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An analysis of the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth in the Visuddhimagga

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[9] **Abstract**

In the *Visuddhimagga*, there is movement from an early Buddhist phenomenalist epistemology towards essentialist ontology based in rationality and abstraction. The reductionist methodology of the *Abhidhamma* and reactions to it brought forth a theory of momentariness not found in early Buddhism. *Abhidhamma* reductionism and the concept of phenomenal *dhammas* led to a conception of momentary time-points and the incorporation of a cinematic model of temporal consciousness as a direct consequence of momentariness. Essentialism was incorporated into the *Visuddhimagga* precisely because of Buddhaghosa's commitment to momentariness. This is seen in Buddhaghosa's treatment of karma and rebirth. Karma, particularly death-threshold karma, receives more emphasis in the *Visuddhimagga* than was previously found in the *Suttas*. This is due to the need to explain the continuity of the process of karmic rebirth in light of the theory of momentariness, making it necessary for Buddhaghosa to synthesise momentariness with the tri-temporal existence of the *Sarvāstivādins*.

[10] **Key Words:** Karma, Rebirth, Time and Temporality, Buddhism, Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga

The concept of karma

The literal definition of the Sanskrit word karma¹ is action, particularly action of a ritual variety. The incorporation of karma into rebirth eschatologies appears to be a distinct feature of Indic thoughtⁱ and it is believed to have arisen from the ritual actions and sacrifices of the Brahminsⁱⁱ dating back to the Vedic period.ⁱⁱⁱ In their simplest terms, or what Karl Potter called the “Classical Karma Theory of India”, karma theories declare that certain fundamental features of one’s present life, particularly “one’s birth, length of life and type of experiences”, are conditioned by one’s actions in previous existences and are outcomes of “one’s own past actions and no one else’s”.^{iv}

With the exception of the Ājīvikas, who recognised the existence of karma but denied the efficacy of human action in conditioning rebirth,^v and the Cārvakās, who denied both karma and rebirth, karma and rebirth are usually taken as functioning together in Indian eschatology. However, as Obeyesekere famously demonstrated, although rebirth eschatologies have been quite common in small-scale societies throughout history, only Indian rebirth eschatologies seem to have been ethicised by means of a theory of karma.^{vi}

[11] Given this historical context, it is unsurprising that an ethicised karmic rebirth eschatology is found in Buddhism. However, it is fair to say that the Buddha revolutionised both karma and rebirth by putting forth the doctrine of no-self / non-substantiality (*anatta*). Whereas other Indian karmic rebirth eschatologies depended on the existence of a substantial transmigrating self / soul (Sanskrit: *atman*), life monads (Sanskrit: *jīva*) or some other theorised substantial element, the Buddhist conceptions of karmic rebirth were centred entirely in the notion of causality via the doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and intention (*cetanā*).

When one explores the mechanisms of karmic rebirth in light of the doctrine of *anatta*, it becomes apparent that while Buddhism uses the same vocabulary as other Indic theories of karma and rebirth, the theories are actually quite different. The mechanism of karmic rebirth in other Indian religious philosophies was dependent on the reincarnation / transmigration of a substantial soul or essence, whereas the Buddhist conception of rebirth, or

¹ Karma is not italicised in this article due to its now-common usage in English language, italicised words will be from the Pāli unless otherwise noted. References to the Pāli Canon will be used in the text (formatted in PTS version), while references to the *Visuddhimagga* will be cited in the chapter and verse format (Vism.Chapter.Verse).

rebecoming (*punabbhava*), took great care to point to the non-existence of any substantial entity or essence capable of reincarnating or transmigrating.

The lack of a substantial transmigrating entity led to philosophical difficulties in explaining karmic continuity across existences. The Buddhist conception of continuity in the absence of a substantial entity or essence is laid out in the canon. In the *Suttas*, rebirth is the logical outcome of the process metaphysics^{vii} of dependent [12] arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), with karma itself acting as the “strong principle of continuity”^{viii} across a potentially infinite succession of dependently arisen existences. In keeping with the classification of the Buddha’s teaching as process metaphysics, or what Whitehead referred to as the “philosophy of organism”,^{ix} karma is an organic metaphor for causation.^x A karmic act is likened to the planting of a seed which needs many other conditions like rain, sun and appropriate temperature in order to bear fruit. Using a metaphor from the *Bhava Sutta* (A.I.223), we can say that while an individual villager has little control over the seed or rain necessary for his crop, he does have a great, if ultimately limited, influence on the field in which the seed is planted. This is the field of karma in early Buddhism.

