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THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN JAIN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

*Jain philosophy offers a profound and distinctive conception of time (*kāla*) that forms an essential component of its metaphysics, cosmology, and ethical framework. Time is considered one of the six* dravya *(substances) that constitute reality, alongside soul (*jīva*), matter (*pudgala*), space (*ākāśa*), motion (*dharma*), and rest (*adharma*). Within this system, time is eternal, formless, and indispensable for the processes of change, motion, and karmic transformation. Jain philosophers view time both as a causal and a conditional factor in the emergence and cessation of worldly events. The doctrine encompasses an atomistic notion of indivisible temporal units (*samaya*) and a vast cyclical cosmology represented by the* kālacakra *– the wheel of time – divided into ascending (*utsarpiṇī*) and descending (*avasarpiṇī*) phases. This article examines the Jain concept of time through canonical sources such as* Tattvārtha Sūtra*, commentaries by Umāsvāti and Pūjyapāda, and modern interpretations by scholars including Padmanabh Jaini, Paul Dundas, and Melanie Barbato. It explores four key aspects: (1) Time as a fundamental substance, (2) its measurement and units, (3) its function in the karmic and cosmic order, and (4) its soteriological implications, concluding with reflections on its philosophical significance in relation to broader Indian thought.*

KEYWORDS : *Jain Philosophy*, *Time (Kāla)*, *Kālacakra (Wheel of Time)*, *Samaya (Temporal Atomism)*, *Karma and Liberation*

INTRODUCTION

Among the many systems of Indian philosophy, Jainism stands out for its intricate ontology and detailed cosmology. Its worldview rests on the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (the theory of manifoldness) and a metaphysical realism that recognizes six eternal and independent substances (*ṣaḍ-dravya*). Within this framework, *kāla*—time—occupies a crucial role, serving both as a condition for change and as a real substance that interacts causally with others (Umāsvāti, trans. Tatia, 1994; Jaini, 1998). Time enables the transformation of substances from one state (*paryāya*) to another and thus sustains the continuity of existence.

In contrast to traditions like Advaita Vedānta, which may treat time as a projection of empirical reality (*vyāvahārika-sattā*), or Buddhist momentariness, which emphasizes temporal flux without positing time as an independent entity, Jainism asserts that time is as real and eternal as space or matter. This realism about time aligns with Jainism's commitment to a pluralistic ontology and causal determinism (Dundas, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the concept of time in Jain philosophy as articulated in its classical texts and interpreted by modern scholars, organizing the discussion into four main areas: (1) the ontological nature of time, (2) its units and measurement, (3) its function in cosmology and karma, and (4) its soteriological significance.

1. Time as Dravya: Ontological and Metaphysical Status

In Jain metaphysics, *dravya* refers to a fundamental category of reality that exists independently, eternally, and is characterized by both permanence and change. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (V.22) explicitly identifies *kāla* as one of the six *dravya* that together constitute the universe. Umāsvāti defines time as the "cause of the sequence of modifications," emphasizing that it is not merely a mental abstraction but a real substance necessary for the occurrence of transformation (Tatia, 1994).

Unlike matter or soul, time is **formless** (*amūrta*). It neither possesses physical attributes nor occupies spatial dimensions. Its function is not to act directly but to make possible the change of states in other substances. Pūjyapāda, in *Sarvārthasiddhi*, clarifies that time is "the auxiliary cause that enables continuity in change." Without it, even motion (*gati*) or rest (*sthiti*) could not occur coherently (Jain, 1960). Thus, *kāla* is both *nimitta-kāraṇa* (instrumental cause) and *upādāna-kāraṇa* (substantive cause) in the manifestation of temporal change.

Jain thinkers distinguish between **substantive time (*kāladravya*)** and **modal time (*paryāya-kāla*)**. Substantive time is eternal, indivisible, and omnipresent, while modal time refers to the infinite sequence of instants or modes that constitute its functioning. This duality allows Jain philosophers to affirm the constancy of time as a substance while acknowledging its variability through changing moments. Piotr Balcerowicz (2019) observes that this distinction offers a nuanced response to the philosophical problem of change: substances persist, but their modes alter in time.

