



Impermanence in Buddhism

Impermanence is one of the Three Marks of Existence, that is, the three qualities that characterise everything and everyone that exists in this conditioned world.

The Buddha found that everything in the world is impermanent and changing, which implies that there is nothing whatsoever that is permanent. We could say that change is a fact of life. This truth might sound banal, but the Buddhist view is a very radical one because it does not allow for any exceptions. It covers everything from the glass in your hand to the solar system and more. In the moment a glass begins to exist, its impermanence is assured. This is because it is composed of many different parts. If a thing is compound it only begins to exist when certain factors come together; and at some point in time those factors naturally separate and disperse and then the compound thing will cease to exist. All compound things therefore have a beginning, middle and end.

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

The Buddha questioned all the things people regard as permanent and concluded that there is nothing at all that is not subject to change. He explained that change or impermanence operates on two levels: the gross and the subtle.

The gross level is the obvious physical level of change: things we experience 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. 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 analysis 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 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 subject to the change process all the time. It is on account 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. So 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: that is why it is called subtle. Nowadays we can relate to the idea by referring to modern science and the use of microscopes but the Buddha, of course, did not have any microscopes nor did the Buddhist scholars who wrote philosophical treatises. They made their observations of momentary change through the special insight they 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 decade to the next, so does this mean that Buddhists have got it wrong?

All philosophers, East and West, grapple with the problem of 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 (a moment is sometimes defined as one sixty-fifth of a finger snap). That is why we have the impression that life is continuous. It is rather like the frames of a movie that go through the projector at just the right speed to give us the illusion of a continuous sequence. But, if we check the film reel, we see that each frame is separate.

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 produces the next, and 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 see what happens between the flashes we know that a dance pose is produced by the previous one. There is a causal connection between the situations we see in each flash of light.

Finally, 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 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 mere 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 Pokémon. The Buddhist view is that none of our *abstract* concepts actually corresponds to something that objectively exists; they are only human ways of 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 real. The same goes for the idea of permanence itself. The first Mark of Existence is telling us that there is no such thing as a permanently existing thing. To say that anything exists permanently is a contradiction in terms.



It is one thing to agree with the philosophical reasoning on impermanence, but it is quite another to accept it in practice because we are so habituated to our own views. This 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 readily symbolise impermanence. The other image that is often used is that of the Buddha lying on his right side passing into *parinirvana* because this is a reminder that everything, even the people we value the most, are subject to death. By contemplating and reflecting on impermanence we may 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 are able to 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, 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. We will have less resistance to change, and accepting change as a natural part of life will make us happier because we can then go with the flow, so to speak. The Buddha taught that much of our suffering is caused by grasping at things or craving things or desiring things that are not, ultimately, real.

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

Discussion

Consider several ways of understanding the relationship between continuity and change and evaluate the Buddhist understanding.



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