

Personal Agency across Generations: Evolutionary Psychology or Religious Belief?

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Abstract Although the authors of modern scientific psychology agreed on precious little, Freud and Jung both insisted that any complete science of psychology requires some way to explain the intergenerational inheritance of character traits or personal habits of mind and action. Yet neither they nor their heirs in contemporary philosophy, psychology or cognitive science have been able to provide a plausible conceptual framework, much less a mechanism to account for the conservation of forms of personal agency across multiple lives. Is there a role in contemporary philosophy and psychology for an intergenerational theory of human agency informed by the Buddhist theory of karma? This paper argues the affirmative case, offering both a current scientific reading of karma and a Buddhist scientific approach to the metaphysical and metapsychological problems caused by the divergence of modern science and religion in the West. The model of intergenerational agency I present here is based on a comparative study of ordinary language philosophy in ancient India and the contemporary West. Its premise is that most theories of moral development and psychological agency are limited by the insistence on a substantial or essential ground for the designation of a person or self. Ordinary language philosophy offers greater conceptual freedom because it accepts a distinctively human theory of self as a linguistic construction that refers to mind/body systems and elements in which there is no substantial or essential self. This conceptual freedom permits a model of human agency as an open system of linguistic reference that can be transmitted across generations in the course of language acquisition. Such a system is not merely discursive in that language serves to guide the social construction not just of discursive thinking but also of learned patterns of perception

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and action mastered together with language in the course of neuropsychological development. This model has implications for both Buddhist and Western worldview, popular and scientific, as well as for bioethics and the practice of psychotherapy.

Keywords Agency · Karma · Reincarnation · Intergenerational transmission · Evolutionary psychology · Bioethics · Ordinary language philosophy · Nagarjuna · Chandrakirti · Wittgenstein

The Problem: Karma, Causality and Intergenerational Agency

There are few concepts in Buddhist culture more complex than the idea of *karma*. While the Sanskrit has the literal sense of “action,” its many technical uses range across the domains of biology, psychology, sociology, ethics, metaphysics and religion. Among these, what poses the greatest challenge for Western translators, scholars and practitioners is its metaphysical sense, in which *karma* serves as shorthand for the Buddhist conception of life as involving a process of bioethical continuity across lifetimes, commonly called reincarnation. The main difficulty of translating this conception into Western languages and cultures lies in the way it defies categorization in terms of the ever-widening gulf between the West’s dominant worldviews: materialist science and theistic religion.

The difficulty is formidable enough that some have urged that *karma* should be edited out of the theory and practice of Buddhism in the West, as a culture-bound religious belief indigenous to Asian Buddhism.^{1, 2} Yet the notion that Buddhist civilization could be coherent without some theory of *karma*—some naturalistic account of life’s form and quality as causally shaped by habits of personal agency developed within and across many lives—in my view is not just naïve, but also misunderstands the main thrust of Shakyamuni’s teaching. At the heart of the four noble truths, the foundation of all Buddhist thought and practice, lies the theory of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). The gist of that theory is the Buddha’s *karmic* model of intentional actions and their effects, meant to convey his insight that each individual’s conscious agency, rather than nature or the will of God, is the prime cause determining whether their embodied experience is one of bondage or freedom, suffering or happiness.

In this view, *karma* theory’s therapeutic role in offering a middle way between the extreme metaphysics of materialism and theism is not incidental, but vital to the cogency and efficacy of Buddhist civilization. While it would surely be easier if we could extricate the empowering message of *karma* theory from any metaphysical views of nature and life, in my view that would vitiate the Buddha’s intent: to dispel any worldview that narrows the causal efficacy of the mind and its intentional acts.

¹ Stephen Bachelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (New York: Tricycle Press, 1998).

² Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Hackett & Co, 2007).

Background and Methods: Comparing Buddhist and Western Psychology

As a Buddhologist working at the interface between Indic contemplative science and Western psychotherapy, I have tried to develop a way to translate the *karmic* conception of life that is not just consistent with the most critical strains of evolutionary psychology, Buddhist *and* Western, but also practically helpful in freeing people for more profound insight and character change. This chapter distills the approach I've evolved by integrating my scholarly work in comparative philosophy with my clinical practice as a contemplative psychotherapist.^{3, 4, 5, 6, 7}

Unlike my predecessors, I have explicitly avoided an anecdotal, case study approach, whether based on the techniques of cultural anthropology, psychotherapy, hypnotherapy or parapsychology. While compelling to some, in my view such approaches beg the question, in that their methods and conclusions are hardly more reliable or convincing than the theory they are supposed to prove. More to the point, *karma* theory is not meant to apply narrowly to the most dramatic or outlying case, but very broadly and generally to the natural development of all individuals and species. Hence, my approach draws on the most widely accepted insights and methods of contemporary philosophy, psychology and neuroscience.

Far from an apology, the approach I have taken is based on the seemingly implausible view that an intergenerational theory of personal agency and human development informed by the Buddhist theory of *karma* can help fill a major conceptual void in current evolutionary psychology and psychotherapy. This article offers both a current scientific reading of *karma* and a Buddhist scientific approach to some of the broad conceptual and practical problems that the divergence of modern materialist science from traditional theistic psychology and ethics has caused for contemporary Western culture and psychology.

The Essence of Karma: An Evolutionary Model of Mental Causation

I begin by differentiating the many functions of *karma* theory in Buddhism: as popular worldview or religious belief; as a naturalist metaphysic of morals; and as a scientific theory of mind/body development. As a popular worldview, the Buddha used the concept of *karma* to challenge both the creationist ethos of orthodox Vedism and the hedonistic ethos of Chārvāka materialism. Despite the evolutionary naturalism of his past life memories, recorded in the *Jataka* tales, his intention in casting *karma* theory as a popular worldview was critical rather than metaphysical.

³ Joseph Loizzo, Intersubjectivity in Wittgenstein and Freud: Other Minds and the Foundations of Psychiatry. *Journal of Theoretical Medicine* Vol. 12, No 3; 1997

⁴ Joseph Loizzo, Safeguarding Patient Agency, in *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, Vol 7, No. 2, 2000.

⁵ Joseph Loizzo, *Nagarjuna's Reason Sixty with Chandrakirti's Commentary* (New York: AIBS/Columbia University Press, 2007), henceforth, Loizzo, *Nāgārjuna*.

⁶ Joseph Loizzo, Meditation and Psychotherapy: Stress, Allostasis and Enriched Learning, in *Annual Review of Psychiatry*, American Psychiatric Association Vol. 19, No.1, 2000

⁷ Joseph Loizzo, Mary Charlson, Janey Peterson. A Program in Contemplative Self-Healing: Stress, Allostasis and Learning in the Indo-Tibetan Tradition. In W Bushell and E Olivo, eds, *Longevity and Optimal Health* (New York: Annals of New York Academy of Sciences, 2009).

In light of his refusal to indulge 14 metaphysical questions (*avyākṛtavastuṇī*), including whether or not he would exist after death and whether the person or life is the same as the body or different,⁸ his emphasis on mind and its intentional acts must be read as part of his effort to rationalize and ethicize the *Shramaṇic* counterculture of personal freedom (*mokṣa*) emerging in India during the axial age. By depicting mind and will as naturally free and morally self-determining creative powers, *karma* theory offered a countercultural bioethics that empowered each individual as a self-creative agent while at the same time holding each ultimately responsible for his or her own health, happiness and freedom, governed only by a natural process of behavioral cause and effect.

By stretching the 12 links of dependent origination across three consecutive lifetimes, Shakyamuni intentionally linked the bioethics of *karma* with the evolutionary metaphysics and intergenerational metapsychology of multi-life continuity (*pratisaṃdhi*) we call reincarnation. At the same time, the critical insights of the noble truths—including impermanence, selflessness and emptiness—clearly rule out any naïve, literal view of reincarnation as the rebirth of a fixed, unitary or independent mind, person, self, soul or agent.⁹ Even the realistic Analyst (*Vaibhāṣika*) school of early Buddhist thought held that the multi-life framework of the second truth was not meant to teach rebirth but quite the opposite: to “abolish threefold speculation” about past, present and future lives.¹⁰

So from the outset, there was a tension in Buddhist thought between the critical thrust of Shakyamuni’s teachings—articulated in his theory of selflessness (*anātmavāda*)—and their practical thrust, articulated in the theory of *karma*. And the nexus of this tension lay in how to interpret the model of mental causality spelled out in the second noble truth. If the healing thrust of Buddha’s teaching was to encourage others to follow in his footsteps, his pedagogic thrust was to teach a reproducible method—the eightfold path of the fourth noble truth—by which anyone could replicate his self-analysis and self-healing. The second truth lies at the heart of that method, because it maps the mind/body causation by which every mind creates its own suffering, and in so doing lays out the inverse causation by which that same mind can create its own happiness.

