

Impermanence

1. The polluted aggregates are impermanent (anicca, anitya) because they undergo continuous momentary arising and disintegration.

Understanding this dispels the distortion believing impermanent things are permanent. “Impermanent” here means changing moment by moment. All conditioned phenomena undergo change, disintegrating from what they were and becoming something new. Coarse change occurs when a thing ceases: a person dies, a chair breaks. Subtle change occurs moment by moment—it is a thing’s not remaining the same from one instant to the next.

Our senses observe coarse impermanence. However, for something such as our body to be born and cease in this obvious way, there must be a more subtle process of change taking place each moment. Without it, the coarse, observable change from childhood to old age could not occur.

Almost all Buddhists accept that the moment a thing comes into being, it has the nature of disintegrating simply by the fact that it was produced by causes. It is not the case that a cause produces something, that thing remains unchanged for a period of time, and then another condition causes its cessation. Rather, the very factor that causes something to arise also causes it to cease. From the very first moment of a thing’s existence, it has the nature of disintegrating. Momentariness indicates that arising and ceasing are not contradictory but are two attributes of the same process.

The present is insubstantial. It is an unfindable threshold between the past (what has already happened) and the future (what is yet to happen). While we spend a great deal of time pondering the past and planning for the future, neither of them is occurring right now. The only time we ever live is in the present, but the present is elusive, changing in each nanosecond. We

cannot stop the flow of time to examine a fixed present moment.

Understanding impermanence is a powerful antidote to harmful emotions based on grasping impermanent things—our dear ones, possessions, moods, and problems—as permanent. Do not fall into nihilism thinking that nothing is worthwhile because it will change. Rather, because things are transient, attachment and anger toward them is impractical. Impermanence also means that when we create the causes, our positive qualities such as love, compassion, and altruism will grow.

The Pāli suttas describe impermanence as “arising and passing away.” Occasionally, they speak about “knowing things as they arise, as they are present, and as they pass away,” outlining three phases: arising, changing while abiding, and disintegrating. The Abhidhamma agrees with this formalization. Meditators focus on the sutta presentation of arising and passing away and, within that, especially on passing away because that forcefully highlights impermanence. Practicing mindfulness, meditators pay close attention to physical and mental processes, coming to see that what appear to be unified objects or events are in fact processes that arise and cease in each moment due to causes and conditions. As mindfulness deepens, subtle impermanence is seen clearly with direct experience.

Seeing arising dispels *annihilation*—the notion that things do not exist at all or that the continuity of the person and of the effects of karma totally stop at death. Seeing disintegration dispels *eternalism*—the notion that people and things have a substantial, permanent, eternal reality.

Positing Subtle Impermanence

IN GENERAL “impermanence” is posited on the basis of whether something undergoes change, and conditioned phenomena are subject to change owing to their causes and conditions.³⁴⁷ So if something has causes and conditions, it is subject to change, and if it does not have causes and conditions, it is not subject to change. [384] The fact of such conditioned phenomena being subject to change is primarily a function of the productive causes that produce them. As such, all conditioned phenomena continuously undergo change without remaining static for even a single moment. For example, owing to the change of a tree’s leaves, they fall to the ground with the arrival of cold in winter. It is not that they transform spontaneously, but rather they transform each day and week until in the end they fall to the ground. Those leaves that transform over many days do so naturally through merely being established. Therefore they transform moment by moment, and even though the eye does not see it, in reality they continuously transform. If subtle change did not exist moment by moment, then coarse transformation also could not arise.

With respect to how the four characteristics of conditioned phenomena are understood, the Vaibhāṣikas, for example, assert that when the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena—arising, enduring, and disintegrating—illustrate the conditioned nature of something, such as the form aggregate, they do not do so on the basis of something arising and so on. They do so by way of demonstrating that the given phenomenon possesses characteristics such as arising that are distinct from it. Therefore they don’t assert these characteristics to be the action of arising and so on, but rather as substantially real, distinct entities that are the agents that generate, that endure, and that disintegrate. So although these four characteristics do exist simultaneously for conditioned phenomena, such

as a material entity, when they occur on a specific basis, they maintain that first the action of arising occurs, next [385] enduring, then decaying, then the action of disintegration occurs in a sequential order. As for the four characteristics of arising and so on themselves, as mentioned earlier, they do not view these in terms of the *action of arising* and so forth. Rather they posit these in terms of substantially real, distinct entities that are the agent of generation, the agent of endurance, the agent of decay, and the agent of disintegration. Furthermore they interpret “conditioned phenomena” in terms of “produced through the aggregation of causes and conditions,” that is to say, in terms of activities associated with active agents. For example, the *Treasury of Knowledge Autocommentary* states:

