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PROMISING ACROSS LIVES TO SAVE NON-EXISTENT BEINGS: IDENTITY, REBIRTH, AND THE BODHISATTVA'S VOW



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Perhaps the most striking feature of the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist moral tradition is its conception of the bodhisattva who vows with infinite compassion to remain in *saṃsāra* for endless lives to work for the benefit of sentient beings.¹ There is a sense in which this Buddhist saint's commitment transcends his theistic counterparts, who after all will shortly enter heaven and receive their eternal reward. The bodhisattva has no such respite; in fact many of his rebirths are fraught with sacrifice, including giving up limbs and even his life during the development of full Buddhahood. His vow is among the most remarkable ethical aspirations in the history of human thought.

It is also, upon a bit of reflection, apparently inconsistent on a couple of fronts. First, there is the perennial tension between the ethical activity of persons and the Buddhist denial of self. How can a bodhisattva vow to liberate all sentient beings when neither he nor those beings exist? Although some Buddhist texts delight in this paradox,² a frequent philosophical response is to claim that sentient beings exist conventionally, as conceptual imputations upon causally connected but discrete streams of mental and physical events. These conventionally existing persons possess sufficiently robust existence to liberate beings, as well as to be targets worthy of liberation.

In this essay, I worry about the distinct, though related, question of whether it is coherent for Buddhists to attribute continuity of identity across lives. In particular, can the bodhisattva in one lifetime promise that *he* will continue the path in the next? Buddhists posit causal and karmic continuity between lives, but also accept complete physical dissolution as well as radical psychological discontinuity, including loss of all memory, between the one who dies and the one who is reborn. This does not stop Śāntideva, and other proponents of the Bodhisattva way, from expressing their commitment as a multi-life aspiration:

For as long as space endures and for as long as the world lasts, may I live dispelling the miseries of the world. (10:55, in Śāntideva 1997, p. 144)

But for at least many of the bodhisattva's lives, although the one reborn will be karmically influenced by the vow-taker's actions, he will not remember this aspiration, or indeed doing any previous bodhisattva deeds. Why, then, should we describe their relation using the language of identity, rather than causally connected difference? Consider the difference between a young man promising to do something in his old

age and a father promising that his son will accomplish something after the father has died. Both are intelligible, but it would be unnatural to describe the second in terms of the first. Another way of making the point is to distinguish between a promise and a vow. One can promise, in certain circumstances, on others' behalf: a parent for their child, an employer for her workers, and so on. A vow is taken only for oneself. Therefore, I am asking whether the bodhisattva's commitment can intelligibly be viewed as a vow.

One way to resolve this question would be to reconstruct a Buddhist theory of personal identity, in the sense of determining which factors are necessary for continuity of identity. If these factors hold between lives, Buddhists should claim that identity spans the gap between birth and death. It is not clear to me that Buddhists provide a theory of continuity of identity in this sense, however. Buddhist authors are concerned to show how causal and in particular karmic continuity connects lives, but generally they pay little attention to the question of whether these alone are sufficient to ascribe continuity of identity across lives. Below I argue that doing so is incompatible with other Buddhist presuppositions.

In this essay, I take a different approach. In the first section, I develop the tension between the Buddhists' rejection of an enduring self (*anātman*) and their claim that continuity of identity spans lives. I then argue that even without reconstructing a Buddhist theory of personal identity, we can still determine two claims that such a theory would accept. First, given the complete dissolution of the body at death, Buddhists will have to assume that physical continuity is not necessary for continuity of identity.³ Second, at least some kind of psychological continuity will be necessary for a plausible Buddhist theory of continuity of identity. This is because, for Buddhists, conventional continuity of identity depends partly on ordinary use of language and concepts, and these will be closely tied to psychological continuity. For this same reason, a Buddhist theory of identity that focuses only on karmic causal connections will not be plausible.

In the second section of this essay, I reconstruct a potential solution to the problem created by the absence of many kinds of psychological continuity, such as memory and belief, between lives. Here I focus on the deep level of emotional, affective, and intellectual continuity of habitual response that Buddhists claim passes from one life to the next. I argue that this makes cross-life ascriptions of identity plausible, although describing the relationship as one of closely related difference is plausible as well. I also argue that in an important sense the bodhisattva can keep his vow in future lives, even if he does not remember making it. The third and fourth sections consider objections to my position. In the third, I explain why the account I develop does not conflict with the Buddhist view that identifying with our future lives is a result of ignorance and a continuing source of suffering. In the fourth, I argue that Buddhist claims about enlightened persons remembering past lives cannot naturally be incorporated into a Buddhist theory of continuity of identity. I also briefly consider the relation between Buddhist claims about taking rebirth as animals to my project.

There are many elements of the more than fifteen-hundred-year intellectual tradition of Indian Buddhism that are potentially relevant to my topic, but that I will not

be able to discuss. In particular, the theories of the Buddhist Pudgalavādins and Yogācārins, who respectively posit an existing person and a storehouse consciousness to explain karmic as well as developmental continuity, might be drawn upon in articulating a Buddhist theory of personal identity. The account I develop here is intended to be sufficiently general to apply to almost any school of Indian Buddhist thought; it would take further work that I will not attempt in order to determine how it relates to these and other specific doctrinal ideas.

The Self, Karmic Continuity, and Identity: The Problem of Identity across Lives

Buddhist claims about identity and personhood were developed in the intellectual shadow of the Brahmanical traditions that accepted an eternal self (*ātman*), which constitutes our innermost nature. This Brahmanical self does at least three distinct pieces of conceptual work in relation to personhood and personal continuity. First, as the innermost person, the *ātman* constitutes at the deepest level what a person is. Second, the endurance of that self through time accounts for continuity of identity, both within and across lifetimes. It is the fact that the *ātman* travels with a body and consciousness that accounts for the fact that the infant that is born is the same person as the one who dies, and is literally the same person who is reborn. Finally, the *ātman* is also the carrier of karma, so that actions done in the past can ripen in this or future lives.⁴

The defining feature of Buddhist metaphysics is not-self (*anātman*)—its rejection of any such enduring unified self. Nevertheless, Buddhists accept all three of the elements listed above. They claim that in some sense compatible with the rejection of the self (*ātman*), persons exist to become monks and nuns, progress along the path, and so on. Further, those persons in some sense persist through time, so that a student can become a teacher and take rebirth after death. Finally, Buddhists accept the doctrine of karma, and claim that actions will ripen into positive or negative experiences in this or future lives. They must, then, explain how these features are compatible with the denial of an enduring self.

