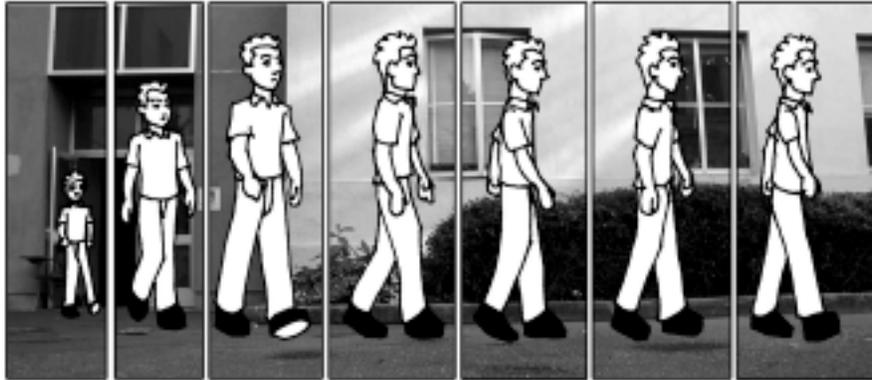


A Time Frame of Mind



• Visual Language and Buddhist Dharma Theory •

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www.emaki.net neil@emaki.net

Author's Note

Due to its expansive spread across the world throughout history, Buddhist terminology arises in several different languages. For example, when concerned with older Indian Buddhism, a term such as Abhidharma (Sanskrit) may also appear as Abhidamma (Pali). For the purposes of this paper, Sanskrit terms will be used primarily, seconded by Pali when needed, with both terminology used to preserve the referenced authors' intentions.

Throughout this work, images have been added to clarify and express thoughts. When this is done accompanying referenced material, it is not to imply any inadequacy in part of the original author, but to maintain the spirit and intention of visual communication, in that it provides further clarity for the reader in understanding the information authors wish to convey. All of the artwork herein has been produced by myself.

Additionally, currently, very little research material in print exists concerning visual language. In fact, most discourses discussing the workings of the medium will be approached in forthcoming works of my own. Despite this, throughout the work I have attempted to make these issues as clear as possible.

Abstract

Since the early days of humans, the ability to communicate solely through image in sequence has resulted in stunning works of communication and narration. Be it painted on a cave wall, spiraling up a stone column, unfurled in a hand scroll, or printed in a modern day comic book, the use of images in sequence to represent thought has empowered humans to express themselves in ways that transcend the use of word. The language employed here is as inherent to the human experience as spoken word, though lexically far more universal. While most commonly found in narratives, though not exclusively, this method of communication is known as *visual language*. As a statically spatial medium, when reflecting the goings on of the physical world, one of the most intriguing aspects of this form arises in the representation of time. Interestingly enough, the temporal progression in visual language has great relations to the metaphysical conceptions of time found in the Buddhist Abhidharma philosophies. Through this relationship, we can gain a better understanding of both of these notions, and perhaps a bit about our lives in general as well.

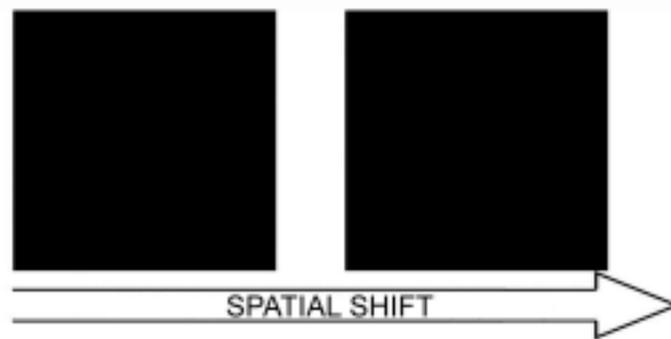
Temporal Maps

In all languages, syntax examines the ordering and relation between one type of conceptual input and the next. This process is no different in visual language, though the conceptual data may not be as incrementally small as in words. In images, concepts become buried into a large framework, lending them to be referred to also as *conceptual bundles*. Thus, successive images (or words) could be referred to as a *concept stream*. In visual language, the use of panels or borders allows for a clear breakup between these

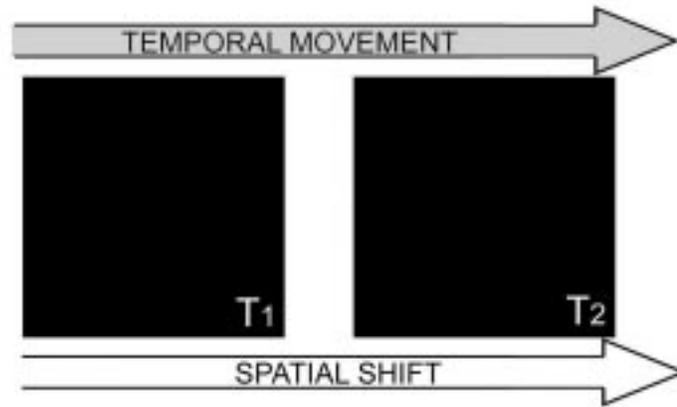
conceptual bundles, providing clarity and space for the connection between conceptual matter to occur, just as the spaces between words does in many written scripts.

In examining visual language syntax, the relationship between time and space can reveal interesting observations. Often, visual language shows a narrative sequence, where the subject matter is drawn from the visual elements of daily life, and each panel depicts a separate moment. If two panels are shown, the move from one to the next is a physical shift in space. However, if those two panels represent separate moments, the shift is also one of time. A simple example of this occurs when two black squares are placed next to each other.

When two squares representing separate objects are read sequentially, only a spatial shift occurs.



However, if the two squares represent the same black box shown at separate moments, the reading of one and then the other creates a change in both space and time to display a temporal progression.¹



This equation of “space equals time”² has come to be known as a *temporal map*.

Nevertheless, this temporal mapping aspect to visual language is not an inherent one, because only explicitly temporal environments can show a change in time. The label of a temporal map is applied when the panels in sequence represent continuous moments. However, visual language is not made up inherently of *moments*, but of *concepts*. Despite this, three types of transitions between conceptual bundles allow for the intrinsic change in time to occur. These transitions are that of 1. Moment-to-moment, 2. Action-to-action, and 3. Embedded panels featuring transitions of the previous two types.

In Moment-to-moment transitions, time is generally observed remaining on the same subject of an environment from a fixed perspective. Here, no factors within the scene are required of the environment or its components save the passage of time. This transition appears as if a camera was placed to just let a scene unfold in front of it.



Although actions are taking place, the action becomes secondary to the subtle yet dominant element of time.

