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An Agent Lacking a Self

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Abstract

An Agent Lacking a Self

By: Lacey Campbell

Referencing the *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddhist philosophical text of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, this thesis evaluates agency in conjunction with the doctrine of *anatta*—i.e., no Self—in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhaghosa, a fifth century Indian, Buddhist philosopher, maintains that there is no intrinsic, inherent, independent Self, yet there exists an agent. This thesis evaluates Buddhaghosa's paradoxical account of a Selfless agent; I examine who or what—if not a Self—assumes agentive responsibility.

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CHAPTER I: KEY CONCEPTS

INTRODUCTION

With the counsel of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, I will address what it means to be an impermanent, empty, karmic agent in Buddhist philosophy. Although paradoxical and perhaps contradictory in nature, it is seemingly upheld that humans have agency, yet humans do not have a permanent Self.[1] The self is argued to be dependently originated, as are all material objects and conceptual thoughts, yet humans, unlike these objects, thoughts, and self, have agency, a mobility[2] to pursue particular actions and reap the benefits or the repercussions that follow. *How*? *Who or what is responsible?* In addressing these questions, I will argue that Buddhaghosa utilizes the mobility of agency and the mental state *bhavaṅga* to resolve the discord in the existence of an agent and the nonexistence of a Self.

In my discussion, I will utilize the work, *The Path of Purification* (in Pāli, the *Visuddhimagga*)[3] authored by Buddhaghosa, a fifth century Indian Buddhist philosopher, to guide my discourse. To commence my evaluation, I will provide a historical account of Buddhaghosa, whereby I will frame his work in the context of Buddhist thought and commentary.[4] Subsequently, I will provide a brief, yet thorough exegesis of key concepts to be

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[1] As others have, I will utilize the capital-S, Self, to denote a permanent, intrinsic definition of Self.
[2] I use the word "mobility" insofar as it is the *momentary execution* of an intended action.
[3] Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Bhikku Ñāṇamoli (Sangharaja Mawatha: BPS, 2011). Ñāṇamoli provides a translation of the *Visuddhimagga,* originally a Pāli text. This translation will be the primary source utilized throughout the entirety of this paper.
[4] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* Ñāṇamoli translates the relevant historical passage from the *Mahāvaṃsa* on pp. xxxiv-xxxix. Maria Heim, author of *The Forerunner of All Things,* (New York Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 6-15, and the *Voice of the Buddha,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1-24, evaluate this translation. All will be utilized to provide a historical account of Buddhaghosa.

utilized throughout the entirety of the paper; it is imperative that these concepts be understood individually before they are placed in conjunction with one another. On the basis of this conceptual groundwork, I will explore what it means to be an impermanent, empty, karmic agent through the lens of Buddhaghosa; supplemental Buddhist literature will be utilized to refine and explicate his discourse.

BUDDHAGHOSA

In the fifth century (CE), Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, a monk from a Brahmin family of Gayā, travelled to Sri Lanka, formally known as Ceylon, to translate Sinhalese Buddhist texts —i.e., Sri Lankan texts—into Pāli, the scholastic language of Theravāda Buddhism.[5] Buddhaghosa translated in the monastery of Anuradhapura. His work was neither original nor mere translation. Rather, he, as a translator and an author, transformed ancient Sinhalese commentaries into what is now regarded as the *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*). He specifically translated the *aṭṭhakathā,* which allegedly was taught by teachers dating to the Buddha's time.[6] This Sinhalese corpus of material no longer exists; it is believed to have been lost. All that remains is the *Visuddhimagga;* the previous Sinhalese texts are to never be reviewed again.

The *Visuddhimagga* is a detailed, descriptive account of the *dhammas*[7]—i.e., the basic physical and mental[8] elements of existence used to elucidate "the deep and underlying way of things."[9] When Buddhaghosa arrive in Ceylon, the teachers of the Mahāvihāra—Sanskrit, for a Great Vihara or Buddhist monastery—tested Buddhaghosa's aptitude as a translator; they

[5] Maria Heim, *Voice of the Buddha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1-2.
[6] Ibid., pp. 18.
[7] *Dhamma* is Pāli for the globalized Sanskrit term *dharma.* I will be utilizing the Pālii term *dhamma* in this paper.
[8] Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), pp. 1-2.
[9] Rupert Gethin. *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 24, 319.

challenged Buddhaghosa to translate a series of *dhammas*. Buddhaghosa accepted the challenge, and successfully produced the *Visuddhimagga.* The *Visuddhimagga* is structured similarly to a guidebook, yet it, unlike most guidebooks, is extremely comprehensive, nearing 850 pages in the English translation. Furthermore, the *Visuddhimagga* differs from a guidebook insofar as it is devoted to evaluating a single verse of the *Sāratthappakāsinì* found in the S*utta Piṭaka*.[10]

> When a wise man, established well in virtue,
> Develops consciousness and understanding
> Then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious
> He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.[11]

Buddhaghosa reconstructs, reconfigures, and analyzes the meaning of this passage, and he manages to *disentangle the tangle* through a variety of perspectives and methodologies. He, however, more specifically, identifies six qualities of a human capable of *disentangling the tangle:* virtue, concentration, impermanence, no self-hood, dissatisfaction, and ardor.[12] He contextualizes these qualities in the words of the Buddha[13] and systematically evaluates their prevalence and their importance.

Buddhaghosa approaches his work as a teacher, seeking to educate his readers; he is not regarded discretely as a translator. In fact, according to legend, Buddhaghosa reproduced the *Visuddhimagga*, verbatim, a second and third time, for it is believed that the gods stole Buddhaghosa's first manuscript and the second.[14] The Mahāvihāra teachers commended

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[10] Bimala Charan Law, *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa* (New Delhi: J. Jetley, 1997), pp 15-18. Also referenced in Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things* (New York Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 8.
[11] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, verse (S.i.13) ch. 1, pp. 5.
[12] Peter Feldmeier, *Christianity Looks East: Comparing the Spiritualities of John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006), pp. 39.
[13] The words of the Buddha are often also translated as *dhammas.* It is important to note that the word *dhamma* assumes a variety of definitions in Buddhist works.
[14] Heim, *Voice of the Buddha,* pp. 2.

Buddhaghosa's aptitude and titled Buddhaghosa as "Metteyya," meaning the future Buddha.[15] As such, practitioners of the Mahāvihāra attribute a large corpus of Buddhist texts to the work of Buddhaghosa. Regardless of whether these works are rightly attributed, many of the texts instruct the reader to evaluate discussions in the *Visuddhimagga;* some texts include direct-line, anecdotal quotes or discussions from the *Visuddhimagga*.[16] The *Visuddhimagga* is maintained with certainty to be the work of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, and it is highly regarded. It is the work that titled him the "voice of Buddha"[17]—the literal translation of his name.

With that said, I will frame my discussion on agency and the Self in Buddhaghosa's highly recognized work, the *Visuddhimagga.* As Buddhaghosa does, I will employ the six qualities of humans to *disentangle the tangle* of an existing agent yet a lack of Self. I will specifically evaluate impermanence (*anicca* in Pāli) and no self-hood *(anattā).*[18] I will begin with impermanence.

IMPERMANENCE (*ANICCA)*

Impermanence, in Pāli *annica,* is an essential concept in Buddhist thought; it is the "continual alteration"[19] or change of things—things such as life, persons, objects, actions, etc. It is prevalent in the context of both abstract concepts and physical entities.

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[15] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, pp 8.
[16] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. xxxiv.
[17] Heim, *Voice of the Buddha,* pp. 1.
[18] Impermanence in Pāli (*anicca),* in Sanskrit (*anitya*). For consistency in my paper I will utilize the Pāli, *anicca.* Note, authors referenced in my paper use both.
[19] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 69.