The general strategy for discharging this conceptual debt is to substitute causal continuity between impersonal mental and physical events for the work done by an enduring self. These are of course the five aggregates (*skandhas*) of physical matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), recognition (*samjñā*), compositional factors (*samskāra*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*), which constitute the conventional person. Persons are conceptual entities (*prajñaptisat*), collections of these discrete but causally connected physical and mental events conceptually unified under a conventional designation (*prajñapti*). The name “Nāgasena,” to use an example influential in the tradition, groups together the physical events constituting Nāgasena’s body with mental events including awareness, moments of recognition, various aspects of conceptuality, and so on.⁵ It is these conventional persons who perform the activities of everyday life, as well as practice the Buddhist path.

Various Buddhist philosophers argue that causal continuity between these aggregates is sufficient to explain person-associated phenomena such as memory, subject-

tivity, and unification of discrete sensory experience as well as karmic continuity both within and between lives.⁶ Further, causal continuity, and the person-associated phenomena like physical and psychological continuity that it enables, grounds ascriptions of continuity of identity within a life.⁷ The name “Nāgasena” not only groups together a discrete assemblage of present aggregates, but unifies a temporally extended sequence of these causally connected events into the life span of the monk who is born and dies. These causal relationships, therefore, explain the existence of (selfless) persons, the continuity of identity within a life, and karmic continuity both within and between lives.

Whether and to what extent identity can be said to continue into the next life, in the absence of an enduring self (*ātman*), is a more perplexing question. Although Buddhist texts frequently ascribe identity across lives, there are good reasons to doubt the intelligibility of doing so.⁸ Buddhist texts give various accounts of rebirth, but most accept complete physical discontinuity between the one who dies and the one who is reborn.⁹ Generally, the last moment of consciousness in the dying person is said to give rise to the first moment of consciousness of the following life.¹⁰ This causal continuity of mental aggregates should not, however, be confused with the psychological connections such as memory and continuity of belief and intention stressed in contemporary theories of personal identity.¹¹ According to Buddhists, for all but highly realized persons, all memories, conscious intentions, beliefs, and so on are lost during rebirth. Given this physical and psychological chasm between lives, it is initially unclear how a Buddhist can plausibly claim that identity in any sense spans the gap between birth and death.

This trans-life gap in presumably identity-relevant continuity necessitates distinguishing between the causal continuity of the mental stream (*saṃtāna*) that connects one life to the next and continuity of identity itself, which for Buddhists requires both conceptual designation of a person and a further conceptual identification of future stages of the person as being numerically identical to past ones. It is not sufficient merely to describe trans-life identity as a way of talking about the causal continuity of the mental stream, as is done sometimes by both classical Buddhist and contemporary commenters.¹² What is at question is not whether there is robust causal continuity between lives, but whether, in the absence of physical and certain kinds of psychological continuity, such continuity as exists is sufficient for plausible ascriptions of identity. Merely the fact of causal continuity itself, of course, will not suffice; we cannot claim, for instance, that an oak growing out of the grave of a person maintains the identity of the person, even if the body nourishes the tree.

One might respond that Buddhist theories of identity simply differ from contemporary ones, in stressing continuity of karmic responsibility, rather than factors such as physical or psychological continuity, in determining when continuity of identity holds.¹³ Karma, for Buddhists, refers to thoughts and intentional action (*cetanā*) accompanied by morally positive or negative mental states, such as greed, ignorance, and so on. These actions result in good or bad effects (*karma vipāka*) in the future, which can include various kinds of rebirths and favorable and unfavorable circumstances, as well as psychological states like pleasure and pain.¹⁴ This response, then,

claims that continuity of identity can be ascribed so long as sufficient karmic connections hold between the beings in question. Since karmic potencies are inherited from past lives, this would mean that identity can span the gap between birth and death.

One potential difficulty with a karmic theory of personal identity is that at least contemporary intuitions about identity are unlikely to support it. To help see this, imagine a modification to Buddhist understandings of karmic regularities, so that one person's karmic actions are able to ripen in the causal stream of another person.¹⁵ For instance, we can imagine that Bill steals from Ted, but that Sam experiences the negative karmic result of that theft. If karmic continuity was sufficient for continuity of identity, and there were a sufficient amount of these connections, this would mean that Sam would now be Bill, but intuitively this seems to be the wrong result. Rather, it would still be Sam, with his various memories, ideas, beliefs, and other identity-relevant features, who would be experiencing the karmic results of actions done by someone else. In a case like this, in which karmic responsibility parts ways with physical and psychological continuity, our intuitions suggest that identity follows physical and psychological continuity. Accepting a karmic theory of identity, then, would clash with these intuitions.

Such an argument will not of itself be sufficient, however, since Buddhists claim that many of our intuitions about persons are deeply deluded. A deeper response is to recognize that Buddhist accounts of the conventional existence of persons, as well as continuity of identity, presuppose much of the content of our ordinary ways of talking about persons and personal identity, which will include reference to physical and/or psychological continuity.¹⁶ Recall that since Buddhists reject the existence of an enduring self (*ātman*), there is no metaphysical entity grounding ascriptions of identity over time. Instead, for Buddhists, these ascriptions depend on two conceptual unifications. First, persons, like all partite objects, are conceptual aggregations of more basic elements, unified by an aggregative concept (*prajñapti*). Second, there is a further temporal conceptual unification of these spatial conventional wholes. We use the name and concept "Nāgasena" to spatially group together the physical and mental events constituting the monk, and conceptually unify the discrete but causally connected segments into a temporally extended whole that moves, ages, teaches, promises, and so on.

