

Reconsidering the Debates on Conditioned Dharmas in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

Philosophical disagreements between Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra concerning the ontological status of conditioned dharma have introduced tension within Abhidharma philosophy. This study outlines their interpretations to explore how the ontological status of dharma is determined by analyzing its relationship with the four conditioned characteristics- production, succession, deterioration, and destruction. Vasubandhu challenges the notion of dharma's intrinsic reality, arguing that conditioned dharmas and their conditioned characteristics lack an intrinsic nature and exert causal efficacy solely in the present moment. In contrast, Saṃghabhadra argues that the conditioned dharmas and their conditioned characteristics exist as real entities across past, present, and future. While critically engaging with Saṃghabhadra's Sarvāstivādin ontology, this paper draws particular attention to the Sautrāntika conception of temporality, to contextualise this debate within the broader philosophical milieu of early Buddhism. Through a comparative analysis, this paper clarifies the subtle ambiguities within both philosophical standpoints, highlighting their significance for early Buddhist metaphysical and temporal thought. This approach seeks to view Abhidharma not just as an ontological debate, but as an analytical reflection on the momentary and interconnected nature of existence.

Keywords: *Ontology, Conditioned dharma, Conditioned Characteristics, Saṃghabhadra, Vasubandhu*

1. INTRODUCTION

The early Buddhist Therāvāda Abhidharma accepts four traditional categories of 82 dharmas, out of which eighty-one are conditioned and the eighty-second is unconditioned. These are: Citta (which encompasses single dharma), Cetasikās, Rūpa, and Unconditioned dharma [13]. Sarvāstivāda accepts the distinct taxonomy of 75 dharmas along with a fifth category known as "dharma dissociated from both form and thought" [13]. Sarvāstivāda claims that the conditioned characteristics are placed within this fifth category, "conditioned dharmas that are dissociated from thought" (*cittaviprayukṭtasamkāra*). This category, in turn, facilitates the assimilation of the four conditioned characteristics: production, succession, deterioration, and destruction. These four conditioned characteristics exhibit their functioning throughout the lifespan of a single dharma.

A thorough study of the Abhidharma literature suggests that the dispute over the ontological status of conditioned dharmas and their conditioned characteristics constitutes a seminal area of discord between Saṃghabhadra and Vasubandhu, two of the most influential figures in Abhidharma philosophy. The core of their doctrinal disagreement between these two thinkers mainly lies in how they interpret the term 'everything' and, more specifically, in what sense this 'everything' is said to exist.

Dharma, the fundamental constituent of all material and mental existence, remains a central issue of debates in the early Buddhist metaphysics. The early Abhidharma text, particularly the *Mahāvibhāsa* (MVS), upholds the view that 'everything exists' based on twelve sense spheres, while affirming the reality of conditioned dharma across the past, present, and future [16]. The early Buddhist Abhidharma discourse suggests a twofold division of dharma: conditioned and unconditioned. Conditioned dharmas are those that arise, persist, produce effects, and cease each moment through dependent origination; unconditioned dharmas inherently lack these characteristics.

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The characteristics through which conditioned dharmas are recognized offer a systematic framework for understanding how phenomena exist and change without assuming a permanent self. The conditioned dharmas exhibit the conditioned characteristics of production, succession, deterioration, and destruction, illustrating the full lifespan of a particular conditioned dharma. Since these characteristics analyze the nature of conditioned existence, for the same reason, the conditioned dharmas become the focus of philosophical debate between Saṃghabhadra and Vasubandhu. The text *Samyuktābhidharmahrdayasāstra* (SAHS 1:51) regards conditioned characteristics as entities in themselves, which necessitates that they follow their own nature [6]. The philosophical nexus of Sarvāstivāda asserts that conditioned dharma is characterized by production, succession, deterioration, and destruction that enables the exertion of the dharma's activity across three temporal modes [3]. In *Abhidharmakośābhāṣya* (AKB, 2.46), Vasubandhu, while refuting the Sarvāstivāda position, claims that these conditioned characteristics do not exist as the real entity, as they have been mentioned in the Sarvāstivādin texts [17]. Vasubandhu asserts that the reality of dharmas is limited to the present moment since the activity of dharma only exerts in the present. Thus, he rejects the real existence of the past or future, labelling them as the conventional reality. On the other hand, Saṃghabhadra, a leading proponent of the Sarvāstivāda school, advocates the reality of dharma and its conditioned characteristics across all three time periods. Saṃghabhadra suggests that, like the present dharma, past and future dharmas also exist as real and discrete entities.

