

Research Paper

Deconstructing *Aniccā* Through Semantic Logic and Ethics in Early Buddhism and Western Philosophy

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Abstract

This research paper explores the multifaceted concept of *aniccā*. It is defined as “impermanence” by combining perspectives from early Western philosophy, *Pāli Tipiṭaka* texts and current scholarly discussions. This work aims to clarify the original meaning of *aniccā*, outside its temporal aspect. It clarifies its logical relationships with *dukkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (non-self). A methodological framework of comparative philosophical analysis and textual exegesis was employed, drawing on Western fragments (Heraclitus, Parmenides, Aristotle, Stoics) alongside key *Pāli* suttas and commentaries. The findings reveal that *aniccā* encompasses both the universal flux of phenomena and the subjective perception of unsatisfactoriness when one seeks permanence in conditioned realities; logically, (*aniccā* → *dukkha* → *anattā*) collapses into *aniccā* ↔ *anattā*, signifying the inseparability of change and non-self. Limitations include reliance on textual sources without empirical or ethnographic validation and a primary focus on *Theravāda* commentarial traditions to the exclusion of *Mahāyāna* interpretations. The implications of this reconceptualization extend to Buddhist studies, ethics and cross-cultural philosophy, inviting reappraisal of how impermanence informs contemporary debates on identity and suffering. The originality of this work lies in its logical critique of “impermanence” as an incomplete translation. Its synthesis of Wāharaka Thera’s linguistic arguments and its reintegration of early Western and *Pāli* insights into a cohesive account of *aniccā*’s full semantic range.

Keywords: *Aniccā*, *Tilakkhaṇa*, *panta rhei*, impermanence, *pañcakkhandhā*, *nibbāna*, *Heraclitus*.

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to discuss and explore the notion of *aniccā*. It will attempt to understand the notion of *aniccā* from a different perspective. It discusses the perspective of early western philosophers on impermanence. After that, it raises questions about the meaning of *aniccā* as impermanence, provides a logical argument and then gives the complete meaning of *aniccā*. Further, it finds *aniccā* meaning from *Tipiṭaka* sources. The first question is that what *Aniccā* is? It is one of the *tilakkhaṇa* of *Samāsāra* (three characteristics of existence)¹ derived from *Pāli* word and translated as impermanence into English. This translation comes from the Sanskrit word *anitya*, which is etymologically formed by the letters *a+nitya*², where “a” stands for not or the opposite sense and “nitya” stands for permanent, so *anitya* means that which is not permanent. Most scholars, particularly western scholars, translate the *Pāli* word *aniccā* as impermanent, but what is impermanence about? It is used to describe the mutable nature of mind and matter. All mental or material things that are compounded are conditioned to change and are prone to formation

and destruction, or ephemeral occurrences. They are not absolute, real entities; they just come into being and vanish³.

It is observation that living things going through the process of getting old and dying, as well as the rebirth and death cycle. As same way material things appear to change over time, they change on a minute-by-minute basis. Our planet, the solar system, the galaxy and the cosmos are all coming to an end in the distant future. Scientific theories say the earth will be destroyed after four billion years, the solar system will be destroyed after five billion years and the cosmos will be destroyed after twenty-two billion years⁴. This is not only true of the human world; according to the Buddhism, all of the thirty-one planes of existence (*Samāsāra*), including heaven and hell (*deva* in heaven and inferior beings in *niraya loka*⁵), are also ephemeral and constrained by time⁶. These collectively reflect the idea of impermanence.

2. Western Philosophers’ Perspectives on Impermanence

The concept of impermanence in western philosophy is first found in the writing of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. He mentions that change (*panta rhei*)⁷ is the essential nature of everything.

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¹Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism* (Routledge, 2006), 47. “The three interconnected features of all phenomenal existence are its impermanence, its suffering and its absence of soul or essence.”

²Thomas William Rhys Davids, *Pāli-English Dictionary* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1921), 355.

³Ray Billington, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Routledge, 2002), 56.

⁴Adams & Laughlin (1997)

⁵Niraya is the hell where lower beings get rebirth in thirty-one realms of existence

⁶Damien Keown, *Buddhism* (OUP, 2013), 32.

⁷everything flows

Plato's *Cratylus* contains the Heraclitus quotation, "Nothing is still; everything is in motion."⁸ Also "You cannot enter the same stream more than once because everything is in constant motion."⁹ Nicholas Rescher interpretes of Heraclitus as Reality isn't a collection of objects at all; rather, it's a collection of processes. All things are variations of fire, which is the fundamental 'entity' of the universe rather than any physical substance (*puros tropai*). Change is essential; the sun is not a physical entity but rather an everlasting fire, just as the river is not an object but a flowing stream. Each facet of existence depends on activity, change and process (*panta rhei*).¹⁰ Heraclitus' fragments provide an early example of this point of view. He asserts that conflict and strife form the fundamental building blocks of all reality, which is defined by change. The balance and resistance in strife serve as the foundation of variation and consistency in the flux of reality¹⁰. Impermanence, or the theory of change, was popular at that time, but not all philosophers agree on that. In contrast to Heraclitus, Plato argued against impermanence.¹¹

How is it possible for anything that is never in the same condition to be real? ..because as the observer approaches, they transform into something else... such that you cannot know more about their nature or condition....however, if the knowing and the knowledge ever coexist...If such is the case, I don't believe they can reflect a process or flux.¹²

This constant quality of 'being' is described in the Poetry of Parmenides in fragment 8:

We can only talk about one thing and that is that 'It is'. There are a lot of signs in it that what is was not made and cannot be destroyed, that it is alone, complete, unmovable and has no end. Neither has it been in the past nor will it be in the future because of this."¹³

What do the words "it" and "is" in words like "Is it or is it not?" mean? What is it, according to Parmenides, that is timeless, unchanging, or demonstrates "No-Change."

