

# Momentariness and Conditional Duration: A Critique

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## Abstract

The doctrine of momentariness (*khaṇikavāda*) in classical Abhidhamma asserts that all phenomena exist only for an instant, with continuity being merely a conceptual reconstruction (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*). While this view succeeds in highlighting impermanence, it does so by fragmenting temporal processes, often complicating our understanding of how mental, physical, and cosmic structures actually sustain themselves over time. This paper offers a critique of such radical fragmentation and proposes "conditional duration" as a more cohesive alternative. This framework suggests that phenomena endure continuously as long as the specific conditions sustaining them remain operative. By shifting the focus from flickering instants to sustained patterns, we can preserve the core insight of impermanence while better accounting for duration and coherence. Ultimately, conditional duration offers a unified perspective on consciousness, meditation, and materiality—one that aligns more closely with our lived experience and invites a deeper exploration of how patterns truly persist across both mental and physical domains.

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## 1. Introduction

The doctrine of momentariness (*kṣaṇika-vāda*) has been a central feature of classical Abhidhamma philosophy. It asserts that all phenomena, mental and material alike, exist only for an instant, ceasing immediately after arising, with continuity being merely a conceptual construction of the mind (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, Ch. XVII). This view arose in part as a response to eternalist tendencies and as a way to account for impermanence in a precise, analytic framework.

While momentariness highlights the impermanent and conditioned nature of phenomena, it also imposes a very strict temporal ontology that fragments continuity into a succession of discrete instants. This paper argues that momentariness, although insightful in emphasizing impermanence, overstates the degree of discontinuity inherent in existence. A more coherent framework, which may be termed conditional duration, better accounts for continuity, duration, and sustained structures without undermining impermanence. Beyond an academic exercise, this exploration touches the heart of how we understand consciousness, meditative states, material structures, and the nuanced flow of temporal experience.

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## 2. Momentariness in Classical Texts

In the *Dhammasaṅgani*, dhammas are systematically enumerated and classified, with frequent emphasis on their arising and ceasing (*Dhammasaṅgani*, Ch. I-II). Each *rūpa*, *citta*, or *cetasika* is described in terms of how it manifests, operates, and then passes away, often in relation to conditions that sustain it. While this presentation highlights impermanence (*anicca*), it does not explicitly assert that phenomena exist only for a literal instant.

It was in later *Abhidhamma* commentaries, most notably the *Visuddhimagga*, that momentariness crystallized into a more radical philosophical stance. Here, the stream of consciousness becomes reimagined as a rapid sequence of discrete mind-moments, with continuity explained as a conceptual reconstruction. Buddhaghosa and his contemporaries transformed the Buddha's insight into an almost computational model of experience—each moment arising and passing with mechanical precision.

Yet something essential gets lost in this fragmentation. The *Dhammasaṅgani*'s original approach suggested a more nuanced understanding: phenomena as sustained processes, enduring precisely as long as their sup-

porting conditions remain active. What emerges is not a stark choice between permanence and momentariness, but a more sophisticated dance of interdependence—where experience flows, transforms, and persists through intricate conditional relationships.

This textual evolution reveals a creative tension at the heart of Abhidhamma thought. What began as a careful observation of impermanence gradually morphed into an increasingly abstract philosophical mechanism. Momentariness, in its pursuit of analytic precision, risked dismantling the very continuity it sought to understand—a theoretical knife so sharp it threatened to cut through the fabric of lived experience itself.

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### 3. Conditional Duration as an Alternative

An alternative to momentariness is the framework of conditional duration, which acknowledges impermanence while allowing phenomena to endure continuously over time, so long as the conditions sustaining them remain in place. Rather than breaking existence into a succession of discrete instants, conditional duration treats phenomena as temporally extended processes: they arise, continue, and cease in accordance with causal and sustaining factors.