Furthermore, Jainism maintains that time pervades only the **lokākāśa** (inhabited universe), not the **alokākāśa** (the non-worldly space beyond). Thus, time is spatially bounded—it operates only where other substances exist. This localization aligns with Jain realism, which treats each *dravya* as having a definite range of operation. The ontological interdependence of the six *dravya* reflects a sophisticated pluralism that allows for interaction without fusion (Dundas, 2002).

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One of the philosophical implications of this view is that **time is real yet dependent**. It is real because it exists and functions independently of perception, but dependent because it has meaning only in relation to other substances. Time cannot be conceived in isolation—it gains significance only as the condition for change. This relational realism parallels Jain doctrines of *syādvāda* (conditional predication), where every statement about reality is true only from a specific standpoint.

The recognition of time as *dravya* also grounds Jain cosmology and ethics. All karmic transformations, physical processes, and cosmic cycles presuppose time as their causal condition. Without time, the *pariṇāma* (modification) of substances, including the soul's moral and spiritual evolution, would be impossible. Hence, time occupies both metaphysical and moral significance in Jain thought. Jaini (1998) aptly summarizes that *kāla* is "the silent architect of the universe," ensuring continuity amidst change and providing the framework for karmic justice.

2. The Measurement and Units of Time: From Samaya to Kālacakra

Jainism's cosmological imagination expresses time on two radically different scales: the **infinitesimal** and the **cosmic**. At the microscopic level, the smallest unit of time is the *samaya*—an indivisible instant in which a single change can occur. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (V.40) defines *samaya* as "the minutest period that cannot be further divided." In commentaries, Pūjyapāda describes *samaya* as the temporal equivalent of the *paramāṇu* (atom) of matter (Jain, 1960). Though inconceivable to human understanding, innumerable *samayas* make up larger measurable units such as *āvalikā*, *muhūrta*, *palyopama*, and *sāgaropama*—vast spans used to describe cosmic cycles.

At the macroscopic level, Jain cosmology portrays time as an eternal **wheel (*kālacakra*)**, rotating endlessly through ascending (*utsarpiṇī*) and descending (*avasarpiṇī*) half-cycles. Each half-cycle consists of six **ages (*ārās*)**, characterized by gradual improvement or decline in moral, spiritual, and physical conditions. In *utsarpiṇī*, human beings experience increasing happiness, knowledge, and longevity; in *avasarpiṇī*, these qualities progressively deteriorate (Jaini, 1998). The current epoch is believed to belong to the fifth *āra* of the descending cycle, marked by moral and physical decline yet still permitting spiritual progress.

The cyclical conception of time underscores Jainism's rejection of creation and destruction myths. The universe, being eternal, neither originates nor ends—it merely transforms. As Paul Dundas (2002) notes, this cyclical temporality conveys an ethical message: the external universe may decline, but the soul retains its potential for liberation. The cosmic rhythm of ascent and decline thus mirrors the individual's journey from bondage to release.

In addition to these cosmological divisions, Jain thinkers also classify time in functional terms:

1. **Nishchaya-kāla** – Real, substantive time that exists independently.
2. **Vyavahāra-kāla** – Empirical time used for practical computation.
3. **Kāladravya** – Eternal time as substance.
4. **Kālavyavahāra** – Time in the sense of duration, age, or sequence.

These classifications reveal the multidimensional role of time in Jain metaphysics: ontological, epistemic, and moral. It is both the condition of change and the measure by which change is known.

The scale of Jain temporal units reflects a distinctive metaphysical imagination. A single *palyopama* is said to equal countless years—so vast that its magnitude defies comprehension. By employing such immeasurable spans, Jain cosmology underscores the infinitude and beginninglessness of existence. As Jaini (1998) explains, this vastness serves not merely a speculative purpose but an ethical one: it cultivates humility and detachment by situating human life within an immeasurable continuum of time.

Furthermore, the *kālacakra* operates as both cosmological map and moral allegory. The cycles of rise and fall in human virtue parallel the flux of karma within each soul. The repetition of cosmic ages symbolizes the recurring bondage and liberation experienced by innumerable beings. Melanie Barbato (2017) interprets this cyclical temporality as a reflection of *anekāntavāda*—acknowledging multiple, coexisting layers of truth and change.

In essence, Jainism's temporal schema integrates the infinitesimal *samaya* and the infinite *sāgaropama* into a coherent continuum. Time, in this vision, is simultaneously atomic and cosmic, mathematical and moral. It binds all substances within an orderly rhythm that both sustains the universe and opens the path to liberation.

