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Is there a Future? Some Answers from Indian Philosophical and Narrative Literature

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Introduction- The assumption in a conference talking about the future, is, I think, that the future is something we can in fact talk about as distinct from the present and the past by definition, in function and in ontological status. Alas, as I began to think more closely about these assumptions I was ready to call off the show. Many Indian philosophers in fact argued that it is impossible to define the three times, past, present and future as distinct from each other; some even went so far as to assert that no difference can be seen in the function of something that is past and something that is future. Both past and future can be objects of knowledge, and this is trickier, both can act as causes giving rise to products. This ability to cause something was seen by Buddhists and following them, by Jains too as the very definition of existence; an imaginary flower doesn't emit fragrance but a real flower does. If past, present and future things all can act as causes, then they are all equally existent.

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Is there a Future? Some Answers from Indian Philosophical and Narrative Literature

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I. INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHERS GRAPPLE WITH THE MYSTERY OF TIME

The assumption in a conference talking about the future, is, I think, that the future is something we can in fact talk about as distinct from the present and the past by definition, in function and in ontological status. Alas, as I began to think more closely about these assumptions I was ready to call off the show. Many Indian philosophers in fact argued that it is impossible to define the three times, past, present and future as distinct from each other; some even went so far as to assert that no difference can be seen in the function of something that is past and something that is future. Both past and future can be objects of knowledge, and this is trickier, both can act as causes giving rise to products. This ability to cause something was seen by Buddhists and following them, by Jains too as the very definition of existence; an imaginary flower doesn't emit fragrance but a real flower does. If past, present and future things all can act as causes, then they are all equally existent. Debates over the ontological status of the past and future and the very nature of Time are many in Indian philosophy and have a complex history. More often than not such rarefied philosophical arguments existed in an intellectual world that was very different from the extensive space occupied by narrative literature in all of India's three classical religions, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. In some cases stories may even appear to be at odds with fundamental doctrines. An obvious example of such a disconnect between doctrine and story literature is the entire genre of Jātakas or stories of the Buddha's past births, in which the Buddha explains that he was the character in the past about whom the story was told, despite the pan-Buddhist denial of an enduring self. Stories from all three traditions have complex ways of dealing with the three times, past, present and future, and I will argue here that their treatment of time is one case in which narratives mirror the philosopher's concerns.

Debates about the nature of the past, present and future in Indian philosophy are debates about Time itself, Kāla, as a substantial entity that can be clearly defined. The challenge for the philosopher who accepts the reality of Time is to explain how Time can be one entity and yet be experienced in three different ways, as

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past, present and future. The Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna in his *Madhyama kāśāstra*, chapter 19, has a brief refutation of Time that serves as a useful starting point for discussion.¹ Nāgārjuna has three basic points in this chapter but his main argument is fairly simple. Past, present, and future are relative concepts and are defined with reference to each other. For example, the past and future are only understood with reference to the present time. Now for the past and future to depend on the present, they must exist in the present time. Something that does not exist cannot depend on something else. Or, another way of saying the same thing, if the past depends on the present then the present must exist in the past. What we get in the end is that past, present and future must all exist simultaneously. This is, I hope to show, exactly the impression we get from certain narratives.

One of the most radical Buddhist doctrines dealing with past and future that eradicates the distinction between them develops several centuries after Nāgārjuna, with the philosopher Prajñākaragupta in the 9th c. CE.² Prajñākaragupta argues that what is in the future can serve as a cause of something that preceded it. The normal construction of causality, which met with pretty much universal approval from all the schools of philosophy, is that a cause immediately precedes its product. For Prajñākaragupta this understanding of causality which had imbedded in it a strict temporal relationship between prior cause and posterior effect was too limited. Prajñākaragupta uses omens as a case in point. It is the future good fortune or misfortune, he argues, that causes an omen to appear. There are other cases in which a theory of future causes is called upon. Buddhists have a distinctive theory of inference, arguing that there are only two possible relationships between the terms in a valid inference and one of these is causality. One can infer a cause from its product because in the absence of a cause either a product would not exist or if it did, it would be eternal. But there is another feature of these inferences: it is not possible to infer a product from a cause, since causes do not always produce their products. Many things may intervene to stop a cause from functioning. This Buddhist theory ran up against several widely accepted

¹*Madhyamakāśāstram*, ed. P.L. Vaidya, Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960.

²*Pramāṇavārtikālamkāra*, ed. Rahula Samkrtyayana, Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, reprint, 2010, pp. 67-68.

inferences; among them is the inference that a constellation x will rise soon because we now see constellation y, which we observe always precedes it. This looks like an inference of a future product, constellation x, from its cause, constellation y. There were ways around this, but Prajñākaragupta's theory of future causality provided a new one. He said that this inference constellation x will rise, because constellation y is present, is in fact an inference of a cause, the future constellation x, from its product, the present constellation y.³ This theory of backward causation radically undermines efforts to separate the three times; it implies that there is no difference in functioning between a cause that is past (the normal theory) and a cause that is future (the new theory) and makes future, past and present functionally equivalent.⁴ Given that the definition of existence in Buddhism is causal efficiency, in this theory past, present and future are not only equally existent; they cannot be defined as different from each other on the basis of whether or not they have causal efficiency. This is a radical theory. Well before Prajñākaragupta Buddhist philosophers of the Sarvāsvivāda school had argued for the necessity of granting existence to past and future factors, and even some causal function, but they then endeavored to explain what differentiates past and future from present factors. They distinguished the present from the past and future by arguing that while past and future have capability, only present factors have activity.⁵ Prajñākaragupta does not make any such distinction when he makes the case for future causality.

