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TIME AND TEMPORALITY IN INDIAN BUDDHISM

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Introduction

It is not an easy task to give an outline of the origin and development of the concepts of time and temporality in Indian Buddhism.¹ There are three main difficulties to face in pursuing this aim: first, the relatively late and frequently interpolated nature of the available sources makes it hard to state with confidence what the historical Buddha taught; second, in order to rebuild the philosophical systems of many of the following schools of Abhidharma we often have to piece together fragments of information extrapolated by texts which were produced by other schools, always questioning the correctness of their statements; third, the problem of time was not always treated systematically, and therefore there is no other way than draw our conclusions by analysing related concepts such as impermanence, duration, motion, et cetera.

Great scholars have examined the subject in depth, but the debate on many of the issues raised is still open, and a definitive solution seems to be still to come.

With the present essay, I intend to give an outline of the different views on time and temporality developed in the context of Indian Buddhism, from the early teachings to Nāgārjuna's *Kālaparikṣa*, in order to suggest a solution to the above mentioned problematic issues. Nevertheless, the extremely controversial nature of the topic leads me to keep far from claiming the absolute authority of my opinions.

¹ It is essential to draw a clear distinction between the categories of time and temporality. While the word 'time' refers to an absolute time, ontologically independent from the beings, the word 'temporality' indicates change as a modality of phenomenal existence.

Early teachings about the nature of existence

In the “Sūtra of the Turning the Wheel of the Dharma” (pāli *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*), by exposing the first of the “Four Noble Truths” (pāli *Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*), known as “The Truth of *Dukkha*” (pāli *Dukkha Ariyasaccā*), Śākyamuni Buddha gives the foundations for the following construction of a doctrine of time based on the impermanence (pāli *anicca*; skt. *anitya*) of each and every phenomenon.²

Then, in the “Great Sūtra on the Destruction of Craving” (pāli *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta*), he indicates the three marks (skt. *trilakṣaṇa*) which characterize all the phenomena of the *saṃsāra*: suffering (skt. *duḥkha*), impermanence (skt. *anitya*) and no-self (skt. *anātman*). Everything is source of suffering for us, as we tend to feel desire and craving for a world that is impermanent and has no stable substance. In other words, suffering is due to the illusory reification of temporal existence. It is caused by ignorance (skt. *avidyā*), the unrecognition of the real character of existence.

Existence is described as a ceaseless causal process, where any supposed stability is recognized as false, illusory, and therefore source of suffering.

Dependence by causes is the real structure of the universe: any phenomenon exists depending on its causes (skt. *hetu*) and conditions (skt. *pratyaya*). As the cause is impermanent, the effect (skt. *phala*) will be impermanent as well.

An impersonal law of causality defines relations between events: if X occurs, Y will follow; if X does not occur, Y will not follow (pāli “*imasmiṃ sati, idaṃ hoti, imasmiṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti*”). This is the so-called

² See Rahula 1997:16-28 and Williams 2000:42-43.

“Dependent Origination” (skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*), the core of Buddha’s middlepath between eternalism and nihilism.

The teachings outlined above represent the basic standpoints which enable us to analyse the development of the concepts of time and temporality in Early Buddhism.

Abhidharma schools’ views on time and temporality

Although the Buddha preached the law of impermanence, he never explained the extent and the modalities of this law. This was probably due to the fact that Buddha’s reflections about reality were directed toward the delineation of a soteriology: he did not intend to create an ontological system.

On the contrary, the schools which developed during the first centuries after the Buddha’s demise needed to build up a well-defined ontological system to be able to undertake positively the challenging debates with the representatives of the other Indian religious traditions, and to be ready to defend their views during the discussions between the various doctrinal currents arisen within Buddhism itself.

These schools were in accord about the fundamental tenets of the Buddhist doctrine (Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, No-self, and Impermanence). Trying not to break these principles, they made their attempt to determine the extent of the law of impermanence.

The clash of views that arose between the Abhidharma schools about temporality was very divisive, and the systems of thought that resulted from it were the most disparate.³

³ Bareau (1957:364); Panikkar (1974:163).

