



On Time

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In this article, I study selected Buddhist perspectives on time. After surveying discourse references to specific times, kāla or samaya, as a way of introducing my topic, I turn to the idea of a moment, khaṇa, and the doctrine of momentariness. Then I study the three time periods in relation to vedanā, feeling tone, and proceed to the two occurrences of vedanā in the standard exposition of dependent arising, paṭicca samuppāda. Besides serving as the condition for the possible arising of craving, feeling tone is also part of name-and-form. Exploring these two contexts helps to put dependent arising into temporal perspective.

References to Specific Times

In my exploration of the topic of food in the last issue of this journal, I had referred to the practice of refraining from eating at the “wrong time”, *vikāla*. The term *kāla*, found in this expression, appears in a variety of contexts in the discourses to indicate a specific time. In what follows I survey such occurrences as a way of introducing my exploration of the connotations of “time” in early Buddhist discourse.

One example can be seen in relation to the same topic of food, namely when the Buddha or his monastic disciples have been invited for a meal. When preparations are completed, the host will dispatch a messenger to let them know that it is “time”, *kālo*, to come, as the food is

now ready for consumption. The messenger thereby “announces the time”, *kālaṃ āroceti*.

Shifting from physical to mental nourishment, it is commendable to listen to the teachings at the proper time, *kālena*. This requires approaching the Buddha or his disciples, something that should not be done when they have withdrawn into seclusion, as that would be the wrong time, *akālo*. When delivering teachings, the Buddha is one who speaks timely, *kālavādī*, and his teaching is timeless, *akāliko*.

Once the teachings have been given and a visitor wishes to depart, the Buddha will grant his leave by encouraging the visitors to do what they consider fit to do at that time, *yassadāni kālaṃ maññasi*.

The teachings received should be remembered from time to time, *kālena kālaṃ*. Their purpose is to inspire practice; hence it would be regrettable if one does not make an effort at a time when such an effort should be made, *uṭṭhānakālamhi*.

Time turns out to be, in the end, a matter of life and death. Hence passing away finds expression in the phrase “doing time”, *kālaṃ karoti* or *kālakiriya*. One who is dead therefore has “done time”, *kālakata*.

The best way to face the time of one’s death is with meditative composure. When death comes, one “should await one’s time”, *kālaṃ āgameyya*, with mindfulness and clear comprehension (SN 36.7).¹

In addition to *kāla*, another term used frequently to convey the sense of a specific point in time is *samaya*. This occurs regularly in the discourses to indicate “then”, *tena kho pana samayena*, “when”, *yasmiṃ samaye*, “once”, *ekasmiṃ samaye*, and “later”, *aparena samayena*. In addition, *samaya* can also qualify a mental experience of liberation to be “temporary” (such as when attaining an absorption), in contrast to the eradication of defilements, which is not temporary, *asamaya*.

The Moment

A term occurring less frequently in the early discourses is the “moment”, *khaṇa*, usually employed to convey the sense of an opportunity. For example, coming into contact with the liberating teachings of a Buddha is indeed an auspicious opportunity. One should not miss such an opportunity, *khaṇo mā upaccagā*, as later one will regret it when that opportunity has passed, *khaṇātīta*.

The term becomes considerably more prominent in later tradition, especially in relation to the doctrine of momentariness, *khaṇikavāda*. This doctrine involves a radicalization of the teaching on impermanence by affirming that whatever arises will without exception cease on the spot.²

The emergence of this doctrine, which was eventually accepted by a range of Buddhist traditions, might have originated from the recurrent emphasis on contemplating the fading away and cessation of phenomena in the cultivation of insight.

Another contributing factor would have been the perceived importance of preventing any misinterpretation of the evident fact of continuity of phenomena as implying a permanent entity. This need comes to the fore in the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, *Mahā-taṇhāsankhaya-sutta* (MN 38), where a monk firmly upholds the mistaken view that the same consciousness continues from one life to the next. The way he affirms his mistaken view makes it clear that he sees consciousness as some type of a permanent entity. He has failed to understand that continuity from one life to another involves only a stream of consciousness, a continuity of changing conditions, rather than a continuity of something unchanging.