Prajñākaragupta's ideas were rejected by non-buddhists, but Nāgārjuna's arguments about Time find a close parallel in the celebrated work of the Vedānta philosopher ŚrīHarṣa, the Khaṇḍana khaṇḍakhādyā. The Khaṇḍana has a more extensive refutation of the three times, past, present and future.⁶ The opponent here, a representative of a realist school like the Nyāya or Vaiśeṣika, holds that time is a substance and that it is one, all-pervasive, and eternal. ŚrīHarṣa replies that in that case the present time would never be perceived as past or future, since by definition if it is one and unchanging it would always have to be perceived as present. The opponent is allowed to refine his doctrine

somewhat and say that time is a single substance but that it is also three-fold by nature. In that case, ŚrīHarṣa replies, when something is perceived as present it should also be perceived as past and future, since all time by its very nature is three-fold, past, present and future. The next suggestion is closer to what realist philosophers actually do say, and that is that time is one but it is differentiated into past and present by its association with something external to it, namely the activity of the sun. This is not going to solve the problem, since the past and the future and the present will all share this characteristic of being delimited by the movement of the sun. If it is the same solar activity, we are back where we started from- that it is impossible to differentiate the past and future from the present. Next the opponent tries to improve his position by saying that the present time is characterized by the movement of the sun that is currently taking place, while the past time is characterized by a movement of the sun that no longer exists and the future by a movement of the sun that is yet to come into being. It is not difficult to see what the problem is with this formulation: the definition of the present requires that we already know what the present is, since it requires that we are able to distinguish the activity of the sun as present, past and future. You thus need to know the present to know the present. And one can also ask what activity determines that the present activity of the sun is present? Again, it is not hard to see that this eventually results in an infinite regress of activities to demarcate an infinite series of present activities. ŚrīHarṣa continues, but the general trend of the argument is clear. The past, present and future are inextricably intertwined and every effort to define them as separate from each other must end in failure. In fact whatever definition the opponent can give for one of the three times applies equally to the other two times⁷. ŚrīHarṣa ends up in the same place as Nāgārjuna: past, present and future would all be one and the same time.

In their debates with other philosophers Jains stand somewhere in between Nāgārjuna and ŚrīHarṣa on the one hand and their realist opponents on the other.⁸ They repeat several arguments shared by Nāgārjuna and ŚrīHarṣa against the Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika contention that Time is a substance that is one, all pervasive, and eternal.⁹ Prabhācandra, a 10th c Digambara philosopher, may be taken as

³ Anne Clavel, "Can the Rise of Rohiṇī be Inferred from the Rise of Kṛttikā? A Buddhist-Jaina Controversy", *Buddhist and Jaina Studies*, ed. J.Soni, M. Pahlke and C. Cüppers, Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2014, pp.342-367.

⁴ On backward causation see Eli Franco, Jitāri on Backward Causation (bhāvīkāraṇavāda) in KL Dhammajoti, ed *Buddhist Meditative Praxis Traditional Teachings & Modern Applications*, Hong Kong Centre of Buddhist Studies The University of Hong Kong, 2015, 81-117. I thank Eli Franco for sharing with me his edition of Jitāri's text.

⁵ On the Sarvāsvivāda theory see Collett Cox, *Disputed Dharmas: Early Buddhist Theories on Existence*, Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1995, 141-145.

⁶ *Khaṇḍanakhāṇḍakhādyā* ed. Pandit Lakshmana Sastri Dravida, Benaras: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1914. pp. 1238-1248.

⁷ See also Jonathan Duquette and Krishnamurti Ramasubramanian, "Śrīharṣa on the Indefinability of Time", in *Space, Time and the Limits of Understanding*, eds. S. Wuppulari & G. Ghirardi, Springer: The Frontiers Collection, 2017, pp. 2-16.

⁸ I make this qualification since much of the Jain concept of time is specifically Jain and never enters into mainstream philosophical literature. See for example the *Dravyasamgraha* of Nemicandra with English Translation of Vijay, K. Jain, Dehradun: Vikalp Printers, N.D.

⁹ *Prameyayakamalamārtanda*, ed. Pandit Mahendrakumar Shastri, Mumbai: NirnayaSagara Press, 1941, pp. 564-568.

representative. He adds to the arguments against Time as a single eternal substance the observation that in different countries at any given moment time is different. Prabhācandra nonetheless accepts the existence of time as a substance, arguing that it is in fact atomic and not all-pervasive. Many of his arguments are aimed at making sense of our perceptions of remote and near, whether referring to the past or future. Something in a time remote from us is remote because many particles of time separate our present time from it, while something that is near future or past has fewer particles between it and us.¹⁰ What is striking about Prabhācandra's discussion is that he has only one brief comment about distinguishing the past from the future; he simply says that such a distinction is impossible in the opponent's view in which Time is one and eternal and yet he does not elaborate on how the distinction is possible in the Jain theory. Distinguishing the three times from each other remains something of a problem for him. Prabhācandra also accepts the reality of conventional measures of time, the seasons, months, hours and days, units which are defined with reference to the movement of the celestial bodies. Some Jain descriptions of the conventional units of time, with differentiation of past, present and future by means of the activity of the sun that is itself either past, present or future, look very much like the opponent's view against which ŚrīHarṣa argues.¹¹ Jain thinking it seems did not entirely escape the conundrum of making sense of Time on the one hand and the three times on the other.