However, aside from the general relation of karma to the process metaphysics of dependent arising, the particular mechanics of the karmic rebirth process are not detailed in the *Suttas*. The groundwork for explaining the functioning of a karmic rebirth mechanism is drawn from the *Abhidhamma*, and expanded on in the commentaries, with the emergence of *dhamma* theory. *Dhamma* theory is the idea that “all the phenomena of empirical existence are made up of a number of elementary constituents, the ultimate realities behind the manifest phenomena. These elementary constituents, the building blocks of experience, are called *dhammas*”.^{xi} The mechanics of rebirth are demonstrated in this theory of *dhammas* by inferring continuity across time from the contiguity of the infinitesimal *dhammas* in sequential experience.

[13] **Early Buddhist karma theory**

Buddhist karma theory is primarily based on intention (*cetanā*) and produces conditions of existence rather than retributive consequences in the form of “rewards and punishments”.^{xii} In other traditions, karma may be thought of as an absolutistic and deterministic law of retribution. Among the Jains karma was conceived of as a substance working in the physical realm, while among the Ājīvikas, past karma was operative, but at the same time, impossible to

expiate and ultimately irrelevant to one's escape from the rebirth process.^{xiii} Given the shared vocabulary among several different Indian traditions, it is unremarkable to note that aspects of Buddhist karma theory are often conflated with aspects of other Indic theories of karma. We contend that the main cause of these misunderstandings regarding particularly Buddhist conceptions of karma is a tendency toward the conflation of multiple karmic functions into one essentialist, overarching and unwieldy karmic theory. In order to remedy this difficulty in the analysis of Buddhist karma, we must examine the various aspects of all Indic karma theories separately and in doing so, we find three major functions.^{xiv}

1. Karma as causality;
2. Karma as ethical theory;
3. Karma and its relation to rebirth/ salvation from rebirth.

[14] In early Buddhism, the karma as causality functions *descriptively* to illustrate principles of causality and continuity in a conventional and instrumental relation to the larger process metaphysics of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, while the ethical and rebirth-oriented aspects of karma function *normatively* to affirm the efficacy of human action in leading a moral life. Karma as causality describes why the circumstances of one's life are the way they are. The ethical theory of karma demonstrates the efficacy of human action in changing one's circumstances now and in the future. The relation of karma to rebirth both reaffirms the descriptive aspects of karmic causality and offers an avenue of escape via ultimate liberation from karma by the attainment of *nibbāna*.^{xv}

All three facets of karma are derived from a phenomenological analysis of the world in which one perceives that while one has no control over the circumstances of one's birth and only limited control of experiences resulting from these circumstances, one does have the ability to bring about wholesome or otherwise positive results for oneself within society now and into the future, through engaging in "wholesome / skilful" (*kusala*) ethical action and thought.

In Buddhism, karma as an aspect of causality functions as a denial of determinism and an affirmation of the efficacy of human action, even if it is limited by circumstances beyond one's control. This is best contrasted with the complete determinism of the Ājīvikas. [15] While Buddhism does not put forth an argument for complete freedom of will, it does leave space for moral action. According to the Buddha, Ājīvika determinism and fatalism did not provide a valid reason for living a moral life (D.I.47; A.I.286; M.I.517) and the

Buddha explicitly rejected this view. In fact, the Buddha declares that Ājīvika doctrine is the worst of all doctrines specifically because it denies “karma, deed and energy” (A.I.287) and proclaims (M.I.483) that no Ājīvika has made an end of suffering and that the only Ājīvika who was reborn in heaven over 99 aeons was a believer in karma (*kammavādin*).

However, while the Buddhist notion of karma as causality rejects strong determinism, it also recognises the role that non-intentional and external conditions play in one’s experience and comprehends the presence of limits on complete freedom of action, with karma as only one of many causal factors involved in the present and possible future states of the individual (S.IV.230). It is precisely in this undetermined, but limited “field of action” (A.I.223) that intention and volitional action can operate and from which Buddhist conceptions of karma as causality can be coherently ethicised.