If we carefully consider the teachings of the Abhidharma schools it becomes clearly evident a shift in the understanding of the law of impermanence, from an empirical realization of change to a radical ontology of instantaneousness. In fact, the various standpoints held by the Abhidharma schools seem to compose a spectrum between these two poles.

This view is supported by Stambaugh and Kalupahana. They both argued that, although the textual sources do not allow us to make any certain assertion, it seems reasonable to believe that at the time of the Buddha and of his early followers the concept of impermanence was still not carried to its logical extreme: instantaneism. Radical instantaneism, logical consequence of the law of impermanence, was probably established by Abhidharma's thinkers.⁴

Stcherbatsky rejects this view. He believes the doctrine of instantaneous existence to be nothing but a restoration of the Buddha's teaching of impermanence, a teaching which was affected by corruption after the master's demise. He even suggests that this doctrine should be considered a pre-Buddhist inheritance.⁵ However, in absence of decisive evidences, the theory suggested by Stcherbatsky seems quite implausible.

It is possible to highlight the steps of the development of the concept of impermanence by analysing the most important points of controversy in the *saṃgha* regarding temporality:

⁴ Stambaugh 1974:132; Kalupahana 1974:184-185.

⁵ Stcherbatsky 1930:108. Coomaraswamy (2003:48) agrees with the opinion of Stcherbatsky, but at the same time criticizes Stcherbatsky's understanding of the doctrine of instantaneousness.

- 1) Nature of impermanence: the Vātsīputrīya held that to state that things are impermanent does not mean that they should rise and disappear in one instant of thought. They admitted the existence of a certain degree of duration and motion (skt. *gati*), and they even believed in the existence of a transmigrating “personality” (skt. *pudgala*). In contrast, the Mahāsāṃghika, Mahīśāsaka, Kāśyapīya, Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika schools held an instantaneist doctrine, refusing to make any kind of distinction in degrees of impermanence.

- 2) Extent of the law of instantaneity: should radical instantaneism be applied only to mental phenomena, or even to the material world? The Theravāda and the Vātsīputrīya school maintained that the thought is instantaneous (skt. *kṣaṇika*), while the matter, although does not last, is not instantaneous, but rather momentary (skt. *anitya*). In other words, for these two schools the rhythm of appearance and disappearance was not the same for mental and material phenomena. The Theravādin even established a rate of conversion: in their views, one material instant corresponded to sixteen or seventeen mental instant. In contrast, the other schools affirmed the same identical impermanence for any conditioned *dharma*, without any distinction between mental and material *dharmas*.

- 3) Nature of the instant (skt. *kṣaṇa*): after defining *dharmas* as instantaneous, taking in consideration that a *dharma* rise and disappear, the Theravādin argued that an instant should be divided in three moments: one for birth (pāli *uppāda*), one for duration (pāli *thiti*), and one for cessation (pāli *bhanga*). The Sarvāstivādin

believed in the existence of four stages: birth (skt. *jāti*), duration (skt. *sthitī*), perishing (skt. *jarā*) and cessation (skt. *nāśā*). Contrary to these claims, the Sautrāntika believed in the existence of just two phases: birth (skt. *utpāda*) and cessation (skt. *vyaya*).

- 4) Existence of past and future *dharmas*: the Sarvāstivādin upheld the theory of the existence not only of present *dharmas*, but also of past and future ones. By doing so, they dissociated the couple existence-efficiency: for the Theravādin and for the Sautrāntika, as a matter of fact, the existence of a *dharma* was determined on the ground of its efficiency, in other words on its presence. For the Sarvāstivādin, efficiency is a mark of presence, but not of existence. Early Mahāsāṃghika, early Mahīśāsaka and the Vātsīputrīya maintained the existence of present *dharmas* only, as the Theravādin and Sautrāntika did. A position between these two standpoints was held by the Kāśyapīya, who believed in the existence of some past *dharmas* (the ones which still not bore fruit) and some future *dharmas* (the ones which will surely appear as a consequence of already performed actions – i.e. the fruits already established by the law of *karma*). The late Mahāsāṃghika maintained the “possession” of past and future experiences in the present.