The atomism of Democritus and Leucippus may be seen as a response to Parmenides rejection of the idea that things may or do change.¹⁴ The atomists were convinced in their view that nothing could originate from or evolve into nothing, but only in terms of material substance, not in terms of universal attributes. They proposed that everything visible is made up of invisible atomic particles of various shapes and sizes. Although it was believed that these particles were eternal and indestructible; nevertheless, by rearranging themselves, the composite entities they created could exist and then vanish in existence. Democritus said that these composite items and their attributes were "conventionally sour, conventionally bitter, conventionally hot, conventionally cold, conventionally coloured, but in reality, they are atoms and nothingness."¹⁵ This means that any apparent change in an object's characteristics is illusory and cannot be refuted by

Parmenides arguments.

Anaxagoras had a similar answer, although he proposed many eternal, primordial "ingredients" that were combined into a continuum rather than atoms. No material item was created from a single pure component; instead, it was the result of several substances predominating over one another to give it its material characteristics. In this manner, Anaxagoras may claim that no component ever entirely came into existence or went out of existence in this fashion.¹⁶

Atomism believes that matter is made up of inert atoms with constant properties (such as mass) and that natural breakthroughs are the subatomic results of atoms interacting and transforming their spatial locations. Because the cause of motion for these collisions was still unclear, **Aristotle** established a philosophy of nature that offers a cogent explanation for the beginning of the movement in natural occurrences, providing for further justifications based on self-realization and self-maintaining substantive or structural variables.

According to Aristotle, an object in nature endures through the active application of a range of abilities, a self-maintaining organisation of the internal process (*morphē*)¹⁷ that recognises a distinctive sort of functioning. Using these distinctive sorts of functioning, we can categorise objects into natural kinds.

It is necessary for a substance or medium (*hylē*)¹⁸ must achieve certain kind-specific capabilities that encourage the appropriate process organisation but also have opposed, disintegrative tendencies because the constituent elements of matter (fire, water, earth, or air) actively work to ascend or descend to their "natural location."

However, Aristotle also included the characteristics of substance (*ousia*) which later history chose to become the cornerstones of the paradigm of "substance metaphysics." Additionally, Aristotle divided changes (*kineseis*)¹⁹ into four categories: production, destruction, modification and movement. Substance metaphysics might also depend on this categorization because its categorization is based on a complex concept of "actual" vs. "potential" qualities, which are all assigned to a constant source of change.²⁰

The Greek philosopher **Pyrrho** was influenced by the early Buddhism, which was practised in Bactria and Gandhara²¹. He passed on his knowledge to his pupil, Timon and his other students. His philosophy is summarised in *Aristocles's* passage below:²²

These three issues must be taken into account by anybody seeking *eudaimonia* (happiness). First, what is the nature of *pragmata*²³ (ethical issues, affairs and topics)? Second, what mindset should we have toward them? Thirdly, what will happen to people who adopt this mindset? The response given by Pyrrho is, "As for *pragmata*, they are all *adiaphora* (indistinguishable by

⁸Plato puts Heraclitus' doctrine in *Cratylus*, 401d.

⁹*Cratylus*, 402a. translated by Seneca in *Epistulae*, VI, 58, 23

¹⁰Philip Wheelwright, *Heraclitus* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 35.

¹¹*Cratylus*, Para. 440 sections c-d

¹²*Ibid*

¹³Poem of Parmenides : on nature

¹⁴Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1946), 75.

¹⁵C. C. W. Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments : A Text and Translation with a Commentary*

¹⁶Patricia Curd, *A Presocratics reader : selected fragments and testimonia*, 102-105.

¹⁷Used for "form" sensible to object.

¹⁸material cause for change

¹⁹transition towards a goal

²⁰According to Gill, M.L. Gill, *Aristotle on Substance: the Paradox of Unity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.)

²¹Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* Book IX, Chapter 11

²²Bett, Richard; Zalta, Edward (Winter 2014). "Pyrrho"

²³"Matters (*pragmata*) are equally . . ." as "All matters are . . .".

logical distinction), *anepikrita* (non-fixed, undisclosed, unjudged) and *astathmta* (uncertain, imbalanced, not measured),” as a result, neither our sensory impressions nor our *doxai* (thoughts, opinions, beliefs) can inform us of the truth or a lie, thus we should not place our trust in them.

