

# How Long Do Impermanent Things Last?

Momentariness in the *\*Bodhisattvabhūmividyākhyā*

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Impermanence is one of the cornerstone teachings of the historical Buddha. In later times, particularly in the Abhidharma literature, Buddhist scholars sought to establish the concept's validity by developing the doctrine of momentariness. However, the acceptance of momentariness, including views regarding its range of application, varied from one Buddhist school of thought to the next. For example, whereas the Saṃmatīyas only regard momentariness as a property of mind, the Sarvāstivādins apply it to all the conditioned phenomena. They argue that the four marks of the conditioned (*saṃskṛta-lakṣaṇa*)—namely, birth (*jāti*), presence (*sthiti*), aging (*jarā*), and impermanence (*anityatā*)—make an entity arise, remain, age, and perish, all within a single moment. The Yogācāra school follows the Sarvāstivādins. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (BoBh) of the *Yogācārabhūmi* (YoBh) borrows the framework of the four marks from the Sarvāstivādins when it describes a *bodhisattva*'s meditation on impermanence. The YoBh, including the BoBh, does, however, distinguish its view from that of the Sarvāstivādins by not regarding the four marks as substantial entities (*dravya*) that have efficacy on other discrete entities, but merely as the particular states of a given entity. A previous study has asserted that the BoBh assumes that the arising and cessation of an entity occur in two distinct moments. If, however, that were the BoBh's view, the text would stand in conflict with other sections of the YoBh, according to which an entity arises and perishes in a single moment. In this paper I would like to reconsider the theory of momentariness in the BoBh based on Sāgaramegha's (or Samudramegha, ca. late 8th C.E.) *\*Bodhisattvabhūmividyākhyā* (BoBhVy). In so doing I will attempt to identify some potential sources for the BoBh-Vy's argument and demonstrate that this text interprets the BoBh as teaching that things arise and perish in a single moment, not in two moments.

**1. Previous Studies** There are three modern studies that are relevant to the question of momentariness in the BoBh. Hayashima (1988, 15–16) claims that the BoBh treats birth,

presence, and aging as constituting the first moment of an entity, while cessation is its second moment. Hayashima also admits, however, that it is difficult to be certain about the specifics of the BoBh's position due to the simplicity of text's presentation of the subject. He further argues that the BoBh's view differs from that of the Sarvāstivādins, who assert that the four marks of the conditioned exist in every moment, and also from that of the Sautrāntikas, who establish the four marks in a continuum (*santāna*) (for instance, birth refers to birth of a sentient being, presence to his whole life, aging to his growing old, and impermanence to his death). von Rospatt (1995, 64–71) also addresses the same passage from the BoBh, but he does not explicitly state how he interprets the text's theory of momentariness. Judging from his statement that the treatment of the four marks in the BoBh does not fundamentally differ from that of the Sautrāntikas, it appears that he presumes the BoBh presupposes the simultaneity of arising and cessation. Harada (2010, 40–42), accepting Hayashima's (1988) interpretation, points out that BoBh's idea of momentariness must be distinct from that of other chapters in the YoBh, such as the *Śrāvakabhūmi* (*ŚrBh*) (note that both the *ŚrBh* and the BoBh are judged to be two of the earliest portions of the YoBh). He thus concludes that the authors of the BoBh and the *ŚrBh* could not have been identical.

None of these three studies touch on the BoBhVy, which I will discuss below. First, however, let us review the BoBh's description of impermanence.

**2. Meditation on impermanence in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*** The BoBh teaches a *bodhisattva*'s meditation on impermanence while elucidating the four core principles of the teaching (*dharmôddāna-catustaya*). A *bodhisattva* observes impermanence in terms of arising and cessation as described in the following passage:

Having experienced the continuity of conditioned phenomena continuing without being cut off in the three times in this way, [the *bodhisattva*] sees three marks of the conditioned (*trīṇi saṃskṛta-lakṣaṇāni*) of a conditioned entity (*saṃskṛta*) in every single moment of conditioned phenomena (*ekaikasmīn saṃskāra-kṣaṇe*). After [the respective] moment (*kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*), he recognizes the fourth mark of the conditioned (*caturthaṃ saṃskṛta-lakṣaṇam*). Of these [four marks], he sees that the appearance of the nature of a new moment of conditioned phenomena, immediately after the perishing (*vināśānantaram*) of the nature of a previous moment of conditioned phenomena, is birth (*jāti*). He sees that the non-destruction of the arisen [conditioned phenomenon] at the time is presence (*sthiti*). He sees that otherness or change of the arisen [conditioned phenomenon] when compared with the previously annihilated nature of

the moment of conditioned phenomena is aging (*jarā*). He sees that the perishing of the nature of that very arisen moment of conditioned phenomena after the moment of arising (*tasmād jāti-kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*) is cessation (*vyaya*).

