

Time to Live?

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This article was written with help from members of the Huddersfield and Leeds meditation groups and members of the brightmoon.org forum.

I've been involved with a couple of retreats with the Huddersfield meditation group and the Leeds group recently: both groups wanted to have a discussion on the topic of 'busyness.'

During our conversation we moved towards seeing busyness as a state of mind we choose, rather than a condition imposed upon us by our circumstances. There was a difference between 'having lots to do', and the mental attitude of 'busyness.' It was possible to do many things and not have a 'busy' mind, and we felt that there was a spiritual choice involved in being busy. We noted there are some subtleties in this though, sometimes we can feel like we are being 'driven' along by feelings without consciously choosing to be busy. However, once we were aware of these feelings it seemed there was then the choice to sit with them—to investigate them—rather than continue to be driven.

This is not to say that the conditions of peoples' lives were ignored. A common thread running through the comments was that people felt under increasing pressure to do more in less time.

The ability to remain in constant communication with friends and work colleagues through texting, email, website forums and other kinds of social networking could, it seems, end up diminishing the quality of life. For example it may be easier to just text someone, or ‘fire off’ an email, rather than have a face-to-face meeting. This is quicker but something is lost.

Also the boundaries between work and personal time were less obvious, more people are working from home, and it seemed you had to make a real effort to ensure you had some time when there was ‘nothing to do.’ This could sometimes lead to either a sense of guilt that people weren’t giving enough, or resentment of the fact that things seemed to keep invading ‘our time’.

There were many practical suggestions that came out of our discussion, and I hope to share some of them later in this article, but what I would like to concentrate on here is the relationship between the ‘busy mind’ and our assumptions about the way we to live ‘within’ time. This is where Great Master Dōgen’s chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* called ‘*Ūji*’ or ‘being-time’ comes into it.

I know a lot of trainees I meet struggle with Dōgen. And the question may well be asked: “How does a seemingly esoteric and poetic description of something called ‘being time’ or ‘existence, time, flow’ fit into our struggles with busyness?”

‘Time to live?’ gradually became the title of this attempt to relate *Ūji* to real experience, (and I am only trying to give people a ‘way in’ to appreciating *Ūji* for themselves here, I am not aiming to give a definitive account of what it means). It seems that there is a question mark for many over the issue of ‘what is time for?’, which is related to fundamental questions about our purpose for living. We are being made to ‘get the most out of

our life' in so many ways, and this leads to the basic fear, "Will I have time to fulfil myself?" The sense of pressure I noticed arising in our discussions seemed to come out of this sense of being trapped within time; that the demand that we fulfill ourselves and help others as much as we can, has increased this sense of claustrophobia. We now have so much we could do, or 'ought to do,' and the fear we may 'run out of time' before we achieve it is even greater. But are we really trapped in time? Is time really like that? How does our sense of a 'self' that has to prove itself through fulfilment or helping others relate to this sense of being trapped in time?

This is where I believe Dōgen's *Ūji* can help. It offers a totally different vision of what life is, where the sense of a personal self that exists independently of time and other beings is allowed to fall away; and there is only *Ūji* or 'existence, time, flow' as one thing; in which each moment is sufficient and the fear of not having 'enough time' can drop away. It is saying "there is another way to live."



We need to be accurate in our description of 'busyness.' A clear description of the problem helps with a diagnosis and makes it easier to choose the appropriate 'cure.' I recently read an article by Raymond Tallis ¹ that really caught the sense of how we can feel trapped by time, and also linked it to an attitude of grasping.

There are also lesser woes that may follow from keeping time. The kitchen clock, my watch, the pips from the radio peeping the hour, preside over my hurry,

your hurry, the hurry of widening rings of friends and strangers who soften and domesticate the infinite hard clockwork of the universe. Thus our orchestrated lives may be being emptied even as they are being enriched. The ever-greater efficiency of an ever-more-intimately-clocked world adds to our opportunities, but it also drives a positive feedback cycle in which we demand more of the world and the world demands more of us. This quickening of pace is evident in every aspect of our lives. We supplement the treadmill of work with a treadmill of pleasure—hurry seems to be a constant condition, even if the hurry is to catch a plane to go on holiday, to arrive at a concert on time, or to honour an engagement whose sole purpose is for a casual get-together. We are forever on the edge of being late, and any dereliction in this respect causes us anguish: we are mortified, and the others are impatient.

Raymond Tallis is right when he talks of how trying to fit everything in within ‘time’ drives a cycle in which “we demand more of the world and the world demands more of us.” Maybe we can even turn spiritual practice into a ‘treadmill’, if we come to it with an acquisitive mind?

