A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SACRED TIME AND SPACE

Fred Alan Wolf

To realize the *true self* is a task that may not be easy for a number of reasons. Why should it be so difficult? One cause is that we live in space and time. This answer is easy to articulate but hard to appreciate fully. The problem has to do with the reality that, while time and space seem to be *out there* as objective facts, they also turn out to be deeply ingrained in the *in here* world of the mind. We can think of the *out there* world as ordinary or profane and of the *in here world* although often chiefly concerned with objective events as a sacred stream of time at its very core. Sometimes this sacred stream does not run at the same speed as the clock on the wall ticks.

University of Texas Professor E. C. G. Sudarshan tells the following mythological story from the *Vishnu Purana* that illustrates this connection. In the *Vishnu Purana* there is a mythological story about sage Narada asking Lord Vishnu to tell why people are deluded into living in profane time when all along they could function in sacred time. Lord Vishnu offers to do so, but asks Narada, in the meantime, to fetch a cup of water. Narada goes to the nearest house and knocks on the door to ask for the water. A beautiful and attractive young woman opens the door. Narada is completely captivated by her charms, forgets about his fetching a cup of water for the Lord, forgets that he is an avowed celibate; and he woos and wins her hand. They live together in a house after getting married and in due course two beautiful children arrive in successive years. While they are living in contentment, suddenly a flash flood engulfs their neighbourhood and even their home. They have to try to escape as the flood waters rise and the current becomes stronger. It becomes so strong that first one child, then the other, and finally his wife are swept away by the raging waters. Narada himself is barely able to maintain a precarious hold on a tree and is feeling terribly shocked by the tragedy that has befallen him. While waiting thus, he hears Lord Vishnu's call asking him *where is the cup of water* because he is still thirsty. Narada suddenly realizes that he was all the while standing on the firm ground and only a few moments had passed!

Most of us have experienced, at one time or another, the distinct feeling that time has passed too quickly or perhaps too slowly. I know that when I sit down to write a book such as this one, I struggle for several minutes at the beginning, but once I find a rhythm and the words begin to flow, I lose all sense of time. Perhaps hours go by and I have no sense of their passing at all. On the other hand, time seems to go much too slowly if I find myself in an embarrassing situation or when I'm visiting the dentist and experiencing the dentist's drill. Scientists, particularly psychologists, call this relative experience of time *subjective time*.

Objective time, by contrast, is that *thing* we believe to be measurable by clocks and in terms of rhythms or frequencies. In fact, all clocks work by comparing rhythms they imply an objective time simply by counting repetitions. Now this may not seem to be a comparison of rhythms, but it is most certainly that. For instance, if you choose to count the number of swings of a pendulum, as Galileo did one morning long ago in a Sunday service watching a swinging chandelier, you are actually comparing the number of swings you see with your own subjective internal rhythm for example, your heart rate or your eye blink rate or even the rate at which words arise in your mind. Think about it: How do we know that a pendulum makes a *good clock* one that keeps *true time* except by comparison? (Note how the assessments *good* and *true* subtly enter the picture here.) Certainly we do compare a questionable clock with another that we trust keeps good time. Yet even though we may check our clock with a trusted timepiece, we perhaps most often notice that our mechanical clocks are incorrect through comparison with our inner time sense.

The human mind is capable of discerning the differences among a vast array of rhythms--from the amazingly rapid vibrations of the quartz crystal in a watch to the yearly journey of the earth around the sun--and, based on those differences, constructing an objective *timescape*, a vista or expanse of time that all of us see and agree on. To make these comparisons requires an internal, subjective sense of time.

However, as we saw when we examined the five fluctuations of the mind in chapter 1, this time sense may be an illusion causing us to think that something that has happened is happening now, or will happen again. This inner, perhaps illusionary connection given to us by the great God of Time turns out to be the first tether that binds us in time and space and subjects us to time. Without this connection, the vibrations of music and sound could not play a vital role in enchanting us, nor could the sun's rising, the movement of tides, and the changing seasons. Yet despite the fact that these natural rhythms are cyclical, we in the West have interpreted them to

mean something quite different. We have learned to map them linearly, implying that even though they repeat, they never repeat themselves in quite the same way. What is it that is changing? This sense that something changes gives us an experience we label *time passing*, and we have learned to see that experience in terms of a straight line.

