

The Dharma (2 of 5) Immediate

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

akālika, rapidity, present moment, timeless, saddleback, trough, ping-pong, cortisol, immediate, subjective time, wellspring, immediacy

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This week I am taking the time to talk about the five descriptions of the Dharma in the famous expression:

The Dharma is well-spoken by the Buddha. It is visible here and now. It is immediate. It invites us to see. It is onward leading and to be known by the wise.

Today the topic is the idea that the Dharma is immediate. The Pali word is *akālika*. The etymology of it is “not in time,” “not of time.” Some people will translate it as “timeless.” That is a wonderful experience if we leave it just as an experience, the experience of being a timeless moment. But sometimes when the word “timeless” is used, it goes along with some idea that there is a transcendent place that is very far removed from this world here, a transcendent consciousness or something. At least that is how I hear some people talk about it.

Probably a more literal meaning than “timeless” is “not of time” in the sense of being immediate. When the Buddha describes what he means by *akālika* (not of time), he refers to it as the ability to be with the present moment as it is changing, as it flows, arises, and passes. This ability to really be in the present, not in a static present but a dynamic present – that is how it is immediate. That is how it is not of time. It is a different, more complicated or active, activity of the mind to have a sense of the past and future and to bring them into the present, compared to the present by itself.

The Dhamma is *akālika*, not of time, because the seeing of change is immediate. It is part of the immediacy of attention here and now. Of course, you can argue that whenever there is change, there has to be some sense of time. But if you say in the immediate present, you’re really there, then there is the sense of watching flowing with the changing nature of time.

But what I find even more interesting about this *akālika*, this immediacy of now, the present moment, is that the human sense of the length of the present moment is variable. I would say that for myself, if I’m playing ping-pong, the present moment is quite short. But if I’m laying on the lawn in the park on a nice day, looking up at the sky at the drifting clouds going by, the present moment has a feeling of being more extended, more relaxed, than the rapidity of the present moment in ping-pong.

It is somewhat subjective, this experience of what is the present moment. How long is it? How long is it extended? William James, the American philosopher, referred to the “saddleback” of the present moment. Rather than being like a snap of fingers, it lasts briefly for kind of a saddleback. It comes and then it goes, like the bottom of a wave, maybe a trough. Does it extend up the sides of the trough for any period of time, or is it just the very bottom of the trough? I think his idea is it extends in some indeterminate way up the edges of the saddle.

What I find most interesting is that how we live our life can be seen in relation to our sense of how long this present moment is. When there is greed, fear, anxiety, panic, and hatred, these are emotions that want something to happen right now. Or afraid of something that is going to happen now. Sometimes there is a quickening of the mind, a quickening sense of time, a quickening reactivity. The faster the reactivity, like ping-pong, the shorter the moment is. When there is a very short moment, rapidity of things, we might not even be aware of time or the timeless present. We might not be aware of what is really going on.

More importantly, I think, is that as the sense of time becomes more extended, more leisurely, there is more space for the moment to be there. The present moment, the trough of the wave, becomes wider. Then there is more opportunity for some of the deeper responses to operate – emotions we have that don’t come from reactivity but from some deeper wellspring within.

In my sense, not to make an absolute case for this, but generally, things like greed, hatred, and anxiety are kind of needed for human beings to be able to respond quickly to threats that have to be immediately taken care of. Maybe that is one of the reasons why these emotions began for human beings evolutionarily. But when they are chronic in us and always there, it leads to stress, a rapid, fast, spinning mind, and a tendency to create a lot of stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, stress in the body. This limits our capacity to feel the emotions and attitudes that have more to do with being relaxed, being at ease. Oxytocin, serotonin, and different kinds of hormones and chemicals in us require a different kind of relaxation and ease to come forth.

Qualities like generosity, love, kindness, and friendliness, these feelings belong to the world of extended time, where there isn't that rapidity. If you are caring for someone who may be distressed or hurt, maybe a child who is not hurt so badly but is upset. The parent or adult is there in an extended way, caring, and giving lots of time and space. Not tapping the finger and saying, "Get over it," and "Yes, I care for you and stop it because we have important things to do." It's like, "Okay, now we're here." Someone who is dying and we are accompanying them in their death, we are just there, hopefully peacefully, at ease – an extended sense of time.

When I've been with people who are dying, the present moment seemed very extended, like a timeless present. Everything had stopped, just there. What was arising inside of me is very different from when I'm driving my car on a crowded freeway, late for something, it's smoggy and I'm trying to find the quickest way to get to where I'm going. That tends to elicit all kinds of other emotions and feelings, rather than care, love, and generosity.

This idea of *akālika*, the immediacy of now in this practice. The dhamma is immediate. It is now, but in this extended now, in this more available and present, relaxed time. I don't know if it is okay to say a leisurely present moment. We are not basking in luxury with the leisurely present moment. The relaxed and open here-and-now-with-this allows for some deeper wellsprings of our life to appear. That cannot appear if we are in the rapidity of greed, hate, and delusion – the wanting monkey mind that as soon as it grabs one branch is reaching for the next branch.

If our mind is that way, always reaching, going, going, it doesn't give a lot of room for some of the most valuable parts of who we are. The valuable parts that don't seem to have any obvious monetary or status value, or obvious value in getting what we want from life. This deeper place has lots of time for time. We have a lot of time for the immediacy of now, for this moment. This moment just seems to extend, become longer and longer. How long can it last, this timeless now for you?

So the dharma is immediate. It doesn't belong to time. How long can you rest in this timeless moment? Can you extend it? What are the benefits of that for you?

I would suggest that this would be a great day for you to experiment with this. Take time to do this. Maybe even put a timer on your clock, once an hour or randomly. Through the day, experiment with giving more time, making room, a pause, to see if you can experience the extended present moment. If you're playing ping-pong, stop playing. Or the equivalent, stop doing it. Sit down and let there be an extended pause. Maybe as you have a cup of tea. See what's available to you that is different from the rapidity of some of the things that we're doing. What happens? What shifts in you? What comes?

The dhamma is *akālika*, immediate, now, is not of time. Thank you. We'll continue this tomorrow.