

Standing still in time's flow

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The king and the ants

AS THE UNIVERSE, SO TOO INDIVIDUAL LIVES: our times and histories do not make us who we are, there is no time when we have actually completed our selves for ever. Heinrich Zimmer illustrates this with a parable about Indra, king of the gods and overlord of the universe. Reigning gloriously, enthroned in unparalleled splendour, Indra views himself as the greatest of all. But then a boy comes to him, surveys his splendour, and praises Indra ambiguously: 'Not bad – better than the previous Indras'. Indra is disturbed by this unfamiliar reference, and his ego slowly deflates as the boy explains how in ages past there were many other Indras, each seemingly the greatest. The boy notices a column of ants crossing the floor while they are speaking, and laughs aloud. He explains himself to the disconcerted Indra:

I saw the ants, O Indra, filing in long parade. Each was once an Indra. Like you, each by virtue of pious deeds once ascended to the rank of a king of gods. But now, through many rebirths, each has become again an ant. This army is an army of former Indras.¹

Indra can take his kingship seriously only as long as he has no memory of all those Indras who preceded him. The greatest king in history, 'Indra' is nothing much at all.

At the beginning of *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization*, Heinrich Zimmer vividly distinguishes the Indian (primarily Hindu) and the western (primarily Christian) views of time. He identifies as western the view of a linear, progressive, once-for-all temporal sequence which humans traverse as they progress toward the climactic moment, be it tragic or beatific. By contrast, Hindu mythology envisions long eras of time, patterns of 'gradual and relentless deterioration, disintegration, and decay', culminating in a final dissolution which, however, is followed by yet another time, as 'the universe reappear[s] in perfection, pristine, beautiful, and reborn'.² Every creation involves new possibilities which work themselves out until finally there is nothing left but final cosmic dissolution. But even this is not a truly dramatic dénouement, since the world begins again.

Temporal identities collapse like houses of cards in view of the enormous reaches of time spreading out before and after us; only the seemingly inconsequential present moment remains our own. Better, then, to learn to stand quietly, untouched by a flow of time that we cannot stop and should not invest with significance. For time is like space, which has its special and intimate places – while changing places never solves our problems. So too, the past and future are like places we visit, neither golden nor dark, neither fearsome nor hopeful. Over time we can become wise, but only if we are no longer drawn along by it, instead standing quietly amidst its flow, totally present, a still point. Time is not of the essence, the truth of the self is already settled and ever-present, neither improved nor diminished by the histories we live.³

A sense of self in the midst of time

Shankara (eighth century) was a saintly ascetic and one of the greatest Hindu theologians. He is famous for his nondualist interpretation of the ancient Upanishads, whereby the individual self is ultimately not different from Brahman, the underlying reality of the universe. Passages such as this pointed up how he understood the self:

The self is not born, nor does it die.
It has not come from anywhere, nor has it become anyone.
Unborn, constant, eternal, private, this one
Is not slain when the body is slain.

(*Katha Upanishad* I.2–3)⁴

Once one realizes this self, intellectually but also existentially, time ceases to be the relevant factor. I am always already myself, and whatever comes about in my future cannot change me deeply. If I realize this, the conception of life as a project pursued over time, aimed toward a desired conclusion, simply dissolves.

The traditional hagiography of Shankara reports that he took up the renunciant's life at a very early age, choosing to move to the margins of society, no longer living a life measurable in terms of growth and progress. As he explained to his distressed mother, once the self is discovered, the quest is finished and ordinary life is no longer possible. The same tradition also reports a peculiar but illuminating incident in Shankara's mature life which highlights the recovery of identity, but also the danger of lapsing back into ordinary ideas about life. To complete his mastery of all human learning by knowledge of sexual intercourse without abandoning his own vow of celibacy, Shankara

entered the body of a dying king who revived as Shankara's spirit entered him. But thereafter Shankara seems to have got entangled in the duties and pleasures of his new regal life, even to the extent of clinging to it later on, when it was time again for the king to die. Luckily, Shankara's disciples, alarmed at his long absence, searched for him and found him just in time to remind him of his true identity: 'You are the Self, you are not defined by all these regal ornaments, powers, pleasures! You are not this king, you are not the one now dying!' They woke Shankara from his new and mistaken identity, and he began again to live according to the truth of his self, detached from the pleasures and foibles of the royal life.⁵

In both theology and story, Shankara insists that once we gain a true sense of self, we are no longer bound by time and space, nor by alluring worldly attachments or sincere religious ones. The dramatic search for meaning and authentic identity halts; the self finally shines forth in the present moment, free of pasts and futures. Shankara accordingly defends a theory of 'sudden enlightenment'. Although most people, most of the time, take a long time to become wise enough to stop identifying with what happens to them, in truth the path can be much swifter. One can realize one's deeper, unchanging identity right now, for there is no best or worst time for this; the passing of time makes it neither more nor less likely.⁶

