The Buddhist understanding of momentariness

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Momentariness has emerged as the mainstream theory of existence in Buddhism. For the 8th century Indian scholar Shantarakshita[1], this theory is the single most important teaching given by the Buddha because it refutes single-handedly, as it were, all non-Buddhist views regarding the creation of the world and the existence of a soul. Over the centuries Buddhists put forward many different arguments to counter non-Buddhist beliefs, showing that they are riddled with inconsistency and self-contradiction, and all such reasoning is well and good. But in the end, says Shantarakshita, these efforts are unnecessary because every one of these views can be disproved simply and solely through the teaching on momentariness.

All material objects can be broken down into their minutest constituent parts that are 'partless particles' – like atoms or quarks; they are therefore called composite. And both matter and mind are broken down into their shortest possible constituent moments of time. Buddhists hold that all conditioned and composite things – everything, from particles to large objects and to thoughts and feelings – are momentary by nature. They *appear* to exist in a stable and continuous manner but fine analysis reveals that they are really in perpetual flux. All the component parts of which they are made exist in a succession of moments; one moment produces the next according to causal laws that ensure like produces like. In Abhidharma, the Buddhist wisdom teachings, a moment is defined as one sixty-fifth of the duration of a finger snap. That means that each particle or dharma arises and lasts for only a fleeting moment before it ceases to exist. The technical term for this is 'serial continuity', meaning apparent continuity based on moments in a series.

The infinitesimally small units of which phenomena are composed (whether they be particles or moments) can't be perceived by the senses so they are called subtle. For this reason, it's difficult to reflect upon them. If we want to understand them more deeply it's therefore helpful to turn to the discoveries that have been made using scientific instruments. Various types of machine allow us indirectly to perceive infinitely small material particles such as electrons and quarks while other machines measure fractions of a moment in time. It's as though we need to develop 'laser eyes' to see through the solidity of things and realise that, at the atomic and subatomic levels, they are in perpetual motion.

Take the example of large objects, whether organic like a lump of meat or inorganic like a computer screen. Both appear stable and continuous and yet if we put them under a microscope or an electron-microscope we would see that the atoms or cells of which they are made change and move in every moment. We could also think of the way a stroboscope slows down our perception to show us successive moments

[1] Shantarakshita, *Tattvasamgraha,* Chapter 8, 350-351.

of a movement that would otherwise appear continuous. Movies are a favourite example, too: they appear to show a continuous story but analysis reveals they are composed of lots of static frames. The impression of continuity therefore depends entirely on speed – over 24 frames per second to be exact.

This principle explains how meditation practice works. Calm abiding meditation allows thoughts and emotions to calm down and settle. Mental agitation slows down and its intensity is reduced. As long as thoughts and emotions are jumping around in an agitated and distracted mind they are experienced as a continuous flow – and our awareness is swept along in that flow. It's only when thoughts slow down in meditation practice that it's possible to experience their momentary nature for ourselves. We train the mind to discern each frame of the movie: to notice when a thought arises, to know which thoughts are present in the mind, and to notice when a thought dissolves.

To contemplate momentariness as it applies to a particular object, I could focus on, say, my coffee table. I set out knowing intellectually that my coffee table is made of atoms and that those atoms (and molecules) change from moment to moment in an on-going process of deterioration and aging. As I focus on that coffee table in meditation I reflect on what this means and on the gap between apparent solidity and intrinsic flux. I may not develop the ability to actually 'see' its flux but I may well find that my attachment to its reality is weakened and my relation with it softened by the realisation that it is not the static, well-defined object it appears to be. And reducing attachment is the main point. If a thing does not really exist out there as a stable entity, then what is there to be attached to and what is the sense of being attached to a projected image of what we mistakenly think it is? We only feel attachment for something or someone we think is real, so once we realise that things are not real in the way we thought they were our attachment to them automatically decreases. This is one instance of the way knowledge and wisdom eliminate the afflictions by aligning our emotions with reality.

By reflecting on the momentary existence of specific objects we find that some objects are more obviously momentary than others. Live flowers (rather than plastic ones) are traditionally taken as an example of perpetual change because their change from budding to blooming to wilting is visible over a relatively short period of time. The flow of a river is another well-known example because the water in the river in front of you is never the same from one moment to the next. It's therefore easier to begin contemplating objects such as these and to progress to more rigid and solid ones as we become more familiar with the idea.

The momentary nature of all phenomena has tremendously important implications. It calls for nothing less than a completely different vision of the world. First, it means that human perception is limited and even those with the highest IQ or the sharpest eyes are unable to perceive reality as it is. The subtle reality that is being described in Buddhism is beyond our normal perceptual scope. We are confronted with the fact that what we know directly is only surface level, and to go deeper we need logic and reasoning, experimentation, contemplation, meditation and lots of determined effort. Reflecting on the implications for the limits of our knowledge is sobering. And it is all

the more sobering when we remember that Buddhist scholars taught momentariness long before any microscopes existed at all; they apprehended this reality through logic and through meditational insight without using any mechanical props. That is quite impressive.

The second ground-breaking implication is that perpetual flux proves that the wholes that make up our experience have no intrinsic, inherent, essential reality that somehow underpins or overrides the collection of their parts. Some non-Buddhist philosophers and religious thinkers believe in essences and souls, yet they never actually perceive the essences they speak of; they establish them through logical reasonings. But with perpetual flux there is no logical need to suppose that things have an essence to guarantee their continued existence over time. Serial continuity is sufficient to explain how things arise, exist for a while and then decay and disintegrate. And it applies not only to everyday objects but to the entire universe. There is therefore no need to posit a Creator God to explain how the world came to be and how it continually evolves and changes. This consequence is momentous, of course, and is aligned with a modern scientific understanding of reality.

Realising the composite nature of things reduces our attachment to them and realizing their momentary quality cuts away even more of our certainties. This is the third implication of momentariness. It is such a radical truth that it dismantles the world as we know it and the ground upon which we metaphorically stand. Ironically, though, science has proved both these truths – the composite and momentary nature of reality – so these ancient Buddhist ideas will not come as much of a surprise to us intellectually. But Buddhism goes further than science by offering contemplative and meditative ways of turning 'objective truths' into the way we sense and relate to things, not just the way we think of things. This learning method changes our emotional relationship to everything and thereby punctures our attachment to things which, for the Buddha, is a prime cause of suffering. That is why deep reflection on momentariness really does change the way we see the world.

Finally, we turn our attention to the momentariness of living beings and we realise that our own existence as a person is also in perpetual flux. It goes without saying that any realization of this kind, to whatever degree, brings about a momentous shift in the seat of consciousness. We will no longer naively identify ourselves with anything – with our body, our mind, our feelings or thoughts, our tendencies and so on. All the mental factors described as thoughts or feelings are momentary in the radical sense of the term, and we recognize that they are completely and utterly susceptible to change. When a person is described as having such-and-such a habit or such-and-such strengths and weaknesses, from the Buddhist point of view this is just a figure of speech; a person can never be defined in any set or permanent way. Buddhist psychology has little in common with the way Western psychology categorises different types of person.[2] The Abhidharma is interested in moments and how the next moment can be produced in a fresh and unpredictable way. The person is not an entity, it is a process.

The opposite of momentariness is permanence and for Buddhist scholars this only

[2] See Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu,* p.54.

applies to unconditioned phenomena. In early Buddhist thinking, only space and nirvana are held to be unconditioned and permanent.