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

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

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 (sāṅkhārā) are impermanent (anicca). This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and having discovered and mastered it, he announces, proclaims, preaches, reveals, teaches and explains thoroughly, that all sāṅkhāras 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 having discovered and mastered it, he announces, proclaims, preaches, reveals, teaches and explains thoroughly, that all sāṅkhāras are subject to suffering.

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 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).

Out of these three characteristics only one, namely anicca, is selected here for further examination and the rest are bypassed unless their relationship 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 (atman)?—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

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


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 aspe-
cists of anicca represent it and (3) which aspects do not represent anicca.

III

What then is meant by anicca, most frequently translated as imper-
manence? 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 sub-
ject, three approaches to the nature of the impermanence may be identi-
fied. One of these may be constructed out of Buddhaghosa’s Commen-
taries 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 insepar-
able 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.

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 Nānanamoli. He identifies three aspects of 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"—idappaccayata—which pattern is set
out in the formula of dependent origination—paticca-samuppāda".11
This position may be summed up in the statement that "to be imperma-

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 Herakleitan 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, "instant-
taneous being is the fundamental doctrine by which all the Buddist
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 imper-
manent, 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 hinayāna 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.

8. For etymological derivations, see ibid.
10. Ibid.
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. 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;

(5) the fact that events are interconnected creates a semblance of continuity 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’.

This prepares the ground for a proper understanding of the doctrine of anicca as not implying annihilationism in the well-known kacciyavanāvāda Sutta, wherein the Buddha avoids the extremes of sassatavāda or eternalism and ucevedavāda 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 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’.

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 Māluṇkṣyaputta which the ‘Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected—that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal.’ 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, Māluṇkṣyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Māluṇkṣyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtains, Māluṇkṣyaputta, 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.

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-sāññi) and conceives concepts about the world (loka-māññi) 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.

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 Johansson, op. cit., p. 15).


In other words much of what Buddha says\textsuperscript{22} really applies to \textit{sāṁsāra} rather than \textit{jagat} per se.

(2) the word \textit{sānkharā} 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 \textit{sānkharā}, 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 \textit{Mahā-Sudassana-suttanta} where, referring to the glories of the famous king of the past, \textit{Mahā-Sudassana}, his cities, treasures, palaces, elephants, horses, carriages, women, etc., the Buddha says: ‘Behold, Ananda, how all these things (\textit{sānkharās}) are now dead and gone, have passed and vanished away. Thus impermanent, Ananda, are the \textit{sānkharās}; thus untrestworthy, Ananda, are the \textit{sānkharās}. And this, Ananda, is enough to be weary of, to be disgusted of, to be completely free of, such \textit{sānkharās}.

(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.\textsuperscript{24}

(4) Thus the experiences in the world are \textit{anicca}, the objects to which they relate are \textit{anicca}, and the agents of these experiences, be it man\textsuperscript{25} or Brahmā\textsuperscript{26} are \textit{anicca}.

\textsuperscript{22} J. B. Horner offers a useful correction to the view that the characteristic of \textit{anicca} applies to the 'universe' (A. L. Basham, \textit{The Wonder that was India} [New York: Tavener 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 (\textit{anicca}); it is anguish, suffering, painful (\textit{dukkhat}); and it is insubstantial (\textit{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 (\textit{Avaguttara 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’ (\textit{Avaguttara Nikāya} iv, 430). This ‘world’ far from being external is internal to a man: ‘Where there is not built, does not age, 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 stop- ping are in this fathom-long body itself with its perceptions and ideas’ (\textit{Smāyutta Nikāya} i, 61-2; \textit{Avaguttara Nikāya} ii, 47-9) (op. cit., p. 288).

24. See Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 52, etc.
25. \textit{Ibid.}, Sutta 13, etc.

In league with Māluṇkyāputta 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?\textsuperscript{27} What answers should we expect? It may be noted that this question is to be genetically traced to the doctrine of \textit{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’\textsuperscript{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’\textsuperscript{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’.\textsuperscript{30}

Ch’en has pointed out how Buddhist cosmological speculation can be seen as being consistent with the doctrine of \textit{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 \textit{kalpa}s, or aeons. Once the Buddha was asked how long a \textit{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,

\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Ratnakīrīti} (V. 1. 73):

Therefore the attainment of nirvāṇa 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.


\textsuperscript{29} Basham, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 274.

\textsuperscript{30} Thomas, \textit{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.  

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.

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31. Ch’en, op. cit., pp. 42, 43-44.