When he recognizes that the arisen moment of conditioned phenomena has X as its nature, [he sees that] birth, presence, and aging of that [moment] have exactly the same X as their nature. He does not see [them] as having natures distinct from this (X). And, in accordance with reality, he sees that the passing away (*apagama*) of that nature (X) of the moment of conditioned phenomena after the moment [of arising] is precisely the [passing away of] those [marks] beginning with birth. Summarizing all these four marks of the conditioned, [we can say that the marks of the conditioned] are in brief characterized by two states of conditioned phenomena: [namely, those] characterized by existence (*bhāva*) and [those] characterized by non-existence (*abhāva*). Of these [two], it is established by the Glorious One that that which is existence is one mark of the conditioned (= *jāti*), and that which is non-existence is the second mark (= *vyaya*). And the third mark of the conditioned is established [by him] in the sense of existence that is characterized by the change of the way of existence (*sthity-anyathāva*) of these conditioned phenomena. ...<sup>1)</sup>

The underlined portions include some problems to solve. Firstly, we have to examine which of the marks are the three observed in every single moment of conditioned phenomena and what is the remaining mark observed subsequent to those three.

With regard to it, Hayashima (1988) understands that the first three marks refer to birth, presence, and aging, while the final mark refers to cessation. Evidently the main reason for this understanding lies in the overall structure of the passage. First stating that a *bodhisattva* sees three marks and after the moment (*kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*) sees the fourth mark, the BoBh then defines three marks such as birth, presence, and aging, and then defines cessation with a similar phrase “*jāti-kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*.” The text further describes cessation as the passing away of birth, presence, and aging. Lastly, it divides the four marks into two kinds: existence (*bhāva*, birth, presence, and aging) and non-existence (*abhāva*, cessation). Based on such flow of the description, Hayashima seems to have assumed that birth, presence, and aging occur in the first moment, and that cessation occurs in its second moment. Hayashima’s interpretation, however, does not appear to be reasonable. For, if cessation were seen in every other moment as Hayashima suggests, there would be the possibility that an entity repeats the illogical process of arising at ( $t_{1, 3, 5, \dots}$ ) and arising again and perishing at ( $t_{2, 4, 6, \dots}$ ), since birth is included in the three marks that occur in every moment.

**3. The BoBhVy's Understanding** Now let us move on to consider the explanation of the BoBhVy. Additionally, I would also like to suggest the possibility that the BoBhVy refers to discussions on the four marks of the conditioned found in earlier texts such as the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh).

With regard to [the statement in the BoBh that “the *bodhisattva*] sees three marks of the conditioned in one moment” (*\*ekasmin kṣaṇe trīṇi saṃskṛta-lakṣaṇāni paśyati*),<sup>2)</sup> [three refer to] birth, presence, and annihilation. “After [the respective] moment, [he recognizes] the fourth mark of the conditioned” (*kṣaṇād ūrdhvam caturthaṃ saṃskṛta-lakṣaṇam*) intends to mean (*\*iti kṛtvā*) that that which is established as different in comparison with the previous characteristics [of the conditioned phenomenon] is aging ... “When compared with the previously annihilated [nature]” (*taṃ pūrva-niruddhaṃ ... apekṣya*) means that aging has the characteristic of change (*anyathātvā*) and change is characteristic of being distinct in earlier and later [moments] (*\*pūrvāpara-viśeṣa*). Thus, the distinction of change [just in] the very [one single] moment will not be recognized. Therefore, it is taught:

Aging is not established by [an entity's] remaining in the same [state as before]. If [the entity] is different [from what it was before], it is indeed different. Therefore, what is called aging is not recognized (*\*upalabhyate*) in just one phenomenon (*\*dharmasya*).

Aging is of two kinds: aging of following and aging accompanied by destruction ...<sup>3)</sup>

The BoBhVy takes the three marks mentioned by the BoBh as birth, presence, and cessation. According to this understanding, entities arise and pass away in one moment, and a *bodhisattva* meditates on aging, i.e., the change of a conditioned phenomenon, by comparing its nature in a certain moment with those which have occurred previous to it.

Allocating among the four marks of the conditioned the largest portion of its commentary to aging, the BoBhVy illustrates that aging cannot be seen in a single moment. In other words, aging is confirmed in the continuum of a conditioned phenomenon. The text emphasizes that a *bodhisattva* could not see a conditioned phenomenon change without observing it for more than one moment. A similar argument about aging is already made by Vasubandhu (ca. 400–480), who was active earlier than \*Sāgaremeḥga. In his AKBh, he assumes a Sautrāntika position to refute Sarvāstivādin's theory of the four marks. He states that although presence and impermanence may be defined respectively as the non-destruction (*avināśa*) and destruction of a single arisen phenomenon, aging could not be defined as its change, because it is not reasonable to assume that a single arisen phenomenon, which remains for only one moment, could in

any way be different from itself.<sup>4)</sup> From the Sautrāntikas' viewpoint that an entity is a series of momentary *dharma*s, Vasubandhu argues that aging cannot be seen in a single moment. Afterwards, he quotes the same verse that is quoted in the BoBhVy.<sup>5)</sup> Thus, we can say that the BoBhVy knew about the discussion found in the texts such as the AKBh.