When specifically contextualizing impermanence in terms of the physical, impermanence is understood as the infinite flux of imperishable, conglomerate, and separate atoms that are situated in space and time.[20] The four primary substances (earth, water, fire, and air) occur as impermanent, destructible compounds of atoms;[21] the substances and the compounds are forever changing. This physical nature of impermanence is often best described by the continuous ebb and flow of rivers. Humans recognize a river as a river, yet the water is never the same from one moment to another; the particles of H_2O that reflect off the rock walls are continuously changing. As stated by Heraclitus, a human can never step into the same river twice, for it is ever changing;[22] it is impermanent. Similarly, all perceived physical entities are impermanent and continuously changing, yet some things change rapidly, such as rivers, and others, slowly, such as mountains.[23] It is important to note that "if something endures unchanged for even a moment, then the fundamental Buddhist principle of impermanence is compromised."[24]

Concepts are likewise impermanent, as they are composed of experiences, thoughts, etc. They are not static, nor do they have a fixed nature; rather, concepts have no inherent, permanent existence.[25] A concept is continuously changing. Furthermore, concepts are subject-dependent, for they depend upon the perceiver. Take the concepts full vs. empty; for example, both are concepts, yet what I perceive as half full could be different from what you, the reader, perceive as half full. I may describe a glass as half full, and you may describe it as half empty. Concepts, like these, are products of the human experience and its components—i.e., the five

[20] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 52.
[21] Ibid., pp. 2.
[22] Plato, "Cratylus," in *Plato Complete Works,* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp. 101-156. This paraphrase is directly taken from section 402a of the "Cratylus."
[23] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 61.
[24] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 221.
[25] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 74.

aggregates[26]—each of which is impermanent and dependently arisen.[27] Each aggregate can be broken down and each continuously changes over time, often explicitly. Buddhaghosa notes that "contemplation of impermanence is contemplation of materiality... as "impermanent" in virtue of that impermanence."[28] The concept of impermanence is impermanent. With that said, the impermanent nature or the systematic change of the physical and the conceptual is what grounds humans' lives and a majority of Buddhist thought.

It is important to note that impermanent objects, concepts, and subjects, however, are often regarded as permanent, static entities; humans transform a group of impermanent particles to "concrete, empirical objects and phenomena we encounter in everyday experience."[29] For instance, humans are inclined to refer to a table as an unchanging, permanent object, yet this perception can shift if one recognizes the *impermanent nature* of the table. The impermanent nature of something like a table is the continuously changing compilation of atoms which compose it and the compilation of aggregates which construct one's conceptual understanding of the concept, *table.* To complete this analysis, one is beginning to grasp the impermanent and *momentary* nature of a table and more broadly our world.[30]

In conjunction with impermanence, it is imperative that one understand the term *momentary*, for Buddhaghosa goes so far as to utilize the term in one of his many definitions of impermanence, stating that "impermanence is the breakup of produced aggregates through their momentary dissolution."[31] The term 'moment,' particularly in Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāsika tradition,

[26] The five aggregates are further explicated and outlined in the section titled ABHIDHAMMA.
[27] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 283.
[28] Ibid., pp. 283.
[29] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 52.
[30] Gethin. *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 235

[31] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 283.

means the smallest, definite unit of time that cannot be subdivided, the length of which came to be equated with the duration of mental entities as the briefest [of] conceivable events."[32]

MOMENTARINESS

In early Buddhist teachings, momentariness was not a doctrine "in its own right;" rather, it originated from the early Buddhist understanding of impermanence, the continuous "rise and fall of all mental and physical phenomena."[33] Just as everything is impermanent, every experience in the physical world is momentary. The smallest of experiences or the shortest of occurrences determine the next consecutive moment. For instance, if a human consumes food, they will likely feel less hungry or perhaps, full in the next consecutive moment. To become less hungry or, simply, *to become* denotes what Buddhaghosa describes as "the continuous flow or flux of moments."[34] Sensual experience—e.g., feeling hungry—material items, and abstract concepts all exist momentarily. Their impermanent nature signifies their inherent momentariness. In terms of physical objects, for instance, an apple on a countertop is impermanent: it slowly browns. When a human blinks at time x, the apple has a specific chemical composition, yet after the human blinks at time z, the apple has a different chemical composition. The doctrine of momentariness takes note of the "uninterrupted, flowing continuum of causally connected momentary events. These succeed each other so fast that we conceive of the phenomena they constitute as temporally extended."[35] An apple is constantly undergoing chemical changes and reactions, yet it is perceived as the "same" apple from moment to moment.

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[32] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 61.
[33] Ibid., pp. 59.
[34] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 241.
[35] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 59.

Abstract concepts maintain a similar nature. Although concepts may appear constant, they, too, exist momentarily, for Buddhaghosa identifies mental constituents, or concepts, as "momentary cognizable states (*dhamma*)."[36] Concepts are products of the human experience, specifically immaterial conscious awareness, in Pāli *citta.*[37] A *citta* is often translated as a conscious thought; it "is regarded as inseparable from its associated mental states."[38] Thoughts, like everything else, exist momentarily and impermanently; they are composed of a compilation of mental factors (*cetasikas*).[39] For instance, take this sentence; as you read this sentence, each word exists and is processed for a single moment. After completing these sentences, you will have a thought of their meaning, and you will continue to read. That thought exists in a singular moment and then, it continues to evolve. It will not be thought in an identical manner again. A human's thoughts and their interactions with their environment are momentary; all exists momentarily.

One, like the scholar Maria Heim, however, may inquire: "If experiences are momentary how can there be enduring tendencies lying inactive in the mind?"[40] This question inquires how individuals maintain coherent memories and understandings of the past in conjunction with the present. In the *Visuddhimagga,* Buddhaghosa resolves this paradoxical action of the human mind in his discussion on *Abhidhamma.*

ABHIDHAMMA

[36] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. xlvi.
[37] *Citta* is both Pāli and a Sanskrit. It is being translated here as conscious thought. It, however, is important to note that this translation is not perfect. *Citta* is translated differently in different Buddhist disciplines.
[38] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 49.
[39] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 87.
[40] Ibid., pp. 121.

Abhidhamma[41] (or *Abhidharma* in Sanskrit) is a developed interpretation of Buddha's teaching, in Pāli, the *Dhamma.* It is important to note that *dhammas* are not equivalent to the *Dhamma; dhammas* are understood as "the mental and physical phenomena, or the teachings, that constitute the Dharma."[42] *Dhammas* can exist in a variety of forms and phenomena, yet *Abhidhamma* is "not clear about the precise concept of *dhamma* as an element."[43] Often, *Abhidhamma* is understood as either a phenomenological reality or an ontological doctrine. To appropriately situate Buddhaghosa amid these constructions of *Abhidhamma*, I will provide an account of both interpretations—the phenomenological and the ontological.

Ontologically, *Abhidhamma* is an account of sentient experience grounded in the *dhammas*; here, the *dhammas* exist as elements. *Abhidhamma* is understood as the composition of aggregates and elements addressed in the canonical discussions produced by Buddha's lists—e.g., the five aggregates, the twelve sense-fields, etc.[44] I will briefly address one of the lists to explain and contextualize the doctrine of *Abhidhamma. The five aggregates*[45]*:* this doctrine addresses human experience; it is composed of the following: "the materiality aggregate, the feeling aggregate, the perception aggregate, the formations aggregate, and the consciousness aggregate."[46] Per the ontologically inclined interpretation of *Abhidhamma,* each aggregate

[41] For purposes of consistency, I will be utilizing the Pāli term *Abhidhamma* in my work. Take note, other authors referenced in this paper may utilize the Sanskrit equivalent, *abhidharma.*
[42] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 319. Note, *dharma* (Sanskrit) is equivalent to *dhamma* (Pāli) here.
[43] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 34.

