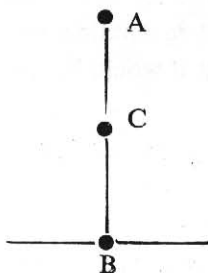


**NATURE AND DURATION OF PRESENT TIME :  
AN INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE**

We find an interesting discussion regarding the present time in the *Nyāya-sūtra* of <sup>1</sup> Gautama and the commentary of Vātsyāyana (350-425 A. D.) thereon. The latter refers to an opponent<sup>2</sup> who denies the reality of present, but maintains that of past and future. To justify what he thinks, opponent cites an example of a fruit



(C) falling from the stalk (A). At any point (C) of its journey there are only two parts: (i) the space (AC) already traversed by it, the time connected with which is past time, and (ii) the space (CB) yet to be traversed by it, the time connected with which is future time. There is obviously no third part of the space with which we may connect present time. This shows that there is no present time.<sup>3</sup>

The problem for the Naiyāyikas is that the opponent's hypothesis is illustrated by space, which is actually absurd. Therefore, Vātsyāyana urges that the three divisions of time can properly be manifested only by way of an action, say an action of 'falling' (*kriyāvyāṅgya*). When the action has ceased, the time associated with it is past time; when it has yet to happen, the time associated with it is future time and lastly, when it is observed in operation

in an object, the time associated with it is present time.<sup>4</sup> In case, one does not observe the action while it is in progress, what could he conceive of as having ceased or as going to happen ? The past time refers to the action having been ceased, and future time to the action which has yet to be. In both these times the object is devoid of action. When the object is actually falling down, it is said to be connected with the action, and this relation between the two gives rise to the conception of present time. If present is denied, the other two (past and future) also, which are known only in relation to the former, cannot be established.<sup>5</sup> There are other reasons too to admit present time. If past and future are proved mutually, only then can present be abrogated. But this is not so. Neither is future proved in relation to past, nor vice versa. Without admitting present it would be impossible to prove either past or future.<sup>6</sup>

The opponent may suggest that just as short and long, high and low, light and darkness are relative concepts and mutually proved, in the same way, the past and future should be understood. This solution, states Vātsyāyana, does not fare any better, as no specific reason has been given for this. Without proper reasons mere illustrations will not suffice. There are counter-illustrations, such as form and touch, odour and taste, which are in no way proved mutually, and the same case is with past and future. Mutual dependence proves neither, because when one is absent, the other is also absent, and thus both cease to be.<sup>7</sup>

Further, present time is not only denoted by an action of falling, but also by the existence of things, such as, substance (dravya) exists, quality (guṇa) exists, action (karma) exists. The very existence of these things, which necessarily determine their presentness, prove the reality of present.<sup>8</sup> This also indicates absolute time. In other words, the action of falling and the like give the notion of present in a limited sense only, whereas the existence of an object stretches universally over the whole

present<sup>9</sup> which is real, all-pervading time. Again, if present is not accepted, perception, which actually arises from the contact of sense-organs with the present objects only, would not be possible. That which is non-existent come into contact with the senses, and there is nothing which is considered by the opponent as existing or real. Thus, on the acceptance of the opponent's thesis, the means of perception, the object of perception and the perceptual knowledge would be negated all together. And in the absence of perception there will be no inference and verbal testimony as well which are necessarily based on the former. So, if all means of knowledge are spurned, there will be no knowledge of anything,<sup>10</sup> including past and future too which are known through yogic intuition.<sup>11</sup>

Vātsyāyana holds that the present time can be conceived of in two ways: (i) by the existence of an object, such as 'there exists a substance', and (ii) by a series of actions, such as, 'cooking' or 'cutting'. The latter is of two kinds: one is a series of different actions in order to produce a single result, e. g. 'cooking', which includes placing the pot on the oven, pouring the water into it, washing the rice and putting it in the pot, collecting the fuel and inserting it into the oven, kindling the fire, stirring with a ladle, pouring out the scum of boiled rice and finally, putting the pot down on the ground. The other is a series of repetitions of the same actions, e. g. 'cutting'. In this action a man repeatedly lifts up an axe and strikes it on a piece of wood. Both the series of actions—from placing the pot on the oven to putting it down on the ground, on the one hand, and from the beginning of cutting the wood to the end when it is cut into two pieces, on the other, indicate present time.<sup>12</sup> Now the future and past can be known in relation to these series of actions, which give the knowledge of present. A series of actions, which is intended but has not yet commenced, denotes future time, e.g. 'he will cook'. The cessation of the series followed by its result denotes past time, e.g. 'he cooked', and the

series of actions, which is still in progress, cause the apprehension of present time, e.g. 'he is cooking'. A complete series of actions refers to all the three time-epochs: (1) that which is ceased is said to be 'already done' (past time). (2) that which is intended but yet 'to be done' (future time), and (3) that which exists is said to be 'in progress', i. e. that which has commenced but has not yet ceased to be (present time).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Vātsyāyana shows that the past and future are known only in relation to the present as its preceding and succeeding states respectively.