Karma as an ethical theory in Buddhism rests upon the move from karma as action to karma as intention (A.III.410). Bronkhorst points out that “Buddhism psychologised the notion of karmic retribution”,^{xvi} by shifting away from the emphasis on deed found in other Indian schools towards an emphasis on desire [16] and intention. It is this move that is the key to Buddhist soteriology. The usual Indic view of karma as action and latent substance leads to theories of liberation through inaction to avoid making new karma coupled with austerities to annihilate existing karma. In contrast, the Buddhist theory of karma avoids inaction and austerities by focusing on the elimination of mental defilement (*kilesa*) through psychological practice.^{xvii} This is the essence of the Buddha’s “middle way” and it accommodates an ethical and active soteriology, rather than one based on immobility and austerity.

Karma as an ethical theory may be said to presuppose the existence of a moral order, a moral order best thought of as an explanatory construct rather than as a metaphysical concept like a “moral law”. This is due to the philosophical problems inherent in the existence of a moral law in the absence of a moral “lawgiver”. While ethical aspects of karma are seen as part of a predictable, yet undetermined, process in which unskilful (*akusala*) intentions will tend to produce unpleasant results and vice-versa, it must be remembered that an action is not unskilful or “wrong” because it brings about unpleasant results; it brings about unpleasant results because it is wrong.

Failure to make this distinction may result in a misunderstanding of karma as a strong type of naturalistic ethical determinism. While there is some canonical support for an intrinsic moral order resembling a western conception of poetic “justice”, such as the lascivious male’s [17] three rebirths as animals that were to be castrated (Thig. 437-4), the effects of a karma are not to be understood as determined in a one-for-one fashion. Instead, they depend on the nature of the person and circumstances in which the karma was done,^{xviii} (A.I.249) as part of an “indeterminate (yet non-random) process”.^{xix} It is clear from the Buddhist rejection of Ājīvika determinism in regard to causality that any doctrine of karma as strong ethical determinism must also be rejected. It may be that since karma as an ethical theory is primarily directed toward lay practitioners as a basis for practical morality in Buddhist society, karmic depictions of poetic justice can be taken as evidence of a doctrine of “moral naturalism”^{xx} and / or as pedagogical instruments to teach ethics to lay followers of the Buddha.

The final point to be made regarding karma as an ethical doctrine is that it inculcates in the practitioner a desire to consider the consequences not only of their ethical actions, but to cultivate consistent moral practices, mentally, physically and verbally, with the aim of affecting their intentions. Karma as ethics encourages humility and selflessness through contemplation of the innumerable factors in the process of dependent arising and how they necessarily produce consequences. The ethics of karma also takes emphasis away from abstract ethical thought experiments about the essence of “right” and “wrong” and focuses effort on producing compassionate ethical actors whose cultivated moral sensibilities continually inform their intentions and actions when morally significant situations are presented to them.

[18] The final aspect of early Buddhist karma theory is the function of karma in the Buddhist soteriological project. In this scheme, karma is seen as something to be overcome and ultimately rendered irrelevant with the attainment of *nibbāna*. In other Indian schools which define karma as action and the fruit of action, karma can only be annihilated through the most extreme forms of inaction and immobility. However, due to the Buddhist conception of karma as intention, karma can be rendered inoperable through a purification of the mind that results in actions that are free of the poisons of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), which causes them to produce karma that is “neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright ripening, that conduces to the exhaustion of karma” (M.I.387).

Karma in the Visuddhimagga

In this paper we are primarily concerned with the different aspects of karma and rebirth as presented in the *Visuddhimagga*. We contend that Buddhaghosa brought into Theravada Buddhism an essentialism that is not found in early Buddhism, due to a shift away from the process metaphysics of the *Nikāyas* towards the sectarian *Abhidhammic* conceptions of atomistic *dhammas* as mind-independent, elementary constituents of existence; followed by another shift toward a notion of *dhammas* as discrete, atomistic time-moments due to the inclusion of a theory of momentariness.^{xxi} We contend that there was an increasing shift away from the process metaphysics [19] of the *Nikāyas* toward an essentialist metaphysical view from the time of the schism following the 2nd Buddhist Council that eventually culminates in Buddhaghosa's synthesis of momentariness with the doctrines of karma and rebirth in the *Visuddhimagga*.

