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## Buddhist Meditation and the Consciousness of Time

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## BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF TIME

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**Abstract:** This paper first reviews key Buddhist concepts of time — *anicca* (impermanence), *khanavada* (instantaneous being) and *uji* (being–time) — and then describes the way in which a particular form of Buddhist meditation, *vipassana*, may be thought to actualize them in human experience. The chief aim of the paper is to present a heuristic model of how *vipassana* meditation, by eroding dispositional tendencies rooted in the body-unconscious alters psychological time, transforming our felt-experience of time from a binding to a liberating force.

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*Time, the devouring tyrant.*<sup>1</sup>  
*Time, the refreshing river.*<sup>2</sup>

‘I come as Time, the waster of the peoples,’ says Krishna in the *Gita* (chapter 11). And human beings, beholding the disappearance of all things beloved into time’s ravenous jaws, scanning the ruin left by its ineluctable march, understandably recoil. Anxiety about time haunts human life. It is one of the forms of suffering for which the Buddha, long ago, hoped to offer a remedy. It is my intention in this paper to offer an heuristic account of how Buddhist mental culture (*bhavana*), as cultivated in the Theravadin tradition and usually referred to as *vipassana* meditation, transforms the human experience of time.

I say ‘transforms’ rather than ‘transcends’ because my focus in this paper is the process of liberation rather than its putative end. To be sure, Buddhism, like other wisdom traditions, envisions the possibility of a final and complete transcendence of time: the *nibbana* into which a fully awakened being passes at his or her physical death is supposed to end all temporal process. But I am more concerned to describe the path’s proximate, rather than its final, results, more concerned with the transformative possibilities of the work than with the transcendental imponderables of its consummation. This is in large part because the achievement of arhathood, without which final *nibbana* cannot be reached, is by all indications extremely rare.<sup>3</sup> The Buddha himself said that the practice of the way was beneficial in the beginning, beneficial in the middle, and beneficial in the end. If so, then perhaps the rarity of the end provides some justification for our dwelling upon the benefits of the long journey towards it.

In most Buddhist lives, then — and here I am limiting the term ‘Buddhist’ to those who believe that serious engagement with meditative practice is an indispensable ingredient of the way — the benefit of the path lies not in ‘transcending’ time but in the establishment of skillful relationship to our all-but-ineluctable temporality. Short of *nibbana*, the aim of Buddhist meditation is not to escape time-consciousness but to enter into it with an indescribable intimacy, and thereby to transmute it from a binding to a liberating force, from a devouring tyrant into a refreshing river.

<sup>1</sup> Traditional expression.

<sup>2</sup> Attributed to W.H. Auden by Joseph Needham (1943).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. King (1980), p. 118.

### A Note on Consciousness

One of the greatest introspective psychologists who ever lived, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, never attempted to define consciousness. He left unanswered the question of whether 'mind' and 'body' are ontologically distinct, explicitly rejecting it as a question that did not lead to edification (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 63). He hinted that such questions could easily become 'a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet show, a writhing and a fetter' (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 72). His primary aim was not to describe consciousness but to change it, to create within it the optimal conditions for the arising of well-being. For this work a basic, tacit understanding of consciousness as a presumably common human medium functioning as an 'awareness of' seemed to be sufficient. Though the early Buddhist tradition was mightily interested in a *taxonomy* of states-of-consciousness, it avoided an ontology of consciousness, preferring instead an heuristic, general picture of its co-operation with other dimensions of the human organism for the purpose of providing theoretical support for the practical work to be undertaken. Nevertheless, a few assertions can perhaps be ventured so as to place the consciousness-discourse of this paper somewhere on the map of the contemporary consciousness studies.

Buddhist psychology is keen to teach its students to regard themselves not as 'minds' or as 'bodies' but as living processes in which both mental and physical forces mutually and ceaselessly interact. Since talk of a 'self' was likely to obscure this way of seeing things, the Buddha abandoned it and instead urged his followers to look upon themselves as ever-shifting precipitates of five co-conditioning factors (*skandhas*): a physical substrate (body), sensations, perceptions, dispositional tendencies and consciousness.

