

Time and Timelessness: discovering the true nature of mind.

The mind that sees into the flux of arising and decaying, and recognises the transient nature of the world, is called the way-seeking mind.

Nagarjuna

It means that ignorance never was. Truth is in the discovery, not in the discovered. And to discovery there is no beginning nor end. Question the limits, go beyond, set yourself tasks apparently impossible - this is the way.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*, "The Truth Is Here and Now":

It was St Augustine who asserted, in that famous passage in *The Confessions*, that time is an illusion. ¹ "The past", Augustine insisted, only exists as memory in the present while "the future" is an anticipation from the present. Memory can be very fallible, while the future can turn out quite differently from our anticipation of it. It follows that the past and the future are, in other words, constructs of the mind. It is our way, along with the concept of space, of making sense of the world and universe. The illusion may be an actual part of our experience but a mental phenomenon, not a reality. In Augustine's thinking, "the present", as a passing moment between past and future, is equally unreal. It only becomes real when it is experienced as "timeless".

But it is impossible to say what timelessness is without reference to time. One is beyond concepts and words, while the other is describable and endlessly contingent. One is absolute and the other relative. Yet they are not opposites. They depend on each other. Time is understood intellectually and analytically, timelessness, through a contemplative practice. They are, in truth, both accessible to the human mind, though different levels of it. It would seem a paradox that we cannot understand the one without the other, though timelessness, in the view of all the great wisdom traditions, is the context for time.

Only as we are confronted with the climate and ecological crisis - and the possibility of the end of time, as we have known it - do we begin to see how unreal our human sense of time is from an absolute perspective. We imagine it to be an objective truth we live within - and measure it in terms of seconds, minutes, weeks, years, decades, centuries, and

¹ See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick, OUP classics, 1991. Book X1: "Time and Eternity" pp 221-245. Also Henry Chadwick, *Augustine*, OUP, chapter 6, "Confessions" pp 66-74.

millennia etc. - but the real truth is that time is always transient. It is forever moving and cannot be contained in any calendar our rational minds conceive.

The speed of time and emergence

In his book, *Each Moment is the Universe*, reflections on the teachings of the twelfth century founder of the Soto Zen school, Eihei Dogen, the modern Japanese/American Zen priest, Danin Katagiri, referred to Dogen's view that it was important to see that human life is based on absolute impermanence.² For Dogen, time passes very quickly, far too fast for our slow intellectual minds to follow. In fact he suggested - fantastically - that a day consists of 6,400,099,180 moments, and each moment, of sixty-five instants. This inconceivable number is meant to signify how fast time moves, faster than the human mind, clock or calendar can possibly measure. We try to stop time with our human constructions, but, while History can be seen as a parade of immortality projects, all things are, in fact, transient, as Dogen emphasised. In fact, to define time in terms of transience and impermanence, is to realise that, while the impermanence of everything carries with it the constant threat of the cutting off of life, it also clears the way for new life to emerge.

The nature of life is that it is ever emergent. Old forms may die but new ones always arise out of the old. Life is a constant stream and impermanence is the means to continuation. The trick for us, as human beings, is to identify with the force of emergent life that runs through us, rather than with the part which dies. The body dies but, somehow, our life continues. This notion of timelessness as the substance of immortality is strange to a material and purely secular culture. But, if time is imaginary and illusive, it must be so in relation to what is real. Timelessness would seem to be more real than time.

The fourth turning of the dharma wheel

Buddhism has always had an eye on both. While it focuses and analyses the three absolute "marks of existence" - impermanence or transience, suffering and non-self - it also has a sense of the relative dynamics of evolution. For example, Buddhists often list "the three turnings of the dharma wheel" in the history of Buddhism. "Dharma" is a Sanskrit word having a number of meanings, including the important one, for Hindus, of universal truth and also, for buddhists, of the Buddha's teaching - *Buddha dharma*.

² Dainin Katagiri, *Each Moment Is the Universe: Zen and the Way of Being Time*, 2007, p 3.

The first turning of the dharma wheel was Gautama's original ethical and practical teachings in 600 BCE. These were the essential, primary dharma on which further turnings could be built. The second was the insight into "emptiness" - *shunyata* in Sanskrit - associated, in particular with the Indian sage, Arya Nagarjuna, in the second century AD.³ Shunyata, unlike our conventional meaning of emptiness, connotes fullness and gives expression to the sense of the infinite and boundless nature of the universe.