It is often difficult to move from the abstract arguments of the philosopher to other forms of writing and to know if the rarified philosophical speculations had any bearing on life closer to the ground: on literature or on religious practice. I hope to show that in fact we can see in narratives and poems from all the three religious traditions the same kinds of slippage between past, present and future that the philosophers highlight and in the Jain case we may even find a clear distinction between remote and near past. I begin with selected Buddhist literature.

II. THE LIVES OF THE BUDDHAS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The three times glide into each other in many ways in the narratives of the lives of the Buddhas. It has been noted that generally the past and the future are described in Buddhist literature with the same phrases, "many aeons from now in the past" or "many aeons from now in the future": *anāgatea dhvaneasam khyeyekalpe* or *atīte 'dhvaniasam khyeyekalpe*. It is possible to substitute past for future and future for past

without changing anything else in the phrase.¹² In a way this could serve as a metaphor for the treatment of the past and future in the literature that treats the lives of the Buddhas, in which the past, present and future seem virtually identical and are always intertwined. For Buddhists, Śākyamuni, called by scholars the historical Buddha to distinguish him from the mythical Buddhas of the past and future, was only one of many Buddhas. There were Buddhas in the past and will be Buddhas in the future. The Pali *Buddhavamsa* is probably the best known text on the Buddhas of the past and tells the lives of 25 past Buddhas.¹³ An earlier Pali sutta the *Mahāpadāna sutta*, had told the lives of the seven Buddhas of the past. There is also in Palian *Anāgatavamsa*, "The Future Lineage", that describes the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya, after a brief account of some of the Buddhas of the past. It is not uncommon for texts to include accounts of both the Buddhas of the past and the future.

Descriptions of the events in the lives of the Buddhas of the past and future exist in the Sanskrit Buddhist traditions as well. The *Mahāvastu* includes two recensions of a *Many Buddhas Sutra*, *Bahubuddhaka sutra*; the speaker is the Buddha of the present Śākyamuni, and he tells of both the past Buddhas who came before him and Maitreya, the Buddha who will come after him. A version of the *Many Buddhas Sutra* or *Bahubuddhaka sutra* has been discovered among the very earliest Buddhist manuscripts from Gilgit, bringing the date of this genre of texts down to the 1st c CE.¹⁴ Another text, the *Bhadrakalpika Sutra*, gives information about the usual Buddhas of the immediate past and the future Buddha Maitreya, but then talks about some further 999 Buddhas of the future.¹⁵

The lives of past Buddhas and future Buddha(s) in all these texts are formulaic and remarkably similar to each other. The speaker is the present Buddha, Śākyamuni, and being Omniscient he knows equally both past and future. The past and the future are both objects of perceptual knowledge for the Buddha. Richard Salomon in discussing these texts that combine accounts of future and past Buddhas remarks that in Buddhist sources there is no difference between history

¹² Ingo Strauch *More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism* New Evidence for Akōbhya and Abhirat in and Early Mahayana sutra from Gandhāra p 47

¹³ *Buddhavamsa and Cariyāpīṭaka*. Ed. Rev. Richard Morris. London: Pali Text Society, 1882.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the *Mahāvastu* sections on the Buddhas of the past see Vincent Tournier *La formation du Mahāvastu*, Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2017, ch 2, pp. 125- 194.

¹⁵ It seems that the texts listing Buddhas other than Śākyamuni were initially about the past Buddhas, which is what we see in the Pali *Buddhavamsa*. Continuing into the future with Maitreya occurs in the *Mahāvastu*. Maitreya is also mentioned in the *MūlasarvāstivādaBhaiṣajyavastu*. See Tournier 156-169.

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¹¹ For example, see the discussion in Pt. Sukhlalji's *TattvārthaSūtra*, L.D Series 44, Ahmedabad: L.D. Institute of Indology, 1974. p. 164.

and prophecy.¹⁶ In fact, this is clear from the title of the texts: in Pali accounts of the past Buddhas and of the future Buddha are both called *vamsas*, a term we usually translate as history, but which is more properly an account of a lineage. I return to this use of the term *vamsa* below.

These texts in fact provide a narrative parallel to the Buddhist philosopher's denial that there is anything unique about the past or the future or that it is possible to define one to the exclusion of the other. For the philosopher, given the dependence of the three times on each other, the conclusion was clear: since something can only depend on another thing that exists at the same time as itself, it must be admitted that all three times, dependent as they are on each other, would have to exist at the same time, meaning that they all would have to be either past, present or future. This makes it utter nonsense to speak of three distinct times, past, present and future. Again, for the philosopher this absurd situation was meant to lead any thoughtful person to reject entirely the very notion of time. But for those who wrote the life stories of the past, present and future Buddhas, this kind of entanglement of past, present and future was a boon. It became a means to express the eternal nature of the Buddhist teaching and ensure that the object of Buddhist practice, Liberation or the achievement of Buddhahood, was open to the future.