A Line of Time

The notion of linear time is an objective construction of the human mind, one that is particularly ingrained in the Western attitude toward life. We, in the West, give more credence to objective or mechanical clock time than we do to our inner, subjective time sense. We ultimately reduce all subjective senses of time to the merest thread of objective agreement. Yet our inner, subjective sense of time is as real as any sense can be. We think that since we can't measure it, it can't be real. But what could be more real to us than the inner sense of time through which we experience rhythmic variations like music and even the pace of our own thoughts and feelings? We may not be able to compare it with another person's temporal sense, but this shouldn't make it any less real.

We have abandoned our inner sense of time, not because of the Gita's teaching, but to replace it with the commonly accepted outer sense we call clock time. Yet linear clock time doesn't really exist *out there* any more than subjective time does. It, too, is abstract and imaginal. But based on that imagined, objective thread or line of time, we produce an enormous outflow of creative and technological innovation. We construct, for example, the notions of the forty-hour work week, the nine to five office, the daily grind, the two or three week vacation, equal employment opportunity, equal hours of work for all employees, overtime, slacking, and so on. As for technological inventions, nearly every one of them implies linear time at its heart. For what are inventions but devices to save time so that we can increase our hourly, daily, and yearly output or else to help us pass the time that we've saved?

We walk on a temporal tightrope that stretches from the instant of our birth to the last breath we take. This linear notion of time appears to make sense to us, and it certainly seems egalitarian and *real*; nevertheless, it arises ultimately from a subjective perception. Inside our minds lies a sense of time that tells us, even without a watch on our wrists, what takes a long time and what doesn't. We hone this sense of time as we perform any number of daily tasks, from waiting in line at the grocery checkout stand to brushing our teeth before we retire. Clocks and calendars certainly were invented to display this inner sense of time, allowing us to make comparisons. For without comparing clock time with our inner, subjective sense of time, we would have no measure of the difference between our dreams and fantasies and the reality we presently believe we are living in.

Without this inner temporal sense, we would not be able to measure the length of a thumb or the height of a tree or for more sophisticated example, the height of a skyscraper, the flying altitude of a modern jetliner, or the distance to the sun and other stars and galaxies. Our inner temporal sense enables us to realize and measure space, simply because it takes time and repetition to do so. It may not seem that you are repeating anything when you use your eyes to measure the length of your thumb with a tape measure, but the light reaching your eyes consists of many frequencies, and these rapid repetitions in turn provide you with a sense of sight.

Many other Western societies have also developed the linear time idea. In fact, one way or another, at times with some difficulty, all civilizations have adopted or formed a concept of linear time, one that shaped their attitudes and enabled them to have a historical perspective and anticipate the future. Professor Sudarshan reminds us that the two great civilizations of Asia, the Chinese and the Indian, have treated time differently from the way Western civilization does. The Chinese kept meticulous chronology, but valued ancestral time more than present time. Immediate ancestors were held in highest regard, and the duty of the individual was to do hard work for the good of society. As long as the people worked hard and kept the ancestors in mind, society would progress and life would be better for all. Indian society, on the other hand, seems to have the notion that time as experienced depends on the state of awareness of the individual, and hence time functions in a variety of subjective forms. So chronology in India is unreliable, in any linear objective sense, and most events were simply *a long time ago*. That is, the Indian mind does not see time as a simple imaginary scaffolding--something projected by the mind *out there* as a skeleton or framework upon which the real business of the world is measured and compared. Instead, time exists integrally and inseparably from space and matter; as a result, it can change in a nonlinear manner.

Cycles and Dreamtime

The Chinese and the Indians aren't the only peoples who look at time differently from the way Westerners do. In a chapter of my book *The Dreaming Universe*, I write about the ways of the Australian aboriginal peoples.

In his book, *White Man Got No Dreaming*, W. H. Stanner refers to the Dreamtime or the *Alcheringa*, of the Arunta or Aranda tribe, first introduced to the West by two Englishmen: anthropologist Baldwin Spencer and researcher Frank Gillen. Stanner prefers to call it **the Dreaming** or simply **Dreaming**. Dreamtime's a curious term. Surprisingly, It Is not original to the Australian aboriginal people. Rather, it was coined by Gillen in 1896 after his attempt to understand the aboriginal concept of time and was used by Gillen and Spencer in their now classic work of 1899. Even though aborigines think of Alcher Ãnga not so much as Dreamtime but more as the law or the sacred understanding of life, time nevertheless enters into it.

