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Time, Finitude, and Finality

Author(s): Joan Stambaugh

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In this article I should like to compare briefly some Eastern and Western ideas on the problem of time and its relation to finitude and finality. The relation of time to finitude appears to be fairly self-evident, since time has been called the principle of finitude, the mythical Chronos who devours his own children. The relation of time to finality, on the other hand, appears at first to be less evident.

What I wish to attempt in these remarks is not exactly a comparison of theories of time in East and West—I am not qualified to do that—but to see how the West has related time to the question of finitude, and how the East has ultimately related time to the question of finality.

It has almost become a hallowed tradition when one speaks on the problem of time to quote Augustine who stated that if you did not ask him what time was, he knew; but if you did ask him, he no longer knew. I should like to proceed further to quote Immanuel Kant, who stated that time was so very difficult a problem because it “yields no shape.” It was Kant who truly grasped the absolutely intangible nature of time, the impossibility of externalizing, objectifying, or representing it in any way. Even our everyday language and experience where we constantly refer to “time” hardly has any image capable of adumbrating time. The watch or clock is solely an instrument for *measuring* time; it is, by no means, an image for it.

At the same time, it was also Kant who first understood the intimate relation between time as the form of inner sensibility, and consciousness or the self.

By the phrase, “form of inner sensibility,” Kant meant that not only must all of our outer, objective experience be in space, but all of our inner experience, which includes the outer as well, must take place in the stream of successive moments in time. The link between time as the inner form of all thoughts, feelings, and experience, and the person having these experiences was so close that Kant believed that time and the self were somehow inseparable without being identical. Thus Kant saw that time was the intangible core of existence itself. He was a major link on the way from thinking time as the framework in which things occur toward thinking of time as this occurrence itself. Before Kant there was a tacit philosophical assumption that things were somehow “in” time in a way parallel to the way they were “in” space. The nature of this temporal “in” was left unclarified, even unquestioned. Kant still thinks of time as a *form*, the form of inner sensibility, but he linked it so closely to the “I think,” which must be able to “accompany” consciousness that the word *form* could no longer be understood as an external framework.

Kant’s line of questioning was “transcendental”; that is, he was interested

in the problem of time with regard to the way it made inner experience—and thus, ultimately, all experience in general—possible. His sole concern with time lay precisely in this analysis of the manner in which the spontaneous flow of “time” miraculously ever springing-up in our consciousness “created,” so to speak, the occurrence of our consciousness. Kant links time indissolubly with the self, but he did not link it to the *finitude* of the *individual* self. The self for Kant is the self in general, the self as the transcendental, and that means, of necessity, the universal subject of knowing.

It took Western philosophy hundreds of years to cease thinking about time as an objective framework of nature, although it never thought of time without a relationship to some kind of “numbering soul” (Aristotle), and to discover the intimate relation of time to the self. The German Idealists continued to further Kant’s insight, but retained his fundamental conception of a universal, not an individual, self; and, of time as transcendental time, what makes experience possible.

It was Martin Heidegger who first and most decisively related time to the individual “self,” thus bringing it into a radical relation to finitude, which now brings me to the substance of this article. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger accomplished at least three things with regard to the problem of time, which seem to me to be new. First of all, in relating time to the finite, existing individual (*Dasein*), he stresses the irreversibility and directedness of time in *Dasein*’s being-toward-death, thus grasping the true nature of the finitude of time, which lies not in the limited amount of time allotted to the individual, but in this very irreversibility and directedness itself. Thus, finitude loses its former sheerly quantitative meaning of “not *enough* time,” a kind of pre-philosophical meaning which “went along” with the philosophical idea of things being “in time” without ever really being integrated with it. The fact that something is in time is incapable of explaining why it should be finite, why it should ever cease to be in time. Finitude acquires the more profound meaning of the realization of the inherently indissoluble relation of life and death. Life and death are inseparable from each other. For man, life includes suffering primarily because an awareness of death is present in it, and man is aware of death because it is present in life. Death is not a medically definable event terminating physical existence. It is, rather, an awareness permeating and transforming life, not in the sense of some morbid preoccupation with dying, but in the sense of radically individualizing and authenticating us. In Buddhist terms, it makes us aware of the problem, the *task* implicit in the solution of life and death. The concept of “endless life” is a thoughtless, shallow one, which precludes any true understanding of the nature of life and death. Secondly, Heidegger removes time from its transcendental context of the knowing subject in general, and relates it to the individual. Strictly speaking, Heidegger talks neither of the universal nor the individual, but

always of what is “in each case mine” (*Jemeinigkeit*). Heidegger’s *Dasein*, human being, is neither an individual nor a subject in the traditional sense of these words. It eludes the dichotomy of individual-universal, partly through emphasizing the radical relation of man to time. Man is the time-producing, the temporalizing being. Finally, Heidegger not only dispenses with the traditional understanding of time as “in time,” he even tries to explain what this “in,” what any possible “being in,” means. “Being in” means for Heidegger the way in which the human being exists as his “there” and constitutes it through understanding of himself-in-the-world together with a certain attunement of himself-in-the-world. Contemporary slang expresses this idea of being attuned to or in tune with the world quite well by speaking of “wavelengths” which people are on and the “vibrations” which they give off.