The early Abhidharma text states that the conditioned characteristics function simultaneously as internal conditions within a dharma, coordinating with other intrinsic and extraneous causal factors that facilitate the execution of its activity [2]. Regarding the existence of these four conditioned characteristics, Saṃghabhadra affirmed their self-subsistent real existence, regardless of the dharma that they characterize, whereas Vasubandhu accepts the conceptual designation of these characteristics [2]. An in-depth analysis of the ontological status of conditioned dharma reveals that previous studies have generally overlooked the role of four conditioned characteristics (*jāti, sthiti, jarā, vyaya*) that serve as a conceptual framework for explaining conditioned phenomena (*sarvam*). This paper addresses this oversight by re-examining the role of these four conditioned characteristics as a conceptual tool for systematically understanding the “everything”-conditioned existence- in early Buddhist thought. Taking a closer look at Saṃghabhadra's Sarvāstivāda and Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika interpretations, this paper examines how these characteristics influence a dharma's causal activity and the temporal continuity. Through analysis of early Buddhist Abhidharma texts, such as the *Abhidharmakośābhāṣya* and other Sarvāstivādin texts, this study demonstrates that the fourfold framework provides a straightforward way to explain how “everything” arises and ceases through conditioning, thereby linking ontological structure with lived impermanence and causal interdependence.

2. DISPUTED NUMBER OF CONDITIONED CHARACTERISTICS

The early Abhidharma exegesis elucidates that conditioned existence is necessarily subsumed by the five aggregates: matter, feelings, ideas, volitions, and pure sensations [16]. The conditioned dharmas by their very nature possess the distinctive characteristics of production, succession, deterioration, and destruction, which serve to distinguish them from the unconditioned.

In the Abhidharma tradition, Sarvāstivādin scriptures acknowledge four conditioned characteristics of conditioned dharmas: production, succession, deterioration, and destruction [2]. Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma exegesis, such as the *Aryavasumitrabodhisattvasaṅgītisāstra*, *Sariputrābhidharmasāstra*, the earlier translation of *Jñānaprasthāna*, and the majority of the early Sarvāstivādin texts, acknowledge these conditioned characteristics to illuminate the conditioned existence. Saṃghabhadra, an adherent of Sarvāstivāda, claims that these characteristics exist as real entities in all three time periods occur concurrently with the individual dharma. These conditioned characteristics serve as the predominant condition for enabling the arising of dharma's activity, i.e., operating its own effect. These characteristics are responsible for impermanence, momentariness, and the termination of dharma.

The “Production” outstretched the conditioned dharma from the future, enabling it to enter the present by exerting its capability when both the characteristics and the conditioned dharma it characterized are in a state of being produced. The *Abhidharmakośābhāṣya* (AKB 2.45 c-d) [2,14] characterizes production as an object of

consciousness which causes the conditioned dharma to pass from the future into the present [17]. The authoritative text, *Atthasālini* (The Expositor, 3.1), claims that the integrated matter functions as the proximate cause for making material things manifest at the beginning [1].

The characteristic of “succession” is the internal condition that enables already produced conditioned dharma to project its own effect. This characteristic acts as the predominant cause in stabilizing the dharma [2,14]. The text *Abhidharmakosābhāṣya* (AKB, 2.45c-d) recognizes “succession,” which enables conditioned things to sustain themselves without interruption and assists them in lasting [17]. Nevertheless, the *sūtra* does not explicitly speak of succession as conditioned characteristics in order to prevent any infringement on unconditioned dharma. The *Atthasālini* (The Expositor, 3.1) sketches this characteristic as the proximate cause that functions in connecting an unbroken series of moments as continuous manifestations of occurrences and events [1].

The “deterioration” or decay is the internal condition that causes conditioned dharma’s activity to depreciate, preparing it to pass away by distinguishing prior moments from subsequent ones [2]. The distinguished function of deterioration is to lead matured dharma towards its termination. In *Atthasālini* (The Expositor, 3.1), this characteristic is marked as the proximate cause attributed to the maturity of matter, which functions as a disruption [1].