⁸ This is discussed at length in chapter nine of the *Treasury of Scientific Teaching* (*Abhidharmakośa*), where Vasubandhu presents the Vaibhāṣika view that the Buddha declined to answer because his questioner could not understand that the person (*puṅgala*) or soul (*jīva*) was only a superficial designation (*prajñaptikasamvṛti*) for the mind/body systems or aggregates. See Leo Pruden, trans., *The Abhidharmakosabhasyam of Vasubandhu*, 4 Volumes (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press), 4, 330-1338 and Yosomitra’s *Vyākhyā* quoted in n.97: / *prajñaptika iti prajñaptau bhava prajñaptika samvṛtisann api puṅgalo nāstika kaścid grhṇīyād ity ato nāstīti nāvocat* /.

⁹ Hence, of the four periods in which the cycle of dependent origination operates, only one is “personal” (*sattvākhya*), in that it shows the continuity of agency across different lives. The other three periods, in which the cycle operates microcosmically within lifetimes, sequentially across specific causal events or mind/body states and microscopically within single moments, show the “impersonal” (*āsattvākhya*) nature of *karmic* causation. Ibid, AK, 3.26ff; Pruden, 2.404-407. In fact, this passage of Vasubandhu’s *Treasury* explains that the sections on the past and future are abbreviated to two links each simply for economy, since the causality of *karma* is the same in the past and future as it is in the eight links described as present.

¹⁰ “Did I exist or not in the past? How and as what did I exist?...Will I exist in the future? How and as what will I exist?...What is this (present life)? What are we?” *Ibid.*, AK, 3.25cd; Pruden, 2.405-406.

So, as with Freud and his heirs, the most basic premise of all Buddhist theory and practice is the premise of mental causality: the idea that the mind and its intentional acts have determinate effects. The presuppositions behind this central idea are spelled out in the notion of a centrist model of mental causation. In order for the mind to heal, it must be free enough to learn and change; yet it must also be connected enough for its actions to have an effect on how life works.¹¹ This explains why the Buddha taught a middle way between theistic views that tie the individual's fate to God and materialist views that unlink the mind from the causal mechanics of nature entirely. Within Buddhist schools, it explains why the essential tension of Buddhist thought has been to balance the critical insights of impermanence, selflessness and emptiness—which show how the mind is free enough to change—with the practical theories of *karma* and dependent origination—which show how the mind is interconnected enough to have effects on all aspects of life.¹² This tension is evident in the growing commentarial debate associated with the scientific teaching (*abhidharma*) tradition shared by the Individual Vehicle (*Theravāda*) and Universal Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*) of Indian Buddhism. The rest of my comments will focus on the logic of *karma* as a theory of mind/body causation central to the core discipline of contemplative science (*adhyātama-vidyā*) within the Universalist scientific teaching tradition developed at Nālandā and preserved in Tibet.¹³

Karma in Buddhist Psychology: An Indo-Tibetan Perspective

Having characterized Buddhist views of life and mind as broadly naturalistic and evolutionary, I first locate *karma* theory as a band within the spectrum of causality recognized in the Buddhist sciences. Confounding interpretations of *karma* theory is a widespread terminological confusion. While the word is often used broadly as a synonym for *hetu* or cause, its scientific usage refers more narrowly to the range of causation between the causality of inanimate matter and the causality of human cultural systems like language and religion (*dharma*). On the more deterministic end of the spectrum, the causality of elemental matter and vegetative life is characterized by seven types of causes (*hetu*), all clearly distinct from the mental causation of *karma*.¹⁴ On the least deterministic end, the constructive causality of human cultural action is represented by the four types of causal interventions or paths (*marga*) of contemplative healing,¹⁵ distinguished from ordinary *karmic* action because it frees

¹¹ Karl Potter used this traditional Buddhist point to open the discussion in his *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972).

¹² One way to view the history of Buddhist thought is in terms of the need to find more and more refined middle ways, that is: models of the mind, self and person that are increasingly free of the burdens of reification, essentialism and objectivism, while being compatible with increasingly light-weight models of agency that account for the efficacy of intentions and actions without fixed notions of personality, selfhood or identity.

¹³ Joseph Loizzo. *Renewing the Nālandā Legacy: Science, Religion and Objectivity in Buddhism and the West*. *Religion East & West* 2006; 6

¹⁴ Namely: homogeneous (*sabhāga*), emergent (*janana*), transformative (*vikāra*) and generative (*upabr̥mahāna*). See Vasubandhu's *Treasury*, AK, 2.65; Pruden, 1, 308-9.

¹⁵ Namely { the aversive (*vidūṣanā*), remedial (*ānantrya*), liberative (*vimukti*) and decisive (*viśeṣa*) paths. *Ibid.*, AK, 5.61 and 6.65; Pruden, 3, 855 and 1020-1021.

mind and life from the compulsive instincts and habits of afflictive (*kliṣṭa*) *karma*.¹⁶ This leaves the ordinary workings of intentional actions and their developmental effects (*karma-vipāka*), located in the middle band of causality where animate matter meets embodied mind. This band is characterized by five types of causes (*hetu*), all of which involve the interaction of primary intentionality with its associated mental factors and their cooperative mind/body functions.¹⁷

Another way to define the scope of the term *karma* in the Buddhist sciences is with respect to its reference among the table of elements (*dharmasamketa*).¹⁸ The category distinction most relevant here is that between physical and mental elements. While the model of dependent origination rules out any substantial or essential mind/body dualism, even the most critical systems of Buddhist thought and practice¹⁹ preserve a categorical distinction between mind and body, consciousness and neural energy. In these non-dualistic systems—where mind and body are seen as two interactive aspects of one indivisible process—the distinction between mental and physical causation, top-down and bottom-up interactions is preserved by distinguishing the causal link between events of the same aspect from that between events of a different aspect.²⁰

Of course, preserving this nominal dualism obliged the Buddha and his heirs to grapple with the metaphysical and metapsychological complexities of reincarnation. It logically required some reply to the questions of whether and how the continuity of mental causation spanned transitions from moment to moment and life to life. Buddhist science decided this question by postulating a middle way between the dualistic extremes of idealism and materialism, permanence and annihilation, that is: a continuity in which the efficacy of intentional acts is conserved with trans-

¹⁶ Technically, the primary distinction made on the table of elements (*dharmasamketa*) is described in two different ways: between contingent and non-contingent elements (*saṃskṛta/asaṃskṛta-dharmas*), and between pure and impure elements (*anāsrava/sāsrava-dharmas*). The two are not identical, the main difference being the elements pertaining to the path of self-healing. These are contingent since they depend on afflictive causes and conditions, but pure in that they counteract the defilements that drive compulsive life. In the more critical schools, the two distinctions converge somewhat, since even non-contingent elements like cessation and extinction are seen as dependent on causes and conditions, although those literally consist of the pure negations like the absence/termination of the causes and conditions which reproduce suffering.

¹⁷ Including homogeneous (*sabhāga*), cooperative (*sahabhū*), associative (*samprayukta*), pervasive (*sarvatrga*) and developmental (*vipāka*). Ibid, AK, 2.49-55; Pruden, 1, 255-280.

¹⁸ The outlines of this table are sketched in the first chapter of Vasubandhu's *Treasury*. AK, 1.4-48; Pruden, 1, 58-131.

¹⁹ Dialecticist Centrism (*Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika*) and the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras (*Anuttara-Yogatāntṛa*).

