Impermanence: the first mark of conditioned existence

Dominique Side

The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent and changing, which implies that there is nothing whatsoever that is permanent. We could say that change is a fact of life. On one level this is basic common sense: the seasons change, day changes to night, people age, things fall apart and so on. We all know this. So why did the Buddha give impermanence such importance when it is simply common sense? The Buddhist view is not banal; it is actually quite radical because it does not allow for any exceptions. Impermanence applies to everything, from the book in your hand to the entire solar system, and to all the ideas and values you might believe in.

In the moment a book begins to exist, its impermanence is assured. This is because it is compound and only exists when certain factors come together; at some point those factors naturally separate and disperse and the compound thing ceases to exist. Impermanence and change apply to everything that is conditioned in the Buddhist sense of the term: everything that is compound and produced from causes and conditions.

Although we all know that things change, in practice most of us believe some things in life are permanent and lasting, or at least we behave as though they are. We believe there are exceptions to the rule. For example, there may be some values we believe are universal and eternal: justice, peace, truth, beauty or love. Those who follow a religion other than Buddhism might believe there is an eternal God, an everlasting soul and an eternal heaven and hell. Even in terms of everyday life when we have a crush on someone we think it will last forever. We also relate to ourselves as permanent; we make plans as though we were going to be healthy and young forever, and when death approaches we regard it as a failure, a shock or a surprise.

Gross and subtle change

The Buddha explained that impermanence operates on two levels, the gross and the subtle. The gross level is the obvious physical level of change: things like the weather, the seasons, the way things decay or get broken, the way people grow up and age and die. This gross level also applies to historical change, social change, geographical change and so on; in fact, it applies to all areas of life and the world. This is what we commonly call change – a phenomenon we can usually observe with our own eyes and that does not require special scientific or philosophical methods to be discovered. Buddhists consider that change in this sense is undeniable.

The subtle level of change is sometimes called *momentary change* or *momentariness*: it means that everything is in a perpetual process of flux from moment to moment. Although objects like tables and chairs and computers look the same today as they did yesterday, in fact they are continually changing in each moment. If we use a microscope we will see that the atoms and molecules that objects are made of are in perpetual motion and are continually changing their configurations. So, even though at the gross level objects appear to remain the same for a

certain length of time before they are broken or decay or are destroyed, nevertheless at the subtle level they are continually subject to the change process all of the time. It is because of this subtle level of change that things eventually change visibly at the gross level; we don't suddenly grow old on a certain day or even in a certain year, it's a gradual process. Visible changes like ageing or the change of the seasons do not just happen as one special event but result from the culmination of millions of smaller changes.

Momentary change cannot be observed by the naked eye. Nowadays we can relate to the idea by referring to modern science and the use of microscopes but the Buddha himself, of course, did not have any microscope nor did the Buddhist scholars who authored the philosophical treatises on wisdom. They made their observations through the special insight developed in meditation.

You might think that radical impermanence makes no sense because things don't change all the time and there *is* some continuity. If we could not recognise our friends from one day to the next because of change, life would be chaotic. Clearly this is not the case: we do recognise people from one day to the next, even from one year to the next. So does this mean that Buddhists have got it wrong?

All philosophers in the world have grappled with the relationship between continuity and change. The way Buddhists account for this relationship is by explaining that momentary change happens as a continuum of linked moments. Each moment is so short that we don't notice it and that is why the continuum gives us the impression it is a single continuous thing. This continuum of moments does not happen haphazardly: I cannot be a human being in one moment and an elephant in the next. The continuum happens in an orderly fashion because one moment of x produces the next moment of x; a moment can only produce another moment that is similar to it because there are causal connections between each of the factors that make up a situation. For instance, if we imagine change in slow motion the process is rather like looking at a dancer in a night club under stroboscopic light. Each time the light flashes we see one dance pose, and although we cannot exactly see what happens in the gaps we know that a dance pose is produced by the previous one and so on. There is a causal connection between the situation in each flash of light.

Even ideas and values are changeable and conditioned

Even if we agree that impermanence affects all inanimate and animate objects in the world, what of our abstract ideas of permanent things? What about beauty, truth, justice and God? Why does the Buddha deny that these things are permanent? The very definition of all these terms includes the notion of permanence: God would not be God if he were not eternal. Here, Buddhists make a distinction between the ideas we have about things and the reality to which our ideas refer. They say that the bare fact we have an idea that something exists is no proof that it exists in actuality. It is clear we can have quite convincing ideas and images of the existence of things or people that do not actually exist: unicorns are the classic example of this, but we could add modern examples such as hobbits or Spiderman. The Buddhist view is that none of our *abstract* concepts actually correspond to something that objectively exists; they are only human ways of conceptualising and interpreting experience. Beauty, truth, justice, God and enlightenment are all instances of human beings creating an idea in order to understand and communicate experience, but they are not reals. The same goes for the idea of permanence.

The first mark of existence is telling us that there is no such thing as a permanent existent. To say that anything exists permanently is a contradiction in terms.

There is another, perhaps more interesting, way of refuting the common belief that some ideas and values are permanently and universally true and valid. Rajiv Malhotra[1] has shown how Western claims to universality are rooted in the Abrahamic religions and in the 18th century Enlightenment. Christianity claims exclusive truth and the only true God while at the same time insisting that this truth is universal in scope and that Christians have a divine mandate to convert all of humanity to it. The assumption, then, is that Judeo-Christian ideas of God, justice, right and wrong, sin and salvation relate to real permanent, universal truths. Similarly, the Enlightenment developed various conceptual absolutes and endowed these with 'universal' status. The value of Kant's categorical imperative is that it is supposed to give rise to ethical values that are universally applicable and independent of context. An example of this is the act of lying that Kant considers to be universally and permanently unethical, independent of context, because otherwise language would be dysfunctional. This explains why the contemporary American philosopher Richard Rorty states that Indian philosophy is context-bound – and therefore considered to be inferior – whereas Christian scientific-technological thought is universal.[2] Malhotra turns this thinking upside-down and shows that Western values and ideas are just as culture-bound as those of any other civilisation. In the light of these considerations it is important for each one of us to reflect on our own notions of justice, beauty, the divine, human rights, sin, freedom and so much more and to ask ourselves whether we actually believe they are permanent and universally valid reals.

Contemplating impermanence

It is one thing to agree with the philosophical justification of impermanence, but it is quite another to accept it in practice because we are so habituated to thinking otherwise. That is why change is one of the first themes on which a Buddhist will meditate. Flowers are often used as a focus of meditation because their beauty does not last long and they therefore symbolise impermanence. The other image that is often used is that of the Buddha lying on his right side passing into *parinirvana* since this is a reminder that everything, even the people we value the most, are subject to death. By contemplating and reflecting on impermanence we come to a deeper acceptance of the truth of change.

This reflection also makes us realise that change is not always a reason to be sad. On the positive side, it is because we change that we can learn and make progress. It is because we are subject to impermanence that it is possible to change a negative situation into a positive one or transform a negative emotion into a positive one.

The main benefit of reflecting on change is that it loosens our attachment to things. If we realise deeply that things come and go, that everything in our experience will eventually come to a natural end, then this helps us to stop hanging on to things. We will grasp at things less and it will be easier to let go when the time comes. When we are attached to something we resist change; accepting change as a natural part of life will make us much happier because we are then able to 'go with the flow'. The Buddha taught that much of our suffering is caused by

[1] Rajiv Malhotra, *Being Different: an Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*, HarperCollins, 2011.
[2] ibid., p.28.

grasping at things or craving for things or desiring things that are not, ultimately, real and that will eventually disappoint us.