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THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN BUDDHISM

**A Thesis
Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Australian National University**

**by
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This thesis is the product of original research
carried out by myself in the Department of
South Asian and Buddhist Studies at the Australian
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26 February, 1982.

Ateli Sankar Prasad

To

My revered teacher, *Professor J.W. de Jong*

With deepest gratitude

PREFACE

The concept of time is perhaps the most difficult problem of human thinking. It has always been a perennial source of mystery and has often troubled the heads of those who try to understand it. It is really surprising that a concept with which we are so intimately mixed up in our daily life gives rise to a tremendous number of insurmountable intricacies from all sides as soon as we start analysing it critically. This is because time is not a single concept in itself. Firstly, it has different aspects, such as philosophical, psychological, literary, historical, anthropological, religious, cultural, mystical, mathematical, physical and biological. Secondly, it is related to many other concepts in some form or other, such as change, events, actions, causality, space, substance, matter, consciousness, motion, identity and difference, which in themselves are often vague. Thirdly, the concept of time raises a number of questions: What is the nature, status and direction of time? What is its origin and development? How can it be measured? Is there only one time or two, viz. eternal and phenomenal? Does time flow? What does its direction consist of? What are temporal orders, the past, present and future? Is a reversed direction of time possible? What are temporal priority, temporal posteriority, simultaneity, non-simultaneity, soonness, lateness, oldness, youngness, etc.? What is the duration of present? Is time finite or infinite? What is the relation between time, instants and interval? What is the difference between absolute time and clock time? What are timelessness, permanence, and temporality? What do mortal and immortal mean in respect of time? Is time linear, or cyclical, or spiral? Is time a cause or a cosmic power? And so on.

Even if we want to deal with time philosophically only, there are different approaches to it, namely, realistic, idealistic, relativistic, and negativistic. This shows how difficult it is to understand time in its entirety.

It is very disappointing that there is not even a single good work on time in Indian philosophy, though the original sources are replete with long as well as brief discussions on it. We find only a few scattered articles in journals and some brief accounts of it in a few books. Thus the study of time in India has always been neglected. There is certainly a small book of comparative study of Indian and Western concepts of space and time by K.K. Mandal (1968), but it is badly presented. The author gives the impression that he is not well-equipped with knowledge of the languages of the original sources, such as Sanskrit and Pali. He has failed to give a good philosophical account of these concepts.

In Indian tradition the discussion of time may be traced back to the *Atharvaveda* (3.52-53). Since then both Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts have dealt with this problem. But for my study I have been very selective in regard to the systems for two reasons: first, my primary aim is to discuss the treatment of time according to different schools of Buddhism in considerable detail. We can agree with Schayer (1938, p. 14) that

"As a matter of course, India is indebted for real progress in the critical analysis of the Time-problem ... to Buddhism. This progress was so essential that, if the history of the Indian Time philosophy is ever written, it will be in a large measure a history of Buddhist thought. Since sources are only partly opened, it is difficult to attempt an exhaustive exposition just now. But some facts can be ascertained."

I have also selected three non-Buddhist systems - Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya-Yoga and Jainism - which, I consider, are the most important

schools of thought for our purpose. Secondly, limited time and resources, provided to me for writing a Ph.D. thesis, do not allow me to deal with all those texts and schools which speak of time in some or other way. However, I think, I have left a very important chapter to write, i.e. *Time and the Theory of Momentariness* throughout Buddhism ranging from Pali sources to Dignāga's school of logic and its subsequent developments. Although I am overwhelmed by the available materials, lack of time prevented me from doing this.

Throughout my thesis I have tried my best to maintain consistency in the presentation and to keep myself close to the original sources. It is not my aim to answer all those questions raised above regarding time, but rather to show what the Indian philosophical systems say of time and whether their interpretations of time are in line with their other metaphysical and epistemological postulations. I have often given my own observations where necessary and have made an attempt to analyse what they say about time. I have found in a number of cases that modern scholars have either misunderstood the original sources or relied on secondary writings while discussing this concept. Although to the best of my capacity I have advanced arguments in order to prove my thesis, yet there may be a substantial amount of scope to introduce fresh arguments and sharpen the present ones. One can pick holes in my arguments here and there, but I think it is not possible to reject what I have written in its entirety. I admit that in philosophy there is a difference of opinion even on a single topic and this is legitimate. In short, the present work is a humble attempt to give an idea of what the major philosophical systems of India think of time, but due to my own limitations and shortcomings I can claim of little originality in my presentation. To quote Jayanta:

kuto vā nūtanam vastu vayam utprekṣitum kṣamāh /
vacovinyāsavaicitramātram atra vicāryatām //