Here owing to arising it generates that phenomena, owing to enduring it causes it to abide, owing to decaying it causes it to age, and owing to impermanence it causes it to disintegrate.³⁴⁸

Explanation of the Treasury of Knowledge states:

Here they assert the characteristics of conditioned phenomena are by nature different substances.³⁴⁹

Therefore those characteristics are not posited in terms of extremely short moments. *Treasury of Knowledge Autocommentary* states:

The Bhagavan teaches that “the continuum of conditioned phenomena is a conditioned phenomenon and a dependent origination” . . . up to . . . “these three are the characteristics of conditioned phenomena,” but not for just a moment, for arising and so on do not manifest for just a moment.³⁵⁰ [386]

For the Sautrāntikas, however, it is not the case that conditioned phenomena arise in the first moment, then endure in the intervening period, and then disintegrate through contact with the causes of disintegration. For the Sautrāntikas, the very instant the first moment of a given phenomenon came into being, it did so as something that does not remain still even for a single moment. And given that the first moment has the nature of some-

thing that does not remain static even for a single moment, the fact of it not remaining for a second moment takes place. Therefore they maintain that the specific character of the first moment not remaining even at its own time was created by the very same productive cause that produced the phenomenon in the first place.

So too, they view the characteristics of conditioned phenomena, such as arising and so on, to be the actions of arising, of endurance, and of disintegration of phenomena such as form and so on. To take a sprout as an example, *arising* is the new arising of a sprout that has never existed before, *enduring* is maintaining the continuum of its prior moment, and *disintegration* or *decaying* is the difference in characteristics between the earlier and later moments. The time when the sprout is at the point of arising is posited as the time of the sprout's cause, the time when the sprout arises is posited as the time of the first moment of the sprout, the time of the sprout's enduring is posited as the time of the three moments of a sprout—earlier, later, and middle—and the time when the sprout disintegrates is posited as the time of the first moment of the result of the sprout. The Sautrāntikas view these three characteristics to be simultaneous and not different in substance from conditioned phenomena. For example, *Blaze of Reasoning* states:

For example, a Sautrāntika says: Arising is not arising just once but arising in a continuum derived from the power [387] of specifically defined causes and conditions. Enduring is enduring within the stream of earlier moments. Decaying is the factor of dissimilarity with earlier moments and disintegration is complete separation.³⁵¹

So too, insofar as something is a conditioned phenomenon it exists in the nature of disintegration from the very instant of its coming into being. Dharmakīrti states in *Ascertainment of Valid Cognition*:

There is no such thing called “impermanence only” that will come into being subsequently. The very fact that functional things endure only for a moment, this alone is what is meant by impermanence. This has been explained numerous times.³⁵²

Thus the Sautrāntikas are different from the Vaibhāṣikas in asserting that even a thing that does not remain for longer than the duration of a shortest moment possesses all three characteristics. *Explanation of the Treasury of Knowledge*, for example, says:

Others say: Some measure of endurance exists even with regard to the final moment of a sound or a tongue of flame and so on. So too, since their transformation relies on earlier moments, hence they are posited as having the three characteristics.³⁵³

“Others” must be taken as referring to the Sautrāntikas. [388]

Just like the Sautrāntikas, the Cittamātrins and Mādhyamikas too view the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena—arising, enduring, and disintegrating—as actions and also as existing simultaneously. For example, *Compendium of Bases* states:

The impermanence of conditioned phenomena will be understood by means of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena as transformation through arising, enduring, and disintegrating. Also these three characteristics should be understood in dependence on the two continua of conditioned entities. As such there is (1) a continuum that is the continuation of one life to another and (2) a continuum that is the continuation of one moment to another.

Regarding the first continuum, taking birth as a type of sentient being is *arising*, and dying at the end is *disintegration*. The phase of youth and so on that occurs between the first and last phase is change through enduring. It is *enduring* since it endures for the measure of this life however long it lasts. Since there exist specific later phases there is *change*.