[44] There are a multitude of doctrinal lists that are accounts of Buddha's *Dhamma:* the four noble truths, the four states of absorption in meditation (*jhana*), the five aggregates (*khandha*), the five hin-drances (*nivaraa*), the six sense faculties (*sa¬ayatana*) , the twelve sense spheres (also called *ayatana*), the six higher types of knowledge (*abhiññña*), the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaπga*), the noble eightfold path, the twelvefold chain of dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppada*) or the eighteen elements of cognition (*dhatu,* namely, the twelve *ayatana*s plus their six corresponding types of cognitive awareness). Ibid., 27.

[45] Aggregate: (Pāli: *khandha*), (Sanskrit: *skandhas*)
[46] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 439.

describes reality as it is. Compositely, they form experience, yet individually, the aggregates deconstruct the human experience into elements of reality. The elements, however, deceivingly exist sequentially and conceptually as a unit in the human mind. To address the elements is to explain the human existence, yet categorically and ontologically speaking, the *dhammas* or the elements are not mere explanations of reality. Rather, "the canonical *Abhidhamma* claims that the *dhammas*... are the absolutely primary objects of reference, analysis and distinction. The post-canonical *Abhidhamma* takes this claim to imply that the *dhammas* are also ontologically prior to all other types of encountered phenomena."[47] Under the ontological doctrine, *dhammas* are reality; they "are the soil" of human experience.[48] To identify the human experience void of *dhammas* is to exist in ignorance. Many scholars have deemed *Abhidhamma's* "categorial preference for the *dhammas* [as] dubious."[49] Individuals, who identify *Abhidhamma* as a phenomenological doctrine, are often among this group of scholars.

What is the phenomenological doctrine of *Abhidhamma*? Phenomenologically speaking, *Abhidhamma* is identified as, yes *dhammas*, but more importantly a concept (or a collection of concepts) to be used to relieve suffering (in Pāli, *dukkha*).[50] Buddhaghosa assumes a phenomenological position on the topic. As touched upon earlier, Buddhaghosa's work should be contextualized in the verses from the *Sutta Piṭaka.* Notably, to *disentangle the tangle,* one should be wise, virtuous, and understanding. Thus, Buddhaghosa assumes a phenomenological doctrine, promoting the relief of both ignorance and suffering. Additionally, the scholar Maria Heim notes the inherent error in assuming an ontologically categorical position of *Abhidhamma,* for the lists

[47] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 251.
[48] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 439.
[49] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 251. Another scholar, Maria Heim, assumes the phenomenological perspective of Abhidhamma, denying reality in units of experience.
[50] As is translated in Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 38. I will use the Pāli translation in my work.

of *dhammas* "do not complete the process of elaboration or classification."[51] *Abhidhamma* is composed of *dhammas* that are intertwined and continuously developing; the lists are not assumed to be complete. Buddhaghosa goes as far as to elaborate upon the categorically "fixed" lists (or *dhammas*).[52] For example, he presses further with the five aggregates, dividing the first clause, the "materiality aggregate" into *primary materiality*—i.e., the material nature of the earth elements—and *derived materiality*—i.e., the material nature of perceptual qualities, subject to human interpretation.[53] On the phenomenological grounds of *Abhidhamma,* it is imperative that *dhammas* are not understood as fixed. Heim believes that "we cannot understand the nature of *Abhidhamm*a if we think that the lists, or the moral phenomenology they depict are always meant to be complete."[54] A belief in fixed nature poses problems; it could induce attachment and ignorance. With that said, I will now address the moral phenomenological component of the *Abhidhamma.*

The moral phenomenology of *Abhidhamma* originates in the expansion and contextualization of the *dhammas* in mental processes and mental factors. Buddhaghosa identifies the *Abhidhamma* as moral mental processing and ultimately a method for relieving suffering. To evaluate the *dhammas* that construct *Abhidhamma,* one learns to break "down conscious awareness (*citta*) and material phenomena... This knowledge is not easy to come by."[55] One must identify the interdependence and the conglomerate and complex nature of the *dhammas* present in human nature, mind, and morality. If one, however, acquires this knowledge, Buddhaghosa explains that it is liberating; two liberations are presented from

[51] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 99.
[52] Ibid., pp. 90.
[53] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 440. The *derived materiality* is further divided into twenty-four materials.
[54] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 99.
[55] Ibid., pp. 87.

knowledge of *Abhidhamma*, "namely the desireless and the void."[56] One learns to identify the impermanent, void (empty) nature of phenomena in the world, for all phenomena are empty of an inherent, independent existence. Further, understanding the impermanent nature of one's environment and material goods invokes a capacity for detachment; one can detach from their ill-formed perceptions of their environment.[57] Thus, a phenomenological study of *Abhidhamm*a grants liberations that can necessarily be transposed into detachment and thereby, a relief from suffering.

Thus, the phenomenological understanding of *Abhidhamma* is a critical component in understanding human experience; it is the morally motivated *dhamma* that explains the perceptual inherent mass of *dhammas* that create what humans comprehend as experience. Included in the human experience is the belief in a Self. Does knowledge of the *Abhidhamma* disrupt this belief? It is noted that Buddhaghosa believes *Abhidhamma* is to be taught to those who maintain a concept of Self, meaning they need to dismantle the Self.[58] To dismantle a belief in Self is to disassemble the Self.[59] To what extent does disassembling the Self disrupt "ignorant"[60] human experience? What does disassembling the Self entail?

NO SELF- *ANATTA*

[56] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 688.
[57] Note, attachment induces suffering.
[58] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 135.
[59] Lowercase s-self indicates a *belief* in a capital S-Self or the compilation of human experiences that construct what people perceive to be a Self.
[60] I am utilizing the word ignorant to refer to common human experience, which is subject to *saṃsāric* (Refer to KARMA section for definition) suffering.

Abhidhamma is inherently related to the concept of the Self, or the lack thereof in Buddhist philosophy. Self,[61] here is understood as embodying *sabhāva,* meaning an "individual essence, own being or it-ness."[62] In Buddhism, however, it is believed that there is no permanent, inherent Self. Rather as a condition of Abhidhammic study, a Self cannot wholly exist; further, a permanent Self is negated insofar as everything is impermanent. Buddhaghosa recognizes the teaching of no-Self (*anatta*) as a condition of disentangling human experience. To contextualize *anatta* in Abhidhammic doctrines and its pertinence in disentangling human experience, it is imperative that I explicate what is meant by the following concepts: "there is no Self*"*[63] and the Self ought to be dismantled. I will utilize the previous discussions on impermanence and momentariness to frame this discourse.