3. Time, Karma, and Cosmic Causation

The connection between time and karma lies at the heart of Jain ethics and metaphysics. In Jainism, karma is conceived not as an abstract moral law but as **a form of subtle matter** (*karma-pudgala*) that attaches to the soul as a result of actions and passions. Time is the essential medium through which karmic bonds operate and mature. As Jaini (1998) observes, "without time, there could be no moral sequence, no fruition, and no liberation."

Time functions in the karmic process in two principal ways. First, it serves as the **instrumental cause (*nimitta-kāraṇa*)** of change—allowing karmic particles to ripen and yield their results. Second, it acts as the **substantive cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*)**, because temporal moments provide the structure within which karmic fruition occurs. Each karmic influx, bondage, and dissociation unfolds through specific *samayas*. Pūjyapāda (Jain, 1960) notes that karma binds to the soul at a definite temporal juncture and remains until the prescribed time of fruition. Thus, the moral causality of karma is inseparable from temporal causality.

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Moreover, the Jain understanding of **motion and rest** depends upon time. The substances *dharma* and *adharma* provide the media through which motion and rest are possible, but time ensures their sequencing and succession. Without temporal order, motion could not be distinguished from stillness. Paul Dundas (2002) comments that time, in this sense, "makes intelligible the dynamic interplay of all substances" by linking their transformations into a continuous causal chain.

The cyclical cosmology further reinforces the moral dimension of time. During *utsarpiṇī*, when spiritual and physical conditions are favorable, karmic liberation may seem easier to attain; during *avasarpiṇī*, when decline prevails, spiritual effort becomes more challenging. Yet, in both cycles, the law of karma operates infallibly. Melanie Barbato (2017) explains that this cyclical temporality instills moral responsibility: actions have enduring consequences across endless cycles of existence.

Time's role as a **moral regulator** also extends to Jain asceticism. The disciplines of fasting, meditation, and renunciation are designed to interrupt the flow of karmic time—to slow down or stop the attachment of new karmas. In ascetic experience, time is not denied but transcended through awareness and detachment. The sage perceives the impermanence of temporal processes and thereby ceases to identify with them (Jaini, 1998).

At the cosmic scale, time maintains the balance of eternal processes. The universe is never annihilated or recreated; it continuously evolves within the rhythm of *kālacakra*. This eternal recurrence mirrors the law of karma at the individual level. Each soul moves through an infinite sequence of births, deaths, and rebirths until it attains liberation. Time, thus, acts as the grand stage upon which the moral drama of existence unfolds.

In summary, time in Jain philosophy is both **causal and moral**. It is not a passive backdrop but an active principle enabling karmic fruition and cosmic transformation. Through time, actions acquire consequence, change gains order, and liberation becomes meaningful. Without time, the Jain doctrines of karma and rebirth would lose their coherence; with it, the entire moral and metaphysical edifice of Jainism stands firm.

4. Time and Liberation (Mokṣa): The Transcendence of Temporality

While time governs the world of change, Jain philosophy also envisions the possibility of transcending its bondage. Liberation (*mokṣa*) in Jainism is the state of the soul (*jīva*) completely freed from karmic matter. This purified soul, called *siddha*, ascends to the highest region of the universe, the *siddha-śilā*, where it abides eternally in omniscient bliss (Umāsvāti, trans. Tatia, 1994).

The relationship between time and liberation is paradoxical. On one hand, liberation occurs **in time**, as a culmination of spiritual discipline. On the other hand, the liberated soul exists **beyond the operation of time**, since it undergoes no further change. Pūjyapāda (Jain, 1960) clarifies that although time as *dravya* continues to exist, it no longer affects the liberated being. The soul, having exhausted all karmas, experiences an unchanging state of existence. Balcerowicz (2019) interprets this as "the cessation of becoming without the negation of being."

Jain texts describe the liberated soul as *kāla-atiīta*—beyond the reach of temporal succession. Yet, this transcendence does not imply annihilation. Unlike Advaita Vedānta, which merges the liberated self into the timeless Brahman, or Buddhism, which treats nirvāṇa as cessation, Jainism affirms the eternal individuality of each liberated soul. The soul persists in time but without undergoing temporal modification.

