

## Buddhist Conception of Time (*kāla*): A Critical Study

Kuheli Biswas

**Abstract:** In this article, I would like to present a critical examination of ‘time’ (*kāla*) as discussed in different Buddhist texts. The cyclical and recursive concept of ‘time’ (*kāla*) is the most important metaphysical question in philosophy. In western view, *kāla* exists apart from the concept of human mind. In Indian philosophy the concept of time (*kāla*) is the ultimate cause that governs the formation of and changes in all living things. It is also an all-pervading principle, which controls everything in it. Some thinkers believe that ‘time’ (*kāla*) is a permanent reality that controls the beginning and the end of the universe. In Vaiśeṣika philosophy, ‘time’ (*kāla*) is the one, imperceptible and permanent substance and the cause of past, present and future. Upaniṣad emphasizes on permanence with denial of change and causation. In Buddhist philosophy, time has been elaborately discussed in the *Dharmasangani*, the *Milinda Panha* and the *Visuddhi Māgga* in which the term (*kāla*) is impermanence regarding the concept of past, present and future with the aid of moment and event. According to early Buddhism, everything is impermanent (*anitya*), conditioned and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) which is the causal law of the universe, as well as individual which leads the metaphysical view of time. Therefore, it has separate existence and there is mutual relation in present, past and future. Nevertheless, Mādhyamika philosophy denies the existence of time and proves the difficulties of admitting time in explaining contingency or relativity. Nāgārjuna denies not only *svatotpattih*, *paratotpattih* and *ākasmikatāvāda* of causal relation and reject change in the context of theories of identity and difference by the dialectic method. For him past, present and future have no own being and in this respect they are called ‘*śūnya*’ (empty).

**Key-word:** Impermanent (*anitya*), time (*kāla*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), *niḥsvabhāvatā* (essencelessness), *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

### Introduction:

In philosophy ‘*kāla*’ (time) is a central aspect concerned with the issues surrounding the ontological, epistemological and different laws. Moreover, the word ‘*kāla*’ (time) is used in various sense in Indian philosophy. The word ‘*kāla*’ is derived from the root  $\sqrt{\text{kal}}$ , which means to count, to define name (*kalyate iti kāla*) and another meaning is a definite time, *gamanakāla* (the definite time of motion), *bhojankāla* (the definite time of eating) etc. Another meaning of it is to destroy,

to death and it is referred to power that believes the universe.<sup>1</sup> *Kāla* (time) eats up all beings and destroys all worldly things. In Buddha literature *kāla* (time) and *māra* have the same meaning.<sup>2</sup> A person who devours time, he attains complete emancipation and liberated from *māra* and then he is able to destroy all desires. In Pali *kāla* (time) is *amatta* (immortality). Death is most important meaning of *kāla* (time) but in general sense *kāla* (time) signifies *kṣaṇa* (moment), numerator/ fraction, minute, second, hour, day, week, month, year etc. Therefore, *kāla* (time) means divided or undivided moment; all event arises in a particular time. In this respect naturally this question arises that the existent of *kāla* (time) is external or mental concept and two parallel schools grow up depending on these questions; one is realist (*vastuvādī*) and another idealist (*bhāvavādī*).

**Western view on *kāla* (time):** Most ancient thinkers explained *kāla* (time) as cyclic, especially with agriculture societies, and in more developed cosmologies the cosmos as cyclic although they expressed differently. Plato admits *kāla* (time) with the period of motion of the heavenly bodies and Aristotle defined *kāla* (time) as the number of changes with concerning before and after<sup>3</sup>. Augustine denied Aristotle's view on time and admitted that knowledge of time depends on knowledge of the movement of things<sup>4</sup>. Ancient Greek philosophers believed that the universe had an infinite past with no beginning. And medieval philosophers and theologians explained the universe as having a finite past with a beginning which is called temporal finites. According to the Christian philosopher John Philoponus, an infinite temporal regress of events cannot exist because an actual finite cannot exist and an infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite<sup>5</sup>. Ontologically, a traditional realist believed the separate existence of time apart from the human mind and idealists deny the separate existence independent of the human mind. But J.M.E. McTaggart expresses time as an illusion<sup>6</sup>. Immanuel Kant identified time as an *apriori* intuition, not substance, not illusion. According to him, *kāla* (time) is empirically real and transcendently ideal. Leibniz said that *kāla* (time) is relational, not a physical entity and it is an ideal entity. He regarded *kāla* (time) as being phenomenal and ideal.

