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The Buddhist Perspective on Time and Space

Buddhism in Every Step 35

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The Buddhist Perspective on Time and Space

Time travels from the past to the present; it spans the past, present, and future. Likewise, space covers hundreds realms; it spreads across all ten directions. For most living beings, time and space are just like the act of breathing: we breathe every moment yet are not conscious of this action. Depending on our individual make-up, we all have different understandings about time and space. For example, certain insects live for a day and are contented; humans live to seventy and are still not satisfied. We all confine ourselves to our own limited slice of time and space. From the Buddhist perspective of the cycles of rebirth, the life span of all sentient beings is limitless. Not only is space without bounds, time is also endless and cannot be measured. If we penetrate the ultimate truth of time and space, we can be liberated from the space defined by the four directions of north, east, south, and west and

emerge from the time cocoon of seconds, minutes, days, and months. We then will be in the dimension of total freedom, and we will be able to experience what is described in the saying, “Clear cool water everywhere; Prajna flowers every moment.”

I. Time and Space for All Living Beings

The term “all living beings” includes not only human beings but also encompasses beings in the other five realms of existence: celestial beings, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and beings in the hell realms. What is time and space for all living beings within the six realms of existence?

We will first talk about time.

A. Ksana

In Buddhism, a “ksana” is the smallest unit of time. Within the context of how we measure time today, it is approximately one seventy-fifth of a second. It is very brief. In Buddhism, how do we gauge such a short duration of time?

A reflection is a moment of thought; one human reflection takes up ninety ksanas.

Within one ksana, there are nine hundred instances of arising and ceasing.

There are 32,820,000 ksanas in one day.

From the descriptions above, we can glean that the arising and ceasing within a ksana occurs very

rapidly. During any particular moment, we see flowers as red and leaves as green. In reality, they are constantly changing from ksana to ksana, and after a while, they will wilt. Within each ksana, they are perpetually growing and wilting. Take the example of a table: we see it standing firmly. However, if we were to look at it under a high powered microscope, we would see that the internal fiber structure of the wood is changing, expanding and contracting as it decays from ksana to ksana. In a few years, this table will no longer be any good. In this world, how can there be any flowers and grass that will never wilt? How can there be any tables that will not be subjected to destruction? Because all phenomena and existences are arising from ksana to ksana, all phenomena and existence are therefore ceasing from ksana to ksana. There is a saying, “When a young man snaps his fingers, sixty-three ksanas have gone by.” Time goes by very fast. Youth can disappear in a flash. A ksana is indeed an extremely brief and short span of time.

B. Asamkhya Kalpa

In Buddhism, a very long period of time is called an “asamkhya kalpa.” It is a very, very long period of time; the duration of an “asamkhya kalpa” is so long that any attempts to describe it in words would be futile. There are two lesser units of time within

an “asamkhya kalpa” which are described below to give the reader some general references.

“Mustard seed kalpa”: Imagine if we were to take a huge container measuring ten kilometers on each side and fill it with mustard seeds. Then, every one hundred years, we were to remove one seed. The time it would take to empty the container of all the mustard seeds is one “mustard seed kalpa.” Exactly how long a “mustard seed kalpa” is would probably have to be determined with the help of computers.

“Boulder kalpa”: Imagine if we were to take a huge boulder measuring ten kilometers on each side and sand the boulder with a piece of sandpaper every one hundred years. The time it would take to sand down the boulder to dust is “one boulder kalpa.” This period of time is much longer than that of a “mustard seed kalpa.”

Within the Buddhist time scale, both the “mustard seed kalpa” and the “boulder kalpa” are only considered to be minor kalpas. In contrast, the duration of a major kalpa like the “asamkhya kalpa” is so immeasurable and infinite that it is beyond words.

C. Life Span of Living Beings

Lives of living beings never remain still. Like bubbles on the surface of water, they arise as suddenly as they disappear, each with a different

life span. Human beings typically can live to about a hundred; some insects are born at dawn and are dead by dusk. To such an insect, one day is the equivalent of one hundred years in human terms. Tortoises, the longest living creatures on earth, can live up to two hundred and fifty years. Viruses probably perish in less than three hours. Although there is a huge difference between three hours and two hundred fifty years, nevertheless, each existence spans a lifetime. Elephants and dolphins can live to be ninety. Cows, horses, monkeys, and dogs generally live for fifteen to twenty years. Rats may live for three to four years. Although flies and mosquitoes can only live for a period of about seven days, this is still a lifetime. The life span of a living being—whether it is a day, a few hours, a century, or two hundred and fifty year—may seem lengthy by worldly standards.

