

Dancing at the Still Point: The Dharma and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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[original pagination 157–76]

... I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.²

IN THIS PAPER I want to suggest a reading of a number of passages from T.S. Eliot's long poem, *The Four Quartets*, in the light of the Dharma, or, to be more accurate, explore the Dharma as expressed by passages within the poem. This raises the immediate question – why not approach the Dharma directly, rather than through the writings of a non-Buddhist writer? The answer is twofold; firstly, as great poetry, as a sublime work of art, reading and reflecting on it can in itself have a positive and uplifting effect. It has a [158] power and beauty that prose can rarely achieve, and hence can at times manage to convey truths to our heart more immediately than abstract philosophy. And secondly because the poem is part of our Western cultural heritage. Being part of our culture it is perhaps more immediate and accessible than traditional Buddhism can appear, coming from a time and place very different from our own.

The Four Quartets is the last major work of T.S. Eliot, written in his late forties and early fifties. Most scholars, and Eliot himself, consider the long poem the culmination and crowning achievement of his life's work. The first quartet, 'Burnt Norton', was written in 1936 as a separate work. The other three – 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages', and 'Little Gidding' – were written between 1940 and 1942.³ It seems like Eliot's response to the Second World War raging around him was to want to write more personally, to attempt to express his deepest convictions and intuitions. Hence he abandoned writing plays and returned to the immediacy of poetry, to expand on the poignant themes he introduced in 'Burnt Norton'.

In this paper I will draw out a few of the themes covered in the poem, although that unfortunately leaves many others unexplored. If however this article prompts its audience to an appreciative (re-)reading of the great poem – an ambitious attempt to bring 'to expression in language what language doesn't readily lend itself to'⁴ – then it will have more than served its purpose.

A PLACE OF DISAFFECTION

THE FIRST TOPIC that Eliot communicates in the poem will be a familiar one to anyone who knows anything about Buddhism; an exhortation to live in the present moment, rather than the shadow-lands of past and future, what Eliot calls 'time before and time after'. Eliot contrasts what he calls the 'waste sad time/stretching before and after' with the creative possibilities, beauty and meaning that are accessible to us if we inhabit the present moment. He graphically evokes the semi-conscious twilight state of being lost in memories of the past, or fantasies about an unreal future.

Here is a place of disaffection
 Time before and Time after [159]
 In a dim light...
 ... Only a flicker
 Over the strained time-ridden faces
 Distracted from distraction by distraction
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
 Tumid apathy with no concentration
 Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
 That blows before and after time,
 Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
 Time before and time after.⁵

This, unfortunately, is an experience probably all too familiar to meditators, a state without mindfulness or awareness, with the meditator so caught up in distractions he has no vantage point to even realise he is distracted. The mind is without direction or meaning, blown along like litter in the gutter.

Time past and time future
 Allow but a little consciousness.
 To be conscious is not to be in time
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time time is conquered.⁶

Being lost in the past or future ‘allows but a little consciousness’, allows but a little mindfulness. However this is not to say that one cannot recall memories or make plans, but one does so not to *escape* the present, but to integrate or *involve* the past or future with the present. This then requires an awareness of both the experience – in this case vivid memories Eliot frequently comes back to in the poem of a rose garden, or a village church – *and* an awareness of oneself, in the present moment. This integration leads, Eliot says, to a sense of time being *conquered*.⁷ [160]

The main reason however for being in the present moment for Eliot, more important than the integration of past and future, is the possibility it offers for *visionary* or insightful experience, what he calls the *timeless moment*. He evokes one such visionary experience early on in the poem. He is walking through the gardens of an old country house (called Burnt Norton). His whole experience of the garden seems to have been one of heightened awareness, which he associates with the innocence and freshness of childhood. He has a sense of presence in the garden, and of being in intimate relationship with what he sees, as he walks through the roses; flowers, he says in a lovely line, that ‘have the look of flowers that are looked at’. On reaching the drained fishponds he has a vision, a vision interestingly enough including a lotus flower.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,

The surface glittered out of heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
 Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
 Cannot bear very much reality.⁸