However, in Action-to-action transitions, time is generally taken at a much faster pace than moment-to-moment, due to an *action* taken by one of the subjects of the environment. Because actions inherently must work within a frame of time, a deliberate temporal progression occurs, as well as, often, a change of perspective within the scene.



In contrast to the Moment-to-moment, where time allows for actions to occur, in Action-to-action, actions occur and drive time because of it. Events or actions must happen within a larger context of the unfurling of time. This type of transition exploits the outcomes of such incidents while letting the factor of time become sucked up into the

event itself, as a necessary aspect to any occurrence. Time becomes the secondary element to the dominant pushing of an action or event.

Embedded transitions allow for multiple types of panel transitions, though the transitions are inherent to the single image itself. This is comparable to embedded clauses in spoken language. For example, the clause “Jimmy sang” can become incorporated into another clause to become “Christina saw Jimmy sing.” Here though, the transitioning elements are visual and become linked into the framework of the otherwise “single moment” image. Essentially, the division between conceptual matter is an aspect of the larger conceptual makeup, making the transition inherent to the framework of the larger conceptual environment. In essence, the mind creates the "mental divisions" on its own though they don't physically exist.

Take for instance an embedded moment-to-moment transition where a figure moves through a single background, but is shown several times in the single image space. Despite the “motion” being shown, this registers as one conceptual bundle, even though it contains a stream of concepts within it.



The classification of such environments treat the panel as a set of motions within that conceptual bundle, and not as a “true” transition occurring intrinsically. Essentially, the concept bundle thus contains within it the *concept of motion*.³ However, while this panel may not mark increments of time, because of its internal shift in space and time, a temporal map exists within the conceptual bundle itself to create an intra-panel continuum.

With any other transition, this progression of time is not inherent, though contextual elements of those transitions often imply a shift when in a narrative environment. Naturally, when transcription of any sort is added integratively to visual elements in the image, for instance through word balloons denoting speech, a temporally bound environment is created from the union of sound and space. Despite these nuances, the fundamental principle that a movement through space is a movement through time allows temporal mapping to pervade the visual language form. This transitioning through incremental moments coincides with the Buddhist theories on *dharmas*.

Abhidharma

Early in the development of Buddhism in India, “a coherent, systematic approach to Buddhist doctrine” was developed to analyze, organize, and delineate the varied nature of the relatively unstructured early discourses of the Buddha.⁴ Through these aims, the conception of Buddhist metaphysics, or Abhidharma (P. Abhidamma), came to life, and “ultimately became both an explanation of the sutra teachings as well as a distinct body of exegetical material in its own right.”⁵ Given that “no Buddhist scriptures of any sort were committed to writing before about the time of Christ, almost five hundred years

after the death of the Buddha,”⁶ attempts have been made to trace these teachings back to the Buddha himself. However, scholars “agree to a large extent that the individual Abhidhamma books were propounded by the Elders”⁷ around the 3rd century BC, though the source for such works most definitely arise in the texts attributed as the closest to the lessons of the actual Buddha.

As the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (5th century AD)⁸ pointed out, the term “abhidharma” can connote two things. He explains it as

‘etymologically, the prefix *abhi* means “over,” “next to,” or also “beyond” or “above,” whereas the term *dharma* carries a complexity of meanings throughout its pervasive use in Buddhism. Derived from the root *dhr*, which means “to hold,” “to carry,” it originally was used to designate the “Law” in religious contexts, meaning the Doctrine to be accepted by the mind and to be obeyed by the will. Thus, the term *abhidharma* could be justly translated as the “Supreme Doctrine” or “Supreme Law.”’

However, a second meaning can also be derived. Beyond the description of abhidharma as a treatise to acquire the teachings of “untinged knowledge” it also is “said to mean ‘whatever carries...a proper characteristic.’” In this sense, Vasubandhu describes that it “‘it studies the characteristics of the *dharma-s* (now in plural),’ i.e. of those primordial components or ‘factors of existence’ which are carriers... of both mental and physical determinations.”⁹ From these metaphysical building blocks of experiential existence, *dharmas* (P. dhammas), notions of the properties of time arise.

According to the Abhidharma, “phenomenal existence is analyzed as a fluctuating totality of transient elements (*dharmas*). These elements are the only ‘realities’ in this transient world, and persons and things apparently complete in themselves... are nothing more than temporary conglomerations of certain basic elements.”¹⁰ Thus,

“the term *dharma* establishes itself as designating the basic, primordial constituents of the conscious stream of individual being,... considered as subject of world-conscious-experience. These elemental factors intervene in bringing about the... conception of the mind as a mere streaming river of sensations, perceptions, and notions (a river where no permanent substratum or self ‘bathes twice’).”¹¹ However, dharmas “as elementary ‘factors of existence,’ are not in themselves the immediate object of sensorial knowledge. Only their interrelated conglomerates... come to manifest themselves as the ever flowing stream of individual existence.”¹²

Of great importance to the Abhidharma philosophers was the categorization of the types of dharmas.* The “function of *Abhidharma* analysis was thus twofold: first, to reveal that commonly accepted existents do not conform to our expectations, and second, to provide a mode of interpretation that could be proven to reflect the manner in which aspects of our experience actually do exist. The product of this analysis was a taxonomy of the *dharmas*... of which experience is comprised.”¹³ Dharmas then were 1) defined, 2) related to other dharmas, 3) analyzed, 4) classified into different types, and 5) arranged in numerical order.¹⁴

In most, the matrices begin with a distinction between factors that “good, bad, and intermediate. Their arrangement is made by grouping together factors in three mutually exclusive sets which, when combined encompass all mental... factors in some cases and both mental and material... factors in others.”^{15†} From there, various other factors become derived, allowing the matrices to expand to huge proportions. Because these lists grew from all the potential elements that a person could experience, they reach to expansive sizes.

To get a brief feel for the types of elements classified as dharmas, selections from a cross section of the various groupings within the “kinds of good dharmas,” are as follows:

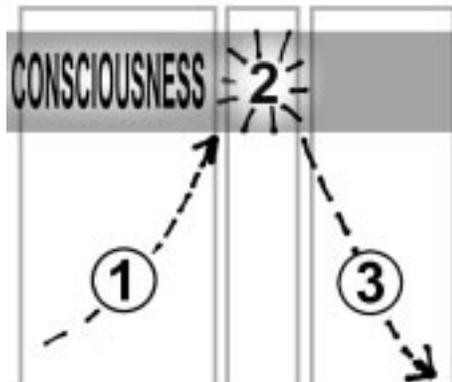
- “1. Contact (sparsa)...
- 6. Initial thought (vitarka)...
- 17. Faculty of Vitality (jivitendriya)...
- 22. Right Mindfulness (samyak smrti)...
- 29. Power of Shame (hribala)...
- 32. Absence of Hatred (advesa)...
- 38. Scruples (apatrapa)...
- 43. Bodily Pliancy (kayamrduta)...
- 56. Undistractedness (aviksepa)”¹⁶

* Not only for use in analytic examination, but also for the direct use of such knowledge in meditation, as will be discussed further on.

