

THE THERAVADA THEORY OF MOMENTS

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1. There is no theory of moments in early Buddhist Discourses. This, in fact, is the view held by the Theravada tradition as well. In introducing the theory, a Buddhist commentary observes that it is found only in the Abhidhamma, not in the Buddhist Discourses. What we get in the Buddhist Discourses is the doctrine of impermanence, the transitory nature of all phenomena. It finds its classic expression in the well-known formula: "All conditioned phenomena are impermanent" (*sabbe sankhara anicca*), and in the more popular expression: "Impermanent, indeed, are conditioned phenomena" (*anicca vata sankhara*). Both mean that all phenomena brought about by conditions are, by their very nature, subject to change and dissolution.
2. The emphatic assertion of impermanence is fundamental to Buddhism. As the first (logically, but not chronologically) characteristic of sentient existence, it is in fact impermanence that provides the rational foundation for the other two characteristics, suffering and non-self. An insight into the fact, "whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of cessation" is defined as "a vision into the heart of the doctrine" (*dhamma-cakkhu*).
3. "Khana", which is the Pali term for "moment" occurs in the Buddhist Discourses. However, it is used without any technical import attached to it. It is used in its general sense to mean a small fraction of time. We find it often used in the instrumental, "tena khanena", or in the locative, "tasmim khane" to mean "at that moment" and, as the PTS Dictionary notes, sometimes it is used in the accusative to mean moment as coincidence or concurrence, that is, "all at once or simultaneously" (*tam khanam yeva*). Buddhist commentarial exegesis explains the Early Buddhist usage of "khana" as moment, in a general sense, to mean a "small fraction of time" (*muhutta-sankhata-khana*). In its technical sense, it means the briefest temporal unit, "moment in the ultimate sense" (*paramattha-khana*).
4. Another meaning of "khana" is "the right moment or opportune time". Thus, we have: "khano ma ve upaccaga" = "Let not the right moment slip away." This usage of "khana" brings into focus the brevity and rarity of the right occasion and, therefore, the need to make the fullest use of it.
5. "The early Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is not the result of any kind of metaphysical inquiry or of any mystical intuition. It is a straightforward judgement arrived at by empirical observation, and as such, its basis is entirely empirical": (Professor O. H. de A. Wijesekara, *Three Signata*, p.1). On the other hand, the Abhidhamma theory of moments shows a shift of emphasis from empiricism to rationalism. It is an attempt to understand the process of change through a process of pure reasoning.
6. The earliest reference to a doctrine of moments is found in the Mahaniddeśa, the Canonical Commentary to the Suttanipata. It goes on to assert that what we call life, or individuality, or pain and pleasure, join in one conscious moment that flicks away as soon as it arises. One lives only in the present moment, and not in the past and the future moments. Even the denizens of the heavenly existences,

who are supposed to live for 84,000 years, do not live during two conscious moments. (Mahaniddesa, PTS. 1, 117-118).

7. The issue of “momentary/instantaneous being” divided the early Buddhist Schools of Thought into two groups. Some, for example, the Sautrantikas, maintained that it applied to both mental and material phenomena equally. Others, for example, the Mahasamghikas and the Arya-Sammitiyas maintained that only mental phenomena are momentary and that matter has relative duration and therefore a gradual change.

8. In the Kathavatthu of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the Theravadins reject the view that the duration of a thought-moment is equal to the duration of matter. This shows that the Theravadins too did not agree with the view that mind and matter are of equal duration. They argue that if the lifespan of mind and matter is equal, then it will not be possible to explain the perception of the external world. This seems to mean that the Buddhist theory of perception involves a succession of mental events. If a momentary material object impinges on a momentary sense organ, both will have disappeared by the time of full perception. (Kathavatthu, PTS, 620 ff.)

9. Besides the Kathavatthu, the Yamaka of the Abhidhamma Pitaka refers to mind’s moment of origination (*uppadakkhana*) and mind’s moment of cessation (*nirodhakkhana*). However, neither of the works mentions mind’s static phase or its moment of existence, what came to be recognized in the Buddhist exegesis as the moment of existence.

10. Alexander von Rospatt’s contention that the doctrine of momentariness was only a marginal issue for Theravada is not adequately borne out by relevant texts. (Rospatt, *Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness*, 34 ff.) The reference to a theory of moments is found in three pre-commentarial works: Mahaniddesa, Yamaka and Kathavatthu. He makes note of the Kathavatthu reference but is inclined to believe that this section of the Kathavatthu must have been added well after the composition of the core of this treatise. Even if this were so, still we have to reckon with the Yamaka, which also belongs to the Abhidhamma Pitaka, where we find reference to mind’s moments of origination (*uppadkkhana*) and cessation (*nirodhakkhana*). Besides, the theory of conditionality of the Patthana presupposes at least the momentary existence of mental phenomena. The four conditions by way of proximity (*anantara*), immediate contiguity (*samanantara*), absence (*natthi*), and disappearance (*vigata*) imply that the apparently continuous stream of consciousness is in the final analysis a succession of momentary cognitive acts.