- *Nyāyamañjarī* (p.3.3-4)

"How can we discover a new fact (or truth in philosophy)?
Hence (as far as this ... [thesis] is concerned) one
should only consider our novelty in rephrasing (the older
truths propounded by the ancients in modern terminology)."

- Tr. Matilal, 1971, p. 7.

Now it is my duty to thank those who have helped me write this thesis. First of all, I owe my deepest gratitude to my revered teacher, Professor J.W. de Jong, whose name appears on the dedication page. It was he from whom I got the inspiration to work on this project during his visit to Banaras Hindu University in January, 1976. In the same year I first started my work under the supervision of the late Professor R.K. Tripathi of the Department of Philosophy, Banaras Hindu University. But because of my severe financial difficulty I could not carry on my research until February, 1979. Again, it was Professor de Jong on whose kind and strong recommendation I was awarded an Australian National University Ph.D. Scholarship to work under his supervision on the present topic. Throughout my research he has been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. He not only supervised my thesis with great interest, but also lent me lots of books which were not available in the University Library. I have also immensely benefited from his vast erudition and accuracy of presentation which have really set an example before me. It was an impossible task for me to maintain the standard he wanted.

My thanks are also due to Professor A.L. Basham, Dr. Baas J. Terwiel, Miss Linda Thompson, Mr. Rafäel Bar-Illán de la Plata and Mr. John Jorgensen for their help in writing the thesis. I wish to thank the libraries of Congress, Yale University, Harvard University, Oxford University, British Museum, India Office and Tokyo University for supplying me with

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Special thanks to Miss Betty Kat, the departmental secretary of South Asian and Buddhist Studies, for her elegant, prompt and careful typing. It is not possible to record all the help she has happily extended to me during my stay in Canberra.

Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Meena, for her affection and encouragement. I would also like to express my thanks for her soothing company during all the moments of loneliness, happiness and occasional despair.

ABSTRACT

The present thesis is an attempt to expound the philosophical study of time in India. Its main purpose is to give a clear picture of the Buddhist notion of time as discussed in its different schools: the Pali tradition, Vaibhāṣikas (or the Sarvāstivādins), Sautrāntikas and the Mādhyamikas. It also deals with the three major non-Buddhist systems: Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya-Yoga and Jainism.

The first chapter deals with the substantive reality of time in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, which is a realistic and pluralistic system. It accepts time (mahākāla) as an instrumental cause, eternal, absolute, independent, unique, infinite and all-pervading. According to this system, finite time (khaṇḍakāla), such as second, minute, hour, day, past, present or future, has no independent status, and is only an imposed property of eternal time (kālopādhi). In the second chapter, Sāṃkhya-Yoga gives a tremendous shock to absolute time of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. Whereas Sāṃkhya identifies time with change, actions or events, Yoga ascribes reality to moment (kṣaṇa), but denies its aggregates as absolute time. In the third chapter, Jainism maintains that time is real and a substance, but it does not possess corporeality, though it has existence. It propounds the semi-realistic and atomistic theory of time. The fourth chapter makes an analysis of the concept of time in Pali Buddhism dispersed through a vast number of Pali texts. The fifth chapter deals with the important controversy on time between the Vaibhāṣikas (or the Sarvāstivādins) and the Sautrāntikas. The sixth and final chapter provides a Mādhyamika critique of time. It is to be noted that in the entire Buddhist tradition time has never been considered as a reality, though

we do find in it some interesting passages on the three time-epochs, the past, present and future, which are often taken as the modes of existence. But they too are in no sense real as such.

The first appendix gives some different lists of computations of time maintained by different texts. This is in addition to the lists given by Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Jainism. The second appendix is a new critical edition of the *Prasannapadā*, chapter XIX, which demonstrates the Mādhyamika critique of time.

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