This subtle shift away from process metaphysics to essentialism was an effect of the doctrine of momentariness that developed logically from the reductionist methodology of the early Buddhists. The Buddha himself was primarily a religious teacher concerned with salvation from suffering rather than a builder of a systematic metaphysics, and as such left an incomplete view of ontology. Therefore, the metaphysics of early Buddhism closely resemble process thought approached from a phenomenologically "realist" perspective. The Sarvāstivādin and Vātasīputrīya sects approached their versions of Abhidhammic theory from the same realistic perspective as the early Buddhists, which led to the formation of a school of "personalism" (Pudgalavādins) in the case of the Vātasīputrīyas and to the concept of tri-temporal existence of *dhammas* (*dhammas* that exist in all three periods of time, past, present and future) in the case of the Sarvāstivādins. Both the personalism of the Vātasīputrīyas and the realism of the Sarvāstivādins would be vehemently opposed by the Sautrāntika and Madhyamaka sects as forerunners of Yogācāra, while it would be left to Buddhaghosa to synthesise the doctrines of the Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas with the doctrines of the Theravādins.

[20] As phenomena were reduced in the various sectarian *Abhidhamma* philosophies, this reduction to *dhammas* conceived of as the smallest perceptual building blocks of experience resulted in a tendency to reconstruct them as discrete ultimate entities (*paramattha-dhamma*). Although, as Karunadasa contends, "In the Pāli tradition, it is only for the sake of definition and description that each *dhamma* is postulated as if it were a separate entity",^{xxii} when the same logical reductionism that gave rise to *dhamma* theory was applied to time, a theory of momentariness arose.

This atomistic momentariness of time was ultimately coupled with the conception of *dhammas* as discrete, ultimate entities, which introduced a philosophical difficulty in accounting for continuity between these *dhammas* conceived of as discrete time-moments. Without a way of establishing continuity between these time-moments, a great difficulty was also raised in establishing karmic continuity across lives, which threatened the entire soteriological project of Buddhism.

The Sarvāstivādins appear to have held fast to the realist phenomenology of early Buddhism, but with an explicitly eternalist view of time. They fully accepted the real existence of the past, present and future *dhammas*. Even after adopting momentariness, the Sarvāstivādins continued to believe in the past, present and future existence of *dhammas*, while attributing full causal powers only to the momentarily present *dhammas*. Furthermore, the entire concept of past, present and future is condensed into the momentarily present *dhamma* by defining the [21] “time-moment” as the interval in which a *dhamma* arises, persists and perishes. This is the Sarvāstivādin theory of tri-temporal existence and it was also vehemently opposed by the Madhyamaka and Sautrāntikas.

The Vātasīputrīya responded to the problem of karmic continuity across lives by resorting to personalism, postulating the *puggala* as a non-eternal, but existing, personal entity to maintain personal identity in karmic rebirth. This concept of *puggala* was taken to be heretical by the other sects at the time, and it is certainly considered heretical by modern day Buddhists. However, according to Hiuen Tsang in the 7th Century ACE, Pudgalavādins were the most numerous of sects at that time in Indian Buddhism. Due to the strong acceptance of Sarvāstivāda and Pudgalavāda in classical India, we contend that it is likely that there was wide-spread doctrinal acceptance of ontological realism prevalent in classical Indian Buddhism that is underappreciated today.

The Madhyamaka rejected the entire concept of momentariness and denied the absolute reality of time itself (as well as the entire conception of *dhammas*, postulating that reality itself was a conceptual construct) on the basis that the past, present and future cannot logically exist in each other and that a non-static time cannot be grasped as the absolute present continues to flow into the past.^{xxiii}