For the Buddhist, therefore, both conventional persons and conventional continuity of identity over time depend on conceptual unification by these aggregative concepts (*prajñapti*), which allow us to treat a plurality of elements as if they were a unity. Moreover, for Buddhists these concepts (*prajñapti*) are at least partially rooted in social customs and the way we use language.¹⁷ We apply terms like "chariot" and "person" not as isolated individuals, but as members of communities with complex practices that at least partially determine how such terms may be applied. We cannot ascribe continuity of identity between a chariot and a splinter of wood that has scraped off the carriage. Likewise, we cannot ascribe identity between myself and my fingernail clippings, nor between myself and a student whose ideas are influenced by my own.

Since ascriptions of identity depend on our own conceptual aggregations of spatially and temporally discrete phenomena, rather than the presence or absence of a metaphysical entity like an enduring self (*ātman*), there will be a certain amount of flexibility over when such ascriptions can be made.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the application of these concepts will be constrained by the ways partite entities fit into human forms of interaction. For this reason, concepts like “personhood” and ideas about when continuity of personal identity holds will be closely bound up with physical and psychological continuity. Like all persons, Buddhists grow up in families, develop careers and projects, have relationships, and so on, all of which depend on physical and/or psychological continuity. Buddhist authors themselves are careful to claim that their rejection of an enduring unified self is consistent with these ordinary social practices.¹⁹ What this means is that Buddhists must give at least some importance to physical and/or psychological continuity in determining when continuity of identity holds. Karmic continuity, to the extent that it is divorced from physical and psychological continuity, will not be sufficient for plausible ascriptions of identity.

Similar considerations also show why a Buddhist cannot successfully claim that trans-life ascriptions of identity can be justified *merely* by their pragmatic efficacy. Like a karmic theory of identity, such a position emphasizes that the current person’s actions have direct karmic consequences for the future person. However, here it is not karmic continuity of itself that is appealed to in ascribing identity; rather, trans-life identifications are made because it is *useful* to do so, since we will then be strongly motivated to perform positive and avoid negative karmic acts that would affect the well-being of our future self. From an impersonal point of view, doing so is beneficial since it minimizes the amount of pain in the world.²⁰ This position, then, claims that since all conventional designations (*prajñapti*) are made for pragmatic purposes, the pragmatic utility of removing impersonal pain is sufficient for ascribing identity across lives, even in the absence of psychological continuity like memory.²¹

In response, we can begin by noticing that we do not need to make trans-life identifications to maximize removing pain in this way. We often care as much or more for our biological children than we do for ourselves, even in a single lifetime. Seeing the future life as a karmic heir, distinct in identity from oneself, need not impede concern for its welfare. The Buddhist, of course, claims that ordinary people erroneously take themselves to be identical to their past and future rebirths, as a result of falsely believing in an enduring self (*ātman*). This erroneous identification will result in a pernicious selfish and exaggerated concern for the future self’s well-being. Such beliefs are false even at the conventional level, however, and once they are rejected it is not clear why any benefit would be gained by conventionally identifying ourselves with a future life, rather than seeing the future life as a closely related but numerically distinct person.

More importantly, the objection against a karmic theory of identity as developed above remains in force against this pragmatic identification account. Above, I argued that the Buddhist would accept that physical and psychological continuity are deeply entwined with our understanding of persons and continuity of identity. This is because

designations of personhood depend on applying aggregative concepts (*prajñapti*), which are themselves rooted in social practices that restrict their application. In the case of persons, the application of these concepts will be restricted by physical and psychological continuity, since these are closely tied to the role persons play in societies. It is not clear, therefore, that I could in any meaningful way conventionally identify myself with a being that lacked all physical and psychological continuity with me, even if there were pragmatic efficacy in doing so. The fact that ordinary people do make these identifications is not relevant, since they will be doing so because of their erroneous belief in an enduring self.

Initially, these considerations may seem to suggest that Buddhists will not be able to plausibly ascribe continuity of identity across lives. Nevertheless, we also saw that Buddhists should accept a certain amount of unproblematic indeterminacy over when ascriptions of identity can be made. This suggests that even in the absence of physical continuity and presumably identity-relevant psychological continuity like memory, it may be open to Buddhists to extend the ordinary concept of identity across lives provided significant kinds of alternate psychological continuity remain. In the next section, I argue that the deep layer of affective, emotional, and intellectual continuity of habitual response that Buddhists claim connects lives does indeed make such ascriptions plausible. The point made thus far, however, is that neither karmic continuity nor the pragmatic value of identification alone will suffice to make such ascriptions plausible.

We can also note that this unproblematic indeterminacy suggests there will be times when Buddhists can simply describe identity as continuous or discrete as they choose. In making a similar point, Derek Parfit offers the example of a club that dissolves and reforms some years later with many of the same members. Does this club represent a continuation of the old club, or the formation of a new one? Clubs are merely collections of persons organized by various club rules, motivated by common goals, and so on. Moreover, in this case there is partial continuity between the old and newly (re)formed clubs, but a temporal gap and partial discontinuity as well. Parfit's suggestion is that, in cases like this, identity is metaphysically indeterminate; nevertheless, we can plausibly describe the situation as one of identity or difference, for strategic purposes, if we choose (Parfit 1984, pp. 213–214). For instance, we might claim that the reformed club is a continuation of the old one to attract former members.

What this suggests is that Buddhists need not give a definitive answer as to whether identity in general, or in any given case, spans lives. Instead, if there is a sufficient quantity of identity-relevant features, then ascriptions of identity may plausibly be made, even if they might also be denied. This result is compatible with the often ambivalent way in which many Buddhist texts themselves talk about identity across lives. Śāntideva, for instance, characterizes the bodhisattva vow as a trans-life commitment, but elsewhere claims that the one who is reborn is not the one who dies (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8:98). Likewise, although early Buddhist texts liberally ascribe identity across lives, they also sometimes claim that we are the heirs to our karma, an image compatible with discreteness of identity.²² Finally, the influential

Buddhist characterization of the identity of persons at different times as being neither “the same” nor “another” suggests an ambiguous attitude toward identity across rebirth (Rhys Davids 1890, p. 63).²³

Buddhist ascriptions of identity across lives will be plausible, therefore, if there is sufficient continuity of identity-relevant factors holding between the one who dies and the one reborn. Since I will not be attempting to reconstruct a Buddhist theory of identity, I will not be able to list and evaluate the significance of each possible identity-relevant factor. Nevertheless, we saw that the problem with ascribing identity across lives arises because of complete physical and massive psychological discontinuity. We will simply have to assume that physical continuity is not necessary for trans-life identity if we are to take Buddhist descriptions of rebirth seriously. The question then will be whether there is sufficient continuity remaining, which may include other kinds of psychological continuity, to keep the identity of the dying and reborn person in the indeterminate zone where ascriptions of identity may plausibly be made.