The poet has a momentary vision, a vision of beauty, gentleness and shimmering light, and a sense of interconnection with everything around him. He re-calls the incident with an adult's (and poet's) sensibility, the evocation of the childhood experience suffused by 'significances outside the range of childhood apprehension'.⁹

And then the moment passes with the cloud; he it seems, like ourselves, 'cannot bear very much reality'. We are commanded to leave the garden; 'Go'. There is a suggestion of failure on the part of human kind. We cannot, but we *should* be able to bear reality. (Perhaps this applies only to adults; are the children laughing at *us*, with our complex lives and frantic displacement activities?). Even without visionary experience humankind can find staying in [161] the present moment too intense. Afraid, we plumb for a safer, twilight existence, for something secure, known, albeit only half alive:

the enchainment of past and future
 Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
 Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
 Which flesh cannot endure.¹⁰

Included in the 'enchainment of past and future' is an enchainment to clock time, to planning every minute of one's day, one's experience squashed into tight boxes of allotted time. The extremes of heaven and hell are too big for such little boxes of experience. Receptivity to beauty, and the generation of a potentially insightful intensity, is available only outside of clock-time.

F.R. Leavis describes 'a decided arrest' when arriving at the line 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality'. It precipitates him into a forthright critique of what he sees as Eliot's contemptuous attitude towards all things 'in time', i.e. all people and their activities, including the creative process. In this I think the eminent critic is misguided. Eliot's contempt is for people living unreal lives, engaged in wilful distraction, who are 'wasting' their 'sad time'. His exhortation is open to all, and refers to here and now:

Quick now, here, now, always-
 Ridiculous the waste sad time
 Stretching before and after.¹¹

THE STILL POINT

MOVING ON from time past and time future, what does Eliot have to say about the *present* moment? Here we come to what is, quite rightly, one of the most well known passages in the poem:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
 Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,

But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
 Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
 Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. [162]
 I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
 The inner freedom from the practical desire,
 The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
 And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
 By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.¹²

‘The still point of the turning world’. This has connotations of a centre, of a stationary hub within a spinning wheel, a point of stillness at the heart of movement. The still point is central, poised, balanced, and is also the locus of power. Here, ‘past and future are gathered’, absorbed into the present. The second crucial image is ‘the dance’ with its associations of beauty, control, elegance, power and harmony. Dancing, like meditation, needs concentration but also fluidity, a blend of conscious control and a creative flowing and spontaneity. ‘At the still point, there the dance is’ – the dance comes from that stillness. Without it the beauty and poise of the dance would be impossible. ‘And there is only the dance’. There is only the dance – there is only that which the dance signifies – as only this is of value, of importance. Only that which comes from this creative and self-aware way of being is of any worth. To translate this into Sangharakshita’s terminology, only that which comes from the *creative mind*, imbued with awareness, is of any value.¹³

To understand why the still point, the dance, cannot be ‘placed in time’ we need to look at the next few lines, that state that the dance is a state of freedom from desire and compulsion. *Our experience of time is a product of our craving*, our desires. Time flies – it passes too quickly – when we are enjoying ourselves, when we want to stretch out an experience to last longer than it does. On the other hand time drags along too slowly when we are bored, when we want an experience finished quicker than is actually happening. Either way our experience of time is conditioned by our desires, either to hold onto an experience or push it away. The still point then is *timeless* in that it has no relation to the future. It is in the present moment, with no clinging nor rejecting, with no restless desire to be in another place or another time. Dancing at the Still Point can only take place in the here and now. [163]

The passage uses paradox, similar to that in the Buddhist wisdom texts of the Prajñāpāramitā. The still point is ultimately a state unconstrained by limitations of time and space, so if we try to describe it using the language of time and space, it can only really be talked about negatively, in terms of what it is not. So it is ‘neither from nor towards’, and ‘neither flesh nor fleshless’, personal or impersonal; none of these dualisms apply. As already quoted, the subject matter of the Four Quartets ‘required a capacity... for bringing to expression in language what language doesn’t readily lend itself to’.¹⁴

In this sense the notion of the still point resonates with that of emptiness, *sūnyatā*, with the ‘open dimension of being’. Eliot may or may not have had this level of profundity in mind when writing the poem, but that is perhaps unimportant. There is as it were a ‘vertical alignment’ of mindfulness, and the openness and freedom this gives us, and the fluid and open nature of reality itself, the openness that is the true nature (or non-nature) of ourselves and of all things. Dancing at the Still Point we dance in Emptiness, ‘surrounded / By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving’.