God, wrapped up in time

Even God descended to earth can be tempted to take time too seriously, so immersed in a human role that he forgets himself. In the *Ramayana* (one of the two great Indian epics), we hear of the trials and tests undergone by the virtuous prince Rama (Lord Narayana come down on earth) who willingly chooses exile rather than disobey his father. For a major part of the *Ramayana* Rama is on a quest to recover his wife Sita, kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. Rama wins her back, but people still gossip that Sita might have given in to Ravana and become his consort. Rama dutifully (and rather coldly) allows her to prove her fidelity through a trial by fire. As she steps into the fire, Rama is afflicted and gives way to tears, but he does not attempt to stop this dramatic public test of her virtue; such are the required roles of rulers and their wives. He is caught up in the drama of the moment and the expectations of his princely role, and has no recollection that Sita is really Lakshmi, his eternal, ever faithful consort.

The gods are dismayed, so Brahma, the chief of the gods and divine grandfather of all beings, confronts Rama with the question, 'How can

you be unaware that you are chief among the gods? . . . You distrust Sita as if you were an ordinary man!' Rama is surprised: 'I deem myself to be a man, Rama, son of Dasharatha – but who then am I in reality? whence have I come? Let the grandfather of the world inform me!' Brahma then offers a litany of praises which remind Rama of his true identity:

You are the great and effulgent God Narayana, the blessed Lord armed with the discus . . . You are the imperishable Brahman, Existence itself, beyond the three divisions of time. You are the Law of Righteousness . . . subduer of the senses, supreme Person . . .⁷

In this way Brahma aids Rama to see himself once again from the perspective of eternity, a step back from the drama of his grand and tumultuous life story. Again he can recognize himself and Sita as the eternal Narayana and Lakshmi, very present yet untouched by all the things that happen around them.⁸

How to stop right in the middle

It is not just a Shankara or Rama who can discover a simpler self unaffected by time; this truth is for everyone. In the famous *Bhagavad Gita* (part of the other great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*), Lord Krishna powerfully illumines the discovery of self and the achievement of detachment and equanimity in the midst of time, by instructing the warrior Arjuna in his time of crisis. About to initiate the great, climactic battle, Arjuna first tries to imagine the battle's outcome – and is horrified at the bloody alternatives: he might die, or he might win by killing his kinsmen and teachers. He loses his self-confidence, and everything comes to a halt. Time seems to stop, Arjuna refuses to fight, and the assembled warriors hold their collective breath. But this stillness is a failure, a flight from time, for Arjuna rejects his future without finding another self-image free of pasts and futures.

Little by little, Krishna leads Arjuna toward a sense of self which is not time's creature. He explains to Arjuna that he grieves because he does not know himself, and so worries about the future. But prospects of death need not be a source of sorrow, since the reality underlying them all is always there, and quite wonderful:

Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these rulers, and never in the future shall we cease to exist.

The self is not born, it does not die; having been, it will never not be; unborn, enduring, constant, and primordial, it is not killed when the body is killed. (2.12, 20)⁹

Arjuna must learn to depend solely on this self, neither worrying about the future nor attempting to control it. He needs to live with a sense of self that is stable even as time passes, no longer relying on the calculus by which people spend their lives seeking to gain and fearing to lose. Self-understanding leads to detachment, a life marked by duty not future plans, by freedom not desire. 'Let a person find delight within himself and feel inner joy and pure contentment in himself; then there is nothing more to be done,' Krishna says, for then the person 'has no stake here in deeds done or undone, nor does his purpose depend on other beings' (3.17–18). Taking this teaching to heart, Arjuna begins to see the flow of time differently.

This teaching may sound simply like a strong but ultimately serene wisdom: think differently, and your life will be different. But the *Gita* acknowledges the rupture and emotional wrenching that comes with the decision to put aside the temporal perspective and no longer view life in terms of how one matures over time. In Chapter 11 Arjuna asks to see Krishna face to face, and is shocked to learn that all of time is already comprehended in Krishna, the future as well as the past. T. S. Eliot captures a bit of how this realization feels:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant –
Among other things – or one way of putting the same thing:
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.¹⁰

Krishna, who is Time, put it less subtly:

I am Time, wrecker of the world's destruction, matured, resolved here to swallow up the worlds. Do what you will, all these warriors shall cease to be, drawn up there in their opposing ranks. So stand up, win glory, conquer your enemies and win a prosperous kingdom! Long since have these men in truth been slain by me: yours it is to be the mere occasion. Drona, Bhishma, Jayadratha, Karna, and all the other men of war are slain by me. Slay them then – why falter? Fight, for you will conquer your rivals in the battle. (*Bhagavad Gita* 11.32–34)

As far as its meaning is concerned, the future is as settled as the past: everything dies, everything is born, all times are to be measured by God's measure, not ours. Arjuna is horrified when he sees Krishna as time, for he finds himself to be nothing, an infinitesimal point within the immensity of God, Time. Only Krishna's subsequent gracious assurance makes it possible for him to recover, and to begin to act in a way marked more by timelessness than time.¹¹

Suddenly timeless

The key then is to stop thinking of oneself in temporal terms, whether one manages this by divine intervention or self-recognition. Sometimes it happens very suddenly and simply. On an ordinary day in a small village in south India in 1895, a teenage boy named Venkataraman found his life changed, suddenly and dramatically. Without any express or conscious preparation, he suffered an overwhelming sense of death – found himself unable to move, helpless – and all at once his life stopped:

The shock of death made me at once introspective. I said to myself mentally, 'Now death is come. What does it mean? This body dies.' As I said this to myself, symptoms of death followed, yet I remained conscious of the inert bodily condition as well as of the 'I' quite apart from it. On stretching the limbs they became rigid, breath had stopped and there was hardly any symptom of life in the body. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried to the burning-ground and reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body, am "I" dead? This body cannot be the "I", for it now lies silent and inert, while I feel the full force of my personality, of the "I" existing by itself – apart from the body. So "I" am the Spirit, a thing transcending the body.' All this was not a mere intellectual process. It flashed before me vividly as living truth, a matter of indubitable and direct experience, which has continued from that moment right up to this time.¹²

Venkataraman's ordinary life, his plans (and his family's plans for him) shattered as he burst the narrow boundaries of ordinary, temporal existence. Time stopped, the future, like the past, became irrelevant. Once he had found himself, there remained no agenda, no plan to pursue in a lifelong quest. He lost interest in his daily life, his schoolwork, and no plans could satisfy him. Within weeks he had wandered away from home without any particular destination in mind, eventually settling down near an ancient temple where he remained

until his death in 1950. Known as the sage and teacher Ramana, he became renowned because he was so powerfully and simply present.

The liberating power of simply being present

In keeping with his own life experience, Ramana's primary teaching strategy was to help people to quiet their minds and sit still, discovering a present self in the present moment. Paul Brunton was a spiritual explorer who travelled around India in the 1920s meeting spiritual teachers. Finding his way to Ramana's ashram, he encountered Ramana in a large hall where the master sat quietly with his disciples. Brunton had a thousand questions but was reluctant to break the deep silence of the gathering. As he sat there in Ramana's presence, little by little his priorities changed:

Pin-drop silence prevails throughout the long hall. The Sage remains perfectly still, motionless, quite undisturbed at our arrival . . . If he is aware of my presence, he betrays no hint, gives no sign. His body is supernaturally quiet, as steady as a statue. Not once does he catch my gaze, for his eyes continue to look into remote space, and infinitely remote it seems . . . There is something in this man which holds my attention as steel filings are held by a magnet. I cannot turn my gaze away from him. My initial bewilderment, my perplexity at being totally ignored, slowly fade away as this strange fascination begins to grip me more firmly. But it is not till the second hour of the uncommon scene that I become aware of a silent, resistless change which is taking place in my mind. One by one, the questions which I prepared in the train with such meticulous accuracy drop away. For it does not now seem to matter whether they are asked or not, and it does not matter whether I solve the problems which have hitherto troubled me. I know only that a steady river of quietness seems to be flowing near me; that a great peace is penetrating the inner reaches of my being, and that my thought-tortured brain is beginning to arrive at some rest.¹³

Encountering a person who lived entirely in the present moment, Brunton found for himself a moment of quiet within time's flow, the burdens of a confused past and hoped-for future no longer burdening and defining him. Time went on, but (at least for a while) Brunton had stopped.

A possibly undramatic reading of Christian existence

The preceding reflections may partly confirm and partly alter readers' expectations about Hindu views of time. There is much in

these accounts which undercuts progressive notions of time, but the point is that there is never an eternal return or inevitable cycle. We may rightly wonder whether this wisdom can be really available to Christians whose sense of time is so deeply intertwined with a sense of salvation history, gratitude for God's work in the world, hope for the future. But we ought not to rule out the possibility; there is no reason not to consider the matter thoughtfully.