11. What led to the theory of moments among Buddhist Schools of Thought could perhaps be traced to a passage in the Anguttaranikaya, where we read, “what is conditioned” exhibits three characteristics, namely, origination (*uppada*), cessation (*vaya*), and change-in-continuance (*thitassa annathatta*). This Sutta-passage, as De la Vallee Poussin says, corresponds to the “Trilaksana Sutra” of the Chinese version of the Samyuktagama. (Abhidharmakosabhasya, French Tr. 223, n.2).

12. For early Buddhism “what is conditioned” meant all cognizable objects on the empirical level. But for the Abhidhamma such cognizable objects are not ultimately real, because being conceptual constructs they have only consensual reality. What is ultimately real are the dhammas, the basic factors into which

empirical existence can be finally analyzed. In the light of this development the three characteristics of the conditioned came to be applied, not to composite things, but to elementary dhammas, because only the dhammas have ontological validity.

13. As to the relationship between the dhammas and the three characteristics, the Vibhajyavadins maintained that the dhammas are conditioned, but the conditioning characteristics are unconditioned. This is an attempt to show that the conditioning characteristics have universal applicability and eternal validity. All that is causally dependent come under their inexorable sway. The Dharmaguptikas maintained that only the characteristic of dissolution is unconditioned. This is to stress that not only the conditioned dhammas, but the characteristics responsible for their origination and modification are brought to an end by the all-powerful characteristic of dissolution. The Sarvastivadins held that the characteristics as well as the dhammas are both equally conditioned. The Theravadins and the Sautrantikas maintained that only the dhammas are conditioned, not their characteristics.

14. Although the Sutta-passage mentions only three characteristics: origination (uppada), cessation (vaya) and change-in-continuance (thitassa annathatta), the Sarvastivadins increased the number to four: (a) origination (jati/utpada), (b) presence/duration (sthitii), (c) decay/modification (jarata), and (d) impermanence/dissolution (vyaya).

15. The Sarvastivadins maintain that the four characteristics of the conditioned are also conditioned. What led to this interpretation is the use of the words “the conditioned characteristics of the conditioned”. It gives the impression that the characteristics of the conditioned are also conditioned. The Sautrantikas and Theravadins contend that the repetition of the term “conditioned” should not be understood in a literal sense. A Buddhist commentary says the repetition of the term is not because of any idiomatic peculiarity of the language, but is absolutely necessary. What is conditioned can also have other characteristics such as impermanence and non-self. What the Sutta-passage intends to show is that among many characteristics of that which is conditioned, there are three specific characteristics that allow us to identify what is conditioned as conditioned. In clarifying this situation, another Pali commentary, refers to a similar canonical statement: “Monks, there are these three wise characteristics of the wise”. Surely, just because the word “wise” is repeated, it does not mean that the characteristics of the wise are also wise. They are repeated precisely in order to show that the wise man as a wise man has three characteristics that enable us to identify the wise man as wise. What is more, in the Sutta passage even the opposite word “unconditioned” is repeated (asankhatassa asankhata-lakkhanani). Surely, this is not intended to show that the characteristics of the unconditioned are also unconditioned.

16. The Sarvastivadins reckon the four characteristics as four separate dharmas and include them in a category called “citta-viprayukta-samskara”, in order show that they apply equally to both mind and matter. Since the four characteristics are conditioned, they have in turn, their own secondary characteristics (anulaksana), namely, origination of origination (jati-jati), duration of duration (sthitii-sthitii), decay of decay (jarata-jarata), and impermanence of impermanence (anityata-anityata).

17. Thus, when a dharma arises, together with it arise the four primary and the four secondary characteristics. This rather complex situation is explained as follows: Jati (origination), which is the first

primary characteristic, produces the dharma as well as the other three primary and four secondary characteristics. When 'jati' performs this function it does so while being in the future. Although 'jati' produces the above eight elements, it must also be produced. This means that it must transit itself from the future to the present. This function is performed by 'jati-jati', the first secondary characteristic. Although 'jati-jati' is produced by 'jati' when it is in its future state, it is 'jati-jati' that enables 'jati' to transit from the future to the present. The second principal characteristic, which is 'sthiti' (duration), while being stabilized by its own secondary characteristic, called 'sthiti-sthiti' (duration of duration), stabilizes the dharma and the other seven items, namely, the remaining three principal and the four secondary characteristics. Likewise, the third and fourth principal characteristics, 'jarata' (decay) and 'vinasa' (dissolution), while being weakened and destroyed by their two secondary characteristics called 'jarata-jarata' and 'vinasa-vinasa', weaken and destroy the remaining items.