As a net result of the arising of the doctrine of momentariness, however, explaining the fact of continuity becomes challenging. How to account for memory, in particular the ability to remember something after having forgotten about it for some time, if the mind is just a rapid succession of mental states, each disappearing as soon as it has arisen?

The doctrine of momentariness differs from the position taken in the early discourses, which recognize that, in between arising and passing away, things can endure for some time as processes. A discourse among the Numerical Sayings identifies this as a characteristic of all conditioned phenomena in the following manner (AN 3.47):³

An arising is evident, a vanishing is evident, and an alteration of what persists is evident.

In other words, between arising and vanishing there can be a period in which phenomena persist. What persists, however, is only a changing process.

An instruction given for applying this understanding of impermanence to actual contemplation takes the following form for the case of *vedanā*, feeling tone (AN 8.9):⁴

Known feeling tones arise, known feelings tones remain present, and known feelings tones disappear.

The same instruction is also applied to perceptions and thoughts. In this way, be it as a doctrinal position or as an actual meditation instruction, impermanence in early Buddhist thought differs from the notion of momentariness. Instead of positing an immediate disappearance after having arisen, early Buddhist thought clearly recognizes the continuity of things as changing processes.

Three Times

The manifestation of *vedanā*, feeling tone, can take place in each of the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. A recurrent instruction in the discourses on the need to avoid any I-making and my-making, let alone adopting the notion of a self, takes up explicitly the possibility that this could happen in relation to past, present, or future instances of feeling tones (or any of the other aggregates). The instruction for the case of feeling tone is as follows (SN 22.59):⁵

Whatever feeling tone, be it past, future, or present ... all feeling tone should be seen with right wisdom as it really is: this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.

The distinction into three time periods appears also in another discourse, which presents these as generally agreed-upon conventions. The discourse notes that even non-Buddhist practitioners will concur on keeping these three periods distinct for fear of being otherwise criticized. The passage relevant to the case of feeling tones proceeds as follows (SN 22.62):⁶

Whatever feeling tone that is past, has ceased, and has changed, is designated as “it was”, reckoned as “it was”, described as “it was”; it is not designated as “it is” and not designated as “it will be” ...

Whatever feeling tone that has not yet arisen, has not yet manifested, is designated as “it will be”, reckoned as “it will be”, described as “it will be”; it is not designated as “it is” and not designated as “it was” ...

Whatever feeling tone that is arisen, that is manifest, is designated as “it is”, reckoned as “it is”, described as “it

is”; it is not designated as “it was” and not designated as “it will be”.

It is worthy of note that according to this passage the distinction into three times simply concerns “pathways of language”, *niruttipathā*, “pathways of designation”, *adhivacanapathā*, and “pathways of description”, *paññattipathā*. This does not grant any ultimate reality to time in its three periods, but simply sees this as a convenient model for conceptualizing change.

Although merely a convention, the distinction as such is certainly meaningful. In terms of feeling tones, it requires acknowledging that certain manifestations of feeling tone have already changed, certain manifestations of feeling tone are changing now, and certain manifestations of feeling tone will change in the future.

Time and Dependent Arising (1)

The question of time provides a convenient entry point into the much-discussed doctrine of dependent arising, *paṭicca samuppāda*, aspects of which I intend to discuss in several articles. From the viewpoint of feeling tone, *vedanā*, two distinct perspectives emerge.

The first of these perspectives concerns feeling tone as the seventh link in the often-found exposition of dependent arising by way of twelve links. Here feeling tone arises in dependence on contact (*phassa*) and in turn forms the condition for craving (*taṇhā*).

From the viewpoint of insight meditation, the link from feeling tone to craving is of eminent importance, since the presence of mindfulness can make a world of difference at this juncture. The reason is that feeling tone can, but does not have to, result in craving. Being mindful at the moment

of experiencing feeling tone can introduce a crucial pause that enables stepping out of reactivity.

Craving is a reaction to feeling; it occurs subsequently to it. According to the traditional exposition of dependent arising, craving in turn leads via some other links to manifestations of *dukkha*, such as old age and death. This definitely involves time. Even if birth is not taken in the sense of rebirth, time is still involved from the moment something arises to its decay and eventual falling apart.