The Sautrāntikas committed themselves to non-substantiality (*anatta*) by avoiding essentialism [22] while accepting a radical momentariness that

resulted in a commitment to durationless *dhammas* resembling infinitesimals, and a notion of radical presentism in regard to time. The Sautrāntikas accepted a cinematic model of temporal consciousness fully and followed it to its logical conclusion by postulating *dhammas* that arise and cease without persistence or duration. This position is rigorously logical in avoiding essentialism, but it does little to answer the question of how a *dhamma* that ceases immediately upon arising can have causal power or continuity. The Sautrāntikas displayed the same hard-headed logical consistency and attributed on-going causal efficiency to the series of moments rather than to the enduring effects of the individual momentary *dhammas*. They banked on immediate contiguity to account for change rather than postulating any change in the *dhamma* itself, due to the *dhamma's* lack of persistence over time. Instead, the *dhamma's* activity was reduced to its existence.^{xxiv} In this account, time is no more than the succession of infinitesimal *dhammas* perishing immediately after their origination.

Buddhaghosa dealt with the difficulty of establishing karmic continuity across lives by inferring continuity from the contiguity of time-moments in line with the Sautrāntikas. In the realm of karmic rebirth, this was accomplished via the rebirth-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāṇa*), which is postulated as “existing” momentarily between the cessation of the death consciousness (*cuti-citta*) and the arising of mentality-materiality (*nama-rupa*) and the life-continuum consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*) at the moment of rebirth-linking. The existence of the rebirth-linking consciousness is a logical necessity for Buddhaghosa in order to explain the continuity between the processes of death and rebirth in keeping with the Buddhist doctrine of non-substantiality (*anatta*). The rebirth-linking consciousness is inserted to avoid any troublesome gaps between existences. The *bhavaṅga-citta* of the new existence is simply classified as a resultant state of consciousness (*vipaka-citta*) conditioned by the karma that in turn conditioned the rebirth-linking consciousness of the previous existence (Vism.XI.2).

This is an elegant philosophical explanation of how continuity is maintained across lives and a useful tool for meditation on this subject. It also accounts for the ability of spiritual adepts to recall past lives by tracing one's continuity of subjective experience from the present existence back (Vism.XIII.14). Even non-Buddhist adepts are said to be able to recall past lives, but only as a succession of aggregates. Buddhists are said to have a more privileged insight by tracing both the succession of aggregates and death and rebirth-linking, while a Buddha can skip the succession of births

and deaths in his own or another's stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) and speak of any particular point at will (Vism.XIII.17). Finally, Buddhaghosa is able to demonstrate the mechanism by which the *arahant* is liberated from the cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*), with the attainment [24] of enlightenment (*nibbāna*) stopping the formation of another rebirth-linking consciousness at the cessation of the death consciousness in the present lifetime (Vism.XIV.124).

Buddhaghosa takes as his premise the idea that just as one conscious moment invariably conditions the next conscious moment in one's present life, the death consciousness invariably conditions the rebirth-linking consciousness, which in turn conditions the resultant consciousness in exactly the same manner as in the present succession of moments (Vism.XVII.126). The entire metaphysics of the *Visuddhimagga* depends on this uninterrupted succession of *dhammas* as discrete time-moments. It is for this reason that the common folk belief in the existence of an intermediate state (*antarābhava*) is also denied in this metaphysical system to maintain continuity (Vism.XIX.23).

Temporality and Momentariness in the *Visuddhimagga*

A significant problem arises in putting forth a metaphysically satisfying account of the nature of continuity inferred from the succession of contiguous, momentary *dhammas*, of which the rebirth-linking consciousness is just another example. The Sautrāntikas were only able to deal with this issue by attributing causal efficiency to the series of moments with each individual *dhamma* fully replicating the preceding *dhamma* as well as bringing to fruition its own momentary, individual, causal efficiency. The *dhammas* as wholly independent and [25] durationless time-moments can combine interdependently with other *dhammas*, but cannot interact with those other *dhammas* as they are each indivisible time-moments that cannot exist long enough to be acted upon by each other or act as a catalyst.^{xxv}