The path to liberation involves mastering time's influence through self-restraint and awareness. Ethical conduct (*samyak-cāritra*) and meditation (*dhyāna*) enable the practitioner to perceive the transience of all temporal phenomena. By observing the operation of karma through successive *samayas*, one gradually detaches from the causal chain. This process transforms time from a binding force into a vehicle of liberation.

Moreover, liberation represents the **resolution of temporal dualities**. In the empirical world, existence oscillates between past and future, gain and loss, joy and sorrow—all temporal opposites. The liberated soul, however, dwells in an eternal present—a changeless awareness beyond succession. As Jaini (1998) observes, this is not a negation of time but its transcendence: "The liberated soul abides where time neither creates nor destroys."

This metaphysical vision also carries existential meaning. For the Jain sage, awareness of time's impermanence inspires detachment, equanimity, and compassion. The temporality of existence becomes a teacher,

Comparative Reflections

The Jain conception of time occupies a unique position in the broader philosophical landscape of India. It neither dissolves temporality into illusion, as in Advaita Vedānta, nor reduces it to momentary succession, as in Buddhism. Instead, Jainism articulates a realist and pluralist understanding of time as an ontological substance that is both the condition and measure of change. A comparative reflection on Jain *kāla* illuminates how it mediates between metaphysical permanence and empirical flux, offering a middle path between absolutism and nihilism.

1. Comparison with Vedic and Vedāntic Views

In early Vedic literature, time (*kāla*) is often mythically personified as a cosmic power governing creation and dissolution, identified with *Prajāpati* or *Brahman* in later Upaniṣadic thought. In Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara interprets time as part of the phenomenal order (*vyāvahārika-sattā*), ultimately unreal when viewed from the standpoint of absolute reality (*paramārthika-sattā*). The experience of temporal succession belongs to *māyā*—the illusory superimposition that veils the non-dual Brahman (Śaṅkara, trans. Gambhirananda, 1989). Liberation (*mokṣa*) therefore entails transcending time by realizing the timeless Self.

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Jain philosophy, while also recognizing liberation as a state beyond change, refuses to relegate time to illusion. *Kāla* remains real even for the liberated being, though it ceases to exert causal influence. The eternal coexistence of *jīva*, *pudgala*, and *kāla* implies a pluralistic realism absent in Vedānta. As Balcerowicz (2019) notes, Jainism "saves the world from ontological erasure" by affirming the independent reality of all substances. Thus, whereas Advaita sees temporality as ignorance to be overcome through metaphysical insight, Jainism views it as a real framework necessary for moral and spiritual evolution.

Furthermore, the Jain cyclic model of time—the *kālacakra*—differs from Vedāntic cosmology. Vedānta's *kalpa* cycles are governed by divine will or *īśvara*, marking phases of creation (*sṛṣṭi*) and dissolution (*pralaya*). In contrast, Jainism's cycles are automatic and beginningless, requiring no creator or external agency (Dundas, 2002). The universe operates according to intrinsic laws of motion, rest, and temporality. This mechanical cosmology underscores Jainism's commitment to self-causation (*svabhāva-vāda*) and moral autonomy rather than divine determinism.

2. Comparison with Buddhist Conceptions of Momentariness

Buddhism, especially the Abhidharma schools, conceives reality as a succession of discrete momentary events (*kṣaṇika-vāda*). Time, in this view, has no independent existence; it is a conceptual abstraction inferred from the arising and cessation of phenomena (Williams, 2009). Each moment perishes as soon as it arises, and continuity is merely an illusion created by causal succession. Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka-kārikā* further denies the ultimate reality of temporal distinctions—past, present, and future—since such distinctions presuppose permanence.

Jainism challenges this radical momentariness. While it acknowledges change as real, it also posits an enduring substratum—each *dravya*—that persists through changing modes. Time, as *kāladravya*, provides the causal condition for this persistence. The Jain realist thus upholds a "continuity within change," avoiding both eternalism and annihilationism. According to Jaini (1998), this middle path ensures that moral causation remains coherent: karmic effects depend on enduring agents and substances operating within temporal order. The Buddhist denial of substantial continuity, in contrast, risks undermining the ethical link between action and consequence.