Instead, we should *alkineis* (unbiased from this or that side) *adoxatoi* (without belief) and *akradantoi* (steadfast in our unwillingness to make a decision), saying of each one that it is neither it nor it or it is both and it is not or it is neither. Per Beckwith’s interpretation of this passage, the Buddhist idea of *aniccā* was translated into Greek by Pyrrho as *anepikrita*, in other words, *pragmata* (problems, objects and dharmas) are not fixed. As they are always changing, it is impossible to judge them.²⁴

As per **Christopher I. Beckwith’s examination** of the Aristocles Section, *adiaphora* (*anattā*), *astathmta* (*dukkha*) and *anepikrita* (*aniccā*) are remarkably similar to the Buddhist *tilakkhaṇa* (three characteristics of existence)²⁵, showing that Pyrrho’s doctrine is founded on Buddhism. According to Beckwith, Pyrrho’s eighteen-month stay in India was sufficient time for learning a new language. and that Pyrrho’s skepticism primary creative premises were not present in Greek philosophy at the time but rather were mainly found in Indian philosophy.²⁶

Plutarch’s interpretation of impermanence states, ‘Consequently, if the nature that is determined is influenced by the same conditions as those present at the time that it is examined, this nature, in and of itself, is subject to time’s changing nature, which causes it to undergo the transformation and ultimately perish. It is neither stable nor unchanging.’²⁷ There are several quotations regarding impermanence in the **Meditations by the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius**.²⁸ *Remember that everything in existence is already fragile and in transition, prone to disintegration and decay.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 10.18.)

They discuss how we only have the present moment. *Put everything else aside. Each of us only has this one moment to live, so hang onto it and keep it in mind. The remaining has already been experienced or cannot be seen.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 3.10.)

Everything we stand to lose; *The most long-lived individuals and those who will pass away the fastest, both die. They can only give up the present because that is all they have and what you don’t have, you can’t lose.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 2.14.)

Avoid wasting time; *Take a minute to pause what you’re doing and consider if you’re frightened of dying because you won’t be able to continue doing what you’re doing.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 10.29)

Even though our whole lives may not be enjoyable; *we must hurry up. Not only because we draw closer to death every day, but also because we may not even be able to fully comprehend it when we get there due to the possibility that it will already be too late.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 3.1.)

Everything we accomplish will have a final instance and it could occur more quickly than we anticipate; *Parents are advised by*

Epictetus to mumble the words “He may be dead in the morning” to themselves when they kiss their children good night. (Marcus, *Meditations*, 11.34.)

Do not hold out hope that our funeral will be recognized. Soon, everyone who could have a memory of us will also be dead; *Some people were remembered, but they are now long forgotten and no longer remembered by anybody.* (Marcus, *Meditations*, 7.6)

3. Critique of the meaning of *aniccā* as impermanent

Aniccā as impermanence, was criticised by Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Waharaka Thera. He claims that he has unearthed the original teachings of Buddha, which had been distorted for generations. Waharaka interpretation reinterprets major *Pāli* terms in innovative ways that are largely based on modern Sinhala translations, rejecting their traditional etymologies in the process.

According to the Waharaka movement, Waharaka Thera obtained the four analytic knowledge (*paṭisambhidhā-ñāṇa*)²⁹ with become an arahant. By doing so, he was then able to clarify the long-forgotten, accurate understanding of the Buddha’s teaching that was recorded in the *Pāli* Canon. The Waharaka interpretation transforms well-known *Pāli* terms into new meanings by largely depending on modern Sinhala pronunciation and paying little to no attention to their original origins, whether in *Pāli* or Sinhala. In contrast to traditional linguistics, which they regard as *bhaṣā nirukti*, they refer to this approach as pada nirukti (the etymology of words), which *Waharaka Thera* had access to through his *niruttipaṭisambhidhā-ñāṇa* (analytical understanding of language). He encourages the reader not to focus on the terminology he employs or their etymologies, but rather on the message he is attempting to express.

Waharaka Thera asserts that the Buddhist tradition holds a language that the Buddha forbade using and established a rule against it. The incident was such that when two monks, Yameḷu and Tekula; who were brahmins by birth and had good voice and speeches³⁰, asked to the Buddha that his teachings be recorded in *chandasa*/footnote “The grammarian Patañjali (around 150 BC) seems not to be aware of the word *saṃskṛta* and to call *bhāṣā* the language he describes (in the 4th century BC, Pāṇini opposes *bhāṣā*, “the spoken language,” to *chandasa*, “the holy language (of Veda)”. The Buddha refused their request, rebuked them and instituted a Vinaya rule prohibiting them from doing so in the future³¹. As per Waharaka Thera, *chandasa* refers to the Sanskrit language itself, not the metrical form as it is commonly interpreted³². Thus, he rejects any relationship between *Pāli* and Sanskrit terminologies like *aniccā* and *anitya* and rests his expositions on Sinhala translations that he claims have no Sanskrit influence to deduce the *Pāli*’s meaning.

²⁴Beckwith, Greek Buddha (PUP, 2015), 23.

²⁵Ibid, 23.

²⁶Adrian Kuzminski, Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction (Routledge, 2021).