**Indian view on *kāla* (time) except Buddhism:** During the early time of Indian thought, time is the cause and a pervading principle which controls everything in it and it came to be regarded as one of the causes which determine the course of natural phenomena. Upaniṣad defined time as permanence, eternity. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika admits *kāla* (time) as imperceptible, one, infinite, eternal substance which possesses extremely large dimension (*paramamahatva*) and is the substratum of all composite things (*sarvesāṃ yogisamānadeśatva*)<sup>7</sup>. *Kāla* (time) is the cause of our notions (*pratyaya*) of temporal priority or oldness (*paratva*) and temporal posteriority or youngness (*aparatva*), simultaneity (*yaugapadya*) and non-simultaneity (*ayaugapadya*), and

soonness (*kcipratva*) and lateness (*ciratva*)<sup>8</sup>. According to ridhara, change also gives knowledge of time, which takes us inexorably from birth to death because different states and successive changes in the phenomena indicate the passage of time. But ivaditya (12<sup>th</sup> century), Candrakānta (19<sup>th</sup> century) explain time as the independent reality and Navya-Naiyāyika Rāgūnātha Śīromāṇi denies *kāla* (time) as an individual substance and he proposes eight new categories (*padārtha*), the first of which is the moment (*kṣaṇa*) which is momentary in duration and separate category and is termed as an imposed property of time (*kālopādhi*)<sup>9</sup>. Annāmbhatta admits *kāla* (time) as our temporal expressions, such as the past, present and future<sup>10</sup> and Jayanta accepts *kāla* (time) as an undivided whole which gives the notions of the past, present, and future<sup>11</sup>. Both Sāṃkhya and Yoga deny *kāla* (time) as absolute unitary time and for Advaita Vedānta time is the realm of appearance. The Buddha realized that everything in this world is impermanence (*anitya*), conditioned, and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) which is the causal law of the universe and he insisted that the beginning is inconceivable (*anamatagga*) but it is possible to observe the period of evolution and dissolution. Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is the central philosophy of early Buddhism. Buddhist philosophers define it without taking space as a factor, *kāla* (time) is defined by the factors of past, present and future based on the other facts and factors, not by illusory relative *kāla* (time). Time is momentary temporality. Dhammasaṅgani has explained *kāla* (time) in entirely a different way from a day, week, month, year and so on, in *Viśuddhi Māgga*, *Dhammasaṅgani*, *Milinda Pañha* and Ācārya Buddhaghosa has explained past, present, and future in the light of moments, movement and events as an extension of former three factors, but not respectively. Ācārya Nāgasena explains the King Milinda, “two persons die in a place at the same moment and both are immediately reborn at the same moment. The first one is reborn in the same place where he died and the other one is reborn very far away from the place where he died. Nāgasena explains that the event of a rebirth of these two persons takes place at the same moment irrespective of the difference of ‘distance’. Hence Buddhist time confines itself into the idea of the moment going beyond the limitations of space or distance or units or numbers”.

**Early Buddhism view’s on *kāla* (time):** In Buddhism *kāla* (time) is the idea of a moment going beyond the limitation of space or units<sup>12</sup>. According to the Buddha, the beginning is inconceivable but evolution and dissolution are perceptible. The process of evolution and dissolution leads to the causal principle, which is stated as ‘when this exists that arises’. The Buddha repeatedly says that a person, who has understood the law of Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), understood the teaching of the Buddha<sup>13</sup>. The main point of this doctrine is that there is nothing that is not produced depending on causal conditions and it gives a very

clear idea of the impermanent and conditional nature of all phenomena.

Realist philosophers admit the external world and the existence of *kāla* (time)<sup>14</sup>. They explain four conditions on which an effect originates. The four conditions are 1) Cause (*hetu*), 2) the supporting Condition (*ālambana*), 3) The immediately Preceding Condition (*samānantara*), 4) the dominant condition (*adhipatipratyaya*). Cause (*hetu*) is the material cause of an effect. For example, the *hetu* of a sprout is a seed. The supporting Condition applies only to the cognitive elements (*cittacaitta*). That depending on which cognition arises is the supporting condition of that very cognition<sup>15</sup>. Hīnayānist interprets that dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is a temporal sequence of real entities between which there was a causal relation. This causal principle refers to the relation of the division of time (past, present, and future) or *pūrvāpara* or *yaugyapadya*. According to *kṣaṇabhaṅgavādī*, everything is momentary and always changing, they have no permanent entity. Therefore, *kāla* (time) is always changeable like the sea and for this reason the three-state past, present, and future are changeable. The Buddhist school *bhāvānyathāvādī* Bhadanta Dharmatrāt focuses on changeable condition of the existential property of element but admits the permanent substance. In that sense time is not changeable but the property (*dharma*) is unstable. Moreover, Bhadanta Ghosak, *lakṣaṇavādī* states that the *lakṣaṇa* (definition) of time and *lakṣavastu* (time) are both changeable and for this aspect past, present, and future are always changeable. According to Bhandanta Basumitra, the nature of *kāla* (time) is unchangeable and Basumitra declares that past, present, and future are interdependent.