However, in the unlimited extent of time and space, these lengths of time are still quite brief. Why? According to Buddhist scriptures, there are beings with much longer life spans than human beings. The realm above humans is the celestial realm consisting of many heavens. The heaven closest to us is called the “Caturmaharaja Heaven.” Beings in “Caturmaharaja Heaven” can live to five hundred celestial years, or 25,000 human years. Above that is the “Trayastrimsat Heaven.” Beings in “Trayastrimsat Heaven” can live to 50,000 human years. Beings in “Yama Heaven”

have life spans of around 400,000 human years. Beings in “Tusita Heaven” live for about 1,600,000 human years. Beings in the yet higher “Nirmanarati Heaven” can live for as long as 6,400,000 human years. Beyond the heavens in the realm of desire are the heavens of the realm of forms. The length of the life span there is beyond our comprehension. Within the heaven of forms is the “ParanirmitaVasavartin Heaven.” Beings there can live to be the equivalent of 25,600,000 human years. Such long life spans really stretch our imagination. Beyond the heavens in the realm of forms are the heavens in the realm of formlessness. Beings in this realm can live to 80,000 major kalpas. The duration of such a life span is incomprehensible. Regardless of how long these beings live, they are nonetheless still trapped in the cycle of rebirth. They still cannot transcend the boundary of time and space.

Conversely, below the human existence, the hungry ghosts of the Avici Hell suffer tremendously. Their ever-expansive bodies and their ever-conscious minds experience relentless torments. Furthermore, time in the Avici Hell stretches out endlessly. The sufferings from the incessant punishments are beyond description. The scriptures give this descriptive example of “a hungry ghost waiting for spittle.” There was a hungry ghost in hell that had been starving for a very long time. As he had not eaten

anything for a long time, his hunger was unbearable. Every day, he painfully yearned for anything to eat. Eventually, he spotted a person who was about to spit. He eagerly waited for this person to spit so that he could consume the spittle. He waited and waited. During his wait, he saw a city crumbled and rebuilt seven times. Countless time passed before he finally got the spittle. In hell, where there is no day or night, time stretches out frighteningly long.

Let us now talk about space. In Buddhism, the largest unit of space is called a “Buddhaksetra” or Buddha Land, and the smallest unit of space is called a “suksma” or dust grain. Despite their differences in names, both terms ultimately describe the three thousandfold world system, major universes, that are endless, immeasurable, unlimited and unbounded.

How big is the universe? Modern astronomy says that the planet earth on which we live is only a part of the solar system. Earth is only 1/1,300,000th the size of the sun. In other words, the sun is 1,300,000 times the size of earth. The Milky Way galaxy has hundreds of billions of stars, and a universe probably has hundreds of million of galaxies like the Milky Way. Just try to imagine the vast immensity of the universe!

On the other end of the scale, modern physics analyzes matter into ever smaller particles called atoms, protons, electrons or neutrons. A suksma is

even smaller than a neutron. For example, a piece of ox hair is very small. If we examine the tip of the ox hair under a high-powered microscope, we would discover that it is made up of many smaller elements. Similarly, a suksma is tens of thousands times smaller than anything we commonly know. Our little finger may look clean and spotless, yet it actually harbors millions of dust particles and microorganisms. Each eye of a housefly consists of four thousand lenses. Such spatial dimension is so minute that it is undetectable by the naked human eyes.

With the help of modern laboratory equipment, technology has provided us with a broad and detailed understanding of the time and space in which we live. When we learn of these modern interpretations based on scientific research, we realize that the universe is indeed extremely vast and deep. However, the dimensions offered by these interpretations are nonetheless small and shallow when we consider time and space from the Buddhist perspective. Why? In Buddhism, time and space are immense without an outer limit and yet miniscule without an inner limit. Time and space are immeasurable and boundless. For example, today we are here talking; by tomorrow this speech can be translated, televised and distributed to the world. In the future, it can be published as a book to build Dharma connections with tens of millions of people everywhere in the

world. The Dharma is forever beyond the limits of time and space.

