

## Mindfulness and time

If we have been meditating, we may often enough feel how time seems to fly when we are absorbed in our meditative joy or peace. On the other hand, if it is a “bad” meditation, or someone is giving a poor talk, time seems to slow down: it seems to take longer than usual.

Let me explain the second situation first because it is more common. In a difficult meditation or boring situation, time seems to “slow” down because we are thinking about it. Our cognitive process is in overdrive: we are watching the time, and wanting it to go faster. The relative effect of not getting what we desire is that it seems to take longer. This is an example of “organic” or mental time, which seems to be longer than mechanical or “tick-tock” time.

Organic time is also at work when we are having a good meditation or a good time – time seems to fly. There are two ways of explaining this perception of a relatively faster pace of time. The first is that we are “gobbling” up the experience like a very thirsty person guzzling water down his throat. We are trying so hard to take in every second of it that we actually miss the present moment. We are simply waiting to gobble up the next one, the next one, and so on.

This “gobbling” action is that of unmindfully enjoying sensual pleasures. We are so engrossed in the next moment of experience that we are not really enjoying the **present** one. There is a cognitive expectation at work here: our attention is in the future, not the present event. So, we actually miss the present, and so we don’t really enjoy it in the end. We keep wanting more of it.

Mindful lay Buddhists are taught that they may enjoy sensual pleasures in keeping with the spirit of the 5 precepts (not harming any life; not taking the not-given; not exploiting anyone sexually; not communicating falsely; and not getting drunk or addicted). The keyword here is to **enjoy** – feel the joy in the moment.

When we mindfully enjoy some **wholesome sensual pleasure** (whether in good meditation, or, in the case of the laity, sex between a married or committed couple), we should be aware of 3 aspects of the moments of our experience which I call the flow of “see, feel, mind.” We see (mindfully notice) the pleasant state arising; then, we feel it (directly experience it); then, we mind it (accept it as it is: ended or gone). This is a what I call the **affective flow** of feeling. In this case, it is a “joy cycle.”

The same mindful process can be applied to a **negative experience** (say, pain, fear or depression). We notice the 3 aspects of the unpleasant moment. We simply (impersonally) anticipate it; then, we attend to it (feel it as it is); finally, we recall it (accept it as gone). As in the “joy cycle,” so, too, it is in the “pain cycle.” We simply watch it as it is (objectively). Either way, the “holistic effect” of the whole experience is that of feel impermanence.

Whether we are experiencing pleasure or pain, when we simply “see, feel and mind” it, we are actually harmoniously “in time” with the reality of the experience. We truly, that is, objectively, “feel” the pleasure or pain for what it is.

However, when we cognize such pleasure or pain, we see it as a sense-based event, and go on to discern whether it has arisen through the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body or the mind. Then, we evaluate it (check against some past memory and perception) as being pleasant or unpleasant. With this, we go on to want more of it (when we perceive it as being “pleasant”) or reject it (when we perceive it as being “unpleasant”). All this takes time. Hence, such a negative cognition seems to last relatively longer.

In both the “joy cycle” and the “pain cycle” – the wise attention to pleasure or pain – time is minimized, as it were, to merely the cognitive moment in the flow of the experience. In fact, it is the only and the least moment of cognition – when we **mind** it (attend to it) at the end of each cycle. We merely **cognize** this experience for what it is; hence, the time involved is not dilated.

However, because we do not subjectify the experience – we do not discern, evaluate or judge it – it is not exactly correct to say that we “cognize” it. Rather, we “feel” (*paṭisaṃvedeti*) such an experience, we *directly* experience it. It is not a mentally constructed virtual reality, but an experience of true reality in the moment.

Science may measure a mind-moment of human decision to the theoretical micro-second. The practical reality is broader. In breath meditation, for example, it takes us at least a few seconds to watch the in- and out-breath. As we keep our mind focused on this, the breath slows down.

This is when we go on to watch more calm or stable aspects of the breathing process – that is, the “spaces” of breath-free peace that spontaneously and sporadically arise as the breathing slows down. As these calm spaces lengthen, we do not need to follow the breath cycle any more. We “feel” the spatial peace – this is where our attention becomes more “sharp” in terms of time. The focused moments take less time and are more frequent. The wavelength of the breath-attention becomes lower, as it were. In time, even this modulation just ends, so that there is only pervasive peace – samadhi or dhyana.

The experience of attention is always momentary. Attention only works when the object is constantly changing, like the breath, a thought, or a feeling. We cannot pluck this moment out of its “present” state. It occurs only in the present state. Technically, we can say that it arises, stays and falls away. These are the 3 phases of the present moment of our experience of discrete realities of what the mind sees as being “out there.”

When we recall the experience, we **re-cognize** either the pleasant or the unpleasant experience – or rather, our memory of it – as something that has passed. It is impermanent, non-existent, gone.

Or, if we are up it, we can see such an experience as being mentally constructed, and therefore unreal, without any essence, a figment of the past. We are now free of it. This moment, here and now, is truly ours – then, it goes its way. Living in the present is greatest gift we can enjoy – the gift of time.

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