When we demand of the world, it seems that it demands of us. There is a separation, a gap that we feel can only be filled with more activity. So the busy mind I would define as an aspect of the grasping mind. Because of some basic fear, the grasping mind has the potential to become ever more controlling. Because we have the very useful capacity to imagine various scenarios and possibilities and plan for them, this imaginative exercise can end up being projected onto reality, a reality that seems ‘demanding.’ But is this hostile reality true?

This is where it is good to talk about Dōgen's *Ūji*. But rather than just launching into a detailed commentary on the *Ūji* chapter, I would like to try a different approach and ask: “What was Dōgen arguing against when he wrote *Ūji*, what is the point of it?”

To do this we can contrast two views: the ‘confined’ view, and the view from within *Ūji* itself. In doing this I am deliberately going to exaggerate the differences and present extremes. It seems good to say beforehand that I am not intending to make a judgement in describing these two realms, and also to briefly mention the Mahayana perspective on the different worlds or states of being we find ourselves in. The first ‘realm’ is based somewhat on my own experience as an expert worrier, and hopefully doesn’t fit the way any real person lives all of the time. Also, it is important for me to remind myself that even when I seem to live in the ‘confined realm’, I am actually still in the realm of liberation—of ‘*Ūji*’. As Dōgen says, even at the time of doubting, this doubt itself is ‘being-time.’² This is the great compassion of the Buddhist approach. Even when driven by worry or ambition, we can see that within these very things, there are aspects of real concern and a genuine wish to do what is right. In the Mahayana, *Samsara* (the world of suffering) and *Nirvana* (the world of liberation) are two views of the same thing, which Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett described as “non-substantial liberated existence.”³ Whether we live in the confined realm or the realm of *Ūji* depends on grasping. Although external conditions definitely do have an effect, we can choose to let go at any time, and the sense of the kind of world we live in can change dramatically when we do so.

The confined view

In the confined realm, there appears to be a substantial self, time, and meaning/purpose; and these three appear to be separate. There is:

A substantial self with a degree of continuity—my life, my career, my training.

Time, which is like a container within which ‘my life’ is acted out. Almost like one of those sealed ‘snowglobes’ which has its own little internal landscape. Its main characteristic is that it feels like it limits us—death is one of those things imagined as ‘outside’ of this sealed world, that most of the time we hope to ignore. There are other things that we feel we need to achieve within a certain time (career opportunities, family opportunities etc.,—even spiritual attainment). These are like mini-mountains within the snowglobe we feel we must climb before we are too old and tired to make it! Sometimes the tiny world can seem to be the whole world, but in moments of insight we can see that it is indeed a manufactured reality dependent on so many other things.

Meaning/purpose. This can seem to be related to what we want to achieve within the restricted realm of time. We are offered the seeming possibility of transcending time, through some kind of fame, or passing on some legacy through family or achievement. Somehow though, these can often seem hollow. We have moments of realising the futility of attainment, when we see that a sense of achievement only makes sense within a very restricted sphere. Buddhism refers to these as the eight distractions which include, gain and loss; pleasure and pain; praise

and blame; fame and disrepute (status/disgrace). Our sense of our value being judged seems to be based on imagining some kind of omniscient super-self that weighs our worth outside of time.

Within this view: *time is either a means of achievement or an obstacle*. Suffering is inherent in it, because fulfilment or meaning can only be found within time, and there is the constant background fear that time can be (or is being) withdrawn. The response to this can be to try and control things more and more, but even this can be recognised as a form of suffering.

The liberated view of *Ūji*

Before I attempt to describe this, it is worth making what may seem to be a digression, and talk about the importance of ethics in Buddhism: what we in our tradition call the Precepts. *Ūji* can be seen as a development of the Three Pure Precepts: “Cease from evil, do only good and do good for others.” If we cease from evil: if we stop trying to grasp and control things, what happens? If we really ask “What is good to do?” in the heart of the situation as it is now, what comes forth from that? Releasing our grip on the world, it becomes a different place. “What can I achieve?” is replaced by “How can I help in this situation?” The ‘doing’ of ‘what is good’ is specific to the moment: and in a deeper sense *is* that moment, because existence and time cannot be separated.

So in the realm of *Ūji*:

There are not three separate elements

What appear to be three separate elements in the confined realm, (being and time and meaning) are not separate.

“Because real existence is only this exact moment, all moments of existence-time are the whole of time, and all existent things and all existent phenomena are moments of time.”⁴ *This actually means that we can find fulfilment in every moment in every situation.* What we need is right here and now, and even what we need to know from the past is contained in the present. The constant search for meaning in some imagined future becomes an absurdity the more we let go of the sense of a separate substantial self.