The sense that the three times are not distinct from each other is conveyed by the fact that the lives of the Buddhas are so formulaic; as the present Buddha describes the lives of other Buddhas it is clear there is indeed very little if anything at all that differentiates a past Buddha from a future or the present Buddha. Indeed, in the *Mahāvastu* accounts of the many Buddhas, the past merges almost entirely into the future, that is, the present, the time of the narrator, as Śākyamuni, the present Buddha, recounts how in the past he was a merchant and made a vow to become a Buddha under a past Buddha who was also named Śākyamuni and lived in the city of Kapilavastu.¹⁷ The present Buddha Śākyamuni also comes from Kapilavastu. The past is a double for the future, which in the time of the narrative is the present. That the present Śākyamuni is exactly like the past Buddha Śākyamuni is clear from the content of the vow he makes at the very beginning of the *Mahāvastu*, "In the future may I be a Buddha exactly like this one; may I also be named Śākyamuni and have a city called Kapilavastu."¹⁸ This

particular past Śākyamuni was not the only past Buddha with that name; in fact our Śākyamuni had worshipped a vast number of Śākyamuni Buddhas.¹⁹ The Buddhas of the past are indistinguishable from each other and from the Buddha of the future/present not only in their actions but even in name.

Lives of the Buddhas, whether they extend back into the past or move ahead to the future, in these accounts also remain deeply rooted in the present by the central presence of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Even where the past Buddha is not given the same name as the present Buddha as is the case in the *Mahāvastu*, nonetheless in a text like the *Buddhavamsa* the present Buddha Śākyamuni is the narrator and as he relates the lives of the past Buddhas he emphasizes who he was at that time and what meritorious deeds he did. In some cases he makes a resolve to become a Buddha in the future and attains a prediction that his desire will be fulfilled. The text is really an account of the past lives and deeds of Śākyamuni that resulted in his becoming the Buddha of the present age. In all these texts, whether the emphasis is on Śākyamuni's pious deeds or on predictions of future Buddhahood, whatever the names of the past Buddhas, the focus on the present Buddha brings together in his person the past, present and future. The past is significant because it implies the future, which in the narrative is the present time. It is as almost as if the composer of these texts had something like Nāgārjuna's first verse in mind, that the present and the future are intimately tied to and dependent upon the past. The awareness of the inseparability of past, present and future, which led the philosopher to deny the very possibility of something called "time", is for these narratives part of their core structure and essential message.

Scholars familiar with Buddhist literature could easily add other examples of narratives in which past, present and future entwine. The entire genre of Jataka stories, stories of the past births of the Buddha, would be an obvious place to start. In the jatakas the Buddha tells a story of the past that is meant to explain the present. The texts use a telling simile; revealing the past, concealed to his audience, is like drawing out the moon that was behind a cloud. The moon and the past are there, but are temporarily invisible.²⁰ But I would like to turn to lesser known literature from Jainism and I begin with the life stories of the Jinas.

¹⁶ Richard Salomon, *Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhara: An Introduction with Selected Translations (Classics of Indian Buddhism)* Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications 2018, chapter 8.

¹⁷ *Mahāvastu*, 1.47; 3.239; 3. 243. GRETIL http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/mhvastuu.htm accessed July 5, 2018.

¹⁸ *Mahāvastu* 1.1. http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/mhvastuu.htm, accessed July 5, 2018. On the past

Śākyamuni see Tournier, pp.182-191. On p. 188 Tournier cites a passage from the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 4. 110d identifying the past Śākyamuni as the Buddha under whom the present Śākyamuni made his vow to become a Buddha.

¹⁹ *Mahāvastu*, 1.57; 1.61 http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/mhvastuu.htm, accessed July 5, 2018.

²⁰ *himagabbhampadāletvāpūṇacandaṃnīharantoviyabhavantarenapaṭi cchannakāraṇampākaṭamakāsi.*, *Apannakajātaka* <https://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>, accessed December 21, 2018.

III. PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN THE LIVES OF THE JINAS

Like the Buddhists, Jains believe in a series of past and future Jinas. There are twenty-four Jinas of our present world age, which constitute the Jinas of an extended present. I use the phrase extended present since many of these Jinas are said to have existed in a time remote from ours, although still in the present very long time cycle. Scholars believe that the last two in the traditional list of twenty-four, Pārśvanātha and Mahāvīra, were historical figures. Jains also composed texts which told the life stories of these 24 Jinas. Unlike the Buddhist narratives which are held together by the central figure of Śākyamuni, who narrates the stories of the other Buddhas and tells us how he worshipped the past Buddhas, resolved to become a Buddha under them and received a prediction from one or more of them that he would become a Buddha, there is no one Jina whose life is the central focus of all the narratives and around whom stories of the other Jinas cluster.²¹ This no doubt reflects the fact that many of the Jinas in the list were full-fledged objects of worship in their own right, which was less the case with the individual Buddhas of the past. That the lives of the Jina are different from the lives of the Buddhas is reflected in the very different words Jains and Buddhists used to describe their texts. The lives of the Buddhas were often called *vamsas*. A *vamsa* is a lineage history; royal *vamsas* give the history of a dynastic succession. Monastic *vamsas* detail the succession of monks in the position of chief monk or abbot. A *vamsa* thus implies a direct connection between the individuals whose stories are told, either through biology or discipleship. Even where the accounts are not given the title *vamsa*, the parallel between the account of the successive rebirths of Śākyamuni at the time of the past Buddhas and a royal genealogy is clear from the language of the texts. Thus the *Mahāvastu* describes the prediction for Buddhahood given Śākyamuni by the previous Buddha Kāśyapa as his “being concentrated to the position of crown prince”, *yuvarājye* ‘*bhīṣiktaḥ*’.²²

