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**SOME BASIC METAPHORS OF TIME: CONTEXTUALIZING
THE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES OF TEMPORALITY**

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SOME BASIC METAPHORS OF TIME : CONTEXTUALIZING THE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES OF TEMPORALITY

by PADMASIRI DE SILVA

Within the early Buddhist tradition there is a tendency to consider certain questions as 'metaphysical' questions', because they are of a speculative nature, as the person who raises these cannot determine the cognitive content of the answers, they lead to contradictions and paradoxes, they do not lead to edification, they are not directly relevant to the liberation from suffering (dukkha) and so on. The Buddha's silence on the fourteen questions which he did not answer may provide a paradigmatic Buddhist attitude to St. Augustine's question; "what is time"¹ In addition to the fact that some of the questions on which the Buddha was silent, like the temporal dimensions involved in these questions (the origin of the world, the continuity of the Tathāgata after death) have a reference to aspects of temporality about which the Buddha does not speak, by an extension of the Buddhist attitude to philosophical issues, it may be said that the question, "what is Time" may not make sense in the philosopher's forum of questions and answers. Again by an extension of the same attitude, it may be said that it is not a legitimate concern for the Buddhist to answer whether time is unreal., an issue raised by the Philosopher McTaggart.²

Installed in this predicament a Buddhist would try to bracket such questions and focus on the experiential aspects of the temporal aspect of our lives and relate this to the features of 'impermanence', 'no-self' and 'suffering'-- the basic features of human existence. But even if we do not speak in the official Buddhist forum on issues like, what is time or is time unreal, some contextual distinctions need to be used and clarified, as far as this is made necessary by the exigencies of human experience, contingent routine and discourses. Thus in this paper I am attempting to isolate some such contextual distinctions, which when taken within the context makes sense, and beyond context raises spurious and unending philosophical puzzles. Our usages are often embodied in some of the recurrent metaphors we use and I have selected some basic metaphors for discussion around which we can determine some viable and intelligible ways of talking about what is 'temporal'. I am seeking for a legitimate Buddhist analysis in this direction, and answers to some of these issues may have sufficient relevance for easing off the conflicts which emerged in the later interpretations of the doctrine of the Buddha. One can do a little, 'ground clearing'.

Let us look at the avenues of our contact and knowledge of temporality, or the experience of time, what may be called the 'epistemological frame' for the experience of time. If we look at the ordinary experience of time we see that there are four modes of time experience:

- a. The present, short time intervals and the rhythm timing.
- b. Duration, the past, long-term memory.
- c. Temporal perspective - philosophical, social, cultural constructions of the world and their effects on the interpretation of time experience. 'Becoming' the future.
- d. Simultaneity and succession.

All this come under our notion of 'experiential time'. The temporal perspective is often coloured by the culture we live in and thus can influence our experience of time. Though the cultural factors influence our experience of time, it has been pointed out that there are certain basic metaphors which can capture different answers to the question, what are the avenues of encountering 'time'. The epistemological question is, in the way that there are ways of knowing that there is a square, brown table in my room or that there is a hotel called Orchard Parade in Singapore, how do we discover this thing called 'time' or to put it in a more accessible form, is any kind of time sense involved in the experience of temporality. There are five basic metaphors which need to be discussed.

Robert Ornstein in an extremely stimulating attempt to unearth⁴ these metaphors mention the following :

- (1). The notion that time is like a 'sensory process' and there is an 'organ' for the experience of time, like the eye which is attuned to vision.
- (2). The notion that we are like 'time keepers'. This is the conception of clock time and also of the added notion of physiological rhythms of the body and what may be called the biological clock.
- (3). Man as a 'constructor' and time as purely a mental construction.
- (4). The third metaphor, gives way to a new metaphor of cognitive processing, the 'storage metaphor'.

After having looked at this array of metaphors, we shall examine in detail, the metaphors of the 'stream' and 'flux' as a continuous process, portrayed in a graphic way in the writings of Bergson and William James, and even very early in the history of thought by Heraclitus. Most of these metaphors have some point but can only capture one aspect of the temporal perspective or experiential time. Some of the metaphors introduce metaphysical elements which are not truly found in the experience of time. The effort to consider time as a sensory process is a

misguided venture. "If time were a sensory process like vision, then there would exist a real 'time' independent of us, and we would have an 'organ' of time experience such as the eye".

