

Time: the early Buddhist concept

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3.6.3 Early Buddhist concept of time

3.6.3.1 ONTOLOGY OF TIME

The sentence, “These states arose, **known** to him; they were present, *known* (to him); they disappeared, *known* (to him)” [§4.3b]—in terms of being and existence—gives us the 3 moments of a mental event, that is, arising, presence and absence. This 3-moment sequence is applied to all the 16 or so “states” (*dhamma*): the dhyana-factors, the attainment factors, the 5 bare aggregates and the 6 mental factors [§4.1 f etc]—all this is listed in Panel 2 of **Table 3**. They are all of the nature to arise, exist and then pass away.

In fact, there are *no* moments of time: it is simply our perception of change, alteration, becoming other—applying our mind to them, examining them, turning away from them. **Impermanence** is not about “time,” but about what we notice when our mind is rightly attentive to what is going on before us¹—such as stated in **the Bhadd’eka,ratta Suttas** (M 131-134): “ ... the past is gone, | and the future has not yet come. || Only this present state ... let one be sure of it.”*

[*M 131,3/3:187 + SD 8.9 (5)]

3.6.3.2 It helps to reflect on the Sutta teaching about **TIME** in the broader context of its early Buddhist conception. While all the major theistic religions conceive of time “historically” as being linear (with world-creation at the starting-point and world-ending at the impending other), early Buddhism (and ancient Indian religions) sees time “existentially” cyclic, that is with neither beginning nor end (*anamat’agga*), except in between world cycles when the pulsating universe is in stasis before it resumes its cycle of expanding, expanded, then contracting and a “crunched” stasis. This is called **samsāra** (cyclic existence), which also refers to the endless cycle of redeaths and rebirths. This may be said to be “cosmic” time.

With the re-evolution of the universe, its constellations, stars, planets, heavenly bodies, including the earth, “historical” or “physical” time (*kāla*) restarts. This is the “linear” sequence of time which can be assigned numbers, which are often astronomically huge. The best known of such numbers is the “aeon” or *kappa*, a term that refers to the fourfold **cycle** of expansion, steady-state, contraction and stasis, as well as to the average **lifespan** of a being (usually called *āyu,kappa*).

These lifespans are **relative** to the existential planes, totaling 31 (4 subhuman suffering states, the human realm, and 6 heavens (comprising the 11 sense-worlds); 16 form-worlds; 4 formless worlds). For example, a night and a day in the heaven of the 33 (*tāvātimsa*) is 100 human years (our average lifespan). The lifespan of the beings in the highest of the formless

¹ Cf Whitrow: “ ... the idea that time is ultimate and irreducible does not commit us to the unnecessary hypothesis that it is absolute, for moments do not exist in their own right but are merely classes of co-existent events” (*The Natural Philosophy of Time*, 1961:183)

worlds (that of the brahmas of the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception) is 84,000 aeons! Such descriptions of relative durations and lifespans refer to what we today call “**time dilation**.”

3.6.3.3 The time we live by daily is said to be **physical “clock” time** measured in years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds and fractions of seconds. This is a “scientifically” or “socially” objective or *conventional* time.

Then, there is a personal “mind-dependent” subjective, **psychological** time. This is the kind of time we experience in meditation and in rebirth in the existential states, which vary in length and quality. We can also call this “**karmic**” time, since how unwholesome (painful time) or wholesome (pleasant time) it is, depends on our own mind. Either way, karma (*kamma*) is our experience of time: we literally *do* time. When our time is *done*, we are “dead” (*kāla, kiriya*).

Most often, the early Buddhist concept of time is commonly understood in **mind-based** or *psychological* terms. In such a time-system, the past no longer exists, the future does not yet exist, only **the present** exists as an endless series of instances or moments (*khana*) in which a host of mental and physical constituents arise and cease instantaneously, like lightning or faster.

The less we notice this, ironically, the slower time seems to move. Our notion of time slows down even more so with thought or desire (such as when we are waiting for a bus that seems to be late). This apparently **slowing down** of time arises from directing our mind from the present (natural time) into the past (which has gone and does not exist) or into the future (which has not yet arisen). However, when we are enjoying our meditation, time just seems to fly, and we emerge from it to discover that we have blissfully sat for a few hours! This is an experience of **natural time**, also called “organic time.”

3.6.3.4 The Anupada Sutta (M 111) reports, in this connection with how Sāriputta, upon observing the cycle of arising-presence-disappearance of the states “understood thus: ‘So indeed, these states, *not having been*, come into being; *having been*, they pass away’” [§4.4]. Note that the key phrases are in the present tense. Moreover, it is said that he “understood.” This is **knowledge**; to be exact, it is “inferred” knowledge. The past state is recalled; he notes how it is present; and finally how it passes away.

This is mind-based cognitive (thinking) knowledge. The same process applies to affective knowing, the experience of feelings: *not having been, they come into being; having been, they pass away*. All this happens *after* the fact: it is subject to time, dependent on consciousness. This knowledge arises in time, which is relative to our perception of the world through our senses; and recalled or inferred by the mind.

3.6.3.5 We now come to another important point about the early Buddhist concept of time. Note the 2 key verbs we are now studying: “**discerned**” [§4.3 etc] and “**understood**” [§4.4 etc]—they apply to all the repeated passages related to how time is *relative* to Sāriputta’s experience. Both “discerned” and “understood” entail that these processes occur in his mind: they are mental processes, **mind-made**. These experiences take time but that time does not

have any real existence. It is only a series of **concepts** relative to the realities of the states noticed by Sāriputta. In other words, time is a relative truth of the world of experience in our own mind or consciousness.

In **the (Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta** (S 1.20), when a female forest deity tries to entice the young monk Samiddhi to enjoy sensual pleasures, he replies: “I have abandoned what takes time (*kālika*), avuso, to go after what is visible right here (*sandiṭṭhika*).” **Sandiṭṭhika** describes one of the virtues of the Buddha Dhamma, and refers to true reality, seeing which we awaken to nirvana. “**What takes time**” (*kālika*) is a humorous wordplay on sensual pleasures, especially sex, which keeps the world busy and populated.

3.6.3.6 Sandiṭṭhika, the “visible here and now,” is, of course, the present moment to which we wisely attend. From **§4.3** (and its refrains) we know of the 3 phases of each of the states: *they arose, they were present, they disappeared*. A similar triad of terms is found in **the Saṅkhata Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (A 3.47a) which describes the “conditioning characteristics of the conditioned” (*saṅkhatassa saṅkhata, lakkhaṇa*), in reference to each of the 5 aggregates, which is characterized by “arising (*uppāda*), passing away (*vaya*), a becoming-other of its presence (*ṭhitassa aññathatta*).” This triad became more systematized in the Abhidhamma as “arising” (*uppāda*), “presence” (*ṭhiti*) and “breaking up” (*bhaṅga*).

These are useful and interesting conventional terms, but they all point to what has already passed, including the “present.” These descriptive words are helpful in communicating with the world, but, in reality, none of them exists. Time, in other words, is unreal: it keeps passing away. This is the true reality of **impermanence**.

Existence occurs in time, which is itself *conditioned*. Beyond the conditioned that is samsara, there is nirvana, **the unconditioned**. Since nirvana is free of samsara, it is said to be time-free or timeless (*akālika*). It is outside of time. Hence, it is neither impermanent, nor unsatisfactory, nor has a self. Our task, then, is to be in time with our practice, ever watching the present.

Time devours all beings,
everyone, including oneself;
but the being who swallows time
cooks the one who cooks beings.
(J 245/2:260)

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