²⁷Plutarch, On the “E” at Delphi

²⁸Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus was roman emperor served as a philosopher-king. Meditation is collection of his personal diary

²⁹There won’t be a rebirth for Waharaka Thera, he asserted. Hela Bodu Piyuma (Waharaka organisation, 2017)

³⁰“brāhmaṇajātikā kalyāṇavācā kalyāṇavākkaraṇā...” in Vinaya Piṭaka 2, 139

³¹“If the monks recite the canon of the sūtras with the intonation of the chandas, they make themselves guilty of transgressing the Law.” Compare with. Lin 1949, 222 and Lévi 1915, 444-445.

³²Vincent Eltschinger, Why did the Buddhists adopt Sanskrit?, doi/10.1515/opli-2017-0015

Based on the *Theravāda Abhidhamma* tradition, the *Pāli* com-mentarial interpretation of *aniccā* might appear completely objec-tive and devoid of any emotive qualities. Things that are not perceived as “my” might lead one to wonder, “So what?” In addi-tion to posing this query, Waharaka Thera creates a workaround by claiming that *aniccha* is the correct term, derived from the con-junctions *na* and *iccha* and purportedly denoting “not in the sense that one likes or desires,” is the correct meaning. He finds evi-dence for this viewpoint of “awareness of a dispassionate attitude toward all formations”³³. Here logical arguments as presented to show how impermanence is a mistranslation of *aniccā*.

4. Logical arguments against impermanence as the mistranslation of *aniccā*

When we look at the English translation, it would not make complete sense to grasp the *aniccā* concerning *Pāli* scripture. After Buddha’s *mahāparinibbāṇa*, the first council was held and all *buddhavacana*³⁴ was recorded by memorization. Later, it was passed down orally to the next generation.

Buddha said “*Yadaniccāṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ; yaṃ dukkhaṃ tadanattā*.”³⁵

Translation: whatever *aniccā* is *dukkha*. What’s *dukkha* is *anattā*.

It may write as:

$$(\text{aniccā} \rightarrow \text{dukkha}) \& (\text{dukkha} \rightarrow \text{anattā})$$

When we translate *aniccā* as impermanence, *dukkha* as suffering and *anattā* as no-self, then it should be as:

$$(\text{impermanence} \rightarrow \text{suffering}) \& (\text{suffering} \rightarrow \text{no-self})$$

The most important thing to notice is that in this huge cosmos, there exist an endless number of physical objects and they are all transient and impermanent. However, not all of them result in suffering for someone. Only those things that one by intention clings to with *nicca-saññā*³⁶ are the source of one’s misery.

$$(\text{impermanence} \rightarrow \text{suffering})$$

When we employ the rule of contraposition,

$$(A \rightarrow B) \leftrightarrow (\neg B \rightarrow \neg A)$$

i.e., if A then B, then not-B then not-A

Therefore, **No suffering $\rightarrow$ permanence,**

In this case, if someone is not suffering, it suggests that some-thing is permanent. However, there are several cases when “not suffering” does not indicate permanence. For instance, when we hear about the passing of a rival, we are not moved by grief. For another illustration, example, If we eliminate a sickness that cannot be cured, that’s connected to no-suffering.³⁷

Thus, the “no-suffering” requirement in both cases did not entail “permanence”. As a result, the initial claim—(Impermanence $\rightarrow$ suffering) —is untrue. Let’s now consider a different approach to analysis.

The assertion $A \rightarrow B$ typically does not result in $\neg A \rightarrow \neg B$ (i.e., not A $\rightarrow$ not B does not necessarily follow). The assertion

$\neg A \rightarrow \neg B$ would be true, nonetheless, if B depends entirely on A and nothing else. For instance, (rain $\rightarrow$ wet street) does not necessarily mean (no rain $\rightarrow$ dry street). A garden hose left open might cause the street to become wet. However, if rain is the main factor contributing to the street’s dampness, then (no rain $\rightarrow$ dry street) is true.

Based on three attributes, this world has either a *nicca* or *aniccā* nature. It is possible for the *nicca* or *aniccā* nature to cause *dukkha*, *sukkah*,³⁸ or neutral feelings. Consequently, in order to carry out this analysis, we will only take into account *dukkha* or “no *dukkha*.” Nothing else follows those two without them. *Atta* or *anattā* make up the third characteristic.

As a result, for this demonstration, we can rewrite the original statements. (*aniccā* $\rightarrow$ *dukkha*) and (*dukkha* $\rightarrow$ *anattā*) as (*nicca* $\rightarrow$ no-*dukkha*) and (no-*dukkha* $\rightarrow$ *natta*), and both of these state-ments are equivalent.

As a result, if we interpret *nicca* and *aniccā* as permanent and impermanent, the sentence, (impermanence $\rightarrow$ suffering) equally implies, (permanence $\rightarrow$ no-suffering)³⁹, since we assume that suffering simply depends on whether something is permanent or impermanent. So, in our particular situation, we have: (perma-nence $\rightarrow$ no-suffering) Consequently, we have the following in our particular example for the three aspects of nature:

(permanence $\rightarrow$ no-suffering) and (no suffering $\rightarrow$ permanence). This is expressed as follows in the logician’s mathematical language: (no suffering iff permanence), that is (no suffering if and only if permanence) This assertion is stronger than the previous one.