Ultimately, a conditioned dharma must meet the attributes of “destruction” to dissolve and cease any future activity. The termination of a particular dharma is complete at this point. The distinctive characteristic of “destruction” is manifested as making entirely fall off and cessation of particular dharma tending towards flux [2]. In *Atthasālini* (The Expositor, 3.1), this characteristic has been marked as that which functions as the proximate cause of the complete dissolution of the conditioned existence [1].

However, the comprehensive analysis of conditioned characteristics in the *sūtras* of the *Abhidharmakosābhāṣya* clarified only three characteristics of conditioned dharmas (*saṃskṛtadharmas*): production or origin, dissolution, and change over time. The *sūtra* passage states;

“*tiṇ’imāni bhikkhave saṃkhatassa saṃkhatalakkhaṇāni*

Katamāni tiṇi uppādo paññayati vayo paññayati ṭhitassa aññathattaṃ paññayati.” (AKB 2.45c-d)

Vasubandhu interpreted this as:

“O Bhikkhus! three characteristics of the conditioned are themselves conditioned. These are: the production of an object is consciousness; the disappearance is also the object of consciousness; likewise, the temporal change.”

Vasubandhu interpreted this *sūtra* passage as there are only three characteristics of conditioned dharma: production, change in state of duration, and destruction [17,13]. Vasubandhu rejects the characteristics of “succession” from the taxonomy of conditioned characteristics, arguing that there is no doctrinal passage in the scriptures that explicitly mentions such a characteristic. Building upon this interpretation, Vasubandhu argued that the inclusion of succession as a distinctive and essential characteristic would violate the theory of momentariness, a core principle of Buddhism. The theory of momentariness emphasizes the transience of dharma while restricting its real existence to a single moment. Vasubandhu argues that this theory of the momentariness of dharma becomes fallacious as succession would imply the duration of conditioned dharma extending over more than one moment [17]. Furthermore, Vasubandhu presents scriptural evidence to reject the notion of “succession” as a conditioned characteristic. He presents Buddha’s assertion, “O monks! The moment when all conditioned forces are about to be annihilated, they are without continuance and without destruction” [2]. Additionally, Vasubandhu argues that the *sūtra* emphasizes the reality of only present dharma, representing past and future dharma as merely conventional realities. The *sūtra* states that conditioned dharma exists after it has existed; once it has existed, it no longer exists; the series of dharma is its duration; and the dissimilarity of the series is its transformation [17]. Vasubandhu’s assertion can be illustrated with a candle and a flame. The flame of a candle does not exist before lighting it, and it ceases to exist after it is extinguished. It is evident with this analogy that there is only production and destruction of the flame, lacking the characteristics of succession.

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Therefore, Vasubandhu concludes that acknowledging succession to be a real characteristic would contradict both the reasoned argument and the scriptural authority. Similarly, since the characteristics of succession are subject to modification, there are only three characteristics: production, duration-modification (senescence), and disappearance.

However, Saṃghabhadra contrasts this viewpoint with a reasoned argument which suggests that succession applies to both conditioned and unconditioned dharmas. He claims that unconditioned dharmas also possess succession as their inherent characteristics, i.e., succession without change. However, in the case of unconditioned dharma, this characteristic does not modify its nature [2]. To reinforce this claim, Saṃghabhadra presents the *sūtra* passage as scriptural authority:

“O monks! Conditioned forces can be analysed like a mirage, like a flame. They stay for a period and pass away quickly; they do not originate from reality or depart to reality” [2].

Saṃghabhadra interprets this assertion that the *sūtra* mentions duration-modification or “*sthityanyathātva*” as intending to pronounce succession mentioned implicitly [17].

Contrasting this view, Vasubandhu argues that if the “succession” accounts for the endurance of the dharma, then, in this stance, the Sarvāstivāda misrepresents it by asserting the continuity of dharma in more than one moment. Thereby, Vasubandhu concludes that this Sarvāstivādin standpoint advocates for the continuity of existence across more than one moment, thus violating the core principle of Buddhism- the concept of momentariness [9].

However, Saṃghabhadra, challenging Vasubandhu’s viewpoint, argues that the *sūtra* simply uses the phrase “conditioned forces do not stay” to negate their persistence beyond one moment. He added that the characteristics of succession do not imply a continuous causal efficacy, but rather a temporal suspension of conditioned forces for a single moment. Saṃghabhadra argues that without the characteristics of succession, it would be impossible to establish the provisional designations of time period and moment [2]. Additionally, if the characteristic of “succession” is not accepted, the conditioned dharma would disappear immediately once they pose their own nature. Saṃghabhadra claims that the statement “the moment when all conditioned forces are about to be annihilated, they are without continuance and without destruction” is made in implicit reference to a future time period. As a result, according to Saṃghabhadra, these four conditioned characteristics merge their existence in the present with that of the past and the future to form a real entity. Building upon this argument, Saṃghabhadra, on the one hand, includes “succession” as an essential characteristic of conditioned dharma, while simultaneously positing the real existence of past and future dharma.