²⁰ As opposed to the contemporary mind/brain model of dual-aspect monism, I characterize this view as dual-aspect non-dualism. That is: mind and body are conceived as two empirically inseparable yet causally distinct aspects of the non-dual reality of emptiness or relativity. For instance, while the emergence of a given moment of visual consciousness depends on a bottom-up interaction with the neural infrastructure of vision and an object of sight, it is primarily dependent on the antecedent condition (*samanātara-pratyāya*) of a prior moment of mind, including a range of mental factors like conception, emotion and sensation. Vasubandhu's *Treasury*, AK, 2.62; Pruden, 1, 297-302. Conversely, while the execution of a verbal or physical action depends on a top-down interaction with the mental act of intention that initiates it, it is primarily dependent on the physical elements which are the supportive cause (*pratiṣṭhāhetu*) and sustaining cause (*upastambhahetu*) of the vocal apparatus and the musculoskeletal system. Vasubandhu's *Treasury*, AK, 2.65; Pruden, 1, 308-9.

formations within and across different lives.²¹ This focus on the continued efficacy of mental acts is reflected in a distinctive approach to the role *karmic* heredity plays in human development. Given the basic Buddhist model of conception as the union of three factors—egg, sperm and a continuity of mental habits in transition from prior lives—it is the latter, the continuity of mental habits, that carries *karmic* heredity for the developing mind, as distinct from the parents' genetic contributions to the developing body.²²

This analysis helps further characterize karma theory: as an intentional causal model of psychological development set within a broadly evolutionary theory of physical heredity and an interactionist theory of psychophysiology. In this light, *karma* theory bears some family resemblance to the kinds of developmental models assumed by modern psychology. So, it is only logical to consider how *karma* theory might help overcome the limits of Western models of psychological development informed by contemporary neuroscience and evolutionary biology.

Intergenerational Inheritance and Development: Where East Meets West

Despite their differences, Freud and Jung agreed that any science of psychology requires some way to explain the intergenerational inheritance of character traits or personal habits of mind and behavior. Given his bias towards scientific materialism, Freud hypothesized that “ego-structures” were preserved and handed down as part of our complex phylogeny.

The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but when they have been repeated often enough with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection.²³

...the derivation of the super-ego from the first object-cathexes of the id, from the Oedipus complex, signifies even more for it. This derivation, as we have already shown, brings it into relation with the phylogenetic acquisitions of the id and makes it a reincarnation of former ego-structures which have left their precipitates behind in the id.²⁴

Unfortunately, in his effort to align the inheritance of agency with the biology of modern genetics, Freud confounded the distinction between the mechanisms of mental and physical heredity. However skillful, this rhetorical elision invites a reduction of character to genetics, although contemporary research has only succeeded in showing a

²¹ This focus on causal continuity through change is reflected in the choice of the term continuity (*pratisam̐dhi*) for this conservation over more literal terms like rebirth (*punar-jati*) or reincarnation (*punar-bhāva*).

²² Vasubandhu's *Treasury*, AK, 3.15; Pruden, 2, 394-6.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1990), 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

genetic basis for general dispositions, not particular character traits. More inclined towards transcendental idealism, Jung hypothesized that character was formed by archetypal patterns inherited mentally through a “collective unconscious.”²⁵ While this move distinguishes mental from physical inheritance, it fails to account for how these two could be compatible within a broadly evolutionary view.

Though contemporary researchers of family systems like Nagy have supported Freud and Jung, based on their findings of intergenerational patterns in the etiology of mental disorders, none has given much thought to the mechanism or implications of such inheritance.²⁶ Nor have contemporary cognitive science or philosophy of mind offered a conceptual framework to explain the conservation of personal agency across lives. The closest contemporary thought has come to such a framework is in the convergence of semiotic approaches to biology,²⁷ sociology,²⁸ anthropology²⁹ and psychology,^{30, 31} though these remain wed to single-life notions of personal agency in a way that contradicts the very evolutionary model they assume.³²

The Psycholinguistics of Multi-Life Agency: A Comparative Model

The model of intergenerational agency I have developed is based on a comparison between therapeutic philosophies of ordinary language in ancient India and the contemporary West. Its premise is that most theories of moral and psychological agency, Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, are limited by the insistence on a substantial ground or essential criterion for the designation of a “person” or “self.” Ordinary language philosophy offers greater conceptual freedom because it accepts a distinctively human theory of self as a mere dependent designation (*upādāya-prajñapti-mātra*) used in reference to mind/body systems and elements in which there is no substantial or essential identity, nature or self. In the Buddhist Centrist tradition, the classical formulation is Chandrakīrti’s, “While that self will never be [analytically] established, either in the ultimate or in the world, in any one of seven

²⁵ Carl Jung, *The Development of Personality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

²⁶ I. Boszormenyi-Nagy & G. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy* (New York: Bruner-Mazel, 1973).

²⁷ Pierce’s semiotic theory helped articulate a non-dualistic perspective that could embrace the development of human individuals, societies and cultures as well as the evolution of different species under a unifying rubric: the symbolic encoding and transmission of information. This application is most closely associated with the theoretical biology of Jacob von Uexküll and his followers. See K. Kull and T. Tiivel, *Lectures in Theoretical Biology: The Second Stage* (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Sciences, 1993).

²⁸ Jaan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa, *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Nancy Budwig, *Language and the Construction of Self: Developmental Reflections* (Electronic Manuscript: Clark University Faculty Publications, 2008).

³⁰ Alasuutari, Pertti (1997) The Discursive Construction of Personality. In: Amia Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson (eds.): *The Narrative Study of Lives* Vol. 5. Newbury Park, California: Sage 1997, 1-20.

³¹ Michael White & D. Epston. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: WW Norton, 1990)

³² The idea that the development of the mind, seen as a natural processor of learned information, should be subject to a causality that begins and ends with one brain, seems out of place in a model of life that views the natural history of the brain in terms of a continuum of genetic information stretching across the lives of countless individuals and species.

[logical] modes, nonetheless, it is designated in dependence on its constituents on the strength of unexamined social consensus.”³³

In the Western context, this approach grows out of a post-critical tradition traceable to philologist Nietzsche.³⁴ The most mature formulation is Wittgenstein’s, “Outside of language, I cannot recognize the human in the human;”³⁵ and, “Aren’t you at bottom really saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction? If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction.”³⁶

The conceptual freedom of such an ordinary language concept of self permits a model of human agency as *an open reference system of symbolic action that can be transmitted across generations in the course of language learning and neuropsychological development*. As a mere designation or grammatical fiction, such a lightweight, distinctively human self may be seen as a particular habit of reflexive speech that can be transmitted from parent to child through early interaction, along with other idiosyncratic patterns of self-expression and symbolic action. Since it comes embedded in an intergenerational narrative of personal and family history, this linguistic self-habit helps seed a fresh point of reference for the child’s construction of a new personal and family narrative, extending and revising the network of roles, relationships and story lines handed down from the parent generation.

This new self-world system is not merely discursive, but deeply constructive, because language acquisition serves to guide the social construction not just of thinking, but also of patterns of perception, emotion and action learned in the course of a child’s neuropsychological development. So despite its linguistic dimension, the role the discursive self-habit plays in organizing learning and development is so pervasive that it eventually impacts and influences all levels of the mind/body process, in some views down to the level of cellular plasticity and gene regulation, the biological basis of adaptation.³⁷

In the Buddhist context, Nāgārjuna and his heirs fleshed out their linguistic model of personal agency and human development by proposing a language-critical reading of the classical cycle of dependent origination. By identifying misknowledge

³³ Chandrakirti, *Madhyamakāvātāra*, henceforth MA, VI, 158, Tibetan in P. Fenner, *Ontology of the Middle Way* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990, henceforth Fenner): *de ni de nyid du `am `jig rten du // rnam par bdun gyis `grub `gyur min mod kyi // rnam dpyad med par `jig rten nyid las `dir // rang gi yan lag brten nas `dogs pa yin //*.

³⁴ “It is language which sees everywhere deed and doer; this which believes in the ‘ego’ as being, in the ‘ego’ as substance, and which projects its belief in ego substance on to all things. Only thus does it create the concept ‘thing.’” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 37.

³⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Psychology* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1977b) 11.

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953, henceforth, PI) 307.

³⁷ One living system in which the interaction of social learning and gene regulation has been studied recently is in songbirds. See D.F. Clayton, “Role of gene regulation in song circuit development and song learning,” in *Journal of Neurobiology*. 1997 Nov;33(5):549-71; and S. Iyengar and S.W. Bottjer, “The role of auditory experience in the formation of neural circuits underlying vocal learning in zebra finches,” in *Journal of Neuroscience*. 2002 Feb 1;22(3):946-58. In humans, a tantalizing bit of evidence supporting the physiological impact of self-reference is a fine retrospective study that found a number of highly significant correlations between the use of personal pronouns and the incidence, morbidity and mortality of coronary heart disease: Larry Scherwitz et al., Self-involvement and coronary heart disease incidence in the Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 84:187-189, 1986. The literature on the link between self-concept and mental and physical health is vast, and I have reviewed one aspect of it in a chapter on the neuropsychiatric mechanisms of meditation and psychotherapy: see J Loizzo, *Meditation and Psychotherapy*, *op cit*.