Yet Jain and Buddhist temporalities converge in emphasizing impermanence and cyclicality. Both reject linear progress and divine creation, viewing existence as a continuous flow governed by causal law (*pratītya-samutpāda* or *niyati*). However, whereas the Buddhist aims to extinguish the temporal process entirely through nirvāṇa, the Jain seeks liberation while preserving the individuality of the soul beyond temporal change. Thus, Jainism retains both moral continuity and metaphysical realism within an eternal temporal framework.

3. Comparison with Sāṃkhya and Yoga

Sāṃkhya philosophy also presents an eternal cosmos evolving through cycles of manifestation and dissolution governed by *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. Although Sāṃkhya recognizes change and sequence, it does not treat time as a distinct *tattva*; rather, temporality is an implicit aspect of *prakṛti*'s transformations (*pariṇāma*). Jainism goes further by granting time an independent ontological status. In doing so, it provides an explicit explanation of succession, which Sāṃkhya leaves unexplained. As Larson (1969) remarks, the Jains "ontologize temporality" where Sāṃkhya merely assumes it.

The Yogic path's aim—*kaivalya*—resembles the Jain goal of liberation, but its metaphysics differs: Yoga conceives time as a modification of the mind (*citta-vṛtti*) rather than a universal substance. Jainism's distinction between substantive and empirical time parallels Yoga's distinction between cosmic and psychological time, yet Jain realism insists that the former exists even if unperceived. Thus, Jainism bridges metaphysical and phenomenological perspectives on temporality.

4. Parallels and Contrasts with Western Thought

In Western philosophy, debates about time have oscillated between two poles: the realist or "absolute" conception (as in Newton) and the relational or "process" conception (as in Leibniz and Bergson). Jain *kāladravya* anticipates aspects of both. Like Newtonian absolute time, it exists independently of events and serves as a container for change. Yet, like Leibnizian relational time, it has meaning only through the succession of modes in other substances. Jaini (1998) calls this a "relational realism," balancing substance and relation in a way absent in Western dichotomies.

Moreover, the Jain cyclical cosmology resonates with Greek and Stoic notions of eternal recurrence, as well as Nietzsche's later idea of the *eternal return*. However, the Jain emphasis on moral causality distinguishes it sharply from these purely metaphysical cycles. Time's recurrence is ethically charged—it sustains karma and provides infinite opportunities for liberation. In contrast, Western cyclical models often lack a moral dimension.

Phenomenological approaches to time, such as those of Husserl or Heidegger, interpret temporality as the structure of consciousness. Jainism too acknowledges subjective time (*vyavahāra-kāla*), but situates it within a larger ontological continuum. Thus, Jain thought offers a synthesis: it recognizes temporal experience as perspectival yet grounds it in a substantive cosmic reality. This integration of the subjective and the objective prefigures modern process philosophies that view time as both constitutive of being and the medium of becoming.

5. Integrative Perspective

Across these comparisons, Jain philosophy emerges as a system of **temporal pluralism**. It affirms that multiple kinds of time coexist: the infinitesimal *samaya*, empirical time, cosmic cycles, and the timelessness of liberation. Its realism safeguards continuity, its pluralism accommodates change, and its soteriology transforms time from bondage into a path of release.

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In this way, Jain *kāla* reconciles opposites—permanence and impermanence, eternity and succession—embodying the Jain doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, the many-sidedness of truth.

As Dundas (2002) concludes, the Jain vision of time "refuses to let eternity swallow change or change annihilate eternity." This balanced metaphysics not only distinguishes Jainism within Indian philosophy but also contributes meaningfully to global debates on temporality.

CONCLUSION

The Jain conception of time presents an integrated vision that unites metaphysics, cosmology, and ethics. Time (*kāla*) is not a mere measure or illusion; it is a real, eternal substance that enables transformation, karma, and cosmic rhythm. From the infinitesimal *samaya* to the vast *kālacakra*, Jain thought spans both micro and macro scales of temporality, grounding moral causation and soteriological possibility within an eternal universe.

By viewing time as both a cause and a condition, Jainism provides a unique reconciliation between permanence and change—two of philosophy's perennial concerns. Time's cyclicality situates human existence within an ever-revolving moral cosmos, while its transcendence in *mokṣa* underscores the possibility of freedom even amidst eternal recurrence. The Jain doctrine thus continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary reflections on metaphysics, temporality, and spiritual liberation.

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