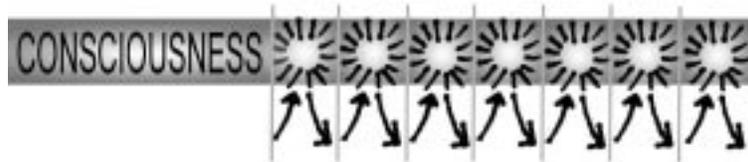
† In later Abhidharmic thought, the existence of dharmas dissociated from mind were subject to great debate, though such distinctions need not be approached for the purposes of this discourse.

However, many schools' matrices disagree in their classifications. In fact, "there does not seem to have been a basic set or even a canonical number of factors that are to be found in all the lists. Even to find a common core relating any two lists is difficult and probably impossible."¹⁷ Despite such discrepancies in classification, the sheer volume and breadth of these matrices attests to the number of possible factors that the mind can engage in.

Through the dharmas, Buddhism's assertion of the "three marks" of existence can be seen. Because of the dharmas, existence (1) is impermanent (anitya, P. anicca), (2) is subject to suffering (duhkha, P. dukkha), and (3) contains "no self" (anatman, P. anatta). Dharmas are "the ever transient and impermanent 'holders' or 'carriers' of such an existence."¹⁸ They are "momentarily composed in a continuous succession of moments,"¹⁹ arising and extinguishing in sequence. Therein, they are subject to "three phases: (1) the arising... or the nascent state; (2) the (relative) stability... or state of continuation, which may be understood as the culmination point of the respective process or as the point of the closest contact in the temporary combination of mental factors; (3) the gradual dissolution... of that combination. In other words, these three phases represent the approaching and departing movement in the mutual relationship of the mental concomitants."²⁰



The result of this activity begets a single "flash" of experience. In this sense, the arising and passing away of transient “flashes” of experience create existence, which is at no point definable as permanent or solid.



Through this intrinsic impermanent characteristic of dharmas in a temporal sequence, the early Buddhist notions of “momentariness” (Skt. Ksanikavada) come to the fore. Essentially,

“individual existence,... is only the illusory outcome of momentary, ‘quantum-like’ aggregates of dharma-elements simultaneously cooperating together on the basis of causative principles, and being successively projected from the potential future into the extinguished past through the indivisible and punctiform door of the present. We are nothing but temporal, down-the-line streams of such manifolds of momentary projections of ‘dharmic’ factors.”²¹

Through this perspective, the Buddhist view of time places us only into the present, where dharmas exist merely for an individual moment before dying away and begetting the next existence. Any permanent

“substance is a fiction...; what exists is momentary... Any object which appears to be solid, substantial and enduring, is a construct. The [dharmas] alone are real. These particulars are discrete, momentary, erupting into life for one fleeting

moment and then vanishing into naught. What really exists is only a succession of these evanescent entities..., the appearance instead of a continuous, extended whole is a product of imagination.”²²

How then, if life’s experiences are merely a succession of separate moments, is the perception of a coherent, unified whole retained? Though each manifesting dharma dissolves following its apex, “some of them ‘survive’– or more correctly, recur– in the combination of the next moment, while others, conditioned by their previous occurrence, may reappear much later.”²³ This process of “homogeneous causality” (Skt. *sabhaga-hetu*) outlines that “dharmas of one species are always followed by dharmas of the same specific resemblance in the ‘down-flow’ of the personal stream...But by begetting the subsequent dharma, the said dharma disappears.” Though the subsequent dharma is not the same as the antecedent, its resemblance lies in the causality spawned from the previous dharma. This is similar in “the case with the resemblance between parent and child. The parent is the proximate cause of his resemblance to the child. The child, however, is the condition for a ‘resemblance’ of the parent to be transmitted.”²⁴ All the while, parent and child both remain distinct unto themselves as separate beings, for “any entity’s existence will immediately be extinguished along with the immediate production of the effect.”²⁵ Thus, through this system of casual links, the unified “flux of the life stream is preserved uninterrupted”²⁶ to our basic perceptions. Nevertheless, “the different moments never actually touch each other. Reality is a staccato progression of discrete moments.”²⁷

Given that the general perception of existence occurs in a constant unified whole, the Buddhist assertion of non-self can be somewhat difficult to discern. However, when

analyzing life as a stream of consistent dharmas, one cannot find a definitive “self” contained in any of their arising states. While the common view is to identify a consistent ‘self,’ ‘individual,’ ‘personality,’ or ‘Ego,’ “the underlying idea is that, whatsoever be designated by all these names, it is not a real and ultimate fact, it is a mere name for a multitude of interconnected facts, which Buddhist philosophy is attempting to analyse by reducing them to real elements (dharmas).”²⁸

This conception of “anatta...represents the ‘subjective’ side of impermanence as this mark points to the insubstantiality of what appears to be an absolute and permanent Ego: thus, it signifies the total absence of a commonly postulated ontological basis to our mental and willing functions.” If a defining state of “self” were found in a dharma, it would die shortly after, where a new, different dharma would surface. Here, impermanence is turned upon the notion of a self

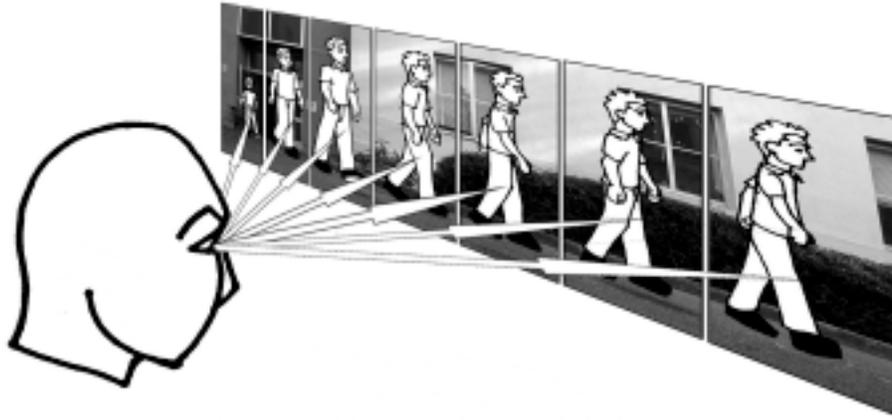
“in that the same impermanence afflicts both the flux of subjective consciousness which appears as the Ego and the external objects of our perceptions, feelings, and volitive addictions. And by the same token, the same insubstantiality affects both the apparent, permanent Ego that seems to underly our conscious states... The wheel of ‘Suffering’ (dukkha) turns around this bipolar axis of world-impermanence (anicca) and Ego-insubstantiality (anatta).”²⁹

Thus, like everything else, any notion of “self” would be subject to the impermanence and fluctuation of the dharmas, never fully definable because of its constant state of change.