Though the mind is considered as a sense-door, along with vision, audition, taste, smell and touch in the psychology of Buddhist sense perception, it cannot function as an organ of time perception. The mind (mano) has the power to survey the objects of other sense organs and represents the reflective aspect of our experience as different from the sensory aspects of our experience. The metaphor of considering the mind as a door (dvāra), like the other sense organs, can mislead one to project some thing like a time sense to the mind. In fact if one wishes to refer to the mind as a continuous stream it is viññāna that is used rather than mano. Secondly, The Buddhist does not have to consider time in terms of the categories of 'existence' or 'non-existence', and avoids the intricacies of the question, whether an independent time, which is real and independent of us exists. The process of change that is underlying the cycle of dependent origination is not described in these categories : "when applied to the phenomena of our daily experience, this principle enables us to wean our minds from the tendency to rest on the concepts of existence and non-existence. As a preliminary step towards this end, these two concepts are replaced by the two terms 'uppāda'

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(arising) and 'vaya' (decay)." This perspective emerging on the way in which the Buddhist doctrine of conditionality is understood is extended to the practice of both calm and insight meditation : "In developing 'samatha' and 'vipassanā' (calm and insight), the mind is made to oscillate between these two terms with ever increasing momentum, spurred on by the three signate anicca (transience), dukkha (suffering) and anatta (non-self). At the peak of intensity in this oscillation the lingering notions of existence and non-existence wane into insignificance since the mind now hardly rests on them." Thus the Buddha does not consider the experience of time as a sensory process or the mind as an organ which can encounter the existence of an independent medium called 'time'. By adopting the cautious attitude to the two terms 'existence' and 'non-existence', Buddhism avoids the puzzlement of the man who searched for an independently existence of what is called 'time'. The contextualizing of the question what is time in the setting of meditation is perhaps the most profound answer which can be given, as briefly analysed in the quotations cited above.

It may also be said that the mind gets weary of the extremes of existence and non-existence, and whether the experience is 'timeless' itself seems to loose its edge. The distressful tension between the extreme of existence and non-existence is abated.

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In ancient times people did not have clocks and calendars but they used the recurring events to get an idea of the measures of time, like the tides, seasons, flight of birds, rising of the sun. The invention of the clock and of mechanical time enabled man to perceive time in terms of hours, minutes and seconds. It has been said that, "The clock modelled an abstract concept of the sun, moon and earth and replaced the organic rhythms of nature by the mechanical ticking of its clockwork, the chiming of the bells". Thus the new experience of time, quantified and mechanized was dependent on the state of the clock than experiencing the quantity of time. Thus time charts, time tables and schedules based on clock time guide our lives today.

But yet this cannot be ignored. Though the Buddhist focus is on psychological time and experiential time, clock time is adhered to as a conventional way of organizing ones lives and the activities of the community. If we look at the discourses of the Buddha the notion of the 'Time keeper' remains as a conventional texture of the routine lives of people: reference to morning and night, days and fortnights, 'from time to time', proper time and right season, the 'last hour' before death etc. are found dispersed in the discourses. References to appointed time, fixed time, suitable time, meal time etc. are also found. The Dialogues of the Buddha refers to the seven qualities of a good man :
knowledge

of the Dhamma, of the meaning contained in its doctrines, knowledge of self, knowledge how to be temperate, how to choose and keep time, knowledge of group of persons, and individuals".⁹ The notion of a meal time and the biological rhythms of hunger are true of even perfected ones (the arahat) till they lived. It was in fact, the philosopher Krishnamurti who said that if the philosopher does not pay heed to clock time, he could miss the train.

