

Impermanence of Things - The Gurbani Argument

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EVERYTHING IN LIFE IS TEMPORARY. Just think about it for a moment. The darkness of the night, the brilliance of the day, the warmth and the cold, they're all temporary. Thunderstorms appear and disappear, as do rains and rainbows. Our experiences, emotions and actions are temporary too.

Everything is subject to change and alteration in the world. There is nothing that is fixed and permanent. Existence is a flux, and a continuous becoming. Life is like a river. It is a progressive moment, a successive series of different moments, joining together to give the impression of one continuous flow. It moves from cause to cause, effect to effect, one point to another, one state of existence to another, giving an outward impression that it is one continuous and unified movement, where as in reality it is not.

The river of yesterday is not the same as the river of today. The river of this moment is not going to be the same as the river of the next moment. So does life. It changes continuously, becomes something or the other from moment to moment. In Sri Guru Granth Sahib¹, the holy Sikh scripture, the concept of impermanence of things is enunciated to make us aware of the ephemeral nature of life and the material world. It articulates that the awareness and understanding of impermanent nature of things leads to liberation from the sorrows of human life.

Impermanence in Nature:

Nothing is static or fixed. Everything is fleeting and impermanent. It is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything - every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and the inanimate - is always changing, moment-to-moment. The dynamic nature of things has been articulated in Gurbani² as;

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਰੁਤਿ ਫਿਰੀ ਵਣੁ ਕੰਬਿਆ ਪਤ ਝੜੇ ਝੜਿ ਪਾਹਿ ॥ ਚਾਰੇ ਕੁੰਡਾ ਢੂੰਢੀਆਂ ਰਹਣੁ ਕਿਥਾਉ ਨਾਹਿ ॥

[SGGS: 1383]

i.e. Fareed, the seasons change, the woods shake and the leaves drop from the trees. I have searched in the four directions, but I have not found any resting place anywhere.

Have you ever stayed up at night to see a Cereus cactus flower open? The flower opens and dies in a few hours, but because we are aware of that, we appreciate its wondrous fragrance and beauty. We can be in real contact with the flower and not be sad or depressed when it fades, because we know before it opened how ephemeral its life was. Gurbani³⁻⁴ makes us aware of the impermanence of life as;

ਜੋ ਉਪਜਿਓ ਸੋ ਬਿਨਸਿ ਹੈ ਪਰੇ ਆਜੁ ਕੈ ਕਾਲਿ ॥

[SGGS: 1429]

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਥਿਰੁ ਕਛੁ ਨਹੀ ਸੁਪਨੇ ਜਿਉ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥

[SGGS: 1429]

i.e. Whatever has been created shall be destroyed; everyone shall perish, today or tomorrow. Says Nanak, nothing lasts forever; the world is like a dream.

Our dear ones who live with us, and the beautiful and precious beings around us are all wonderful cactus flowers. If we can see their true nature as well as their outward form, we will know how to value their presence in the present moment. If we know how to value them, we will have the time to be in real contact with them, and we will take care of them, make them happy, and therefore be happier ourselves⁵.

The awareness of the impermanent nature of life is not to make us weary of life, but to help us see how precious life is; not to make us pessimistic, but to help us see that we do not waste our life. When we see the impermanence of things, we appreciate their true value.

Impermanence of Human Life:

Take for example the life of an individual. It is a fallacy to believe that a person would remain the same person during his entire lifetime. He changes every moment. He actually lives and dies but for a moment, or lives and dies moment by moment, as each moment leads to the next. A person is what he is in the context of the time in which he exists. It is an illusion to believe that the person you have seen just now is the same as the person you are just now seeing or the person whom you are seeing now will be the same as the person you will see after a few moments.

Even from a scientific point of view this is true. We know cell divisions take place in each living being continuously. Old cells in our bodies die and yield place continuously to the new ones that are forming. Like the waves in a sea, every moment, many thoughts arise and die in each individual. Psychologically and physically he is never the same all the time. Technically speaking, no individual is ever composed of the same amount of energy, mental stuff and cellular material all the time. He is subject to change and the change is a continuous movement.