Regarding the dispute over a sizable number of conditioned characteristics, ‘succession’ is likely to be seen as a key element in ensuring the dharma’s survival for the existence of the experiential world. Vasubandhu’s analysis of the exclusion of succession is untenable since, in the absence of succession, even the provisional designations of “time-period” and “moment” could not exist. On the other hand, the Sarvāstivāda standpoint preserves a logical consistency by endorsing ‘succession’ as an essential conditioned characteristic. This Sarvāstivādin position enables the dharma’s activity to produce an effect and ensure logical coherence, thereby determining both the status of dharmas and their persistence. Additionally, the Sarvāstivāda posits that the characteristics of ‘succession’ contribute to linking each prior moment with its subsequent moment within a causal chain. In fact, the physical world also shows the same pattern. It is generally perceived that “everything” that arises dependent on causes and conditions is subject to endure for a moment to project its own effect before it eventually disappears. Moreover, the progression of karma and its true nature of the effect within the twelve classes of karma can only be known by the acknowledgement of the endurance (succession) of conditioned karmic dharma. The oversight of “succession” as a key characteristic might lead to the loss of the dharma’s effects as soon as they arise. The early Buddhist text *Vissuddhimagga* (VSM) validates this position by arguing that when the characteristics of production and destruction are not apparent, dharma is carried out by succession. VSM reads, “it is inferred that the characteristic of ‘succession’ sustains the dharma’s endurance temporarily to produce the effect” [1]. Buddhaghosa in the *Vissuddhimagga* professed that rebirth-linking consciousness arises in due succession at the end of death; consciousness occurs with a past or present object next to death [1].

In light of the above discussion, this section interprets that Saṃghabhadra's proclamation of "succession" is likely to enrich the conditioned characteristics of conditioned dharma. Since the production operates when the conditioned dharma is still in the future, while ready to come into being, whereas deterioration and destruction operate when they are ready to be destroyed. The characteristic of "succession" is solely attributed to the persistence of dharma for a moment to produce its effect. These two distinct moments comprise the whole lifespan of a dharma where the four conditioned characteristics exert their functioning. These four characteristics exist alongside the characterized dharma, which might be recognized as distinct real entities, since the moment of their respective functioning is distinct.

3. THE NATURE OF CONDITIONED CHARACTERISTICS

Vasubandhu emphasizes the Sautrāntika standpoint that conditioned characteristics, production, deterioration, and destruction cannot be categorized as discrete and real entities in the way they have been recognized. He added that these characteristics are classified among "forces dissociated from thought," which themselves lack intrinsic reality [2]. Nevertheless, Vasubandhu in *Abhidharmakosābhāṣya* (AKB, 1:45c-d) admits that since these conditioned characteristics are the object of consciousness, they can be termed as characteristics: "whatever is the object of consciousness can be a characteristic" [17]. Vasubandhu states that because conditioned characteristics lack intrinsic nature, they are only provisionally designated as lacking independent function. Furthermore, if these conditioned characteristics possess real existence, a conditioned dharma would produce, sustain, and destroy at the same time since these characteristics cannot exist apart from the dharma [17]. Thereby, Vasubandhu (AKB, 2:46b) concludes that conditioned characteristics neither possess real essence nor do they exist independent of conditioned dharma as the Sarvāstivāda contends [17]. Vasubandhu claims that there is no valid source of knowledge, whether through sense-perception, inference, or a sūtra passage, that explicitly accepts the existence of these conditioning characteristics as real entities. Vasubandhu illustrates that similarly, modes cannot exist without the substratum; in the same way, conditioned characteristics cannot exist without dharma [17].

