the senses. And "these five strands of sense-activity are called 'world' in the discipline for an Aryan... and all of them are longed for, alluring, exciting" (*Āṅguttara Nikāya*, iv. 430). This "world" far from being external is internal to a man: "There where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass on (from one birth) and does not arise (in another)—I do not say that is an end of the world that one can apprehend, see or reach by... walking... But neither do I say that, not having reached the end of the world, an end can be made of anguish. For I lay down that the world, its uprising, its stopping and the course leading to its stopping are in this fathom-long body itself with its perceptions and ideas" (*Smayutta Nikāya* i, 61-2; *Āṅguttara Nikāya* ii, 47-9) (*op. cit.*, p. 288).

23. Kalupahana, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

24. See *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 52, etc.

25. *Ibid.*, Sutta 13, etc.

26. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

In league with Māluṅkyāputta and Vaccha, if we were impertinently to ask one of those questions which tend not to edification of the Buddha: How is it Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world (=cosmos) is not eternal and that this view alone is true, and every other false?²⁷ What answers should we expect? It may be noted that this question is to be genetically traced to the doctrine of *anicca*.

V

The question carries us into the controversy about the place of theories of cosmic creation in Buddhism. On one view, "In their views on the structure and evolution of the universe, the Buddhists were... content to borrow from the traditions of contemporary Hinduism."²⁸ Other scholars point out that the Buddhist scheme was "based largely on the prevalent Indian ideas, which accounted for the existence of the world without a creator,"²⁹ and was not a mere borrowing. E. J. Thomas even goes further and argues that Buddhists explained away the creator Brahmā and "invented a creation myth of their own. As the doctrine of recurrent cycles was assumed, it was not necessary to ask about an absolute beginning. There is no destruction of the whole universe, but only up to the world of Brahmā"³⁰.

Ch'en has pointed out how Buddhist cosmological speculation can be seen as being consistent with the doctrine of *anicca*. He writes:

If, as the Buddhists say, everything is a becoming, without beginning or end, then one would very naturally raise the question, just how did the universe originate? Although the Buddha discouraged speculation on the origins of the universe there is a theory of evolution found in the Buddhist scriptures. In the limitless expanse of space, the Buddhists conceive of an infinite number of world systems requiring immense periods of time called *kalpas*, or aeons. Once the Buddha was asked how long a *kalpa* was, and he replied with the following simile. Suppose there were a mighty mountain crag, four leagues in dimensions all around, one solid mass of rock without any crack. Suppose a man should come at the end of every century,

27. One may note that Nāgārjuna offers his own explanation of the Buddha's silence on the eternity or non-eternity of the universe in *Ratnāvali* (V. 1. 73):

Therefore the attainment of nirvāna does not imply in fact any destruction of worldly existence. That is why even the Buddha, when requested whether this world has an end, remained silent.

28. Edward Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 48-49.

29. Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

30. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

and wipe that crag with a fine piece of cloth. That mighty mountain would be worn away and ended, sooner than the aeon. . . .

Such a theory of evolution would, as one could see, fit in very well with the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, for it is still fashioned in the scheme of a cycle, without beginning or end, just an eternal becoming. After its exposition in one discourse, there is no other reference to it in the sermons of the Buddha, and instead, the master often discouraged his disciples from speculating about the beginnings of life, saying that such speculations were fruitless and devoid of religious merits.³¹

In other words, notwithstanding the Buddha's reluctance to answer the question it seems that the question whether the cosmos was *anicca* or not can perhaps be answered. It was *anicca* in the sense all the other elements to which *anicca* had been applied are *anicca*—in the sense that they are unstable, of temporary duration; arising, appearing and ceasing but related to further arisings just as the earlier arising was related to the previous arising.

THE PALI TEXT SOCIETY'S CENTENARY

Ven. Dr. H. Saddhātissa

Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids the most eminent Pali scholar in the 20th century studied Pali in Ceylon and, on his return to London, founded the Pali Text Society (in 1881) for the purpose of promoting the study of Pali, particularly in the West. The other objects of the Society were to publish original Pali texts in Roman characters, English translations of them and other works, ancillary to the study of Pali. These included dictionaries, grammars and the Pali Tipiṭakam Concordance, as well as selected Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, or in translation.

Most of the major texts and commentaries have now been edited in Roman characters and also the greater number of books of the Tipiṭaka have been translated and published.

Under the able guidance and direction of the present President of the PTS Dr. (Miss) I. B. Horner arrangements are being made to celebrate its centenary in 1981. In connection with this great event, the PTS has already published facsimile reprints of 23 journals, issued consecutively over the years 1882-1927. These are now bound in cloth in 8 volumes and the set is priced at £ 65.00.

(1) PTS Journal

The PTS Journals had been out of print for about 18 years, and virtually impossible to procure. They still remain valuable tools for Pali scholars, research workers, lexicographers and others. The rich variety of scholarly topics they contain, comprise editions of some 20 important smaller Pali works, not published separately by the PTS.

They also contain original articles, learned notes and queries on difficult Pali words and passages, lists of Pali mss. in various leading libraries in Europe and South-East Asian countries, an index to works published by the PTS and much else of service and interest mostly, but not exclusively, in the field of Pali studies. It is because these contributions—all by eminent scholars—have commanded such a high degree of respect, that the Society hopes this complete reprint will prove acceptable now, even before the Centenary year.

31. Ch'en, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 43-44.