Both in this key Buddhist formula (five *skandhas*) and in the equally important 'twelve links of dependent arising', consciousness is seen as arising dependently out of a complex of factors. Consequently the phrase 'pure consciousness' is, for this lineage of ideas, an oxymoron. Consciousness is always consciousness *of*, since it is precisely the 'of' that, so to speak, brings consciousness into being. Consciousness, in other words, is seen as *conditioned*; therefore, the Theravadin notion of consciousness is farthest away from the mental monist (idealist) outlook that sees consciousness as somehow ultimate.

However, it is equally clear that consciousness is also a *conditioning* factor, that lines of causation run not only to it but from it, and that therefore neither physical monism (i.e. materialism) nor epiphenomenalism can claim the Theravadin Buddhist view as theirs. Indeed, it is remarkable that even in the most analytic and reductive phases of this tradition (the Abhidhamma literature), in which a practitioner might begin to think that the Buddha was after all a materialist, commentators never abandon the practice of analysis in terms of both mental and physical factors as if both, at least at the level of conceptual analysis, were irreducibly real.

Therefore, if the understanding of consciousness tacitly assumed in this paper was forced to align itself with one of the contending theoretical positions in consciousness studies, it would, I believe, take up residence in the camp of dualist interactionism, where both 'mind' and 'matter' (whatever they are) are real and that they causally affect one another.

The later tradition, of course, would not remain content with even this provisional, pragmatic dualism. Some Mahayana schools would assert that consciousness was indeed the ultimate reality; others would suggest that mind and matter were, in the last analysis, complementary manifest modes of an ineffable, unmanifest reality. But these propositions are well beyond the scope of this paper.

### A Buddhist Sense of Time: *Anicca*, *Khanavada* and *Uji*

The doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*) is fundamental to Buddhist practice. This fact is vividly underscored in the Buddha's dying words: 'All formations are impermanent; work out your liberation with diligence.' As frequently as one finds the ocean's taste salty, one finds upon entering Buddhist practice an emphasis on the law of incessant change. In Theravadin meditative traditions, concentrative attainments are finally at the service of *vipassana* or insight, and insight is always into the three marks of existence — impermanence, conditionality (*anatta*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). The three marks are correlative and mutually implicatory. Insight into impermanence — an unspeakably intimate awareness of the temporality of all psychic and somatic events — is often the gateway to more comprehensive insight into the other two marks. The Buddha's doctrine of impermanence is as radical as that of any other thinker, Heraclitus' included. You cannot step in the same river twice not only because it is in the next instant no longer the same river, but also because it is neither the same foot nor the same you. Every cell, every atom, every neuron, every nexus and every part of every nexus: changing, changing, changing.

Over the Buddhist centuries, at least two other notions have grown out of *anicca* and added nuance to it. They are: *khanavada* (Pali: instantaneous being or momentariness), probably an early Buddhist attempt to formalize the doctrine of impermanence but which was speculatively elaborated and over-absolutized by the scholastic Abhidharmists; and, on the other side of the Buddhist world a millennium and a half later, *uji* (Jap: being-time) attributed to the Zen master, Dogen. Despite their geographical and temporal distance from one another the notions of *khanavada* and *uji* are close in their attempt to correct the mind's mistaken tendency to overlook the present moment. Perturbed in the midst of its habitual and ceaseless intentional flow toward the future, the mind tends to devalue the present moment and overlook it as but one more moment in the sequence of causal relations, an effect of past causes and a cause of future effects. Our usual sense of the present is of a single moment within a time stream understood to exist 'out there', a container in which events occur. It is precisely this apprehension which is at the root of the problem for, as David Loy (1988) explains,

. . . in order for time to be a container, something must be contained within it: objects. And for objects to be 'in' time, they must themselves be nontemporal — i.e. self-existing [emphasis his]. In this way a delusive bifurcation occurs between time and 'things' generally as a result of which each gains a spurious reality. The first reified 'object' and the most important thing to be hypostatized as nontemporal is the 'I', the sense of [some aspect of the] self as . . . permanent and unchanging. So the objectification of time is also the subjectification of the self which thus appears only to discover itself in the anxious position of being a nontemporal entity inextricably 'trapped' in time (p. 220).