Eliot uses the language of the still point in a more poetic, image-based passage later on, which concludes:

After the kingfisher's wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.¹⁵

The reference to the kingfisher's wing and the tight rhythm and assonance of the proceeding section recalls, perhaps deliberately on Eliot's part, a sonnet by Gerald Manley Hopkins, a sonnet that has relevance to the subject at hand.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring: like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow strung finds tongue to sing out broad its name:
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:
Selves – goes itself: myself it speaks and spells: [164]
Crying 'What I do is me: for that I came'.¹⁶

What Hopkins is saying that has relevance to our consideration of the dance is that everything, poetically speaking, has a 'nature' which it cannot help but express. A stone, hitting another as it tumbles in a river, rings; the electric-blue of a kingfisher's wing catches the light like fire. And the self of the poet? It 'speaks and spells: / Crying "what I do is me, for that I came"'. The poet's *raison d'être* is to communicate, to speak, spell, proclaim himself. Likewise we too articulate ourselves, give expression through what we say and do to ourselves, to what is within; we give forth 'that being indoors each one dwells'.

So, another element of dancing at the still point is self-expression, communication. With this comes notions of integrity, self-awareness, honesty and truthfulness; seeking the purity and transparency of a stone's ring.

FEET RISING AND FALLING

SO FAR all the quotes from *The Four Quartets* have come from 'Burnt Norton'. In the later *Quartets*, which are somewhat more expansive, less philosophically dense, Eliot continues with the broad theme of time and our relationship with it, introducing *other types of time* that we can experience.

Firstly there is *natural time*, the time of nature and the 'living seasons'. In the following passage, in a style reminiscent of Ted Hughes, Eliot evokes an ancient pagan marriage ceremony. Again dancing is mentioned, but this time the connotations of the dance are very different from that seen so far:

Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest

The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.¹⁷ [165]

Although the imagery here is fairly positive, Eliot's response to the pastoral scene is ambivalent. If we read the poem out loud the insistent rhythm, combined with the earthy language, expresses the claustrophobia and narrowness of living this way – hemmed in by the recurrent cycle of the seasons, and caught up in purely animal concerns. Feet rise only to fall. We eat, drink, procreate (like beasts), only to die and rot, even our decomposing bodies caught up in the never-ending, outsideless circle of nature. Rhythms from the animal realm perhaps.

By contrast Eliot later in the poem uses the ocean as an image for what he calls a 'ground-swell time'. This is something primordial, pre-human, unconscious. He compares it in this passage with the anxious hours spent by women waiting for the return of their fishermen husbands:

... under the oppression of the silent fog
The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
...
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell.¹⁸

To use an image Eliot himself uses, our little lives, rushing around with our little plans and worries, are like waves on the ocean, rising and then falling. We try in vain 'to piece together the past and the future'. Beneath us, within us, part of us, a ground-swell time rolls on unhurried, the chronology of birth and death. And it's *this* time that clangs the bell.

Thirdly there is the aspect of time as an *ongoing continual* process:

In my beginning is my end. In succession [166]
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.¹⁹

'In my beginning is my end'; ends and beginnings, Eliot is saying, are just our inventions, arbitrary points within a continual process. If we insist upon positing a beginning then we cannot avoid an end. There are no real divisions of time, just a constant succession of events, and our splitting up of

time into before and after, beginnings and ends, although convenient, is not to be taken too literally, not to be believed in too firmly. The process of decay and renewal continues seamlessly. Like the steps of the rustic dancer 'Houses rise and fall'; the 'Bone of man and beast' becomes 'cornstalk and leaf'.