Though each dharmic moment arises and falls in impermanent succession, our basic perception of solidity tricks us into believing in a permanent abiding self. Because of this misguided belief in permanence, both pertaining to objects apart from self and the self itself, people suffer. According to early Buddhism, liberation from such suffering occurs through the realization of that impermanence, as well as a cessation from desire for permanence in any form. True experience then, consists of the unification of momentary flashes of dharmic activity.

The Subjectivity of Time

From here, the relationship of dharmas to temporal mapping can easily be seen. Both contain incremental elements of time that piece together to form a stream of temporal activity. In the narrative sense, visual language mimics the “reality” of dharmic time. We read from one moment to another, taking in and connecting them all to create a whole coherent story, albeit only able to exist within one single “moment” (re: panel) at a time, even though the past and future can visibly be seen (remembered or anticipated). However, fundamentally, in visual language, this stream of concepts is *perceived*, not *lived*.



In life, it appears more that we move through these moments,



or that these moments perceptually move through us.



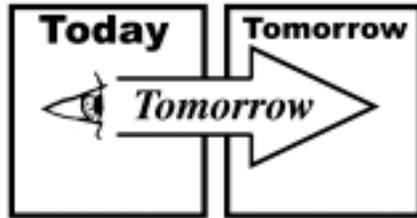
Nevertheless, this distinction of subjectivity loses its basis when, bearing in mind the “three marks,” there is no real “us” to fully posit an object that is moving.

This conception of moving through time has been illustrated quite eloquently by the Zen master Dogen* (1200- 1253 AD) in his discourse *The Issue at Hand (Genjokoan)*, through the metaphor of a boat:

“When someone rides in a boat, as he looks at the shore he has the illusion that the shore is moving. When he looks at the boat under him, he realizes the boat is moving. In the same way, when one takes things for granted with confused ideas of body-mind, one has the illusion that one’s own mind and own nature are permanent; but if one pays close attention to one’s own actions, the truth that things are not self will be clear.”³⁰

Here, Dogen notes both the nature of impermanence to our notion of self, in relation to our perceptions of time. While we may think that we see time passing by around us, it is actually ourselves that are moving. This use of a boat also brings the image of a vessel. Like the boat, our minds provide a vantage from which we observe this moving nature. From this subjective viewpoint, our relative notions of present, past, and future become created. Dogen plays on this issue of perspective in his discourse on time, *Being Time (Uji)*, noting that time is relative to the position from which it is perceived. He states that in viewing “time there is the quality of passage. That is, it passes from today to tomorrow,

* Interestingly, though Dogen does not fall explicitly under the Abhidharmic sect, he was said to have been “reading intricate Buddhist abhidharma... by the age of nine.” (Cleary 1)



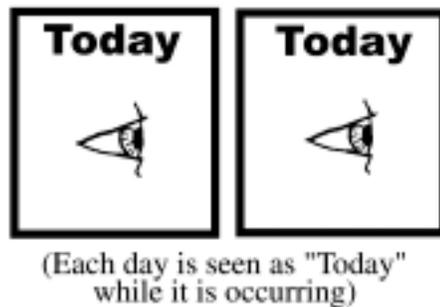
it passes from today to yesterday,



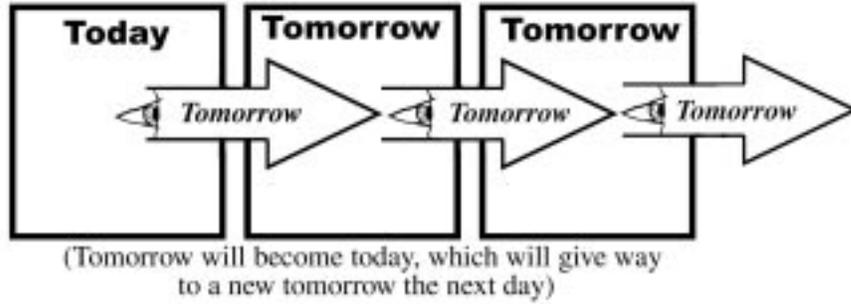
it passes from yesterday to today,



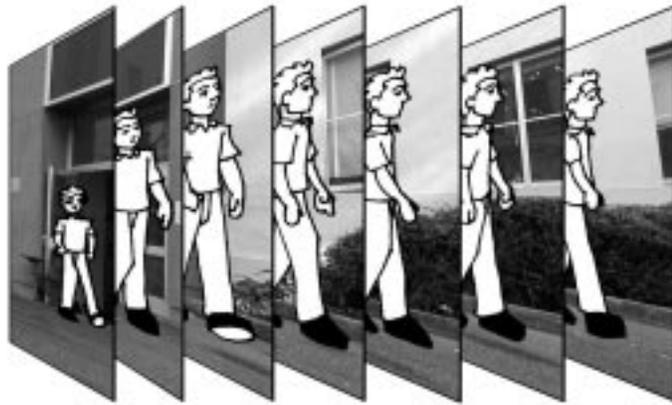
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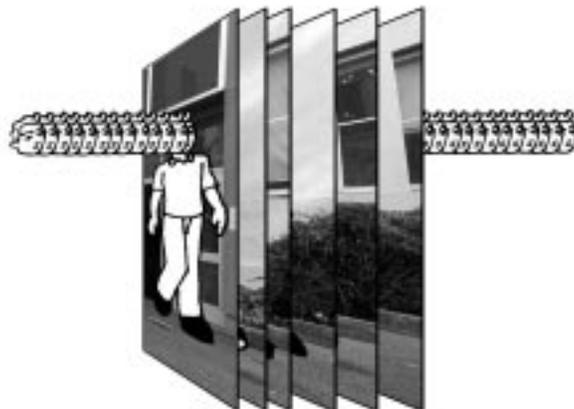
it passes from tomorrow to tomorrow."³¹



Dogen illustrates that our conceptions of the passage of time, expressed through language, are linked to our subjective perspectives. However, when this subjective vantage is no longer distinguished, time simply happens, without the problems of passage,...



...and our perspective of “self” within the increments of it arise merely because that is the place at which we view it from.



Thus, the distinction of ‘ dharmas moving through us’ or ‘us moving through them’ is merely based on creating a dualistic separation of the dharmas from the person. Ultimately, this division cannot occur, because without a person to experience them, there can be no dharmas.