II. Practical Reality of Time and Space

Our daily lives in the vast universe are integrally related to and can never be separated from time and space. How successful a person is and how effective one handles one's affairs depend on one's management of interpersonal relationships, one's utilization of time, and one's allocation of space. Without effective timing, we either move too quickly or too slowly and bring about the resentment of others. Without proper spatial awareness, we end up either taking others' space or robbing others of their advantageous locations, and we will annoy others. Thus, time and space have significant impacts on our daily existences.

In today's society, some people never seem to have enough time; to them, every second counts. Then, there are others whose time passes painfully slowly; to them, days feel like years. Some people are impoverished and homeless. Others possess so much land and so many buildings that they even want to own a piece of the moon. There are many different types of people and circumstances. The famous poet, Tang Bohu, once wrote about how fleeting and illusive time is:

*Life rarely reaches seventy;
That I am seventy is a surprise.
I was too young the first ten years
and too old the last ten.
There are only fifty years in between;
Half of that time is spent at night.
By calculation I have only lived
twenty-five years,
During which I have endured much toil
and trouble.*

Time is most impartial. The poor do not have a minute less; the rich do not have a second more. It cannot be hoarded even with all the power and might.

Time is the most able judge, as described in the saying, “A long journey can truly test a horse; the passage of time can reveal one’s true character.” Right or wrong, love or hatred, success or failure—all these will be revealed in time.

Time is the arbiter of one’s character. Hence this saying advises us, “Do not do acts that cause others to frown; the world should be free of those who grit their teeth in anger.” A person’s character, be it noble or base, will become evident over time.

Time exists in a three-fold dimension in our everyday lives regardless of whether we believe that life rarely reaches seventy or that life begins at

seventy. Lives of living beings gradually flow by in the three-fold dimension of time: “the past, present, and future.” Times of the “past” are quietly gone; it will never return. Times of the “present” flies like an arrow; it disappears in a flash. Time of the “future,” amidst our hesitation, slowly draws closer and closer; it suddenly slips by. Poets often tried to describe the ephemeral and illusive nature of time in their poems.

*The only true fairness in this world is gray
hair;*

It does not overlook the heads of the rich.

— Du Mu of the Tang dynasty

Do not complain that we age too easily.

Even mountains turn white sometimes.

— Luo Qilan of the Qing dynasty

What these lines mean is that time is most fair. Time ages everyone, regardless of whether you are rich or poor, whether you are strong or weak. Once years have passed, hairs do turn gray. Just as there are times when green mountains are blanketed with snow and frost, there will also be a day when we turn gray:

*We all gain a year on our birthdays;
The world does not single me out to make
me old.*

— Lu Yu of the Sung dynasty

What this verse says is that we all will get old. Every year, we age. The years of human lives disappear in the midst of the sound of the New Year firecrackers. Buddhism talks of the cycle of rebirth and the impermanence of all things, like the poem by the poet Bai Juyi:

*Regrettably my hair is like snow.
You are young and strong with the vitality
of clouds.
To whichever youngster who looks down on
me,
White hair will also come to you someday.*

As Buddhist learners, we strive to cultivate diligently in order to realize bodhi in infinite time and space. We need to seize eternity within an instant and to see the wondrous reality in each flower, each tree, each body of water, and each rock. We can then venture into the supreme realm of the Dharma.

Not only must we learn to break through the confines of time, we have to do likewise regarding space. Some people climb a mountain to seize land

from the mountain. Others fill the ocean to claim land from the ocean. In countless disputes and lawsuits over real estate properties, the living fight for space with the living. Sometimes the living even fight with the dead for space as when graveyards are reclaimed for the construction of housing. Not only do people have disputes over land, nations also battle over boundary lines to seize more living space for their people. Almost all the wars in the world are fought over the amount of available living space. “Ten thousand acres of fertile farm land, but how much can one eat in a day? One thousand mansions, but one can only sleep in an eight-foot space.” This saying points out that all space, both tangible and intangible, is ultimately illusive and fleeting. The rapidly existing and disintegrating space of the three realms ultimately arises from the mind. Poet Bai Juyi expressed this concept well in the following poem:

*Why fight over the space
on the tip of a snail's antenna?
Our existence is only as fleeting as a flint
spark.*

Similarly, I often tell people that “trees may live for a thousand years; glory and sorrow cannot last for more than a hundred.” These lines are trying to tell us we should let go of attachment, let go of illusive forms. We should forego the suffering of rebirth and

impermanence and in so doing, eventually abandon pain and attain happiness.