In the next section, I examine a second layer of trans-life causal continuity accepted by Buddhists: the deep layer of continuity in emotional, affective, and intellectual habitual response that Buddhists claim is passed between lives. I will argue that in contrast to the karmic continuity just considered, this layer of deep psychological continuity makes ascriptions of identity across lives by Buddhists plausible.

Deep Psychological Continuity across Lives

Above, I argued that what is commonly referred to as the doctrine of karma, in which good and bad thoughts and intentional actions cause positive or negative results in future lives, is not sufficient for ascribing identity across lives. Buddhists, however, also claim that these thoughts and actions have psychological effects, in that they build up the propensity for the reoccurrence of the same kind of mental state.²⁴ Buddhists refer to negative emotional and intellectual propensities as *anuśayas*, our habitual dispositions to become angry, to crave, and so on.²⁵ Significantly, Buddhist authors claim that these underlying habitual dispositions travel from life to life with the karmic stream.²⁶ What this means is that although I do not remember who and what I hated in my last life, I inherit the propensity to become angry, to crave and to reify impermanent and dependent phenomena. The same is true of a plethora of secondary negative emotions, like jealousy, pride, distraction, and so on. Likewise the dispositions for the arising of the three good roots of wisdom, non-attachment, and non-craving and the other positive mental factors (*kuśala-dharma*) also accompany the karmic stream to the next life. It is building up these propensities that largely constitutes progress on the path to enlightenment.

These emotional and intellectual dispositions are an obvious example of psychological continuity between lives, but we can deepen our account by examining how these habitual dispositions function in relation to pleasure and pain. In Buddhist psychology, pleasant, painful, and neutral sensations (*vedanā*) arise as a result of the ripening of past karmic action.²⁷ When I experience a particular sensory input, a pile

of trash for instance, the unpleasant feeling that arises is a consequence of a negative action committed in this or a former life. Likewise, when I eat chocolate, the rush of pleasure is caused by the ripening of past good karma (Gethin 1998, p. 216). Although determined by past karma, these involuntary affective responses are themselves karmically neutral in that they create no new karmic seeds. Affective response, however, activates the underlying habitual tendencies (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 1134, M iii 285; Waldron 2003, p. 33). I feel a burst of pleasure from the chocolate and I crave more. I hear the dog's shrill barking and I become angry. These defiled mental reactions then create new karmic seeds that will ripen in the future. Likewise, dispositions for the arising of the positive mental factors lessen and finally eliminate these negative habitual reactions. I hear the shrill barking, experience a painful audible sensation, but as a result of perfecting patience it does not annoy me, and so no new karma is created.

There are, then, two distinguishable components of psychological continuity associated with the habitual tendencies that travel from life to life. Both my tendency to feel pleasure and pain in response to a particular stimulus and my propensity to respond emotionally and intellectually to this compound of sensory input and hedonic affect are inherited from past lives. Buddhist texts develop these insights as part of their project of liberation, but it is easy enough to translate them into ordinary descriptions of psychological continuity. The pleasure I feel at certain sensory and mental stimuli, such as the sharp taste of tamarind, the joy I feel when I hear opera, my immediate distaste for unsweetened yogurt—all this is the result of the ripening of karma from this or former lives. Likewise, my emotional reactions, such as the anger I feel when my mother-in-law demeans me or my irrational fear of snakes, are all heavily influenced by habitual tendencies built up over numerous lives. This does not necessarily mean that my specific affective responses in all their idiosyncratic particularity will reoccur in future lives, but my general pattern of affective and emotional reactions will be passed on. I will tend to like sour tastes and lose my temper in the next life, and perhaps for eons to come.

In fact, this is hinted at in various Buddhist narratives describing cross-life continuity, such as the story of the greedy monk who was recognized by the Buddha as having been an elephant in a past life (Appleton 2011, pp. 234–235), or the stories of partners feeling great affection for each other and remarrying repeatedly in many lives (ibid., pp. 237–239). It is also worth noting that in Buddhist psychology these affective and emotional responses take place at a much deeper cognitive level than ordinary intellectual thought. I bite the chocolate, enjoy it, begin to crave it, and only then do I think about where to get more.²⁸ On its own terms, then, Buddhist psychology claims that the deepest elements of psychological continuity are passed from life to life. That surface-level phenomena like ordinary memory are not may be less of an issue in relation to continuity of identity than it at first seems.

There is also a great deal of psychological continuity in habits of attention and concentration that are passed from life to life. For instance, the mental factor of pliancy (*praśrabdhi*) allows my mind to transition easily from one idea or experience to the next. Various concentration factors like mindfulness (*smṛti*), attention (*manaskāra*),

and concentration (*samādhī*) enable different levels of focus on a particular experience, while introspection (*saṃprajanya*) indicates a background awareness of what my mind and body are doing.²⁹ What this means, in terms of personality, is that there will be a great deal of continuity over how I experience my mental life across rebirths. If I am focused and attentive in one life, and continue to develop these propensities, I will be even more so in the next. If I space out a lot and get distracted easily, this will reoccur in future lives.³⁰

Given the unproblematic indeterminacy of identity discussed in the last section, Buddhists need not give a yes or no answer to the question of whether continuity of identity spans lives. Viewing one's future lives as a continuation of the past one, rather than the beginning of another, will not be a metaphysical imperative. Moreover, even Buddhist texts that posit trans-life identity do not treat it as completely analogous to identity within a single life. Even when trans-life identifications are made, this is done with awareness that each member of the identification possesses a distinct body, with their own set of memories and beliefs as well as a distinct social history. Identifying the Buddha with Sumedha implies that each lived in their distinct time with their own circle of relations and so on. Nevertheless, with these qualifications kept in mind, I think it is at least plausible for Buddhists to ascribe continuity of identity in some sense across lives, on the basis of this deep layer of psychological continuity.³¹