By contrast the lives of the Jinas are most often called *caritas*, something we might translate as

“Account of the Deeds”. *Caritas* of different individuals were often collected into a single text, but there was no expectation of any connection between the subjects of the different *caritas*.

Even when the lives of the twenty-four Jinas were put together as a collection, there was still minimal or no continuity from one life to another. In fact there are

only two occasions in the lives of the Jinas in which a later Jina is said to be a rebirth of someone who had appeared in the life of a previous Jina. This is a stark contrast to the Buddhist texts like the *Buddhavaṃsa* or the *Mahāvastu* in which as we have seen the historical Buddha Śākyamuni appears as the main character in the life of the past Buddhas. Perhaps the best-known collection of the lives of the Jinas is the 12th c. *Triṣaṣṭīśalā kāpuruṣacarita* of the Śvetāmbara monk Hemacandra. It begins with the first Jina of our world age, Ṛṣabhanātha, and ends with the last Jina, Mahāvīra.

The life of Mahāvīra is somewhat atypical in the number of unfortunate prior rebirths for Mahāvīra that it recounts. It is also unusual that two of these rebirths appear in the stories of earlier Jinas, creating a tenuous connection between the lives of different Jinas. In the account of Ṛṣabhanātha we meet the Jina’s grandson, Marīci. Marīci attends the preaching of his grandfather Ṛṣabhanātha, who predicts that he will one day become a Vāsudeva, a World-emperor or Cakravartin, and a Jina. The Jains single out a number of special individuals in their universal history; Vāsudevas are wicked people who are defeated by their antagonists, the Prativāsudevas.²³ Marīci has a surprising career for a future Jina; he becomes a false ascetic and is subsequently reborn in low rebirths, in which he commits many violent acts. He turns up in his rebirth as a Vāsudeva named Triprīṣṭha at the preaching assembly of the eleventh Jina Śreyāṃsa, where he finally gains solid faith in the Jain teachings. This does not stop him, however, from living a dissolute life and falling prey to violent anger. From that birth he is reborn in hell more than once; he endures several rebirths as animals and finally as a human begins to acquire good karma.²⁴ He will eventually become the last Jina Mahāvīra. Triprīṣṭha is mentioned again in the biography of the sixteenth Jina, Śāntinātha, one of whose previous rebirths is as a son of Triprīṣṭha’s brother-in-law.²⁵ Even from this brief account it is clear that although the lives of the three Jinas Ṛṣabhanātha, Śreyāṃsa and Mahāvīra and perhaps Śāntinātha have this minimal point of contact through Ṛṣabhanātha’s grandson Marīci and his subsequent rebirth as the Vāsudeva Triprīṣṭha, this association in no way serves to construct a linear account of the virtuous deeds that the previous rebirths of the Jina Mahāvīra performed under past Jinas and that led to his becoming a Jina. Many of Marīci’s and Triprīṣṭha’s deeds, as we have just noted, are in fact quite heinous and lead to bad rebirths, in low caste families, or even

²³ John E Cort, “Genres of Jain History”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 23: 469-506, 1995.

²⁴ The deeds of Triprīṣṭha are told in the two Jina biographies, that of Mahāvīra and Śreyāṃsa, *Triṣaṣṭīśalā kācaritavols* 3: 9-59 and 6: 10-17. References are to the translation by Helen M. Johnson, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1931-1962

²⁵ *Triṣaṣṭīśalā kāpuruṣacarita*, vol. III, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1949, p 208.

²¹ Naomi Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-Life Stories*, Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 116-126, contrasts Jain and Buddhist treatments of the lives of the Jinas and Buddhas with a different emphasis.

²² *Mahāvastu* 1.1; Tournier p. 239.