The third turning of the dharma wheel were the "mind-only" teachings of the *Yogachara* school, inspired by the Indian brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu in the fourth century AD. The emptiness teachings were sometimes thought to be interpreted as too negative, even nihilistic. The *Yogachara* school synthesised all buddhist teachings up until that time but also emphasised and analysed the notions of consciousness and Buddha nature, to balance the potentially negative implications of teachings on emptiness.⁴

The interest today in the Western world in these three traditional turnings suggest we are now experiencing a "fourth turning of the dharma wheel", not just as the further evolution of Buddhism, but as a global phenomenon, a "turning" that belongs to the whole world. In this "fourth turning", the stakes are very high for us, since climate change threatens our actual existence. But, whether - or how - we survive beyond the 21st century, there is an opportunity for a new awareness, a consciousness of consciousness, that brings a new experience of ourselves and the universe.

Time and timelessness

It could be said that while the modern twentieth century - in the Western world at least - discovered time, the twenty-first is beginning to discover timelessness, the discovery of which is central to the fourth turning. The understanding of "deep time" emerged along with the concept of evolution in Europe and the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While these new discoveries of time overturned fundamentalist Christian beliefs about the age of the Earth, and about a divine creator who established a fixed and permanent number of species, they left unexamined the experience of ourselves - *Homo*

³ See Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, *The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, translated by Ari Goldfield, 2003, and Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, translated and commentary by J L G, 1995. Also Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime*, 2000.

⁴ For the teachings of Asanga on Buddha nature see Ken Holmes, *Maitreya on Buddha Nature*, a new translation of Asanga's *Mahayana uttara tantra sastra* by Ken and Katia Holmes with commentary and explanations from Kenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso Rinpoche, 1999, and for Vasubandhu see Thich Nhat Hahn, *Understanding Our Mind*, 2006.

sapiens - as a cultural phenomenon. We were not thought to be subject to evolution, except as a biological species.

Time and timelessness are a continuum. To know one without the other leaves a person feeling incomplete. What we discovered in the last century was “the arrow of time”, its irreversibility, and the truth that it never stops. The arrow never really lands, as it were, while timelessness, by contrast, in its apparent immovability, is very dynamic. It may seem not to move but, using the same metaphor, shoots arrows everywhere - the spokes in the wheel - resting at the hub of the wheel of time. It follows that to experience timelessness is to change one’s relationship with time.

The first noble, or holy, truth of Gautama Buddha’s teaching was the inevitability of suffering, or, as the fourteenth Dalai Lama translates it, of “dissatisfaction”. The dissatisfaction that we experience in life lies in its impermanence. The one certainty about life is death. As soon as we are born we are fated to die (though the one uncertainty is when). Death consciousness - true knowledge of impermanence - can, however, make us aware of something in ourselves which is changeless and indestructible. We might describe this as the spirit of evolution, the continuity and progress of life.

Waking up and growing up

Ken Wilber has written about the fourth turning in a recent major book.⁵ In it he also mentions two features in particular in the new enlightenment which accompanies it. He describes these as “waking up” and “growing up”. Waking up refers to the phenomenon of “awakening” that is well known to the contemplative traditions of most non-Western cultures but which Western civilisation, with its material consciousness only, had lost touch with. Essential to any contemplative practice, prior to analysis, is stillness and tranquillity, qualities which the modern world undervalues. But awakening, whether to the fact of climate change or true self-knowledge, is the door to an experience of timelessness.

Growing up is about recognising the knowledge of science, whether natural or political and social. We too often discredit the material progress of the seventeenth century Scientific Revolution and the progressive cultural values of the European Enlightenment because of their part in our present climate and ecological emergency, but they were significant evolutionary steps at the time. We may want - rightly - to press for zero

⁵ Ken Wilber, *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions*, 2017

emissions of carbon-fuelled energy today, but coal and oil - and our mechanical inventions - have helped us evolve our present level of cultural consciousness.

“Being-time” and timelessness

Dogen expounded the notion of “being-time”, as different from *chronos*, chronological time, ⁶ a concept familiar also to the German existential philosopher, Martin Heidegger, whose *Dasein* - Being-in-the-World - was central to his *Being and Time*. ⁷ Chronological time is thought of, as I have suggested, as something separate from us, as a real, objective entity. But, again, this is an illusion. For Dogen and Heidegger, human “being-time” is more real than clock time.