However, as previously noted, there are many examples of no-suffering without permanence⁴⁰. Furthermore, as nothing in this world is ever truly long-term or permanent, this suggests that it is impossible to achieve *nibbāna*⁴¹. Another inconsistency exists here. However, if we understand *aniccā* correctly, which states that “nothing can be sustained to one’s pleasure over the long term,” then the above sentence becomes: (no suffering) if and only if (over time, we can keep everything up to our satisfaction). As long as one remains in this world, or the loop of rebirths, it is hard to achieve a condition of “no misery,” since we know that the idea that “everything can be sustained to our pleasure in the long term” is false.⁴²

As a result, “*avijjā*” is nothing more than a failure to recognise this basic feature of nature⁴³. Realizing the truth about the “*aniccā*” character of this existence” goes beyond “simply comprehending.” The mind must embrace this without question. To believe this to be the truth, one must evaluate as many examples as they arise in actual life.

We may now conclude that *aniccā* and *anattā* have a strong connection, similar to the one we found between *aniccā* and *dukkha* before. In this case, we use the syllogistic principle: [(A $\rightarrow$ B) (B $\rightarrow$ C)] $\rightarrow$ (A $\rightarrow$ C)

As a result, the initial connection, (*aniccā* $\rightarrow$ *dukkha*) and (*dukkha* $\rightarrow$ *anattā*) refer to: *aniccā* $\rightarrow$ *anattā* Using the same logic, we

³³“sabbasaṅkhāresu anicchāsāññā” in *Anguttara Nikāya* 10.60: *Girimānanda Sutta*

³⁴Gombrich, *Teaching of Buddha* (2018), 73.

³⁵*Samyutta Nikāya* 76: *Paṭhama Arahanta Suttaṃ*

³⁶Perceived as permanence which is one perversion or distortion (*vipallāsa*).

³⁷Lal Ariyaratna Pinnaduwege, *Pure Dhamma: A Quest to Recover Buddha’s True Teachings*, section on *aniccā* as logical interpretation

³⁸Since *aniccā* for *dukkha* then *niccā* for *sukha* in this case

³⁹It is also true in case of *nibbāna*

⁴⁰As see temporary happiness.

⁴¹the absence of pain.

⁴²*Micchā Dīṭṭhi* in *Samyutta Nikāya* 35.164: *Pahāna Sutta*

⁴³*Samyutta Nikāya* 35.79: *Paṭhamaavijjāpāhānasutta*

obtain (*aniccā* → *anattā*) As a result, we have the powerful assertion, *aniccā* if and only if *anattā* That is, *anattā* is unavoidable if nature (this world) is *aniccā*. Then the complete meaning of *aniccā* is slightly stronger than just “impermanence.”

4.1. Complete meaning of Aniccā

Living beings and phenomena all have both impermanence and permanence as inherent properties. The opposite of this is that of *niccā* / *aniccā*, which are perceptions of them in one's mind.⁴⁴

We must acknowledge that, as we grow older, this change is unavoidable for all of us. It is impossible for us to maintain anything to our satisfaction, no matter how hard we try. It is intrinsic to nature of “this world”: *aniccā*. Thus, “impermanence” is a quality shared by everything in this world and is therefore inevitable⁴⁵. However, “*aniccā*” is merely a perception held by a single individual. One can eliminate suffering by altering one's perception, which is possible. In this situation, the bodies of celebrities are transient, but this does not necessarily result in suffering for everyone. Only those who disliked getting older felt pain as a result of it. Their adversaries, if they had any, would rejoice at their “good looks” fading away. Impermanence is a fact, but impermanence is not the complete meaning of *aniccā*.⁴⁶

It doesn't take a Buddha to demonstrate that impermanence is a fundamental aspect of our universe. Although scientists⁴⁷ are well aware of this, they have not attained *nibbāna*. *Aniccā* is a complex idea with numerous meanings that are interconnected. Here are three perspectives to consider:

Therefore, “*anattā*” is how most people spell it. As long as the meaning is understood as “without essence” or “without refuge” and not “no-self,” it doesn't matter how it is written. It does, however, imply that “claiming anything as mine is not fruitful.”⁴⁸ The Pāli words *aniccā* and *anattā* are difficult to directly translate into English. *Aniccā* (or *anattā*) cannot be adequately described in English using any words.⁴⁹ Let's see the interpretation of *aniccā* according to the *pāli* text.

5. Aniccā through the Lens of the Tipiṭaka

Aniccā is defined as “*aniccāṃ khayatṭhena*”⁵⁰ which means *aniccā* in the sense of *khaya*, which signifies arise and cease, or subject to diminish.

Everything exists for a particular time at a certain place and time and then vanishes instantly. A past-existing entity does not exist in the present and a present-existing object does not occur in the future. This concept is best understood by example. For instance, a person's life appears to start at birth and end with death at first glance, but when we look closer, it reveals an accelerated pace of growth and declines over an age span. Each year, each month, each week, each day, each hour, each minute, each second, or a tiny fraction of time, rises and falls. Impermanence can now be

explained and revealed thanks to recent scientific advancements, particularly in physics.