worse in hell or as animals.²⁶ Jinās gain the karma that determines that they will become Jinās in their second to last rebirth, after which they are reborn in heaven. From heaven they are reborn on earth to become Jinās. ²⁷ Mahāvīra gained his so-called Tīrthankarakṛt karma after being an ideal ruler who renounced and lived the life of an exemplary Jain monk.²⁸ The account of his deeds in that birth is brief indeed, so brief as to make us wonder if the author suspected that virtuous deeds make less exciting reading than wicked ones. We are told simply that as prince Nandana he ruled righteously and then renounced; as a monk he engaged in rigorous asceticism. Instead of deeds we are given a long list of his virtues, redolent of monastic scholasticism, rejecting five of this and four of that, knowing the 11 canonical scriptures and practicing twelve-fold penance, etc. ²⁹ In fact this long list of his virtues in his second to last rebirth comes as something of a surprise after the wickedness of Tripṛṣṭha, recounted in some detail. Also significant is that Prince Nandana renounces the world to become a monk under the tutelage of another monk and not under a past Jina. ³⁰ There is no effort, even in this one Jina biography that has connections to the lives of other Jinās, to establish anything like a lineage of Jinās in which there is continuity between the Jinās of the distant past and the present. There is also a sharp disjuncture over the long term between the past and future rebirths within this single biography. The rebirths of Mahāvīra in the distant past, in hell, as animals, are in stark contrast to his birth as a righteous prince and then a god and finally as the prince who will become the Jina. If we look at the individual rebirths, however, proximate rebirths are closely connected. Thus the wicked Tripṛṣṭha goes to hell for his violent deeds, and the imperfect ascetic Maṛṭīkeeps turning up in low caste families. The distinction between remote and proximate past, so important to the Jain philosopher Prabhācandra, I would argue, is essential to understanding the trajectory of the

rebirths in this biography. Even in the lives of the other Jinās, where there is more consistency over the many rebirths, the belief that the karma to become a Jina is bound in the penultimate human birth implies a special status for the proximate past.³¹

The life of Mahāvīra differs in another way from the vast numbers of didactic stories that Jains loved to tell. In the bulk of stories, there is no disjunction between the present and the rebirths of the proximate and distant past. The world of Jain didactic stories verges on the claustrophobic, with souls transmigrating together over countless rebirths. Past enmities and loves continually resurface and explain otherwise seemingly random attachments and hatreds. In these stories, moreover, past, present and future as emotional experiences are indistinguishable, as souls repeat their past entanglements and head for more of the same in the future. These stories, and to a lesser extent the lives of the other Jinās, are consistent with the reticence of the Jain philosopher on the question of how past, present and future can be distinguished from each other.

The past lives of a Jina, proximate and remote, were all important to the Jina's life story, so fundamental that they even came to be listed in short hymns of praise to the Jinās. The 13th century monk Dharmaghosa composed a number of hymns to praise the Jinās that list the Jina's rebirths. ³² He has a series of short Prakrit poems in praise of each of the Jinās of the present world cycle, and he begins each poem by saying that he praises the Jina by reciting his past births. The hymn to the first Jina Ṛṣabhanātha begins in this way: I praise Rṣabha, the son of Nābhi and Marudevi, who is radiant like gold and has as his sign the bull, who is five bows tall. I praise him by telling of his thirteen past births. O Lord! You were the merchant Dhaṇa in the city Kḥiipaiṭṭha, and in the second birth you were born in the land of the Uttarakurus, and a god in the third." For the last birth in which he is the Jina, Dharmaghosa provides more than just the place of birth; he gives the dates of the Jina's descent from heaven, birth, renunciation, achievement of Omniscience and Final Nirvana. He closes with a prayer that the Jina, praised in this way, will grant him wisdom, joy, and glory in the Dharma. Dharmaghosa's praise hymns of the other Jinās of the present world age are similar, although the number of past births he names for each Jina varies.

²⁶ The Buddha could also have unfortunate past births; in the *Temiya* or *Mūgapakkajāṭaka*, 538, we learn that the Bodhisattva, having been king in Banaras for twenty years was born in hell, where he spent 80 years. After that he was born in heaven. <https://www.tipitaka.org/romn/> accessed December 30, 2018. *Bodhisattopitadāvisatīvass ānibārāṇasiyaṃrajjamkāretvātato cutoussadanirayenibbattivāssāvassas ahassānitathapaccivātato cavitvātāvatiṃsabhavanenibbatti.*

²⁷ The second to last rebirth is also important in Buddhism; for the Theravādins it is the birth as Vessantara, but for other groups it is under the Buddha Kāśyapa. On this see Tournier 236-239.

²⁸ There is a standard list of the deeds that lead to binding the karma that will result in being a Jina. It begins with worshipping the Jinās and their images and includes looking after your gurus and fellow monks, mastering the scriptures, avoiding breaking the rules of proper conduct, meditating and practicing austerities. They are detailed in the biography of the first Jina, Johnson vol. 1, Baroda: Oriental Institute 1931, pp.80-85. The list of Nandana's virtues does not correspond to this standard list of actions leading to becoming a Tirthankara.

²⁹ *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacarita*, vol.6, p17-20

³⁰ *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣācarita*, vol. 6, p 19.

³¹ At times Buddhists will also make a distinction between remote and proximate past, as in the *dūrenidāna* and *avidūrenidāna* in the biography of the Buddha in the *jātakatṭhakaṭhā*. The distinction between remote and proximate past is well known to the Sanskrit grammarians; thus the perfect tense is enjoined for the remote past, while the aorist is intended to denote recent past. Harmut Scharfe, *Grammatical Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977, p. 96.

³² *Jainastotrasandoha*, vol.1, ed Caturvijaya Muni, Ahmedabad: Sarabhai Manilal Nabab, 1932, pp. 106-112.