If we accept Loy's reading, then the notions *khanavada* and *uji* can each be seen as conceptual correctives to the 'delusive bifurcation between things and time' that comes about as a result of ontologizing time as a container. For both the early Buddhist doctrine of *khanavada* and the later Japanese Mahayana notion of *uji* suggest that there are no things, but only 'thingings'. Reality is pure process, pure temporal becoming, and *khanavada* can be seen as anticipations of Whitehead's 'actual occasions', those perpetually perishing throbs of experience which are nevertheless the ultimate facts composing the universe in its creative advance. Events, says Kenneth Inada (1974) speaking from the perspective of *khanavada*, do not flow *in* time, but *as* time.

This is Dogen's point as well in his poetic rendition of *uji* (being-time):

The time we call Spring blossoms directly as flowers.  
The flowers in turn express the time called Spring.  
This is not existence within time; existence itself is time.<sup>4</sup>

Loy's more prosaic instruction well summarizes the transformed notion of time encouraged alike by *khanavada* and *uji*:

We normally understand objects such as cups to be 'in' space, which implies that they must have a self-existence distinct from space. However . . . the cup is irremediably spatial. All its parts must have some thickness and without the various spatial relations among the bottom, sides, and handle, the cup would not be a cup . . . [T]he cup is space . . . [it] is what space is doing in that place . . . The same is true for the temporality of the cup. The cup is not a nontemporal, self-existing object that happens to be 'in' time, for its being is irremediably temporal. The point of this is to destroy the thought-constructed dualisms between things and time. . . The being-times we usually reify into objects cannot be said to occur *in* time, for they *are* time (Loy, 1988, pp. 220–1).

This may sound at first as if Loy has used the interdependence of time and objects only to deny the reality of objects, while leaving 'time' reified. But the dialectic cuts both ways. To say that there is only temporal process with no nontemporal 'thing' anywhere to 'suffer' it, is actually equivalent to saying there is no time, no container, no reference for temporal predicates. Just as 'Spring' is not a 'time' when flowers bloom, but flowers-blooming *is* Spring, and just as winter is not a time when flowers die but flowers-dying *is* winter, so too 'birth' and 'death' are not times when I appear or I disappear, but I-appearing-disappearing (i.e. changing) every moment *is* birth and death. Says Loy:

Because life and death, like Spring and Summer, are not in time, they are in themselves timeless. *If there is no one nontemporal who is born and dies, there is only birth and death* [his emphasis] . . . with no one 'in' them. Alternatively, we may say that there is birth-and-death in every moment with the arising and passing away of every thought and act (p. 222).<sup>5</sup>

This is why Dogen, Loy's mentor on these matters, can say: 'Just understand birth and death is itself *nirvana*. . . Only then can you be free from birth and death.'<sup>6</sup> What *khanavada* and *uji* convey, then, is that I am not 'in' time, but rather, I am time. But this

<sup>4</sup> Masunaga Reiho, *The Soto Approach to Zen* (Tokyo: Layman Buddhist Society Press, 1958), p. 68. My source for this quote and reference was Loy (1988), p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> Loy's nondual deconstruction of time is one of a number of ways that he cuts through the traditional irreconcilability of the great philosophies of flux and the great philosophies of permanence. A brief sampling of his conclusion:

*The immutability of the Now is not incompatible with change* . . . So Heraclitus/Buddhism and Parmenides/Vedanta are both right. There is nothing outside the incessant flux, yet there is also something that does not change at all: the standing now. What transcends time (as usually understood) turns out to be time itself. This breathes new life into Plato's definition . . . time is indeed the moving image of eternity, provided that we do not read into this any dualism between the moving image and the immovable eternity. In Buddhist terms, life-and-death are the 'moving image' of nirvana. This paradox is possible because, as with all other instances of subject-object duality, to forget oneself and become one with something is at the same time to realize its emptiness and 'transcend' it (Loy, 1988, pp. 223, 224).