The Self, "I," is often perceived as enduring and inherent, "as precisely an unchanging constant behind experiences."[64] It is the character[65] that repeatedly and consistently responds to the question, who are you? In Buddhist philosophy and commentary, however, the self does not maintain this nature; the self is, instead, identified as "an assemblage of mental and physical processes."[66] It does not exist; what we think of as a Self is "nothing more than... complex bundles of constantly changing and conditioned phenomena."[67] There is no single thought, interaction, or entity that defines the Self. Take this analogy, the self is like an onion; it has layers composed of impermanent experiences. Yet, when you remove the layers, you find that

[61] Capital-S, Self, represents a self-embodying *sabhāva*. As others have, I will utilize the capital-S, Self, to denote a permanent, intrinsic definition of Self.
[62] Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. xlvi.
[63] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, pp. 51. The term no self is also prevalent in Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 683.
[64] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 135.
[65] By character, I am referring to the identity, name etc. of a person.
[66] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics,* pp. 43.
[67] Heim, *The Forerunner of All things,* pp. 51

there is nothing at the core; the self is nonexistent and empty. Yet, humans are inclined to identify a Self. Because humans are subject to the impermanent experiences of connected mental and physical phenomena, humans are emotionally and logically inclined to label these joint experiences as a Self.[68]

Note, though, it is incoherent and unvirtuous[69] to maintain a belief in the Self. The self should be understood as dependently originated,[70] for "virtue is to be had through the contemplation of not-Self."[71] Humans should dismantle the Self, which can be completed using *Abhidhamma*. The dhammic lists touched on earlier can be employed to disentangle the web of the self.[72] Buddhaghosa, in conjunction with modern scholars, commonly dismantles the Self using the *khandhas*—the five aggregates—for Buddhaghosa believes the aggregates construct "the widest limit as the basis for the assumption of Self."[73] The self can be broken down into form (*rūpa),* feelings (*vedanā*), perceeptions (*saññā*), formations/dispositions (*saṇ*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa).*[74] For example, the six senses[75] of a human construct the physical world (*rūpa)* of a person—a self. In response to the physical stimuli, the human mind is active, producing feelings (*vedanā*) and mentally constructing perceptions (saññā). Further, as the person undergoes experiences, they develop dispositions (*saṇskāra*) and upon analyzing these dispositions, one becomes self-conscious (*viññāṇa*). Compositely, these aggregates "form" what humans experience as a Self; conversely these aggregates are used to disassemble the Self. To disassemble the Self—to recognize the self as a composition of these impermanent aggregates—

[68] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 139.
[69] Virtue: (Pāli: *sīla*), (Sanskrit: *śīla*)
[70] See the subsequent section on dependent origination.
[71] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 47.
[72] See Chapter 1, the section titled ABHIDHAMMA. Also, refer to footnote 43.
[73] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 488.
[74] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 136. See for Sanskrit translation of aggregates.
[75] In Buddhism, there are six senses: smell, taste, touch, sight, hearing, and mind.

is to be one step closer to *disentangling the tangle*, for one is gaining knowledge and becoming wise. Note, the five aggregates are not exhaustible, nor are they the only *dhammas* used to disassemble the Self. In fact, additional systems operate in conjunction with the five aggregates—specifically, dependent arising.

DEPENDENT ARISING

Since we have addressed *Abhidhamma,* impermanence, and *anatta,* it is fitting to now address dependent arising. I have nodded to the concept of "dependent arising" in my discussion, but it is imperative that I outline its functionality. In the *Visuddhimagga,* Buddhaghosa identifies dependent arising as "the structure of conditionality... the aspect of arising, or the process of being."[76] It is regarded as the impermanent process which enables suffering and *karmic* production. More specifically, the teaching on dependent arising identifies the conglomerate of aggregates which construct a belief in an essential Self —that is, a Self with *sabhāva* as its essence.

Dependent arising is often contextualized in what Buddhist scholars term the arising of the twelve links (*nidāna*) (the twelvefold formula) or what Buddhaghosa terms the "Wheel of Becoming."[77] The twelvefold formula is often presented linearly, with ignorance as the origin of "Becoming." The scholar Rupert Gethin provides a clear and concise outline of the twelve links, which I will use to explicate dependent arising.

> Conditioned by (1) ignorance are (2) formations, conditioned by formations is (3) consciousness, conditioned by consciousness is (4) mind-and-body, conditioned by mind-

[76] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. *x*lviii.
[77] Ibid., pp. 599.

> and-body are (5) the six senses, conditioned by the six senses is (6) sense-contact, conditioned by sense-contact is (7) feeling, conditioned by feeling is (8) craving, conditioned by craving is (9) grasping, conditioned by grasping is (10) becoming, conditioned by becoming is (11) birth, conditioned by birth is (12) old-age and death-grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair come into being. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.[78]

Dependent arising or the twelvefold formula demonstrates the conditions which drive a belief in a Self and a "whole mass of suffering." Aggregates, like feelings and formations, are included in this construction of the self and suffering, for these and their effects perpetuate a sentient being's belief in Self and existence in *saṃsāra*[79]—i.e., rebirth. I will not provide a detailed account of the systems outlined in the twelvefold formula. I, however, believe it is imperative to continue to contextualize dependent arising in Buddhaghosa's construction of the self and eventually, agency.

Buddhaghosa enunciates the true nature of the twelve links; "the Wheel of Becoming with its twelve factors, revolving with the linking of cause and effect, is established as having no known beginning."[80] A term often used in Buddhist literature is "interdependent," meaning there are a multitude of causal factors that cause the arising of a particular effect. The self is an example, for it is a product of aggregates and external influencers, such as one's parents and their environment. Further, a belief in a Self is facilitated by ignorance or what Buddhists identify as *karma*. If, however, one was to identify the interdependent nature of the self, the links[81] perpetuated by a belief in a Self would be halted. The individual would succumb to a new understanding of themselves and their environment; the teachings on the Wheel of Becoming is

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[78] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, pp. 141-142.
[79] For a detailed construction and explanation for what *saṃsāra* is, see the subsequent section in Chapter I, titled KARMA.
[80] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification*, translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 599.
[81] I use the word links insofar as it refers to the twelve links—i.e., the Wheel of Becoming.

structured to facilitate this change in perspective. With that said, Buddhaghosa introduces the proper means of identifying the Wheel of Becoming and alludes to the benefits of engaging with the Wheel in this manner.

> This Wheel of Becoming consists in the occurrence of formations, etc., with ignorance, etc., as the respective reasons...it should be understood to be without any maker or experiencer...this Wheel of Becoming should be understood thus, "Void with a twelvefold voidness.[82]

Engaging with the Wheel of Becoming encourages an evaluation of a sentient being's interactions with their world, and it enables them to evaluate how they induce their *saṃsāric* existence. To identify ignorance and the other links as interdependently arisen is to warrant one capable of identifying the selfless or empty nature of everything; all is dependently arisen, void of an essential *sabhāva.* Buddhaghosa evaluates the twelvefold path one step further, identifying that "void with a twelvefold voidness" is the existence of the Wheel of Becoming; the concept, in and of itself, is empty, lacking inherent existence—i.e. "void." Therefore, it is important for one to evaluate and understand the interactions that exist between these links; it, however, is prudent that one identify them as void of an inherent, intrinsic existence. One should not imagine that these links can be extracted from the process as independent realities; one should not attach themselves to the links.

Further, if one neglects to identify the nature of the Wheel of Becoming, or likewise identifies a Self, Buddhaghosa declares that one remains in a state of ignorance; they reside in a state of suffering.[83] In this state, they continue to accumulate *karma* and persist in *saṃsāra.* If,

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[82] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli. pp. 599-600.
[83] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 547. Buddhaghosa notes that "when [thus] arisen it [ignorance] keeps the truth of *suffering* concealed, preventing penetration of the true individual function and characteristic of that truth."

however, one can identify "how actions arise and perpetuate suffering, the practitioner is able to gain greater control over this process and eventually free himself from it [suffering] altogether."[84] The acknowledgement of ignorance and the will to act virtuously (*sīla*)[85] results in assumed positive *karmic* products; bad, ignorant actions produce negative *karmic* goods. What is *karma?* What implications does it have on *saṃsāra* and oneself?

KARMA

Karma, or *kamma* in Pāli, is the process of "how actions create the disposition and [the] temperament that determine future births."[86] Both good and bad actions of the human "activate virtuous or unvirtuous *karma*—which... result [in] pleasure, pain, and so in a future rebirth."[87] What is virtuous *karma*? What is *karma*?