(*āvidya*), the first link in the cycle, with the unconscious instinct and learned habits of reification (*samaropa*), Buddhist Centrists were able to give a deep linguistic account of the way the compulsive life cycle evolves from the reification of the language of self-reference.³⁸ This allowed for the highly frugal and light-weight Dialecticist view that the reification of personal pronouns alone serves as the basis for the transmission of *karmic* patterns within and between lives. Thus, Nāgārjuna says in his *Jewel Garland*,

The mental and physical aggregates arise
 From the conception of “I” which is false in fact.
 How could what is grown
 From a false seed be true?³⁹
 As long as the aggregates are conceived (as “mine”)
 So long thereby does the conception of “I” exist.
 Further, when the conception of “I” exists,
 There is (intentional) action, and hence there is also rebirth.
 With the three pathways mutually causing each other,
 Without beginning, middle or end,
 The wheel of cyclic existence
 Turns like the wheel of a firebrand.⁴⁰

Commenting indirectly on this formulation in his *Central Way Introduction*, Chandrakīrti explains, “Misknowledge, whose nature is the obscuration of the understanding of the real nature [of things] through reification [of intrinsic reality] in things without intrinsic reality, is utterly false...Thus, the superficial reality is established under the influence of the compulsive misknowledge included among the [twelve] factors of existence.”⁴¹

In the West, Wittgenstein offered a deep linguistic account of “the natural history of human beings”⁴² in his later work. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he says, “The

³⁸ In a sense, this model takes the classical Analyst (*Viabha ika*) view of self as a “designation” (*prajñapti*) to its ultimate conclusion, by qualifying the discursive self more strongly as a “mere designation” (*prajñapti-mātra*).

³⁹ Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvali*, henceforth RA, I, 29

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 33-34. The three “pathways” referred to here are aspects of the developmental cycle, namely: (1) *karmic* action-patterns from “beginningless” past lives, inherited as self-reifying misknowledge, compulsive attachment, etc.; (2) *karmic* actions driving development in a present life, such as obsessive craving, compulsive grasping and addictive lifestyle; and (3) the developmental effects of past and present actions in present and future lives, namely, alienated consciousness, a reified self-image, reactive perception, traumatic experience, aversive sensation, compulsive repetition, and the triad of traumatic illness, aging and death.

⁴¹ This passage from Chandrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatārabhāya*, VI, ad.k.28 is cited in Tsong Khapa’s *Lets-bshad shing-po* and quoted as translated in Robert Thurman, *Tsong Khapa’s Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence* (Princeton: Princeton, 1986, henceforth *Essence*) 309. This deep linguistic model of self-reification is further refined by the Centrist distinction between consciously acquired or constructed self-habits (*parikalpita-ātmagraha*) and instinctive or innate self-habits (*sahaja-ātmagraha*). In this view, learned forms of self-reification are especially harmful since they rationalize and reinforce the self-reifying instincts we share with more primitive life forms, making it harder for us to use language liberatively, to see through, override and reform such self-limiting instincts.

⁴² PI, 415.

problems that arise through a misinterpretation of our forms of language...are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.”⁴³ He unpacks this by describing development as a process in which words and actions are learned together as are forms of childhood play, in what he calls the “language-game.” Gradually amassing a complex system of countless such games prepares a child to master what he calls a human “form of life.” This process is further described in *On Certainty*,

The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to those beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakably fast and some are or more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.⁴⁴

As in the Buddhist context, so in Wittgenstein, at the root of our “disquietudes” lies what he calls “the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language;”⁴⁵ and the pattern of this bewitchment is the instinctive habit of reification.⁴⁶

Another way in which this model of agency is not merely discursive is in its deep view of the role language plays in the social dimension of human life. As the language of self-reference shapes personal development, it also impacts and influences the construction of diverse forms of human life by acting as the substrate for the linguistic construction of sociocultural agency in the course of socialization and acculturation. This is possible because of the natural embeddedness of language in social forms of life, grounded in social emotions and behaviors like empathy and altruism that evolved across countless species and generations. So Nāgārjuna says, in his *Reason Sixty*,

[Buddha] declared the effectiveness of actions,
As well as the forms of life [they create];
[Then] taught his full understanding of their nature,
Including their uncreatedness.⁴⁷
“The world is conditioned by misknowledge!”
Thus spoke the perfect Buddha.
Hence, what’s invalid about saying that
“This world is [mere] construction”?⁴⁸

Wittgenstein shares this view, linking the linguistic construction of cultural forms of life to the primitive cooperation of social animals from childrearing through extended group empathy and altruism.⁴⁹ He views human forms of life as presupposing a natural ethos of “spontaneous sympathy” that begins with child-

⁴³ PI, 111.

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper, 1970, henceforth OC) 144.

⁴⁵ PI, 106.

⁴⁶ “We are up against one of the main sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 1.

⁴⁷ *Yuktiṣastika*, henceforth YS, 32, translated in Loizzo, *Nāgārjuna*, *op cit.*, 123.

⁴⁸ YS, 37, Loizzo, *Nāgārjuna*, 123.

⁴⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 545.

rearing and is stretched through language acquisition to support the extended network of tacit cooperation he described as a deep social consensus. Anticipating the new consensus of modern biology,⁵⁰ Wittgenstein agreed with traditional Buddhist and modern Western deconstructionism that such forms of life are ultimately arbitrary, while affirming that they work nonetheless, as socially constructed, culturally relative systems sustained by unexamined conventions of speech and action, constituting what he called a “cultural style.”

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and false?”—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. This is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.⁵¹ ...The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule.⁵² ...When we reach conventions, we reach rock bottom.⁵³

Incorporation and Language Learning: Mechanisms of Personal Agency

Assuming that patterns of linguistic self-reference seed the transmission of forms of agency across generations, how would an ordinary language model portray this transmission? Both Buddhist and modern Western models assume a shared picture of early development we know as Oedipal theory. In it, the self is not formed passively by nature or nurture, through genetics or by mindless conditioning, but rather by the developing mind’s active engagement with the persons of its caregivers. In the Buddhist model, the nascent person forms when the developing mind, blinded by the instinct for self-reifying delusion and driven by compulsive emotions, chooses to objectify one parent as an object of desire and the other as an object of incorporation.⁵⁴ Thus, an intergenerational system of agency is not a disembodied discursive abstraction, but a complex psychosocial construction. This construction is rooted in the infant’s instinctive reification of early social experience, and motivated by the erotic instincts for attachment and care along with the aggressive instincts for appropriation and mastery.

While Buddhism and psychoanalysis agree in tracing human agency to a preverbal process of reification and emotional investment, an ordinary language model assumes this process as a deep structure or subtext of the higher, parallel process of language learning. In this model, these twin layers of symbolic construction are heterarchical rather than hierarchical. Rather than one producing the other, both are concurrently and interactively co-produced. In addition, these twin layers of symbolic construction in turn are layered over the still deeper process of biological development. In this deeper layer, primal consciousness emerges with the generic perceptual, emotional and behavioral instincts of a given disposition, and

⁵⁰ Frans de Wahl, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁵¹ PI, 244.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 372.

⁵³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 26.

⁵⁴ See Vasubandu’s *Treasury*, AK, 3.15; Pruden, 2, 394-6.

this substrate is shaped and informed by the process of symbolic learning with which it is also interactively co-produced. To the extent that language is the definitive symbolic system governing the mastery of human forms of life, linguistic constructions generally take a determinative role in selecting which forms of perceptual construction are selected by use-dependent plasticity and which are gradually pruned. Even the development of instinctive patterns of emotion and action is likely influenced by top-down symbolic input and social reinforcement.⁵⁵

The distinction between this model of agency and Freud's definition of ego as the precipitate of internalized love objects lies in this linkage of the intergenerational process of ego formation with the distinctively human process of language learning. It also differs in its conception of how self-creative discourse serves to integrate self-other images modeled on parents, as well as how the reification of self-other distinctions serves to bifurcate conscious from unconscious, as elaborated respectively by Jung and Lacan. In effect, the linguistic construction of self-expression is layered over the perceptual construction of self-imagery much as verbal processing in the dominant hemisphere is layered over sensorimotor processing in the non-dominant hemisphere during waking.