This distinction arose through the continuation of the dharma theory within the philosophies of the Yogacara, or Cittamatra (Mind Only), school of Buddhism, around the 2nd century AD.* Through the Yogacaric philosophies, a unification between the experiencer and the experienced emerged in the conception of a “Basic Consciousness” (Skt. Alayavijnana) which “operates as the total sphere of the elements of existence (dharmadhatu)...as...analyzed in accordance with the dharma-theories of the earlier schools.”³² The Mind Only school allows for no duality between subject and object distinctions, acknowledging that “cognition is not different from that which is cognized, but completely identical with it.”³³ Moving from this, “the intention therefore is to effect a withdrawal from both the empirical object and the empirical subject. This does not lead to another subject opposed to an object, but to... a transcendental subject which is identified with its object,”³⁴ identified as Basic Consciousness.

From this Basic Consciousness, the unenlightened mind creates “the world of really existing subjects confronting really existing and separate objects. It is how things appear to us, the realm of subject-object duality.”³⁵ Indeed,

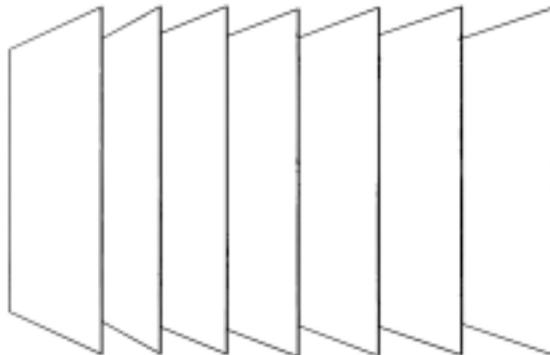
“the basis for Consciousness in this absolute sense is the continuing stream of dharmas, of which an imagined person with his body and organs of sense, and an

* It should be noted that this marks the shift from the Theravada to the Mahayana perspectives on Buddhist dharma theory.

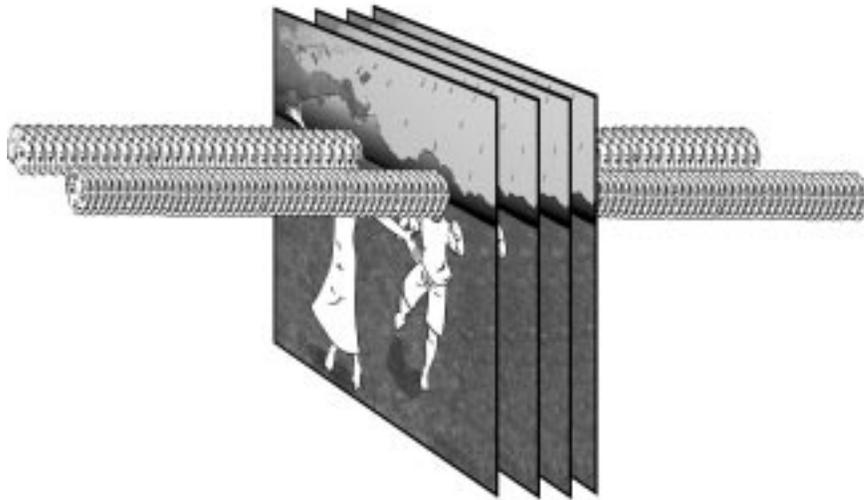
imagined outer world with its objects of sense is the everyday experience. This so-called Basic Consciousness... thus corresponds as a later concept to the earlier concept of the person as a mere continuance (santana) of a stream of dharmas.”³⁶

In the Yogacaric sense, “what it amounts to is that through meditation we come to know that our flow of perceptions, of experiences, really lacks the fixed enduring subjects and objects which we have constructed out of it. There is only the flow of experiences. The perfected aspect is, therefore, the fact of non-duality, there is neither subject nor object but only a single flow.”³⁷

The Basic Consciousness though, “is not conceived as a permanent subconscious ground of the self; this would run counter to the anatman doctrine which is essential to Buddhism.”³⁸ Rather, “the Basic Consciousness in its impure states serves as the operative basis for all other types of consciousness,” and in its pure form flows as a sort of universal dharmic flow underlying the conceptions we have of “not only our subjective life, but also the whole objective world which we apprehend through our senses.” Even this Basic Consciousness “is never stable, for it consists of a succession of dharmas which manifest themselves momentarily”³⁹ arising and extinguishing the codependency with the subjective impure dharmic view bound to them.



Thus, it is from this ‘pure’ flow of dharmas that each person derives their experiences of existence. Emergent from the constant flow of ‘purified’ and ‘absolute’ dharmas, it would appear that the unenlightened create their own individual perspectives on existence based on the vantage-point that their constructed consciousness gives them. Essentially, “mind in its normal flow is nothing but a stream of consciousness which being disturbed gives rise to certain activities or happenings with reference to the different senses, mind itself being regarded as one of the six senses.”⁴⁰



Just as the recognition of impermanence in the earlier dharma theory required a shift in perception, liberation in the Yogacaric sense extends out to the realization of this non-duality of an experiencer of dharmas and the experienced dharmas themselves. However, in our ‘impure’ unenlightened state a subjective viewpoint of personal experiences cannot be avoided. Thus to analyze these moments, awareness of the arising and falling of the dharmas must be cultivated. As hinted to previously, in the traditional sense, this would be done through meditation, from which one can hope to transcend this duality of perception. However, since visual language provides a stripped down two-dimensional view of an otherwise three-dimensional world experience that is filled with

sense data beyond mere vision, it offers additional support from a medium that can only be observed in a simplistic single sense manner. Additionally, this form can show a clear separation between each moment, allowing each increment to be fully defined in its own right.

Meditation

As mentioned earlier, the Buddhist path for developing awareness of the dharmas is through meditation. Long before the Buddha's time, the system of developing serenity (P. samantha) aimed at concentration (samadhi) was practiced prevalently. However, while this form of meditation may be used by Buddhists, the primary practice is that of "the development of insight (vipassana), which aims at understanding or wisdom (panna). In the Buddha's system of mental training the role of serenity is subordinated to that of insight because the latter is the crucial instrument needed to uproot the ignorance"⁴¹ found in believing the dharmas to be a constant unified existence.

