A characteristic is something that is necessarily connected with something else and it tells us about the nature of that thing. Heat, for instance, is a characteristic of fire but not of water. Heat is always and invariably connected with fire, whereas whether or not water is hot depends on external factors – an electric stove, the heat of the sun, and so forth.

According to the Buddha’s teaching, there is nothing in this world that does not come within the realm of the causal law – the arising and passing away of things. Hence, the direct corollary of the theory of causality is that all things in this world are impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha) and non-substantial (anatta) – the three universal characteristics.

1) **Impermanence (anicca)**

* Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that one cannot step into the same river twice, which implies the ever-changing and transient nature of things.
* In the Buddhist scripture, it is said that the world is impermanent like autumn clouds; that birth and death are like dance, and that human life is like a flash of lightning or a waterfall.
* Our bodies are impermanent and subject to constant change. We grow thin, old and gray; our teeth and hair fall out. Similarly, our mental states are impermanent. At one moment we are happy, and the next moment sad. As infants, we hardly understand anything; as adults we understand a great deal more; in old age, we lose the power of our mental faculties and become like infants.
* Our relations with other people are subject to change. Friends or relatives become enemies; enemies become friends or relatives. All the things that we dearly love – our homes, mobile phones, clothes are impermanent. They are subject to decay and eventually be destroyed.
* How often do friendships deteriorate and end. Marriages fail because the parties involved fail to notice the other party has changed in their attitude and interests. We lock ourselves into fixed, artificial, unchanging ideas of the characters and personalities of our friends and relatives. We fail to develop our relations with them appropriately and hence often fail to understand one another.
* The understanding of impermanence is an antidote to attachment and ill-will. Seeing that all things are perishable and change every moment, we begin to see things having no substantial existence of their own.

2) **Suffering (dukkha)**

* The Buddha said that whatever is impermanent is suffering because impermanent is an occasion for suffering. Impermanence is only an occasion for suffering as long as ignorance, craving and clinging are present.
* In our ignorance of the real nature of things, we crave and cling to objects in the forlorn hope that they may be permanent, that they may yield permanent happiness. Failing to understand that youth, health and life itself are impermanent, we crave for them and cling to them. We long to hold onto our youth and prolong our life, yet because they are impermanent by nature, they slip through our fingers. When this occurs, impermanence is an occasion for suffering. Similarly, we fail to recognize the impermanent nature of possessions, power and prestige. We crave and cling to them.

3) **Non-substantial (anatta)**

* The Buddha uses the examples of a chariot and a forest to explain the relation between the name or term “I” and the components of a personal experience. The term ‘chariot’ is simply a convenient name for a collection of parts that are assembled in a particular way. The wheels are not the chariot nor the axle, nor the carriage, and so forth. Similarly, a single tree is not a forest, nor the numbers of trees. Yet there is no forest apart from individual trees, so the term “forest” is just a convenient name for a collection of trees.
* This is the thrust of the Buddha’s rejection of the self. His rejection is a rejection of the belief in a real, independent, permanent entity that is represented by the name or term ‘I’. Such a permanent entity would have to be independent, sovereign in the way a king is a master of those around him. It would have to be permanent, immutable and impervious to change, and such a permanent entity or self is nowhere to be found.

**The Buddha gives the following analysis to indicate that self is nowhere to be found:**

1) The body is not “the self”, for if the body were “the self”, the self would be impermanent, would be subject to change, decay, destruction and death.

2) “The self” does not possess the body, in the sense that I possess a car because “the self” cannot control the body. The body falls ill, gets tired and old against our wishes.

3) “The self” does not exist in the body. If we search our bodies from the tops of our heads to the tips of our toes, we can’t locate “the self”.

4) The mind is subject to constant change and is agitated like a monkey. One moment is happy and unhappy the next.

**By ejecting the idea of “a self”, we benefit in two ways:**

1) At the mundane level, in our everyday lives, we become more creative, more comfortable, more open to people. As long as we cling to “the self”, we will always have to defend ourselves, our property, our prestige, opinions and even our statements. But once we give up the belief in an independent and permanent self, we will be able to relate to other people and situations without paranoia. We will be able to act freely, spontaneously and creatively.

2) It is a key to enlightenment. The belief in a self is synonymous with ignorance – the most basic of the three afflictions. Once we identify, imagine or conceive of ourselves as an entity, we immediately create a schism, a separation between ourselves and the people around us. We respond to the people and things around us with either attachment or aversion.

Understanding these truths will free us from the fundamental errors that imprison us within the cycle of birth and death. When these delusions are removed, wisdom arises, just as, when darkness is removed, light rises. When wisdom arises, we experience the peace and freedom

of nibbana.

**Reference:**

**1) The Tree of Enlightenment by Peter Della Santina**