

May 1961

READING 1
ALL GROUPS

You cannot have studied the Law of Octaves – even for a mere two or three months – without suspecting that all events go in cycles, and that the idea of ‘Time’ as a straight line is a convenient illusion.

From some unknown ‘Past’ goes this odd sort of line apparently made up of moments continually slipping from the ‘Future’ into the ‘Past’. And where is this line going anyway? Why, into something which we call the ‘Future’, equally unknown and quite unforeseeable.

Something like this:

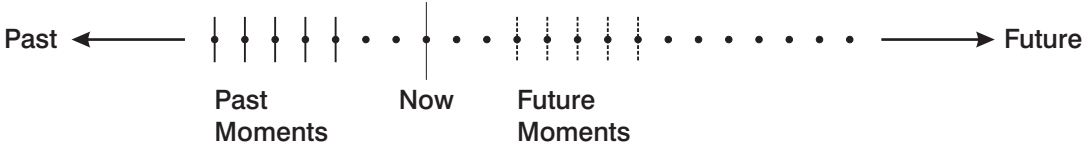


Figure 1

It seems odder still when we take it in relation to our own lives:



Figure 2

We have made a film showing this in movement, and when you see that you will wonder why you ever believed in it at all! Moreover, this illusion is very unpleasant – it’s a kind of prison with no escape:

The Moving Finger writes: and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

But if every succession of events goes in cycles, then man’s life is a cycle too: (Figure 3)

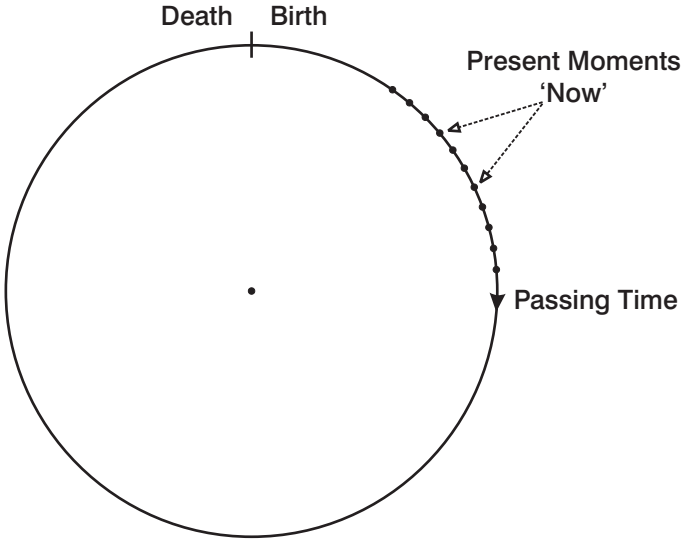


Figure 3

Some of the trouble is caused by our language, for we have only one word for 'Time', whereas the Greeks had two words for it: *Chronos*, a stretch of time and *Kairos*, a moment ('Now'). This is shown in those lines from Ecclesiastes:

To every thing there is a *season* (Chronos), and a *time* (Kairos) for every action under the Heaven:

A *time* (Kairos) to be born, and a *time* to die: a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

Kairos, the moment, the opportunity, the way out of the prison. For if we could find the centre of the circle there would be 'Time no longer' – Eternity.

What *is* this 'passing time'? We can't think of Time apart from *Motion* and this 'passing time' is imposed on us by the motion of the earth and the moon. The earth turns on its axis night and day and our clocks measure *that* motion; our calendars record the months of the moon's motion round the earth and the seasons of the earth's orbital motion round the sun in a year. All this motion is very real; we can't get away from it, our social lives are governed by it. It's a sad nuisance especially to the traveller, for Greenwich time is not the only time and it disagrees with 'local' time everywhere you go.

Further, it is not at all the same as 'Biological time' as the Nobel prize winner Lecomte du Noüy proved. And now we have a neurologist contrasting 'official time' with the various clock systems within the body of man.

One obvious clock system is that based on the heart-beat – the pulse. Under conditions of complete quiet and rest, this pulse beats seconds – it is a sort of 'seconds hand' in the human clock.

The heart cycle is a good one to study because we can not only feel it and listen to the heart sounds, but nowadays we can watch the electrical changes going on as well.