On the other hand, Saṃghabhadra in the *Nyāyānusārasāstra* (NAS) objects that these characteristics, conditioned by "activity" and "capability," characterize all mental and material conditioned dharmas. Contrasting Vasubandhu's position, Saṃghabhadra posits that these conditioned characteristics possess discrete and real existence apart from the dharmas they characterize. Saṃghabhadra proposes that since each conditioned dharmas (mental and material) are characterized by these four characteristics, they exist dissociated from both form and thought. Regarding the real existence of these conditioned characteristics, Saṃghabhadra claims that they could not be established as provisional designations by any means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) [2]. Saṃghabhadra presents the scriptural evidence that implicitly maintains the discrete and real existence of these conditioned characteristics:

"The conditioned factors that belong to someone who holds erroneous beliefs are all included in the category of those false beliefs, as are their physical, verbal, and mental actions and intentions." [2].

Saṃghabhadra interprets that the conditioned characteristics are implicitly mentioned in the *sūtra* through the reference to "conditioned forces," which deduce the real existence of these conditioned characteristics. Additionally, the text *Samyuktābhidharmahrdayasāstra* (SAHS, 1:51) affirms that each conditioned dharma endures in its own nature with its specific conditioned characteristics [6]. Moreover, Saṃghabhadra observes that the *sūtra* explanation of the three conditioned characteristics provides sufficient evidence to validate that the four conditioned characteristics endure as discrete and real entities. Saṃghabhadra contends that the *sūtra* has never mentioned that there can only be three characteristics of conditioned dharma [2]. Furthermore, Saṃghabhadra claims that although these characteristics are subtle and difficult to distinguish, this does not refer to their provisional existence [17]. To substantiate this claim, Saṃghabhadra presents the *sūtra* statement as: "it is possible to distinguish the emergence of conditioned events, it is also possible to distinguish the transition, and constant change of conditioned events" [5]. Saṃghabhadra interprets this statement that the *sūtra* mentions "also possible to distinguish," intending to demonstrate that conditioned characteristics exist as a real entity apart from the dharma it characterizes [2]. Thereby, Saṃghabhadra consolidated the scriptures' testimony to substantiate the assertion that conditioned characteristics possess real existence apart from the dharma they characterize.

Samghabhadra further claims that the real existence of conditioned characteristics can also be validated by “inference.” Samghabhadra argues that “if the particular distinctive characteristic is observed in the last moment of the stream, then the other prior distinctive characteristics definitely can be inferred within that stream” [2]. Samghabhadra argues that the concept of these conditioned characteristics would be unjustified without the real existence of production, succession, deterioration, and destruction. [2]. However, the author of *Tattvasiddhīśāstra* considered them to exist only as conveniently posited entities since their classification under form or matter is not well-defined [8].

Based on the arguments presented by Samghabhadra and Vasubandhu, elucidating the nature of conditioned characteristics, the ontological status of dharma seems logically consistent with Samghabhadra’s viewpoint. Failure to recognize these characteristics as a real entity prevents them from assisting the real dharma even in present, which Vasubandhu also affirms to exist as a real entity. Samghabhadra’s position can be illustrated by the lifespan of entities that pass through different stages, pointing towards the momentariness and impermanent nature of conditioned objects. For instance, when a person dies or a table breaks, it does not disappear abruptly; instead, it goes through a gradual process of termination. From its arising to final cessation, a man, table, or any conditioned object experiences several stages: it produces, it endures to perform activities, prepares to terminate (deteriorate), and eventually ceases. However, observing these subtler changes occurring each moment is not possible with our sensory perception; it can only be inferred directly through insight. Additionally, the intrinsic nature of conditioned phenomena that “they do not last from one moment to another” cannot be regarded as real if these characteristics have a provisional designation. Arising and cessation are two inseparable elements of conditioned entities, equally applicable to both metaphysical and material objects. Failing to consider the reality of conditioned characteristics can lead to the mistaken belief that conditioned phenomena are unreal, which is not the case, and seemingly result in false conclusions. Furthermore, this conception also nullifies Vasubandhu’s assertion (AKB, 1:45c-d) itself, which posits that the essential characteristic of a real existent is to serve as an object domain for generating cognition [17]. If these characteristics do not really exist, they would not be able to produce cognition of conditioned objects.

