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The Flow of Time

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Translated by Marcello Rotondo

It is said that “time” flows, but I do not clearly understand what that means to begin with. However, we usually say so, and think so, and even though we do not know what time is, we divide it into past, present, and future, and we say that its “flow” runs steadily from the past to the present, and from the present to the future.

There are things called clocks that mark “time.” The echo of a “tick” means that it is the past; when it is making “tick-tock,” that’s the present; and when it hasn’t made “tick” or any other sound at all yet, that we call the future. If we try to think a little bit more about it, though, it can’t get any vaguer than that. That’s because there is nothing more difficult than catching this “tick.” When we hear the “tick,” that’s already the past, and if we don’t hear it yet, that’s still the future. It is said that the present is the instant in which the past moves into the future: it is always in motion. In the time it takes to say “ah,” that “instant” is no longer there. Although we say that nothing is as real as the present, there is nothing as difficult to catch. It is not that it’s difficult to catch it, but that we are unable to do so. If that is true already for the present, then it must be said that human thinking, which talks about the past and the future taking the present as a reference point, is something affected by extreme precariousness. Even more than precariousness, we could say “extreme abstractness.” Marking “time” in terms of present, past, and future is something done by human thought out of practical convenience, but as a matter of fact, it is not such a non-concrete thing, unfitted to reality.

If we translated “time” in spatial terms, trying to compare it to a water

flow, it might seem that something becomes clearer, but in fact the problem becomes more and more labyrinthic. We would like to see the upstream as the past and the downstream as the future, but since the future has not run yet, we cannot talk about the river's water as if we could see it also from the top of a mountain. When we talk about a river, there is a riverbed along both riverbanks, and there is water flowing on top of it: that is what we call a "river." In the case of "time," we cannot think of such riverbanks or a riverbed. Furthermore, we cannot look at "time" like we look at the river, standing apart from time itself and looking at it from the banks of "time." When we say that we stand on the banks of "time" and see the flow of "time," that "time" loses its reality. The reason is that we are always in "time." By cutting time into the three temporal states of past, present, and future, or overlooking its flow as a continuum while we stand outside of it, we are making an abstract discussion with no relation to "time" itself.

Although it may not be clear what the word "reality" means, the reality of "time" means nothing but actually living in "time" itself. To say that we live in time itself must be equivalent to saying that "throughout Heaven and Earth, I alone am the honored one." This honored one makes "time." "Time" is the marking of the living of the honored one. "Time" cannot be understood apart from this honored one. Since "time" is a marking, if one sees that alone as "reality," the gigantic honored one is no longer there. We must say that the congestion of our thoughts really begins with this contradiction.

I think that what is considered concrete and abstract depends on the person's way of thinking and perspective. For example, we can say that there is a tea bowl here, or that four sparrows have gathered on the electric wire over there. One may think that there cannot be a statement more concrete than that. It is said that all sensory experiences are concrete and that they become abstract once they are put into thought. However, although we might think that to be certainly so, these sensations are not at all that concrete. When it comes to the movements of the honored one, it is something extremely abstract to say "here" or "there," to partition space, to limit and individuate things such as the sparrows or the tea bowl. Such limitations cannot be assumed along with the honored one. In other words, only when they are thought apart from the honored one, there is "here," and the sparrow emerges. The "object" called sparrow is an abstract thing that has come by

through thought. The “here” follows the same reason. For the honored one, there is neither here nor sparrow. Therefore, he can be here and there; he can be the sparrow, the electric wire, and the pen. He can be anything and everything.

People say that the honored one is a result of abstract thought. At the same time, from a different point of view, namely that according to which the sparrow already is something abstract, there is nothing as concrete as that honored one. It can be said then that no one lives in the concrete world as much as the religious person does. Shinran Shōnin said, like others did, that this world is a mirage, that all is a fabrication. It truly is like that. The words “mirage” and “fabrication” mean nothing but being abstract. On the other hand, there are also people in this world that see philosophers as contractors of abstract concepts, but while it can certainly be said that some philosophers are like that, there are others who are not like that at all. Indeed, to make such a distinction, one must have experienced what this honored one is. The more concrete that which one grasps is, the more universality it has. Something tinged with abstraction hides subjectivity somewhere. It is because of that subjectivity that it cannot be generally accepted. In my opinion, without turning around the view of ordinary people, one cannot enter the world of truth—that is, what is most concrete. Unable to do that, one should not speak of “proper ideological guidance.”