<sup>6</sup> In the *Shoji* fascicle of Dogen's *Shobogenzo*. My source for the quote is Loy (1988), p. 222.

also means that I am free from time (in its ordinary sense) because to the degree that I viscerally discover that there is no 'I', I also discover that there is no (separate) 'time'. 'Only when time is understood as a determining container of change,' writes Asian philosophy scholar John Koller, 'is there *dukkha*.' He continues:

However, when time is understood to be simply a *conceptual* ordering of temporality without real power to originate and terminate becoming, one is free from time and bondage to inevitable death. When one transcends the entrapment of concepts and no longer ontologizes conceptual existence, then the conceptual space of time loses its binding power . . . (Koller, 1974).

To the degree that one could spread this intellectual understanding from the psyche's skin to its marrow (for I assume that the reader agrees that even perfect intellectual comprehension can fail to actually transform the way life feels, as it were, from the insides of one's organism) one would discover a new organismic relation to time. Time, the devouring tyrant, would become time, the refreshing river. But this is as easy to say as it is difficult to do. For this spreading cannot be accomplished by an act of will or by the entertainment of ideas. The latter are all too easily swallowed in the stream of consciousness whose deeper currents are vectored by the predispositional tendencies (in Buddhism: *sankhara*) or aptic structures<sup>7</sup> constituting the unconscious. Therefore, Dogen's admonition — '*Just understand that birth and death is itself nirvana*' (i.e. that Arising-Passing is all there is) — is deceptive. For the understanding spoken of here, in order to be effective, must penetrate to the precognitive roots of cognition, to that level of organismic feeling that is the vague but primary ground of all our human knowing.<sup>8</sup> Time is to be not only apprehended differently, but *prehended* differently, and the latter requires nothing less than the deconstruction and reconstitution of the hidden roots of conscious awareness—precisely the aim of Buddhist attentional disciplines.

### Buddhist Meditation and Time Consciousness

#### 1. *Samatha (concentration) and vipassana (insight)*

In his *Buddhist Meditation*, Edward Conze (1975) puts it plainly: 'Meditational practices constitute the very core of the Buddhist approach to life' (p. 11). The presumption that the insight gained from such practices is equally disclosed to intellectual analysis, even of the highly refined and subtle sort, seems to be rejected again and again in Buddhist literature. Buddhism's deepest insights are available to the intellect, and powerfully so, but it is only when those insights are discovered and absorbed by a psyche made especially keen and receptive in meditative discipline, that they begin to find their fullest realization and effectiveness.

The various forms of Buddhist *bhavana* begin with an effort toward sustaining nondiscursive attention so as to establish some stability within the mental flux. This practice is called *samatha* (Pali: concentrative tranquility), and it consists of the attempt to train attention to remain steadfastly aware of a given object for longer and longer intervals. This attempt, like any involved in learning a new art, encounters innumerable frustra-

<sup>7</sup> 'Aptic structures' is a term used by (coined by?) Julian Jaynes in his *Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicomeral Mind* and it accords well with the notion of *sankhara* or predispositional tendencies spoken of in Buddhism.

<sup>8</sup> What is referred to here is, of course, Whitehead's 'perception in the mode of causal efficacy', a pre-conscious and absolutely primary, albeit vague, mode of perception from which is abstracted the clear and distinct sensory data and thought, (i.e. perception in the mode of presentational immediacy) of conscious awareness.



tions, but depending on factors such as duration and intensity of practice, personal ripeness, and a conducive context for practice, the mind becomes palpably calmer and clearer. Basic concentration (*samatha*), then, is the *sine qua non* of Buddhist attentional practices. Without it, further steps are impossible. With it, one of two basic deployments are possible.

On the one hand, concentration practice can lead to increasingly profound states of absorption called 'jhana'. Buddhist tradition is ambivalent about this route, however, for though it seems to encourage the cultivation of the *jhanas* and to insist on their profundity, it also dismisses them as nonproductive of liberation. For example, scriptural accounts tell us that the Buddha mastered the highest *jhanas* under his first two meditation teachers, but he found that his virtuoso mastery of these rarified states (wherein time is transcended, though only temporarily) could not produce liberating enlightenment; that is, they could only temporarily mask but could not eliminate the poisons of craving, aversion, and ignorance. Therefore, he abandons them, the scriptures say, 'in disgust'.<sup>9</sup> Robert Gimello (1983) makes the point emphatically:

... the ecstatic and unitive experiences [i.e. *samatha* leading to *jhana*] . . . which are just the experiences usually cited by those who aver the essential identity of Buddhist mysticism with the mysticism of other traditions, are shown to have *no liberative value or cognitive force in themselves* (p. 63).