Dōgen starts his chapter *Ūji* with a quote from poem by Yakusan:

A former Buddha once said in verse:

“Standing atop a soaring mountain peak is for the time
being

And plunging down to the floor of the Ocean’s abyss is
for the time being;

Being triple-headed and eight-armed is for the time being

And being a figure of a Buddha standing sixteen feet tall
or sitting eight feet high is for the time being;

Being a monk’s traveling staff or his ceremonial hossu is
for the time being

And being a pillar supporting the temple or a stone
lantern before the Meditation Hall is for the time
being;

Being a next-door neighbor or a man in the street is for
the time being

And being the whole of the great earth and boundless
space is for the time being.”

The phrase ‘for the time being’ implies that time in its totality is what existence is, and that existence in all its occurrences is what time is.⁵

The *Ūji* chapter works on many levels, and must be read again and again to get some appreciation of this. But one way in to understand an aspect of this poem is to re-translate it in our minds into our present existence. Yakusan is describing a being with various functions at different times, as a teacher, as support for the Temple, as an ordinary person. The ‘person’ is no longer the substantial self (that goes from one time to another but remains essentially the same). It is a different functioning in the moment, which is only “for the time-being”: specific to that time and inseparable from being. So we can say (and I am using single-quotes here for my own words, so they’re not confused with Dōgen’s):

‘Meditating on retreat is for the time being

Waiting in the queue at the supermarket check-out is for the
time being

Watching TV with a cup of tea is for the time being.

Offering help to a friend is for the time being.’

Instead of the continuity of a person who “does this, and then does that”, we have events, in which the functioning is different. It is just the response to the unique situation at the moment.

One aspect of grasping hold of a self as a separate and continuous ‘thing’, is that it gets tied up with comparisons and

judgements. If you are on a train and the train is very late, it can feel like you are ‘wasting your time’ compared to what you should have been doing if the train had got you to your destination on time. The palpable frustration that builds on a delayed commuter train is understandable, but I’m not sure if it’s necessary. Being on a train is only negative *in comparison with the projected place we should be*. This can seem like a small thing, but consider how often we judge ourselves for not being ‘good trainees’, or judge even a meditation period, as being ‘dull and uninspiring’ — in comparison to....what? Buddhist Scriptures in our tradition regularly point out the danger of taking the continuity of self as a reality. ⁶

In the realm of *Ūji* there is no external time separate from things

Dōgen illustrates this by talking about spring:

We should learn in practice that the momentary passing of time continues without there being any external thing. The momentary passing of spring, for example, inevitably passes, moment by moment, through spring itself. It is not that the momentary passing of time is spring; rather because spring is the momentary passing of time, passing time has already realised the truth in the here and now of springtime. ⁷

Spring is rather poetic, but let’s substitute ‘old age’ for spring, and we can see how radical this is. So (using my words) we can say: ‘Old age is passing time realising the truth in the here and now of being old.’ Without ‘being old’, there is not passing time, and no truth in the here and now. So ‘old age’ or

any transitory thing, cannot be something to avoid—without it truth is not expressed through “passing time.”

I have already mentioned the tangle we can get in when we compare ourselves with an idealised other, or a projection of what we would like to be. Part of this is seeing spring as just something ‘on the way to being’ summer; or seeing our training as on ‘the way to being’ enlightenment. Although there is passing time, *it is* realising the truth in the here and now of ‘spring’—of how we are right now.

So you can see how time and meaning/purpose and the truth come together, and the self is no longer something that has to be maintained as a continuous thing, but is the expression of the truth ‘at the time of being young, and at the time of being old.’ If we don’t cling onto either the self, time or the truth, we can trust that truth is manifested in the here and now as ‘existence, time, flow’. In a very real sense without spring, or youth or old age, truth cannot be expressed. Dōgen stresses the concrete actuality “Spring is the momentary passing of time”, rather than the passing of time is spring. There is the truth of ‘being’ which we cannot avoid. So the question becomes “what is the nature of being, this right now, right here?”



As well as showing us the results of living from the Precepts, *Ūji* is just taking some basic Buddhist teaching as far and as deep as it can go. The Buddha taught on annicca (impermanence), annatta (no substantial self) and the suffering (dukkha)

caused by clinging. (These are known as three of the four ‘signs of existence’ in Buddhist theory).

Dōgen is saying that when we fully understand impermanence, we see that there are no external substantial things that limit training: “the momentary passing of time continues without their being any external thing.” When we talk about impermanence, it is easy to imagine that we are talking about the fact that some things are changing within a basic framework that is more or less permanent. In a way we give time one of the qualities of permanence: that of somehow standing outside of existence. For Dōgen training does not happen within this external thing called time. It is all movement, with no external measure of changeability. There is not a ‘time’ ‘out there’ when training comes to fruition—just continuous being-time, constant realization.

This has several positive consequences:

- We can value our existence ‘as it is now’—what other expression of truth can there be?
- There are no irremovable obstacles unless we choose to make them so. Each moment is separate and unlimited *and* there is some continuity within time—there is still cause and effect.
- Meaning is the Truth of this moment and cannot be pre-defined. We cannot carry the Truth with us as a possession from one moment to the next.