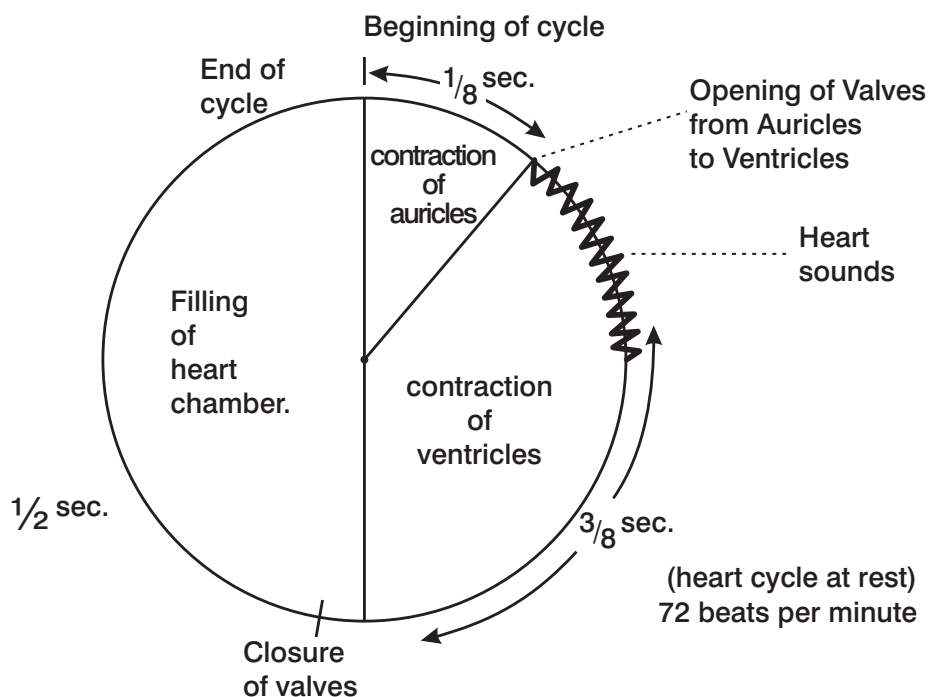


Figure 4

There is another clock based on breathing – 20 per minute at rest – and the breathing cycle of inspiration and expiration lasts 3 seconds at rest. These two clocks affect each other but run independently of each other and are recorded on the charts of every patient in every hospital. Moreover, it is by this 3-second clock that we are aware of the ‘present moment’.

If these rapid cycles correspond to the ‘seconds hand’ of the human clock, there is a quite different clock system which beats hours, and is based on the rhythm of sleeping and waking in a 24-hour period. Many physiological functions are based on this rhythm – the intake, digestion and metabolism of food, the rhythms of hunger and thirst, fatigue and recovery of the muscles, rest for the intellectual part of the brain, even the most important constituents of the circulating blood are geared to 24 hours in single, double or triple rhythms. The temperature and pulse chart shows it clearly.

A slower-beating clock system shows itself in the epochs of a life-time; from the moment of conception, through the great event of birth, through infancy, childhood, puberty, maturity, reproduction, middle-age and old-age, the great hand of the human clock beats at more or less the same pace in all the teeming millions of humanity; and when it stops beating our time ends and the clock is wound up again.

Coming to rhythms more rapid than breathing, there is a complicated system of clocks which beat fractions of a second from the brain waves to the shortest possible nerve impulse at 1/10,000 second. Volleys of these nerve impulses reaching the front part of the brain set up a mental impression, and it is these rapidly changing impressions that give us the sensation of ‘passing time’.

But most of us have experienced flashes of consciousness which is ‘Timeless’ and not dependent on sensory impressions. These flashes bring with them a very vivid *memory* of a kind quite different from our ordinary memory; a memory in which many things come altogether and at once. They are accompanied by a strange sensation that ‘all this has happened to me before somewhere, sometime’. They occurred most often in our childhood before all those impressions of passing time obscured them. In fact, those are the only moments we vividly remember in our childhood.

Let us call such a flash a ‘*creative impulse*’; the *human* clock which measures it beats in thousand millionths of a second (the time taken by light to travel 1 metre – which is the ‘measure of man’). The centre point in the picture (Figure 5) represents a ‘photon’ – which means ‘little ration of light’. It is these *creative impulses* that we set out to recapture; we want to be able to get them when we need them, to have them more often and to make them last longer.

The mysterious author of the fourteenth century English work *The Cloud of Unknowing* has this description:

This work asketh no long time or it be truly done as some men ween; for it is the shortest work of all that man can imagine. It is never longer, nor shorter than is an atom: the which atom, by the definition of true philosophers in the science of astronomy, is the least part of time... for it is neither longer nor shorter than... one only stirring that is within the principal working might of thy soul, the which is thy will. For even so many willings or desirings... may be and are in one hour in thy will as are atoms in one hour. And if thou wert reformed by grace to the first state of man’s soul, as it was before sin, then thou shouldest evermore by grace be lord of those stirrings.