We might begin, for instance, by noting resemblances within the Christian tradition, for it would be a great mistake to identify the Christian viewpoint too strongly with the notions of progressive time and temporal drama which have predominated in the modern West. Taking these Hindu notions of time to heart, we may be able to free up the deeper Christian sense of time and eternity which stresses not only the drama of loss, achievement, death and triumph, but also simple presence and unaltered realities.

Jesus himself encouraged people to stop reducing spiritual truths to negotiable material quantities, including the strictures of time. When some Sadducees (sceptical about life beyond time, life after death) attempted to trip Jesus by posing the case of a woman whose seven husbands (all brothers) had died before her – which will be her husband in the afterlife? – Jesus reminded them that after the resurrection, calculations of past, present and future have no place, since 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living' (Mark 12:27).¹⁴ The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were so distracted, so burdened by disappointments and their shattered future, that they could not see the Jesus whom they had known and loved walking with them in the present. They had to recover the value of the present moment, welcome the stranger and sit down with him. Only then could they recognize him as the one they had been seeking, the one who had been with them all the time (Luke 24).

We might read the entire Gospel according to St John freshly with a heightened sense of realities unrestricted by time's rules. The woman at the well may actually have expected the Messiah to arrive some time in the future with the water of life, but Jesus surprised her by telling her that *now* is the moment when that living water is hers for the asking. The man born blind was stubbornly honest about the radical change in his life, but even he wondered where he might find the Son of Man until Jesus told him, 'You have seen him, it is he who is speaking to you' (John 9:37). Martha believed that there would be a resurrection from the dead, but she was amazed to discover that her own brother might

actually rise, right now. At Cana, even Jesus himself had to be reminded that his hour had already come, right there at a simple village wedding.

We could also look into the later Christian tradition for instances where different senses of time and timelessness come to the fore, closer to the Hindu sense of presence described here. But for now, I hope, it is enough that we do not rule out learning something from this Hindu sense of timelessness in time. It would be ironic were we to elude this possibility by postponing it to some future, more opportune time. Now is the time to see ourselves anew without hastily retreating to the old stories we tell about ourselves; now is the time to act as if – at least ‘as if’ – we already are, have always been, who we need to be in God’s eyes. Or, to put it another way,

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
onwards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say *where*.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.¹⁵

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NOTES

1 Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1946), p 7.

2 Zimmer, *Myths and symbols*, p 20. On the Hindu sense of the cycles of creation, see also Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu wisdom for all God’s children* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), chapter 1.

3 Though some Hindus see rebirth as a progressive path, the tradition seems to point more clearly towards an inevitable circling about, so that the answer is not in rebirth either, but only in wisdom regarding it. Just as one’s life history can add up to something better or worse, multiple lives too are ultimately neutral, ensuring neither decay nor progress. Rebirth is simply part of reality, a fact of life which one must take into account and make the best of.

4 As translated by Robert E. Hume, *The thirteen principal Upanisads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

- 5 This story is recounted in chapters 9 and 10 of the *Shankaradigvijaya* of Madhava Vidyaranya, trans Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Śrī Ramakrishna Math, 1978), pp 115–130.
- 6 *Samskara: a rite for a dead man* is a powerful novel by U. R. Anantha Murthy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976; trans A. K. Ramanujan) which vividly portrays an orthodox brahmin's struggle between finding his identity inside and outside of temporal realities.
- 7 From the 'Book of War' (*Yuddha Kanda*), chapter 119; as translated by Hari Prasad Shastri, *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1985), vol 3, pp 338–339. For a simple retelling of the *Ramayana*, see the version by R. K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).
- 8 The sudden termination of an expected dramatic scenario is illustrated clearly by the transformation of the heroine Kannaki in the famous Tamil-language drama *Cilappatikaram*. See 'Learning from Kannaki: light, darkness, and the full meaning of life', *The Way* vol 38, no 1 (January 1998), pp 40–53.
- 9 I have used Barbara Miller's *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's counsel in time of war* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), with slight adaptations.
- 10 T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages III*, *The Four Quartets*.
- 11 See 'Learning from Kannaki', pp 44–45, for more on the vision of time in Chapter 11 of the *Gita*; see also Chapter 4 of *Hindu Wisdom*.
- 12 As quoted in *Śrī Maharshi: a short life-sketch* (Tiruvannamalai: Śrī Ramanashramam, 1973), p 2.
- 13 As quoted in Paul Brunton, *The Maharshi and his message* (Tiruvannamalai: Śrī Ramanashramam, 1977), pp 11–14.
- 14 I have used *The New Revised Standard Version*.
- 15 T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton II*, *The Four Quartets*.