Causality and Impermanence in Finite Cosmologies: Theravada Abhidharma and Norse Mythology

The following will attempt to show a philosophic congruency between two otherwise radically different systems of belief. We are going to find what Buddhist themes and ideas we can that would resonate in the world of the Vikings and their gods. What we will be looking at is how the cosmological narrative in the 13th Scandinavian text *Voluspa* expresses and sympathizes with important philosophical themes found in Theravada Buddhism. I will show how the concepts of impermanence and anatman are deeply embedded in the story told in the *Voluspa* through a presentation of *Ragnarok*. Supplementary texts will also be used from the *Elder Edda* to prove that the Buddhist themes found in the *Voluspa* are not singularities but are constant in the larger philosophical context behind the myths of the Norsemen. Furthermore, we will explore how karmic legacy and causal connection act in the same way for the rebirth and cycling through samsara in the Buddhist cosmos as presented in the Theravadin *Abhidharma* as they do for “rebirth” into Valhalla in the Viking one. The overall purpose of this essay will not simply be to understand how two seemingly unrelated world views share common idea but rather to gain insight into the larger ideas of impermanence, mutability and change, and what the ultimate consequences of such realities are upon an understanding of the cosmos in which humans (and all sentient beings) live.

There are a few obstacles that bar a straight forward path. Buddhism is not a system of belief that can be easily (if at all) reduced to a single essence or meaning. When we say Buddhism, we refer to an abstract composite whole that comprises many and varied beliefs. Buddhist schools are numerous and complicated beyond the larger division of the Three Vehicles of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. The subdivisions in each vehicle host a large variety of different practices and syncretic mythologies, while the Three Vehicles have their own branches of philosophical discourse concerning the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism has proven itself to be extremely adaptable if not mutable. Therefore, before any discussion can begin, we have to focus specifically upon which Buddhism we are going to look at. Similarly, Scandinavian mythology and practice cannot be placed in a neat box either. Mythological accounts of certain stories often stage different gods playing in the same roles while the cosmic chronology is not always consistent from one myth to another. Moreover, what documentation there is of Scandinavian mythology, ritual practice and belief was for the most part recorded through a Christian lens, and so we must always operate with this veil in mind. Thus, not only are there few primary sources, but we must also must keep in mind that the sources are biased.

What might appear as an oversight in the following essay is its lack of discussion concerning the rituals and practices of Theravadin schools and Viking Scandinavian religion. Orthodox doctrine (or doctrine of any sort) and

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interpolations are easy to detect. There are overarching themes in the *Voluspa*, which we shall explore below, that resonate strongly with other texts in the *Elder Edda*. The elements we may dub as Christian additions prove to be much more singular and discordant entities when viewed in respect to the larger corpus of the *Elder Edda*.

The Theravadin *Abhidharma* tradition that we will be using is a compilation of seven works that, unlike the *Voluspa*, are authoritative texts written down by Theravadin Buddhists themselves. The term *Abhidharma* means beyond, higher or further Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) while the texts make up one part out of three of the Tripitaka along with the *Sutrapitaka* and the *Vinayapitaka*, and are considered to be the word of the Buddha. They are a system of thought and commentaries. It attempts to concretize and describe accurately all circumstances and eventualities, the underlying nature of the Dharma as found in the discourses of the Buddha.“

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The first two Noble Truths of Buddhism state that life is suffering (duhka) and that suffering is caused by craving (trsna). Duhka means dis-ease, and we experience dis-ease when we encounter change. Consequently, duhka does not strictly refer to negative feelings, but also to those joys which fade away and thus cause us to experience dis-ease and suffering. We experience duhka because we do not want to accept the ephemeral condition of our existence.

This extends to any notion of the soul, or a permanent immortal self. This is the idea of anatman: no-self. There is no soul that reincarnates to the next life which keeps your essence from the previous life. It is only the karmic legacy of beings that persist into the next realm of rebirth.

The Abhidharma texts detail thirty-one basic realms of existence that compromise the endless thrice-thousand world systems which are encompassed within samsara. It is through these realms that beings pass through countless cycles of death and rebirth. Fundamentally, one can compress even these basic thirty one realms into six realms, in which each of the six realms contain many different strata. For example the god-realm, which is detailed as the most stratified, is separated into more than six different categories. Yet those god-realms belong the World of the Five Senses, in which the remaining five basic realms exist. Beyond those six god-realms of the World of the Five Senses are the even higher god realms of the World of Pure Form and Formless World (cumulatively containing 20 sub categories) where heavenly creatures exist for up to 84, 000 aeons. But no matter how long or blissful a creature’s life, existence in any state is finite.