Perhaps the closest analogy to the psychological continuity found across lives is a popular conception of amnesia, in which a person loses all memories, but retains their emotional and affective dispositions, the deep layers of their personality, if you will. Nevertheless, the amnesiac person is naturally described as maintaining her identity for two reasons not analogous to rebirth: her memories are likely to return, and she will be encouraged by loved ones and society to identify with the person she was before. To strengthen the analogy with rebirth, we need to stipulate that her memories will never return, and that she finds herself in an entirely new social setting, which will never significantly overlap with the one she left behind. In such a case, would or should we consider the person continuous with her pre-amnesiac self? If she learned of her history, should she take up her old name, or be content to adopt a new one? It seems to me that if one is a reductionist about identity, there is no clear answer, and we have here a question whose resolution has the nature of a choice rather than an imperative.

The example of the amnesiac suggests that Buddhist rebirth falls into a similar gray area. Given the dissolution of the body, the loss of memory, and the inability of social customs to range over lives, I think it perfectly sensible for the Buddhist to consider the reborn person simply a closely related but different person from the one who has died. In this case, we would look on our future rebirth somewhat as we might look at our current children, with the added emphasis that the personality features shared between us would be particularly deep. The reborn being would then be, as some Buddhist texts put it, an heir to our karma and, as I described above, an heir to our deeply rooted habitual emotional, intellectual, and affective responses as well. This is not, however, the way Buddhist texts usually portray continuity between

lives. Instead, they indicate continuity of conventional identity between past and future persons by use of personal pronouns ranging over multiple lives and by explicit ascriptions of trans-life identification. What I have argued here is that such ascriptions are at least plausible. In dependence on this deep layer of psychological continuity, and the fact that there should be indeterminate cases where it is not clear if identity holds, it is open to those within the Buddhist tradition to extend the concept of identity across lives and identify, at least to a certain extent, the one who is reborn as continuing the identity of the one who dies.

This still does not resolve the question of the intelligibility of the bodhisattva's trans-lifetime vow, however. This is because, at least during the early stages of his progress, the vow he takes will be forgotten after his death.³² Generally, if I promise to do something tomorrow knowing that I will forget to do it, then not only is the statement worthless, but it is not even clear if it is a promise. The bodhisattva, however, is likely to fulfill his vow, even after he forgets he has made it. One reason this is true is that his positive past karmic actions will ripen into the conditions for encountering Buddhism and retaking his vow in the future.³³ For numerous iterations, the bodhisattva will retake this vow, not knowing whether he is initiating the process to becoming a full Buddha, or building upon a commitment that was made many eons ago. Not surprisingly, this begins to take us into territory where our intuitions about promising begin to break down. It does seem, however, as though a forgetful person can intelligibly promise to do something if he knows he will be reminded of his promise in the future. Perhaps the situation where one promises, knowing one will forget but remake the promise, is likewise a not too unnatural extension of our current concept.

Just as importantly, however, there is a sense that the bodhisattva will likely keep his promise even if he both forgets the vow and does not retake it, at least for many lives. The content of the bodhisattva's vow is to perfect the virtues of full Buddhahood in order to benefit all beings. The bodhisattva will spend the rest of his life strengthening the habitual dispositions for the arising of the virtuous qualities, and at death these strengthened habits will cross the gap between lives. As we have seen, this means that a virtuous intellectual and emotional response will be much more likely to arise in relevant situations in this new life, thereby further strengthening these habitual dispositions, which will be passed on once more to the next life and so on. The content of the bodhisattva's commitment, then, is such that he is likely to complete it, even if he no longer remembers making the vow itself. In fact, this is displayed with great ingenuity in the Jātaka stories portraying past lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva, in which he develops virtues, sometimes in animal form, and generally without any explicit memory of having taken the vow itself.³⁴

Again, without any great surprise, this situation stretches our ordinary use of promising. The case is analogous to a person in a single lifetime promising to do a task, knowing he will forget the promise, but initiating a process whereby he will complete the task without remembering his commitment to doing so. Perhaps we might imagine a very forgetful gardener promising to mow the lawn, then cutting a visible patch immediately so that tomorrow he will notice it and complete the job. In

such a case, we might perhaps say that the gardener has both made and completed his promise.

None of this entails that we must view the project of the bodhisattva as a multi-life endeavor bound together by a single commitment formed at the beginning of the path. We might instead characterize each rebirth as a discrete identity taking the baton of altruism from the former life like a relay race runner (Garfield 2001). A literal rendering of the bodhisattva's vow, then, would use the first-person pronoun only to refer to this life, and might perhaps add the aspiration that all future karmically connected lives might also take up this commitment. The initial lifetime of the bodhisattva is the karmic father who passes his commitment on to his karmic children. Nevertheless, this is not how the Buddhist tradition depicts the institution of the bodhisattva. In this section, I have tried to show that taking the traditional formulation of the bodhisattva's vow more literally is plausible, despite the significant break in physical and psychological continuity that occurs after every death. Based on the deep layer of psychological continuity between lives, ascriptions of continuity of identity are at least plausible for the bodhisattva. Moreover, as a result of the karmic and psychological force of positive actions in a particular lifetime, it is likely the bodhisattva will continue the project of perfecting the virtues in future lives, even if he forgets taking the vow itself.

Identification across Lives and Conceit

In this section I consider an obvious objection to the approach I have been developing. According to Buddhism, identification of the stream of momentary physical and mental events as enduring selves is the deepest form of ignorance that binds us to *saṃsāra*. One might therefore object that my project of questioning whether multiple lives of a bodhisattva might coherently be thought of under one identity misses the point of the doctrine of not-self. Instead, we should recognize that Buddhas and advanced practitioners speak of identity both within and across lifetimes only as a skillful means to communicate with deluded ordinary people. Any deeper sense of identification, even at the conventional level, would be a product of ignorance and is therefore harmful.

