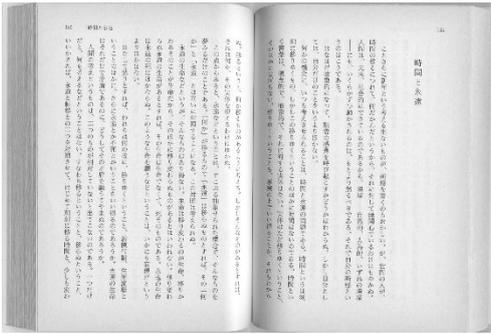


'Time and Eternity' by D.T. Suzuki



It seems absurd for someone, to whom the thought of New Year does not arise, to write something for the New Year. But, since people say this and that about shifting of time, I cannot remain disinterested in that. Because human beings are designed to be social, it is inevitable to be affected by his or her surroundings, whether it be artificial or natural. My sentiments are as follows.

What I have to say is extremely abstract so it may not interest the readers. However, I can only speak for myself.

Whenever the opportunity arises, I am always made to think about the issue of time and eternity. Time keeps changing and it does not exist in any other way than to keep changing. 'Time' is a conceptual and an abstract notion with no substance. Its essence is that it just keeps changing. Whether time changes is a fact or not is also uncertain. When one says it changes, it seems that there is something which changes. If there is such a thing, it is impossible to grasp what that something is.

From this point of view, eternity is very much an abstract concept and it can only be imagined. If 'something' is what changes and 'eternity' is what does not change, then that 'something' and 'eternity' are in opposition with each other. This dichotomy is inconceivable.

People talk about eternal life but such a thing cannot exist. Life is life because it changes. Change itself is life and therefore, it is not possible to say that there is something else which does not change. If there is an eternal life which does not change, then such a life is not life but death itself. Eternal life is nothing but eternal death. To wish for such a life is nothing but delusional.

If this is the case, for what reason can we talk about eternity and immortality, as well as change, renewal and 'Shōji Ruten' (all things being in flux through the endless circle of birth, death, and rebirth). Eternal life itself is a contradictory notion, so why do we keep desiring such a contradiction?

Human thought only comes into being when two things are in opposition. If there is just one thing, thought does not arise. That is to say, when you place change along with something fixed, or eternity with change, it becomes possible to think of constantly changing time as well as eternity, which does not change one bit. Wishing for eternal life becomes possible because there is 'Shōji Ruten'. You can also put it like this. We desire eternal life because we think of life and death as change.

Human consciousness comes into being as it can observe experience by detaching itself from the experience. In other words, it arises because the seer and the seen become two separate entities. For all animals, things are not split into two. They live in a world where everything is one. And apart from the experience of the reality, they do not become aware or criticise. They do not self-examine nor desire. When they are living, they just live. When they die, they die. They do not talk about eternity nor life, or anything else. Humans are different because of consciousness, which divides things into two, they step out of reality and dream of many things and desire things which they currently do not have. Why is this so?

In the end, it must be that a moment is eternity, and Nirvana is life and death themselves, and this life itself is heaven. Eternity does not exist anywhere but in changing time. Eternity is the absolute now.

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In Diamond Sutra, a Buddhist scripture, there is a following verse: ‘過去心不可得、現在心不可得、未來心不可得’ (These are Chinese characters. Literal meanings of characters are as follows: Past, mind, not possible to obtain; present, mind, not possible to obtain; future, mind, not possible to obtain). A greatly profound idea is stated here. I do not have time to go into detail now. The verse means vicissitudes in life and death is eternal life, in other words, absolute now is infinite time itself.

Let us return to the thought for the New Year. Every new day, every new moment in a day, year by year, age by age, time is the same for humans and flowers alike. Living within this time, which does not cease to change, is eternal life. To say otherwise is just an illusion of philosophers and religious men. This is not to say that you can just live your life idly. This is where discernment becomes necessary. New Year is indeed a very good opportunity to awaken such discernment.

‘Time and Eternity’ appears in the essay collection *Oriental Point of View* (Iwanami Bunko, 1997). The essay was originally published under the title ‘The Issue of Time and Eternity’ in *Mainichi Shimbun* on 3 January 1959. This English translation is by Kaz.