

Cosmic Scale, Human Scale

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I was reading a book recently about how the Romantics were among the first to grow up in a universe of deep astronomical time and space, and deep geological time. Prior to that, most people believed that the earth had been in existence, what, 6,000 years. The stars were on a dome they called the sky. The sun was the center of the universe. Everything was very neat, orderly, and not all that large. And the time scale was human. The reason people knew the Earth had been around only 6,000 years is because they counted all the begats in the Bible. But then people started noticing the evidence of geological change around them. They also built bigger and better telescopes so that they could look further out into the universe. And they began to realize that things were a lot bigger and had been around a lot longer than most people had imagined before.

One of the astronomers, Herschel, realized that there are many galaxies out there. Those little smudges that other people had seen in their telescopes, he saw as whole galaxies, and he began to realize that galaxies and stars went through huge time cycles. Some were old. Some were new – dying and being reborn. A young journalist interviewed Herschel when Herschel was quite old and, to put it in modern terms, Herschel pretty much blew the young man's mind about how the stars you see in the sky are so far away that the light we see was emitted many millions of years ago. Maybe the stars themselves no longer exist. Here was an old man who had bigger ideas about the universe than the younger man had. It pulled the rug out from under a lot of people's feet – to think of things as being that old, that big, that chaotic. Kant, a member of the old order, talks at the end of one of his books about looking up at the sky and seeing how wonderfully orderly everything is and feeling inspired by that. And then just one generation later, Schleiermacher—under the influence of the new vision of the universe—wrote in his *Talks on Religion*, “When you look up in the sky at night, what do you see? You see chaos.”

That larger view is very similar to the Buddhist view, with the universe going through many, many, many cycles, with lots and lots and lots of beings out there. Many universes, many simultaneous universes:

That was also an early Buddhist idea. And it's useful to think about this—like the character in *Through the Looking Glass* who liked to think of two or three impossible things every morning before breakfast just as an exercise to open up his brain. It's good to think about infinity: how long things have been going on and how much longer they could go on if you don't get your act together. This also helps to put small issues from day-to-day life into perspective. They seem big to us in day-to-day life, but it helps to see them as really small – as preparation for being willing to get the mind to settle down.

The main purpose of this contemplation is *samvega*—as in the Buddha's comment that the water in the oceans is less than the tears you've shed, less than the blood you've lost from having your many, many, many heads cut off over the course of time. That, in turn, forces you to think about all the possible things you could have been, or could be.

One of the purposes of taking this larger perspective is to chasten the mind so that you're willing to come in and settle down, to be with the present moment, and do the work that needs to be done there.

When you've thought of how large the universe is, think about all the beings in the universe – and wish them goodwill. This helps in several ways. When you think about all the beings in the universe, then when you're sitting here meditating and the meditation's not going well, you can remind yourself, "At least I'm meditating. There are a lot of people out there, a lot of beings out there, who have no chance to meditate at all. I've got some merit. I'm here meditating with my eyes closed." The mind may not be ready to settle down yet, but the fact that it's not settling down is not to be taken as a sign that you can't do it. All too often, you come to the meditation with your story of the day – the narrative of what's happened today, what's happened in the previous days. Things may be going pretty poorly, you sit down to meditate, and things are not going well in the meditation, either. It just seems to be one more piece of evidence that you can't get your act together.

So it's good to enlarge your mind to encompass all the other people who haven't had the chance to meditate and, even among those who *have* meditated and done very well, how they too had their periods of real difficulty. Some were ready to commit suicide. So you're not the only one who's got difficulties. The ones who were about to commit

suicide ended up coming to their senses and eventually gaining awakening. If they did it, you can too.

In this way, you see the larger pattern and that helps to put the affairs of your life in perspective. It's like the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He first gained knowledge of his many lifetimes—and there were lots and lots and lots of lifetimes. Yet he didn't see any pattern to all the ups and downs. It wasn't until he thought about the whole universe, in the second knowledge, that he saw the pattern. Rebirth happens based on your actions, and sometimes the actions can take a long time to yield their fruits and to be worn out. That's why it was hard to see the pattern the first time around with just the evidence of his one narrative.

So every time you meditate, it's good to think two or three thoughts of infinity before you try to settle down with the breath. Spread goodwill for all beings without limit and think about the long passage of time you've been through—and the potential for a long passage of time on into the future. To face it, you've got to be willing to settle down and, as they say in the customs of the noble ones, to take delight in developing and take delight in abandoning – realizing that here's your chance to develop some skillful qualities, here's your chance to let go of some unskillful ones – and to regard that as a precious opportunity.

We're all lucky we're here right now, so take advantage of it, because there's a lot of suffering out there. As the Buddha said, the amount of suffering left to beings who haven't gained the Dhamma eye is like all the dirt in the Earth. The amount of suffering left to those who have gained the Dhamma eye is just like the dirt under your fingernail. How much dirt do you want to deal with? Here's your chance to cut your sufferings down to size. Time may be large; space may be large, and even the sufferings are large. But they can be cut down, brought down to a manageable size – to a human framework – to something a human being can handle. So here's your chance.