18. The Sautrantikas apply the four characteristics, not to a single momentary dharma, but to a series of momentary dharmas (dharma-santati). "Jati" is the origination of the series, "vyaya" is its cessation, "sthiti" is the series itself, the difference between the preceding and succeeding states of the series is "sthityanyathatva", change-in –continuance. In their view a momentary dharma cannot have the two characteristics of duration and modification. This led to their theory of moments as point-instants of time. The point-instants have no duration in time, just as geometric points have no extension in space. In a way, appearance itself is disappearance. They are two ways of looking at the same happening.

19. According to the Theravada, there are three moments: the moment of origination (*uppadakkhana*), the moment of presence (*thitikkhana*), and the moment of dissolution (*bhangakkhana*). In the first moment a dhamma arises, in the second moment it exists, and in the third moment, it dissolves.

20. Sometimes the moment is defined to embrace the three moments taken together as one unit: the triad of moments corresponding to origination, presence, and dissolution (*uppada-thiti-bhanga-vasena khanattayam*). Thus, the moment comes to be defined in two ways. In its more general sense, it means the time taken by a dhamma to originate, exist, and dissolve. In its more specific sense, it means the time taken by a dhamma either to originate, or to exist, or to dissolve. In this latter sense, the moment becomes a sub-moment.

21. The three characteristics of the conditioned do not operate simultaneously. Nor do they operate in temporal succession within one single moment. There are three separate moments corresponding to them: the moment of origination (*uppadakkhana*), the moment of duration/presence (*thitikkhana*), and the moment of dissolution (*bhangakkhana*). A dhamma arises in the first moment, exists in the second moment, and ceases in the third moment. The three characteristics operate one after another, each accomplishing its operation in its own moment. This ensures the definition of the moment as the briefest temporal unit, because during one moment only one characteristic accomplishes its operation.

22. Theravada exegetes took special care to stress that the three characteristics necessarily involve a temporal sequence (*tividham bhinna-kalikam*). As one commentary says, 'in the case of a conditioned dhamma, during the moment of its origination, there comes to be manifested the fact of being conditioned, the characteristic of origination and, moment as the briefest unit of time. When the

origination moment has elapsed, there comes to be manifested the fact of being conditioned, the characteristic of decay, and the moment as the briefest unit of time. When the decay moment has elapsed there comes to be manifested the fact of being conditioned, the characteristic of dissolution, and the moment as the briefest unit of time.” What come to be manifested together are not the three characteristics but a given characteristic, the conditioned nature, and the time instant.

23. The life-span of a moment of matter is longer than that of a moment of mind. The ratio is 1 to 17. A mental dhammas is strong (*balava*) at its moment of origination and weak (*dubbala*) at its moments of duration and dissolution. In contrast a material dhamma is strong at its moments of duration and weak at its moments of origination and cessation.

24. Dissolution is not due to causes (*vinasassa hi karana-rahitatta*). Whatever that originates, necessarily ceases (*avassam bhijjanti*). Origination is certainly caused, but dissolution necessarily follows (*nirodhanugata jati*), “just as the rising sun is coursing towards its own setting”. This idea is recognized in the Theravada doctrine of conditional relations as well. A condition is always defined as a dhamma that assists another dhamma either to originate (*uppattiya*), or to exist (*thitiya*), but not to cease.

25. All Buddhist Schools of Thought agree that whatever originates must cease. What became controversial was whether dissolution is spontaneous or, whether it needs causes and conditions for dissolution to take place. There were three different explanations: The Vatsiputriyas and Arya-sammitiyas say that while mental phenomena cease spontaneously (*akasmika*), material things require a concourse of external causes for their dissolution. The Sarvastivadins maintain that destruction is caused by the characteristic of destruction. The Sautrantikas, Darstantikas, and Theravadins say that both mental and material dhammas dissolve spontaneously. Whatever that originates, necessarily ceases (*vinasassa hi karana-rahitatta*). This is recognized in the doctrine of conditionality as well. A condition is always defined as a dhamma that assists another dhamma either to originate (*uppattiya*) or to exist (*thitiya*), and never to cease.

26. A logical consequence of the theory of moments is the denial of motion. Momentary material dhammas have no time to move. They disappear wherever they appear. The transition of a thing from one locus in space to another (*desantara-sankamana*) is interpreted to mean the successive appearance of momentary material dhammas in adjacent locations (*desantaruppatti*), giving rise to our idea of movement.

27. On the mutual relationship between time and consciousness, a Buddhist commentary says:

“By time the Sage described the mind

And by the mind described the time”.

The moment as the briefest temporal unit becomes definable as equal to the duration of a consciousness and its concomitant mental factors. While a consciousness and its concomitant mental factors (a cognitive act) determine the moment as the briefest temporal unit, the moment in turn determines the time during which a consciousness and its concomitant mental factors arise.