The distinction between this model and traditional Buddhist views of development is that the child brings to the process very general instincts of perception, emotion and behavior (developing along with the egg and sperm), while *the specific habits that condition the construction of self-consciousness come not from the prior life of a deceased self, but rather from the child's current parents*, as do the specific forms of speech which condition the development of the child's language instinct.⁵⁶

Thus, the child's karmic genealogy is not preexistent and received from a disembodied continuum of mind, but retroactively constituted by the specific way in which the child instinctively appropriates the discursive-perceptual-affective-behavioral patterns encoded in the living streams of the parents' conscious and unconscious mind-brains. When, under the influence of instinctive reification and emotion, the infant chooses to incorporate specific self-habits from one parent's stream as an idealized object of desire and self-habits from another's stream as an internalized object of identification, it proactively creates a unique personal agency and retroactively creates that agency's multi-life past. Once the child has committed itself to a particular constellation of habits of agency modeled on its caregivers, it inherits the combined strengths and weaknesses of that constellation, along with the complex, repetitive drama of decisive actions and outcomes which its re-created style of agency tends to produce.

To be clear, in this theory, the multi-life conservation of agency does not take place independent of some contemporaneous interpersonal bond, whether a

⁵⁵ I often think of this in light of Daniel Dennett's notion that the brain produces "multiple drafts"—that is, parallel lines of symbolic action from which the narrow stream of consciousness is selectively constructed as a moment-to-moment gestalt, under the influence of complex contextual factors and cues.

⁵⁶ Not to be confused with Jung's collective unconscious, the pool of prior habit patterns from which the child draws reflects the confluence of two or more *individual* streams of mental genealogy, each of which is made up of a multi-life sequence of prior minds that may or may not line up with the child's lineage of genetic heredity. Nor do these streams converge on the child's life-world from some disembodied mental realm, but rather from the parents' personal unconscious, which is consubstantial with the caregiver's neuropsychological individuality.

parenting relationship or some other nurturing bond. That is, it does not occur by means of the transfer of a stream of consciousness supposedly independent of a physical body, any more than perception occurs without depending at least indirectly on some external object, as Chandrakīrti insisted in his critique of idealism.⁵⁷ *Also, it does not take place in an all-or-nothing fashion at the time of death, but is rather distributed incrementally over the course of a lifetime of intimate role-modeling.*⁵⁸ In this view, the moment of death is only determinative by bringing to closure one chapter in a multi-life narrative of person to person transmission. In a sense, this model views the transmission of agency less as a discrete, “particulate” event than as a diffuse, “wave-like” process of confluence that spans the overlap between contemporaneous individuals from two generations.⁵⁹

Name and Form: The Grammar of Agency in Buddhism and the West

Although this model does not require the transmission of any substantial or essential identity or agency, such a transmission is not required by *karma* theory. All the theory requires is that the developmental effect or psychobiological imprint of habitual patterns of intention and action not be destroyed but conserved and transformed within and across lifetimes. So Nāgārjuna states, “The Buddha proclaimed the truth of the conservation of (evolutionary) actions; as emptiness they are not annihilated; as cyclic life, they are not permanent.”⁶⁰ This point is underscored by the classical metaphors of the transmigrating of *karmic* agency: as the lighting of one candle by another^{61, 62} and as the imprinting of two drops of wax by a single seal.⁶³

I view these metaphors as corresponding to the two mechanistic aspects of intergenerational transmission hypothesized above. The kindling metaphor illustrates the replication of a linguistic self-habit with revisions; the imprinting metaphor illustrates the appropriation of a perceptual self-image with modifications. These two self-constructs are aligned and co-evolve following the general Buddhist view of the mutually interdependent construction of conceptual and perceptual categories

⁵⁷ MA, VI, 39-71.

⁵⁸ Thus, this model can also accommodate the transmission of agency across intimate mentoring relationships other than parent-child bonds, as in the case of the Tibetan Buddhist institution of grooming a recognized reincarnation (*sprul-sku*).

⁵⁹ In terms of traditional Buddhism, this model places the transmission of agency in ordinary lives somewhere along the same spectrum described by the diffuse influence a Buddha has by means of a beatific body (*sambhoga-kāya*) and emanation body (*nirṇāna-kāya*). Unlike a Buddha’s influence, however, that of ordinary beings may be positive, negative or mixed, depending on the individual’s particular style and habits of agency.

⁶⁰ *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*, henceforth MMK, XVII, 20, Sanskrit in K. Inada, Nāgārjuna (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1970, henceforth Inada), 109: *śūnyatā ca na coccheda saṃsāraśca na śāshvatam / karmano vipraṇāśca dharmo buddhena deśita //*.

⁶¹ Vasubandhu’s Treasury, AK, 3.18; Pruden, 2, 399.

⁶² Thus we find the following dialogue in the *Milindapanha*, “How, Bhante Nagasena, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating? Give an illustration.” Suppose, your majesty, a man were to light a light from another light; pray, would the one light have passed over to the other light? “Nay, verily, Bhante.” In exactly the same way, your majesty, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating.” Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1963), 234.

⁶³ Nāgārjuna’s *Mahāprajñāparāmītaśāstra*, chapter 12.

(*śabdasāmānya/arthasāmānya*), included in the formula of dependent origination as fourth link: name and form (*nāma-rūpa*).

Nor is the requirement that a subjective sense of identity be conserved along with particular patterns of action a stumbling block to this model. The Buddhist view is that any sense of personal identity and agency is illusory (*māyopama*), being the product of the reification of a constructive centering of alienated consciousness on a particular name and form designated as “I,” and the subsequent appropriation of selfless mind/body systems designated as “mine.” So Nāgārjuna says, “As an artist may artfully fashion a fiction, which fiction in turn may fashion another fiction, so likewise, the agent is a fiction who fashions another fiction, and his actions are the fiction he fashions.”⁶⁴

In effect, this model of agency diverges from substantialist or essentialist models by treating the reflexive designation of “I” and “mine” as performative statements: creative speech acts that make things so just by pronouncing them so. This is at once a simple description of common conventions of the grammar of agency and a radical affirmation of the creative power and responsibility of humans as speaking mammals to define their own identity in and through self-ascription. In an existential inversion of the Cartesian *cogito*, “I say ‘I am,’ therefore (I think, feel and act as) ‘I am,’” this radical affirmation of self as constituted by mere designation and sheer relativity is consistent not just with Buddhist ethics and social theory, but also generally with the Centrist view of causation. If the relation between actions and their consequences was “too tight,” constrained by some intrinsic (non-relational) reality or identity, it would preclude the efficacy of *karmic* action to bring about transformations within and between lives.⁶⁵

Of course, affirming the grammar of agency not only requires that *karmic* causality not be “too tight,” but also demands that it not be “too loose,” that is, that it not be so arbitrary that specific actions randomly produce any and all results or that one agent experiences the developmental consequences of another’s actions. An ordinary language model does this by pointing out that even without any intrinsic necessity or essential identity, mental, verbal and physical actions are all part of an inescapable network of causes and conditions that is infinitely efficacious and unfailingly determinate. Despite its nominalism and constructivism, this model does not imply that reference systems or styles of agency are superfluous or arbitrary, either in the sense of being merely superimposed on a mind/body process like a software program on fixed hardware or in the sense of leaving no determinate developmental effect (*vipāka*) or imprint (*vāsanā*) on the developing mind, body and life of the individual who acquires them.