Then regarding the momentary nature of the second continuum, the newest arising of conditioned entities is *arising*. The moment of arising that does not abide beyond that is *disintegration*. Enduring in just the moment of arising is *enduring*.

Transformation has two types: (1) transformation into the same entity and (2) transformation into distinct entities. Transformation into the same entity is the disintegration of the con-

ditioned entity within the same continuum. Transformation into distinct entities [389] is the disintegration into different continua. But since a transformed body does not exist separately from its enduring state, these two merge as one and are designated a single characteristic.³⁵⁴

In brief, impermanence is defined as “that which is momentary.” “Momentariness” in the context of the definition of “impermanence” refers to not enduring for a second moment beyond the time of its occurrence. Not remaining for a brief period is not the meaning of “momentariness.” Thus for this moment there is a range of different lengths of duration. In the case of a year, for example, there are twelve months from the time of its occurrence, and when twelve months have passed the year no longer remains. Similarly, when not enduring for a second moment beyond its time of occurrence is applied to a day, the time of its occurrence lasts for the duration of twenty-four hours for a day and a night. Applied to a phenomenon that lasts only for the period of a minute, its duration becomes that of a minute.

One might ask: Does a century, for example, exist for one hundred human years or not? If it does not so exist, this would contradict the assertion that a year exists until the completion of twelve months. If, on the other hand, a century does exist until a hundred years are complete, it would contradict the assertion that it is impermanent in that it does not exist for more than one moment.

Response: This objection stems from the fault of not knowing how to posit a continuum, as stated in *Four Hundred Stanzas*: [390]

If you view a continuum erroneously,
you could be saying it is permanent.³⁵⁵

Thus Āryadeva states that if you view a continuum erroneously, that is, if you fail to understand that it is composed of parts, there is a danger of mistaking it to be permanent. Further, if illustrated by a year, the continuum possesses twelve months as its parts, and since the parts and the whole are the same entity, a year that is the whole disintegrates and so on owing to the first month that is part of that year disintegrating. All things are similar. However, the distinction must be made that when one month that is a

part of that year disintegrates, the year that is the whole disintegrates but it is not yet destroyed, and though a year does not remain it is not without remainder.

In general there are two types of impermanence: impermanence in terms of a continuum and momentary impermanence. Prajñāvarman's *Exposition of the Collection of Aphorisms* states:

Impermanence has two types: impermanence in terms of a continuum and momentary impermanence.³⁵⁶

Of these two, the first is called *coarse impermanence* and the second is referred to as *subtle impermanence*. To illustrate these two types of impermanence by taking Devadatta as an example, Devadatta not remaining after death is extremely coarse impermanence, since even a cowherd can ascertain this fact with sense perception. Compared to this, the fact of Devadatta not remaining from the time of his first moment to the second moment is subtler. Compared to this, the fact of Devadatta disintegrating even at the time of his first moment is even more subtle. Therefore, in order to cognize subtle impermanence, it must be preceded in general by comprehending the fact of coarse impermanence. [391]

Furthermore, if there were to be no subtle impermanence in the sense of moment-by-moment disintegration, one would not know how to posit impermanence in terms of a continuum. This fact of subtle impermanence in the sense of moment-by-moment disintegration has not been brought about by some other adventitious condition nor some subsequent factor. Rather, it is the productive cause of the entity itself that generates its momentary disintegration.

As for impermanence in terms of a continuum, this is explained in *Explication of the Five Aggregates*:

A continuum commences from the birth of the five aggregates up until death, and that unbroken continuity of momentary characteristics is called *a continuum*. Disintegration refers to later moments not succeeding earlier moments owing to the momentary continuum of the five aggregates being severed. The arising of other moments of dissimilar type is called *disintegration*, and just that is designated *impermanence*.³⁵⁷

So a person who reaches the age of ninety is old and infirm owing to age, but he or she did not become old and infirm suddenly. First while abiding in the womb, then at birth, then in childhood, and so on up until becoming an elder, the person progressively changed until in the end he or she became old and infirm. Asaṅga's *Yogācāra Ground* states:

What are the eight times? The time of abiding in the womb, the time of birth, the time of childhood, the time of youth, the time of a young adult, the time of an adult, the time of an elder, the time of frailty. [392] The time of abiding in the womb is the embryonic stage of arbuda and so on. The time of birth is the time beyond that up to and including the time of infirmity. The time of childhood is becoming mobile up to being able to engage in play. The time of youth is being able to engage in play. The time of a young adult is being able to engage in sex, up to and including the age of thirty. The time of an adult is up to and including the age of fifty. The time of an elder is up to and including the age of seventy. The time of infirmity occurs after that.³⁵⁸

In general when impermanence pertains to a coarse basis, such as the final moment of the flame of a butter lamp and something ascertained by direct perception, it constitutes coarse impermanence. In contrast, when it pertains to a subtle basis and needs to be ascertained through reasoning, it is subtle impermanence. Impermanence is analogous to what is meant by *not remaining for a second instant beyond the time of its establishment*. For when impermanence is applied to a day, it refers to the duration of thirty hours.³⁵⁹ If, on the other hand, impermanence is applied to the briefest unit of time, it would endure for the period of a shortest moment. Therefore not remaining a second instant beyond the time it comes into being has both subtle and coarse dimensions.

The fact that all conditioned phenomena were created in the nature of disintegration by the very productive causes that brought them into being in the first place and that they do not remain in the second moment beyond the time they come into being are stated in *Sūtra on Gagana-varṇa's Patient Training*:

These phenomena [393] arise in the first moment, disintegrate in just that moment, and do not exist in the second moment.³⁶⁰

Similarly, in *Exposition of Valid Cognition* it states:

Because it has no other cause,
disintegration is related to the entity itself.³⁶¹

Here Dharmakīrti states that the disintegration of a product exists from the very moment of its existence and is related intrinsically to its very nature. The disintegration of a product is generated not by some other third factor but by the very cause that gave rise to its existence. As such the very cause that produced it also generates its disintegration.

To present this in a syllogism: Take a product; it is characterized by disintegration from the first moment of its existence because it arose from its own causes with the essential nature of disintegration without relying on some alternate cause of disintegration.

Again, *Exposition of Valid Cognition* states:

If something were to disintegrate because of
another cause of disintegration being generated . . .³⁶²

The opponent's position is that the disintegration of something, such as a vase, is not automatically established through the mere fact of the vase arising from its productive cause, for the vase disintegrates due to some other factor that causes its subsequent disintegration. To demonstrate that such a view is untenable, the same text then states:

If it itself establishes the state of disintegration,
how could a subsequent cause facilitate disintegration? [394]
If it does not facilitate that state,
how could it act on its dependent effect?
How could there ever be an entity
that lacked dependence? It does not exist.³⁶³

Thus Dharmakīrti states that since all conditioned phenomena are characterized by disintegration by the very productive causes that produced

them, the subsequent factor that the opponent asserts to be the cause of disintegration neither facilitates the disintegration of form and so on nor harms it in any manner. And if this subsequent factor that is supposedly the cause of disintegration does facilitate the disintegration of form and so on, it is then illogical to maintain that this subsequent cause of disintegration and the disintegration of form and so on are related as the dependent effect and its dependent cause.

This logical establishment of the momentariness of conditioned phenomena is accorded great importance in Buddhist texts in general and epistemological texts in particular. A key point is the establishment of how disintegration does not depend on a subsequent separate factor or cause. We have presented such logical arguments only briefly here as an introduction. Those who desire to understand them in detail should consult the first chapter of Dharmakīrti's *Exposition of Valid Cognition*, such as the verses cited above, "Because it has no other cause, it disintegrates . . .," and their related commentaries. *Ascertainment of Valid Cognition* states:

Again, because it establishes production and impermanence
[395] of the characteristics of aggregates, elements, and bases,
there is no error.³⁶⁴

There is an extensive presentation after the above opening passage that addresses the following topics: (1) identification of what a conditioned phenomenon is, (2) logically establishing it to be impermanent, (3) rebutting objections to the view that disintegration does not require a subsequent factor as a cause, (4) how even so, disintegration does not become causeless, and (5) thus how the conclusion is derived that disintegration is an essential nature of functional things.

There are works that serve as supporting material for these two texts by Dharmakīrti, such as chapter 13 of Śāntarakṣita's *Compendium on Reality* and its commentary by Kamalaśīla, and Dharmottara's *Proof of Momentariness* and its commentary by Muktikalaśa. In them, Buddhist logicians present with refinement and in great detail the essential and subtle points of their reasoning to prove the momentary nature of conditioned phenomena. [396]