From this brief analysis we can infer a shift from a concept of impermanence which did not exclude a certain degree of duration to a law of momentariness which preserved duration for material *dharmas* only, to finally get to a radical theory of instantaneousness for both material and mental *dharmas*. In this context, reflections on some problems in the fields of epistemology and causality lead to the spread of several variations.

In contrast with the multiplicity of views concerning *temporality*, it seems to me that there was a general agreement between the early Buddhist schools about the status of *time*.

Most of the schools of Abhidharma refused the concept of an absolute time having an ontological status independent from the beings contained in it. From their perspective, the time-container should be reduced to what it is commonly understood as contained in it: the beings. Therefore time was not considered to be an eternal substance; it was not understood as an ontological receptacle divided in three segments (past, present and future).

Schayer claims that Buddhism, originally, maintained a theory of a spatialized time-container, and afterwards abandoned this view to espouse the 'reductionist' theory elaborated by the schools of Abhidharma.⁶ But Schayer himself affirms that his opinion is nothing more than a hypothesis, and admits that it is a hard task to give a definitive answer to the question.

Sinha, opposing to Schayer's opinion, argues: "[...] a reservoir ideal of Time is totally alien to the basic Buddhist ontological framework, and it is very implausible to attribute it even to the pre-Ābhidhārmika Buddhism".⁷

I tend to agree with Sinha's argument. The principle on non-duality of beings and time could be considered the basic and fundamental

⁶ Schayer 1938:15. I define 'reductionist' a theory which claims that the time-container should be reduced to its content. In this perspective, time is not considered as a real and independent substance.

⁷ Sinha 1983:93.

standpoint which usually marks the distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems.⁸

Nevertheless, this does not mean that there were no Buddhists claiming the independent and real existence of an absolute time. In this sense I agree with Schayer, who states that “[...] there is no general Buddhist theory of Time accepted by all schools and sects. If therefore we characterize Buddhists as antagonists of the *kālavāda*, then even this characterization will be correct only in reference to some school belonging, it is true, to the most representative ones”.⁹

A remark on Sarvāstivāda

For the sake of clarity, it would be necessary to give a detailed account of the ontology of the Sarvāstivāda School, as the interpretation of its teachings became source of confusion and polemic between great scholars. Unfortunately, I have not enough space here to treat it in a proper way. Therefore I will just illustrate the controversial point, and give my opinion about.

Some fundamental misreadings of the Sarvāstivāda doctrine known as the ‘everything exist’ (skt. *sarvam asti*) theory lead scholars like Kalupahana, Stambaugh, Koller and Williams to believe that the Sarvāstivādins were upholders of the existence of the Three Times (past, present and future).¹⁰

⁸ For a comparison between Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsaka’s Kālavāda doctrines and early Buddhist systems, see Schayer 1938:1-27.

⁹ Schayer 1938:14.

¹⁰ Stambaugh (1974:132), Koller (1974:204-5) and Williams (1977:288). Stambaugh states that Sarvāstivādins claim “that all three times exist”, and that they “all are real”. Williams rectifies his own statements in a following work, maintaining that Sarvāstivādins

These scholars have probably been deceived by the sources they referred to. Some of them relied on a text which does not belong to the Sarvāstivāda tradition, but to a rival one, without questioning it. Kalupahana, for instance, reports that in the *Kathāvatthu*, during a debate with the Theravādins, the Sarvāstivādins admit the existence of the Three Times as independent realities.¹¹ But the *Kathāvatthu* is a Theravāda text, and therefore we cannot rely on it if we aim to understand Sarvāstivāda's doctrines. As Prasad points out, Theravādins' criticism of Sarvāstivāda thought reveals that they have not properly understood their rivals' doctrine.¹²

Scholars who draw their conclusion by examining Sarvāstivāda's texts, such as the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, were often confused by the ambiguous use of the word 'avasthā' (usually translated as 'position') in Vasumitra's version of the *sarvam asti* doctrine.¹³ In this regard, Sinha claims: "[The term *avasthā*] has both spatial and temporal connotations. *Avasthā* can be translated both as 'a state of affair' or 'a time span in the personal history' of an entity. A spatial rendering or interpretation of the term *Avasthā* in the passages of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* [...] seems to have obscured a proper appraisal of Ābhidhārmic conception of temporal determinations".¹⁴ In fact, the spatial rendering of the term 'avasthā' lead these scholars to believe

believed in the existence of past, present and future *dharmas*, and did not believe in the Existence of the Three Times. He rightly claims that the *sarvam asti* doctrine has nothing to do with the problem of the ontological status of time (Williams 2000:259).