And the learned Buddhist commentator Sangharakshita adds:

... To get 'stuck' in a superconscious state [*jhana*] — the fate that befalls so many mystics — without understanding the necessity of developing insight, is for Buddhism not a blessing but an unmitigated disaster.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, concentration can be deployed precisely toward what Sangharakshita has just called 'developing insight'. This cultivation of insight (Pali: *vipassana-bhavana*) is something rather different from what is usually meant by mystical experience or the cultivation of same, and seems to have little to do with the standard categories of mystical literature like 'transcendence', 'union with the ultimate', 'pure consciousness' and so on. Rather, insight (*vipassana*) is a technique of observation in which one learns to observe, within the framework of one's own body and at a level of subtlety that defies description, the nature of mental and physical phenomena. The aim, simply put, is to see viscerally and directly through a highly refined lens that all phenomena share the three 'marks' of existence. Phenomena are without exception impermanent (*anicca*), and therefore contingent (*anatta*), and therefore intrinsically unsatisfactory (*dukkha*). Testifying to the difference between the cognitive and the contemplative perception of these marks the Buddha's chief disciple, Sariputra, is reputed to have said: 'Those truths of which before I had only heard, now I dwell *having experienced them directly within the body*, and I observe them with penetrating insight.'<sup>11</sup> It is the testimony of the Buddhist psychologi-

<sup>9</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya*, I.240 ff. Quoted in Thomas (1927), p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Sangharakshita (1957/1966), p. 172. Sangharakshita's full statement on this issue is worth noting:

In fact, with the sole exception of neighborhood-concentration, though the various stages of *samadhi* are a means to the development of liberating insight . . . they are even as a means not indispensable. Hence two kinds of disciples are distinguished. There are those who attain the transcendental paths (*ariya-magga*) with 'tranquility' as their vehicle (*samatha-yanika*) and those who, on the other hand, attain them by means of bare insight alone (*suddha-vipassana-yanika*), without having passed through any of the *jhanas* (loc. cit.).

<sup>11</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya*, XLVIII (IV). v. 10 (50), Apana Sutta. My source for the quote and reference is Hart (1982), p. 157. Italics mine.

cal tradition that such insight into the real nature of mind-body phenomena can become so penetrating as to lead to the lasting transformation of character and quality of awareness that Buddhism identifies as liberation and beatitude.

## 2. *Field notes: an intensive vipassana practice period*

In the realm of Buddhist practice the author is neither an expert nor a beginner. He has logged over 3000 hours on that bed of agony/seat of repose known as the meditation cushion, over half of it during intensive practice periods. Of the latter, his most recent stint was a silent 20-day period in the Spring of 1995.

The first seven days of the practice period are devoted to developing one-pointed concentration (*samatha*) so as to sharpen the probe with which one will investigate in succeeding days the fluxing field of events called 'mind' and 'body'. The concentration-object in this particular tradition is the natural flow of respiration as it makes itself felt on the small area below the nostrils and above the upper lip.

One might well imagine how initially difficult it is to feel, even for a moment, the soft, subtle touch of the incoming and outgoing respiration on this tiny area, let alone sustain one's attention upon this phenomenon for an entire hour, hour after hour, throughout the long meditation day. Nevertheless, the combination of silence and serious effort make this difficult task a possible one. For the meditation day consists of 10–12 hours of absolutely still sitting, complemented by continuing efforts to remain acutely aware of the process of respiration while eating, walking, washing and all other non-sitting activity. This makes for a total of 14–16 hours of intensive practice per day. After four or five days, one finds that one's attention is able to remain fixed on this one area of sensation with little or no distraction for large portions of the one to one-and-a-half hour meditation sessions.

To someone who has never deployed his/her mind and body in this way, the whole process may appear slightly insane. Why would anyone with a healthy body and an active mind want to spend seven insufferably long days doing absolutely nothing but trying to remain steadfastly attentive to the upper-lip sensations occurring from moment to moment as a result of incoming and outgoing respiration? Perhaps the best answer to this question is the sports principle: no pain, no gain. One does not enter new domains of human experience by persisting in one's routines, however salutary. In this case, only in this way can the probe of attention be adequately honed for the deep and delicate work it will do in the remaining thirteen days.