The phenomenological realism of early Buddhism avoided this problem by accepting a common-sense extensional model of temporal consciousness^{xxvi} that accepted one's immediate experience as constituting a succession of finite temporal experiences, each with some duration over time, constituting a "specious present".^{xxvii} This is similar to a Whiteheadian "actual entity", whose very being is constituted by its process of becoming.^{xxviii} These "drops of experience, complex and interdependent"^{xxix} can accommodate the momentary arising and cessation of phenomena in a theory of

momentariness into a single, conscious perception of an extensional specious present that endures through a short period of time. This idea of an extensional specious present that is a product of conscious perception *of the world*, but which does not rely on the ontological status of things *in the world*, supports Kalupahana's assertion that early Buddhism followed the "middle path" regarding time; rejecting both the concept of absolute time and the hypothesis that time is an illusion of the intellect as two extremes. Instead, the Buddha "seems to have considered time as an essential feature of the universe and the experience of it".^{xxx}

[26] Likewise, in Whitehead's version of process metaphysics, the impossibility of perceiving an abstracted temporal location such as the "absolute present" is remedied while avoiding "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness"^{xxxix} by postulating an "enduring physical object",^{xxxix} which is in reality, a nexus of processes functioning as "actual entities" (occasions of experience) in time. Much like *dhammas*, these "actual entities" are postulated purely as logically atomized instruments of definition and description rather than as ultimate entities.

With the existence of an explanation in early Buddhism that does not contradict the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*) and coheres with the *dhamma* theory of the *Abhidhamma*, why then does Buddhaghosa resort to essentialism in his metaphysics?

The simple answer is that while Buddhaghosa was careful to avoid attributing metaphysical essence to the own-nature (*sabhava*) of *dhammas* he remained committed to the theory of momentariness that arose from the application of the reductionism used to create *dhamma* theory to the concept of time. The addition of a momentary, atomised conception of time to the idea of *dhammas* as elementary constituents of existence logically led to the conception of *dhammas* as atomistic time-moments along the lines of those postulated by the Sautrāntikas. This created the aforementioned difficulty with causation as this type of momentary *dhamma* could not be said to endure long enough to condition the successive *dhammas* [27] that arise following each *dhamma's* cessation without granting *dhammas* some form of substantiality, essence and experiential "thickness". It also created a problem with the idea of direct perception of the external world, to which Buddhaghosa and many other commentators and philosophers were also committed.

An unwillingness to grant any substantiality to *dhammas* leads to a Sautrāntika type of “cinematic model of temporal consciousness” in which, “Our streams of consciousness are composed of continuous successions of these momentary states of consciousness... analogous to movies, which (as displayed) consist of rapid sequences of still images”.^{xxxiii} This cinematic model of temporal consciousness is the usual end result when a reductionist methodology is applied to the concept of time. However, this model is subject to the serious objection that a succession of experiences is not the same thing as an experience of succession.^{xxxiv} The Sautrāntikas maintained their commitment to the reduction of time by committing to the theory of representationalism rather than direct perception.

The Sautrāntika solution posed a great difficulty for Buddhaghosa because he was committed to direct perception of *dhammas* as actual experiences of events *in time*, or even *as time*,^{xxxv} in the manner they were presented in early Buddhism, while also being intellectually committed to the abstraction of momentariness. While the Sautrāntika commitment to avoiding essentialism [28] *and* accepting momentariness resulted in a commitment to durationless *dhammas* and radical presentism, the Sarvāstivādins resorted to the concept of tri-temporal existence in which the *dhammas* were said to exist at all three periods of time; past, present and future. Other schools of Indian Buddhism saw the Sarvāstivādin commitment to the existence of *dhammas* in all time periods as the doctrine of substantiality by another name, but it had the advantages of complementing the doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and accounting for the perception of past and future *dhammas* in line with direct perception.^{xxxvi} However, according to Karunadasa, the tri-temporal theory of existence introduced among the Sarvāstivādins resulted in the emergence of:

A metaphysical dimension to the doctrine of *dhammas* and thus paved the way for the erosion of its empirical foundation. For this theory makes an empirically unverifiable distinction between the actual being of the *dhammas* as phenomena and their ideal being as noumena. It assumes that the substances of all *dhammas* persist in all the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—while their manifestations as phenomena are impermanent and subject to change. Accordingly, a *dhamma* actualizes itself only in the present moment of time, but “in essence” it continues to subsist in all the three temporal periods. As is well known, this resulted in the transformation of the *dhamma* theory into a *svabhavavada*, “the doctrine of own-nature.” It also paved the

way for a veiled recognition, if not for a categorical assumption, of the [29] distinction between substance and quality.^{xxxvii}

Given Buddhaghosa's commitments to both momentariness and direct perception, he was forced to resort to this Sarvāstivādin essentialism in order to underlie his metaphysics in the *Visuddhimagga*. He accomplished this by incorporating tri-temporal existence into his conception of *dhammas* by conceiving of *dhammas* as containing within them (rather than existing in) all three periods of time, past, present and future.

