

Time Vs Cause & Effect

Lord Buddha explained the Samsaric world in terms of the cause and effect principle.

In this respect, cause occurs first, and is followed by effect. For example, light produced by the sun first, reaches the ground later. It strikes the eye first, and its sensation produces an internal image later.

All events perceived by us are taken as a whole by our mind to produce a sensation of the passage of time.

The “Past”:-

What “has” happened usually leaves a “scar” or an “imprint”. It may be in our brain or in an external object. Scientists dig up fossils from the earth, and conclude that there was a past where huge dinosaurs or strange fish lived. They find “rings” in tree trunks, and try to determine that those trees existed for so many years or seasons.

The past is however no longer with us. All that remains are representations. Diaries, photographs and memories in our brain are representations of a “past” which we associate with our lives. History books are a “record” of a “past” that we associate with the human race.

Beyond a certain point, human historians have not recorded anything. Ancient books like the Ramayana, Mahavamsa and the Illiad maybe among the earliest understandable records kept by humans (provided you could believe the myths that are in them).

Beyond that point, we have to look at the fossils dug up by scientists, and accept their systems of dating the so called fossils. They are just extrapolations. Something similar to drawing lines on a graph using dots.

The “Future”:-

The future does not really exist at all. Again we do extrapolations. But here we don’t need to be scientists. The mind of the average human being has learned to “predict” the future, from the events he/she observed in the past and by events being observed at present.

How do you know that the Sun will set today or that it will rise again tomorrow? You have observed that thousands of times during your own life time. The memory of sunrise and sunset is coded in your sensory systems, and you use this to assume that it will occur the same way tomorrow, the day after (.ad infinitum).

If you drop an egg onto a hard rock, you assume it will crack, because from “past experience” you know that egg shells are soft.

But then, it may not crack. The rock may not really be as hard as you expected, or the egg shell may not be that soft as you imagined.

Sequence of events:-

Events have certain sequences. Usually people come out of the womb, grow up, grow old, and go to the grave. No one comes out of the grave, grows younger and smaller, and goes back into the womb. It does not and (from the logic we are used to) cannot, happen that way. Hit an egg and it will break. It does not “**un**” break. So as we live our lives, these behaviors too get programmed into ourselves.

Being aware of the act of perception:-

Human beings are trapped in this Past-Present-Future illusion, or drama. The Buddha gave us a way of training our thoughts (mind) out of it, with 3 basic practices.

The 3 practices are as follows:-

- 1) “Ditte Ditta Maththam” – Realise that you experienced the Act of Seeing (no further thoughts on what one saw).
- 2) “Suthe Sutha Maththam” – Realise that you experienced the Act of Hearing (no further thoughts on what one heard).
- 3) “Muthe Mutha Maththam” – Realise that you experienced the Act of Feeling (no further thoughts on what one felt).

If we analyze the 3 practices above, they all tell us to stop at the act of perception, and recognition of the perception. You are not supposed to further analyze what you saw, or heard, or felt. If you remember something that happened an hour ago, just recognize it as a memory.

This practice can help us to live in the “present”. What we mean by the present, is actually the sum total of what our five senses immediately feel. For those not used to this sort of thing, it may take some time getting used to. However, do not rush. Allow your mind to grasp this as it can.

This so called “present” is an ever-changing phenomenon. Being aware of it, one also becomes aware of the changing or impermanent nature of the Universe (Anicca).

Nirvana

A person who have attained Nirvana, but is still alive in his mortal body (Arhath) may experience sequences of events, but for Him/Her, time does not have any importance other than for interacting with the world and with other beings. Once total Nirvana (Parinirvana) has been achieved by the decaying of the body, the senses no longer arise. Therefore time (and space) together with other Worldly-objects (and existence itself) becomes totally meaningless for such a person.

From a Non-Buddhist Hypothetical Perspective:-

If one is so immersed in so called “modern science”, or cannot let go of the concept of time, one can look at the following hypothetical scenario.

Imagine that all Planets and Stars stopped rotating. Imagine that all Stars stopped orbiting Galaxies, and all Planets stopped orbiting stars. The sky would not change. It would be always daytime to some, always night for others, and always dawn or dusk to others, depending on which part of the they lived. Days would not pass. There would not be any seasons. The constellations would not pass. (If you were a Sri Lankan, you would observe that the Sinhala-Tamil New Year would not be possible – no change of the sun from Pisces to Aries constellations.)

Now imagine that all energies (except for those in your body) would cease to act. No gravity - so nothing would fall down. No light rays – so you would not see anything. No sound – a deathly silence. Since all clocks, watches and time measuring devices have stopped, you would not have anything to measure time, except for your own heartbeat, pulse or breathing. You may feel nothing (but if you are so attached to the external world, you may feel some pain maybe mental, maybe physical) – no touch taste or smell either.

Atoms themselves have stopped vibrating (except for those inside your body). Electrons have stopped orbiting those atoms. What has happened to time now?

Now the entire Universe has frozen in time, to such an extent that you do not even feel that it exists. Any memories of it that remain may seem like mere dreams.

If you can absorb all of the above, then imagine that all of then nervous signals in your brain and nerves have stopped transmitting – your feelings have stopped, your thoughts have stopped!!!

This scenario is hypothetical, and will not occur in a cause-and-effect based Universe (or Multi-verse) like ours. However it just shows us a way to understand that time itself is something imagined by the mind. (In a similar way one could also think of a scenario to show that even space and dimensions are imagined by the mind.)

Time is just another Miccha Ditti (Unwholesome View). However, the Buddha may have sometimes referred to Past, Present and Future existences as well as time. This is because those concepts are conventional truths accepted by society, and the Buddha had to use the language that the Un-enlightened members of society could easily understand.