

Martin Aylward

*Evolving Dharma: How Practice Transforms*

Week Four: "Cosmology: The Evolution of Our Worldview"

September 24, 2022



Hello. In this series so far, we've looked at what we practice, how we practice, why we practice, and the ways all of that evolves over time. Today, I'd like to look at the evolving sense of cosmology and how we understand reality and the way that changes over time.

Of course, at first, the way we understand reality is like everybody else understands it: I'm a self, and I'm moving through a world of space in a life that unfolds over time. We may have a certain cosmological view that fills that out. That may be the cosmological view that we grew up with, where I'm going to live and then I'll die, and then we may have a belief about what will happen to us after we die. It might be a view of heaven and hell, or it might be a view that we're coming round and round and round again. It may be that we're going to just die and rot in the ground, or it may be that we have no idea what's going to happen. Those pretty much cover the various cosmologies: one life with an eternity of something afterwards; many lives going round and round until we get off the wheel of samsara; one life and then nothing beyond it; or a complete unknowing, a sense that it's complex enough dealing with what's happening while we're alive, and let's just put aside any idea of what happens after we die.

But it's worthwhile considering one's cosmology. You have a worldview. You were born into a worldview. You grew up with the conditioning of a worldview. It may have been predominantly a religiously influenced worldview. A few generations ago, most of us had a worldview that was predominantly religiously conditioned, and now we have one that's predominantly scientifically conditioned.

I think we could make an argument for science being the religion of our age. Science tends to say, "There are all those religions, and then there's us science. We do things properly. It's about measurement and empirical evidence, so we're totally different from religions in that sense." But that's actually what all religions say. They say, "There are those religions, and then there's us, and we are actually right and the true." In that sense, what does religion do? It tries to give us a sense

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of our place in life, and it gives us a story as to how the world began and where it's going. In that sense, science fulfills that same remit.

It's worth considering what cosmological conditioning we have. What is it that gives you a sense of what the world is and what your place in it is and how to move through it? I don't know if you were born into a Buddhist cosmology or have adopted a Buddhist cosmology or if you enjoy and benefit from Buddhist practices but don't feel the need to take on the cosmology. I don't have an agenda to replace any cosmology you might have with a newer or more Buddhist one. But I'd like to examine just some of the fundamental tenets of our felt cosmology. That is, I'm a self in a world going along through time and space. That's the fundamental cosmology we all start with, and then we might have various stories to try to make sense of that.

But let's put aside the stories and just come to the reality. I start off, and I'm a self in a world. Then we get into these transformational practices, we start meditating, and we start to find out that the boundaries between self and world are not so solid, not so fixed as they might seem. Our everyday understanding tells us the self who I am, which seems rather real and so obvious as to be mad to question it, is everything that's inner to me, and it ends at the flesh boundary here, and the world is everything that's external to me. That sense of an inner world called *self* and an outer world called *reality*—it's very easy to have that perception. And because it's so easy, because that's our most normal mode of perception, it's easy for that to become our cosmology: That's what reality is. There's a self in here navigating a world out there.

And then as we settle into a quieter, more receptive, more holistic mode of perception, which we call meditation, we might start to notice, for example, that sounds appear within awareness. In ordinary mind, sounds are out there, and the hearing of them is in here. But fundamentally, awareness has no location. So that already might jangle our usual cosmology a little. But just for a moment, ask yourself and look to your direct experience: Where is awareness? Is your

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awareness in here, and is the world out there? Or actually, is what we call the world—everything I'm seeing, everything I'm hearing, everything I'm conceiving of and imagining—happening within awareness? Is awareness in here and the world out there? Or is the world in here *inside* awareness?

That might seem a little clunky to reflect on, and it's a question to which we can never find a satisfactory answer. Where is awareness, or equally *what* is awareness? In other words, what or where is the medium in which the whole world is appearing and disappearing? The best answer I can come up with for where awareness is is that awareness is *here*, undeniably here. And all the sense of *inner* that I have—my thoughts, my feelings, my memories, my hopes, and everything that goes on in what I call the inner world of self—it's here. It's met here and experienced here in awareness.

Everything I call the outer world, whether it's the outer world of my direct sensory experience or the abstract world that I read about or hear about or watch on TV or the abstract world that I remember from all my previous experiences or the abstract world that I imagine of the places I think I'll go, all of that world also is here within awareness. And this is where our cosmology ceases to be a belief system, either an adopted one or an unconsciously inherited one, and starts to become a living experience.

Our cosmology is here. The entire world, by which I really mean the entire universe, is here. And here is edgeless. One can contemplate that in a very simple way, like I say, with sounds. Everyday language says that the object that's making the sound is out there and the hearing of it is in here. But when I just attend to hearing, the hearing is here. I can't really find where the sound ends and the hearing of it begins. So we find that *hereness* fills out and absorbs and gathers up all the senses of inner and outer.

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So I'd like to invite you to reflect on that evolution of cosmology from inner and outer to here and the way that our practices can be a way of sinking into hereness, getting comfortable with hereness, giving ourselves up to this hereness, allowing the seeming boundary between inner and outer to relax, to soften. We can know not just conceptually but know, feel, and sense the way we're here. Amidst this whole wide world and all the places and all the people and all the senses of coming and going, we're always in just the right place. So there's a subtle yet important radical shift in our cosmology from inner and outer, self and world, to the hereness in which everything is happening.