At some point, every creature has been reborn into one of these realms (except the Pure Abodes as, in these states, nirvana is a guarantee) and so has had the pleasure of being a god, a hungry ghost and a hell-being. This finite state also extends to the entirety of the massive cosmos itself as it cyclically gets destroyed, either by fire, water, or wind (except for the Formless Worlds in the highest strata of the god-realm) to then be reborn. Impermanence and change are then not only...
the condition of living things, but are also the condition of the entire cosmos. It is not just a lofty philosophic idea, but the fundamental nature of existence. We see a very similar model presented in the *Voluspa*.

The *Voluspa* states that the world was made by the Corpse-Father Odin and his brothers, using the bones, limbs and organs of the primordial giant Ymir. Built around Yggdrasil, the world-tree, they created a cosmos composed of nine worlds, in which dwell the gods, giants, humans, and other mythological creatures. It is important to note that right away the creation of the world is produced through acts of violence, and the lord of that word is introduced as the Corpse-father. This sets the tone for what is to come as the cosmos of the Norsemen is one of seeming relentless violence and bloodshed.

Halfway through the poem, the narrator, who has only just begun to recount the beginning of the world, already alludes to the end of creation: *Ragnarok*, “the rendering of the powers.” It is here where the gods, the world, and the whole cosmos comes to an end in a final battle.

It is thanks to *Ragnarok* that the themes of change and impermanence are omnipresent in the *Voluspa*. To flesh this out, we will look at two of its key players: Odin and Loki. While Odin ordered the world, represented by his epithet Allfather, change is nevertheless definitive of his character. Odin cuts out his eye, travels the nine worlds in disguise. changes sex, is at both the lord of destructive war and creative poetry, and come *Ragnarok* dies. Death and change are part of Odin’s very identity. Placed beside Odin is Loki. He is the trickster god, who instigates *Ragnarok* by orchestrating the murder of Odin’s son Baldr. Yet Loki is also the blood brother to Odin, and shares many of Odin’s traits. While opposing each other, they are also quite similar, and require one-another. One approach to understanding *Ragnarok* and the elements of change therein, suggested by Levi-Strauss, is to look at Loki, and the race of giants that he partially belongs to, as abstract forces of nature and chaos contending against the forces of culture and order of Odin and the Aesir. This view, however, is problematic as these two forces are not simply in dualistic opposition. Change is inherent to Odin, the creator of the nine worlds, as it is to their destroyer, Loki. Moreover, without the “unstable, flawed figure of Loki, there could be no change in the fixed order of things, no quickening pulse, and no *Ragnarok,*” and yet with no order Loki would have nothing to change. Order and chaos...
as depend on each other and yet both share the similar traits of impermanence. Instead of presenting a struggle between Odin/order/permanence/culture against Loki/chaos/change/nature, the similarity between both figures, and their interwoven fates leads us to consider the fundamental condition of the world as it exists, that of change and impermanence, than dualistic forces in opposition. 

This is the very same argument made by the First and Second Noble Truths. Change and impermanence are the conditions of existence in samsara. We can understand this similarity better if we take a close look at Ragnarok.

The great Yggdrasil survives the destruction of Ragnarok and from there life, like in the Buddhist cosmos, is born anew. What persists along with Yggdrasil is the *nidhoggr*, a dragon which has since the beginning of time gnawed at its roots. 

Despite its seeming immortality, Yggdrasil is paradoxically in a constant state of deterioration and abuse by the *nidhoggr*. Yet it is also a symbol for life as it sustains the cosmos. Indeed, Yggdrasil is the very trembling heart of the nine worlds.

The value of the *nidhoggr* is a little more discreet. It, like Yggdrasil, is a looming and a passive player in the cosmological narrative. Yet the last line in the *Voluspa* is reserved for the evil dragon. In the pen-ultimate stanza of the *Voluspa* it is foretold that a new powerful high-god will appear once the world is reborn. This line concerning this new god is believed by many to be a Christian interpolation suggesting the end and irrelevance of pagan beliefs. What is important to consider here is that, in spite of this intrusion, the very none Christian promise of the *nidhoggr*’s persistence in the new world remains the final line of the poem. 

Despite the rebirth of the world after Ragnarok, the final image in the poem is not a redemptive or hopeful one, but one of the dragon flying over the new world with corpses falling from its wings. This shows us that even in the new world death persists, promising that this new world will end in flames just as the old one. 