Heidegger is perhaps the first major Western philosopher to place human finitude at the core of his philosophy, human finitude unmitigated by a doctrine of the soul’s immortality (Plato) or of some form of afterlife. He is also the first to say, roughly speaking, that man *is* time. Time is not something in which man finds himself. His very manner of being is being *in*, so to speak, temporalizing and timing, not in the sense of clocking, but of engendering time, spinning out the temporal stuff of consciousness.

To turn now to what I understand of Eastern conceptions of time, I should like to relate the Buddhist ideas of existence-time (*uji*) and instantaneous being (*kṣaṇikatva*) to the questions of being “in time” and finitude discussed earlier, and then inquire into the relation of time and finality. This attempt will, of necessity, have to be rather sketchy, and at times even speculative, since my knowledge of this subject falls far short of my interest in it.

Existence-time and instantaneous being are historically and geographically rather far apart, the first being a Japanese conception and the second an Indian Buddhist one. But since the doctrine of instantaneous being is one of the few ideas common to *all* forms of Buddhism, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna alike, it must be at least commensurate with, if not indigenous to, the later idea of existence-time.

How, then, does Buddhism relate existence to time, and what is its fundamental *question* with regard to time? Whereas the concept of time prevalent in Western thinking is almost exclusively oriented toward continuity and duration, the doctrine of instantaneous being emphasizes the radical discontinuity and absolute lack of duration in time. By relating the question of time not to the stretching out, to the extension and extent of continuity, but rather to perishing and arising, to actual occurrence itself, Buddhism attempts to explain how anything at all is able to happen, take place, and change. It seems to me that the arguments “proving” the doctrine of instantaneous being

have at least in part the function of explaining occurrence. In other words, these proofs are not only reminding us in a doctrinaire fashion of the transitory nature of things, but perhaps serve also to explain transition and change itself.

The fundamental tenets of Buddhism—emptiness, dependent origination, etc.—are not primarily theoretical or descriptive, but rather intensely practical; that is, they serve to indicate the *possibility* of a profound change, the transcendence of the cycles of life and death. Indicating this *possibility* would be tantamount to a “how-to” instruction, if such possibility could be objectively communicated, which it cannot. I shall discuss these arguments briefly.

The Buddha taught that all things are transitory, impermanent, perishable, and finite (*anitya*). (I prefer the somewhat awkward term “perishable” to the term “finite” because it expresses a verbal process, whereas finite is apt to be construed as a static spatial limitation, a concept totally incompatible with the Buddhist view.) But by impermanence or perishability, he meant not the limited duration of things which the West links with the idea of finitude; but, rather precisely, the never-finished quality and incessant restlessness of the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). It is the inability to achieve rest or finality which characterizes the so-called finitude of existence. Finitude or impermanence does not mean ceasing to be, but the impossibility of attaining anything once and for all. This can be formulated as a paradox by stating that finitude consists in a kind of *endlessness*, in the inability to achieve self-containedness.

The doctrine of instantaneous being or instantaneity seems to be a philosophical development and radicalization of the Buddha’s general statement that all things are impermanent. All things are impermanent, not only in the sense that they cannot endure forever, things are impermanent in every instant of their existence. They arise and perish each instant at a rate which defies measurement and makes it irrelevant.

I call the doctrine of instantaneous being a *philosophical* development of the general statement about impermanence, because it is hardly the kind of idea that everyday common sense would ever hit upon. It is the most radical formulation of impermanence possible and certainly sounds, at least to Western ears, very strange if not implausible.

To sketch out briefly what I know of the development of the idea of instantaneous being, it is discussed by a Buddhist school called the Sarvāstivādins, the “everything exists” school. This school claims that all three times exist—the past, the present, and the future. All are *real*. The past and future persist in a kind of endless, static duration, whereas the present moment is the brief flash of appearance emerging from the totality of persisting time. It did not take long until a later school, the Sautrāntikas, denied the reality of such a static, persisting past and future, asserting that nothing exists except

the instantaneously recurring present. *All* being is instantaneous. Two different proofs for instantaneous being are discussed: (1) in terms of perishing, and (2) in terms of “being” or existence.

(1) *The argument in terms of perishing.* In accordance with the Buddhist principle that nonbeing cannot be the effect of a cause, perishing, which is after all a form of nonbeing, cannot have an external cause. Otherwise perishing, nonbeing, would be the effect of a cause, and this is impossible. Yet we know, empirically and otherwise, that perishing is a reality. Therefore, all things must have perishing as their very nature. Everything that exists perishes of itself immediately with no delay in every instant. If it persisted at all even for a moment, it could never leave this state, could never change or perish. All being is instantaneous being.