But we are also an expression of the timelessness from which time comes and which, as Dogen also suggests, we can experience in every moment of our lives. Experiencing timelessness is more natural than we think. Simple awareness of breath and breathing can initially put us in touch with it. As we know, breath provides the body with Oxygen. It is a kind of dynamic food or energy and is responsible for all our activity. It begins when we are born and is the chronometer of life until we die.

Breath is, as it were, the heart of all human civilisation. It has always been symbolic. In her *Book of Breathing* the yoga teacher, Donna Farhi, points to the pause, or gap, at the end of every exhalation. She thinks of this as “a well, a resource that is always available to you.....Without this pause there is no thought and no movement. You may experience it as a pregnant silence, much like you feel when you enter a forest. The new breath arises out of this pause. The next moment arises out of this pause. The inhalation is born out of the stillness of the pause and the exhalation dissolves into it.” ⁸ To our loss, we may have learnt through all our familial, educational, and environmental conditioning to ignore this essential, natural, and creative feature of breathing. Farhi offers a way of “untying the breath” so that we can get back to it. Posture and breathing are the initial *sine qua non* of contemplative traditions.

The perennial sages of all our civilisations agree that recovering this natural source of inspiration offers a path to true enlightenment. In his earlier book, Dainin Katagiri refers to

⁶ See Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, 1985, the chapter in Part two, “The Time Being: Uji”.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarie and Edward Robinson, 1962

⁸ Donna Farhi, *The Breathing Book: Good Health and Vitality Through Essential Breath Work*, 1996, p 10.

it as *Returning to Silence*.⁹ In his view, silence - stillness, tranquillity - offers a way to contact the source of life. In silence is to be found all true inspiration. In modernity stillness may be under-valued, but it is a truly dynamic presence. Out of stillness comes everything. In relating time to being, Eihei Dogen suggested how a view of “time” as a separate phenomenon is an illusion, equivalent to saying there is no such real thing as time. There is only timelessness and “being-time” emerges from timelessness. Being-time reminds us again of Heidegger’s concepts of *Dasein* and “being-in-the-world”.¹⁰

“Stopping and Seeing”

What I am saying is that “being-time” and timelessness are not opposites. Timelessness can be experienced while being in the world. Time, the calendar of our individual and civilisational lives, bounded by birth and death, is not absolute. What makes our lives absolute is timelessness.¹¹ It is the very thing that defines phenomenal life, and breath is its key. Meditation, the heart of any contemplative practice, starts with the observation of breath. As Farhi writes, in the pause at the end of an exhalation can be found the essence of the practice which has made *buddha-dharma* such a powerful force in Asia through the millennia.

An experience of timelessness - as stillness, tranquillity, nothingness - redefines and reframes time. We are always rethinking history as time. Our discovery of evolution and the more enlightened forms of social, political, and philosophical experience in the modern world are progressive but all come with a shadow. In returning to silence and timelessness we are able not only to celebrate modernity’s progress but also analyse its shadow. We can be both in the world and observing witnesses of it.

The ancient Chinese emphasised the importance of “Stopping and Seeing”, as if we always needed to pause and give time to contemplate our activities from a position beyond time.¹² If the 21st is the century of the experience of timelessness, then we

⁹ Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence: Zen Practice in Daily Life*, edited by Yoko Connif and Willa Hathaway, 1988

¹⁰ Heidegger was known to have been influenced by Japanese Zen thinking - the existential, Japanese philosopher, Keiji Nishitani attended his lectures in Germany in the 1930s. See Graham Parkes, editor, *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, 1987.

¹¹ Katagiri refers to the absolute as what he terms “the pivot of nothingness”. See Katagiri, 2007, chapter 13, “The Pivot of Nothingness”.

¹² See Chih-I, *Stopping and Seeing: A Comprehensive Course in Buddhist Meditation*, translated by Thomas Cleary, 1997.

surely use it to reassess the modern world and its identities. We can see, for example, the dark side of imperialism, the criminal foolishness of racism, the oppression and liberation of women (and men), the illusion of ourselves as separate individuals and the apparent paucity today of genuine community life. The experience of timelessness provides, not only a perspective from which to contemplate the shadow side of modernity, but see ourselves as agents of a fourth turning and the new consciousness emerging with it.

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