There are, however, two importantly different ways of identifying with one's future states. We can make this point better by first examining the analogous case of partite objects. According to many Buddhist texts, craving and suffering do not arise merely because we conceptually unify discrete entities under a conventional label. Craving arises only when we reify this conceptually unified object, taking it to be a single thing that we can own. An advanced practitioner can still conceptually unify these discrete chariot parts under the designation "chariot" as a way of interacting skillfully with this collection.³⁵ This is done not only to interact with people who, due to ignorance, believe chariots to be enduring unified objects, but also because chariot parts put together in this particular configuration are extraordinarily useful tools for travel, and because they fit into our social practices. What this means is that although ordinary people and highly advanced practitioners both interact with

chariots, they do so in very different ways. Ordinary people view them as unitary enduring entities and as a result grasp at them. In contrast, highly advanced practitioners view them as what they are: collections of causally related discrete impermanent elements that we unify via concepts and language. As a result, advanced practitioners feel no craving (*tṛṣṇā*) or aversion (*dveṣa*) in relation to chariots and other partite objects.

Similar remarks apply to the collection of physical and mental events that can be conceptually unified under a human name. Human beings are extraordinarily useful tools for a great many things, predominant among which, for Buddhists, is the removal of suffering.³⁶ Most humans superimpose unity and endurance upon discrete evanescent mental and physical events, and as a result of taking themselves to be enduring selves they suffer greatly. Nevertheless, advanced practitioners may continue to think of themselves as conceptually unified aggregations of mental and physical events that, like chariots, fit into social practices and provide the useful function of removing suffering. These comments may then be extended to continuity of identity. Ordinary people, as a result of thinking of themselves as enduring persons, believe that they exist as a unitary being that travels to another life after death. Nevertheless, highly advanced practitioners may also view themselves as enduring persons, although they will understand this to be only a conventional designation that conceptually unifies temporally discrete momentary mental and physical events. As long as no false superimposition of unity and permanence occurs, craving will not arise.³⁷

This explains how highly realized persons may view themselves as conventionally enduring throughout one life. As I have argued in the previous section, based on the deep layer of psychological continuity spanning lives, ascriptions of identity and commitment across lifetimes are also intelligible. The bodhisattva therefore may view his future lives as continuations of his current one without experiencing the pernicious arising of craving.

Memory of Past Lives and Rebirth as Animals

In this final section, I briefly consider two elements of the Buddhist tradition relevant to the question of trans-life identity, which I will not be able to treat in detail. First is the remembrance of past lives that Buddhas and other high-level practitioners experience, often just prior to their initial enlightenment experience.³⁸ One might argue that these recollections should be seen as a kind of deep memory that can be appealed to as unifying a life, in some way analogous to how ordinary memory functions in psychological theories of identity like those of Locke and Parfit.³⁹ We could then conclude that ascriptions of identity across lives can be justified by these past-life recollections, in a way that is more plausible than emphasizing deep emotional and affective continuity as I have done above.

There are two reasons I do not think these recollections play a serious role in determining the intelligibility of ascribing identity across lives. First, they are inessential to the Buddhist tradition; not only can non-Buddhist contemplatives achieve this

power, but many Buddhist descriptions of awakening do not mention it (Lopez 1992). It is not clear, then, how much of a role this particular power can play in identity across lives, given that almost all ordinary persons, and even many advanced Buddhists, never experience it. Placing too much emphasis on it would result in an odd situation in which certain Buddhist practitioners who attain the power are conventionally identified with their past lives, while all other persons are not.

The second reason is that Buddhist texts typically place the power of recollecting past lives alongside a number of other higher powers, including teleportation, flying, and, most significantly, reading other people's minds.⁴⁰ What this suggests is that the phenomenology of past-life memory in the Buddhist tradition may be almost wholly distinct from ordinary memory, so much so that examining one's past life would be akin to looking into the mind of another person.⁴¹ If this is right, then the remembering of past lives does not establish psychological continuity between past and future lives, but instead provides a magical glimpse into a life that may otherwise be discontinuous from the present one.

The second element I want to touch upon is the fact that Buddhist texts describe the possibility of rebirth, not only in human form, but also as an animal, a hell-being, a deity, and various other kinds of beings. For the most part, I am content to leave the question of psychological continuity between humans and these other rebirths as a fascinating one that I will not explore. It is worth noting, however, that in Jātaka stories in which the Buddha is portrayed in a variety of animal forms, he is almost always described as developing one or more of the virtues of Buddhahood. This suggests psychological continuity, of the kind that I have emphasized above, exists as well between human and animal births, and perhaps a somewhat more tenuous link in continuity of identity might be maintained between these lives. The alternative strategy is simply to treat non-human rebirths as gaps in the ordinary stream of psychological continuity, which will resume when human birth is taken again. Being reborn as a sheep, in such a view, is somewhat analogous to the taking of a long nap in the theories of personal identity formulated by Parfit and Locke.

Conclusion

In the absence of an enduring self, Buddhists appeal to causal continuity between mental and physical aggregates to explain the conventional existence of persons, continuity of identity within lives, and karmic continuity both within and between lives. Many Buddhist texts also liberally ascribe identity across lives, but it is not initially clear why they are entitled to do so, given the massive physical and psychological discontinuity between death and rebirth. I have reconstructed above a potential response the Buddhist can make. Buddhist accounts of persons as conceptually unified aggregations entails that there will be some unproblematic indeterminacy over when continuity of identity holds. Moreover, significant emotional, affective, and intellectual continuity exists between lives, in the form of deeply rooted patterns of habitual response. I have argued that Buddhists can appeal to this deep level of psychological continuity in extending the concept of identity across lives. Moreover,

based on such trans-life identifications, the bodhisattva may coherently take a vow binding together his future lifetimes in the project of achieving enlightenment and removing suffering.

