

## Performing Time in Buddhist Literature: Creative Reimaginings of Past, Present, and Future

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This special section of *Pacific World Journal* is a continuation of the conversations held during a panel that I organized for the Buddhism Unit of the 2022 American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference. The panel, titled “Performing Time in Buddhist Literature: Creative Reimaginings of Past, Present, and Future,” included I and co-panelists Shayne Dahl, Sinae Kim, and Adam Miller, with Chenxing Han serving as our presider. Our respondent, Natalie Gummer, whose own work inspired the inception of this panel, shared very helpful feedback, as did the audience members during the question and answer session that followed. Newer versions of three of the four papers—mine, Shayne’s, and Sinae’s—are included in this special section of *Pacific World*.<sup>1</sup>

To ground the reader in the theme of time as it relates to these three articles, I would like to return to the particular moment that inspired the formation of our AAR panel. The presidential theme of the 2022 AAR was “religion and catastrophe”—so chosen as a flexion point for all of us to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic might be an occasion to reorient our own critical praxes in relation to “religion and catastrophe.” In my own reflections on the presidential theme, it seemed that the very naming of certain events as “catastrophic”—whether these events are natural disasters, pandemics, incidents of racialized violence, or worse—implies a rupture from a particular experience of time presumed to be a constant. In other words, “catastrophe” marks

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1. Adam T. Miller’s conference paper will be reproduced as “Absence Deferred, Presence Realized: The *Precious Banner Sūtra* as a Source of Śākyamuni’s Literary Life,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 41 (forthcoming), and it will be republished in *Literary Buddhas: From Magadha to Mexico*, ed. Naomi Appleton and Christopher V. Jones (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, forthcoming).

a deviation from a normative state, and accompanying that, a longing for a time other than what is. However, there is also a flip-side to the narrative of catastrophe; because it causes a momentary rupture, catastrophe can also call into question the norm itself: in this case, a particular liberal secular vision of time masquerading as a universal. Catastrophe thus offers a unique opportunity to cultivate alternative temporal orientations. *Alternative* for me means alternative to America's forward moving tale of progressive time—a narrative that bypasses its own wounds of colonialism and imperialism and thus ends up perpetuating cycles of racialized and gendered violence.<sup>2</sup> It also means alternative to a capitalist mode of time, which reduces the value of life to productivity and discounts time devoted to spirituality and joy.

The aim of our original AAR panel, and the articles shared with you here, is to explore Buddhist texts and communities for techniques of temporal transformation in the hopes that they might serve as a resource for reimagining our own current temporal frameworks. Buddhism is rich with temporal themes and plays in time. For one, time is directly indexed at the beginning of most sutras and tantras with variations of the *nidāna* “Thus I have heard at one time,” signaling a continual presencing of timeless buddhas in particular times and places. The repetition and variation of these *nidānas* has the effect of emplacing their respective scriptures within a lineage of valid Buddhist speech acts, while also carving out space for new doctrinal and narrative innovations. What results is a kind of temporal stretching in which the enduring presence of buddhas through the proliferation of new teachings, images, and relics persists long after the finale of any one Buddhist drama.

Steven Collins, in his book *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*,<sup>3</sup> has analyzed these opposing perceptions of time through the lens of repetitive time (repeated reappearances of buddhas) and nonrepetitive time (embodied in the here and now, subject to a beginning and

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2. For a discussion of the stakes of buying into America's progressive narrative, I recommend Biko Mandela Gray, “Now It Is Always Now,” *Political Theology* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2093693>.

3. Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 12 (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

an end). More recently, Natalie Gummer’s chapter “Sūtra Time”<sup>4</sup> has argued that Mahāyāna sutras such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* employ “linguistic manipulations of time” that bring sutric worlds into being and manifest a transformative relationship to the listener by articulating new horizons of possibility within their imagination. Building on the work of Collins, Gummer, and others, our articles aim to investigate further strategies of Buddhist temporal manipulation to better understand the interplaying creative forces in a Buddhist re-imagining of one’s own relationship to past, present, and future.

Our articles wrestle with the following questions: How might looking to alternative ways of narrativizing time—of refusing the enclosure of linear time—allow for widening possibilities of narrative transformation? What narrative strategies do Buddhist writings employ to induct their audiences into their particular spatial-temporal arenas? What kinds of performative, affective, and transformative effects do these narrations of time induce? It is our hope that such inquiries into “otherwise possibilities” for time will generate a more constructive vision of how we might narrate and thus experience moments of rupture as opportunities for transformation.

I use the term “otherwise” deliberately to invoke Ashon Crawley’s work in *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2017).<sup>5</sup> In his book, Crawley insists that “otherwise possibilities,” or alternative epistemologies of time and space, are always present in the world, though they may be illegible and largely invisible to canonical presentations of history. *Alternative* in Crawley’s work means alternative to the violence of Newtonian, scientific, modernist notions of time. It is also alternative to what Crawley calls History (with a capital “H”)—the nomination of one event of import at the expense of renouncing otherwise possibilities, and otherwise worlds. Although Crawley’s work is specific to an American socio-political context that is largely absent from the Buddhist texts and communities referred to in this special edition, I make this juxtaposition because I think it can be generative. There is a way in which both Crawley’s work and Buddhist performances of time

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4. Natalie Gummer, “Sūtra Time,” in *The Language of the Sūtras: Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez*, ed. Natalie Gummer, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Berkeley: Mangalam Press, 2021), 293–337.

5. Ashon T. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

have and continue to inspire me to reimagine alternatives to America's progressive story of time. Though I cannot do justice to these juxtapositions in this short introduction, I am grateful for the opportunity to begin the work of imagining some alternatives in this special section of *Pacific World*.

Recent current events—from the wildfires in Hawaii, to the earthquake in Morocco, to the most recent floods in Libya—have shaken me deeply and cause me again to yearn for a different way of experiencing time. I ask myself with urgency: How might we constructively reimagine our collective narrative in these turbulent times of climate catastrophe? I invite you to join in asking questions and imagining alternative possibilities, alternatives that I hope will transform our collective stories.