Beginnings and ends are as arbitrary as divisions as between humus and plant, and the human tendency to 'nail down' the flow of perceptions endemic. Eliot's alternative is expressed in a superb four lines of text, evoking an almost mystical sympathy and resonance with a fluid world:

Dawn points, and another day
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind
Wrinkles and slides. I am here,
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.²⁰

MOVING IN MEASURE

WITHIN THE LONG POEM is a singular and quite extraordinary passage, its other-worldly, visionary status matched only perhaps by the fleeting vision in the rose garden. Leavis calls it 'Dantesque in its measured gravity and weight', yet 'at the same time unmistakably Eliot the great poet – as unquestionably major here as anywhere in his *oeuvre*'.²¹

In it Eliot conjures up a sort of underworld purgatorial meeting, between himself (as the first-person narrator) and an alter ego, what he calls a 'familiar compound ghost', meeting in an ill-defined twilight world of deserted [167] streets, during an air raid before dawn. The ghostly figure is in part a 'ghost of poet-future', talking to poet-present. 'The text [however], with its insistent subtlety, forbids simple identification; the *alter ego* is 'both one and many' – 'A familiar compound ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable.'²²

The mysterious figures discloses to him the 'gifts reserved' for his old age, in order to 'set a crown' upon his 'lifetime's effort'; a lifetime's effort to communicate his ideas, 'to purify the dialect of the tribe'. Once more the image of the dance reoccurs, without which all is bleak.

The narrator meets a figure:

walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves
Before the urban dawn wind unresisting

A figure

Both intimate and unidentifiable.
... Too strange to each other for misunderstanding,
In concord at this intersection time
Of meeting nowhere, no before and after,
We trod the pavement in a dead patrol.

They converse, culminating in the visitor's revelations of the gifts of old age, gifts that are harsh indeed:

First, the cold friction of expiring sense
... Second, the conscious impotence of rage

At human folly
 ... And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
 Of all that you have done, and been

He concludes:

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
 Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
 Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.²³

‘Our future poetry’, writes literary critic G. Wilson Knight ‘must see our city streets tipped with that Pentecostal flame, but those cities will for long be [168] areas heavy with suffering, with darkness, illusion and death. These themselves must pulse with life; through these we must burn our way, in spite of these know our freedom, because of these create our hope’.²⁴ Written ten years before (but read and appreciated by Eliot), ‘Little Gidding’, indeed the whole of *The Four Quartets*, expresses Wilson Knight’s dream, in a war-torn world ‘heavy with suffering’.

In an earlier draft of this passage Eliot makes explicit what is only hinted at in adjoining sections of the poem, that is an awareness of one’s life within the context of death and *rebirth*, ideas he imbibed through studying Buddhist and Hindu texts. Instead of the ‘gifts reserved for age’ the ghost had originally proclaimed insights to the poet designed to inculcate detachment from those who are most near (and most hated) in this life:

So, as you circumscribe this dreary round,
 Shall your life pass from you, with all you hated
 And all you loved, the future and the past
 United to another past, another future,
 (After many seas and after many lands)
 The dead and the unborn, who shall be nearer
 Than the voices and the faces that were most near.²⁵

Eliot however modifies such a non-Christian vision, with the ghost immediately qualifying what he says with the following emphasis on *this* life:

This is the final gift accorded
 One soil, one past, one future, in one place.
 Nor shall the eternal thereby be remoter
 But nearer; seek or seek not, it is here.
 Now, the last love on earth.
 The rest is grace.²⁶

Whatever Eliot’s reasons for subsequently editing out such passages it is clear that he was strongly influenced by traditional Buddhist and Hindu doctrines, an influence explicit in earlier drafts and implicit in the final version. References to rebirth (whether understood literally or metaphorically) remain, but without the central ghost speech they lose much of their specific meaning. [169] ‘See now they vanish / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them / To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern’.²⁷ Eliot links such an enlarged context for one’s life, and

those of others, into a dharmic framework – as part of a movement towards liberation. In the section immediately following that of the ‘compound ghost’ he states:

This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.²⁸

Returning to the concluding lines of the ghost’s speech we have the imagery of a ‘refining fire’. Eliot uses the imagery of *fire*²⁹ many times in the poem, especially in ‘Little Gidding’. It seems to be a symbol of spiritual insight, especially that gained through the recognition of suffering and death. The ghost, the ‘dead master’, reveals here another dimension to the dance, (a point made more clearly in the original version of his speech); to ‘move in measure like a dancer’ we must acknowledge the ubiquity of suffering and of death. ‘Despair’, Kierkegaard says, ‘is the secret malady from which all suffer... The sole difference between men is that some men know from what it is they suffer, whilst others do not’.³⁰

HINTS AND GUESSES

FINALLY, and most importantly, there is the theme of *spiritual practice* itself. How does one place oneself ‘at the still point of the turning world’?

