

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS ON TIME (KĀLA) AND TRUE SELF (ĀTMAN) IN BRAHMA VIDYĀ, MANUSMṚTI, AND BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of time (kāla) and the transcendent self (ātman) within the framework of Brahma Vidyā through an analysis of classical Hindu texts, particularly the Manava Dharmasastra and Bhagavad Gītā, employing a qualitative approach based on library research and conceptual hermeneutics. The findings reveal that kāla is understood not merely as a chronological measure, but as a cosmic-theological principle that governs the order of the universe, the rhythms of life, and the fulfillment of dharma. In the Manusmṛti, time functions as a normative cosmic structure supporting ethical and social harmony, whereas in the Bhagavad Gītā, it is presented as a direct manifestation of divine power regulating the cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution. In contrast, ātman is understood as an eternal, transcendent reality that surpasses temporality, thus the relationship between kāla and ātman exhibits a dialectic between phenomenal reality and absolute consciousness. This conceptual synthesis affirms that time serves as a pedagogical-spiritual medium guiding humanity toward true self-awareness and realization of unity with Brahman. Consequently, the understanding of time from the perspective of Brahma Vidyā holds philosophical, theological, and practical spiritual significance as a foundation for shaping a life aligned with dharma and oriented toward liberation.

Keywords: Kāla, Ātman, Brahma Vidyā, Manusmṛti, Bhagavad Gītā.

INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of Brahma Vidyā, the highest reality is understood as an eternal principle that transcends the bounds of space and time, encompassing the entire cosmic order. Amid the ceaseless dynamics of the changing world, God is regarded as an entity unbound by finitude, yet present and experientially accessible everywhere. Hindu tradition affirms the relationship between God and time through various divine appellations, such as Kāla Kālayāya Namaḥ and Kāla Svarūpāya Namaḥ, which indicate that God is not merely within time, but is also its ruler and very embodiment. Therefore, time (kāla) is understood as a fundamental principle that enables the existence of the world, creation, and the entire process of existence within the cosmic order.

Although time occupies a central position as a divine principle, human awareness of its essence is often reduced to temporal worldly concerns. From the Hindu theological and philosophical perspective, the proper utilization of time forms the foundation for spiritual life and the fulfillment of dharma. The Manava Dharmasastra (Manusmṛti) positions kāla as a cosmic principle governing the order of the universe, including the cycles

of creation, preservation, and dissolution through the division into four yugas. Human behavior in harmony with natural cycles, life stages (āśrama), and the timeliness of rituals and social duties affirms that every moment possesses a normative and spiritual dimension. Thus, kāla is understood not merely as a chronology of events, but as a cosmic principle linking humanity, dharma, and the divine order (Manusmṛti 1.24; Bühler, 2005).

*Kālaṃ kālavibhaktīśca nakṣatrāṇi grahāṃs tathā |
Saritaḥ sāgarān śailān samāni viṣamāni ca ||*

Meaning:

(He created) time, the divisions of time, constellations, planets, rivers, oceans, mountains, level lands and uneven lands.

This verse affirms that time (kāla) is an integral part of the cosmic order, equal to other natural elements regulated by God within creation. Time is not merely a chronological measure, but also a principle that sustains cosmic harmony and enables human beings to understand the rhythms of nature and dharma. Thus, awareness of the true nature of time becomes the foundation of spiritual consciousness, because through understanding the order of cosmic time, humans are guided to live in harmony with divine law and their existential purpose.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, the concept of time (kāla) is explicitly associated with the manifestation of God's supreme power, especially in relation to the cosmic processes of creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe. This meaning is clearly expressed in Bhagavad Gītā 11.32 (Agus S. Mantik, 2008), where time is presented as a divine principle possessing both destructive and transformative power, as follows:

*Kālo 'smi loka-kṣhaya-kṛit pravṛiddho lokān samāhartum iha pravṛittaḥ |
Rite 'pi tvām na bhaviṣhyanti sarve ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣhu yodhāḥ ||*

Meaning:

I am Time (Kāla), the mighty lord who destroys the worlds. I have come here to annihilate all people. Even without you, all the warriors standing on the battlefield shall cease to exist.