Time and Dependent Arising (2)

The situation changes once attention turns to the chain of dependent arising that precedes feeling tone. Feeling tone is conditioned by contact, which is conditioned by the six sense-spheres. Does this still involve a temporal progression? Is it not rather that contact through the six senses is felt and thus these arise synchronously?

The situation becomes even more pronounced with the condition for the six sense-spheres, which is name-and-form. Here “form” stands for the experience of matter and “name” for those mental factors or activities that process form. These do not include consciousness. Instead, they comprise feeling tone, perception, intention, contact, and attention (I intend to discuss the implications of these as making up “name” in a subsequent article in more detail).

In this way, feeling tone, *vedanā*, is part of the fourth link of name-and-form, in addition to being itself the seventh link of dependent arising. Moreover, in the Great Discourse on Conditionality, *Mahānidāna-sutta* (DN 15) this fourth link of name-and-form is shown to stand in a relationship of reciprocal conditioning with consciousness. This part of the standard exposition of dependent arising does not seem to be based on a linear conception of time.

This reflects a general feature of time which, at least from an ancient Indian perspective, is seen as linear and circular. Summer follows winter follows summer follows winter ... day follows night follows day follows night ...

Our experience of time is not only linear but can also be circular. In fact, for quite some 'time' modern physics has made it clear that time is not just linear. Given that ancient Indian thought was also not based on such a conception of time, it seems fair to propose that understanding the teaching on dependent arising need not be based on the assumption that it must invariably involve a linear sequence in time.

I intend to continue exploring aspects of dependent arising in more detail in subsequent contributions to this journal, beginning with the relationship of craving to *dukkha*.

Conclusion

References to specific times in early Buddhist discourse range from the ordinary, such as the time for a meal, to the challenging, namely the time of death. The latter shows that time is, in the end, a matter of life and death.

The notion of a moment of time has in the course of Buddhist history led to the doctrine of momentariness, according to which all phenomena pass away as soon as they have arisen. Differing from the early Buddhist understanding of impermanence, the notion of momentariness has been influential in a range of Buddhist traditions.

Our conceptualization of time just serves to distinguish past, present, and future as what has changed, what is changing now, and what will change in the future.

The doctrinal teaching on dependent arising, in its standard formulation of twelve links, combines what (at

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least from an ancient Indian perspective) are complementary perspectives on time, which is seen as both linear and circular.

Time to conclude this little essay.

Abbreviations:

AN: *Aṅguttara-nikāya*

DN: *Dīgha-nikāya*

SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*

¹ SN IV 211: *sato, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sampajāno kālaṃ āgameyya; ayaṃ vo amhākaṃ anusāsani*. The grammar prevents an interpretation of this phrase as having the sense that one should mindfully let the time ripen, since the accusative *kālaṃ* is the object of *āgacchati*, not the subject. The *bhikkhu* should literally “go towards” the time, which here clearly refers to the time of death (the narrative context is a visit by the Buddha to the sick).

² For a detailed study of the early stages of this doctrine see von Rospatt, Alexander 1995: *The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of the Origins and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

³ AN I 152: *uppādo paññāyati, vayo paññāyati, t̥hitassa aññathattaṃ paññāyati*.

⁴ AN IV 168: *viditā vedanā uppajjanti, viditā upaṭṭhahanti, viditā abbatthaṃ gacchanti*.

⁵ SN III 68: *yā kāci vedanā atītānāgatapaccuppannā ... sabbā vedanā: netaṃ mama, neso ham asmi, na me so attā ti evam etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ*.

⁶ SN III 71: *yā vedanā atītā niruddhā vipariṇatā ahoṣī ti tassā saṅkhā, ahoṣī ti tassā samaññā, ahoṣī ti tassā paññatti; na tassā saṅkhā atthī ti, na tassā saṅkhā bhavissatī ti ... yā vedanā ajātā apātubhūtā, bhavissatī ti tassā saṅkhā, bhavissatī ti tassā samaññā, bhavissatī ti tassā paññatti; na tassā saṅkhā atthī ti, na tassā saṅkhā ahoṣī ti ... yā vedanā jātā pātubhūtā, atthī ti tassā saṅkhā, atthī ti tassā samaññā, atthī ti tassā paññatti; na tassā saṅkhā ahoṣī ti, na tassā saṅkhā bhavissatī ti*.