

The Challenges of Time

Time as a concept has engaged the attention of thinkers for a long time. Every waking second in our life is an encounter with time. For both the person of accomplishments and an average person, the day consists of just twenty-four hours. Nothing more, nothing less. But most people have a feeling of time breathing down their neck. Everyone experiences time according to his or her own mental disposition. Just as people regret their past, they also fear their future. The stream of life carries everyone to the one certainty amid all uncertainties: death—though people hardly think about it. There is an interesting incident in the Mahābhārata ('Vanaparva').¹ During their stay in the forest, Yudhishtira and his four brothers were once seized with thirst and were on the lookout for water

Yudhishtira asked his brother Nakula to climb a tree and look for any water source. He located a beautiful pool of water surrounded by rich vegetation. When he went there and was about to quench his thirst with his palms full of water, he heard a voice without a form (Yaksha): 'This pool belongs to me. If you need water from this pool, you have to answer my questions first.' Nakula did not heed those words, drank the water, and dropped down dead. Concerned about his brother, Yudhishtira sent Sahadeva next. He set out, discovered the pool and was sorry to see Nakula's condition. Nonetheless, not responding to Yaksha's warning, he too met with the same fate as Nakula's. Arjuna and Bhima followed him one after the other. They rebuked the voice challenging its owner to reveal himself to be taught a lesson. But they too lost their lives in trying to drink the water from the pool, unheeding of the warning. Deeply anxious, Yudhishtira went in search of his brothers.

He was beside himself with grief on seeing his beloved brothers unconscious on the bank of the pool. His throat fully parched, he approached the pool to quench his thirst. It was Yaksha again: 'This pool belongs to me. If you want its water, you should first answer my questions. Else, your fate will not be different from that of your brothers.' A man of discrimination that he was, Yudhishtira told Yaksha: 'Well said. Since you own this pool, I don't have a right to drink this water without your permission. Kindly ask your questions.' Yudhishtira's brilliant answers to Yaksha constitute the important portion of the Mahābhārata called 'Yakṣa Praṇa'.

The story goes that, pleased with Yudhishtira's answers, Yaksha finally revived all his brothers. Two important questions and their answers relate to our theme here. The first: 'What is the news?' Yudhishtira's answer: 'The news is: Time is cooking all created beings in a huge cauldron of great delusion, with the sun as the fire, day and night as fuel, and with months and seasons as the ladle to stir the brew.' The other question illustrates the inevitability of death and people's attitude to it. Yaksha asked Yudhishtira: 'What is wonderful?' He replied: 'Every day people go to the abode of Yama (they die). Still the rest of the world desires to live for ever. What could be more wonderful than that?' Can we escape being cooked by time? Can we defy death? Vedanta says it is possible. Before we discuss that, we need to analyse the three states of consciousness we pass through daily.

A. Waking

We have five windows in our human system to experience the external world in the waking state. These are the five sense organs: ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose. These organs are ever ready to come into contact with their respective sense objects. We gain perceptual experiences from these contacts. These experiences, in turn, leave impressions in our mind. The effects of time on the external world are too obvious for explanation: months change; seasons change; what was a body of water once is a mountain today; what was a famous edifice once is submerged in water later. In short, the evanescence of the external world brings out vividly the hand of time. At the individual level, a glimpse at our photographs taken at different times—childhood, boyhood, adulthood and later—impresses upon us the changes time has wrought on the body over the years. But, interestingly, the ‘I’ that has responded to the calls from our near ones over the years has remained the same.

The mind is also active in our waking experiences. Our thinking, feeling and willing influence our actions and determine the direction of our life. We experience the passage of time in accordance with the state of our mind. Time hangs heavily on those who do not have anything worthwhile to do. The same holds good when we slavishly do something unpleasant, not in tune with our nature. On the contrary, when we do something we like—in accordance with our aptitude—time flies, as they say. Similarly, happy experiences make us feel they are short-lived. Miserable experiences make us wonder whether a day consists of more than twenty-four hours! Again, time slips away from us when we allow the mind to drift. Suppose we sit and brood, say, at 8 am some day, on what to do: have breakfast? watch the TV? read the newspaper? have a bath? and so on. After some thirty minutes we find that we had done nothing worthwhile during that time. The mind has taken us for a ride, making us idle during those thirty minutes. If only we had managed our time well with a daily routine, having something specific to do at 8 am, the mind would not have had a chance to examine different options, hoodwinking us in the process.

B. Dream

According to Vedanta, dreams are caused by impressions accumulated in the mind not only in this life but also in earlier lives. These impressions are evidently accumulated during the waking state. Dream thoughts and actions do not leave new impressions in the mind. Reactions to them in the waking state, however, will. The notion of time—and space—we have in the dream state is different from that in the waking state. We cover unbelievable distances, traverse years into the past and future, in a dream that lasts maybe for a few minutes according to our waking reckoning. But there is something interesting: the ‘I’ that has dream experiences is the same ‘I’ that has waking experiences.