This verse affirms that God, in the form of Kāla (Time), is the absolute sovereign over time and death. Time governs birth, life, and death, functioning as an inescapable cosmic principle. By understanding this, human beings are reminded of the limits of existence and the importance of using time wisely, especially for the practice of dharma and spiritual pursuits.

However, in the context of modern life, human beings generally tend to lose their awareness of the sacred nature of time as a manifestation of the Divine. Time is more often treated merely as a tool to fulfill egoistic interests, material ambitions, and instant gratification. A lack of discipline in using time fosters the tendency to seek rapid results without ethical or spiritual processes, in pursuit of wealth or worldly happiness. This condition reflects a shift in existential orientation—from cosmic awareness toward materialistic orientation—which ultimately distances humanity from a true understanding of time as a path toward self-realization and transcendental consciousness.

Driven by the desire for rapid gain, humans often act as if they could “accelerate time” for their own interests, even at the expense of others’ well-being. As a result, deforestation is carried out massively and arbitrarily in many places without ethical or ecological consideration. In such conditions, people no longer reflect on the long-term consequences of forest destruction, even though such actions can trigger disasters such as floods and cause losses both materially and spiritually.

Forests are no longer regarded as sacred spaces worthy of reverence; instead, they are reduced to objects of exploitation for mere profit. In contrast to the past—when forests were protected through constructions of sacred value, often even considered mystical or taboo as a cultural mechanism to instill respect and caution—modern society tends to neglect such wisdom due to the impulse of instant pragmatism that prioritizes short-term benefits over cosmic balance and the sustainability of life.

The sacred concept of time (kāla) in Hindu tradition affirms that time is not merely chronology, but a metaphysical principle that links the cosmos, ethics, and spirituality. In Manusmṛti 1.24, time is understood as part of Brahman’s cosmic creation that sustains the order of dharma and the cycles of life, while the Bhagavad Gītā (11.25–32) portrays it as a formidable aspect of Kṛṣṇa that transcends and dissolves the universe, yet remains relative to the transcendent ātman. In Balinese religious practice, this awareness is reflected in the rituals of purnama and tilem as markers of cosmic harmony, in contrast to modern perspectives that tend to view time in an instant and utilitarian manner, causing its sacred dimension as a path toward mokṣa to be frequently overlooked.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach through a descriptive-conceptual literature review. The analysis focuses on the concepts of time (kāla) and the transcendent self (ātman) in classical Hindu texts, particularly Brahma Vidyā, the Manava Dharmasastra (Manusmṛti), and the Bhagavad Gītā. Data are drawn from Sanskrit texts and authoritative translations as primary sources, as well as relevant scholarly literature as secondary sources. Data analysis is conducted descriptively and analytically using textual hermeneutics and intertextual comparison.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theological and cosmological understanding of kāla in classical Hindu texts is strongly affirmed through direct references to key verses of the Bhagavad Gītā and Manava Dharmasastra, which explicitly position time as a fundamental principle in the relationship between God, the cosmos, and the practice of dharma, as expressed in Bhagavad Gītā 11.32 as follows:

*kālo ’smi loka-kṣaya-kṛt pravṛddho
lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ*

Meaning:

I am Time (kāla), the mighty force that brings about the dissolution of the worlds; I am here to destroy all beings. (Trans. Agus S. Mantik, 2008).

This verse affirms the identity of God as kāla itself, not merely as the controller of time. In dialogue with the Manusmṛti, this statement expands the function of kāla from a

normative framework of dharma into a theological dimension as the direct manifestation of divine power within the cosmic cycle.

In line with this theological interpretation, Manusmṛti 1.24 presents a cosmological-normative perspective that positions *kāla* as a created principle functioning to regulate the order of the universe while simultaneously sustaining the practice of dharma. Based on Bühler's translation and Medhātithi's commentary, time—together with its divisions such as months, seasons, and years, as well as the movements of celestial bodies—is understood as a fundamental framework that ensures cosmic harmony and ethical order in human life.

In the perspective of Brahma Vidyā, these two texts form a unified conceptual framework: the Manusmṛti positions *kāla* as a principle of ethical–cosmic order, while the Bhagavad Gītā affirms it as a theological reality identical with the will of Brahman. Thus, the integration of these two viewpoints demonstrates that time is not merely an ontological framework for the unfolding of the cosmos, but also a spiritual medium that guides human consciousness from phenomenal attachment toward a transcendental understanding of the true nature of the self and divine reality.