Here are a few of the most typical *aniccā* definitions from the numerous commentarial sources:

- Because everything is “not stable and unpredictable.” (*aniccāntikatāya*)⁵¹
- Due to the fact that it starts and ends. (*ādi-antavantatāya*)⁵²
- The next is a typical and widely used definition of what is meant by impermanence: ‘In the sense of to be and then to be no more.’ (*hutvā abhāvattṭhena*)⁵³
- Occasionally, this phrase is supplemented with additional content, such as anything that is thought to be impermanent because it emerges, diminishes and changes into something else. (*uppādayaṇṇathattabhāvā hutvā abhāvato vā*)⁵⁴

There are four reasons why something is considered impermanent.⁵⁵

1. Due to the fact that it emerges and demises, appears and vanishes, arises and ceases. (*Uppādayappavattito*)
2. Since it is mutable and only exists in the now. (*Tāvakālikato*)
3. due to the fact that it could alter; It is changed and transformed continuously. (*Vipariṇāmato*)
4. mainly because it contradicts permanence, the ability to change is an intrinsically conditioned object that stands opposite to permanence. There is no permanence found when the object is carefully observed. Even if someone attempts to view it as permanent, it won't go along with their preferences. (*Niccapaṭikkhepato*)

There are many suttas in *Sutta Piṭaka* that give the details about *aniccā*, following sutta describes the nature of *aniccā*:

- Everything that has a beginning is subject to an end.⁵⁶
- O monk, there is nothing to say. Whatever material and mental factors (feelings, perceptions, choices and consciousness) will be everlasting, permanent, imperishable and eternal.⁵⁷
- O Bhikkhu, Because of the impermanence of *saṅkhārā*, they are temporary, they create discomfort, so it is necessary to detach from passion, allow lust to disappear and attain liberation.⁵⁸
- Oh! Formations are impermanent, By their nature, they rise and fall. Having vanish just after they have arisen. Their fading away is true happiness.⁵⁹

⁵¹ “Tathā aniccāntikatāya lokiyajjhānanibbattaṃ cittissariyaṃ.” Atthakatha Book 26.

⁵² Visuddhimagga 611.

⁵³ compare, “It was there for a while before vanishing again.” Visuddhimagga 628.

⁵⁴ “After having been in existence, it is no longer in existence.” Visuddhimagga 640.

⁵⁵ Visuddhimagga 618; Majjhimanikāya Atthakathā (Papañcasūdanī) II, 113; Vibhaṅga atthakathā 48; Visuddhimagga Tika. “Maggāmaggañāṇadassanavisuddhiniddesaṇṇanā, Rūpasattakasammasanāthāvaṇṇanā” asserts that only physical phenomena are recognized by these four definitions., however the Vibhaṅga Atthakathā shows that they may be applied to any and all phenomena that are conditioned” also: Vinaya Atthakathā ikā (Sāratthadīpanī) “Mahākhandaḥkaṃ, Anattālakkaṇasuttavaṇṇanā.”

⁵⁶ “yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ.” Ānguttara Nikāya 8.22: Dutiyaggaṃsutta; Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11: Dhammacakkappavattanasutta; Udāna 5.3: Suppabuddhakutṭhisuttaṃ;

⁵⁷ Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.96: Gomayapīṇasutta: “Natthi kho, bhikkhu, kiñci rūpaṃ... vedanā.. saññā.. saṅkhārā.. viññāṇaṃ.. yaṃ rūpaṃ niccaṃ dhuvaṃ sassataṃ avipariṇāmadhammaṃ sassatisamaṃ tatheva thassati”

⁵⁸ “Aniccā, bhikkhave, saṅkhārā”. Ānguttara Nikāya 7.66: Sattasūriyasutta.

⁵⁹ “Aniccā vata saṅkhārā, uppādayadhammino; Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti, tesam vūpasamo sukho”ti.” Saṃyutta Nikāya 6.15: Parinibbānasutta; Dīgha Nikāya 16: Mahāparinibbānasutta.

⁴⁴ Lal Ariyaratna Pinnaduwa, Pure Dhamma: A Quest to Recover Buddha's True Teachings (2017).

⁴⁵ “sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ti”, Dhammapada 277.

⁴⁶ Ibid, same section “Aniccā – Inability to Keep What We Like”

⁴⁷ Aniccā is empirical rather rational

⁴⁸ Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59: Anattālakkaṇasutta

⁴⁹ Pāli term for impermanence use as not aniccā; it is adduwan or anyata. As example, “Jeevitan

⁵⁰ In Paṭisambhidāmagga (part of Khuddakanikāya of Suttapiṭaka), Mahāvagga 31.