C. Deep Sleep

The body and the mind are both inactive in deep sleep, and evidently the world does not exist for the person who sleeps. In the absence of any object to experience, his 'I' also is apparently non-existent. When a person gets up from sleep, he describes his sleep experience as 'I slept happily; I did not know anything.' Being detached from our body and mind in deep sleep, we escape the miseries arising out of them: physical pain, stress, tension—to name a few. Evidently, time does not exist in deep sleep. On waking up, however, we remember our identities and go about our daily activities. That raises an important question: is there any continuity at all from the time one goes to sleep to the time one awakes?

D. The Spiritual Dimension

Vedanta says there is a third dimension to the human personality behind the body and the mind. It is called the Atman, the eternally pure, ever-conscious, and ever-free spiritual dimension in us.² This spiritual Reality is the basis and substratum of all the three states of consciousness—waking, dream and deep sleep. It is this Reality that provides continuity during deep sleep. The famous Vedantic equation (mahāvākya)³ says that the spiritual Reality behind the body and the mind, called Atman, is same as the spiritual Reality behind the universe, called Brahman. This Reality transcends time, space and causation, the three attributes of life in the world. All forms of God that we worship are manifestations of this ultimate Reality called Brahman. The Upanishads emphatically say that by realizing this truth in one's heart—purified of all desires and cleared of all doubts—one transcends death and becomes immortal.⁴ Not that the body continues to exist forever.

Being born, it has to die. But a knower of Brahman—being one with Brahman⁵—is not affected by the fall of the body. Sri Ramakrishna's life demonstrates that God exists and He can be realized, and that God-realization is the goal of human life. Sri Sankara makes it clear in his celebrated work *Vivekacōḍāmaṇi* that he who does not strive to realize the Atman despite having had a human birth verily commits suicide, since he kills himself by clinging to things unreal.

E. Delusion the Cause of All Trouble

Yudhishtira's answer to 'What is the news?' is a thought-provoking one. All created beings are cooked by time in a cauldron of great delusion. As long as we are in delusion we are in the domain of time, and keep getting cooked by it. What is this delusion? What is its source? The mother of all delusion is to believe that we are the body. This basic belief makes the the external world and its enjoyments the absolute reality for us. How do we, who are essentially spiritual, believe that we are the body? Sri Sankara attributes this to maya, the power of concealment (of Reality) and of distortion (of Reality). The power of concealment (āvaraṇa) conceals the spiritual Reality from us. Sri Ramakrishna

would hold a towel in front of his face and ask whether those before him could see him. Similarly, he would say, we are not able to see God because of the veil of maya. The power of distortion (vikøpaùakti) distorts the Reality for us. It makes the Real appear as the unreal and the unreal as the Real. It makes Brahman, the Reality, appear as the world with its varied creations. Hence it is clear that, essentially, the ‘I am the body’ idea is the root cause of all trouble. The feeling of ‘mine’ regarding things in the world stems from this main idea. Sri Sankara, in his illuminating commentary on the Kaôhopaniøad (1.3.12), says: ‘

Alas, how unfathomable, inscrutable and variegated is this maya! Every creature, though in reality identical with the supreme Reality and is instructed as such, does not grasp the fact that “I am the supreme Self.” On the contrary, even without being told, he accepts as his Self the non-selves—the aggregate of the body and senses under the idea “I am the son of such a one” though the latter are objects of perception (and hence not the Self).’ Delusion, again, forms part of a graded series beautifully outlined in the Bhagavadgætå: ‘Brooding over sense objects, one develops attachment to them. Attachment gives rise to desire (to possess the objects). Desire results in anger (towards obstacles to its fulfilment). Anger results in delusion (moha). From delusion follows loss of memory (of one’s spiritual nature). This results in loss of buddhi (discrimination), which leads to spiritual death.’⁷ In short, it was the mind’s luxury to brood over sense objects that triggered the systematic downfall ending in spiritual death.

F. Seeking the Spiritual Reality Within

Time’s cooking essentially pertains to the body, which is characterized by six modifications: It comes into being (jáyate), continues to exist as an object (asti), grows (vardhate), undergoes transformation (vipariîamate)—like childhood, youth and old age—decays (apakøæyate) and dies (naùyati). These changes, however, do not exist in the Atman since it is birthless, deathless, eternal, and is not killed even when the body is killed.⁸ As long as one lives a body-centred life—pampering it, abusing it with indulgence, driven by desires—time’s cooking will not cease. So a new orientation to life is called for. But things do not appear to be easy. Though a person understands what is good for him, he continues with his old ways in spite of himself, as if forced by someone.