This delicate work is insight (*vipassana*). In line with the ancient *Satipatthana Sutta*, the key scripture for the entire Theravada Buddhist meditation tradition, the practitioner now turns his sharpened attention to one of four fields. They are: mental states; mental objects (i.e. thoughts); [general] bodily states; and [particular, discrete] body sensations. For all intents and purposes, these four fields cover the full, fluxing sensorium of the mind-body phenomenon.

The meditator is not asked to directly observe all four of these fields simultaneously, but usually only one. In any case, any one field deeply investigated will automatically involve at least peripheral awareness of the other three, any one of which can be directly focussed upon as prudence sees fit. In the author's case, the particular field chosen for investigation was the field of body-sensations.

The instruction to the meditator, constant for thirteen days, is as follows: to move one's (now rather refined) attention circumspectly from the top of the head to the tips of the toes, and in reverse, minute body part by minute body part, in ceaseless repetition, and to



observe the sensations occurring at these sites. (The bio-psychic assumption here is that where there are cells there are sensations and therefore that sensations are occurring *everywhere* on the body whether or not one's conscious awareness at any given moment is sharp enough to feel them.) But — and this is crucial — this observing must be done objectively, choicelessly, dispassionately, nonreactively. This is the meaning of the dictum that attention must be 'bare'. Objects are to be attended to without evaluation, judgement, or any kind of cognitive or emotive elaboration or selection. Bare attention is the noninterpretive, nonreactive awareness of one's predominant experience mind-body moment by mind-body moment. So for thirteen more days, amid total silence, one 'sweeps' the body with one's bare attention surveying it for sensations (Pali: *vedana*).

And what sensations does one experience? One experiences innumerable neutral sensations, innumerable unpleasant sensations (i.e. physical pain), and many pleasant sensations ranging from great bodily ease to intense rapture. One also cannot help but notice the other fields as well and how their phenomena too are impermanent. One sees, for example, that one's general mental state, its overall tone, has been in constant flux. The same holds true of mental sensations, i.e. thoughts, ideas and images. In moments of relative distraction they arise countless in the mind, run the gamut of emotional colours and intensities . . . and pass away. But what is the purpose of all this infinitely boring and banal observation? One might think that the purpose is to experience those occasional floods of rapture, or those luminous, egoless states in which Nibbanic peace is tasted. But no. Though such states do occur, they are in the context of insight training of no more intrinsic value than are the unpleasant and painful ones, for *all* sensations, including the mental sensations we call thoughts and indeed all the phenomena of the mind-body sensorium, teach but one thing: impermanence (and the other two marks co-implied by it).<sup>12</sup> Is that all? Yes, but it is enough. Should the reader find this hard to believe, s/he should pause to carefully weigh the following words attributed to the Buddha himself:

The enlightened one has become *liberated* . . . *by seeing as they really are the arising and passing away of sensations*, the relishing of them, the danger of them, the release from them [emphasis mine].<sup>13</sup>

Insight, then, consists of (1) direct apprehensions at ever subtler levels of awareness that all phenomena within the fluxing sensorium we call 'mind' and 'body' are without exception impermanent — this cannot be stressed too strongly or too often; and (2) in the corresponding transformation of the aptic structures of the unconscious in proportion to the depth and continuity of that apprehension, a transformation that issues in new forms of behaviour and awareness.

What now remains for us to do is to explain how (2) above may be thought to occur. In other words, how is it that the contemplative perception of impermanence yields, in general, a transformation of the unconscious determinants of consciousness, and specifically, a transformation of the human time-sense?

### 3. *Attention and the transformation of consciousness*

To understand how attentional practices transform the unconscious roots of awareness, we must first picture to our ourselves how those roots come to be. I have written of this elsewhere (Novak, 1987) at the length it requires but must now be content to present only a brief sketch.

<sup>12</sup> Impermanence always co-implies the other two 'marks of existence', namely, absence of self-subsistence (*anatta*) and lack of lasting satisfaction (*dukkha*).