4. APPLICATION OF CONDITIONED CHARACTERISTICS

The ontological status of the conditioned dharma is inextricably linked with the disagreement over the application of these conditioned characteristics. According to Vasubandhu, the stream of consciousness consists of a series of similar moments connected by causal link relationships. As Vasubandhu affirms that these characteristics are the objects of consciousness, he argues that they should be applied to the stream, not to a single moment. He claims (AKB 2.46b) that since the stream is a continuation of discrete moments that make up the life spans of characterized conditioned dharma, conditioned characteristics should be applied to the whole stream [17]. Vasubandhu asserts that since the four conditioned characteristics of single moments are not the object of consciousness and do not possess real existence, these characteristics cannot be applied to a single moment. The nature of arising and cessation is confined to conditioned dharma, whereas the nature of the ‘moments’ is neither subject to arising nor ceasing. Furthermore, Vasubandhu argued that the implementation of conditioned characteristics to a single moment would result in contradiction among them. For instance, production would make “destruction” arise, resulting in non-obtaining of destruction; destruction would make “production” disappear, resulting in non-obtaining of production. Thereby, analyzing these characteristics to a ‘moment’ would result in the non-attainment of their functioning. Consequently, the functioning of the respective characteristic would be lost [5]. The text *Mahāvibhāsa* (MVS), mentions that “Sautrāntika, adhered the five aggregates as material are called ‘production’ when emerging from the womb; their succeeding stream are called ‘succession;’ their deterioration are called ‘decay;’ when they passed away, they are called ‘disappearance” [4]. Similarly, Vasubandhu added that “the core of the characteristic marks of the conditioned dharma is simultaneous, but their functions are consecutive” [4]. The moment when dharma arise is said to be “production” and when they disappear, said to be “destruction.” The third characteristic is the moment between production and destruction, which is characterized by duration-change.

Samghabhadra presents a contrasting viewpoint, arguing that conditioned characteristics cannot be applied to a stream; instead, they apply to a single moment, since their focus is on the one dharma that characterizes each

present moment. Saṃghabhadra asserts that ‘moment’ should not be restricted to production and destruction, but rather assigned to the span during which these four conditioned characteristics operate [2]. Saṃghabhadra contends that a stream consists of similar moments that are constantly created within the body from previous moments without interruption. The occurrence of the modification of dharma is confirmed by each individual event of production, succession, deterioration, and destruction. Saṃghabhadra thus concludes that it is unreasonable to assign production solely to the present moment, as Vasubandhu attempts to suggest.

In light of these arguments, it appears that Vasubandhu’s stance on the definition of production and other characteristics within a stream is inconsistent regarding subsequent past and future conditioned forces. This conceptual framework does not align with the conditioned forces that have yet to arise (future) or those that were previously abandoned (past). This stream of conditioned forces comprises several moments, and these moments are impossible to occur simultaneously. If the dharma on which the stream depends is only ‘present,’ the creation of the stream would not occur, because a “stream” does not refer solely to present dharma. Instead, it signifies a ‘moment’ where the ‘present’ can be established only through the characteristic of production, not in the other three characteristics. Additionally, if the existence of previous and future dharma is not accepted as real, the two characteristics of production and destruction cannot be established within a single moment. Saṃghabhadra points out that applying characteristics to the stream would result in the non-application of ‘deterioration,’ as it would be impossible to distinguish between prior and subsequent moments within the stream.

Saṃghabhadra, while refuting Vasubandhu’s objection, added that it is not the case that if all the conditioned characteristics exert their functioning on a single dharma, that dharma will arise and pass away at the same moment. These four conditioned characteristics are discrete real entities possessing distinctive functions that exist apart from the dharma they characterize [5]. The distinctive functions of characteristics must not be attributed to a single dharma; rather, they should be assigned to one moment. These conditioned characteristics are essential for a dharma’s activity to arise and pass away within a single moment. Saṃghabhadra in *Nyāyanusāra* explains that ‘moment’ is regarded as the shortest state of time that a conditioned dharma requires to exert activity [2]. Saṃghabhadra explains that the characteristic of ‘production’ exerts its capability in the future, and the other three characteristics, succession, deterioration, and destruction, remain sequentially active in the present moment when production is no longer active [17]. Therefore, it is consistent to accept that a single dharma cannot be said to be produced and destroyed at the same time.