The various stages in the life of a man, the childhood, the adulthood, the old age are not the same at any given time. The child is not the same when he grows up and becomes a young man, nor when the latter turns into an old man. The seed is not the tree, though it produces the tree, and the fruit is also not the tree, though the tree produces it. Impermanence and change are thus the undeniable truths of our existence. What is real is the existing moment, the present that is a product of the past, or a result of the previous causes and actions. Because of ignorance, an ordinary mind conceives them all to be part of one continuous reality. But in truth they are not. Guru Arjun Dev, the Fifth Sikh Guru, enunciates the impermanence of world in his hymn⁶ as;

ਪੇਖੁ ਹਰਿਚੰਦਉਰਤੀ ਅਸਥਿਰੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਨਾਹੀ ॥

ਮਾਇਆ ਰੰਗ ਜੇਤੇ ਸੇ ਸੰਗਿ ਨ ਜਾਹੀ ॥

[SGGS: 461]

It is by becoming aware of it, by observing and understanding it one can find a suitable remedy for the sorrow of human life and achieve liberation from the process of impermanence.

Understanding Impermanence:

If we cut flowers from our garden to place on the altar, we do so, because we acknowledge the beauty of those flowers. All we can say is, “Although these flowers are beautiful, their beauty is fragile. When in a few days time, these flowers die, their beauty will die with them.” We understand this, and when the flowers wilt in a few days, we will not suffer or feel sad. Because we can see the impermanent nature of the flowers, we can appreciate all the more the beauty of each flower. To observe the impermanence of things is not to reject them, but to be in contact with them with deep understanding, without being caught in desire and attachment. Freedom in Sikhism is freedom, which comes about by being awake and understanding. Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, reminds us about ever changing nature of the material world⁷ as;

ਜੈਸੇ ਜਲ ਤੇ ਬੁਦਬੁਦਾ ਉਪਜੈ ਬਿਨਸੈ ਨੀਤ ॥

ਜਗ ਰਚਨਾ ਤੈਸੇ ਰਚੀ ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸੁਨਿ ਮੀਤ ॥

[SGGS: 1427]

Most people fail to see this reality, for they are attached to what they cling to, to pleasures and delights. Since the entire world is so attached to material things, it's very difficult for people to grasp how everything originates in conditions and causes. It's a hard job for them to see the meaning of the fact that everything, including ourselves, depends on everything else and has no permanent self-existence. Gurbani⁸ advises us against attachment to the material world due to its impermanence.

ਤਿਸ ਸਉ ਨੇਹੁ ਨ ਕੀਚਈ ਜਿ ਦਿਸੈ ਚਲਣਹਾਰੁ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਨ੍ਹੀ ਇਵ ਕਰਿ ਬੁਝਿਆ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਵਿਟਹੁ ਕੁਰਬਾਣੁ ॥
[SGGS: 1410]

Since everything is impermanent, disease and accident can happen to us or to those we love at any time. We must accept this reality. Guru Teg Bahadur advises us to not to be anxious if something unexpected happens as all the things in this world are transitory in nature⁹.

ਚਿਤਾ ਤਾ ਕੀ ਕੀਜੀਐ ਜੋ ਅਨਹੋਨੀ ਹੋਇ ॥ ਇਹੁ ਮਾਰਗੁ ਸੰਸਾਰ ਕੋ ਨਾਨਕ ਥਿਰੁ ਨਹੀ ਕੋਇ ॥

[SGGS: 1429]

i.e. When something unexpected happens don't be anxious. This is the way of the world, O Nanak; nothing is stable or permanent.

Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonderful things. There is spring as well as winter, light as well as darkness, health as well as sickness, gentle breezes and delightful rains as well as tempests and floods. Our eyes, ears, hearts, half smiles, and breathings are wonderful phenomena. We only need to open our eyes and we can see the blue sky, the white clouds, the rose, the clear river, the golden fields of wheat, the shining eyes of a child. We have only to attune our ears to hear the whispering pines and the waves washing up on the shore. Everything is impermanent. Everything is in a temporary form. Nevertheless, there are many wonderful things. In and around us, there are so many wondrous phenomena in nature, which can refresh and heal us. If we can be in contact with them, we will receive their healing benefits. If peace and joy are in our hearts, we will gradually bring more peace and joy to the world¹⁰.

If we live every moment of our lives mindfully and relate beautifully with those around us, we will have nothing to fear and nothing to regret, even when there is a crisis in our lives. If we know that birth and death are both necessary aspects of life, we will see that if our

Creator (God) has brought us to life once, He will bring us to life hundred thousand times more, and we will not be afraid or suffer when He reaches out his arms to welcome us back. An Awakened One remains unperturbed while flowing along the river of birth and death. Thus by becoming aware of impermanence, by observing and understanding it one can find a suitable remedy for the sorrow of human life and achieve liberation from them.



References

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