¹¹ Kalupahana 1974:187.

¹² Prasad 1988:107.

¹³ Both the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* indicate Vasumitra's interpretation (*Avasthā-anyathātvā*) as the orthodox version of Sarvāstivāda's doctrine. The other three reported versions are Dharmatrāta's *Bhāvānyathātvā*, Ghoṣaka's *Lakṣaṇa-anyathātvā* and Buddhadeva's *Anyathā-anyathika*.

¹⁴ Sinha 1983:126.

that the *sarvam asti* doctrine involves the idea of *dharmas* floating through the Three Times.

However, if we examine the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and the other Sarvāstivāda texts available to us, we do not find any statement supporting the theory of the existence of the Three Times. On the contrary, we find a clear refusal of it: “The Vibhajyavādins maintain that the nature of time is permanent and the nature of phenomena is impermanent; they claim that phenomena move from one time to another, like a fruit transferred from a basket to another, or like a person who moves from an house to another; they believe that in the same way phenomena move from the future to the present, and from the present to the past. In order to counter their views, we reveal that the nature of time is not different from the nature of phenomena. In reality, time is phenomena and phenomena are nothing but time”.¹⁵

It is therefore clear that the purpose of the *sarvam asti* doctrine was not to investigate the possible existence of time as an independent reality or its threefold division in past, present and future. Time as an ontological category is not part of Sarvāstivāda’s system.

The Sarvāstivādins postulated the existence of *dharmas as* past, present and future, not *in* the past, *in* the present and *in* the future.¹⁶ Past, present and future are not self-existent distinct realms containing *dharmas*. Consequently, it seems to me completely misleading to describe them both as *kālavādin* (upholders of the real and independent existence of

¹⁵ 「如譬喻者分別論師。彼作是說。世體是常行體無常。行行世時如器中果。從此器出轉入彼器。亦如多人從此舍出轉入彼舍。諸行亦爾。從未來世入現在世。從現在世入過去世。為止彼意顯世與行體無差別。謂世即行行即是世」 (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 27,1545:393a11-16).

¹⁶ Sinha 1983:91.

time) and as *traikālyavādin* (upholders of the real and independent existence of the Three Times).

Nāgārjuna's *Kālaparikṣa*

Nāgārjuna's standpoint concerning time is expounded in chapter XIX of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, called "Examination of Time"(skt. *Kālaparikṣa*).¹⁷ His criticism of time is grounded on the fact that the Three Times are dependent on each other by definition. As two beings have to be co-existent to be dependent on each other, if the present and the future are dependent on the past, so they should be in the past, existing contemporaneously with the past. It is not possible to define the present and the future independently by the past: the Three Times could exist only if reciprocally correlated.

Therefore, without present, there are not past and future; without future, there are not past and present; without past, there are not present and future. The Three Times should be co-existent, otherwise they could not exist.

Nevertheless, past, present and future cannot exist simultaneously by their very nature: past and future are distinguished by the fact that they are before and after the present now. If the past would be present, it would not be past. The same apply for any of the other combinations.

As the Three Times can be neither independent nor co-existent, their existence is conceptual, it is not real.¹⁸ As the Three Times are not

¹⁷ English translation in Garfield 1995:50-51.

¹⁸ There is a great resemblance between the arguments of Nāgārjuna and Buddhadeva regarding the relativity of the words "past", "present" and "future" (see Williams 1977:280-1).

existent in themselves, the theory of time as an ontological reality, receptacle of change, is refused.

