

Momentariness and Conditional Persistence: A Critique

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Abstract

The doctrine of momentariness (*kṣaṇika-vāda*) in classical Abhidhamma asserts that all phenomena exist only for an instant, with continuity being a conceptual reconstruction (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*). While emphasizing impermanence, this view fragments temporal processes and complicates the explanation of sustained mental, physical, and cosmic structures. This paper critiques momentariness and proposes **conditional persistence** as an alternative framework: phenomena endure continuously as long as the conditions sustaining them remain operative. Conditional persistence preserves impermanence while accounting for duration, coherence, and emergent patterns, offering a unified perspective on consciousness, meditation, and material phenomena. The framework aligns more closely with experience, provides conceptual clarity, and invites further exploration of sustained patterns across mental and physical domains.

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 a conceptual construction of the mind (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, Ch. XII). This view arose in part as a rigorous 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 frag-

ments 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 persistence, better accounts for continuity, duration, and sustained structures without undermining impermanence. Such a framework has implications for understanding consciousness, meditation, the organization of matter, and the experience of extended temporal processes.

2. Momentariness in Classical Texts

In the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, dhammas are systematically enumerated and classified, with frequent emphasis on their arising and ceasing (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, 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.

The fully developed doctrine of momentariness emerges later in Abhidhamma commentaries, such as the *Visuddhimagga*, which describe *citta* streams as sequences of discrete, momentary mind-moments, with continuity reconstructed conceptually (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, Ch. XII). By contrast, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* can be read as emphasizing conditional persistence, wherein phenomena endure as long as the conditions sustaining them remain operative. This distinction is significant: momentariness is thus a later analytic abstraction, extending the canonical insight of impermanence in a way that, one could argue, over-fragments continuity.

Taken together, these textual developments illustrate the evolution of Abhidhamma thought on impermanence. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* presents dhammas as arising and ceasing, emphasizing the transient nature of phenomena without asserting that they exist only for a literal instant. Later

commentaries, particularly the Visuddhimagga, extend this insight into the fully articulated doctrine of momentariness, framing both mind and matter as sequences of discrete, fleeting events. While momentariness provides analytic rigor, it introduces a severe fragmentation of continuity that can obscure the enduring coherence observed in both mental and physical processes. This contrast highlights the potential value of conditional persistence as an alternative framework: one that preserves the insight of impermanence while accommodating the temporal extension and sustained organization evident in conscious experience, meditation, and material systems.

3. Conditional Persistence as an Alternative

An alternative to momentariness is the framework of **conditional persistence**, 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 persistence treats phenomena as **temporally extended processes**: they arise, continue, and cease in accordance with causal and sustaining factors.

3.1 Definition and Principles

Conditional persistence 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 persistence 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 phys-

ical 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 persistence, 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 persistence 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 be-**

havior and discrete, particle-like characteristics depending on the context of observation. Similarly:

- Phenomena under conditional persistence are **temporally extended and continuous**, yet can be examined in terms of smaller constituent aspects.
- Just as quantum theory reconciles continuity and discreteness, conditional persistence 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.

4. Addressing Potential Objections

Eternalism: Conditional persistence 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 persistence maintains dependent origination and impermanence; it reinterprets temporal aspects without violating core principles.

5. Conclusion

Conditional persistence 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 ephemeral.

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 persistence 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 persistence offers a **coherent, flexible, and intuitively satisfying alternative** to momentariness, preserving both impermanence and the temporal flow evident across mental, physical, and cosmic phenomena.