Now it is clear from the preceding discussion that present is conceived of in both ways : (1) as having been associated with the past and future, such as, in the series of actions which denotes all the three time-epochs, and (2) as having been dissociated from them, e. g. 'substance exists', which shows the perpetual existence of an object<sup>14</sup> referring to the absolute mode of present. Further, the Naiyāyikas hold that the briefest action (denoting present) takes at least four moments of disjunctions and conjunctions. An instantaneous action is not possible at all. It follows that in the Nyāya system the duration of present cannot be less than four moments. The span of an extended present can exceed more than four moments up to infinity. In other words, if present is not limited to four moments, it matters little to what measurable period we apply the term. The principle is the same whether we speak of a specious present or a present century or the present Yuga. An extended present is a period extending from now backward and forward, and in its extremely extended form it is the absolute mode of present, which is again a durational whole, a substantive, all-pervasive, infinite, eternal and real time of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika.

#### **Sriharsa's Criticism of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Notion of Time :**

Regarding the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika notion of time, Śriharaṣa (13 th century), the great protagonist of Advaita Vedānta, seems to

get hold of the wrong end of the stick. He tries his best to repudiate time as substantive reality in his outstanding treatise *Khaṇḍana-Khaṇḍakhādyā*.<sup>15</sup> His criticism of the reality of time clusters round the assumption that the temporal determinations, past, present and future, cannot be defined and they are unintelligible as well if we take them as separate entities. The Vaiśeṣika's contention is that these determinations are based on external conditions, such as, different solar revolutions, finite actions, or finite objects. But Śriharṣa thinks that they are said to be connected with a particular solar motion and are thus existent simultaneously, which is an absurd position. These divisions of time, he continues, may be either real (*svābhāvika*) or conditional (*aupādhika*). Whichever alternative we take we find self-contradiction in it. In the first case, time is said to be an undivided whole; one, which cannot possess real divisions. It means the same undivided time, which appears present, was future and will be past. But such cognition is not possible. If we say that it has tri-temporal characteristics, there is difference among things. Even if we admit that the above divisions in a unique time are real, the adjustment of past and future would not be possible, because in that case there will always be a cognition of all the three time-determinations, which will lead to a great confusion. The Vaiśeṣika assertion is that past, present and future arise and are distinguishable by means of different external conditions, such as different solar revolutions. But to Śriharṣa it is an unconvincing argument, as all the three times are said to be in relation to a particular solar motion. Thus, for example a particular day, which is apprehended as present because of its relation to a particular solar movement, is also apprehended as past and future in relation to the same movement. That particular day is considered as present on the same day, as past on its succeeding days, and as future on its preceding days, and the particular solar revolution is common to all these three states. Hence, it is obvious that past, present

and future as conditional divisions of one infinite time are also not tenable.

The Vaiṣeṣika may suggest that time when related to the actual action is present; when related to the pre-nonexistent action (prāgabhāvāvacchinna), it is past; and when related to the post-nonexistent or cessation of an action (pradhvaṃsāvacchinna), it is future.<sup>16</sup> But this too does not fare better, because all the three time-epochs are said to be determined by action and so they appear to be present alike. The preceding definitions of time-segments are not appropriate, for there is no time-segment, which is determined by pre-non-existence or post-non-existence of an action, but not determined by action itself.<sup>17</sup> Further, without making reference to previous and later, pre-non-existence and post-non-existence are incomprehensible. But previous is said to be past and later that of future. Thus, we see that the definitions of past and future, which the Vaiṣeṣika proposes, wind up being circular, for reasons given above. The Vaiṣeṣika again defines present in a different way. It pronounces that the time determined by a particular action is called present in relation to that very action only, not in relation to another action.<sup>18</sup> But this too, according to Śriharṣa, does not succeed any better, because it is the same action, which determines the past and future as well alike. In this way Śriharṣa tries to pick holes in the Vaiṣeṣika arguments, which establish the reality of time. Though there is no attempt on behalf of the Vaiṣeṣikas to meet the challenge of Śriharṣa, still we can see how the holes could be blocked up again.