The argument above is not the only response that could be made in regard to the tension between ascriptions of identity across lives and cross-life physical and psychological fragmentation. Surely there is something right as well about Steven Collins' claim that different kinds of Buddhist literature play by different rules, and that therefore authors of narrative texts need not consider technical difficulties arising from the denial of an enduring self (Collins 1982 and 1997). Alternately, Buddhists can give up the idea of trans-life continuity of identity, and instead see the project of enlightenment as being achieved by multiple distinct but karmically related persons, and the bodhisattva path as a compassionate relay race (Garfield 2001).⁴²

Nevertheless, there is a deep loss if we take either of these options, at least for those of us who see Indian Buddhism as one of the great ethical traditions of human history. The moment in which the bodhisattva takes her vow to liberate all beings is breathtaking in its magnitude, representing a portrayal of compassion perhaps unmatched in ethical literature. If we cannot take trans-lifetime identification with the right amount of conventional robustness, however, it becomes simply a moment of hyperbole taken seriously only by deluded persons at the beginning of the Buddhist path.⁴³

Notes

My thanks go to Chris Framarin, Ethan Mills, and an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophy East and West* for comments that have improved this essay.

- 1 – I limit my attention to Indian Buddhist texts, although I will generally omit “Indian” to save space. The problem of continuity of identity across rebirth applies to most of the philosophical Indian Buddhist tradition; therefore I frame my argument in general terms. On occasion doctrinal differences in the specifics of karma, rebirth, and so on would require a slight modification of terminology, but I hope this will usually be self-explanatory to those familiar with the schools in question.
- 2 – See for instance Thurman [1976] 2003, chap. 5.
- 3 – Of itself, this is not particularly objectionable, since a number of influential theories accept this. See, for instance, Parfit 1984.
- 4 – Brahmanical schools develop various positions on the relation between the self (*ātman*), identity through time, and karma, and this sketch is necessarily an oversimplification. Moreover, there lurk deep philosophical problems with appealing to an unchanging self to ground accounts of identity over time. My point here is that Brahmanical schools have a *prima facie* plausible explanation of continuity of identity and these other features that Buddhists did not.

- 5 – See Rhys Davids 1890, esp. book 2, chap. 1.
- 6 – For recent philosophically sophisticated treatments of some of these issues from a Buddhist perspective, see Rudd 2015; Ganeri 2012 (esp. part 3); Siderits et al. 2011; Siderits 2003 (esp. chap. 3); Kapstein 2001, chap. 4; and Collins 1982. Although all of these works treat aspects of personal identity in the Buddhist tradition, in this essay I am particularly interested in the question of identity over time, given radical physical and psychological change, an issue that none of these works addresses in detail. See Waldron 2003 for an excellent discussion of the most influential Abhidharma theories of karmic continuity in the absence of an enduring self.
- 7 – Rhys Davids 1890, book 1, chap. 2, and book 2, chap. 2 provide particularly influential Buddhist treatments of these issues. Interestingly, in this discussion the monk Nāgasena emphasizes the importance of physical continuity of the body regarding continuity of identity within a life (see p. 63). See Kapstein 2001, chap. 4 (esp. pp. 115–119) for a helpful discussion. I agree with Kapstein that we should not take Nāgasena’s isolated statement as a commitment to a bodily theory of identity, although it does show that bodily continuity plays some role in continuity of identity for at least some Buddhist authors.
- 8 – These ascriptions are often explicit, such as when the Buddha identifies a current discussant as being so and so in a former life. Examples like this can be found at the conclusion of many Jātaka stories; see Shaw 2007 for a good collection. Trans-life ascription of identity may also be implicit, for instance in statements by Buddhist authors who attempt to invoke an individual’s concern for *their* future well-being after rebirth. See, for instance, Śāntideva 4:25. See Appleton 2014 for a careful study of multi-life continuity in both Buddhist and Jain texts, as well as Appleton 2010 and 2012 for a discussion of the multi-life career of the bodhisattva.
- 9 – Griffiths 1982, p. 284; Paul Williams 1998, pp. 41–42; and Becker 1998, p. 116 also draw attention to the problem of continuity of identity, given physical and/or psychological discontinuity between lives. An influential Buddhist statement on continuity of identity, both within and across lives, is to claim that karmically connected persons at different times are neither “the same” nor “another” (Rhys Davids 1890, p. 63). This formulation indicates that important elements of continuity, including of course karmic responsibility, connect streams of mental and physical events, even in the absence of an enduring unitary self. My point in this essay is that there are important kinds of identity-relevant continuity, such as memory, which hold within but not between lives, and therefore conventional ascriptions of identity within a life cannot unproblematically be extended across lives.
- 10 – Many schools accept an intermediate state for the mental aggregates between death and rebirth. See Gethin 1998, pp. 215–218, for an introductory discussion focused on the Theravada tradition. Over its intellectual history, the schools

of Buddhism developed a variety of views about rebirth, but the general problem I am alluding to, regarding the tension between physical and psychological discontinuity and Buddhist ascriptions of trans-life identity, would apply to most if not all of them.

- 11 – Particularly influential in contemporary discussions of personal identity is the psychological-continuity view developed by Parfit (1984). An influential defense of the importance of physical continuity is given in Bernard Williams 1970.
- 12 – See, for example, Vasubandhu 1988, pp. 399–400, and the famous images of causal continuity including the lamp comprised of distinct flames in *The Questions of King Milinda* (Rhys Davids 1890, esp. book 2, chap. 1). Contemporary authors making this suggestion include Harvey (2004, pp. 66–68) and Gethin (1998, pp. 142–145).
- 13 – Forrest (1978) makes this suggestion.
- 14 – See Gethin 1998, pp. 119–121, for an introductory discussion. Many Buddhists also claim that the strengthening of the kinds of psychological habitual response that I will consider in the next section is a kind of karma *vipāka*. My point in this section is that karmic continuity, once we exclude overlap with psychological continuity, is not sufficient for continuity of identity.
- 15 – Although for my argument we need only assume this provisionally, arguably some Buddhists do allow direct influence of another person’s karmic stream in the Mahāyāna-emphasized possibility of transferring merit (*punyapariṇāmanā*). If this doctrine is taken literally, it suggests these Mahāyāna authors do not accept a karmic theory of identity, since one retains one’s own conventional identity even while transferring karmic results to others. See Goodman 2009, chap. 4, for a summary of the doctrine.
- 16 – They would, of course, reject any associations of permanence or self-existence implied in ordinary speech about the self. But the point is that ordinary beliefs about continuity of identity, which will be closely related to physical and psychological continuity, are compatible with acceptance of the self as a conceptual unification of discrete momentary elements.
- 17 – The dependence of the conventional existence (*saṃvṛtisat*) of partite objects on social conventions becomes particularly explicit in Madhyamaka texts, for instance Candrakīrti 2004, 6:113, 6:159, and 6:166–167. See also Vasubandhu 1988, pp. 910–911, VI.4.
- 18 – Here I am influenced by Parfit (1984, pp. 212–214).
- 19 – See, for instance, Nāgasena’s famous response to Milinda’s objection that accepting not-self destroys the Buddhist path (Rhys Davids 1890, book 2, chap. 1).