<sup>13</sup> *Digha Nikaya*, 1. Brahmajala Sutta. My source for the quote is Hart (1982), p. 148.

Let us recall that we are creatures of desire who enter the world possessed of what Thomas Aquinas called the *desiderium naturale* or Spinoza the *conatus*: a persistent need to preserve and expand our being. The life activities that spring from this fundamental drive we may call the self-project. Every human being longs to be special, to sense itself as a centre of importance and value. This self-project is more or less easily managed during infancy when one lives in a magical, self-enclosed world in which all one's surroundings are extensions of one's own centre. But quite soon the party is over. The individual begins to collide with real existential limits in a world where s/he is decidedly not the centre, and the agonizing struggle for secure, inviolable self-esteem is set in motion.

In order to fulfil the demands of the self-project the growing child learns that it must defend itself against those thoughts and physical sensations which emphasize its contingency and impotence while playing up those thoughts and experiences (i.e. sensations) that enhance the feeling of secure self-possession. By the time one is old enough even to begin to take an objective view of the project, one is already hopelessly enmeshed in it, with little chance to escape its incessant demands. The self-project unfolds into an ego-centric system in which one's beliefs, feelings, experiences, perceptions and behaviours are automatically viewed and assessed around one's sense of worth as an individual.

The assessment process, automatic and barely conscious, is basically simple. Experiences (i.e. mental and physical sensations) are reacted to according to whether they expand or diminish one, affirm or negate one's will to be. The psyche becomes a webwork of likes and dislikes, desires and aversions both gross and subtle, which manifest the personality in the same way that black and white dots can create the illusion of a face. Time and repetition harden parts of the webwork into iron necessity. The psyche has become a set of predispositions and automatic response patterns which largely determine the quality of one's interactions with reality. One is involved in a 'personal construction of reality' in which one automatically (and mostly unconsciously) limits, selects, organizes and interprets experience according to the demands of the self-project.

We are suggesting, then, that in the course of human development, a network of psychological structures is built up by many and complex variations on the themes of affirmation and negation of one's will to be. Our long-term desires, aversions, sore spots, fixations — in other words, our deeply habituated predispositions (Buddhism's *sankhara*) — are crucial components of this network. They function as pathways along which our psychic energy travels and the result in consciousness is the endless associational chatter and spasmodic imaginative-emotive elaborations of experience with which we are familiar. Note that there is nothing wrong with emotions as such. They are natural manifestations of real joy and real pain. But our imaginary elaborations prolong the emotive experience into a spasm or cramp that afflicts our entire reception of and response to the world. At our worst, we move from cramp to cramp. In other words, energy that would otherwise be manifested as the delight of open, receptive and present-centered awareness is inexorably drawn to these structures and there is gobbled — dis-integrated — into the imaginative-emotive cinema and commentaries that suffuse ordinary consciousness. The problem here, contemplative traditions say as if with one voice, is habitual inattention, a form of unawareness that permits the automatized structures of the psyche to function unchecked. The longer this process continues the more deeply chiseled the grooves of psychological habit become. The machinery built up by our psychological past runs by itself, disperses our attention down the lanes of our past or catapults it into the streets of our future, and largely determines our states of mind, indeed the very feeling of what it is to be alive.

We can now understand the psychotransformative import of the attentional practices described earlier. The effort to sustain attention while sitting in a still posture and in a stimulus-poor environment opens the practitioner's awareness to the flood of thoughts and sensations that arise impersonally and autonomously from within. The unconscious *ex-presses* itself as the stream of thoughts and images that interrupt the continuity of attention and as the constant play of sensations on the body. But now, in training, as if for the first time, one does not scratch the itch, or move the pained knee, or think the thoughts, or follow the fantasy. One simply establishes and re-establishes attention and with that attention *observes*, impartially and equanimously, the arising and passing of all these phenomena. In other words, thoughts and sensations continue to arise due to the automatism of deeply embedded psychological structures [what we have been calling predispositional tendencies (*sankhara*) or aptic structures] *but their lure is not taken*. In the posture of bare attention, associational chains responsible for all the chatter in consciousness and our constant abduction into the dead past or the unreal future are now deprived of a chance to chain-react. Similarly, body-sensations to which we had formerly blindly reacted with craving or aversion, are now seen in their ephemerality, and with each such 'seeing' the habit-reaction grows weaker. The more acute and sustained bare attention becomes, the more this trend continues.