The early discourses of the Buddha in the Pali Canon, from which the Abhidharma arose, contain the instruction of this vipassana meditation. In the *Satipatthana Sutta (The Foundations of Mindfulness)*, the Buddha prescribes to sit in meditation, observing the breath. This "practice of mindfulness of breathing... involves no deliberate attempt to regulate the breath... but a sustained effort to fix awareness on the breath as it moves in and out in its natural rhythm."⁴² The Buddha describes the meditator as "Breathing in long, he understands: 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he understands: 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, he understands: 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he understands: 'I breathe out short.'"⁴³

Breath is used as the focal point in many meditative traditions for various reasons. Quite simply, “breathing is one of the most simple, basic, ever-present bodily activities.”⁴⁴ Without breath, we would not live, and in many cultures the word for energy corresponds to “breath” as well, in the sense of a “life energy.” However, it also serves a function in the temporal sense as well. While the perception of life’s impermanence commonly may be difficult to observe in one’s own body, the breath serves as a constant action that traverses the temporal stream in a form that we can actively feel. Essentially, the breath is a consistent “built in” indicator of the temporal impermanence affecting the human condition. And, like the dharmas, each breath contains three stages of 1. arising, 2. being, and 3. dissolution. Thus, this observation of breath is the first stage to mindfulness of the arising and falling of the dharmas.

Naturally though, when one tries to settle down in such a manner of single pointed concentration, the mind will dart around to all sorts of mental and physical happenings. However, this activity is not considered a threat to the mediation, and is also included into the practice. Instead of withdrawing and pushing away those occurrences, the meditator’s awareness extends out to all of the arising mental and material phenomena experienced. Essentially, “mindfulness is knowing what is happening, while it is happening.”⁴⁵ One technique for mindfulness of the dharmas meditatively “involves three steps: (I) an act of *differentiation*, the breaking up of the apparent unity of persons and things into a conglomeration of elementary dharmic events; (II) an act of *depersonalization*, the elimination of all references of ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘mine’; (III) an act of *evaluation*”⁴⁶ in describing the arising dharma.

This kind of mindfulness technique is described by Buddhist scholar Edward Conze in this “mental drill”:

“The task is to watch feelings as they come up, and to determine each one as either (1) pleasant, (2) unpleasant, or (3) neutral. In the case of (1) and (2) one can furthermore distinguish between physical and mental pleasure... When, say, fifty feelings have been noted, one may proceed to their proximate cause, which is some kind of sense-contact. A jet-plane overhead leads to: ‘there is an unpleasant feeling from ear-contact,’ a lovely sweet to ‘there is a pleasant feeling from taste-contact,’ the thought of a friend to ‘there is a pleasant feeling from mind-contact.’”⁴⁷

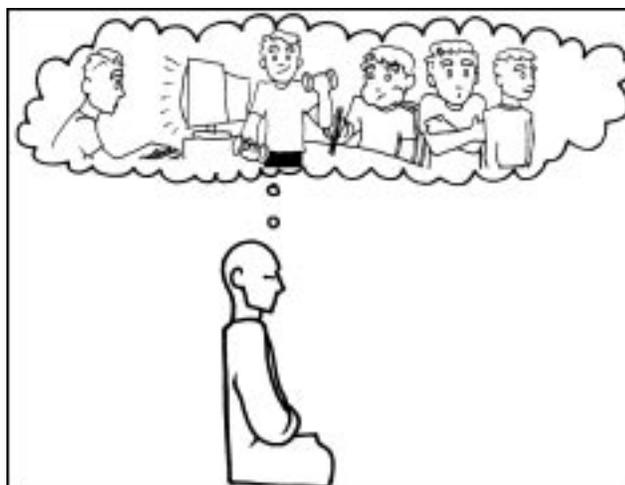
This awareness of the body and mind’s experience then extends further into the categorization of these happenings in “dharmic terms,” which allow these experiences to be labeled directly as they are experienced, free from the distinctions of a ‘self’ and external ‘object.’ Through “this complete description of the character of each dharma, misconceptions obscuring our perception of experience [can] be discarded, and the dharmas of which experience is comprised [can] be seen as they actually are.”⁴⁸ With mindfulness of the arising and falling of each of the dharmas, recognition of their impermanence can be derived. However, “the point of mindfulness/awareness is not to disengage the mind from the phenomenal world; it is to enable the mind to be fully present in the world. The goal is not to avoid action but to be fully present in one’s own actions, so that one’s behavior becomes progressively more responsive and aware.”⁴⁹

Meditation provides a controlled environment from which mindfulness can be extended out to all of life's actions and experiences.

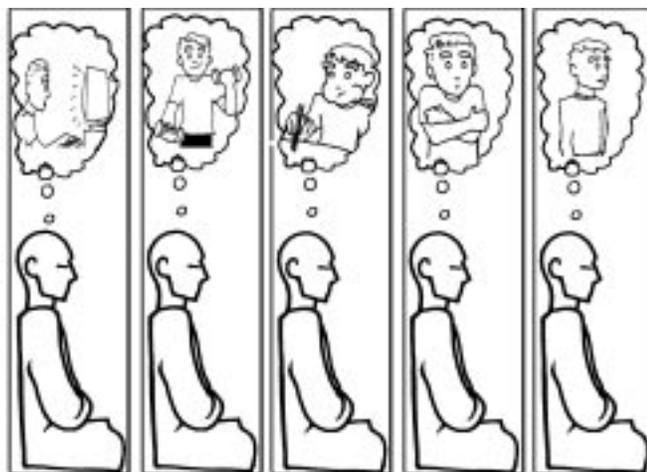
These same meditative aims can be distinguished through the Zen writings of Dogen as well. In the *Ocean Seal Concentration (Kai-in zammai)*, he states, "Prior moment, succeeding moment— each successive moment does not wait for the next: prior element, succeeding element— the elements do not await each other. This is called the [fundamental awareness of true thusness]."⁵⁰ Dogen's

"point, as it applies to Zen meditation, seems to be awareness of the flux of moments without clinging, without stopping to bind them mentally into fixed structures or images. Thus, without the attention being caught up in dwelling on anything conceptually specified, the holistic awareness remains free and unobscured while in the flow of events is clearly and impartially reflected therein."⁵¹

By distinguishing each of the dharmas as they arise, one can become skilled in engaging all the factors of existence. In the temporal sense, as one's awareness of experience speeds up, the "perception" of those experiences will then slow down, and each dharmic moment can be noted in clarity. While "in the ordinary mind, we perceive the stream of thoughts as continuous,...