- 20 – Siderits (2003, chaps. 3 and 5) explores the Buddhist commitment to impersonal maximization of the removal of pain, in relation to conceiving of ourselves as enduring persons. My formulation of this potential objection is indebted to his work.
- 21 – I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I distinguish this position from that of a karmic-continuity theory of identity.
- 22 – “[B]eings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 1053, M iii 203). Notice that the passage also refers to beings as “owners” of their action (Pali: *kamma* = Sanskrit: *karma*), suggesting instead continuity of identity across lives. See Appleton 2011 and 2014 for careful studies of the language of karmic inheritance in Buddhist and Jain literature.
- 23 – But see Siderits 2003, pp. 35–37, for an alternate interpretation. See also my note 9 above.
- 24 – Also relevant here is Perrett’s suggestion that “abilities or capacities” that are transmitted across lives at least partially account for continuity of identity for the Buddhist (1987, p. 53). See also Sorabji 2006, pp. 303–304.
- 25 – These psychological effects of thoughts and actions are considered by some Buddhist authors to be a kind of karma *vipāka*. All Indian schools accept them in some sense, regardless of how they are classified. In contrast to the last section, the emphasis here is on kinds of psychological continuity associated with karmic results as being identity relevant.
- 26 – The early Pali canon gives the example of a newly born baby already possessing habitual tendencies toward anger and lust (Ñānamoli and Bodhi, p. 537, M i 433). See Vasubandhu 1988, chap. 5 for an influential Buddhist explanation of the habitual tendencies (*anuśayas*).
- 27 – In the previous section, I argued that Buddhists cannot plausibly appeal to a karmic theory of identity in the absence of psychological continuity. Here, although karmic tendencies play a causal role, it is the continuity of affective response that I am emphasizing as relevant to continuity of identity.
- 28 – On this point see Heim 2003, pp. 532–535.
- 29 – There is great diversity in the rich accounts of the virtuous mental states developed by different Buddhist schools. My general point about the kinds of deep trans-life psychological continuity will apply regardless, although explanations of specific mental factors may differ. I base my explanations of the mental factors in this section on Asaṅga 2001 and Vasubandhu 2009. The explanation of introspection (*samprajanya*) is taken from Śāntideva 5:108.
- 30 – The psychological tendency toward distraction is theorized through mental factors like inertia (*styāna*) and laziness (*kausīdya*). See Asaṅga 2001, p. 16.

- 31 – On trans-life continuity including inheritance of character traits, see Appleton 2011. See also Harvey 2004, pp. 67–70, and in particular his emphasis on the trans-life stability of biological sex.
- 32 – Toward the late stages of the bodhisattva path, bodhisattvas will take voluntary rebirth and maintain memory of their prior lives. At this point, it becomes more plausible to ascribe trans-life continuity of identity to them. This does not of itself provide a reason to extend that identity backwards to the time of taking the vow, however. I consider the related issue of memory of past lives achieved at enlightenment in the following section.
- 33 – Numerous Buddhist sources, including the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvastu*, depict the Buddha repeatedly retaking the bodhisattva commitment in his past lives (Appleton 2012, p. 6).
- 34 – See Appleton 2014, pp. 29–31, for several examples. A good translation of selected Jātaka stories is Shaw 2007.
- 35 – See Rhys Davids 1890, book 2, chap. 1.
- 36 – On the utility of the person conception in removing suffering, see Siderits 2003, chap. 3.
- 37 – On Buddhist enlightened attitudes toward identity, consider the following passage from the Pali canon: “Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing [dependent origination] in this way, would you run back to the past thus ‘Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? Having been what, what did we become in the past?’—No venerable sir” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 357, M i 265). The passage then repeats regarding our attitude toward the future and the present. Initially one might read this as claiming that a liberated Buddhist would have absolutely no interest in continuity of identity. This conflicts, however, with the careful attention Buddhist texts give to indicating how Buddhist truths of not-self and dependent origination are compatible with ordinary person-involving social transactions. See, for instance, Nāgasena’s famous response to Milinda’s objection that accepting not-self destroys the Buddhist path (Rhys Davids 1890, book 2, chap. 1). It is also worth pointing out that the passage just quoted is presented as a conversation between student and teacher, and therefore presupposes continuity of identity as a condition of these social roles. Rather, we must interpret these verses as indicating the shift in psychological orientation toward one’s continued existence once not-self has been realized. This reading is also supported by Buddhist texts that indicate that liberated persons have no fear of death (for instance, Thanissaro 1995, Thag 715–716, and see Harvey 2004, p. 65). This does not suggest that such persons have lost any idea of themselves as individuals, but rather indicates a psychological attitude toward continuity of identity that is free of craving, and therefore of fear.

- 38 – This experience is mentioned frequently in the early Pali canon descriptions of enlightenment. For example, see Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 341, M i 248.
- 39 – Perrett (1987, pp. 53–55) makes a similar suggestion.
- 40 – See, for example, Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, pp. 883–884, M i 12.
- 41 – On this point see Collins 1982, pp. 189–190.
- 42 – Relevant here also is Collins’ suggestion that altruism rather than identity grounds enlightened concern for one’s own future rebirths. See Collins 1982, pp. 188–190, and chap. 6.3.3.
- 43 – An anonymous reviewer astutely points out that the vow the bodhisattva makes even in a single life is already extraordinarily impressive. Nevertheless, I do think that the temporal breadth of her commitment, in which she vows to remain in *saṃsāra* forever, has a remarkable quality that is lost without taking rebirth seriously. I hope to have showed in this essay that, at least according to Buddhist presuppositions, there is enough conventional robustness of continuity of identity to take this vow seriously.

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