Buddhaghosa accomplished this by way of the metaphysical postulation that material *dhammas* endure longer than mental *dhammas*, by a ratio of sixteen to one (Vism.XX.24). This allowed Buddhaghosa to assign a tri-temporal categorisation of past, present and future (by way of arising, persisting and ceasing) to *dhammas* themselves, thus giving endowing them with traditional causal efficiency; while at the same time maintaining the concept of *dhammas* as discrete infinitesimal time-moments. This ingenious concept also had the added effect of maintaining direct perception and symmetrical causality. While direct perception and symmetrical causality are not explicitly stated doctrines in early Buddhism, they do fit well with the phenomenological realism of early Buddhism.

However, Buddhaghosa's manoeuvre succeeded at the cost of ascribing misplaced concreteness to momentary mental *dhammas* in order to differentiate them from momentary material *dhammas*. It also called into question [30] the very definition of momentariness. Essentialism necessarily emerges from this coupling and Buddhaghosa was forced to downplay the phenomenological and empirically asymmetric nature of extensional temporal causality found in early Buddhism, in which the present is associated with becoming,^{xxxviii} in favour of this new essentialist paradigm. Although this appears to be a minor philosophical innovation undertaken in order to harmonise diverse doctrines, it results in concretisation of the doctrine of momentariness and a final shift away from non-substantiality in Theravāda Buddhism.

The early Buddhist extensional model of temporal consciousness allowed the contents of conscious perception to extend *through time*, and therefore had no need of a theory of momentariness. It also allowed for the presence of past events in the extensional consciousness without according them a type of ontological existence or substantiality. The early Buddhist model of temporal consciousness is in line with the empirical and phenomenological

experience of a “specious present” and it avoided the metaphysical problems of a lack of continuity and diachronic complexity found in the cinematic model of temporal consciousness used by the reductionist Sautrāntikas. While it seems that Buddhaghosa was aware of the danger in attributing substance in the guise of own-nature (*sabhava*) to *dhammas*, he was less attentive to the problem of essentialism arising from the atomisation of time via the theory of momentariness. It was this move toward an analysis of existence into a succession of [31] discrete time-moments that fundamentally transformed Theravada Buddhist epistemology into an essentialist enterprise.^{xxxix} Ironically, the theory of momentariness that arose in part to avoid the ideas of essentialism and enduring substances became the vehicle by which essentialism entered Buddhaghosa’s thought.

We contend that Buddhaghosa could not simply discard the theory of momentariness because he could not accommodate the asymmetric nature of temporal causality in trying to account for a durationless and abstract “absolute present”, rather than an extensional specious present. In the experience of time, the “absolute present” can only be perceived as the past, as is found in retentional models of temporal consciousness,^{xi} and the causal impacts of the past on an unperceivable (absolute) present and future are necessarily a product of inference, not direct perception, due to the asymmetrical nature of temporal causality.^{xii}

Buddhaghosa did recognise this problem of the “absolute present” when he stated that while a material *dhamma*’s ability to act as a causal condition begins with the arising of said *dhamma*, and karma can only condition subsequent events when it is past (Vism.XIX.9). This is because the concept of non-simultaneity means that karmic fruit cannot be said to ripen in the present from karma that is simultaneously being created in the present. Of course, Buddhaghosa’s concept of sixteen mental time moments occurring in the amount of time allotted [32] for the passing of each material time-moment means that the duration between past karma and its fruition could be infinitesimal. Nevertheless, the idea that present karma cannot bear present fruit and that future karma obviously cannot bear fruit until it too is past karma, does indicate that Buddhaghosa was aware of the difficulty in attributing purposeful activity (including karma as intentional action) to any time but the absolute past cognised as an extensional specious present. This was also recognised by the Sautrāntikas, who also held to their commitment to the theory of momentariness. In throwing out the phenomenological and empirical *experience of time* in favour of a purely logical and abstract *analysis of time*, one invariably finishes with a conception of durationless

moments of experience like those found in the cinematic model of temporal consciousness. It was this logical move from an extensional model to a cinematic model that created the problem of demonstrating continuity between successive *dhammas* as well as between successive existences.