In another hymn in Sanskrit Dharmaghoṣa praises the twenty-four Jinas of the future world age.³³ While full-fledged biographies of these future Jinas do not seem to have been written, Dharmaghoṣa names one past incarnation for each of them, suggesting that there was a tradition of at least one past rebirth of each Jina. Dharmaghoṣa's list is close to the one given by Hemacandra in the 12th c.³⁴ These past incarnations belong in fact to the present, by which I mean the present world age. The list of previous incarnations tells us something else about what this linking of future with a past rebirth can accomplish. Among the names of the previous rebirths are virtuous characters who appear in Jain story literature. Several are Jain lay women. Revatī, for example, is the past rebirth named for the Jina Citragupta. Her story is told in a number of didactic story collections. Although just a lay woman, Revatī was said to have been praised above all the Jain ascetics. She triumphs over tests put to her by someone who doubts that a mere laywoman can be so distinguished.³⁵ By celebrating the future Jinas along with a present rebirth the hymn has created a space for bringing into the world of the Jinas, those most honored individuals, a new group of exemplary men and women.³⁶ These two sets of hymns, of the twenty-four Jinas of our world age and of the future Jinas also make use of different types of the past; the rebirths of the twenty-four Jinas of our world age begin as the biographies do with the distant past, working their way to the near past, while the hymns to the future Jinas look to the recent past.

IV. WHAT TIME IS IT? TIME IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA

My final example is from the first book of the Rāmāyaṇa.³⁷ It is a remarkably complex treatment of time and verb tenses and I would suggest leaves the reader with the sense that it is hard to know what is past, what is future, what is present when they all so seamlessly turn into each other. King Daśaratha, Rāma's father, laments the fact that he has no son and wants to perform a sacrifice to get an heir. He asks for guidance and his charioteer Sumantra tells him what he must do. What he relates is of something that had been told in the

past, that embodied a prediction for the future, and that is going to come to fruition in the present. Sumantra quotes the sage's words directly, retaining the original future tense. The sage Sanatkumāra predicts that a child will be born to the ascetic Vibhāṇḍaka. Named Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, this child will also be an ascetic, living in the forest. Romapāda, king of the Angas, will by his sins cause a terrible draught to afflict his kingdom. His counselors will tell him to fetch Ṛṣyaśṛṅga and marry him to his daughter Śāntā. The king must entice Ṛṣyaśṛṅgato come out of the forest by having prostitutes lure him from his hermitage. Thus so far the quote what the sage Sanatkumāra had said, describing what will happen in the future. The account then turns in one verse to the past, as the narrator intervenes, making sure that King Daśaratha and we know that what was described as taking place in the future is already in the past. Sumantra tells King Daśaratha, in this way the king of the Angas had the ascetic's son Ṛṣyaśṛṅga brought to the kingdom, it rained, and Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was married to Śāntā (8.21). The narrator then returns to the prediction, "Ṛṣyaśṛṅga will bring you sons. Just so much have I told you of what the sage Sanatkumāra said." Daśaratha is delighted and wants to know more about how Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was made to come out of his hermitage. Sumantra obliges, but now places in the past the events that had been described in the future in Sanatkumāra's prediction. He then returns to the prediction of the future that Sanatkumāra gave and the tense switches to the future. Sanatkumāra predicted, There will be a king named Daśaratha and this Daśaratha, desiring a son will ask for Romapāda to send Ṛṣyaśṛṅgato him to make a sacrifice so that he can get a son. Ṛṣyaśṛṅga will come, perform the sacrifice, and thereby ensure that Daśaratha has a successor.

Reading this story for the first time, it can be difficult to keep track of what is happening when. Like the Buddhist stories, the account is anchored in the present by a narrator, in this case the charioteer Sumantra, who is prompted to tell the story by the king Daśaratha, also in the present. Sumantra dips into the past to relate what a seer had once predicted; the prediction is of the future and told in the future tense, but it turns out that some of the future it predicted has already happened and other events are taking place in the here and now. The prediction says that there will be a king Daśaratha; in fact there is a king Daśaratha and he is listening to the story. The seer in the past also described how Ṛṣyaśṛṅga would be brought to the kingdom of Romapāda to stop the drought, future tense; when Daśaratha asks how this was done, the narrator in the present tells him, but this time he uses the past tense. Some of what in the past was the future is now the past from the vantage point of the present; some events that were in the future are now the present. It is, I think, clear that if we are confused about what is happening when it is because these three times, past, present and

³³ *Jainastotrasandoha*, p. 241. Lists of the future Jinas with brief details figure as predictions in some of the Jina biographies, for example in the biographies of Ṛṣabhanātha and Mahāvira in the *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita*, vol.1 pp 347-350; vol.6 p. 347.

³⁴ *Triṣaṣṭiśalākācarita*, vol 6 p. 347. The differences are for the former birth of the 18th Jina, Gārgali in Hemacandra, Mārgali in Dharmaghoṣa and for the twenty-third Jina, Dvāramada in Hemacandra and Amara in Dharmaghoṣa.

³⁵ *Bṛhatkathākośa*, tr. Phyllis Granoff, *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden*, Penguin: Delhi 1998, 256-264.

³⁶ See also Appleton, p. 122, for similar comments about King Śreṇika, who will be the first Jina of the future.