Can we say that the BoBhVy offers a reasonable interpretation on the BoBh? Two parts of the BoBh's text are to be examined: the phrase “*jāti-kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*,” and the statement that the passing away of birth and so on is cessation.

The BoBhVy would contradict itself, if the phrase “*jāti-kṣaṇād ūrdhvam*” implied that an entity perishes after more than one moment following its arising, as Hayashima (1988) assumes. However, since the BoBhVy makes explicit that an entity originates and ceases in every moment, it seems that the BoBhVy understands the phrase just as the indication of the sequence from origination to destruction of an entity in a single moment.

The latter passage shares the same structure as the definition of cessation (see the latter two underlined translations of the BoBh on Section 2). If one assumes that this passage also defines cessation, one will agree with Hayashima's interpretation that cessation occurs one moment after an entity arises, remains, and ages. As the BoBhVy (D 240b5, P 300a4) explains, however, the paragraph that includes the passage denies the four marks as substances and presents mere particular states of an entity. Therefore, “the passing away of birth and so on is cessation” emphasizes that a nature (X) of an entity in a certain moment whose state is recognized as either arisen, continued, or changed passes away. The point made here is that the three marks are mere manifestation of a nature (X) as existence (*bhāva*). This passage does not indicate that an entity arises, remains, and ages one moment before ceasing, but instead cessation of its nature (X). Thus, the passage should not be understood as showing that birth, presence, and aging constitute the first moment of an entity, while cessation is its second moment. With that being said, the whole structure throughout the passages of the BoBh that I quoted in Section 2, as well as the inexplicit phrase or statement examined above, may allow one to interpret the BoBh's theory of momentariness differently.

**Concluding Remarks** I have focused on highlighting different readings of the BoBh's theory of momentariness that are found in modern studies and an ancient commentary. These sources differ regarding which of the three marks of the conditioned are seen by a *bodhisattva* in every moment and what is the remaining mark observed subsequent to

those three. Hayashima (1988) proposed that according to the BoBh, momentariness requires two moments, by taking the fourth mark as cessation. The BoBhVy, interpreting it as aging on the basis of the argument found in texts such as the AKBh, understands that the BoBh teaches entities arise and perish in a single moment. But we have to say that the description of the BoBh is unclear particularly in terms of the structure of the whole argument. In summary, the BoBhVy understands that, like other sections of the YoBh, the BoBh teaches the arising and perishing of an entity in a single moment. For this reason, unlike Harada's (2010) understanding, the theory of momentariness in the BoBh is not considered to be different from that in the ŚrBh, at least in Indian tradition. Thus, as von Rospatt (1995) may suggest, the framework of momentariness in the BoBh does not seem to qualitatively differ from the Sautrāntikas'.

### Notes

- 1) BoBh (Skt.) 278.9. 2) Regarding the reading of *ekaikasmin saṃskāraḥṣaṇe*, the BoBhVy (*skad cig gcig la*) seems to read it as *ekasmin ḥṣaṇe*. But the reading does not cause any problem on its argumentation. 3) BoBhVy (Tib.) D 240a7ff, P 299b8ff. 4) See AKBh (Skt.) 79.5–9, (Tib.) D ku 83a7–b1, P gu 95a3–5. I interpreted the reconstructed part included in the passages based on the Tibetan rendering. 5) AKBh: *tathāhvena jarāsiddhir anyathāṭve 'nya eva saḥ / tasmān naikasya bhāvasya jarā nāmopapadyate* / The BoBhVy seems to read *bhāvasya* as *dharmasya* and *upapadyate* as *upalabhyate*. See also the translation of the BoBhVy in Section 3.

### Abbreviations

- AKBh* *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya of Vasubandhu*. Ed. Prahlad Pradhan. Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayawal Research Institute, 1967. Tib. D 4090 ku 26b1–khu 95a7, P 5591 gu 27b6–ñu 109a8.  
*BoBh* *Bonbun Bosatsuikyō* 梵文菩薩地經. Ed. Unrai Wogihara. Tokyo: Sankibo Press, 1971.  
*BoBhVy*\**Bodhisattvabhūmividyākhyā*. Tib. D 4047 yi 1b1–338a7, P 5548 ri 1a1–425a6.

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