In our daily lives, there are many examples when time and space are simply unbearable. We are often rendered desperate, painful and hopeless. Some of the worst moments are described in the following verse:

*Closing time at the bank;
Sad and sick in bed;
Wronged with no outlet for grievance;
Disappointed and love sick;
On the day of a fatal diagnosis;
Escaped convicts with nowhere to hide;
Impoverished with nowhere to turn;
One's spouse and children crying in
sorrow.*

There is another “comic” verse which describes more of these moments. It goes like this:

*One waits for one's date at sunset,
yet the lovely one fails to show;
One takes an entrance exam,
but one's name does not make the list;
One faces farewells and death,
and one cries from heartbreak;
One is about to become a new mother,
yet the pains of labor are unrelenting;*

*One tosses and turns in bed,
yet one cannot fall asleep;
One has teenagers who love to fight,
so one is worried sick;
One has terrible stomach cramps and
needs fast relief, yet a bathroom is not to be
found;
One tries one's best in a campaign, yet
loses the election when the votes are
counted;
One finds a motorcycle heading straight for
one's car, so one tries to brake urgently;
One has been caught for violating the law,
and this is the moment for announcing
one's sentence;
One is a hundred meters into the battlefield,
and one can neither advance nor retreat;
One's family cannot get along, and one is in
the midst of fighting and splitting up.*

There are just too many dreadful examples of intolerable time and space. The situations mentioned above—being stood up, failing an examination, giving birth, being sick, not being able to find a bathroom, being in a car accident, awaiting sentence, couples fighting, facing farewells and deaths—can happen to any one of us. These situations can lead to monstrous arguments and endless disputes: this seat

is mine; this item is mine; this parcel of land is mine, and you may not use it. You did not have time to talk to me because you were in a hurry; you still missed your flight by two minutes. You were upset about not getting on a ship in time until you found out that you escaped drowning in a shipwreck... Although our existence seems real, life is actually illusive like the spots one sees because of eye diseases, or the reflection of the moon in the water. Likewise, the time and space we live in is also just as illusive.

A. *Life is Illusive Like a Flower*

During the time it takes for flowers to bloom and wilt, all of us are gradually growing old. Just as this year's blossoms are different from those of the previous year, I too am different from last year. The following verses aptly describe this change:

*The flowers of this year are as pretty as
those of last year;*

*The person of this year is older than last
year.*

*Fortune does not last for a thousand years;
Flowers cannot blossom for a hundred
days;*

*If one does not treasure the opportunities
now,*

*One is left with nothing when they are gone.
On this day last year, at this threshold,
Your face and peach blossoms glow
together.
Now your lovely face is gone,
The peach blossoms still smile at the spring
breeze.*

B. Life is Illusive Like Flowing Water

In this world, only the shimmering waves of continuously flowing water from the distant past are ever-present. In contrast, a person's physical body cannot survive forever. Let me illustrate this point with the following:

*On the Yangtze River the waves from
behind push the waves in front;
A new generation replaces an older
generation.*

*Water from the rear flows to the fore;
It has flowed like this from ancient time to
the present.
The new persons are not the old ones,
They all walk across the bridge year after
year.*

C. *Life is Illusive Like the Moon*

From antiquity to the present, the same moon still shines. In the reality of human existence, who can be as everlasting as the moon? In fact, even the face of the moon changes between new and full. Time and time again, poets from the past to the present have written verses reflecting on the impermanence of human existence:

*Modern people see not the ancient moon,
But the modern moon once shone upon
ancient people.*

*By the riverbanks, who is the first to see the
moon?*

*When does the moon above the river first
shine upon a person?*

*Generation after generation, people's lives
continue endlessly;*

*Year after year, the moon appears the
same.*

*Not knowing for whom the moon is shining,
I only see the river flowing downstream.*

The time and space of human existence is like a flower, blossoming and wilting within a short time, and as illusory as the reflection of the moon in the water. For example, we could be in a lecture hall.