³⁷ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.8-1.10.GRETIL http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskrit/2_epic/ramayana/ram_01_u.htm accessed July 4, 2018.

future, are as Nāgārjuna and ŚrīHarṣa had insisted, relative concepts, slippery concepts that slide one into the other and cannot be defined except with reference to each other. The impression that the tenses are unstable is heightened in the original by the fact that Sanskrit has no indirect discourse. Thus a speaker from the past uses the future tense, and a present narrator retells the same events using the past tense. The same events are both future and past as the story is told.

The entanglement of past, present and future, is in some ways one of the central themes of the first book of the Rāmāyaṇa. The opening chapters of the epic offer two strikingly different summaries of the epic. As the first chapter begins the epic's traditional author Vālmīki asks the sage Nārada who was the most virtuous and heroic man in the world. Nārada replies that it was Rāma and he proceeds to tell in brief all that Rāma has done. Nārada uses the past tense throughout; he begins with a recitation of all Rāma's glorious qualities and then gets right into the heart of the epic story. Rāma's father wanted to crown him king, but instead in keeping with a promise he made to one of his wives, he is forced to banish Rāma to the forest and crown her son instead. Rāma's wife Sītā is abducted by the demon Rāvaṇa whom Rāma defeats. Nārada's account ends with Rāma's recovery of Sītā, his return to Ayodhyā and his taking over the kingship. All of this has already happened. Nārada then switches to the future with a prediction of the greatness of Rāma's rule, when everyone will prosper and righteousness will prevail. This seems straightforward; Vālmīki will compose a poem about something that has happened in the past. But it is not quite so simple. In the next chapter the god Brahmā comes to Vālmīki and he tells Vālmīki again that he should compose a poem about Rāma that includes things both known and hidden. Vālmīki thus composes his poem about what has happened to Rāma in the past (2.31) but also about what will happen to him in the future (3.29). What was missing in Nārada's account of Rāma's deeds is here specifically named: the abandonment of Sītā (3.28). Vālmīki acquires the knowledge of the future through the god Brahmā's aid and composes an account of the deeds of Rāma, a carita that includes an account of the future, sabhaviṣyaṃsahottaram (4.2). The Rāmāyaṇa, then, in its entirety is to be about the three times, to mingle past and future, and it is not surprising that its first major event, the birth of Rāma, examined above, does just that, when it uses a present narrator to describe a future prediction made in the past and realized partially in the present and partially in a time that was future from the perspective of the speaker who made the prediction, but past from the perspective of the King who is now learning about it.

Throughout the first book of the Rāmāyaṇa the past, present and future are inextricably linked to each other. Rāma's education is accomplished through a

journey that he makes with the sage Viśvāmitra. Stopping at various points along the way Rāma learns of his lineage and the great deeds of his ancestors. Many of the stories he is told involve the past, predictions of the future or curses made in the past, and present resolutions. Here is a typical episode. Rāma and Viśvāmitra have come to the city Mithilā. Just outside the city is a deserted hermitage, and Rāma asks Viśvāmitra to tell him about the place. Viśvāmitra begins with an account of the past. This was once the hermitage of the sage Gautama, who with his wife Ahalyā practiced austerities there. The god Indra lusted after Ahalyā and taking on the outward form of her husband slept with her. She was not fooled by his disguise, but she was curious to know what it would be like to sleep with the god. Gautama is also not fooled and he curses Indra to lose his testicles and Ahalyā to remain in the hermitage invisible to all for one thousand years, living only on air, fasting, sleeping on ashes (1.47.28-30). His curse is also a statement of what will happen in the future; "You will remain here, he tells her, living on wind". She will be released from the curse when Rāma enters the forest and she offers him hospitality. We are familiar with the pattern: a story of what happens in the past includes a prediction of the future. We return to the present when Viśvāmitra tells Rāma that he should now rescue Ahalyā, and this he does. Past, future, present; there is a synchrony to these events as the future becomes the present, a present that is driven by the past future prediction.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

All the texts I selected for study in this essay are lives: lives of the Buddhas, lives of the Jinas, and the life of Rāma. They all deal with the past, present and future, albeit in different ways. The treatment of time in these texts is distinctive, and I attempted to show that in each group of texts it has strong resonances to what philosophers were arguing about the nature of time. In the Buddhist lives of the Buddhas, it is indeed difficult, as Nāgārjuna argued, to distinguish past, present and future, so dependent are they on each other. And as Śākyamuni in the present tells how he worshipped Śākyamuni in the past, and made a vow to be exactly like him in the future, past and present and future do seem to be happening at the same time. The same melting of past, present and future into each other, I argued, is evident in the Rāmāyaṇa. The Jain philosopher I studied here had concerns that were not apparent in Nāgārjuna, nor in the Vedānta philosopher ŚrīHarṣa, who was his contemporary. Prabhācandra was more concerned about distinguishing the remote past from the immediate past than from distinguishing past from present or future. Reading the biography of the Jina Mahāvīra I focused on the sharp a distinction between how remote rebirths and proximate rebirths

functioned, mirroring the importance that this difference had for the philosopher. I suspect that it was to a great extent the future that troubled the philosophers most, in particular, what determined the future and if it was possible or even desirable to escape the pull of the past. I would further argue that what made for somewhat muddled philosophy made for compelling stories; after all, the relationship of the future and present to the past, both remote past and proximate past, continues to engage us, as readers of these stories and authors of our own personal narratives.