To whom is addressed the criticism of Nāgārjuna? It is a common opinion that his intention was to confute the “everything exists” doctrine held by the Sarvāstivādin. Kalupahana, for instance, states that “there is no doubt that it was the Sarvāstivāda conception of time which drew the criticism from Nāgārjuna”.¹⁹ Koller, following Kalupahana, affirms that Nāgārjuna’s analysis of time is “directed primarily at the Sarvāstivādin, who took time to be an ontological container of change and divided the container into three segments: past, present, and future”.²⁰

Nāgārjuna’s criticism was clearly directed toward the idea of a tripartite time-container, receptacle of change.²¹ However, I cannot agree with Koller in attributing this theory to the Sarvāstivādin, for the simple reason that, as I demonstrated above, they never claimed the real existence of an independent time-container. It is much more likely that Nāgārjuna was arguing against a school which maintained the substantial reality of time, maybe the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika.²²

In Stcherbatsky’s view “Les réflexions de *Nāgārjuna* sur le temps ne représentent aucune théorie. Ce n’est que l’application, au sujet du temps, d’une méthode dialectique négative, qui reste toujours la même, peu importe l’object auquel elle est appliquée”.²³

¹⁹ Kalupahana 1974:187.

²⁰ In the same article, Koller even claims that Nāgārjuna’s intention was *only* to negate Sarvāstivādin’s views, not to negate the reality of Time (Koller 1974:204-5).

²¹ A first evidence for this claim is the term used by Nāgārjuna to indicate “time”: *kāla*. The word *kāla* usually refers to time as an eternal substance. It rarely appears in Buddhist texts, but when it does appear it is mainly used for its secondary meaning of “opportune time”, an “appropriate” or “convenient moment”.

²² For an analysis of the concept of time in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, see Prasad 1984.

²³ Stcherbatsky 1926:32-3.

To a certain extent, it is true that Nāgārjuna does not suggest any theory about time. His negative approach seems to be nothing more than a *reductio ad absurdum* of the time-container theory.

Nevertheless, though Nāgārjuna himself claims to have no opinion (skt. *pratijñā*) to demonstrate,²⁴ he describes himself as a *śūnyatāvādin*,²⁵ an upholder of the doctrine of emptiness (skt. *śūnyatā*). In my opinion, it is through the standpoint of emptiness that we can correctly evaluate his criticism of time, and understand his teaching.

Nāgārjuna criticized the concept of a self-existent time-container, as most of Abhidharma's schools did, *including Sarvāstivāda*. As Miyamoto suggests, Nāgārjuna agrees with the Sarvāstivādin in refuting the existence of a time-container, but opposing to the concept of "self-existence" (skt. *svabhāva*) introduced by them, he draws his conclusions through the negation of substantiality (skt. *niḥsvabhāva*), re-establishing Buddha's teaching of no-self.²⁶ Sinha, holding the same opinion, maintains: "It is conceivable that Nāgārjuna would have opposed the Sarvāstivādin articulation of temporality in terms of the *svabhāva* of a *dharma*. But no explicit rejection of Sarvāstivāda can be discerned in the Kālaparikṣa, nor is there any claim that Sarvāstivādin believed in the independent reality status of time".²⁷

²⁴ Vighraha Vyāvartanī, stanza 29 (Nāgārjuna 1979:147).

²⁵ Vighraha Vyāvartanī, stanza 70 (Nāgārjuna 1979:156).

²⁶ Miyamoto 1959:9.

²⁷ Sinha 1983:102.

Conclusions

Through the present essay I illustrated the development of the concept of time and temporality in Indian Buddhism.

It seems evident a shift from the epistemological perspective of the *sūtrapīṭaka* to the Abhidharmikas' ontological approach in the analysis of the nature of existence. This shift corresponds to a gradual development of the teaching of impermanence, which came to be understood as a law of instantaneousness. The several standpoints of the Abhidharma schools regarding temporality fairly represent the different stages of this development.

In contrast with the multiplicity of views concerning *temporality*, the general agreement between the schools about the status of *time* is striking.

The refusal of the idea of a substantive tripartite time receptacle containing floating beings seems to be one of the main marks which characterize the distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems. There are, of course, some exceptions to this general statement, but the small number of those exceptions leads me to the conclusion that probably even pre-Abhidharmikas rejected the duality of beings and time.

(3126 words)

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