When the time comes, we all will leave. The lights will be switched off and the sounds will be silenced. When the doors are closed, the space that is now occupied by the hundreds and thousands of people sitting in this lecture hall will be vacated and returned to a state of quietude. Yet, the Dharma relationships we have built here today will remain with us at all times, accompanying us everywhere. All phenomena in this world may disappear like the faded flowers of yesterdays. Only Dharma relationships are eternal. The Dharma lives forever.

III. The Holy Practitioners of Buddhism and the Liberation from Time and Space

Countless masters in Buddhism have achieved the holy fruits of cultivation. They have neither hatred nor attachment. They are relieved of suffering and ignorance. Liberated from the realm of time and space, they exist in total freedom. For them, time and space are vastly different from that of ordinary people.

The holy practitioners of Buddhism, being well cultivated in meditation, can stop the mind and calm the heart. They can venture into the profound, subtle, and wondrous dharma realm. They can break through the boundary of form and liberate themselves from the constraints of time and space. To them, “A shortened ksana is not necessarily brief, and a lengthened

asamkhya kalpa is not long.” Venerable Master Xuyun, a Chan master in recent history, once retreated to the Cuiwei mountain in Shengxi Province. While waiting for rice to cook, he decided to take a short meditation in a cave and quickly achieved samadhi, an advanced state of meditative concentration. When he came out of his meditation, the rice was already completely rotten. He eventually realized that he had actually meditated for half a year! This is just like the saying, “Seemingly only seven days have passed on the mountain, yet thousands of years have gone by in the world.”

The holy practitioners of Buddhism can escape the constraints of time and space and venture into the dimension of dharma realms. Their pure true nature fills the universe constantly and they are at ease every moment. Their Dharma body is omnipresent and always at peace everywhere. They can eat one meal a day and not feel hungry. They can sleep under a tree and be in bliss. The time and space of their lives is captured in the following verse, “Mountain monks do not think much about time; a falling leaf announces that autumn has arrived.” Chan Master Lanrong abandoned fame and fortune and became a monk. With only the bare necessities consisting of a pair of shoes and a patched robe made out of rags, he retreated to the mountains to cultivate. His younger sister felt sorry for his impoverished lifestyle and

took some food and clothing to the cave which he called home. When his sister arrived, he kept his eyes closed, did not utter a word, and continued to sit perfectly still in his meditation. His sister grew impatient and upset. Consequently she threw the things she had brought into the cave and left. Thirteen years went by, and his sister continued to think of him everyday. Unable to stop worrying about her brother, the sister paid him another visit. He was still sitting perfectly stationary like a rock in meditation. The clothing and food she had brought thirteen years previous remained in exactly the same location, never touched and completely covered with dust.

Chan Master Gaofeng Miao of the Yuan dynasty also decided to retreat to a mountain cave to cultivate. There was originally a ladder leading up to the cave entrance. Once he got into the cave, he threw the ladder down and was determined not to leave. Many people felt sorry for him because he could not wash his clothes, take a bath, trim his hair, shave his beard or have anything good to eat. The living space was so narrow that there was barely any room for him to move around. He did not have anyone to talk to and not a friend visited him. Yet, Chan Master Gaofeng Miao endured the unendurable. He did the impossible. Although he did not have a change of clean clothing, his Dharma appearance was majestic. Although there was no water for bathing, his heart was pure

and untainted. He could not shave his hair and beard, yet all his distress was completely eradicated. He did not have any delicious food to eat, yet he savored the delight of meditation and the endless taste of the Dharma. He had no company, but the flowers and trees of nature were full of vitality. Everything he saw was Prajna; every condition he found was wondrous truth. His joy was indescribable.