At the epistemological level, the Buddha makes a criticism of the purely logical, conceptual and dialectical approaches to issues whether they be about space, time or cause. What is recommended is to understand the pragmatic and contextual use of terms and their place within a system of rules and conventions. As we move from context to context we can dislodge our concept of time or change its focus of emphasis. Within contexts we respect relative patterns of serial order. Though the philosopher McTaggart (who said that time is unreal) may be embarrassed by the question, whether he had his lunch before twelve noon or later, the Buddha will find it a most natural question to ask.

I dismissed the first metaphor of time as a sensory process, but retained the second metaphor of the 'time keeper'. But the great controversies have emerged on the third metaphor of the

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`constructor'. The issue about time being a conceptual construction has very much been debated in terms of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna. While it is well known that Nāgārjuna's analysis of temporality has been made in terms of the law of dependent origination, a claim has been made that Nāgārjuna "employed his dialectic to demonstrate the unreality or non-¹⁰existence of time". John Koller who is critical of this position maintained by David Kalupahana, makes the following observation : "All Nāgārjuna is denying here is the reality of time as conceived by the Sarvastivadins, that is, time as an ontological reality containing change. It is entirely open for Nāgārjuna to accept that time does exist as a conceptual ordering of temporal¹¹ experience". Koller is attempting to maintain that while the universal experience of temporality is a fact, there are many ways of ordering the temporal dimension. I do not wish to make this discussion get converted into an exegetical analysis of "what Nāgārjuna said" or "what he really meant." The thesis that the experience of temporality is universal but that there are different ways of ordering the experience of temporality, some of them conventionally defined, others contextually determined etc., seems to fall in line with what the Buddha said. The whole debate whether time exists or not will not lead one on the path to liberation and understanding, and as one reaches the fullness of Buddhist wisdom, the lingering notions of existence and non-existence will wane into insignificance.

A second point about this debate is that the elements of con-
struction can some times be distorting, as when we project the
 notion of permanence into what is subject to impermanence. In
 fact, if we look at the word diṭṭhi which often according to the
 commentarial tradition is associated with the sixty two wrong
 theories, it should be more correctly considered as "the deep-
 seated proclivity in the worlding's mind to be beguiled by con-
 cepts"¹². Even in the case of Sammā Diṭṭhi (correct view), it can
 emerge as dogmatic involvement with concepts. The famous Dis-
 course on the Parable of the Water-Snake and the Parable of the
 Raft,¹³ brings out this point well.

Thus while the conceptual ordering of temporality can be done
 with caution and contextually defined and pragmatic use can be
 made, as graphically embodied in the Buddha's metaphor of the
 'raft', conceptual constructs need not exceed their point. As
 Ornstein says in his concluding analysis of the four metaphors
 being discussed in this paper, there is no one answer to the
 question about the nature of time : "Time is too diverse a
 concept to be amenable to one answer. Time is many things, many
 processes, many experience"¹⁴. This is why the contextualization
 of our discourse about time is necessary. Even correct view as
 different from wrong view, has to be considered like the raft
 used for crossing the river, which you discard after the job,

instead of carrying it over the shoulder. : "Thus we have arrived at another paradox, as in the case of 'the silence' of the `muni'. the sage does not entertain any views not only when he refutes `micchā-dit̄thi' (false view) but also when he preaches `sammā dit̄thi' (right view). It may also be mentioned that `sammā dit̄thi' itself embodies the seed of its own transcendence, as its purpose is to purge the mind of all views inclusive of itself".¹⁵

This dialectical point about the contextuality of the concepts the Buddhist on the path to liberation uses applies to time, space or cause. Concepts are never substitutes for experience. The emancipated sage does not cling even to the concept of nibbāna. It is said that he is neither attached to attachment nor to detachment.¹⁶ Thus there are number of discourses of the Buddha which emphasizes the value of cultivating a detached attitude to all concepts, so that one can disown them when a context demands this from you. The Buddhist experience is best described in terms of the contextual value of our constructs of time, rather than in terms of an 'ultimate timeless' experience. Thus the metaphor of time as a construction is perhaps the most important metaphor for discussion, along with the metaphor of time as a continuous flux.

