

Time-space in meditation¹

I'm not sure if you should read this reflection. This is perhaps the most difficult one, even the most cryptic, that I've written. If you do read it, despite my warning, then you should just read it like reading music, and let it play inside your heart. This is the kind of reflection that seems to mock thinking and test faith, and yet will not make sense without some contemplation or surrender. In an important sense, it is an experiential reflection, an attempt to put into words what is best felt personally. It's like meditation put into words. If you can simply enjoy it, it certainly helps.

The Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22), or the Discourse on the Parable of the Water-snake, is a remarkable early Buddhist text. It records how the Buddha uses his skillful means in teaching to reject the wrong view of an eternal self or abiding soul (*ātman*) of the Upaniṣads (the speculations of forest sages), some of the most ancient scriptures of the priestly and caste-minded brahmins.

While the Upaniṣads claim that it is the *ātman* or eternal "soul" that "sees, hears, senses, knows," the Buddha simply declares that these are all functions of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). In our mind-body duality, there is nothing permanent. The body comprises the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind – they are all impermanent. The mind functions as feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness – they, too, are all impermanent.

The world around us – whether animate or inanimate – are all composed of the 4 primary elements: earth, water, fire and wind. These are aspects of our body that are solid or resistant (earth), that holds itself together (water), that produces energy and decays (fire), and any kind of motion (wind). These are ancient words close to what we today understand as the 4 states of matter, that is, solid, liquid, gas and plasma. All these are in a state of constant flux.

The reason for the Buddha's unequivocal rejection of this Upaniṣadic notion – that of an abiding self or universal soul – is simply that it is false. If we accept the Upaniṣdic *ātman* or its like in any form, we are simply trying to *freeze* reality in the amber of dogma, as we fall into the rut and ruse of verbosity and hyperbole, the hot air that fills the guru's balloon so that they seem big, and rise so high in the sky – but for the prick of reality's needle. To see the impermanence in everything is to start to *free* ourselves by seeing directly into true reality, and to smile at it, for our being free of its guiles.

There is nothing real or true that is or can be eternal or abiding. Whatever exists must do so in time and space. Ontologically (in terms of being), **time** is change itself, the process of rise and fall of things, or rather, events. And **space** is the relationship or placement of states or matter (earth, water, fire and wind),² that is, the physical aspects of our being. It is our consciousness that creates the reality of our experiences, whether we are aware of this reality or not.

When we are aware of the reality of these experiences, we see them in terms of change (time). Then, we feel how the present is never really *there*, but a shadow of the past or an echo from the future, that at once disappears. When we directly see

¹ The reflection is based on **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) @ [SD 3.13](#) (5.2.2.4).

² On the 4 primary elements, see [SD 17.2a \(2\)](#).

this change as memory and movement, we feel the space in which change occurs. But both space and time are really the same, the difference lies only in our experience of them.

There is a relative form of space, that is, the experience of the movement of time. We can speak of absolute time when all our knowing – sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, or as form, feeling, perception, formations or consciousness – stop or seem to stop. In meditation language, this is called “dhyana” (*P jhāna*). When all consciousness of this subtle experience stops, never to find any more footing. When this occurs in a more sustained manner, then nirvana is said to have arisen.

When we understand the world and reality in this manner, there is no place whatsoever for any conception of something eternal or abiding, a self or soul, such as the Upaniṣadic *ātman*. The relative space that we experience between the momentariness that time is reduced to, acts as the continuity which seems to give us a sense of “identity,” but the reality is that we are only acting in the world.

It is such actions that give meaning to our experience. When we understand this *meaning* -- the nature of reality and its conditionality -- we go on to understand our purpose in the world, in life. Then, we accept the limitations of our physical being, rise above it through our mental being, and so attain that state beyond both space and time, where there is neither here nor there nor in between; neither coming nor going, nor standing still; where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind; where there is the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, unconditioned, the death-free – nirvana.³

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³ See (*Arahatta*) *Māluṅkyāputta Sutta* (S 35.95,13), [SD 5.9](#); *Nibbāna Patisaṃyutta Sutta 1-4* (U 8.1-4).