[33] **Conclusion**

If one conceives of the cycle of existences as an uninterrupted succession of subjective experience, whether the successive experience of momentary *dhammas* or Whiteheadian “actual entities”, the perceived gap separating the end of one existence and the beginning of the next existence (Vism.XVII.164) has no ontological reality (Vism.XIX.23) and is not an obstacle to explanation. However, in spite of acknowledging the lack of ontological reality for the perceived gap, Buddhaghosa cannot help but to fill this perceived gap with the rebirth-linking consciousness because he is committed to an acceptance of the theory of momentariness.

Buddhaghosa is clear to point out that no factor is unconditioned and that rebirth is primarily a result of conditioned desire throwing one forth into renewed existence. However, in emphasising the effects of karma and constructions / dispositions (*saṅkhāra*), whether good, bad or indeterminate (Vism.XIV.129), as the primary driver of the conditions of existence across lives, we begin to see the emergence of a more essentialist metaphysics of rebirth, which leads to a more ethically deterministic interpretation of karma than that found in early Buddhism. This is one reason why we see Buddhaghosa’s metaphysics attach primary importance to the karma that manifests itself before death (thereby directly conditioning the rebirth-linking consciousness), and why his four-fold classification of karmas that [34] manifest as rebirth-linking (Vism.XIX.15) emphasises weighty, habitual and death-threshold karmas as distinct from other accumulated karmas. This is in contrast to the depiction of karma in relation to one’s overall behaviour that is found in the *Suttas* and is a direct result of the fact that for Buddhaghosa, a particular “karma, sign of karma or sign of destiny” (Vism.XIV.111) must appear at the time of death as an object for the rebirth-linking consciousness.

While there is canonical support for the idea that death-threshold karma can be particularly significant (M.III.214), McDermott points out that the Buddha emphasises that it is the totality of a man’s character that may shape his thoughts at the moment of death.^{xiii} While the idea of death-threshold karma (or weighty / habitual karmas manifesting as or influencing death-threshold

karma) directing the rebirth process is plausible in most cases, it fails to account for cases such as that where one is unconscious at the moment of death. Therefore, it is likely that while admitting death-threshold karma may be particularly significant, the Buddha emphasised it far less than Buddhaghosa does in the *Visuddhimagga*. We contend that this is due to the logical necessities found in the metaphysical systematisation undertaken by Buddhaghosa and in his acceptance of momentariness. Buddhaghosa's entire metaphysics depends on the succession of momentary *dhammas* conditioned by karma and karmic constructions to provide an object for the rebirth-linking consciousness.

[35] Therefore, Buddhaghosa was left to formulate a way in which the contiguous and sequential *dhammas* could exert causal influence on each other while still maintaining that these same *dhammas* existed momentarily. He did so by classifying a moment as encompassing the entire process of arising, presence, and dissolution of a *dhamma* (Vism.XIV.190) and through an emphasis on an "unconscious" consciousness called the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*).^{xliii} The former move of incorporating the three stages of tri-temporal existence within a single momentary *dhamma* allowed *dhammas* causal efficacy while the life-continuum provided a type of metaphysical substrate on which mental continuity could be established. This transformation and commitment to essentialism is the reason that Buddhaghosa is forced to assign a more decisive role to the influence of karma, over and above other causal factors, in shaping the process of rebirth than that which is found in the *Suttas*.

While the aforementioned accounting of the rebirth process is quite elegant and speaks to the desire for a rationalised and systematised accounting of karmic rebirth, we begin to see a move away from karma as one part among many (S.IV.230) in a larger chain of causality, including rebirth, toward a growing emphasis on karma as a decisive conditioning factor in an essentialist metaphysical system of karmic conditioning. In turn this leads to a tendency to conflate the Buddhist doctrine of karma with determinism, leading to a tendency among some Buddhist laypersons to see the karma in an overly deterministic or retributive light.

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