To the contrary, the bioethical import of this model is that intergenerational habits or styles of agency have determinate effects on the mind/body process they inform, affecting the health and well-being of both individuals and societies. Thus, Chandrakīrti affirms that the illusory, constructive nature of *karmic* causation in no way obstructs its efficacy or specificity, “As the type of hair line seen by one with eye disease does not assume the form of some other visual entity, however equal in

⁶⁴ MMK, XVII, 31-32, Inada, 111: *yathā nirmitakaṃ śāstā nirmimāta rddhisauṣpadā / nirmīto nirmimātānyam sa ca nirmitakaḥ punaḥ // tathā nirmitakākāraḥ kartā yat karma tat kṛtam / tadyathā nirmītenānyo nirmīto nirmītatathā //*

⁶⁵ So Nāgārjuna says, “If human and god were [intrinsically] other, they could not properly constitute [successive forms of] a continuous process.” MMK, XXVII, 16, Inada, 168: *devādānyo manuṣyaśceta-saṃtatir-naopadyate //*

lacking objective existence, so one must recognize that the developmental effect of actions is not a gratuitous effect.”⁶⁶ This affirmation is also consistent with the general view of causality articulated in his *Introduction*.⁶⁷

As for the requirement that the effects of actions not be transferrable from one continuum of agency to another, an ordinary language model affirms the grammar of individual continuity by insisting that *karmic* agency and genealogy are defined by an act of linguistic self-reification rather than by any supposedly objective ground or essential criterion of physical or mental individuality. Again, the sheer act of identifying with a set of habits of self-ascription and self-expression—a specific multi-life system of narrative-behavioral identity—is enough to appropriate the whole narrative history and dramatic mood of personal actions and consequences that has attached to those habits in the course of their operation in the lives of the individuals who transmitted them.⁶⁸

In terms of contemporary linguistics, the “I” within any specific system of agency serves as an indexical or shifting sign like the zero of an instrument. The indexical function of the “I” allows a specific system of self-expression to be transported from one mind/body process to another. Mastering the use of the indexicals “I” and “mine” allows the developing human mind to draw parental systems of self-reference into a new generation, recombining and revising their conceptual and perceptual signs in a novel way while inscribing them in the wetware of a fresh nervous system. Wittgenstein reminds us of the indexical grammar of the “I” in his *Investigations*⁶⁹ and offers a model for how this grammar works in the transmission of narrative identity in *On Certainty*.⁷⁰ His view is clearest in his account of later self-revisions like religious conversion,

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s *belief*, it’s really a way of living, a way of assessing life. Instruction in religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference.⁷¹

The depth-psychological process of character change has been the subject of similar descriptions of adult development. Adopting the alchemical language Jung

⁶⁶ MA, VI, 41, Fenner, 235: *ji ltar yul ni yod ñid min mtshungs kyang / rab rib can gyis sgra shad rnam par ni / mthong gi dngos gzhan rnam par ma yin ltar / de bzhin smin las slar smin min shes kyis ll.*

⁶⁷ “If a cause could produce a heterogeneous effect, then total darkness could arise even from a flame, and anything could produce anything, since everything other than the cause would be similarly heterogeneous (from the effect).” MA, VI, 14.

⁶⁸ This choice operates not just at the conscious level in which we can identify with others we see as distinct, but also on the unconscious level of seeing ourselves *as* others we’ve internalized. This deep level of identity is betrayed in common slips of the tongue in which adult children use first person pronouns when recounting their parents’ narratives, e.g., referring to their uncle as “my brother” or their grandmother as “my mother.”

⁶⁹ PI, 410.

⁷⁰ OC, 160.

⁷¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 64.

applied to psychotherapy, Heinz Kohut describes the work of deep character change as one of “transmuting internalization.” And, in the language of classical and relational analysis, he describes how the client appropriates aspects of the analyst’s self in stages, through idealization, identification, introjection and internalization. Current constructivist and narrative therapists refine this model by focusing on the way the open, intersubjective exchange of talking therapy can help clients import fresh dialogue that gradually helps them revise their own self-talk. In effect, these therapists align the linguistic layer of self-creation with the perceptual layer Kohut addressed, much as the Buddhist model aligns “name and form.”

The psychotherapeutic import of an ordinary language model of self-change is that intergenerational systems of agency and the personality styles and lifestyles they shape are far more plastic and revisable than foundationalist-essentialist models of self would suggest, especially since even the deepest layers of self-image are open to changes in inner dialogue. In the Buddhist context, Nāgārjuna expresses the therapeutic optimism of this ordinary language model of self-change in his *Central Way Verses* and *Reason Sixty*,

Freedom comes of ending compulsive activity, compulsive activity comes from constructions, which come from fabrications; and fabrications terminate in emptiness.⁷² The forms, sounds, tastes, textures, scents, and [mental] phenomena constructed as the six kinds of objects of desire, anger, and delusion...resemble a fairy city, a dream or mirage.⁷³ When misknowledge ceases, since those things misknowledge imagines will also come to cease, why wouldn’t the (constructed self and) world be cleared away?⁷⁴

Discussion: Implications of a Psycholinguistic Model of Multi-Life Agency

This model has implications for Buddhist and Western worldviews, popular and scientific, as well as for bioethics and the practice of psychotherapy. As for the Western worldview, it challenges our modern conventional wisdom that, absent a substantial or essential mind, soul or spirit that precedes conception or survives death, there is no causal medium or mechanism for the conservation of personal agency or moral development across generations. While this article of faith is closely held by moderns and postmoderns, East and West, as a badge of our scientific realism and pragmatism, I see nothing especially scientific or pragmatic about it. If human experience and action are to play any role at all in our scientific view of the world, it cannot be as a glaring exception to the principle of universal causation.

Although we have as yet no consensus on how to conceive of the causal efficacy of mental acts, as long as we accept a generally evolutionary view of life it would seem only reasonable to place such a conception in the context of our multi-life view

⁷² MMK, XVIII, 5, Inada, 114: *karmakleśaḥśayānmokṣa karmakleśā vikalpyataḥ / te prapañcāprapañcastu śūnyatāṃ nirudhyate //*.

⁷³ MMK, XXII, 7-8, Inada, 133: *rūpaśabdasparsā gandhā dharmāśca ṣaḍvidha / vastu rāgasya dveśasya mohasya ca vikalpyate // rūpaśabda sparsā gandhā dharmāśca kevalāḥ / gandharva nagarākārā marācisvapnasamñibhāḥ//*.

⁷⁴ YS, 38, Loizzo, Nāgārjuna, 123.

of the human genome and brain on the one hand, and of human language and culture on the other. Why does a viable multi-life theory of mental causation still elude us? I believe the answer lies not in our acceptance of an evolutionary view of life, but rather in our continued resistance to it. The deepest resistance is not scientific, pragmatic or logical, but an unconscious psychological block to giving up a bit of narcissism on which modern materialism and creationism, surprisingly, agree.

The view of a single body as the referential base for our innate sense of self—whether seen as a fixed, unified whole or a sum of parts-in-themselves—is the universal, instinctive delusion Buddhist psychology sees as psychological self-reification (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) and psychoanalysis, primal narcissism. This innate delusion, reinforced by conventional wisdom, presents the single most insidious misunderstanding of multi-life theories of mind and personal agency. Namely: that a multi-life view means nothing more than the trivial fact that learned habits pass from generation to generation in the course of development. This mistake is insidious for two reasons. First, it trivializes the enormous personal and social significance of shifting our frame of self-reference from an atomic, “one body: one life” sense of self to a distributive, “one network of body-minds: one continuous stream of agency” sense of self. Second, it presents the individual as a passive vessel of imprinting, when in fact the developing mind is a voracious learner that actively incorporates raw materials from its world to build a new life. The conventional wisdom that mistakes the one life sense for a culture-neutral fact of biology, in this view does so by reifying a mental construct of the body as the self-sufficient, self-evident referent of personal pronouns like “I” and “myself.” This view not only mistakes mental constructs for ontologically real essences, but also denies the post-modern consensus that our sense of identity is a psychosociocultural construction. In effect, it assumes our body and self were “given” to us by nature or parents as if by an omnipotent creator God.

As the de-reifying, anti-essentialist insights of contemporary thought begin to sink in, we must inevitably rise to the challenge they pose. In the absence of any intrinsically objective reference for our sense of self, human individuals and communities are in fact responsible to craft some explicit consensus about how to preserve and extend the grammar of agency we have received. As long as one reads the model presented here as making a logical or quasi-empirical case for a multi-life view, one has missed the main point of this paper and the traditions it compares. As I read these traditions, their intent is to capitalize on the constructed nature of personal agency by offering a therapeutic model that can help us deconstruct and reconstruct our received sense of self in ways that make us more historically free and effective agents of our individual and communal well-being.

