

Adjusting the Body-Clock: Archaic Aspirations and Contemporary Chemicals¹

WILLIAM R. LAFLEUR

*Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania*

One of the attractions of contemporary biotechnology is that it holds out the promise to individuals, even if not yet to all of mankind, of a new level of time-management. Rapid and even accelerated development of a panoply of biological or medical interventions has given extended longevity—at least to those portions of humanity with access to such technologies and the wealth required to purchase them. It is through ever more effective medicine that we gain growing control over the time of the life-span, and the result is that some of us can expect to live far longer than we otherwise would. We have not yet made ourselves capable of living forever, but being able to live quantifiably longer lives is, at least in the popular imagination, a way in which we temporarily stave off the menacing hand of death.

To this method must now be added the promise of another. It lies in the possibility that, through enabling pharmaceuticals, we may be able to greatly reduce the amount of our life-times spent in sleep. A better and more volitional control of our sleep is assumed to be another way in which we, aided by biochemistry, will be better able to control time—at least, the time of our lives. This is especially so if it is assumed that we are most alive, at least as humans, when we are conscious. If this is assumed, then it can logically follow that any reduction of the time we spend in a state of unconsciousness will give us more living-as-human time. And, since sleep is that state in which we are periodically unconscious (even if capable of easily regained consciousness), any significant reduction in sleep-time, if that can be achieved without bodily harm or other kinds of unintended consequence, will be a great boon. It will be another way of *gaining* time. Just as death robs us of life ultimately, so sleep steals our life-time virtually on a daily basis and from within.

This is a domain in which emerging biochemistry has great interest and has begun to make intriguing promises. A new chemical breakthrough has come in the development of modafinil, marketed in the United States as “Provigil.” Modafinil is only the first of what is assumed to be a line of ever better sleep

management pharmaceuticals. As is usually the case, the legalized manufacture and sale of something as new as modafinil is for a specific medical treatment. In this case, its first use will be as therapy for persons suffering from narcolepsy. But, as indicated by news reports of the U.S. military's interest and now of "Professor's Little Helper," the uses of modafinil appear to extend well "beyond therapy."

My intention here is to raise some questions about what kind of value, either positive or negative, we have tended to place on time spent asleep. I am greatly assisted by the fact that the *Encyclopedia of Religion* includes an superb entry on "sleep" by Jonathan Z. Smith.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from Smith's impressive array of data is that, although countered by a scattering of positive statements about sleep, persons writing from within the perspectives of most of the world's religious traditions have described it in largely negative terms. Shakespeare, of course, could refer to sleep as "sweet" and to being able through it to "ravel up the tangled sleeve of care." And Coleridge called sleep "a gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole." Such statements would readily echo the sentiments of persons suffering from Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome, commonly known as insomnia. But they fall within the minority of claims about it.

Far more numerous are the references—and across a wide variety of cultures—to sleep as comparable to dying and, correspondingly, to awakening as having been given "time" or even "life" once again. Smith notes the following: In the *Iliad*, sleep and death are twin brothers. Sleep is something necessary for human beings and lesser gods, but superior or supreme deities, by contrast, are in a state of constant wakefulness. Psalm 121:4 tells the ancient Jews to trust the fact that their deity, YHWH, "will neither slumber nor sleep"—surely an indication of a being far superior to deities who, by being weaker, have the undesirable habit of falling asleep. It is only the ambiguous or lesser gods that require and yield to sleep. Smith notes that Elijah taunts the priests of Baal as worshipping a god who "perhaps is asleep and needs to be awakened" (I Kings 18:27; Smith 1987, 361–364).

Inasmuch as sleep appears so often to have been associated with death, with night, with being unconscious, and with weakness found in lesser beings, we probably should not be surprised to find among ourselves a certain eagerness to bring it under greater control and rational management. Moreover, the desire to "conquer" the need for sleep fully some day, while probably only a utopian dream, may be connected to this long human history of associating sleep with night, with death, and with negativity.

In Buddhism, we find a similar kind of valorization: the Buddhist engaged

in deep meditation is said to be more, not less, fully awake. “Awakened One” becomes the most fundamental way of referring to the Buddha and, by extension, to anyone who is self-mastered to the point of being “awakened.” Language about “being awakened” is probably as central to Buddhism as is that about “being saved” to Christianity. Many of the epistemological demonstrations carried out within the major Buddhist texts of Asia—whether in Sankrit, Pali, Tibetan, or Chinese—attempt to show that ordinary daily wakefulness is really only another mode of being asleep, but usually unrecognized as such.