According to Vasubandhu, the stream of conditioned forces possesses the characteristics of being conditioned and connected through a causal link. Vasubandhu posit that the Sarvāstivādin postulation of conditioned characteristics within a single moment cannot be discerned, and that which cannot be discerned should not be established as a real characteristic. Saṃghabhadra, contrasting this view, maintains that conditioned characteristics undertake their “potentiality” on a single dharma and therefore, one should not assume only one instance of production, destruction, and change in a compound within the stream of conditioned dharmas. Instead, Saṃghabhadra suggests that a life-stream is an unbroken flow of conditioned forces in relation to a single moment. The application of four conditioned forces to a life-stream is only possible when all moments, conditioned dharmas that have already been produced but not yet destroyed, are present, which cannot possibly be established all at once, since it would violate the momentariness of dharma. Moreover, Saṃghabhadra presents the sūtra assertion that “the arising of that which is conditioned also can be discerned, the passing away and change in succession also can be discerned” pertains to moments, not the stream [2]. Consequently, Saṃghabhadra declares that conditioned characteristics apply to a specific moment, not the entire life stream. Additionally, these four conditioned characteristics serve as the primary factors that determine a dharma’s emergence, persistence, development, and cessation. These characteristics are real, separate entities that exist independently of the dharmas they characterize. Besides, the nature of existence cannot be defined as anything other than existence; conditioned forces by their own nature produce, endure, change in their state, and cease. When each of the four characteristics functions as the dominant trait at a time, the other three become subsequent assisting forces.

The critical analysis of the arguments reveals that Vasubandhu’s claim, that conditioned characteristics apply to the life-stream rather than a single moment, appears inconsistent with the ontological status of the conditioned

dharma when it restricts the reality of dharma to a single moment. This perspective affirms only the present time period as real. While it is significant to note that the present moment may be just a part of existence, it cannot define the entirety of existence. Conversely, Saṃghabhadra's declaration that the life-stream consists of a series of single moments suggests a sharp distinction that conditioned characteristics should be applied to a single moment rather than to a whole life stream. Saṃghabhadra's standpoint seems more consistent in outlining the ontological status of dharma when applying these conditioned characteristics to a single moment. In everyday experience, we see that every physical object that exists, such as a table or a human being, acquires characteristics of creation, change, ageing, and ending at various points during its life.

5. SPATIO-TEMPORAL STATUS OF CONDITIONED CHARACTERISTICS

Conditioned characteristics apply to all conditioned dharmas because they arise together with them. Vasubandhu states that the conditioned dharma functions only as a real entity in the present moment, since past and future dharmas exist only provisionally. He argues that the conditioned dharma ceases to exist as soon as it arises; it cannot move from one point to another because the moment is the shortest span of time [11]. In AKB (AKB 5.27c), Vasubandhu contends that neither sūtra nor valid cognition, such as inference or direct perception, demonstrates the real existence of dharma and its conditioned characteristics [17]. Vasubandhu (AKB 2.36a) added that since these conditioned characteristics are categorized as "conditioned forces dissociated from thought," which lack an intrinsic nature, they do not exist as real entities [17].

Saṃghabhadra contrasts this view by arguing that because consciousness is intentional, anything within its scope can be regarded as a real entity. He asserts that the existence of dharma as real entities is validated by both their intrinsic nature and particular causal functions. Building on this concept, Saṃghabhadra responds to Vasubandhu's criticism by arguing that the fifth category, namely, 'conditioned forces dissociated from thought' (*cittaviprayukṭtasamkāra*), exists as a real entity by virtue of its unique, inherent nature. The real existence of the conditioned characteristics in this category, along with the activity each characteristic performs individually, can be understood through inference or yogic direct insight. Since these conditioned characteristics fall within the range of conditioned forces dissociated from thought, therefore, they are held to exist as real entities [2]. Regarding the spatio-temporal existence of conditioned dharma, Saṃghabhadra holds that dharma exists as a real entity in all three time periods. The presence of causal efficacy distinguished by "activity" (*kāritra*) exerted in the present and the "potentiality" of functioning in the past and future plays a key role in determining the real existence of dharma. Saṃghabhadra argues that because past and future dharmas can be objects of perceptual awareness, they can be regarded as real entities. Saṃghabhadra thus declared that these dharmas, endowed with intrinsic nature along with their conditioned characteristics, persist as real entities across all three intervals of time [14]. Saṃghabhadra asserts that, in addition to the conditioned dharma, these conditioned characteristics also operate across all three time periods. These conditioned characteristics arise along with the arising of conditioned dharmas that serve as causes and conditions to enable a particular dharma to project its effect, that is, to exert its "activity." The exercise of the capability of "production" occurs when both the characteristics themselves and the dharma it characterizes are still in the future, whereas the other three characteristics arise when the conditioned phenomena are already produced, that is, in the present. Merely consenting to the present dharmas as real, and to past and future dharmas as provisional existences, does not seem to fulfil these conditions.