The Dreamtime refers primarily to a time of heroes who lived before nature and humans came to be as they are now. It was a time long ago, as in *Once upon a time, there was* .... That is, neither time nor history, are actually implied in the meaning of Dreaming. Time as an abstract, objective concept does not exist in the aboriginal languages. The Dreaming cannot be understood in terms of history either. The Dreaming refers to a complex state that eludes the Western linear description of time and Western logical ways of thinking.

According to Australian scholar W. Love, early Australian aboriginal people, when they arrived in Australia sometime between 40,000 and 120,000 years ago, were faced with flora and fauna very different from what they had known in their own land. These macro fauna, as Love calls them, became in myth and legend the animals of Dreamtime, and their stories became models for human behaviour and were enshrined in ceremonial patterns. As Stanner explains, an aborigine may regard his totem, or the place from which his spirit came, as his Dreaming. He may also regard tribal law as his Dreaming.

According to another expert, Ebenezer A. Adejumo, Dreamtime was not just a fantasy of aboriginal people. Instead, it has as much meaning to them as psychologists and psychiatrists place in our dreams of today. The myths of the Dreamtime contain records associated with certain geographic sites, sociological concerns, and personal experiences. Since the aborigines re-enact the stories of the Dreamtime through ritual, we can deduce that all of the past, present, and future coexist in the Dreamtime as if in parallel worlds of experience. Together these realms make up a reality in which our sense of present time is merely a small part.

The Dreamtime is eternal and timeless, and so are the spirits of the people who are linked with it: They have existed in the past, they will exist in the future in the hearts and minds of the children yet unborn, and they exist now in the hearts and minds of the people of the land. Aboriginals see both themselves and all human beings this way. There is no division between time and eternity; all time is essentially present time. To keep this awareness alive, songs must be sung, dances must be performed, and these creative acts become the repeated reincarnation of the spirit re-enacted by countless repetition by human forms. By keeping track of the stories and legends, the spirit is in a real sense keeping track of himself, his path and pattern throughout historical time.

This re-enactment serves as a solution to the alienation of humans from their own planet. We are all utterly dependent on the earth for survival. The aboriginal culture does not view nature separately as our Western scientific world does, thereby adjusting itself to life on earth through applied science. Instead, it sees itself as part of nature.

Australian aboriginal people today are well versed in linear time, yet they still refer to time in their own original manner. Hence their grammatical constructions in English may seem quaint to Western ears, but I assure you, their use of English is quite correct in terms of their own sense of time. As in a poem one old black fella once told Stanner:

White man got no dreaming.
Him go other way.
White man, him go different.
Him got road belong himself.

Time for the aboriginal is quite concrete. It is based on the observance of natural rhythms, such as the seasons and the lunar and solar cycles. Thus time is marked, not by points on a line stretching from minus to plus infinity, as in the Newtonian worldview, but on a circle: Time is counted by recurrences of cycles. The timing of daily events is marked by the position of the sun. Natives of central Australia mark time in *sleeps*; they say they will return to a place after so many sleeps, or nights. Durations of time are marked by everyday processes. For example, one hour may be marked by how long it takes to cook a yam. A moment might be the twinkling of a crab's eye. Longer times may be marked by the duration of a particular journey. Thus time tables are not definite. What is important is the concrete time of the now.

When time is viewed as circular and sacred, it appears to have an imaginal quality. This imaginal quality is not unique to the aborigines. I believe all humans sense the imaginal quality of time. But we in the West tend to dismiss this subjective perception of time in our commitment to a line time view of events. I like to think of time's imaginal quality as a great hoop that rolls along the imagined straight line of our linear time.

Fred Alan Wolf is a physicist, writer, and lecturer who earned his Ph.D. in theoretical physics at UCLA in 1963. He continues to write, lecture throughout the world, and conduct research on the relationship of quantum physics to consciousness. He is author of Taking the Quantum Leap which won the National Book Award and stars in the movie What the Bleep Do We Know!? This article is an except from his most recent book The Yoga of Time Travel (Quest Books 2004) A Brief Overview Of Sacred Time And Space.