The freedom and delight enjoyed by these holy practitioners in their liberated state of time and space cannot be matched in our modern materialistic society. Nowadays people often only focus on pursuing material satisfactions and sensory pleasures. They neglect the peace and serenity of the mind. In reality, more desire will breed more greed and pain. As a result, people become trapped in the drowning mire of evil and cannot break free. This is truly a pity. Poet Lu Yu of the Song dynasty wrote the following poem to reflect this:

*My body is like a swallow,
always being the guest year after year.
My mind admires the wandering monks;
for them everywhere is home.
The breeze of spring enables me to clearly
understand life
And accompanies me as I travel throughout
the world.*

Many people in this modern age are stressed by work and depressed by life. When the days become unbearable, they go for a vacation abroad to look for a new way of release. Some may visit Southeast Asia, Japan or Korea. Others want to really get away by traveling to European countries, the United States, or South Africa. Their efforts are much like digging for a well when one feels thirsty, very poor planning indeed. The relief from this kind of effort can never bring anyone the completely liberated state of time and space. For the ultimate liberation, it is much better to observe and cultivate the teachings of Buddhism. Buddhist practitioners can attain eternity in an instant.

They can realize the endless universe in a grain of sand. The limitless Dharma and the infinite universe are in our hearts. Why bother to search for them outside?

Countless Chan masters have the power to break through time and space. With the thought of letting go, they instantly let go of everything. When free of attachments, “The mind can travel into antiquity; a thought can traverse ten thousand years.” Not only are they not restricted by time and space, but they also can overcome the hindrance of time and space. They are in the company of the Buddhas. Let me illustrate this point by telling you a legendary story, “Abbot Lingshu welcoming the monastic headmaster.”

During the Late Liang dynasty, Chan Master Zhisheng, also known as Chan Master Lingshu, preached in Lingshu Temple, which was located near the present day county of Zhujiang in Guangdong Province. The temple had hundreds of resident monks; yet, there was not a monastic headmaster in charge. Some people then urged Chan Master Zhisheng, “Since we have so many monks in this temple now, you should appoint a monastic headmaster.”

Chan Master Zhisheng reflected for a moment and replied, “The monastic headmaster of this temple has already been born into this world. He is now herding sheep. Let’s just be patient.”

A few years went by and nothing happened. Others once again urged Chan Master Zhisheng to appoint a monastic headmaster. Chan Master Zhisheng nodded, “It will be very soon. Our monastic headmaster has already renounced household life to become a monk. Please be patient for a bit longer.”

Many years passed, yet the position remained vacant. Others raised the question again. The older Chan Master Zhisheng smiled and said, “The causes and conditions are gradually ripening. Our monastic headmaster is now traveling and studying Chan under many different masters.”

After this exchange, Chan Master Zhisheng remained calm and unperturbed. Twenty-two years passed and Chan Master Zhisheng was getting old.

Everyone was now worried. Once more they raised the issue of the monastic headmaster with him. Chan Master Zhisheng looked up to the sky and smiled. He assured everyone, “Good! Good! Our monastic headmaster has finally crossed the Five Mountains Range and is heading this way. We will only have to wait a very short while longer.”

With this said, he then retreated back to his room to meditate. Looking at each other, the monks started to discuss among themselves. More time passed. One day, the old master asked the disciples to clean up the quarters of the monastic headmaster. The old master even inspected the room himself. A few days later, the big bell was rung. Everyone knew it was the signal that the monastic headmaster had finally arrived and that they should put on their formal robes. They were to gather before the entrance to welcome the monastic headmaster. Everyone followed the elderly master and stood outside the entrance. Soon, a monk showed up with his alms bowl. He was Chan Master Yunmen Wenyan, who would later become the founder of the Yunmen School of Chan.

Chan Master Zhisheng asked smilingly, “Our monastic headmaster position has been vacant for several decades now. Why are you so late and why did you wait until today to show up?”

Wenyan respectfully joined his palms and replied, “Everything was determined by previous causes and

conditions. The length in time and the distance in space are not important. Am I not finally here?"

Chan Master Zhisheng smiled understandingly. Accompanied by all the disciples, he escorted Wenyan into the main shrine and appointed him as the monastic headmaster. This is the wonderful story of "Abbot Lingshu welcoming the monastic headmaster." In recent history, Venerable Master Xuyun, the famous Chan master, stayed in the Yunmen Temple when he revived the Yunmen School of Chan in 1943.

How free are the lives of these Chan masters! How unconstrained is their time and space! In contrast, people of present day feast on gourmet food but are not satisfied. They have fame and fortune but no peace. They sleep on comfortable mattresses but toss and turn all night. They reside in mansions but feel insecure. They fight and struggle everyday. They can never experience the wonder of limitless time and space. Is this not really regrettable?