The fourth model or metaphor that Ornstein mentions is what he calls the 'storage model'. He was critical of the metaphor of

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the mind as an internal clock. He argued that remembered duration is a cognitive construction based on the storage size of memory. He was interested in the encoding of retrievable stimulus information. The storage model had certain limitations and alternatives were offered by other cognitive psychologists. The material in the discourses have not been worked out by any one yet as a response to the concerns of cognitive psychology or even a good study of the nature of memory. There is a close connection between the practice of mindfulness and the functions of memory, and the Pali word sati refers to both. Basically there is an attempt to break through associative thoughts and even abstract thinking emerging on distorted perceptions. If mindfulness is well practiced, the distorting aspects of our cognitive orientations can be removed and memory of a more clear and correct form could be developed. Less distorted and more clear the memory is, it is to be inferred that ones experience of time is more authentic. If one's memory is not subjected to the delusion of permanence, there will be greater clarity and intensity of consciousness, which will present the nature of things as they are without falsifications. Once the distorting medium has been cleared and the falsifying ways of incoming information cleared, one can have a more authentic experience of time. But this is a subject to be explored. It is perhaps a paradox of the Buddhist meditational technique that we learn more

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by emptying than storing and instead of the storage metaphor, emptying the vessel may be the root metaphor that comes to the Buddhist experience of time. A Buddhist cognitive psychology if anything like that emerges will be focussed on un-learning than learning.

The Image of the stream and the notion of `flux'

The attempt to picture the Buddhist perspectives on change and temporality in terms of the `stream of consciousness' brings up again the function of a basic metaphor -- the metaphor of the `stream'. This metaphor had been so popular with ordinary laymen, popular teachers of the dhamma and a certain viewpoint put across by scholars, that it needs great critical acumen to search for its roots in the suttas. A recent study, in fact, maintains that the whole point of the `river imagery' is different. This study maintains that the study of the discourses will clearly show that it is the strength of desire and craving that is depicted by the stream imagery : "...the fundamental idea is of desire, of the craving for and enjoyment of sense-pleasures as an uncontrollable forces, a current by which one is drowned or carried along helplessly in the round of rebirth, samsāra. We read of `desire that flows along', of `attachment and sense-pleasurer that flow along', of the `swift-

flowing stream of desire'". The image of those who cut this stream of desire and craving and reach nibbāna is also found in the suttas.¹⁹ Steven Collins who makes this analysis makes the following observation : "The uses to which the imagery is put are various, as I shall show presently; but it is never used in Theravāda texts to illustrate the fact of change and the connected paradoxes of identity and difference. Rather, the dominant idea is of desire , and life-in-samsāra, as an uncontrolled forward flow, in which the ignorant unenlightened man is swept away to suffering and death".²⁰ According to him what this imagery show is the Buddhist moral attitude to desire and to draw comparisons with Heraclitus,²¹ Bergson and James may²² be going beyond the contextuality of the river image in the suttas.

Apart from these negative usage, Collins brings out a positive use. The mind of the monk in meditation is like the Ganges, far-reaching, wide immesurable',²³ and the Tathāgata, is 'deep immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean'.²⁴

If one loses the specificity of the stream imagery in Buddhism and its contextuality, it is easy to introduce th Heraclitian flux where it does not fit in." I think it is clear that the image has nothing to do with the significance of change in systematic theory, or with the paradoxes of identity and

difference; and so Rahula's collocation with the Buddhist passage of a version of the idea attributed to Heraclitus, "you cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you", obscures rather than clarifies the wider imaginative world in which the river image in Buddhism is set".²⁵ Collins discusses parallel issues which emerge in comparisons with Bergson and William James.