The other element of shifting cosmology is around time. The usual sense of time is with the past and the present and the future, which is sometimes called time's arrow. In a way, we have a sense that's actually a completely culturally determined sense of time as linear. In many other cultures, time is considered to be circular. It just comes around and around, which in many ways might seem foreign to us if you've been acculturated to a sense of linear time. But in many ways, it makes more sense. Given the way day and night go round and round, given the way the seasons go round and round, the sense of time being a circular process makes sense. But rather than linear or circular, we're invited to actually meet the way time seemingly unfolds rather than to rely on an inherited view.

In meditation, we're often encouraged to put aside the future, put aside the past, and just be in the present moment. But I don't see why the present moment is any more interesting or important than the future or the past. Actually, one's perfectly capable of getting caught up in all three fields of time. When we get caught up in the past, it's through memory, regret, or nostalgia. It can be positively or negatively charged. When we get caught up in the future, it can be hope and fantasy, or it can equally be worry, fear, anxiety. But we're just as capable of being caught up in the present moment: commentary, analysis, judgment.

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So what we're actually asked to do isn't to privilege the present moment over the past and the future. What we're actually invited to do in our practice is to be present with whatever is unfolding, or more accurately, we might say, to be present in whatever is unfolding. And to be present is to easily include the three fields of time. To be present in the natural movement of referring to past memories is a completely natural function of mind. To be present in the way mind moves to the future and anticipates is a completely natural movement of mind. To be present in the tendency we have to commentate and analyze and judge what's happening right now is a completely natural movement of mind.

In that sense of evolving from trying to be in the here and now, in the present moment, to being present in the midst of whatever's happening, we find that our relationship to time evolves and changes in all kinds of ways.

There's a certain paradox with time that the more we slow down, the more time we think we feel we have. When we feel that we don't have much time, we speed up, but the more we speed up, the more our perception of time shrinks, and the more we feel hurried by a lack of time. My suggestion would be if you don't have much time, slow down. Slow down, and then a few moments, a few seconds can actually open up. A lot can go on in a very small measure of time because our measures of time are regular: seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, decades, centuries. But our experience of time isn't regular. Time is elastic. It can slow down; it can speed up; it can completely stop. Maybe you've had those moments of a perception of timelessness where this sense of here and what's happening within this whole field of here-ness can open up in all kinds of ways. That's the second big cosmological shift: that we go from a believed cosmology in moving through time to a lived cosmology of timelessness, which we might equally describe as all time is met here.

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Lastly, I'd like to touch upon an area of cosmology related to the sense of path, the spiritual path, the path we tend to follow a little like the famous donkey follows the carrot: the more the poor old donkey advances, the more the carrot recedes. One of my teachers asked me once, "So how far along the path are you? If this is the beginning of the path and this is the end of the path, where are you on that movement?" The reason that they asked me that question wasn't because they were expecting me to position myself anywhere, but rather it was an invitation to drop that sense of a path.

We chant the bodhisattva vows here, and there's one line that says, "Though the path is endless, I vow to walk it to the very end." Those two things can't possibly fit together: Though the road is endless, I vow to walk it to the very end. But another word for endless is infinite. Consciousness is infinite. Reality is infinite. The universe is infinite. So of course the path of exploration is infinite. The ways we can experience the fundamental freeness of our being are infinite.

At first, that can feel a little daunting because if we've got a path model, infinite just seems like it means infinitely far away to get to the end of it. But infinite also means one's never any further from nor closer to the beginning or the end. That sense of powerlessness is again an invitation to be right here, right here. We are infinitely far from any sense of beginning or end. And we're also infinitely present in that very end that we vow to walk to.

Krishnamurti famously said, "Truth is a pathless land." I probably heard that 30 years ago, and I didn't understand it very well for a long, long time. But I'd like to ask you to reflect on what might it mean to walk a pathless path of practice, to not be measuring one's progress, to leave alone ideas of where I've come from and where I'm going to and how much more there is to do.

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Endless path, no arrival, no enlightened retirement. And yet right here, right here, a path unfolds. A path is cultivated. A path is followed. A path is attuned to. And then we find that the walking itself, the movement along the path, is also a free process.

So I don't know how your practice will have evolved over time: the what you practice, the how you practice, the why you practice, the reality in which you practice. It may unfold along certain lines. Some of the things I've described in these four talks are classic and universal, and some of them may not be. Some of them may be very particular to your free unfolding, to what blossoms in your understanding.

The central message of these talks is the way that our evolution over time, our evolution of practice and understanding, is one of putting down our inheritance, the ideas we've inherited, culturally, educationally, the ones we've inherited from our practice traditions, and actually finding our own living relationship with the dharma of our life, with the mind in which these ideas come and go, with the wide open awareness in which they're met and received. The invitation is just to lean in, to be close to experience, to meet our ideas and see where they're limited, old, or unnecessary, and to find a free movement through this pathless land of infinite practice.