Karma is the compilation of intentional, positive and negative mental, physical, and verbal actions which produce *saṃsāric*[88] consequences. Although a complex process, Buddhaghosa simplifies and contextualizes *karmic* rebirth utilizing the aggregates discussed earlier; "the [human] aggregates generated by the kamma are [inherent to the] rebirth-process [of] becoming, the generating of the aggregates is birth, their maturing is ageing, their dissolution is death."[89] The aggregates of a being are shaped by previous *karma;* though, one's present aggregates agentively produce their future *karma*. Regardless of their agentive

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[84] Karen L Meyers. *Freedom and Self-Control: Free Will in South Asian Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago), pp. 17.
[85] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 321.
[86] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 34.
[87] Chim Jampaiyang, *Ornament of Abhidharma,* translated by Ian James Coghlan (Somerville: Wisdom, 2018), pp. 402. Note, the virtuous and the unvirtuous *karma* are produced from the human but more specifically, the five aggregates that compose the human.
[88] *Saṃsāric* refers to the nature of continual rebirth. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 321.
[89] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 190.

awareness, however, a being subject to *saṃsāra* is either birthed into the lower or the higher realms. To be birthed into the lower realms is understood as "the result of relatively unwholesome (*akusala*) or bad (*pāpa*) *karma*;" rebirth into the higher realms is due to wholesome (*kusala*) or good (*puñña*) *karma*.[90] To remain in this cyclic existence is to suffer. If, however, one continues to commit *kusula karma,* it is maintained that one can escape *saṃsāra* and reach *nibbãna*,"the ultimate goal."[91] It, however, is important to note that *karma* does not exist as uniformly as described above nor does it have a clearly defined nature; rather, it is a complex process with many anomalies.

How then does one know their actions are virtuous or, simply put, karmically good? One does not. Though, one can commit actions, such as engaging in Buddhist philosophical discussion to refrain from residing in a state of ignorance and to likely produce good *karma*. For instance, one should refrain from identifying a permanent, inherent Self. In fact, Buddhaghosa characterizes the contemplation of *anatta* as virtuous—likely karmically "good." Though, by making this assumption, I am denying the existence of a Self but maintaining the existence of an agent. Am I, thereby, suggesting that an impermanent, empty self or *anatta* is responsible for acquiring *karma*? How? We have reached the questions, which I seek to address in this paper.

MOVING FORWARD

In conjunction with the questions posed above, I seek to understand Buddhaghosa's construction of an impermanent, empty, karmic agent. To whom or to what does Buddhaghosa

[90] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* pp. 119. All terms here are defined in Pāli. See text listed for Sanskrit.
[91] Ibid., pp. 320. I will be using the Pāli, *nibbāna.* In Sanskrit: *nirvana*.

attribute karmic responsibility? I seek to address the role of the agent and the role of *anatta* (as a doctrine) and their relationship in Buddhaghosa's *disentanglement of the tangle*.

CHAPTER II: AGENCY & ANATTA

AGENCY: WHAT IS IT?

To evaluate the relationship—or lack thereof—between agency and *anatta*, it is imperative that I outline what is meant by the term, agency. To begin, I will address the modern meaning and use of the word. Further, I will provide a brief historical account of its modern conceptual origins. Colloquially speaking, in the western world, agency is identified as a status of *will* maintained by a living being. It can be as simple as having control over one's choice in ice-cream or as complex as deciding one's religious identity. The western philosopher, Robert Brandom identifies a rational[92] agent as one whose "behavior can be made intelligible, at least sometimes, by attributing to them the capacity to make practical inferences concerning how to get what they want, and theoretical inferences concerning what follows from what."[93] Under this construction, agency is informed goal-oriented action; it is a quality assigned to those who commit conscious action, often with the effects of the action in mind. As noted by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, we are not merely passive perceivers of sensible information; we

[92] By rational, I mean reasoning which is thereby associated with intentional action. This construction of rationality is derived from the work of Robert Brandom, "Reasoning and Representing," *Philosophy of Mind,* edited by David J. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 509.

[93] Robert Brandom, "Reasoning and Representing," *Philosophy of Mind,* edited by David J. Chalmers, pp. 509.

are cognitive agents that perceive and act in accordance with our active thought.[94] Yet, to what extent are modern, western constructions and components of agency suitable to address the ancient Buddhist constructions of the term?[95] Is agency understood synonymously in Buddhist philosophy and contemporary thought?

In Buddhist thought, the transactional use and the understanding of the word *agency* is similar to the word's use in contemporary, western thought. The Buddhist philosopher, Buddhaghosa, constructs and identifies an agent as a being with "the aim of completing some business or other."[96] This understanding of agency exists in a conventional[97] (in Pāli *sammuti*) sense, meaning it exists as a concept of human experience; a human completes simple actions with a goal in mind. Agency, however, is also evaluated on the plane of causes and effects (in an ultimate sense)—i.e., dependent arising. A human's agentive actions determine the effects and interactions of the subsequent moments to come. Under this formulation of agency, a human is ultimately[98] perceived to have agency insofar as they contribute to the interdependent and causal network in which beings exist. Buddhaghosa provides a constructive and pertinent example of agency contextualized in both the conventional plane of existence and the ultimate plane of existence:

> When someone becomes an agent with the aim of completing some business or other, and he buys goods, say, or obtains a loan, it is simply the fact of his performing the transaction that is the condition for completing that business, not the transaction's actual presence or non-presence; and after the completion of the business he has no further

[94] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 21.
[95] This is not to say that the concept of *agency* solely originates in ancient Buddhist thought.
[96]Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 576.
[97] By conventional, I am referring to the everyday use and construction of labels and beings, such as agency.
[98] In Pāli: *paramattha,* By ultimately, I mean the absolute or critical construction of human interaction.

> liability. Why not? Because the business has been completed. So it is because they have been performed that formations are conditions for their own fruit[99]

An agent has motives that produce effects, which enable the continual production of formations in the Wheel of Becoming; that is the rudimentary takeaway from this example. Though, in a complex manner, a person acts;[100] while completing their act—that is, *business* in this instanc—the act is of their will and responsibility. After the completion of the act, the human, however, is no longer responsible for the act in and of itself, for they are, instead, responsible for the fruits[101] of their work. Buddhaghosa alludes to the progressive nature of agency, for a human's *business* motivates the subsequent moments to follow—like *karma*. Humans causally and willfully impact themselves and their environment.

It, however, is important to note that like every being, humans are subject to external[102] causes and effects. A karmically willed, agentive action may be disrupted and altered by external forces, like one's environment. How do external forces effect one's agency and more broadly, their *karmic* actions? To address this question, it is imperative to evaluate the composition of agency.

ELEMENTS OF AGENCY

In both the Western and Buddhist conceptions of agency, agency concerns "will, intention, and motivation"[103] yet, as Maria Heim notes in her work, the construction of agency

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[99] Ibid. 576. Note, however, this example is more thoroughly explained in the *Visuddhimagga, beginning* on pp. 574.
[100] Note, it is the intentional act that is important, not the physical qualities of the act.
[101] The word *Fruit* is metaphorically used by Buddhaghosa to elucidate the *effects* or *products* of action. See the *Path of Purification*, translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 575-576.
[102] Causes not of their own volition. Perhaps, environmental conditions.
[103] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, pp. 17.

amid these contexts is not synonymous.[104] What are the key constructive elements and/or components of an agent?