- The bhikkhu who meditates alone, with their minds at peace, becomes superhuman when they see the dhamma. Each time he contemplates arising and passing khandha, he is filled with joy and bliss, by this he attains deathlessness.⁶⁰
- As a bhikkhu practises meditation, such as being diligent, alert, conscious and steadfast, they comprehend if pleasurable sensations occur: "I am experiencing a pleasurable sensation right now and that is dependent rather than independent." On what does it depend? completely dependent on the body itself. However, this body is conditioned, temporal and dependently derived. Since a pleasurable experience is based on a body that is ephemeral, conditioned and dependently generated, how could it be permanent? He sees impermanence, abstinence, fading, dispassion and letting go when meditating, along with pleasant sensations. As he does this, they lose the fundamental tendency of desire for the body and pleasurable feelings. Similar to how he abandons his underlying propensity to oppose the body and painful sensations. While he is contemplating pleasure feelings, he also abandons his inherent tendency to be ignorant of the body and that sensation when he is contemplating neither happy nor painful feelings.⁶¹
- One who lives for a hundred years without perceiving the origin and decay of things. It is better to live one day, perceiving the origin and decay inherent in objects.⁶²
- The awareness of impermanence should be cultivated for the destruction of the delusion of 'I am'. One who has such awareness, the awareness of anattā (not to me or mine) gets developed, which leads to the complete elimination of the delusion that "I am" here and now.⁶³
- Through the dependence on duality, consciousness arises. What does that duality mean? There is an emergence of eye-consciousness due to dependency on the eye and forms. The eye is transient, changing and becoming something else, just as forms are transient, changing and becoming something else. As a result, this dyad is changing and altering, impermanent, transforming into something else. Eye consciousness is impermanent, evolving and transforming into something else. The cause and condition of eye consciousness are similarly impermanent, mutable and transformable into something else. Then How could eye consciousness be permanent if it developed as a result of an impermanent condition? Eye contact is the coming together of these three things—the meeting, the encounter and the interaction. The cause and condition of arising eye-contact are impermanent, mutable and transformable into something else. Then How could eye-contact be permanent if it developed as a result of an impermanent condition? One who has been touched through contact feels, Similarly, one who perceives; As a result, these ephemeral, fugitive dhammas (specifically, sensation, perception and choice) are themselves impermanent, changing and becoming others. The same is true for the ear senses of hearing, nose-smell, tongue-taste, body-tangibles, as well as the mind-thought.⁶⁴

⁶⁰“Sunnagaram pavitthassa, santacittassa bhikkhuno amanusi rati hoti, samma dhammam vipassato. Yato yato sammasati, khandhanam udayabbayam labhati pitipamoj-
jam, amatam tam vijanatam.” Dhammapada 373-374.

⁶¹Samyutta Nikāya 36.7: Paṭhamagelaññasutta.

⁶²“Yo ca vassasatam jīve, appassam udayabbayam .Ekāham jīvitam seyyo, passatodayabbayam” Dhammapada 113.

⁶³“Aniccāsāññino hi, megghiya, anattāsāññā sañthāti, anattāsāññī asmiñāsamugghātāṃ pāpuṇāti diṭṭheva dhamme nibbānan’ti”, Ānguttara Nikāya 9.3: Megghiyasutta; Udāna 4.1.

⁶⁴Samyutta Nikāya 35.93: Dutiya Dvaya Sutta.

The notions of *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are interrelated. These are mutually dependent on each other. These three are characteristics of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*).

5.1. Three marks of existence

Tilakkhaṇa is the key teaching of the Buddha. It is a Pāli word made up of *ti* and *lakkhaṇa*⁶⁵. *Ti* means three and *lakkhaṇa* means characteristics⁶⁶. It denotes three characteristics of *Samsarā*, which are-

1. *Aniccā* (change, can't keep what we're like for a long time)
2. *Dukkha* (misery, suffering)
3. *Anattā* (Neither I nor this is mine)

The Buddha asserted that one would reach the Stream Entry (*sotāpanna*) stage of *nibbāna* if one understood the true essence of “this reality,” as expressed in these three words.

The significance of *tilakkhaṇa* is understood by this.⁶⁷

Uppādā vā, bhikkhave, tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā
tathāgatānaṃ, tthitāva sā dhātu dhammatthitātā
dhammaniyāmatā. Sabbe saṅkhārāniccā. Taṃ
tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti.
Abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti
paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati
uttānīkaroti - ‘Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā’ti...
dukkhā’ti...anattā’ti.

Whether or not realised ones emerge, this natural law continues⁶⁸, as does the uniformity of natural laws and their consistency; all *saṅkhārā* are *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā*⁶⁹. When a blessed one fully grasps this, he reveals, teaches, defines, illustrates, analyses and uncovers it⁷⁰: all *saṅkhārā* are *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā* in nature.

These three are mutually linked. For a deeper understanding, we should understand the *pañcakkhandhā*⁷¹ and *pañcupādānakkhandhā*. *Pañcakkhandhā*⁷² is *Samāsāra* or the combination of *nāma* and *rūpa* (mind and matter), meanwhile, *pañcupādānakkhandhā* is *upādāna*⁷³ (craving) for *nāma-rūpa*. There is the question of how *pañcupādānakkhandhā* related to *dukkha*. Also how it linked with *aniccā*. This discussion will now be presented.

⁶⁵Also referred to as "marks" or "signs."

⁶⁶BuddhaSasana: Concise Pāli-English Dictionary.

⁶⁷Ānguttara Nikāya 3.136: Uppādāsutta.

⁶⁸Samyutta Nikāya 12.20: Paccayasutta.

⁶⁹Ānguttara Nikāya 3.134: Dhamma-niyama Sutta; PTS: A i 286.

⁷⁰Ānguttara Nikāya 3.136: Uppādāsutta.