The findings of the study indicate that within the framework of Brahma Vidyā, time (*kāla*) is understood as a cosmic principle possessing fundamental theological and spiritual significance. Ultimate reality is regarded as transcending space and time, yet simultaneously present within them as the foundation of cosmic order. Therefore, time does not merely function as a chronological measure, but as a cosmic medium that enables the processes of creation, preservation, and dissolution. In Hindu tradition, awareness of the true nature of time is often diminished by human orientation toward temporary worldly interests, causing its spiritual dimension to be neglected. In fact, the proper use of time in harmony with dharma constitutes a primary foundation of spiritual life.

The Manava Dharmasastra (Manusmṛti) positions *kāla* (time) as a cosmic principle that governs the order of the universe and human life. Time is understood as cyclical through the division of four yugas—Satya, Treta, Dvāpara, and Kali—which represent the dynamics of creation (*śṛṣṭi*), preservation (*sthiti*), and dissolution (*pralaya*). This cyclical conception affirms that reality does not move linearly but recurs within a predetermined cosmic rhythm. Consequently, human life is ideally lived in harmony with this temporal order, whether through alignment with natural cycles, stages of life, the āśrama system, or proper timing in performing rituals and social duties. Each moment, therefore, contains both normative and spiritual dimensions directly related to the practice of dharma.

This understanding is further reinforced in Medhātithi's commentary on Manusmṛti 1.24, which provides a philosophical foundation for the nature of *kāla*. Medhātithi does not regard time as an independent substance, but rather as a form of action (*kriyā*) associated with cosmic activity. Time is interpreted as an extension of the motion of the Sun and planets, cyclical and recurrent in nature, thereby enabling divisions such as months, seasons, half-years, and years. Thus, *kāla* is understood as a dynamic principle inseparable from cosmic movement and the praxis of human life. This view situates time in direct relation to the practice of dharma, since human actions always unfold within the framework of cosmic order regulated by time.

In the perspective of Brahma Vidyā, Medhātithi's conception carries profound spiritual implications. Time does not merely function as the backdrop for events, but also as a reflective medium that enables humans to realize the true nature of ātman as the transcendent self, unbound by temporal change. When a person lives in harmony with the rhythm of cosmic time, they are guided to transcend worldly attachments and cultivate

higher spiritual awareness. Thus, *kāla* is understood not simply as a source of limitation, but as an existential opportunity for self-realization and for deepening awareness of Brahman.

The conceptual dialogue between the *Manusmṛti* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* further enriches the understanding of *kāla*. In *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.32, God explicitly declares Himself as Time—*kālo 'smi loka-kṣaya-kṛt*—affirming that time is a direct manifestation of divine power. In this context, *kāla* functions as a cosmic force that governs birth, life, and death, and ensures the continuity of cycles of creation and dissolution. This statement indicates that time does not exist outside God, but is identical with the divine will operating within history and the cosmos.

If the *Manusmṛti* emphasizes the normative function of *kāla* in regulating the practice of dharma and social order, then the *Bhagavad Gītā* affirms its theological dimension as an expression of the absolute power of Brahman. These two perspectives complement one another and demonstrate that time is a cosmic principle that is at once pedagogical and theological. Within the framework of *Brahma Vidyā*, understanding *kāla* becomes essential for comprehending the relationship between *ātman*, dharma, and Brahman. Thus, the findings of this study affirm that time in classical Hindu texts cannot be reduced to mere chronological sequence, but rather constitutes a cosmic principle that guides humanity toward supreme knowledge and the realization of unity between the transcendent self and divine reality.

According to I Made Titib (2003), within the framework of Hindu cosmology, time is understood as a cosmic principle that is cyclical, sacred, and theological, rather than merely a linear chronological sequence. *Kāla* is viewed as an expression of the divine power of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa* that governs the dynamics of the universe through cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution, while cosmic units such as *yuga*, *manvantara*, and *kalpa* reflect a metaphysical system affirming that reality moves according to an ordered divine rhythm.