What is that force? Arjuna posed the same question to Sri Krishna. The Lord replied: ‘It is desire and anger that are responsible for his predicament. Both are born of rajas. They are great devourers and sinners. Know them to be your enemies.’⁹ He continues: ‘... the manas is superior to the sense organs. The buddhi is superior to the mind. The Atman is superior to the buddhi. Understanding thus, and completely establishing the mind in the Atman, vanquish the enemy in the form of desire, an enemy very difficult to subdue.’¹⁰ So it is clear that one needs to seek the spiritual Reality within to free oneself from the effects of time. The first step in this seeking is to awaken the buddhi, the discriminative faculty in us.

G. Need to Awaken the Buddhi

Buddhi is an important faculty in human personality having a significant role in character development and mind control. It is essentially a function of the mind. Technically, the mind is called manas when it is busy examining different options set before it, yet to arrive at a decision. It is the deliberative faculty in us. When a decision has been arrived at, it is called buddhi. Buddhi is also the seat of discrimination. The Kaôha Upaniðad¹¹ brilliantly describes the role of the buddhi with the help of an allegory. The body is compared to a chariot, and the 'I' in us experiencing the vagaries of the body and mind, compared to the master of the chariot. The buddhi is equated to the charioteer, the manas is compared to the reins and the five sense organs, to the horses. Sense objects are compared to the road. If the horses are not broken and if the driver is not awake, and the chariot is in motion, that would be a dangerous situation indeed! The reins, the driver and the master—all this will be taken for a ride by the horses! Similarly, if a person's senses are not subdued, his mind, buddhi and he himself will follow the pull of the senses.¹² The course of such a human journey is determined by the sense organs. On the contrary, if the horses are broken and the driver wide-awake and intelligent, the chariot will reach its destination—the place where the master wants to go—without any trouble. With the sensory system under control and the mind disciplined with the help of an awakened buddhi, life's journey will reach its destination, which is God-realization. The above allegory helps us get a better grasp of the human system. The untrained mind (lured by the senses) does not cooperate with us but keeps acting against our interest as an enemy. When disciplined, the same mind acts as our friend.¹³ The challenge lies, therefore, in making a friend of our mind with the help of the buddhi. The training necessary to convert the enemy mind into a friendly mind is achieved by spiritual discipline.

H. Aids to Mind Training

Swami Vivekananda describes four yogas as paths to God-realization: selfless work (karma yoga), devotion (bhakti yoga), meditation (raja yoga) and discrimination and philosophic reasoning (jnana yoga). A discussion on these yogas is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we try to outline some mind training techniques based on them.

Time management: A strict daily routine is a great help in disciplining the mind and reducing its gyrations. A spiritual aspirant tries to live an ordered life with time allocations for all his daily activities. The enemy mind is sure to rebel at every point protesting that its freedom is infringed. But a patient adherence to the routine ignoring the mind's protests will help awaken and strengthen the buddhi, the vital factor in mind control. Cultivating a proper attitude towards work:

Sri Ramakrishna advocated living in the world and performing one's duties like a maidservant in a rich man's house: She 'performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village. She brings up her master's children as if they were her own. She even speaks of them as "my Rama" or "my Hari". But in her own mind she knows very well that they do not belong to her at all. ... Do all your duties in the world, but keep your mind on God.'¹⁴ Doing all work with a worshipful attitude—with one's whole mind on the work—as an offering to God, is a potent means for mind control. Says Swami Vivekananda: 'Every duty is holy and devotion to duty is the highest form of worship of God.'¹⁵ Doing one's work with one's

whole mind strengthens the capacity to watch the vagaries of the mind. This 'watching' the mind in turn strengthens the buddhi, the importance of which was discussed earlier. Cultivating devotion to God: The earlier one takes to devotional practices, the better are the chances of one's success in the struggle against the mind. In his famous Bhajagovindam Sri Sankara admonishes an old man indulging in intricacies of Sanskrit grammar: 'When the end of life is near, grammar rules will be of no avail. Worship the Lord!'¹⁶ Sri Krishna advocates devotion to God in this transient and miserable world.¹⁷ A sincere spiritual aspirant is conscious of the evanescence of life, and reminds himself of the admonition of the Hitopadeya: 'Practise dharma as if the locks of your hair are held by death.'¹⁸ He prays to God and seeks His refuge and protection even now: 'One's lifespan keeps reducing every day, and youth decays. Gone are days spent, never to return. Time is the great devourer of this world. Prosperity is ocean; life itself is as momentary as lightning. Therefore, O Giver of refuge, grant me protection even now; I have taken refuge in You!'¹⁹

In Summary. All created beings are subjected to time's ravages driving them to the one certainty: death. Seeking and discovering the latent spiritual dimension in us alone can make us impervious to time's cooking. This is possible by training the mind and the sensory system, following spiritual disciplines and realizing the spiritual Reality within. For it is only the body that is cooked by time, not the eternal Atman.