In effect, the intergenerational model of agency sketched above is meant to offer an alternative cultural style of personal experience and action, much as the materialist and egocentrist models of agency developed in the modern West offered an alternative to the idealist, authoritarian style received with our medieval tradition. As I see it, this is a more transparent, self-conscious style, more consistent with both a modern evolutionary view of life and the traditional multi-life views of human agency shared by a broad range of cultures prior to the advent of monotheism and creationism.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (University of California Press, 2002).

The Challenge to Buddhist Psychology and Ethics

As much as the proposed model challenges the consensus of Western science and religion, it also challenges the popular view of most Asian Buddhists. I mean the view that some substantial mind or essential identity travels from life to life as the substrate for moral responsibility and human development. With the exception of three sub-schools,⁷⁶ the Buddhist mainstream relies on forms of idealism to explain the Buddha's emphasis on the cosmically creative power and responsibility of each individual's mental acts. Though the Buddha emphasized the insight of selflessness, he was equally clear on the need for an empirical model of self that affirms the efficacy of mind and its intentional acts. Most schools of Buddhist thought identify that empirical self with the continuum (*saṃtana*) or process (*tantra*) of mind that serves as the primary support of intentional actions and of the causal continuity of psychological development and personal agency within and across lifetimes. Hence, the early schools codified in Vasubandhu's *Treasury* replaced naive Realist (*Vāstīputrīya*) views of a substantial person or soul with a complex metapsychology that revolved around the stream of consciousness. His Idealist (*Cittamātra*) writings replace this metapsychology in turn with the more frugal depth psychology of the subconscious mind (*ālaya-vijñāna*). Finally, the history of Universalist thought from Nāgārjuna to Chandrakīrti revolved around a debate over whether the critical philosophy of emptiness needs to be combined with some form of idealism in order to affirm the efficacy of intentional actions and the agents they create.

By reframing Buddhist idealism as a linguistic conventionalism, Chandrakīrti was able to provide an account of mental efficacy and moral agency that was constructivist in an intersubjective and consensual way, hence avoiding any subtle reification of individual minds and their creative acts that could serve as a nidus for the persistence of instinctual reifications of self.

Despite the unchallenged consensus that Chandrakīrti's view was definitive, idealism returned in critically revised forms with the rationale that less critical minds might mistake his radical conventionalism for a nihilistic negation of action and agency. Though his Dialecticist system became the system of choice in the *Mahāyāna* academies of India and Tibet, in practice Idealist Centristism gained a dominant role in the mainstream worldview of Buddhist civilization, elite and popular. In my view, the main reason for this is that, when it came to ethical and contemplative practice, Idealist depth psychology offered the only viable alternative to the neurolinguistic depth psychology of the Buddhist Tantras, which was restricted to confidential, private teaching contexts.⁷⁷ Hence, this reliance continued despite the preference of Centrist masters from Chandrakīrti, who spent much of his life critiquing idealism, to Tsong Khapa, who echoed Bhavaviveka's critique of its

⁷⁶ The *Vāstīputrīya*, *Sammitīya* and Chandrakīrti's *Prāsaṅgika*.

⁷⁷ Since the pedagogic consensus of Chandrakīrti's *Brilliant Lamp* (*Pradīpoddyotana*) insured the complementarity of exoteric *Mahāyāna* and esoteric *Vajrayāna* traditions by restricting teaching in the neurolinguistic depth psychology of the Unexcelled *Yoga Tantras* to private meetings, it left public discourse to rely on a symbiosis between Dialecticist Centrist philosophy and Idealist Centrist psychology and ethics.

role in the gradualist curriculum.⁷⁸ So, should contemporary Buddhists follow the precedent of the modern synthesis of Buddhist sciences in the *Wheel of Time* (*Kālachakra*), by guiding contemplative and ethical practice with an “extremely clear” (Tib. *shin tu sel ba*) version of the neurolinguistic psychology of the Tantras, it would feel to mainstream thinkers and practitioners in all Buddhist cultures like a radical departure from tradition. Yet that is precisely the version of Buddhist psychology offered in the *Wheel of Time*’s prophetic vision for our planet; the vision of a sustainable global culture based on universal education in the contemplative arts and sciences.⁷⁹

In comparative terms, a shift in Buddhist depth psychology from idealism to neuroscience is comparable to that currently underway in the West from the depth psychology of Freud, who avoided explicit neural mapping, to a synthetic neuropsychology informed by the latest brain research. I believe a comparable shift in mainstream Buddhist psychology is neither revisionist nor culturally hegemonic for three reasons: (1) Buddhist thought from its inception has freely incorporated shifts in conventional sciences into refinements in Buddhist teaching;⁸⁰ (2) the rise of the *Wheel of Time* synthesis and Tibetan medicine suggest that the tradition came to regard as technically definitive the neurolinguistic depth psychology of the Tantras⁸¹; (3) contemporary science has finally brought neural structure and function out of the realm of speculative description and contemplative intuition into that of objective knowledge and evidence, making a synthesis of depth psychology and neuroscience inevitable for the future of science education, public and professional.

With that said, there is no understating the profound impact a neurolinguistic model of *karmic* agency would have on traditional Buddhist cultures, popular and elite. For better or for worse, it would challenge the commonsense vision of life and death in those cultures as well as some deeply held forms of ethical explanation, teaching and practice. In general, it would challenge the Idealist consensus that *karma* and rebirth work by means of a quasi-substantial or essential mind that can detach from a deceased body and migrate into a new life. In particular, it would challenge forms of ethical explanation and teaching that presuppose that past *karmic* action is solely responsible for every aspect and event of present life, including misfortunes like congenital anomalies, genetic diseases and traumatic acts of nature or human violence.

As for the general challenge, the image of a stream of consciousness migrating from one body to another and carrying along with it the imprints of past actions would have to give way to a more non-dualistic view of the transmission of

⁷⁸ “...it would be better (to avoid it [idealism] from the first, as it is better) to stay away from the mud, rather than getting soiled and having to wash yourself off.” *Prāṇapradīpa*, as quoted in *Legs bshad snying po*, IV.II.2, translated in Thurman, *Essence*, 274.

⁷⁹ Joseph Loizzo, “Kalachakra and the Nalanda Tradition,” in E. Arnold, ed., *As Long as Space Endures: Essays on the Kalachakratra in honor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2009).

⁸⁰ This tradition is personified in our day by the avid curiosity expressed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his many dialogues with Western scientists.

⁸¹ This maps consciousness onto a model of the nervous system featuring all the explanatory elements of modern neuroscience, including neural energies (*prāṇa*), pathways (*nadī*), complexes (*chakras*) and drops (*bindu*), all interactive with mind but made of “subtle matter” (*sukṣmarūpa*).

intentional agency. Such a view would include primal consciousness as one of the primary elements, consubstantial with the five states of living matter, and growing along with a vague disposition and generic instincts in and through embryonic development.⁸² And it would view the transmigrating agency as in the de-reified science of the *Wheel of Time*: as an open system of mental habit patterns (*śūnyacitta-vāsanā-skandha*), free from any gross atoms from another life yet made of subtle, space-like mass energy and empty information, like a dream/sleep body (*svapna-śarīra*) or the apparitional bodies (*upapāduka-śarīra*) of beings in formal contemplation and formless absorption.^{83, 84}

The second major challenge posed by a psycholinguistic model is to certain applications of *karma* and rebirth in Buddhist ethics. This includes the use of *karma* as an explanation of last resort to make ethical sense of cases of extreme hardship, trauma or inequity. On the level of popular worldview, the effects of *karma* in past lives are often invoked to bring a sense of justice or equity to situations that seem anything but just or fair in the present. These include inequities of wealth, fortune and power, as well as seemingly inexplicable cases of calamity or violent trauma.⁸⁵ While this helps empower individuals to accept hardships as part of the natural order of things and to take full responsibility for their perception and reaction to stressful events, it is often interpreted literally in ways that conflict not just with modern concepts of justice, but also with the traditional science of *karma* as well.⁸⁶ A similar problem arises when *karma* theory is used, as in Tibetan medicine, to explain natural anomalies like congenital defects or illnesses with physical causes like cancer or toxic exposure. However challenging, a painstaking analysis and revision of such

⁸² Buddhist science from the *Treasury* to the *Wheel of Time* sees consciousness (*vijñāna*) as one of six primary elements or states (*mahābhūta*) present in all living matter; and as naturally impure or contaminated (*sāsrava*) by the root toxins of instinctive delusion and compulsive emotions evolved from “beginningless time.” Vasubandhu’s *Treasury*, AK, 1.28cd; Pruden, 1, 89.