(2) *The argument in terms of “being” or existence.* Whatever exists is instantaneous. “To be” means to be capable of meaningful action or of producing an effect (*arthakriyā*). Only something which is instantaneous can produce an effect. Anything else that is not instantaneous is either always existent and thus incapable of action because the initiation of action would require a change, so to speak, a break in existence, or else never existent and thus even less capable of action. Following the definition of being or existence as capability for action, whatever *is*, must be instantaneous. This particular argument may have in the background the two extremes which the Middle Way strives to avoid: the extremes of always existing, eternality (*śāsvata*); and of never existing, nihilism (*uccheda*). Neither of these two extreme states is capable of anything. When the implications of this are thought through strictly to the end, it is only instantaneous being which can allow for anything to happen at all.

Whereas the first argument states that whatever is instantaneous must perish of itself immediately, the second argument states that whatever is instantaneous is what truly exists, is capable of bringing about an effect. If one collates these two statements, one gets the highly remarkable principle that the meaning of existence or being is perishing. This position is the radical direct opposite of the Western tradition, beginning with Plato, which separates never-changing, eternal Being from the realm of change and becoming. Thus, it would seem that the doctrine of instantaneous being provides the philosophical foundation for the later idea of existence-time (*uji*). Existence *is* time, it does not take place *in* time. To exist means to be one’s time, if I may use the verb “to be” in a transitive sense similar to Sartre’s use of “exist,” when he says, “I exist my body.” To quote Dōgen: “Do not regard time as merely flying away; do not think that flying away is its sole function. For time to fly away there would have to be a separation (between it and things). Because you imagine that time only passes, you do not learn the truth of being-time.”

To return to the question asked earlier: what is the fundamental question with regard to time for Buddhism? It seems that this question has little to do with time as a principle of finitude, finitude understood as limited time, as not enough time. It even seems that the question of time that I am trying to elucidate is not primarily bound up with the endlessness of continuous, recurring cycles from which the individual wishes to escape, as is the case with early Buddhism and with Indian thought in general. In keeping with the de-emphasis of any kind of continuity—be it the substantial continuity of the soul which is replaced by a self constituted by groups of impersonal psychophysical components (*skandhas*), or be it the idea of any substance whatever which is replaced by “causality,” by the theory of dependent origination—time, too, is thought as something discontinuous and disparate. The question about time *shifts* from that of how to escape the continuous, recurring cycles of birth and death in which we are caught, to the question of how something significant can *occur*. As long as we are caught in the cycles of birth and death, nothing of any lasting significance can happen which is not superseded and swallowed up by the overwhelming flux of events constantly assaulting us and, so to speak, *undoing* the reality we thought we had attained. We are trapped in the endlessness of *samsāra* where no finality is possible. When, however, time is thought and experienced as discontinuous and instantaneous, it gains a “vertical” dimension which is lacking in the horizontally conceived cycles of recurrence.

This brings me by way of conclusion to the third topic of these remarks, the topic of finality. Buddhism does not have a “positive” concept of eternity comparable to that developed in the West. Whereas the West opposes a concept of eternity to the finitude of time, Buddhism—especially early Buddhism—“opposes” *nirvāṇa* to the endlessness of *samsāric* time. Western thinking developed at least four concepts of eternity: endless time; timelessness; the simultaneity of past, present, and future; and, the nunc stans or eternal present. These concepts are interrelated. Most of them seek a prolongation of durational time or at least some form of continuance. Buddhism, however, seeks a finality, whether the finality of *nirvāṇa*, the cessation of the endlessness of finitude, or *satori*, the awakening of insight which nothing can ever take away or jeopardize. *Satori* is “absolute” in that nothing can remove it. It is final in the sense that nothing coming after it can have a negative effect on it. Most of our life experiences fade away with time and ever newly arising experiences. Some of our more intense life-moments resist this tendency toward the loss of vivid immediacy. The finality of *satori* consists partly in that it is not an experience in any ordinary sense of that word and, thus, does not conflict with or give way to succeeding experiences. On the contrary, the finality of *satori* seems to vault right out of and back to everyday

experience so that Mahāyāna Buddhism can say that there is not a hair's breadth difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

To conclude, Western thinkers came to center upon time as transcendental, as what makes experience in general possible. Alongside of the inquiry into time, the whole of the tradition, insofar as it inquired into the meaning of eternity at all, thought eternity as something outside of and apart from time, negating or overcoming the finite character of time. Buddhism, in spite of some elements seemingly akin to Kant, was never interested in the transcendental problematic, but rather in the possibility of a *transcendence* of endlessness—a transcendence which, if it were to occur at all, had to occur within time itself, more explicitly, had to occur as time itself and the possibility of transforming the quality of time right here and now.