⁷¹*Rūpa* (matter/form); meanwhile *vedanā* (feelings), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhāra* (mental formation/disposition) and *viññāna* (consciousness) come under *nāma* (mind)

⁷²“Katame ca, bhikkhave, pañcakkhandhā?... me vuccanti, bhikkhave pañcakkhandhā”, Samyutta Nikāya 22.48: Khandhasutta

⁷³taking as one's own, laying hold of, grasping, New Concise Pāli English Dictionary

5.2. Pañcakkhandhā and pañcupādānakkhandhā are aniccā

If we fulfil *pañcupādānakkhandhā*, we stretch our own *Samsarā*. We are bound to separate from that *rūpa* in *pañcupādānakkhandhā*⁷⁴. Meanwhile, immoral efforts to acquire the much-desired *pañcupādānakkhandhā rūpa* would certainly lead to *apāyā*⁷⁵. Again *apāyā* is *Aniccā*. Separation from liked or attachment from unliked *rūpa* is *Aniccā*.

Despite many efforts to possess the desired *rūpa* in *pañcupādānakkhandhā*, we fail. What we wanted but didn't acquire will make us unhappy⁷⁶. While still having *kammā viññāna* for such *rūpa* and doing *saṅkhāra* under that *viññāna*, would again elongate our own *Samsarā*. This would lead to *jāti* various *bhava* depending on the type of *saṅkhāra* done for that desired *rūpa*. So, both types of *pañcupādānakkhandhā* would lead to birth and all births would lead to much suffering in the future. Unless, of course, one is *ariya*.

All *jāti*⁷⁷ would lead to old age, illness and death. All births lead to grief, pain, distress, despair, depression, etc. —

So, *saññā*, *vēdanā*, *viññāna*, *rūpa* and *saṅkhāra* are all *aniccā*⁷⁸, not to my liking and not to be kept as one wishes.

The six senses or internal *rūpa* are *aniccā*. We have unliked contacts through six senses, separate from desired contacts, producing *dukkha*.

Six external *rūpa* are *Aniccā*. We meet unliked *ārammaṇa*⁷⁹ a separate form like *ārammaṇa*, *jāti*, *vipariṇāma*⁸⁰, *jarā* of any *saṅkhata*⁸¹ are not-to-liking/ *aniccā*.

All *jāti* and/or *bhava* of any stream of life in any of the 31 realms are subject to exhaustion/finite. So, they are *Aniccā*. *jarā* is certain. One's new *jāti* or *bhava* is *aniccā*. Not as one wishes.

Samphassa is not to liking. (Consequences of *samphassa*⁸² is *aniccā*)

Upādāna is not to liking. (Consequences of *upādāna* is *aniccā*)

*Taṇhā*⁸³ is not to liking. (Consequences of *taṇhā* is *aniccā*)

Having separation from liked is *aniccā*.

In short, whatever not liking would produce suffering hence, *aniccā*. Since, all *saṅkhata* go through the stages of *jāti*, *vipariṇāma* and *jarā*; they are all not to be liked. Hence, all *saṅkhata* will produce *dukkhā*, hence, no *saṅkhata* is worthy of calling mine. All things are *saṅkhata* in this world, except *nibbāna*⁸⁴. Hence, the whole world is *aniccā* → produces *dukkhā* → not worthy of being called mine/not true refuge/cannot be controlled as one wishes/*anattā*. In short, meeting/having disliked, not meeting/separating from liked, Whatever is not to one's desire/wishes, what is not to one's satisfaction, what is not to one's

expectations, all produce suffering, hence *aniccā*. All *ārammaṇa*, *saṅkhata* and *saṅkhāra* either have directly visible suffering or hidden suffering. They all cause suffering, either immediately or eventually.

6. Conclusion

Aniccā is not just a description of impermanence, but it is critique of clinging to transient realities. It reinterpreted as the inability to retain satisfaction. This paper connects early Buddhist doctrine with Western intellectual arguments on change, highlighting the futility of attachment to the *pañcakkhandhā*. *Aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are interdependent and serve as existential truths that guide freedom. While Western thinkers like Heraclitus and Marcus Aurelius echo impermanence. Buddhism uniquely views *aniccā* as a soteriological instrument. Recognising its nature dismantles ignorance and catalyses *nibbāna*. This cross-philosophical interaction enhances both traditions by illustrating that *aniccā* is a lived insight into the conditioned character of life, rather than a metaphysical claim. The study concludes that a clear knowledge of *aniccā* is crucial for overcoming *samsāra* and obtaining liberation.

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⁷⁴Ibid, last section

⁷⁵Group of the inferior worlds. The apayas do comprise four worlds: The asuras, the animals, the petas and the evils.

⁷⁶Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.22: Bhārasutta: “Katamo ca, bhikkhave, bhāro? Pañcupādānakkhandhā tissa vacanīyam.”

⁷⁷to rebirth, the emergence of a being within *samsāra*

⁷⁸“saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkha”, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11: Dhammacakkappavattanasutta.

⁷⁹support, assistance, foothold, expediency, or anything that can be relied upon to help one achieve their desire or their operational foundation.

⁸⁰viciissitude, change (for the worse)

⁸¹put together, produced by a combination of causes, “created”, conditioned.

⁸²(sam+phassa) contact, reaction, The Pāli Text Society's Pāli-English Dictionary

⁸³craving, longing and desire

⁸⁴nibbanā is only asaṅkhata, unconditioned dhamma.

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