

The mystery of time

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“It seems to me that we have ultimately to go beyond all forms of thought – even beyond the Trinity, the Incarnation..... All these belong to the world of signs – manifestations of God in human thought – but God Himself, Truth itself is beyond all forms of thought.”
(Bede Griffiths OSB)

We have to accept that we can't capture either our true Self or God by our rational mind, in words and images: *“He/She is ... beyond all speech, beyond every concept, beyond every thought.... He/She is above both place and time....You are left with the notion of pure being and that is the closest you can come to God.”*(Clement of Alexandria 2nd century). Not only is the Divine Reality beyond all thought, but it is also beyond our ordinary sense of time. Sometimes in meditation we have a different experience of time. In your meditation group someone may query: *‘Have we really meditated for half an hour?’* In previous letters Dr Shanida Nataraja explained that meditation switches off our usual sense of time and space; boundaries of space and time disappear; there is a sense of timelessness and connectedness.

When we come out of meditation, our ordinary mind takes over and normal time reappears. But what is time? This is a question that has preoccupied many a sage and mystic. They stress that time, past and future, is a product of our rational mind. It is not an integral permanent quality of the Cosmos as a whole. Einstein showed the relativity of time clearly in his theories. St Augustine in the 4th century CE also stated the problem for us: *“What then is time?...Now what about...past and future: in what sense do they have*

real being, if the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist? As for present time, if that were always present and never slipped away into the past, it would not be time at all; it would be eternity.” (St Augustine ‘Confessions’ book XI 17).

The only time that has any real being is the present time, but even there St Augustine reminds us: *“There are three tenses or times: the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things....memory... attention...expectation.”(St Augustine ‘Confessions Book XI 26).*

Attention is the quality he mentions as being linked with the ‘*present of present things*’. Attention on our mantra keeps our mind in the present moment. We let go of the thoughts that form the past, our *memories*. They are only our perception of things past. They are not necessarily images of what really happened, only of what we thought happened or what we wished had happened. We also let go of our *expectations* for the future, our hopes and fears. They too have no basis in reality; they are only our thoughts, our illusions and delusions.

It is only in the present moment that we truly *are*. Only in the present moment does the timeless, Divine Reality, intersect with time, as T.S.Eliot so beautifully describes:

“Men’s curiosity searches past and future

And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint –

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time..

Music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts.

These are only hints and guesses,

Hints followed by guesses;

and the rest is prayer,

observance, discipline, thought and action.

And right action is freedom from past and future also.

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