In the Western world, the concept of agency is composed of an ever-evolving compilation of human ability and interactions. Presently, agency has transformed from merely an act of will, to a mental or conscious formula that predicates external activity. These constructions of agency, however, are misrepresentative of the agency constructed in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist philosophy introduces components of agency that are not identified in the Western construction of the term. For instance, not yet identified is the concept of *cetanā,* which is "often translated as volition or intention."[105] Note, however, the application of intention here is not synonymous with the common western linguistic construction of the word. Rather, *intention* here is understood as the "origin from which action springs. "[106] *Cetanā* is a composite of the mental inclination to act and the actual execution of the action itself. An individual's *cetanā* is impermanent, meaning it is constantly changing.[107] For instance, an individual may desire to go outside, but if the individual decides to return to their room to get their umbrella, their *cetanā* has changed (as have their actions).[108] Buddhaghosa notes that the act to will *(cetayati*)—that is both the inclination and the execution of the will—is *volition (cetanā)*.[109]

Further, Buddhist philosophical literature identifies *saṅkhāra* (identified earlier as a component of the five aggregates) as a conjunctive element included in the construction of agency. *Saṅkhāra,* often translated as "formations" or "constructions," is the human aggregate

[104] Ibid. 18.
[105] Ibid. 17.
[106] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 40. See footnote 13. As noted in Heim's work, this phrase is a translation from the Pāli text, the *Papañcasūdanī (Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā).*
[107] For an analysis of impermanence, refer to Chapter I, the section titled IMPERMANENCE.
[108] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things,* pp. 42.
[109] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 470.

which generates consciousness and induces *saṃsā*ric existence.[110] It generates consciousness insofar as it is the instrument responsible for the agglomeration[111] of forms found in consciousness; Maria Heim describes *saṅkhāra* as "the work of our minds which take our sensory data and thoughts, motivations, feelings, and other psychic phenomena and put them together to create our conscious experience, through the radical causal process of dependent origination."[112] *Saṅkhāra* enables the formation of the perceived forms, which construct human consciousness and human experience; it is agentive, similar to *karma*.[113] Like *karma*, *saṅkhāra* is also a product of previous actions. Buddhaghosa goes so far as to describe *saṅkhāra* as unprofitable, profitable, and indeterminate, for it is karmically and agentively produced. With this nature, *saṅkhāra* is often coupled with *cetanā.* One, arguably, motivates the other, and both drive the path of *saṃsā*ric existence. As expressed by Maria Heim, *saṅkhāra* and *cetanā* are psychological processes that occur quite a few steps before choice and decision making.[114] They are the prerequisite components of agency.

Both *saṅkhāra* and *cetanā,* however, are shaped by *karma*, an additional component. To fully evaluate the implications *karma* has on agency, I will address *karma* in the subsequent section. I intend to evaluate the extent to which *karma* determines agency and confirms the existence of an agent in Buddhism.

AGENCY IN SAṂSĀRA

[110] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things.* pp. 49.
[111] See Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification*, translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 460. See Chapter XIV Footnote 57.
[112]Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things.* pp. 50.
[113] Ibid. 48.
[114]Ibid., pp. 52.

Agency, defined as a being's ability to mobilize and affect their environment, is the condition which enables one's participation in saṃsāric existence—and also one's escape from it. *Karma,* which is an essential concept in Buddhist thought and idealism, perpetuates a similar role in sentient existence.[115] *Karma* entails that one's present actions affect one's future, and simultaneously, one's present actions are shaped by one's past. This implication, however, causes suspicion; does karmic existence predetermine one's actions? To what degree does *karma* influence agency?

To begin addressing these questions, it is important to bear in mind that Buddhist philosophy is not deterministic; it does not declare *karma* as the sole cause of actions, thoughts, and happenings. It does not assume that all is predetermined. Instead, *karma* limits the extent to which *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra* are agentive. Maria Heim utilizes the words *agency* and *patiency*; "some *cetanās* are best understood *agentive* in that they are productive of good and bad experience, and others are *patient* in that they are the fruits or results of previous actions *[karma,* dependent arising]."[116] It is imperative that humans have undetermined, agentive *cetanā,* for humans must be able to escape *saṃsāra*.

With that said, sentient beings (with *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra*) mobilize their *saṃsāric* path and their *karma.* Buddhaghosa proclaims that "beings are owners of their deeds, [for] whose[117] [if not theirs] is the choice by which they will become happy, or will get free from suffering, or will not fall away from the success they have reached?"[118] Each individual being is responsible for their karmic actions. *Cetanā,* insofar as it can be understood as *intention*, invokes the human

[115] As directly addressed earlier. *Saṅkhāra* and *karma* are similar.
[116] Ibid. 64.
[117] *Kassa* is translated as whose. See Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, Chapter IX, Footnote 13.
[118] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 312.

ability to determine one's subsequent actions, and in the words of Buddhaghosa, one's ability to "become happy"—i.e., to reach *nibānna.*

With that said, however, it is imperative that *karma* exists, for it is the foundation, which assumes that the human has agency. *Karma* is the integral component of Buddhist philosophy which grounds philosophical constructions. Therefore, I argue that, insofar as the concept of *karma* is needed to validate the construction of agency, *karma* determines agentive existence.

Though, on a non-conceptual level, agency is composed of *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra,* and agency activates *karma.* Because the karmic agent is not a self, is it *cetanā, sankhāra,* both, or neither that accumulates the *karma?* We return to the two questions addressed earlier: what differentiates an agent from a self and what is it that accumulates *karma?*

AGENT VS. ANATTA

How can an agent exist if a self does not? This is the most profound question I will pose in my work. The concept of non-Self (*anatta*) assumes a lack of an inherent, permanent identity; there is no Self. Rather, everything is in flux. Yet, there is something that is identified as an agent, that has agency, that accumulates karmic good or misfortune. How? What is *it* that assumes agency? In the *Visuddhimagga,* Buddhaghosa inquires:

> In the sense of having no core because of the absence of any core of self conceived as a self, an abider, a doer, an experiencer, one who is his own master; for what is impermanent is painful (S III 82), and it is impossible to escape the impermanence, or the rise and fall and oppression, of self, so how could it have the state of a doer, and so on?[119]

[119] Ibid., pp. 636.

To begin addressing the question posed, I will evaluate the basic differences between the elements which construct a self—or account for a lack thereof (*anatta*)—and the elements which construct an agent. We will find that the components of *anatta* and the components of an agent are similar; both are composed of *saṅkhāra* and *cetanā*. *Saṅkhāra* is not limited in its identity, for as described by Buddhaghosa *saṅkhāra* is the "active sense [of] collecting and constructing what is compounded."[120] *Saṅkhāra* is inherently involved in the existence of all five aggregates. Further, because *cetanā* is composed of both the mental inclination to perform an action and the action itself, it invigorates a compilation of the five aggregates—i.e., form *(rūpa),* feeling *(vedanā),* perception *(saññā),* formations *(saṅkhāra),* and consciousness *(vijñana).* For instance, the intent (*cetanā)* to pick up a book involves form (the book), consciousness (awareness of the book), perception (identifying the book as a book), and formations (identifying that which constructs the book). An agent, like a self, is composed of impermanent aggregates. Though, unlike a self, an agent constructs a karmic causality, a compilation of karmic good (*kusala)* or bad (*akusula).* How? What differentiates an agent from a self?

I would argue that the verb or the active quality of an agent—that is, *agency*—differentiates the two subjects. I am identifying agency, here, as the mobility or immobility of a being to commit an action; the mobility—or lack thereof—shapes the subsequent moments of the being and the being's *karma*. The mobile nature of agency is enacted upon in infinitesimal moments, for momentariness—the act of seeing change in aging and death—[121] is the key to grasping the active quality of an agent. In a single, infinitesimal moment, an individual can actively alter their passive, habitual existence. Take, for instance, holding the door open for

[120] Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things.* pp. 48.
[121] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 726.

another; it is a simple task, yet one individual continuously neglects to hold the door open for others. Each time the opportunity is presented; the individual is an immobile passive agent. This immobility or lack of action has consequences and effects. Conversely, if this individual were to decide in that infinitesimal moment to hold the door open for another, the individual would experience different effects. It is important to note that Buddhaghosa and most Buddhist philosophers maintain that one is capable of willfully altering their habitual, passive actions; one's *karma* does not predetermine one's action. Rather, humans can agentively motivate the products of one's *karma*. Thus, agency is unique insofar as it is the subjective action that can effectively shape one's life. A self, however, lacks the mobility of an agent; rather, the self is discreetly the impermanent product of agency.