⁸³ Vesna Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratānta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63; AK, 3.8-9; Pruden, 2, 380-383. Classically, the subtle mind/body in transition to a new incarnation is not just analogous to the subtle mind/body state of a being in contemplation but fully equivalent. In fact, those who die in a state of formless absorption are reborn directly in the formless realm without any transition state at all. See AK, 3.10; Pruden, 2, 383, specifically n. 85. Of note, formless realm beings are said to have bodies made exclusively of the space element and minds sensitive only to sounds, a clear reference to the linguistic cosmogony that the Buddhist Tantras share with the Hindu tradition.

⁸⁴ Of further interest, the imagery of the Unexcelled Buddhist Tantras is also consistent with a psycholinguistic view of agency in that, when the process of death, transition and rebirth is rehearsed in that context, the image typically used is that of a seed syllable (*bīja-mantra*) visualized at the heart of the central nervous system—said to signify the extremely subtle, indestructible mind-energy-drop (*susuk ma-ak ara-bindu*) that transmigrates—dissolving into and resurrecting out of the clear light of death (*m tyur-prabhāsvāra*). See Joseph Loizzo, “Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibetan Perspective: A Spiritual Science of Civilized Happiness” in P. Bilimoria (ed), *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy*. (London: Routledge Press, forthcoming, 2011).

⁸⁵ The rhetoric here is striking, as we can see from the language of Dharmarajita’s classic *Wheel Weapon of Mind Training* (*bLo’byong mTshon-sha ‘Khor-lo*): “In brief, when calamities befall me, it is the weapon of (my own) evil *karma* turning upon me, just like the ironsmith who is slain by his own sword.” Thupten Jinpa, trans. In *Mind Training: The Great Collection* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 140.

⁸⁶ For instance, the popular idea that an abuse victim must somehow have caused their abuse or a subjugated group caused their repression conflicts with the requirement that *karmic* effects not be transferrable.

uses of *karmic* bioethics would add both to its explanatory power and to its ability to resist the corrosive nihilism of materialist ethics.

Multi-Life Agency and Psychotherapy

As for psychotherapy, this model suggests optimistically that personality styles may be no more fixed than the language habits learned to rationalize them. On the other hand, it also suggests that “one life” genetic interpretation that neglects the intergenerational and sociocultural back-story of development may mire therapy in traumatic victim narratives, failing to help therapist or client see and treat self-limiting patterns of agency fairly and objectively. It may be seductive to blame parents or other perpetrators of abuse and neglect for all the suffering an individual, couple, family or social group experiences now, but a neurolinguistic approach would caution that this natural impulse must be carefully assessed and balanced if it is not to backfire on the innocent recipient of other’s misbehavior.⁸⁷ This is especially important in couples and family therapy, where habits like blame, mistrust and resentment predictably create a self-fulfilling prophecy of mutual misunderstanding and mistreatment, perpetuating intergenerational patterns of abuse and neglect.

While this model has obvious resonance with the learning models of current cognitive therapies, it extends beyond specific habits of thought to view personal identity and agency themselves as acquired habits along with the patterns of perception, emotion and action they organize. So this model opens the possibility that psychotherapy could, with the right combination of insights and methods, reach much deeper than it presently does, to expose and change personal habits handed down over generations and ingrained in neural processing since early childhood development.⁸⁸

Although the theoretical and mechanistic aspects of this model are challenging, I have found that most clients grasp the empowering insights and implications it offers relatively easily. In practice, I bring the multi-life model up whenever the therapeutic process runs into self-limiting traits and resistances rooted in unconscious identification and/or symbiosis with parental role models. While conventional therapy may stop at such points and view these as fixed elements of character, an intergenerational model frees both therapist and client to see them as conditioned habits that can be partly or wholly unlearned. Especially key is the willingness to take on what I call the traumatized sense of self, the complex of traumatic distortions, stress emotions and compulsive reactions from early parent-child interactions, which most of us instinctively reify as the real “me, myself and I.”

⁸⁷ By inflaming negative thoughts and emotions that could block objective insight and empathy, psychotherapy may unwittingly lock individuals in a childhood stance of helplessness and hyper-vigilance that only reinforces traumatic memories and the repetitive experience of past traumas.

⁸⁸ Joseph Loizzo, *Meditation and Psychotherapy: Stress, Allostasis and Enriched Learning*, *op cit*.

Conclusion: Language, Culture and the Future of Human Agency

I believe I have shown that an intergenerational theory of personal agency is neither a speculative metaphysics of morals nor a throwback to pre-scientific religious beliefs, but an essential conceptual ingredient in any complete evolutionary psychology. Some way of conceptualizing the transmission of personal agency across generations would seem indispensable for any psychology that assumes a multi-life view of human origins and includes a non-reductive model of the causal efficacy of the mind and its acts. Examples of some such theory can be found in different periods and cultures, ancient and modern, Asian and Western. Since most such theories assume a reified ontology like monistic idealism or interactionist dualism, they have been hard to reconcile with the materialist assumptions of modern science. This conflict, in addition to unconscious commitments to a one body: one life exclusivism, helps explain the failure of modern psychology to articulate a coherent model of the intergenerational transmission of character.

This article offers a distinctive model that avoids both these problems, based on a comparative reading of ordinary language philosophy in Buddhism and the modern West. Set in the context of a deep linguistic approach to the consensual construction of personal, social and cultural agency in human life, this model is consistent with a neurolinguistic conception of development that is specifically suited to humans as speaking social animals. It is also consistent with both neuroscientific revisions of contemporary psychoanalysis and the contemplative neuroscience of Tantric models of psychology and medicine. Though this reading of *karma* may seem anachronistic or revisionist to some, even a cursory glance at the Indian tradition of linguistic philosophy (*vyākaraṇa*) it reflects should suffice to challenge that sense.⁸⁹

Key to its conceptual economy and elegance is its de-reifying, anti-essentialist view of self as a psychosocial construction coordinated by language learning and modified in the course of human development within and across individual lives. And key to its explanatory logic is its embodied, neurolinguistic view of speech acts as a specifically human form of top-down *autopoiesis* embedded within an evolutionary spectrum of mind/body systems for the conservation and transformation of received information. Because of the relative emptiness of linguistic constructs and their vast encoding flexibility, a linguistic model of self-creation helps account for the endless variety of human agency and helps explain why language-guided social learning freed humans to do so much more with the basic wetware of the mammalian cortex and neuroplasticity. On a methodological note, this model of multi-life agency, unlike more literal, idealistic models of *karma*, has the advantage of being amenable to validation or falsification by empirical research.

Despite its obvious strengths, this model poses serious challenges for both Buddhist and Western science, worldviews and ethics. The notion that something as empty as language habits can carry a causal efficacy that fundamentally shapes human experience and development is counterintuitive from the commonsense standpoints of both these traditions. More challenging still to the sense of personal identity innate in all humans and articulated in all human cultures is the notion that

⁸⁹ The intimate tie between Sanskrit linguistics, the *mantric* view of world-creation and the *yogic* map of the nervous system as a subtle body (*sukṣ ma-śarira*) goes back at least as far as the early *Upaniṣads*.

personal identity and history are functions of a performative speech act of self-reification rather than some more objective criteria of identity or history. On the other hand, the corrosive influence of modern materialism and its reduction of self and mind to ineffectual properties of mindless matter has prepared the modern mind for more critical notions of agency than those assumed in prior eras. This is especially so since the modern deconstruction of mental efficacy and personal agency has even come to dominate the cognitive and social sciences, threatening to further undermine and confound the everyday grammar of human experience and action.

In this post-modern context, the linguistic model of agency presented here offers a middle way that affirms the efficacy of the human mind and its intentional acts at the same time as it affirms de-reifying, anti-essentialist critiques of soul, self and mind. Perhaps the greatest limit of this model is that it offers so little quarter to the self-reifying instinct of human narcissism that it seems even more counterintuitive than the reductive materialism and deconstructive relativism of the modern sciences. Compounding this difficulty is the unprecedented freedom and responsibility it ascribes to individual minds and communities of minds as self-creative agents of their own personal, social and cultural development. Yet given the pressing need for humanity to be conceptually prepared for the unprecedented freedom and responsibility of global development and interdependence, the time may now be right for us to seriously explore such a promising alternative to our received views of human agency.