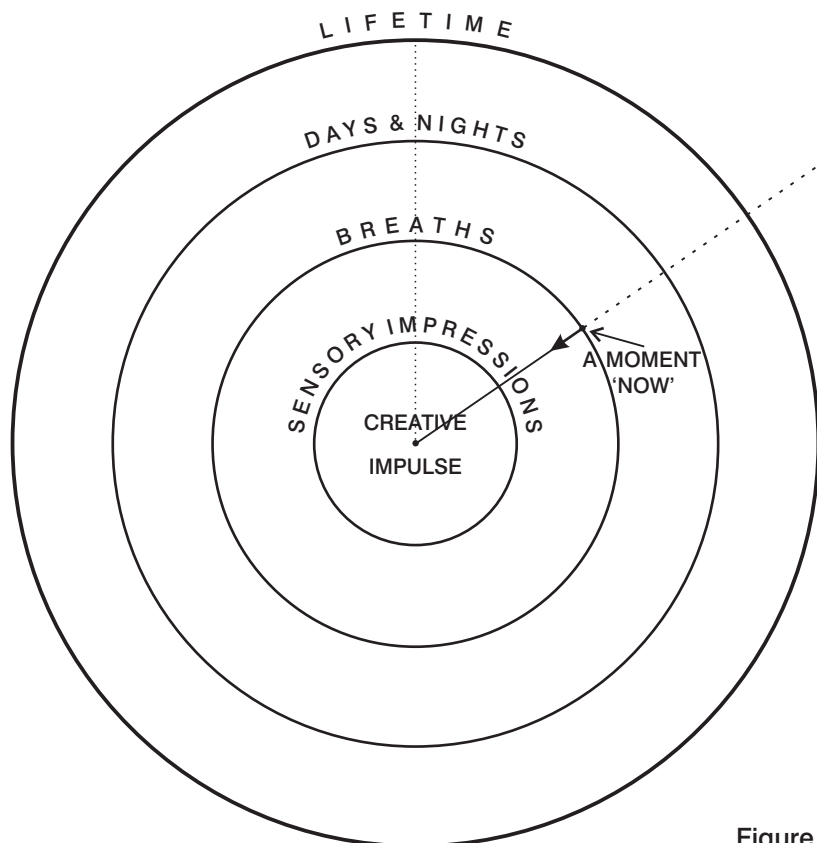


Figure 5

Let us sum up all this by means of a very simple diagram: (Figure 5)

Looking at this diagram we will gradually come to revise all our conceptions of ourselves and the world. As the line of 'Now' passes inwards to the centre one recaptures the energy and happiness that one has lost. One is coming 'home' to the mind's natural dwelling-place – the Source of Creation and of Will.

(Discussion)

PRACTICAL

The line of 'Now' represents the line of 'Attention', and Attention has been said to be the 'only path the Buddhas have trod'. All ways of development are based on some attribute of Attention, but very many mistakes are made. Recently we have learnt that for two short periods during the day the attention can be drawn back like a bow string, so that, as it goes deeper, it reaches its greatest potential energy; then, when we emerge to deal with the problems of the day, the arrow of the attention can be aimed and fired with great force. More and more creative energy will be experienced each day, days will gradually become different, and finally, one's life becomes different.

But before we come to the question of methods, it is useful to try some experiments to see what is meant by *Attention* and realise its power and scope. Nothing exists for one until it comes within the field of one's attention. Try doing ordinary things, untying or tying a shoelace, turning a key in a lock, crossing the street, driving a car; try doing them without attention and with such attention as one can command. There is almost nothing that would be impossible to do if we could muster the *whole* of attention. Again, we would amend the familiar saying:

‘Whatsoever thy hand giveth thee to do, do it with all thy might’, by changing it to: ‘Do it with just that amount of might which is necessary’! And, if there is nothing that has to be done at a particular moment, why do anything? We spend our lives like squirrels in a cage in ceaseless activity for activity’s sake. *It requires attention to do nothing unnecessary* – one of the principles of School work.

CONCLUSION

Attention, rightly understood, is the way out of prison, the ‘new direction of time’, the basis of the mystical experience, of which the possibilities are limitless:

For they shall behold the world which is now invisible to them,
 And they shall behold the time which is now hidden from them,
 And time shall no longer age them,
 For in the heights of that world shall they dwell.
 And they shall be made like unto the angels,
 And be made equal to the stars.
 And they shall be changed into every form they desire,
 From beauty into loveliness
 And from light into the splendour of glory.
 For there shall be spread before them the extents of Paradise.

‘The Apocalypse of Baruch’, Trans. R.H. Charles, from *City without Walls*.

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