One question, however, remains; how can an agent accumulate *karma,* which extends across lifetimes? Because the production of *karma* is the crux of the inquiry and the key distinguishing factor between an agent and a self, it is imperative that this question be resolved. To be left unresolved is to suggest a severance between agency and *karma*. To address this question and to more thoroughly understand how agency functions as a quality subject to *saṃsāra*, one must evaluate and understand the role of *bhavaṅga.*

BHAVAṄGA

Although not yet identified in this essay, *bhavaṅga* is a key component, which structures the Theravadin Buddhist understanding of sentient experience. *Bhavaṅga*, when translated is broken into two constituent parts, *bhava* meaning "existence" and *aṅga* meaning "factor;"[122] or

[122] Ācariya Anuruddha. *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma.* Edited by Bhikku Bodhi and Allan R. Bomhard (Charleston: Charleston Buddhist Fellowship, 2007), pp. 106.

"limb."[123] Thus, *bhavaṅga* is a factor of existence. Though, what factor? A variety of Buddhist texts and translations utilize the term in different manners. It is most frequently demarcated in Theravadin texts as the mind or mental function, which elicits continuity across existences or during times lacking "mental elements"[124]—i.e., active consciousness *(citta).* In the context of this discussion, *bhavaṅga* provides agentive karmic continuity across lifetimes.

In the English translation of the *Visuddhimagga*, *bhavaṅga* is often translated as, "life continuum,"[125] for as the mental factor active during inactive conscious (*citta)* experiences,[126] it provides a form of continuity. Notably, *bhavaṅga* is a "mental but not [active] conscious phenomenon,"[127] for it is only active consciousness that interrupts *bhavaṅga.* The term "active consciousness" is being used to define the activation of the *khandhas* and their contact with the senses. Buddhaghosa describes the interaction between *bhavaṅga* and consciousness in the following example:

> With the life-continuum continuity [*bhavaṅga*] occurring thus, when living beings' faculties have become capable of apprehending an object, then, when a visible datum has come into the eye's focus, there is impinging upon the eye-sensitivity due to the visible datum. Thereupon, owing to the impact's influence, there comes to be a disturbance in [the continuity of] the life-continuum. Then, when the life-continuum has ceased, the functional mind-element arises making that same visible datum its object, as it were, cutting off the life-continuum and accomplishing the function of *adverting*.[128]

Bhavaṅga is instigated prior to active conscious experience or in this instance, sight. At conscious contact or the "impact's influence," *bhavaṅga* ceases and the "functional mind-

[123] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, See Chapter XIV, Footnote 45.
[124]I will utilize the term "mental elements" in this work to identify the what Buddhaghosa would term the remaining thirteen types of consciousness. See Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 463.
[125] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, See Chapter IV, Footnote 13.
[126] If cognitive processes are occurring, *bhavaṅga* is not occurring.

[127] Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), pg. 243.
[128] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 463.

element"—i.e., active consciousness—arises. At the conclusion of conscious experience, *bhavaṅga* is launched again. *Bhavaṅga* spans across time periods while awake, asleep, or intermediary periods between death and rebirth. These moments of *bhavaṅga* are periods void of the colloquial[129] conscious experience, for Buddhaghosa understands *bhavaṅga* as a type of consciousness "operating in a particular mode."[130] In the words of Rupert Gethin, *bhavaṅga i*s "the passive, inactive state of the mind—the mind when resting in itself."[131]

In the instance that active consciousness does not interrupt one's mental state of *bhavaṅga,* Buddhaghosa compares *bhavaṅga* to a river. Like a river continues to ebb and flow, *bhavaṅga* "occurs endlessly."[132] Both are impermanent. For instance, a new particle of water bounces off the wall of a rock at each infinitesimal moment, just as a new karmic good shapes *bhavaṅga* at each infinitesimal moment. *Bhavaṅga* is configured as the kind of rebirth linking factor influenced and shaped by *karma.*[133] It is the mental state that exists during periods of cognitive[134] inactivity but it is engaged insofar as it provides *karmic* continuity. Buddhaghosa identifies that *karma* "comes about in him when he brings to mind whatever is the object of the life-continuum"[135]—i.e., *bhavaṅga. Karma* is realized and accounted for in the conscious state of *bhavaṅga.*

Because it engages *karmic* continuity, the Theravadin construction of *bhavaṅga* can be utilized to account for the impermanent quality of a being that enables karmic continuity and

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[129] The word "colloquial" is be used to refer to modern and common understandings of the term consciousness.
[130] Gethin, Rupert. "*Bhavaṅga* and rebirth according to the Abhidhamma" in *The Buddhist Forum Vol. II, e*d. V Pagel and T Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), pp. 13.

[131] Gethin, Rupert. "*Bhavaṅga* and rebirth according to the Abhidhamma" in *The Buddhist Forum Vol. II, e*d. V Pagel and T Skorupski, pp. 15.
[132] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, Chapter XIV, footnote 45.
[133] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 463.
[134] I am utilizing the word "cognitive" interchangeably with the word "mental."
[135] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 733. Also, see footnote 7 in Chapter XXIII.

thereby, agentive capacities. *Bhavaṅga* or translated, the life-continuum consciousness, addresses the earlier proposed question, "what allows for agentive, karmic products to persist across lifetimes or one's life faculty?" The answer is *bhavaṅga*.

To reiterate and reconstruct the complete argument proposed, I will introduce the following example: *a sentient being commits actions utilizing active consciousnesses*. Active consciousness includes the five *khandhas* and *cetanā*. Understanding that these processes are impermanent, lacking intrinsic/inherent existence, the sentient being lacks a Self, yet the sentient being enables *cetanā* (intention). *Cetanā* invokes the production of *karmic* goods, and because the sentient being maintains an inactive consciousness, identified here as *bhavaṅga,* the sentient being accumulates this *karma.* Together, *cetanā, karma* and *bhavaṅga* invoke agency. I use agency insofar as the sentient being possesses the mobility to commit actions and assume responsibility for their karmic products. An agent is not synonymous with the self.

ADDRESSING THE QUESTION

With the construction of *bhavaṅga* and agency*,* one can address the question proposed earlier, "how can an agent exist if a Self—containing an essential *sabhāva*—does not?" Neither exists in the colloquial sense—possessing an intrinsic nature; rather, both are products of infinitesimal moments and interactions; they are components of dependent arising. They, however, differentiate to the extent that an agent possesses an active karmic nature, which the self lacks. Because an agent exists differentially from the self, it is a sound assumption for an agent to exist and a Self to not.

An agent surpasses the qualitative nature of the self insofar as it possesses an active variable—agency. Agency is understood as the mobile act, which induces certain *karmic* outcomes. Contingent upon *karma,* agency is supported by *bhavaṅga,* the mental state, which accumulates and appropriately allocates *karma* during periods of death and rebirth. Thus, an agent can commit an act in a single moment that could produce karmic goods in future lifetimes. An agent differs from the self, for the self is the product of the agentive acts committed and the human experiences experienced. The self is a mere conglomerate of aggregates; the agent is a conglomerate of aggregates capable of mobilizing existence.

Furthermore, there is value to identifying and ensuring that individuals are agents, for it is imperative that individuals are responsible for and capable of changing their actions—agency ensures one is capable of reaching *nibbāna.* Further, Buddhaghosa believes that "one who desires to accomplish this [the path of purification—the end to suffering] should first of all apply himself."[136] A sentient being has the agency to relieve oneself of suffering, insofar as one learns to willfully produce *kusula karma*.