A criticism of a different sort has been presented by Nanavira Thera : "Aniccata or impermenence, in the Buddha's Teaching, is sometimes taken as a `doctrine of universal flux', or continuous change of condition. This is a disastrous over-simplification".²⁶ His point is that the Buddha described the world as subject to arising, passing away and changing whilst standing.²⁷ The Buddha expected the intelligent worldling to take the fact of impermanence as evident, observe it intelligently and mindfully and apply this to his own existence. There was no great theorising on the subject. Today conditions have changed : "... we have come to learn and accept the idea that change is `continuous', or that impermanence means that things are in a state of `flux', are `becoming'. are `processes'. etc., and we keep repeating these things, never for a moment pausing to determining what all this means...".²⁸ What is maintained in this criticism is that continuous change or flux is not a matter of

observation. The change that we perceive is sudden and discontinuous and it appears that continuous flux is merely postulated. When we claim that we have perceived continuous change, it can mean that the analysis of the complex experience is beyond the power of the person or that a kind of postulation has intruded into his so-called experience. Our knowledge of time comes from the perception of change. Thus regarding the problem whether we perceive continuous change, we can accept that we perceive discontinuous change. In the cinema for instance, we see a succession of still pictures and we perceive movement, but such movement is no evidence for continuous change. When we come to mental states, the notion of continuous change is even more problematic : "Once the notion of continuous change or flux is ruled out we find the structure of change of mental states (or mental objects) has much more in common with that of physical objects than might appear at first sight. Mental states such as grief, joy, etc. persist and vanish." What is characteristic in this process is the arising (uppāda), passing away (vaya) and changing while standing (thitassa aññathattam). This third feature may be described as otherwiseness in persistence" or even as "difference in sameness." As Wettimuni describes the nature of change : "when all these three characteristics are taken into account it means that a thing arises and passes away, and between its arising and passing away it endures as the same thing whilst

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changes occur to it at subordinate levels of generality." If one understands the analysis of change in Buddhism as related to the notion of impermanence, there is no need to posit a notion of continuous flux,. The metaphor of the `stream' needs careful handling.

Our discussion of the Buddhist metaphors related to the understanding and experience of temporality show that metaphors can be useful at times, distorting at times, that they are context bound and need careful handling. Not only the metaphors, but also the conceptual baggage which is used for the description of the experience of `time' need to be tied to context, and in the final analysis, the concept is no substitute for experience. Discourse about `time' with the inherant difficulties of language, concepts and metaphors will always call for a little `ground clearing'. Clarity of concepts and metaphors may play an important role in the initial task of ground clearing.

NOTES

1. See, The confessions of St. Augustine, Trans., Rex Warner, (Mentor-Omega Books, New York, 1963).
2. McTaggart, J.M.E., "The Unreality of Time", Mind, New Series, no 68, 1908, pp 457-474.
3. Robert E. Ornstein, On the Experience of Time, (Penguin books, New York, 1975), p 23.
4. ibid pp 34-41.
5. ibid p 34.
6. Nānānanda Thera, Concept and Reality, (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1971) p 79.
7. ibid.
8. Michael shallis, On Time, (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982), p 16.
9. The Dialogues of the Buddha, III, 252.
10. David J. Kalupahana, "The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality", Philosophy East and West, Volume XXIV, no 2, 1974, p 188.
11. John M. Koller, "On Buddhist Views of Devouring Time", Philosophy East and West Volume XXIV, no 2, 1974, p 205.
12. Nānānanda Thera, Concept and Reality, p 36.
13. Middle Length Sayings, I, 130-142.
14. Robert E. Ornstein, On the Experience of Time, p 109.
15. Nānānanda Thera, Concept and Reality, p 39.

16. Sutta Nipāta, verse 795.
17. see, Nānaponika Thera, The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, (Rider, London, 1975). pp 19.30.
18. Steven Collins, Selfless Persons, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), p 249.
19. Suttanipāta verse, 715.,948 (cited by Collins).
20. Steven Collins Selfless Persons, 249.
21. Steven Collins, Selfless Persons pp 252-258.
22. *ibid.*
23. *ibid* 259.
24. *ibid.*
25. pp 252-253.
26. Nānavira Thera, Clearing the Path, (Path Press, Colombo, 1987), p 57.
27. *ibid.*
28. The point brought out by Nanavira Thera is elaborated in more detail by Wettimuny : R.G.de S Wettimuny, The Buddha's Teaching and the Ambiguity of Existence, (M.D.Gunasena, Colombo, 1978), p 160.
29. *ibid.* p 169.
30. *ibid.*