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## Learning from Stern Old Father Time

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

### Time is Swallowing Us

*Lord Krishna said: I am world-destroying Time grown full, acting here to destroy all beings in the world. Even without you, all these warriors arrayed in hostile armies shall not live. - Bhagavad Gita 11:32*

Like the Hindus, Greeks also had myths about the God of Time, Chronos, swallowing his own children. The insight that we get from these myths, which speak poetically of profound existential truths, is that time is inexorably swallowing us at every moment, and that time is non-different from death in mythical-poetic terms.

Epicurus teaches that we are not to fear death (or time) and the Gods. Instead, we are encouraged to find consolation and wisdom in the transience of things and to contemplate the Gods for the sake of ataraxia. In this article, I propose that one of the ways in which we create value and meaning in the tradition of philosophical materialism is by contemplating on Father Time with equanimity.

### The Wisdom of Wisdom

The same criteria that we apply to anger and desires, we must apply to knowledge. There is a wisdom of wisdom, a set of methods by which the philosopher discerns between what, in our tradition, we may label as necessary and natural wisdom which leads to happiness, and knowledge that is vain and empty, unnatural and unnecessary, which does not lead to happiness.

With old age comes the gray hair that crowns the head, the snow at the peak of the mountain where the sage sits. But wisdom can be a burden. It can be heavy. Many wisdom traditions teach this: there are natural and desirable limits to knowledge. The old sage realizes that not all things are worth knowing.

*Wise in measure let each man be;  
but let him not wax too wise;  
for never the happiest of men is he  
who knows much of many things.*

Wise in measure should each man be;  
but let him not wax too wise;  
seldom a heart will sing with joy  
if the owner be all too wise.

*Wise in measure should each man be,  
but never let him wax too wise:  
who looks not forward to learn his fate  
unburdened heart will bear.*

Havamal 54-56

## Contemplating Death

Buddhists and Hindus, in their Tantric tradition, have a practice of contemplating death and transience as a way to gain insight and overcome the panic, fear, and confusion that death generates. The more we behold it, the more comfortable we feel with death. There is therapeutic value to the practice of contemplating death.

While the practice of visiting the cremation grounds to spend the day seeing how they burn the bodies might seem like a pastime fit for the Adams family, there is merit to this practice. Lucretius' poem *De Rerum Natura* also concludes with a contemplation, and very morbid depictions, of illness and death.

It narrates the horrors of the plague that fell upon Athens after the Peloponnesian War. If we read these verses from a perspective similar to other traditions that also place great importance in the transience of all phenomena, we will likely benefit from the reading by becoming more comfortable with the universality of illness and death.

## Time as a Value Unit

Many social entrepreneurs and thinkers who have pondered the value of time have even created sustainable monetary networks where currency is measured in units of time. The most successful examples of time-based money are the complementary currency known as [Ithaca hours](#) from Ithaca, New York, and the [time banks](#) where hours of service are exchanged by members of the network, many of whom are marginalized by the global economic order and, lacking the dignity of a living wage, can not afford many basic services so that they have to utilize alternative currency networks to meet their needs.

However, these networks aren't just a last resource for times of difficulty: they're useful, subversive, and a great exercise in prudence. They also constitute a social currency where members of a community can exchange time with each other and, as they trade, they build community.

During times of fiscal crisis, such as the ones we're living, these ventures have multiplied and stirred a larger debate about the notion of value and how it's measured. This debate should fascinate all philosophers, as it is the false beliefs that most people have about value that generate much of the dysfunction that we see in our consumerist society.

Even if we are not within a time-based currency network, all philosophers should assimilate the insight that time is a currency. Time is not to be wasted. It is a non-renewable resource. The time that we waste will never be recovered.

Other resources, like true friends, acquire added value when we gain this insight. They are our chosen people during our limited time on Earth. We are free to associate (and dis-associate) with anyone, as free agents, while we're here.

A person who has the conviction that there is only this one life understands that, by making the conscious choice to spend our very limited time on Earth in the company of chosen friends, we are giving them a precious non-renewable resource. We are investing something in our friends that we will never get back. We should therefore carefully and consciously choose our associations.

Chronos may not be the most likeable of the Gods. Father Time swallows not just the soldiers in the Kurukshetra battlefield, but even his own children. He may not have been born to sweeten life like Venus, or to encourage trade and wealth like Mercury, but there is no hope of living the life of a philosopher, a life of prudence and wisdom, without looking at the long term perspectives. Chronos has seen it all and, cynical, sometimes burdened, his are the most irrevocable of teachings.