Sometimes I hear that history unfolds along the flow of “time,” but I think that there is no such a meaningless thing. I cannot think that there is something called history, and that it flows in time. I cannot think that time, as mentioned above, is a blank sheet of paper that unrolls like a waterfall, and that history is there, falling from upon high. Furthermore, we are not watching it. From the very origin, there is no hanging blank sheet of paper called “time.” Thinking that is the result of abstraction. To say that history traces something on time is the same as jumping around chasing the shadow of what history truly is. What we think we caught by doing so is nothing but an empty shell. Those who catch such a shell and regard it as the dearest thing are exchanging something alive with something dead. In other words, they relegate the mummy of a corpse to an altar or to a tabernacle, they perform three genuflections and nine prostrations in front of it, and then they wait for a holy light to gush

forth. Not only is that even more absurd than the belief that a sardine can cherish in its head, but that kind of people tries to make a hard sell of their self-conceived dried mummy. That is so for one's own beliefs, but if nobody has anything to complain, there may be even something graceful about it. However, when it comes to such a gang of stockfish salesmen, the extent of the disaster is truly immeasurable.

Those who worship with adoration the dried fish of history and the shadow of "time" are stuck in the "past" and do not have the ability to move even one step forward. Dried fish can't breathe, and the shadow cannot move by itself. Therefore, people of that kind have neither present nor future, and do not have enough vitality in their spirit to jump beyond subjectivity. Because they always carry the shadow of the past on their back, and because they cannot bear the weight of that shadow, they cannot escape the past and enter into the present. Much less they dispose of the tiniest bit of spirit to try and make a leap into the future. Real history is a succession of leaps. It is the continuity of discontinuity. The honored one always jumps, in the present instant, from the past to the future. In the present instant, in the very middle of darkness, he cuts his way through. In that leap, so-called "past history" comes back to vigorous life. The long strides of the honored one are indeed such a magnificent thing. Somebody with a lot of spare time may try in vain to make a dried fish of him; in vain may the advocate of "reality" try to seal him in the coffin of the "past" and leave him behind.

The honored one does not follow the flow of "time." He is not in "time." On the contrary, it is "time" that follows him. Because he is there, there is time. "Time" is what is left after he has moved. He has no intention from the beginning to leave "time" behind. There is no person as real and concrete as him. Abstract "time" can't do anything to him. It follows him around. No matter how hard "time" tries to reach him, he's always one step ahead. He uses "time," but "time" cannot use him. Once the Zen master Jōshū said, "Many people are used by the twenty-four hours. I use the twenty-four hours instead." Jōshū was an honored one. That is what Rinzai meant by "becoming the master everywhere." It does not mean arranging things in such a way as to become the leading character. It is the bottom of *jinen hōni*. In human terms, we talk of "master" and "guest," but there is no such a thing for the honored one. It is a solitary

journey that must be walked by oneself. Human beings—“time”—chase him along that journey, going from one footprint to the next. That they call “history,” and they go down along it with utmost effort. Those are the ones who drown in the flow of “time.”

When I talk about the honored one, or about being the leading character, or going along one’s own way, one might be reminded of those that are commonly known as the egoists, the tyrants, the gangsters, but there cannot be such a serious misunderstanding. In particular, in recent years a philosophy of “power” has been actively promoted, to the effect that all must prostrate in fear in front of power. That type of propaganda is then used to promote and implement all kinds of violence. However, such dangerous thoughts have no relation to reality. If this was to continue for some more years, our country will go to ruin, and our people will weaken. It is truly deplorable.

To understand history, one must know “time.” To know “time,” a certain amount of thinking, reflection, and analysis is necessary. However, that alone is not enough. One must move from thinking to direct intuition. That is, one must grasp the substance of the honored one. One must grasp the most concrete, the most truthful, and ultimate thing. At that time, one can thoroughly understand the meaning of the flow of “time.” I believe, in other words, that it is by doing so that one can truly go on living.