Titib also emphasizes that the cosmological conception of time carries significant ethical and spiritual dimensions. Because time is part of the cosmic law that sustains dharma, human beings are expected to order their lives in harmony with that order through righteous conduct, inner discipline, and awareness of the limitations of existence. Thus, time functions not only as an indicator of change, but also as a means of cosmic instruction that guides human beings toward self-purification and the attainment of the highest spiritual realization.

This synthetic perspective reaches conceptual depth within the teaching of *Jñānasiddhānta*, which transforms the understanding of *kāla* from a normative–theological category into a metaphysical-spiritual principle that governs the dynamics of consciousness and liberation. As formulated by Harjati Soebadio (1971), *kāla* is not understood as an autonomous reality, but as a manifestation of Śiva's śakti that regulates the cosmic processes of creation, preservation, and dissolution. At the empirical level, time functions as a divine mechanism that binds the *ātman* within the web of karma and *avidyā*; yet at the level of ultimate reality, this temporal attachment is transcended through *jñāna*, when the *ātman* is realized as identical with the eternal Śiva. Thus, *kāla* operates as a relative principle in the phenomenal world but holds no independent ontological status within the absolute horizon of *Brahma Vidyā*. This synthetic perspective articulates time as a metaphysical dimension of consciousness in which true knowledge unfolds, so that cosmic

order is understood not only ontologically, but also experienced as a process of spiritual transformation leading to union with the Ultimate Reality.

In Hindu texts such as Brahma Vidyā (knowledge of Brahman from Vedānta), Manusmṛti, and Bhagavad Gītā, a conceptual analysis of Kāla (time) reveals its cyclical and illusory nature, whereas Ātman (the transcendent self) is eternal and transcendent, beyond the limitations of time.

The concept of Kāla (Time) is depicted as an aspect of Prakṛti that binds the soul within the cycles of creation (sṛṣṭi), preservation (sthiti), and dissolution (laya), governed by the Trimurti—Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva—with vast cycles such as the kalpa spanning trillions of human years. In this context, kāla is temporary and phenomenal, existing only as long as beings are bound to the material world, and is intimately associated with death (Yama).

The Concept of Ātman (Transcendent Self): Ātman is the ultimate reality, nirguṇa (without attributes), unborn, indestructible, and identical with Brahman (sat-cit-ānanda). It is unaffected by kāla (time), space, or change, as stated in Bhagavad Gītā 2.17 and 2.21, where it is described as avināśī (indestructible). Manusmṛti emphasizes that the recognition of the universal Ātman in all beings leads to unity and liberation (mokṣa) in Brahman.

The Relationship Between Kāla and Ātman: The Ātman is transcendent with respect to kāla, as it exists beyond the duality of cyclical time. Avidyā (ignorance) causes the soul to appear bound by kāla, but understanding through Brahma Vidyā liberates it to pure consciousness, where time dissolves into a single, eternal presence. In Bhagavad Gītā 8.3, Brahman is described as akṣara paramam, the imperishable essence of all ātman, untouched by kāla.

The Cycle of Time in Brahma Vidyā: Brahma Vidyā, as the core of Vedānta, views kāla as a temporary manifestation of māyā, with large units such as a kalpa (one day of Brahma) encompassing 4.32 billion human years, emphasizing the transience of the phenomenal world in contrast to the eternity of Brahman.

Kāla in Manusmṛti details time through the yuga cycles—Satya, Treta, Dvāpara, and Kali—which determine moral decline and social order, with time serving as a measure of karma and the inevitable cosmic regeneration.

Kāla in Bhagavad Gītā (11.25–32) depicts Kṛṣṇa as the formidable Kāla who devours all beings, yet remains illusory for the ātman aware of its nature as a divine instrument for cosmic maintenance rather than an ultimate end.

Sathya Narayana's statement (1971) in the book *Sri Sathya Sai Speaks*, "Samayam samyamanam cha kāla" — "Time is self-discipline; Time is God (kāla-svarūpa)" — reinforces the classical Hindu understanding of kāla as both a cosmic principle and a divine manifestation. In this perspective, kāla is not merely a chronological measure but embodies the regulatory power of the divine that governs birth, death, and the movements of celestial bodies. As in the Bhagavad Gītā 11.32, where Kṛṣṇa identifies Himself as Kāla, time is both a destructive and transformative force, asserting divine authority over all creation.