The systematic deployment of attention, as for example in the insight practice described in this paper, would thus appear to be able to short-circuit the automated process of imaginative-emotive over-elaboration of experience and to reduce the habit-driven reactions to bodily sensations that are the long-term residue of our self-project. And it is precisely here that we must glimpse the attention's potential to effect deep psychological transformation. Just as Freud compared his investigation of the unconscious to the draining of the Zuider Zee or a vast land reclamation project, we may compare insight-practice (*vipassana-bhavana*) to a similar strategy of 'starvation'. The automatized structures of the unconscious need constant diet of energy. But every moment that available psychic energy is consolidated in bare attention is a moment when these automatized structures cannot reinforce themselves. In the dynamic world of the psyche, there is no stasis: if automatized predispositions do not grow more strongly solidified, they begin to weaken and dissolve. When deprived of the nutriment and stimulation formerly afforded them by our distracted states of mind, these automatized tendencies begin to lose their integrity, begin to disintegrate. Energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence, fantasy and fear now can appear as the delight of present-centeredness. The deconstruction or de-automatization of old unconscious habit-pathways leads to a new reticulation of those pathways and consequently to the general mode of consciousness constellated by them. By eroding the predispositional tendencies built up over time by the self-project one discovers new modes of receptivity, internal freedom and clarity. The mind acquires the new habit of spending less energy on the imaginative elaboration of desire and anxiety that haunt our being-in-the-world. Ideas, images and emotions still arise in the mind, but one is now less easily caught up in spasmodic reactions to them, less easily yanked into the past or flung into the future by their reverberations or associations. They begin to be experienced in their purity and thus 'leave no tracks' as Zen Buddhists are fond of saying. 'Right Mindfulness,' says the Theravadin scholar Nyanaponika Thera (1973, p. 41), 'recovers for man the lost pearl of his freedom, snatching it from the jaws of dragon Time.' Time still passes and one grows old, experiencing decay. But the fear-and-desire bound organism begins to wake up and to taste his/her primordial freedom, begins to find release into the Present, into the inexhaustible aesthetic richness of the fleeting *now*, that intersection of Time and Eternity

where the sacred dwells. 'The crush of time,' says N. P. Jacobson (1986) who has written perceptively on these matters,

... make[s] a shambles of life's rich qualitative flow (p. 42) ... Buddhist meditation is a discipline that unravels the ego-dominated life by shifting the center of gravity over to the flow of relatively unstructured quality in the passing *now* (p. 63) ... The whole thrust of the Buddhist orientation is to open our experience more fully to what Northrop has called 'the undifferentiated aesthetic continuum (p. 40) ... For those who are able through meditation and analysis to maintain their center of gravity in the passing *now* nature confers upon them one sign that they have succeeded. That sign is joy — celebrating the wonder of being every day alive (p. 86) ... This is what it means to be free, free to celebrate the aesthetic richness which comes as a gift from beyond the claims of the self (p. 38).

### Conclusion

Buddhism tames time, then, not by denying its reality but by radically accepting it. Confronted by the jaws of time, Buddhist practice counsels not a retreat but an advance of the body-mind sensorium into the fundamental reality of temporality, the utter impermanence and momentariness of every mental and physical phenomenon. The experiential penetration of the reality of impermanence, by eroding craving, erodes time as well, changing it ripple by ripple from devouring tide into refreshing river, from a binding to a liberating force. When one knows directly that one is nothing but time, one becomes to varying degrees (in spiritual life everything is a matter of degrees) psychoemotionally free from time. One plunges into time's terrible surf only to emerge riding its wake awakened. As the famous quatrain in the *Jataka* tales has it:

Time consumes all beings  
including oneself;  
[But] the being who consumes time  
Cooks the cooker of beings.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Jataka*, ed. V. Fausboll (London, 1895/1907), ii. 260. My source for this was Kalupahana (1974).