Firstly, Eliot says, we must turn within, in prayer and meditation. In contrast to poets such as Hopkins for whom revelation is *immanent* in the sacramental, rapturous beauty of the world around him, Eliot’s spiritual journey is one of *transcendence* and renunciation.³¹ ‘I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope.’³² So whilst Hopkins can say:

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour³³ [170]

for Eliot, by contrast, you have to ‘put off / Sense and notion’. For him the inner journey requires a radical letting go of the world of the senses and sense experience. ‘You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.’³⁴

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude...
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit³⁵

The nature of such prayer Eliot mentions in a later more ambiguous passage. As in other passages he uses the imagery of the *Pentecost*, in this case as a symbol for a communication transcending birth and death:

... prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,

They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.³⁶

It is difficult to know quite how to take what is said here, to the idea that one is open in meditation to a communication 'tongued with fire beyond the language of the living'. Eliot as a Christian will include a literal meaning to the descent of the Holy Spirit intimated by the tongues of fire, a sense of the *grace* mentioned at other points of the poem. This section immediately precedes the ghost scene, with its references to 'the dead and unborn' being 'nearer than the faces that were most near'. Hence a literal interpretation is possible; that in prayer (and meditation) the dead can communicate to you. Even outside a Christian or literal context however the words still retain a poetic and evocative power, a broad canvas of death and birth within which one creates oneself in meditation. Furthermore this state, this 'intersection of the timeless moment', is available here and now, although the here and now are thereby transcended. [171]

We now come to the section quoted at the start of this paper, which concludes as follows:

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.³⁷

Eliot indicates here a state of receptivity, an openness without expectation, and crucially a state of being that includes a profound recognition of suffering, of death and birth. The fundamental acknowledgement of the facts of birth and death, an openness to the mystery of our life and all life, *itself* brings illumination, freedom, release. The darkness (of suffering and not-knowing) becomes the light, becomes that which illuminates our way, and informs our actions, our dancing. And in this state we can receive the beauty of the timeless moment, symbolised for Eliot by childhood memories, and his vision in the rose garden at Burnt Norton. Whilst for the older Wordsworth the beauty and transcendent power of nature takes:

... a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality³⁸

Eliot goes one step further. For him such visionary and timeless experiences associated with childhood, the 'laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy', are not only retained in maturity, but require and *point* to 'the agony / Of death and birth'.

In the following passage Eliot is at his most explicit regarding the spiritual path, and what he says has much relevance to all practitioners. He first talks of full Awakening, the apprehension of 'The point of intersection of the timeless / With time' as the 'occupation for the saint', requiring 'a lifetime's death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender'. However such experiences are not for the saint alone; the whole thrust of the poem concerns more everyday insights, revelations, and moments out of time that are accessible to all. [172]

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
 The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.³⁹

One of the most radical lines in the whole poem, especially for a poem written by a Christian poet, is ‘The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation’. Incarnation here deliberately has a capital ‘I’, and refers, in Christian theology to the ‘Word becoming flesh’, the Divine assuming human form in the person of Jesus. He for Christians represents the abstract Truth (of God) made actual in bodily form, and living amongst us.⁴⁰ What Eliot is saying that has relevance in a Buddhist context, is that our insights and understandings, our moments of vision and absorption, these ‘hints and guesses’, even if only ‘half understood’, *these* are for us Truth Incarnate. Truth or Insight he seems to be saying is not some abstract notion, existing on some rarefied plane, but consists of the innumerable small personal insights, intuitions, and revelations that we all have. Hence we should take them seriously, reflect on them, reverence them even, because they are for us Truth manifest in our life... And they inform the practice that follows, the ‘prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action’.