In the above discussion, it may be clear that the realist philosophers admit the existence of external world and time as either changeable or unchangeable. Nevertheless, Mādhyamika philosophers deny the existent of external world and they admit the external and mental world as void.

**Mādhyamika Buddhism View's on *Kāla* (time):** The founder of Mādhyamaka school, Nāgārjuna advocates *śūnyatā* as a pivotal conception on which the entire Buddhist thought turned. He rejects all speculative metaphysics and avoids a new theory of his own. Mādhyamika philosophy is divided into schools- *svātantrika* and *prāsaṅgika* which are opposing philosopher but there are no very great ontological or philosophical differences between the two Mādhyamaka schools. The *Svātantrika* schools adopt a syllogistic approach whereas *prāsaṅgika*'s approach is not syllogistic. Bhāvaviveka would refute his opponent's argument in separate (*svatantra*) and that is why, is called Svātantrika. Buddhapālita and Candrakīrti apply reduction ad absurdum (*prasaṅga*) and their school is called *prāsaṅgika*. By this method, they would show the

contradiction of distinguish these but they would not have any view to establishing. Nāgārjuna's aim is to indicate truths that lie beyond these abstract concept and so he examined all speculative metaphysical ideas in his different books i.e. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Viśvavārttanī*, *Vaidalyaprakaraṇasūtra*, etc. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Viśvavārttanī*, *Vaidalyaprakaraṇasūtra*. Nāgārjuna refutes the existent of time and in this aspect, he emphasizes the relative reason to refute the existent of *kāla* (time). By the dialectic method, he examined the existence of *kāla* (time) in the nineteenth chapter titled '*Kālaparīkṣā*' of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and explained the different aspect of *kāla* (time) in *Viśvavārttanī* and *Vaidalyaprakaraṇasūtra* but actually, he discussed the concept of *pramāṇa* – *prameya* in those book and with reference to the context he refers to the idea of time. In *Vaidalyaprakaraṇasūtra* he examined *hetvābhāsa* admitted by *Nyāyasūtra* and in this respect, he discussed *kalātīta hetvābhāsa*.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* almost all of his arguments are formulated around the ideas of things which are said to have "own-being" and he shows that all worldly things have no own essence because they are dependently originated. He attempted to show the identity of *saśāra* and *nirvāṇa* rest on his showing the untenability of causality and by the tetra-lemmas method, he wants to show the self-contradiction of all causal theory. In the first verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna refutes the four different theories of causation or arising i.e. self-causation (*svata-utpatti*), external causation (*parata utpatti*), both self and external causation (*svata and parata utpatti*) and arising out of a non-cause (*ākasmikavada*). Nāgārjuna shows that if something originates depending on something else, then the former has no essence i.e., that entity is empty (*śūnya*). He starts his argument with the following verse,

*Na svato nāpi parataḥ na dvābhyāṃ nāpyahetutaḥ/*

*Utpannājātvā vidyante bhāvaḥ kvacana kecana // 1:1Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

i.e, Entities don't originate from themselves or others or both or without cause. Entities that originate in such a way don't exist. Nāgārjuna shows the problem that if cause and effect are identical, in that case, origination will be merely a re-origination and this makes no sense. In the same verse, he proceeds to deny external causation (*parata utpatti*) or the conception of 'other nature' (*para-bhāva*) advocated by the Sautrāntika. Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) explains the impermanence and impermanence involves change and movement. He focused on the metaphysical interpretation of the concept of change and movement and in this respect, he examined the ideas of the moved (*gata*), the not moved (*agata*) or the presenting moved (*gamyamāna*) in the second chapter named *gatāgata parīkṣhā* of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

In this chapter, verse, 24-25 he maintained, “An existent mover does not carry out the movement in any of the three ways. Neither does a non-existent mover carry out the movement in any of the three ways. Nor does a person carry out a movement, both existent and non-existent, in any of the three ways. Therefore, neither motion, nor the mover, nor the space to be moved is evident<sup>16</sup>. Nāgārjuna established that motion cannot be conceived apart from objects which move; the motion is not an independent category of being. The denial of motion, the mover, and the space moved is the denial of a substantial interpretation of these phenomena.