From the viewpoint of Brahma Vidyā, the passage highlights the ethical and spiritual dimensions of kāla. Human beings, when ignorant of its sacred nature, tend to squander time in worldly pursuits, remaining bound to cycles of karma and avidyā. Conscious recognition of kāla, however, cultivates self-discipline (samyamanam) and aligns human activity with dharma, mirroring the transitory yet structured rhythm of cosmic processes described in Manusmṛti and the cyclical yuga system.

Thus, Sathya Sai's discourse resonates with the Brahma Vidyā synthesis: kāla

operates simultaneously as a cosmological regulator, a moral guide, and a spiritual medium. Through mindful engagement with time, humans can transcend mere temporal existence and orient themselves toward ātman-realization, ultimately achieving liberation (mokṣa) by harmonizing individual consciousness with the eternal, absolute reality of Brahman.

The statement Sathya Narayana, emphasizes that time is understood as a divine manifestation governing the entire dynamics of the cosmos and human existence; therefore, wasting time is equivalent to neglecting the ontological grace that determines the direction of life's journey. Awareness of the sacredness of time calls on individuals to regard each moment as a meaningful spiritual space, rather than merely a sequence of passing seconds devoid of transcendent value.

The implication is that the conscious use of time becomes both an ethical and spiritual practice, encouraging individuals to direct their activities toward inner discipline and devotion, such as bhakti, japa, and seva. Within this framework, the appreciation of time functions as an indicator of moral and spiritual maturity, both at the individual and civilizational level, because a noble civilization is one that prioritizes virtue, self-control, and transcendental goals over the pursuit of temporal pleasures.

Sathya Narayana's concept becomes increasingly relevant in today's digital era, where the rhythm of human life is saturated with technological distractions, accelerated information flows, and demands for instant productivity. In such a context, spiritual discipline over time can no longer be seen merely as a traditional ascetic practice, but rather as an existential necessity to maintain psycho-spiritual balance amid continuous stimuli. Allocating dedicated time for japa, meditation, and self-reflection functions as a mechanism for organizing consciousness, guiding humans from a state of fragmented attention toward integrated inner wholeness.

Thus, spiritual discipline over time in the digital era can be understood as a contemplative praxis aimed at restoring the sacredness of time, which is often diminished by modern efficiency-driven rationality. From this perspective, time is not merely viewed as a means of productivity, but as a theological space that opens the possibility for the transformation of consciousness, deepening of the inner life, and continuous experience of divine presence. In doing so, it supports the realization of harmony and universal well-being—in the relationship of humans with nature, with one another, and with God.

CONCLUSION

Based on a conceptual analysis of classical Hindu texts within the framework of Brahma Vidyā, it can be concluded that the concepts of kāla (time) and ātman (transcendent self) form a complementary metaphysical structure for understanding human existential reality. Kāla is not merely understood as a chronological measure, but as a cosmic-theological principle that governs the order of nature, the rhythm of life, and the observance of dharma. In the Manusmṛti, time functions as a normative framework supporting cosmic harmony and social ethics, whereas in the Bhagavad Gītā, time is revealed as a direct manifestation of divine power that controls the cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution. This perspective affirms that time possesses both ontological and pedagogical dimensions in the human spiritual journey.

Conversely, ātman is understood as a transcendent reality that surpasses the limits of time, space, and change; it is eternal, unborn, and indestructible, and at the highest level, identical with Brahman. The relationship between kāla and ātman reveals a dialectic

between phenomenal and noumenal reality: time binds empirical consciousness within the cycles of karma and samsāra, whereas spiritual knowledge (jñāna) liberates humans toward pure awareness that transcends temporality. Within this framework, time is no longer seen as a constraint on existence, but as a cosmic instrument that educates consciousness toward self-enlightenment.

This conceptual synthesis underscores that, from the perspective of Brahma Vidyā, the understanding of time is not an ultimate goal but a path toward transcendental consciousness. Awareness of the nature of kāla encourages humans to live wisely and in accordance with dharma, enabling them to transcend temporal attachments and realize their deepest identity as ātman, unified with Brahman. Thus, the study of time and the transcendent self is not only philosophically and theologically relevant but also carries existential significance as a foundation for spiritual praxis, guiding the cultivation of a harmonious, conscious life oriented toward liberation.

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