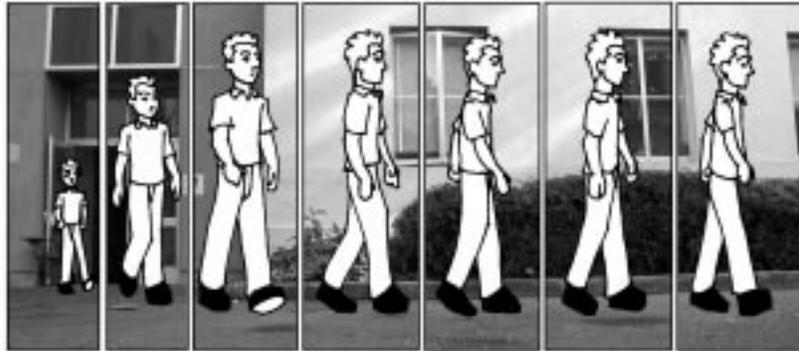
...in reality...there is a gap between each thought. When the past thought is past, and the future thought not yet arisen, you will always find a gap in which the... nature of mind... is revealed. So the work of meditation is to allow thoughts to slow down, to make that gap become more and more apparent.”⁵² With awareness of that gap, the insight into the contents of each dharma also arises.



This slowing down can then be brought back to visual language, as the differences between syntactic transitions are analyzed in relation to dharmas.

Dharmas and Panels

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin examining the connections to a doctrine of momentariness is at moment-to-moment transitions. In each of these panels, the “ideal” view of individual broken up increments of motion can be seen. Each moment exists in its own totality, and though it may be preceded and followed by other moments, the individual parts stand alone in their statement of being.



However, when one takes the first and last panels of a long sequence of moment-to-moment transitions, an action-to-action transition becomes formed.

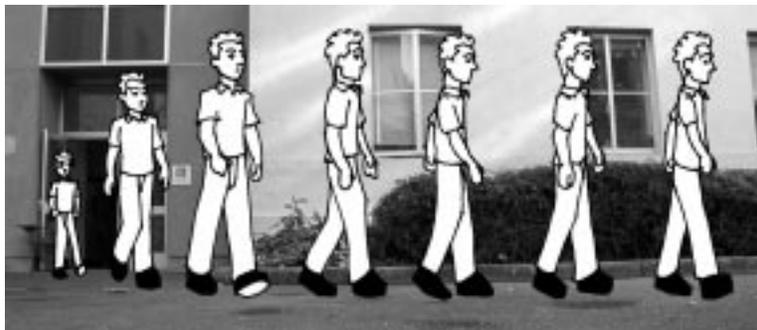


Here, the action happens so fast that the removed middle panels become sucked up into the action itself. *Because an action happens, time passes*; whereas in moment-to-moment, the *unfolding of time* visually allows for the action to take place, and all aspects of each increment can be noted and accounted for as distinct unto themselves.

Under the dharmic view, much of our unenlightened experience may fall into this transition. Our movements and motions in life may appear in successive actions, not

necessarily moments. The experience of events drives time, because they happen within a larger temporal context, though the moments that comprise that event are not noted because only the overall action is realized. If divisions do exist between our awareness of one moment to another, they often may fall in recognizing the differences in actions in their temporal context. Observing one's actions is a far cry from noting the moments that comprise those actions.

An entirely different “false view” arises if the divisions of that moment-to-moment stream are dropped, and the background is unified, begetting an embedded transition. In the dharmic sense, embedded transitions present an apparent temporal impossibility. Essentially, if a panel represents a single moment, within it, a person would be in multiple places at once! The intention with embedded transitions rather, is to convey the progression of a movement over *space*. While this clearly maintains the continuum of a temporal map, the existence of multiple moments in a single frame belies the dharmic perception of momentariness. The implication herein is that multiple moments or actions occur within the frame of a single flash of time. However, no matter how fast a continuum of motion would appear, its experience can be broken down into smaller elements of momentary experience.



This is greatly similar to the common perspective of experience. Though our actual experiences arise *moment to moment*, we *embed* those moments into a unified whole of reality. The increments of experience are believed to be in continuous unbroken moments, bleeding from one moment to the next. No matter how many increments that an embedded transition may contain, it can always be broken up into smaller parts, the same way that our experience can be broken up into dharmic constituents. Further analyzation of incremental parts of moments can be taken into account when discussing visual language issues of micro-embedded transitions.

In the context of the temporal mapping, time can be noted through the passage of increments of time. Each moment becomes clearly defined in contrast to its surrounding ones. However, sometimes the passage of time is portrayed in a single image when displaying motion. This denotation of time involves the relationship between embedded transitions, and the schematic icon of the arrow. Here, the transition contained in a single panel may be disguised through motion lines, which serve as iconic compensation to demonstrate the passage of time in a spatially non-temporally bound medium. To fully see this, an embedded transition can be used as a starting point. In a single image devoid of iconicity, time could simply be displayed through an embedded view of motion.



However, this perspective could become confusing when viewed as a “single moment” because the figure then seems to have two arms, rather than one single moving

arm. When the motion lines become added though, this motion becomes much clearer, and the breakup of temporal space easily is defined by the creation of this continuum.



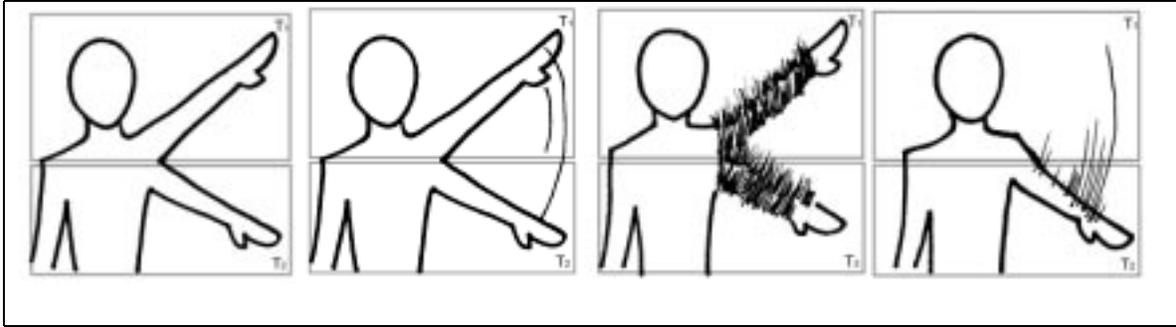
Further use of this aspect arises when the arrow is applied to the image itself, getting closer to a photographic sense of motion, where the shapes merely become blurred



Finally, when the first arm is removed altogether, the affect of the arrow takes over fully to represent the progression of time.



When this form of motion representation is applied, the shift in time is easy to observe. Here, the separate times can be broken up into distinctive segments, shown more clearly by the overlaying of panel borders, and marking off of time as T_1 and T_2 .