IV. The Utilization of Time and Space

In Buddhism, there is a saying, "The mind encompasses the space of the universe, traversing realms as numerous as all the grains of sand." What this means is for those who use time and space wisely, their time is the time of the mind. They can freely journey from past to present.

They have endless Chan wisdom and application. The universe is indeed their time. His space is the space where the Buddha nature flows. It freely fills all dimensions. The dharma realm is their space. On the other hand, for those who cannot use time and space wisely, their time is constrained by the movements of the clock and is controlled by the hands of the clock. To them, an hour is an hour, no more and no less; a minute is a minute, no more and no less. Its use is limited. Their space is area and distance bounded by feet and inches. A kilometer cannot be lengthened; a meter cannot be shortened. It is confined and limited. A devotee once asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “How can I use the twelve hours of a day wisely?”

Chan Master Zhaozhou stared at him, “You are bound by the twelve hours of the day. I use my twelve hours appropriately. What kind of time are you talking about?”

The wise know how to use time and space perfectly; they lead free and harmonious lives. Fools are enslaved by time and space; they are busy running around all day. Wise or foolish, the difference is obvious. There is an ancient fable called “Marking the boat to look for a sword” which illustrates what happens when one is ignorant of time and space. In the country of Chu, a man was crossing a river on a ferry. In the middle of the river, he accidentally

dropped his sword. Everybody urged him to dive into the water to recover the sword. He was not worried but leisurely made a mark on the boat. He was quite proud of himself and replied confidently, “My sword fell down from here. When the boat stops, I will dive for my sword from here. Why worry?” Others told him that as both the boat and water were moving, it would be impossible for his sword to follow the boat in step.

When time passed and space changed, his sword could not be retrieved. He did not listen. When the boat finally docked, he started looking for the sword beneath the spot he had marked on the boat. Do you suppose that he succeeded in retrieving his sword?

Of course not, it was the wrong time and space.

As we all work in society, some people just want to make a lot of money. They work day and night, scheme and cheat and use every avenue to make money. They may make ten thousand a month, a hundred thousand a year. For their entire lives, they may earn a few million dollars. From this amount, if you deduct the expenses for clothing, meals, and entertainment, how much money is left? To forgo all ideals and happiness for a few hundred thousand dollars, what is the meaning of this? What is the value of life? To throw away a precious lifetime in exchange for a few pieces of crumpled and illusive paper currency, is this really worthwhile? Why do

we not use our valuable time to pursue the path of real fortune and happiness?

When I arrived in Taiwan in year 1949, not only was I unable to replace my old torn clothes and shoes, I had great difficulty in obtaining a pen and some paper for writing. Sometimes I had to endure hunger and coldness for months and still could not afford to have these few items. When I saw others receiving generous offerings by conducting Dharma functions or performing services, I did not feel inadequate. They bought comfortable clothing and good food; I did not feel poor or deprived. In cold weather, I warmed myself under the sun. The sun was there for everyone to enjoy. The sun was my robe; it was so very warm. During the hot season, I cooled myself with the breezes. The wind was there to keep everyone cool. The wind was my gown; it was so very free. I looked at trees and flowers; they were my Dharma companions. No one could prohibit me. I had oh so many Dharma companions. I walked across rivers and plains; they gave me so much Dharma delight. No one could take that away from me. My Dharma delight was so fulfilling. If our minds are broad and open, the heaven and earth, sun and moon are all ours. We can have all time and space. If all you know is how to complain and get depressed about poverty and obstacles, you will be poor and ill at ease in all places and at all times. All

your time and space will become an endless hell and a boundless sea of suffering.

One day, a young person saw a very old man. He was curious and asked, “Sir, can you tell me how old you are?”

With a smile, the gentlemen replied, “Oh! I am four. I am four years old.”

The young fellow was shocked. He looked the old gentleman up and down, “Oh! Sir, please do not joke with me. Your hair is so white and your beard is so long. How could you be four?”