CONCLUSION: AND ALL SHALL BE WELL

THERE IS MUCH that could be said about the poem as ‘music’, as a quartet. According to Leavis, for whom the musical analogy ‘has a marked felicity’, it gives Eliot licence to ‘defy the criteria we implicitly expect to be observed in... all forms of written English’.⁴¹ In a musical piece, as in this poem, there are often various melodies and themes which are repeated in various guises throughout, the sections often being linked more closely to the original [173] themes than to an unfolding progression throughout the work. The themes are brought together in the final movement in a harmonious conclusion. Eliot does something similar in his concluding passage, weaving together many of the previous themes from the poem:

- The ability or otherwise of words to adequately describe spiritual experience. There are many passages in the work where Eliot steps out from behind the text, revealing his struggles to articulate his vision.⁴²
- The co-existence, or the arbitrariness of ends and beginnings
- The integration of our history into the present moment, giving it depth and significance
- A state of insight that transcends birth and death, or at least annuls the fear of birth and death; an insight that places the mystery of our life in their context
- And a recognition that such insight doesn’t occur on some mystical plane, but is accessible here and now, as ‘hints and guesses’.

He also brings together a number of *images* that are used many times throughout the poem; the *yew tree* with its associations of graveyards, and hence paganism and death; *fire*, a symbol for spiritual illumination and transformation, especially through the recognition of suffering; and the *rose*, symbol of love and beauty. In this final section Eliot makes his own Holy Trinity, equating the three of them:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
...
Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.⁴³

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NOTES

- ¹ This paper is an expanded version of a talk first given at the Birmingham Buddhist Centre, UK, on 11th May 1999.
² East Coker III.
³ Nevertheless I follow Leavis in treating the Four Quartets as one long poem, to be considered as a whole.
⁴ Leavis (1969), p.115.
⁵ Burnt Norton III.
⁶ Burnt Norton II.
⁷ 'Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual. / Here the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled', The Dry Salvages V.
⁸ Burnt Norton I.
⁹ see Leavis (1977) p. 164 for many of the ideas in this section.
¹⁰ Burnt Norton II.
¹¹ Burnt Norton V.

- ¹² Burnt Norton II.
- ¹³ Sangharakshita (1971).
- ¹⁴ Leavis – see note 4.
- ¹⁵ Burnt Norton IV.
- ¹⁶ First half of the sonnet ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’ by Gerald Manley Hopkins.
- ¹⁷ East Coker I.
- ¹⁸ The Dry Salvages I.
- ¹⁹ East Coker I.
- ²⁰ East Coker I.
- ²¹ Leavis (1977) p.250.
- ²² *ibid* p.260.
- ²³ Little Gidding II
- ²⁴ Quoted in Murray p.213.
- ²⁵ Murray p.145. Given what we know of Eliot’s knowledge of Buddhist and Hindu texts ‘the dreary round’ is likely to be a reference to the Wheel of Life.
- ²⁶ *ibid* p.160.
- ²⁷ Little Gidding III.
- ²⁸ Little Gidding II.
- ²⁹ ‘By the time that poem [East Coker] was finished I envisaged the whole work as having four parts which gradually began to assume, perhaps only for convenience sake, a relation to the four seasons and the four elements’ – Eliot writing to Professor William Matchett, quoted in Murray p.218. Earth, water and air are the dominant elements in the first three Quartets respectively.
- ³⁰ Murray p.119.
- ³¹ Hopkins can ‘love the manifest surface of the natural world, and use it and enjoy it, transfigured in the light of the religious apprehension’ – Graham Hough, quoted in Murray p.78. By contrast ‘the doctrine of transcendence relies on an almost total separation of the human and the divine’, Murray p.79.
- ³² East Coker III.
- ³³ ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’.
- ³⁴ East Coker III.
- ³⁵ Burnt Norton III.
- ³⁶ Little Gidding I.
- ³⁷ East Coker III. Note how all the physical senses are evoked in this passage – Murray p.83.
- ³⁸ Ode: Intimations of Immortality.
- ³⁹ Dry Salvages V.
- ⁴⁰ ‘The fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation’ – Eliot, quoted in Murray p.84.
- ⁴¹ Leavis (1977) p.159.
- ⁴² ‘Words strain / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still’, Burnt Norton V.
- ⁴³ Little Gidding V.