#### 3.1 Definition and Principles

Conditional duration can be characterized by three central principles:

1. **Dependence on Conditions:** A phenomenon persists only while the conditions that support it remain operative. Its endurance is neither absolute nor inherent, but relational and contingent.
2. **Continuous Duration:** Unlike momentariness, conditional duration affirms that phenomena exist in extended temporal intervals, not as isolated, flickering moments.

3. **Dynamic Coherence:** Persistence involves maintaining structural or functional coherence through continuous feedback with the conditions in which the phenomenon exists. For example, a physical object remains coherent because forces and interactions sustain its structure; a jhāna consciousness remains coherent because attention and energy are continuously regulated.

This approach preserves impermanence: the eventual decay or transformation of conditions leads to the cessation of the phenomenon. At the same time, it avoids fragmenting time into abstract moments, providing a more natural explanation for sustained structures.

### **3.2 Analysis and Decomposition of Continuous Processes**

Even within a framework of conditional duration, it is still possible to mentally decompose sustained processes into smaller constituents. For example:

- A jhāna consciousness can be analyzed in terms of attention, energy, and mental factors.
- A star or planet can be studied in terms of mass, energy, and orbital dynamics.
- Ecosystems can be examined through populations, species interactions, and energy flows.

This decomposition does not imply that the underlying process actually consists of discrete, momentary events, but rather that the mind can conceptually isolate elements for understanding and analysis. Conditional duration allows phenomena to be both continuous and analyzable, resolving a key tension: continuity in time does not prevent precise investigation. In this sense, momentariness can be seen as a mental heuristic, useful for breaking complex processes into manageable conceptual units, rather than a literal ontological claim about reality.

### 3.3 Wave-Particle Analogy

The modern physics concept of wave-particle duality provides a compelling analogy. Quantum objects exhibit both continuous, wave-like behavior and discrete, particle-like characteristics depending on the context of observation. Similarly:

- Phenomena under conditional duration are temporally extended and continuous, yet can be examined in terms of smaller constituent aspects.
- Just as quantum theory reconciles continuity and discreteness, conditional duration allows for continuous processes to be mentally parsed into “moments” or elements without assuming they are fundamentally momentary.

This analogy highlights that continuity and analytic decomposition are compatible, and that the desire to see discrete constituents (as momentariness does) may reflect methodological convenience rather than ontological necessity. It also suggests a deep resonance between classical Buddhist insights into impermanence and contemporary scientific perspectives, offering a richer conceptual framework for understanding both mind and matter.

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## 4. Addressing Potential Objections

**Eternalism:** Conditional duration does not imply permanence; phenomena endure only as long as supporting conditions exist.

**Analytic Precision:** Temporal continuity can be subdivided for analysis without fragmenting reality into isolated moments.

**Phenomenological Experience:** Experience of continuous mental states supports persistence rather than flickering instants.

**Orthodoxy:** Conditional duration maintains dependent origination and impermanence; it reinterprets temporal aspects without violating core principles.

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## 5. Conclusion

Conditional duration provides a coherent framework for understanding phenomena as temporally extended and sustained by conditions, preserving impermanence while respecting continuity. Importantly, this continuity does not preclude conceptual or analytical decomposition: at any given time, mental processes, material structures, or cosmic systems can be broken down into smaller constituents for study and understanding. This feature addresses one of the main appeals of momentariness—the ability to examine discrete elements—without asserting that reality itself is fundamentally momentary.

The analogy with wave-particle duality illustrates this point: just as quantum objects can exhibit both continuous, wave-like behavior and discrete, particle-like characteristics depending on observational context, phenomena under conditional duration can be simultaneously continuous and analyzable. This perspective suggests a synthesis between classical Buddhist insights, phenomenological experience, and contemporary scientific paradigms, providing a richer and more flexible understanding of impermanence, continuity, and the organization of mind and matter.

By recognizing that processes endure while remaining conceptually divisible, conditional duration offers a coherent, flexible, and intuitively satisfying alternative to momentariness, preserving both impermanence and the temporal flow evident across mental, physical, and cosmic phenomena.