“Yes! I am really four!” The old man then kindly explained, “In the past, I lived a befuddled life. I was selfish and preoccupied. I wasted away a great portion of my life. It wasn’t until four years ago that I discovered Buddhism. Then I learned to do good and be helpful. I learned to get rid of my greed, hatred, and ignorance. I realized that I should cultivate myself to find my true nature. My entire life had not been meaningful, valuable, or fulfilling until these past four years. You asked me my age. I really feel I have been a worthwhile person for only these four years. This is why I am only four.”

Virtuous deeds should be done as soon as possible. The Dharma should be learned as early as possible. In your brief existence in this realm of time and space, how have you been leading your lives? Have you used the opportunity to do good and to

seek the truth? Have you used all available time and space to benefit others and yourselves?

The scriptures tell the following allegory. A king had two close attendants. The king liked his attendant on the left much better than the attendant on the right. The attendant on the right was puzzled and wondered why he was not in the king's favor. He carefully monitored every move of the other attendant, and finally, he discovered the reason. When the king spit, the attendant on the left would quickly wipe the spit off the ground with his foot. Naturally, the king liked him better. With this knowledge, the right attendant planned to do the same. He was, however, always a step slower than the other attendant and failed to make good of the opportunities to wipe the king's spit. Finally, he thought of a plan. The next time when the king was ready to spit, he would jump on the opportunity. He figured that if he could aim correctly, he would be able to wipe the spit right off the king's mouth before it could land on the ground. Unfortunately, when he kicked his foot up, he knocked out the king's teeth and bloodied his mouth. This way, he also "wiped off" any opportunities he had to gain the king's favor.

Greed and ignorance prevent us from using time and space wisely and even missing out on valuable opportunities. Only if we want to benefit others and ourselves, can we seize boundless time and space.

Once a high official in Japan asked Chan Master Zian about the use of time--“Oh! My position as an official is a meaningless job. Everyday, people want to flatter me. After a while, all compliments sound the same and are actually quite tedious. I do not enjoy hearing all the flattery. Days seem to pass by like years. I just do not know how to pass the time.”

The Chan master smiled and gave him these words, “This day will never return; the passing of time is precious like treasure.” Time once passed will never return. We should treasure our time and remember that time is precious like exquisite jade.

Nowadays, it is fashionable to talk about “conservation.” Unfortunately, we only emphasize conserving materials and money. We do not know that we should also conserve time and our emotions. We should conserve our desires and our lives. We should be careful with every thought and deed. We should not let ourselves be indulgent and lose control. Only then can we know how to use time and space wisely.

Chan Master Zongyan of Japan liked to take afternoon naps. It was his habit. His students asked him why he slept so long. He replied, “What do you know? In my dreams, I visit ancient scholars and masters, much like Confucius dreaming of the Duke of Zhou. The longer my dreams are, the better is my

cultivation. What do you know about this practice of ‘befriending ancient scholars’??”

One day, a few students were scolded by the Chan master for taking long afternoon naps. The students replied, “Well. We are learning from your examples. In our dreams we have gone to seek and to study with ancient masters and scholars.”

“What then have you learned from them?”

“Oh yes! In our dreams, we visited many ancient masters and scholars. We asked them, ‘Is our master studying with you all the time?’ They all replied, ‘No, we have never seen or heard of your master.’”

One must be true to and honest about time and space. “Day by day, time goes by; each day will never return.” The arrow of time never flies backward. If we do not seize the opportunities, we will not be able to make anything out of them. There is a very well-know poem:

*Youth never returns;
a day just has one dawn.
Work diligently now;
time waits for no one.*

In Buddhism, the “Take Heed Verse” of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva aptly describes the urgency of using our time wisely:

*This day is over;
life has decreased accordingly.
As a fish in dwindling water,
where is the joy?
One should work diligently,
as if extinguishing flames on the head.
Be mindful of impermanence;
do not relax one's efforts.*

Time and space quickly disappear. If we want to seize time and space, if we treasure life, we should chant "Omitofo (Amitabha Buddha)" and learn from "Amitabha Buddha." "Amitabha" means infinite light and infinite life. Infinite light is boundless space; infinite life is endless time. If we can make time and space boundless and limitless, we will have risen above the confinement of time and space. We will have broken from the rounds of birth and death. We will have turned ignorance to enlightenment. We will have escaped from the sea of suffering from samsara and have transcended the confusion and hindrance of worldly phenomena. We will have ventured into the bright and free world of nirvana, the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.