Grounded in Buddhaghosa's work, a rejection of a Self does not pose a problem to the supported belief of an agent. In fact, agency is, arguably, the key to escaping suffering. Furthermore, there is value to understanding and evaluating the processes outlined in this work, for Buddhaghosa announces that "understanding is training in the higher understanding."[137] To be a proper agent and reach *nibbāna*, one must understand what an agent is and even further,

[136] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 631.
[137] Ibid., pp. 267.

what it is not. Just as one should learn how to operate a raft to cross a river, one should learn to utilize their agency to reach *nibbāna.*[138]

MOVING FORWARD

To this end, how should one practice agency? I intend to outline the practice of agency and its importance in Chapter III. As mentioned, it is imperative that one grasp the concepts discussed. The self and agency are dependently arisen; one should identify the lack of essential nature yet the fruits these concepts yield. Further, it is imperative to evaluate the synonymy and nonsynonymy between an agent and a self. The juxtaposition between these identities demonstrates the dependently arisen self yet the agent's continual production of *karmic* goods. How should an agent mobilize this knowledge to enable their attainment of *nibbāna*?

CHAPTER III: VALUE IN KNOWLEDGE

VALUE IN PRACTICE

What is the value in differentiating between the properties that construct a Self and the properties that facilitate the functionality of an agent? To address this question, I will utilize concepts originally evaluated in Chapter I—dependent arising, impermanence, and *karma.* These properties warrant value insofar as they are the properties that enable *saṃsāric* existence whilst simultaneously, being one's release from it—that is, *saṃsāra.*

[138] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification,* translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 33. The parable of the raft is further explained in John J Holder's work, *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Indianapolis: Cambridge 2006) pp. 102.

Dependent arising, or what Buddhaghosa refers to as the "Wheel of Becoming," demonstrates the continual perpetuation of ignorance and more specifically, the conception of the self. A state of ignorance sustains the Wheel, for,

> The Wheel of Becoming never halts... With ignorance as [its] condition, there are formations and so on. That is why the factors of the dependent origination should be understood as twelve by taking those [that is, sorrow, etc.,] along with ageing-and-death as one summarization.[139]

Ignorance incites formations and subsequently, twelve factors of dependent arising, all of which result in suffering. If, however, one engages and embraces the discussion had in this paper, one resists the Wheel of Becoming, for they are removing themselves from a state of ignorance. I use the word "engage" insofar as it refers to the practice of identifying the empty nature of ignorant conceptions of the world.

To contextualize the importance of the Wheel of Becoming in my work, I will frame it in one's conception of a Self and the implications it imposes upon agency. As determined earlier, it is imperative that one identifies their conceptions of a Self as incorrect. The conception of a Self is a product of interdependent, impermanent interactions;[140] the five aggregates[141] construct the self. The recognition of a dependently arisen self—that is, the understanding of the non-Self doctrine—removes a degree of ignorance; one can agentively refrain from craving or attaching to the perceived intrinsic nature of the Self and phenomena. If released from craving, one removes a degree of suffering and halters the Wheel of Becoming. The individual is one step closer to reaching *nibbāna*—freedom from a *saṃsāric* existence.

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[139] Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification*, translated by Ñāṇamoli, pp. 547.
[140] For a thorough explanation of impermanent interactions, refer to the section titled IMPERMANENCE in Chapter I.
[141] Though, Buddhist philosophy does not limit their understanding of the self to the five aggregates. I am employing the five aggregates in this paper to reckon with the belief of a self.

Saṃsāric existence is a product of *karma.* If one commits good karmic actions—like identifying the self as empty—one is cultivating a virtuous *saṃsāric* rebirth. To continue to commit karmically virtuous acts is to reach *nibbāna.* To, however, be able to agentively reach *nibbāna*—for there to be a purpose to removing oneself from ignorance—there would have to be a form of "individual" continuity between lifetimes—that is, between *saṃsāric* rebirths. Continuity throughout *saṃsāra,* is maintained because of *bhavaṅga*. I rationalize the continuity produced by *bhavaṅga* as indicative of a schema for agentive accountability. To confirm agency is to impart individuals with the ability to escape suffering.

Thus, the study of *bhavaṅga* in *saṃsāra* empowers individuals to take initiative of their practice. Recalling the phenomenological construction of *Abhidhamma,* one evaluates the *dhammas* to remove suffering; likewise, one disassembles the Self and the agent to eliminate suffering.

CRITIQUE

Assuming one can differentiate between *anatta* and an agent, I agree that one is cultivating virtuous *karma* and thereby, removing suffering. After recounting and reconstructing Buddhaghosa's understanding of agency and his doctrine of no-Self, I, however, am not convinced that these principles can co-exist. I am critical of Buddhaghosa's interpretation and use of the concept *bhavaṅga* in his construction of agency.

Buddhaghosa constructs *bhavaṅga* as an operative yet passive mental state; its operation is limited by conscious activity.[142] As described by the scholar Steven Collins, *bhavaṅga* is

[142] See Chapter II, the section titled BHAVAṄGA.

discontinuous; it is not like a continuously flowing river. Rather, *bhavaṅga* is better described as a thread strewn with beads.

> Moments of conscious functioning are 'like beads strung on the connecting thread of *bhavaṅga*[.] We must realize that in the 'ultimate' terms this connecting thread is itself like a series of beads.[143]

Collins notes the discontinuity of *bhavaṅga,* describing the thread, itself, as composed of disconnected beads. I am critical of this characteristic—the discontinuity of *bhavaṅga*—for *bhavaṅga* is the mental state utilized to account for continuity across and within lifetimes. I identify *bhavaṅga* as the *who* or the *what* that assumes moral responsibility. If, however, *bhavaṅga* is discontinuous, can it assume *karmic* responsibility? I regard this question as paramount to effectively evaluating agency in conversation with *anatta,* yet I argue that Buddhaghosa neglects to address it.

To leave this question unresolved is to suggest that *bhavaṅga* is incapable of assuming *karmic* responsibility. Without *karmic* responsibility, agency is nothing more than *anatta.* On the microscopic scale of a single action, the mobility of an action is preserved, yet the *karmic* product of the mobility is not. *Bhavaṅga* is not there to assume *karmic* responsibility. Thus, the construction of agency as a responsible mobile act is negated. Further, on a macroscopic scale, agency can no longer be understood as the crux for the cultivation of *karma, saṃsāra,* nor *nibbāna; karmic* continuity is required.

Hence, I am critical of the unanswered question—that is, is a continuous *bhavaṅga* needed for *karmic* responsibility—and I am not alone in my inquiry. Collins suggests that, perhaps, questions like these are left unresolved due to the "general difficulty in the

[143] Collins, *Selfless Persons*, pp. 247-248.

interpretation of theoretical concepts in Buddhist psychology in terms of inappropriate or misinterpreted imagery."[144] Perhaps, the translation or interpretation of the mental state *bhavaṅga* is improperly presented. Perhaps, *bhavaṅga* is better understood external to the terms discontinuous and continuous. Perhaps, Buddaghosa's firm beliefs remain supported. This critique will remain unresolved, yet one can assume this position of Collins. One can assume that *anatta* and an agent can coexist.

CONCLUSION

With all that has been said, an agent and the components that construct a false sense of Self are similar, though not synonymous. Agency, arguably, includes the mobility to commit an act and reap the *karmic* consequences or benefits; whereas, the self is the compilation of the aggregates invoked. These differences permit the coexistence of *anatta* and agency. In semblance with Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga,* there are no fallacies—only unresolved questions—amid what colloquially appear to be paradoxical doctrines. In fact, the study of no-Self and the study of agency, both alleviate suffering and aid in the attainment of enlightenment.

[144] Ibid., pp. 248.

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