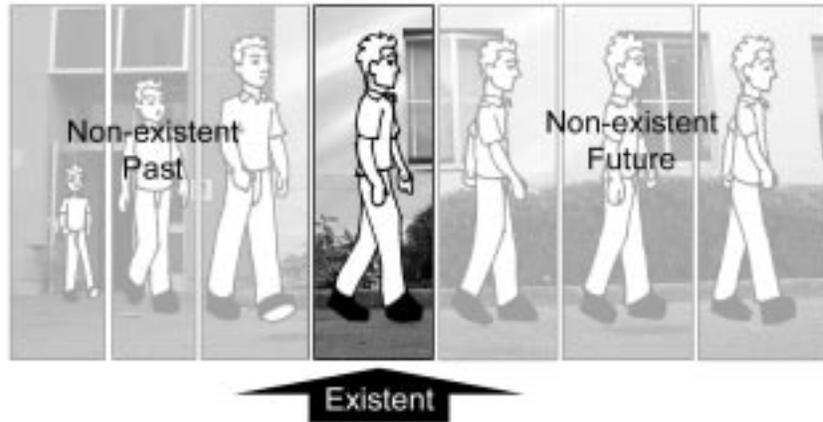


In this sense, actions can appear as a unified whole. Though they seem to be a single contained increment of action, they are actually a series of embedded moments (and thus clear indications of an action-to-action transition). Motion representation becomes another veil of coherency lain upon the momentariness of existence.

A Two Way Road of Application

In this way, visual language provides a reflection of life's experiences based on the Buddhist dharmic perspective. Thus, when reading a narrative, the Buddhist perspective can then take hold. Rather than engaging in a temporal mapping continuum, the reader can visualize each panel as being an enclosed moment in the stream of discourse. Only *that* panel exists at *that* point in the reading, arising and falling in the greater flow of narrative. However, because of the non-temporally progressive nature of the visual form, one can pause and expand one's awareness of each increment. Indeed, as is the nature of a temporal map, the concepts *appear* to be forcing the progression of time. However, no time is actually moving at all, only the arising of varying concepts. In this way, each moment just happens, its existence standing solely in the moment it displays. Similar to Buddhist mindfulness, the actual perception of that moment in the grand scheme of "time" lies solely on the pace that the reader chooses to interpret it at.

Naturally, along with momentariness in visual language, the doctrine of anatta can also be seen throughout narratives. For each individual panel, that image of a person is the absolute existent for that point in time. However, as the reading progresses to each of the next panels, those ones become the existents, and the previous occurrences become past moments that set the casual stage for the goings on of the panel at hand.



Along this vein, the visual evidence of the past and future can document the chain of homogeneous causality inherent to each action. Within the existent panel, the result of all past panels is seen, while it serves as a precursor to the panels immediately following it. Since visual language works with a temporally spatial medium, this aspect of causality can be exploited. By arranging panels allowing for alternate routes of reading, multiple temporal "realities" can be created based on varying causal chains:

individual moments into a continuum, where that being is unique to each single image. The consistent personality is created by our connection of the pieces to form an idea of a larger whole, though in truth, the only character exists uniquely in whatever individual panel is being read at that moment.

While momentariness can be applied to narratives, visual language can also be turned upon Buddhist philosophy to serve a meditative purpose. If the meditator contextualizes their life by inserting *themselves* into the two-dimensional visual language narrative, or conversely, imagines their daily life in terms of visual language narratives, it can become a tool to realizing temporal dharmic activity. Thus, through meditative practice, in sitting or daily activities, a practitioner can perceive their life as a stream of ever flowing “panels.”

This can be particularly useful with a "multiple reality" demonstration similar to that shown previously, where causality can be examined. Through this type of investigation, the causes for life's existent states can be displayed. If the chain of events that caused a state of being is visually evident, one is forced to recognize the roots that led to it. Even more helpful though, is the ability to see the visual mapping of how different decisions can result in different outcomes, though the chosen stream becomes the absolute because of its chain of causation. Since each resultant panel would come from the dharma setting the causal stage by preceding it, assumably, through mindfulness of each dharma, a greater control over the potentiality of the outcome could be exerted.

In line with this, because they designate increments of temporal change, the syntactic transitions provided by visual language can be used as dharmas in the

* This could result in an interesting type of Mandala.

awareness of life's experiences. When one experiences a distinct action, it can be noted as "action." If one's actions flow together into each other to form a continuum of actions, it can be noted as "embedded action." When one's moments flow into a continuum, they can be noted as "embedded moments." And, ideally, when one is mindful of each increment of experience, they can be noted "moment... moment... moment...."

From there, one can observe these dharmas being subject to the same conditions as dharmas in the classical Buddhist sense: they arise and fall in continuous succession, their arising are conditioned from the dharmas preceding them, and being momentary projections of experience, they are devoid of any sense of permanence, be it of 'self' or otherwise.

However, unlike classical dharmas, this type of categorization side-steps issues of subjective judgement of dharmic activity. This view can potentially be problematic and impede upon a realization of 'non-self,' because the dharmic activity arises from a perspective rooted in 'self.' Rather, these dharmic headings tap directly into the broader temporal dharmic stream, only interpreting its flow from a subjective vantage within the stream. Moreso, by noting temporal experience, the realization of momentariness, and thus impermanence, can be attained directly through dharmic awareness. These dharmic moments are not separate from our being. In a single visual language panel, the "person" is built of the same elements of light as the rest of the image. Thus, in the Yogacaric sense, there is no division between the "subject" and the surrounding "objects." Similarly, non-dualistically, we belong to the environment we are in. At each moment in time, that dharma is absolute in both its spatial and temporal makeup. We are the moments, and the moments are our experience.

The use of visual meditative tools does not come new to Buddhism. In the Tantric forms of Buddhism practiced in Tibet and Japan, the use of Mandalas and Thankas has pervaded meditative practice for over a thousand years. However, it comes as no surprise that the connection between visual language and Buddhist dharma theory has yet to be taken advantage of. Though prevalent throughout human history, the application of visual language in its modern form has yet to come to fully widespread use apart from entertainment. Despite this, the applications of such a language has many potentials: in education, journalism, psychology, the arts, and, as has been shown, even philosophy. Visual language can offer its strengths to nearly any field imaginable. Through the allowance of visual thought to manifest in its natural form, the ability for complex expression beyond the scope of spoken languages becomes possible. The power of visual language comes as a mirror of the visual world in which we live, reflecting not only the dimension of space, but the Buddhist perspective of time as well.

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Endnotes

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³ Though Moment-to-moment and Action-to-action transitions are discussed in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (Harper Collins Inc, NY, NY, 1993, p. 70) further elaboration on them, and Embedded transitions, will be forthcoming in further of my own works.

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- ²² Chatterjee, A.K. , *Readings on Yogacara Buddhism*, Centre of advanced study in Philosophy, Banaras Hindu University, Arun Press, Varanasi, 1971, p. 2
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