There is, however, one major figure who enables us to think against the stream. Dôgen (1200–1253) is a Zen teacher of medieval Japan who, in the twentieth century, was re-discovered and declared to have produced writings that easily rank alongside those of some of the world’s most honored philosophical minds. One of his essays, “*Uji*” (有時), can be translated “Being/Time” and has proven particularly fascinating, in part though not only because its title and theme seem to have anticipated a famous European work of philosophy, *Sein und Zeit*, by seven hundred years.

What, then, is time to an “awakened” philosopher? What does Dôgen say in “Being/Time”? The core section is probably what follows in my translation:

People say “time flies,” but it is a mistake to focus your thoughts on time flying away. Do not conceive of time as something which, by being something that flies, gets away from you. When you do that, you have opened up a gap between yourself and time. As long as you fail to understand the complete identity of being and time, you will be reduced to thinking of time merely as something separate from you and always getting away from you. The crucially important thing is to see the entire universe and all its entity/beings as a sequence: time-being followed by time-being...on and on. (Dôgen 1970, 258)

Where does this take our discussion?

Dôgen, I propose, rejects the trans-cultural but clichéd metaphor “time flies” (時は飛去) because it introduces an unfortunate gap (間隙), the exact content of which is not specified in the text but would appear from the larger context to be between the self and time. That is, he is trying to undo the notion, apparently as common to his time and culture as it is to ours, that the “being” of a human or anything comes and goes *within* a separate something which can be designated “time.” For Dôgen to be “awakened” involves a recognition of what is faulty and illusory in common, but bad, metaphors and concepts.

This, I suggest, is why Dôgen turns his philosophical understanding of time into personal advice: “It is a mistake to focus your thoughts on time flying away. Do not conceive of time as something which, by being something that flies, gets away from you.” Time conceived of as flying away from *me* is time portrayed as separate from and even indifferent to me. It is time objectified so fully that its basic relationship to me becomes one of confrontation, antagonism. Time, in a word, is my enemy. This point of view, Dôgen implies, is that of a diurnal consciousness that, upon analysis, is only really a different and easily concealed way of being existentially asleep. His is a wake-up call of a different order altogether.

How might it be possible to go from these considerations back to the discussion of modafinil? It seems like itself a huge leap in materials, disciplines, and time. But a few observations can probably be drawn.

In *Yôga* and other works, Mircea Eliade wrote so approvingly of projects through which humans can taste immortality, “overcome” time, and undertake religious regimens that aim at transcending “the natural,” that it is easy to overlook something far more cautionary in his *Autobiography*. There, reflecting in later years on the sleep deprivations of his youth and on the yogic quest of his early maturity, he wrote: “But it is quite probable that my interest in yoga...stemmed from my faith in the unlimited possibilities of man. I did not realize at the time the consequences of this Faustian ambition” (Eliade 1981, 110).

Faustian? This term so used may have been largely irrelevant until now. That is, during human history until now the capacity to transcend sleep and time was primarily a dream or something attainable only in an afterlife beyond this world. And, even when translated into a religious regimen within this world, it remained limited to a relatively small number of individuals, those whom Eliade referred to as the “religious virtuosi,” within the mass of humankind. In such contexts it was statistically almost irrelevant.

But all that can change when, through the means of relatively available chemicals, being relatively “free” of sleep becomes not only physiologically possible but something as ready-to-hand as any other approved pharmaceutical. How far do we wish to alter our brain chemistry in order to realize our dreams of having more life-time by not wasting so much of it in sleep? Dôgen’s reflections suggest that, by realizing such dreams, we might make our lives nightmares: we might only exacerbate our “confrontation” with time.

Note

1. The author and the editors of *Expositions* are grateful for permission to republish this essay in an abridged version. The original appeared in Walter Schweidler, ed., *Zeit: Anfang und Ende* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2004) and was presented at a conference sponsored by the Hermann und Marianne Straniak Stiftung.

References

Dôgen

1970 *Nihon shisô taikai: Dôgen*. Ed. Terada Tôru, vol. 1. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

Eliade, Mircea

1981 *Autobiography: Journey East, Journey West*. New York: Harper and Row.

Smith, Jonathan Z.

1987 Sleep. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 13, 361–364. New York: Macmillan.