As we know, time in the Nyāya-Vaiṣeṣika is an undivided whole, infinite and absolute. The divisions of time as past, present and future, second, minute, hour, day, etc. measured by a watch, or an action, or a duration, or the existence of an object are empirical, not real. As a matter of fact, absolute time is never divided. The past, present and future, etc. are its imposed determinants (upādhis) for our practical purposes. It means that if there is

no action or change, etc. in the phenomena, there would be no past, present or future. Still real time will continue to survive absolutely, and after all the imposed determinants do not exist as such.

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#### NOTES

1. Cf. 2.1.40-44.
2. Satis Chandra Vidyabhusan (*A History of Indian Logic*, reprint, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971, p. 106, fn. 1) and S. Radhakrishnan (*Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, reprint, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1962, p. 142) affirm that here the opponent is Nagarjuna or the Madhyamika school. But in the whole Madhyamika system, we do not come across such view. As we know, the Madhyamikas take everything as ultimately unreal, void (*śūnya*), and mutually dependent, including the past, present and future as well. G. N. Jha (*Gautama's Nyaya-sūtras : A System of Indian Logic with Vātsyāyanabhāṣya*. Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1939, p. 167) informs us that the *Bhaṣyacandra* also describes the opponent in this regard as the Buddhist. We agree with G. N. Jha (*ibid.*), and S. Bhaduri (*Studies in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Metaphysics*, reprint, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1975, p. 206, fn. 45) that this view cannot be affiliated to any particular school or work.
3. Cf. *Nyāya-sūtra of Gautama with Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya*, ed. by Shree Narain Mishra, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1970, pp. 191. 8-192.2.
4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 192.4-6.
5. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 192.6-10. Also cf. *Nyāya-sūtra*, 2.1.41.
6. Cf. *Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya*, op. cit., pp. 193.3-194.2
7. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 194.3-7. Also cf. *Nyāya-sūtra*, 2.1.42.
8. Cf. *Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya*, op. cit., p. 194.10-11. Also cf. *Nyāya-vārtīkatātpariyātikā* by Vacaspati Miśra, ed. by Rajeshvar Shastri Dravid, Kashi Sanskrit Series, 1925, p. 407.
9. Cf. *Nyāyavārtīkatātpariyātikā*, *ibid.*
10. Cf. *Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya*, op. cit., p. 195.2-5. Also cf. *Nyāya-sūtra*, 2.1.43.

11. Cf. *Nyāyavārtikatātparyatīkā*, op. cit., p. 407 : na hi sarvam pratyaksam vartamānaviṣayam atītanagatayor api yogipratyakṣatvad iti bhāvaḥ.
12. Cf. *Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya*, op. cit., pp. 195.6-196.4.
13. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 197.1-4.
14. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 197.6-7.
15. Ed. by Navi Kant Jha, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1970, pp. 682.10-690.30 and Saṅkara Miśra's commentary thereon.
16. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 684.6-7 : kriyāvacchinnaḥ kālo vartamānaḥ tatprāgabhāvāvacchinno bhūtaḥ tatpradhvaṁsāvacchinno bhaviṣyann iti.
17. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 684.9-10 : kriyānavacchinnyasya tatprāgabhāvapradhvaṁsābhāvāvacchedanupapatteḥ.
18. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 686.22-23 : yatkriyāvacchinno yaḥ kālaḥ as tatkriyāpekṣaya vartamāno na tv anyapekṣaya iti.

#### ANNOUNCEMENT

*PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY*, the international Philosophical Quarterly, founded in Athens by Professor D. Z. Andriopoulos, begins a second period of publication. It is now located in New York : Department of Philosophy, H. Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, N. Y. 10468. Its Editorial Board is re-organized and draws upon the expertise of 60 philosophers in the Universities of 50 countries. To its Honorary Board, along with Professors A. J. Ayer (Oxford), Gr. Vlastos (Berkeley—Cambridge), G. de Vogel (Utrecht), W. H. Walsh (Edinburgh), G. Calogero (Rome), P. Agaesse (C. E. R. P. Paris), H. Osborne (London), R. Kroner (Switzerland), were added last Spring Professors N. N. Chomsky (M. I. T. ) and W. V. Quine (Harvard). Professor A. McLaughlin (City University of New York—Lehman College) was appointed Associate Editor of the journal.