So what are the practical ways in which we can help ourselves make the shift: to see the realm of confinement as something else entirely?

I have already said that seeing things from the perspective of *Ūji* comes from a deep understanding of the Precepts. My experience is that I have to choose *not* to live in the confined realm. No one else, and no other thing, can make that choice for me. This choice is influenced by the clarity with which I can see things in the moment, and for this a regular meditation practice is essential; but, in my experience so far, the choice to ‘refrain from evil’ comes before understanding. We cannot expect wisdom to arise without making the commitment to do what is true.

What follows are some of the practical things that seem to help, shared by members of the meditation groups I discussed ‘busyness’ with and others who kindly commented on drafts of this piece.⁸

It helps to deliberately stand back from the *content* of the busy thoughts at times during the day and ask: “Who is this that thinks, that is acting, seeing, being?” This effort seems to naturally bring the focus back to the present, and remind us that the nature of the mind is not ‘busyness’ itself.

A number of people said how important it was to give yourself time for reflection: when you are not ‘doing anything’ in particular at all. To just stop: have a cup of tea, look out of the window at the view. To have no ‘agenda’ for part of the day. When you are not even aiming to be ‘spiritual’!

A couple of people I discussed this with pointed out that busyness can have a certain momentum—that when we have been busy it is difficult to stop. So giving ourselves time not

doing anything, allows us to feel the resistance to stopping and being still with it; the forward momentum can feel very strong. We can be busy out of fear of what would arise if we allowed ourselves to stop and be still. Giving ourselves space to feel this can be uncomfortable, but it is one way we start to unravel the complex knot of ‘self-time-grasping.’

In terms of the work we do, one person pointed to the value of “Doing things in the time that it takes to do them, that is, in their own time rather than a time that I have imposed on them. Allowing life to unfold. A useful aspect of the above is that it can help with a tendency to overestimate what can be done in a ‘period of time’, if there are ‘time limitations’. I find it helpful to practice being more realistic about this so I can prevent myself getting into a position of trying to ‘cram things in.’”⁹

Deadlines do exist. They are part of working together in a complex situation, where one thing is dependent on another. What I have been describing doesn’t negate the reality of working together; of the need to be efficient at the jobs we do. But it was pointed out that we can take care with deadlines, both in accepting them (if there is any choice, and quite often there isn’t), planning for them, and not being tyrannised by them.

All the above are aspects of an enquiring approach to practice: the need to regularly remind ourselves of ‘the important thing.’ Part of this single-mindedness can involve questioning what seems to be the default assumption in our present society: that more is better. “We can step back occasionally and question which activities are really essential to our well-being and notice how stressed trying to do too much makes us, even when they are ‘pleasurable’ things.”¹⁰

Lastly, I have found for myself that doing some spiritual reading in the day does help. Even if it's only a paragraph or two, as long as it's part of the core teaching by someone who has gone deeply in their own training. Especially when I appear to be trapped, a different view appears when I take refuge in the Dharma. It is like waking up in a dark room, then opening the shutters of the window to look out upon an open vista.

Readers are welcome to offer their own suggestions or experience in this area for inclusion in the Journal. You can contact me at journal@throssel.org.uk

useful sources available: Rev Hubert's translation of *Ūji* can be downloaded from this page. http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-publications_Shōbōgenzō.html

A translation of *Ūji* by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. in *Zen is eternal Life* can be downloaded from here: <http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings>

Notes

1. Tallis, Raymond. 'A Hasty Report from a Tearing Hurry', *Philosophy Now*, Jul/Aug 2012, free from www.philosophynow.org/issues/90/A_Hasty_Report_From_A_Tearing_Hurry
2. "...doubts themselves are merely 'just for the moment' kinds of time, and nothing more." Trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman, p. 179. *Shōbōgenzō* Vol. 1, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1996).
3. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master. Lecture on *Makahannyaharamitsu*, 28th August 1980 Pt1, disc. 1. See the introduction to the Mahayana by Je Gampopa, *Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom*, Trans. Kenneth and Katia Holmes (Altea, 1994) p. 2-3. See also Dōgen's *Shushogi* on Nirvana.
4. *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, trans. by Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross, (Windbell 1998) Book 1, p. 111
5. Hubert Nearman trans. PDF download, (see useful sources above) p. 134.
6. See the *Lankavatara Sutra* trans by Red Pine Ch. XXXII: "Mahamati, it is not true that what occurs sequentially is a continuity. It is merely a projection of what produces or what is produced by direct, supporting, continuous, or contributing causes."
7. *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, trans. by Nishijima, op cit. p. 114.
8. These include Ann Davies, Jill Johnson, Treasa Cassidy.
9. From email from Ann Davies
10. *Ibid.*