In *kālapariṅkhā* of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, he attempted to show that time has no self essence because the three temporal periods of past, present, and future (*anāgata*) are interdependent. He argued that if the past is regarded to produce the present and future, so the later two parts would be already in the past and so it can be said that they have no separate being<sup>17</sup>. If past produce present and future, then it signifies the identity relation of causation (*svatotpatti*) but Nāgārjuna already proved that the identity relation of causation (*svatotpatti*) is not justified. Moreover, he argued, ‘non-contingent upon the past, there [i.e. of the present and future ] establishment is not evident, Therefore, neither a present nor a future time (*kāla*) is evident<sup>18</sup>. In this verse, he criticized the notion of *kāla* (time) in explaining contingency (*apekṣā*) or relativity in the light of a theory of identity and difference. In this way, it can be said that good time or bad time, etc. cannot be justified because they are interdependent and *kāla* (time) is an important factor in the discussion of the fruit of action (*karmaphala*) or moral responsibility which is pivotal to any explanation of human life. He denies the four explanations of *karma* namely, self-causation, external causation, or non-causal explanation offered by metaphysicians and he shows that both action and agent are not existent and so the fruit of action is impossible. According to the opponents, *kāla* (time) exists since it has dimension and it is measured in terms of moments, days, nights, months, and years. Moreover, they establish the existence of time by the instrument of *anumāna* i.e. *vidyete eva kālaḥ parimāṇavattvāt/ iha yannāsti na tasya parimāṇavattvaṃ vidyate tadyathā kharaviṣṇasya/asti ca kālasya parimāṇavattvaṃ kṣaṇalava muhūrtādi vasaratryahorātra pakṣamāsa saṃvatsarādibhedena tasmāt parimāṇavattvāt vidyate eva kālaḥ/*<sup>19</sup>. But Nāgārjuna rejected this argument because he pointed out that it is impossible to measure time by this characters of *kṣaṇa lava*, *moment* etc. and in refer to this context he said in the 5<sup>th</sup> verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that a non-static time is not observed and a static time is not evident. According to Ābhidhārmika philosopher, a non-static time is a temporal flux, where the future continues to flow into the past through the present but Nāgārjuna has already explained in chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that *kāla* (time) understood in terms of distinct momentary entities could not account for experience. The

metaphysician explained the present as momentary present (*kṣaṇa paccupanna*). Here Nāgārjuna has questioned; if non-graspable *kāla* (time) were to be grasped, how can it be made known? It is impossible to know by any means and so absolute *kāla* (time) makes no sense<sup>20</sup>.

Moreover, he said that it cannot be said that the existence of *kāla* (time) depends on an existent substance (*bhāva padārtha*) because without existent-substance (*bhāva padārtha*) *kāla* (time) cannot exist. Already he denied the arising of existence in the previous verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* because *bhāva padārtha* (an existence substance) has no own being. So, Nāgārjuna denied the existence of *kāla* (time) as a separate entity and an absolute truth (*pāramārthika sattā*) but he mentioned the conventional truth (*vyavahārika sattā*) of *kāla* (time). Hence, according to him, *kāla* (time) is an imaginable concept. However, he claimed that his exposition of the doctrine is based on the recognition of the two truths i.e. conventional truth (*samvṛti satya*) and Absolute truth (*pāramārthika satya*). Candrakīrti admitted that the ultimate truth is the independent (*aparapratya*), peaceful (*sānta*), nonconceptual (*nirvikalpa*) and without plurality (*anekārtha*). Hence, Nāgārjuna admitted the conventional reality of *kāla* (time) but criticized *kāla* (time) as an absolute. In early Buddhism, *kāla* (time) is regarded as dependent reality (present, past, and future) and Naiyāyikas also admit it and they mentioned time as *sat* (existence) and separate eternal reality. Mahārsi Gautama mentioned various reasons to prove its existence but Nāgārjuna denies the individual and eternal existence of *kāla* (time).

### Conclusion:

Actually, it can be said that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is the searchlight that illumines the darkest recesses of reason and is the self-consciousness of philosophy, and also makes us *aware* of theories. He admits the interdependent relations of everything and relativity is his own view because he proves the essenceless (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) of all worldly things. In this aspect, it can be said that Isaac Newton focuses on the theory of relativity and he said that *kāla* (time) is a relative concept but Nāgārjuna upholds no theory of his own. Because he believes that Reality is neither *sat* (existent) nor *asat* (non-existence) in absolute categorical sense. He has no own theory. According to him, *kāla* (time) is void because it is interdependent and so *kāla* (time) is regarded as *sūnya* (void). For him the ultimate truth is not 'sizeable' and the Middle Path is the very spirit of his philosophy, which is beyond eternalism and nihilism. This philosophy is necessary to build up a stable and exalted civilization because it teaches us that we live in an interdependent world; nothing is absolute, nothing is fixed but everything is flexible.

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