A thorough investigation of these contrasting standpoints reveals that Saṃghabhadra's view leads to McDaniel's Ontological Pluralism, which states that there are different modes of being, but not everything must exist in the same manner. Saṃghabhadra argues that dharma, which exists across all three time periods, is expressed in three different modes of dharmas. Saṃghabhadra highlights that the temporal modes simply show how dharma exists. McDaniel argues that provisional existence has a kind of decadent beings which exist but not in themselves, dependent on *paramārtha-sat*—therefore, they do not possess real existence. On the other hand, Vasubandhu's standpoint seems more inclined towards "Presentism" [7]. He maintains that dharmas exist only by their "activity," therefore, only the moment in which activity (*kāritra*) takes place can be said to be existent. Vasubandhu also maintains that the four conditioned characteristics are functional to the entire life stream altogether. He maintains that since the characteristic of 'succession' is a superfluous assumption, the idea of considering past and future dharma as a real entity is conceptually untenable. The subsequent effect arises through the process of

succeeding dependence on the present dharma only. On the other hand, Saṃghabhadra maintains that conditioned characteristics employ their “potentiality” on a single dharma characterising each present moment.

In light of this investigation, Saṃghabhadra’s views present a certain difficulty: if all conditioned characteristics apply to a single dharma, and all dharmas are transitory, then all characteristics produce, preserve, deteriorate, and are destroyed simultaneously; therefore, there is no possibility for subsequent dharmas to arise. However, according to the Sarvāstivāda school of thought, sensory grounds are the only indisputable units in empirical reality, and the main existing dharmas are the only fundamental entities that cannot be further analyzed. Apart from these sensory bases, all others are secondary existents that transcend spatio-temporal momentariness and thus cannot be regarded as ultimately real [18].

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the core argument of this study must be outlined briefly. The characteristic of succession is central to the debate, since it serves as the foundation for causality and continuity. Vasubandhu, on one hand, rejects “succession” as an essential characteristic; on the other hand, he denies the reality of past and future dharmas. He maintains that these conditioned characteristics lack intrinsic nature since they fall within the category of “conditioned dharmas dissociated from thought” (*cittaviprayuktasamskāra*). Additionally, Vasubandhu offers a logical argument to emphasize that these conditioned characteristics should be applied to a stream rather than a single moment.

Saṃghabhadra, while discarding Vasubandhu’s argument, recognizes “succession” as a key characteristic because it allows the dharma to produce its effect before cessation. Saṃghabhadra argues that past and future dharma are also objects of consciousness; therefore, they exist as real entities, just like present dharma. He maintains the real and discrete existence of conditioned characteristics apart from the dharma they characterize. Additionally, Saṃghabhadra emphasizes the application of conditioned characteristics in a moment, since the stream consists of numerous moments.

While Vasubandhu’s perspective offers valuable insights into the ontological status of dharma, sometimes he appears dogmatic in his concept of “presentism,” as he limits dharma and its characteristics to the present. His idea of presentism is confined to describing only the part of existence; consequently, he fails to clarify the existence in the past and future, which make up the whole existence. Saṃghabhadra’s standpoint regarding the ontological status of conditioned dharma and its conditioned characteristics appears more appealing than those of Vasubandhu. Saṃghabhadra’s view on applying conditioned characteristics to every single moment appears logically consistent in elucidating the existence of conditioned beings and objects. In day-to-day experiences, it is generally observed that conditioned objects are produced with their implicit characteristics of endurance, ageing, and termination. These conditioned characteristics serve as the primary causes and conditions that enable conditioned dharma to manifest its impermanent nature through its emergence and cessation activities, in three time periods. These conditioned characteristics, while maintaining the continuity and the transient nature of dharma, emphasize the interconnectedness of conditioned existence and highlight the various stages of life throughout its entire duration. This conceptual framework, on the one hand, rejects the idea of permanence; on the other hand, it emphasizes the Buddhist fundamental tenet of impermanence and not-self. Nonetheless, conditioned forces have different kinds of external causes and conditions; the objects of the empirical world cannot be regarded as real unless the reality of these characteristics is acknowledged.

Note: On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

ABBREVIATIONS:

AKB- *Abhidharmakosābhāṣya*

MVB- *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra*

NAS- *Nyāyānusārasāstra*

SAHS- *Samyuktābhidharmahrdayasāstra*

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