While Yggdrasil and life survive Ragnarok, so too does death and the dragon. As Odin’s order is intertwined with Loki’s chaos, so is the eternal life of Yggdrasil forever hounded by death and change, symbolized by the *nidhoggr*. Yggdrasil is similarly the lynchpin which keeps the whole cosmos together. Yet both dragon and tree symbolize that change and impermanence are the fundamental and, dare we say, permanent conditions of existence.

Beyond the world being born anew, rebirth is also a subject which concerns the human “soul” in the Viking cosmology. The term soul however is problematic as it implies an eternal permanence that is missing in the Viking cosmos. Nevertheless, after every battle Odin sends out his Valkyries to choose among the

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31 Crossley Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: Gods of the Vikings*, xxiii. “…Yggdrasil nourishes, and suffers from, the animals that inhabit it, feed on it, and attack it” – It also harbours two humans from the flames of Ragnarok who start the race again.


34 *Voluspa*, stanza 66. “Then there comes there the dark dragon flying!...It bears its wings and flies over the plain/ dead bodies; Spite-Striker [the Nidhogg].”

35 Martin, *Thor: Myth to Marvel*, 29. "Voluspa concludes by predicting that monstrosity,... the dragon Nidhogg, will once again bring death and destruc-
slain human warriors those who will ascend to Valhalla (the hall of the slain) and join Odin in Asgard (home of the gods). These warriors are carried to Valhalla by the Valkyries and in a sense are “reborn” as Einherjar, those who fight with Odin against the giants come Ragnarok.36 However, in the final battle, the Einherjar die alongside Odin and the Aesir gods. There is no permanent heaven, nor a permanent soul that exists after death. This is reinforced in another text in the Elder Edda, the Havamal, where it says that “Cattle die, kinsmen die/ oneself dies just the same/ But words of glory never die/ for he who gets a good name.”37 The idea here is that because there is no eternal state after life, the actions and the name of a person are what must be made eternal. This reflects the model of karmic legacy which holds that while there is no immortal soul, but rather, rebirth is causally connected to actions from the previous life (further on this later).38 In this regard we can understand impermanence as being expressed through anatman as the Einherjar die a final death. The problem in comparing the two systems arises at this point where in the Theravadin cosmos it takes countless rebirths to attain nirvana while in the Viking equivalent it only takes about two.39 In dying alongside Odin, the Einherjar do not possess immortal souls but rather experience only finite rebirths. The comparison goes even further if we look at what gets you into these two heavenly realms: action and intention.

What dictates which of six realms we are reborn into is our karma. Karma works by accumulating merit through congruency of action with the intent behind it.40 Looking at the five skandas, notice that physicality is outnumbered by mental actions.41 Intent behind action is thus more important than action itself, as the intent dictates the merit of the action.42 If I give alms to only appear generous instead of out of compassion, then my action does not acquire much merit. Exterior action is bound within interior intent.43 If my mental actions in life were violent with selfish and hateful intent, then “I” will probably be reborn into a hell-realm. This is due to the philosophy of dependent arising and causal connection. What dictates rebirth into any realm is karmic legacy. One is not simply reborn into the hell-realm arbitrarily, but is reborn there as a causal consequence of hellish actions and thoughts of the previous life. In my hate and anger, one experiences the psychological condition of the hell-realms; being born into the hell realm is continuing the intentionality and actions of the previous life.44

This resonates strongly with the idea that whole reason why Ragnarok occurs to begin with is a consequence of Odin’s initial violent actions against the giant Ymir. The Voluspa gives no account as to why Odin slew the giant, only that Odin drew first blood and though “this act gives rise to the world of the Edda, the slaying also unleashing the power of the giants, the gods’ enemies.”45 Thus Odin might be faulted from the
start and the entire violent history between the
gods and the giants, culminating to Ragnarok,
is really the giants settling a primordial blood
dept. Ragnarok, and the fate of the gods, can
be seen as causally connected to that first pri-
mordial act. Like overwhelming and prevalent
hellish actions or mental states causally con-
dition rebirth in the hell-realm, so did Odin’s
first act of creation through violence, condi-
tion the subsequent nature and psychology of
the world he created. As cycling through the
realms of samsara is also a cycling through
various mental states, so to can the cosmos
created by Odin be seen like existence in a vio-
lent hell realm predicated on a violent action
acted out with unwarranted violent intent. The
Abhidharma texts show that each realm comes
with a certain and specific psychological con-
stitution. This is the fundamental “principle of
the equivalence of cosmology and psycholo-
gy” that the Abhidharma texts so specifically
detail in their understanding of the Buddhist
cosmos. Yet mentality alone is not enough,
as bad merit is accumulated only if “an
action’s being [is] performed with full inten-
tion and full awareness of what one is doing.”
Moreover, intent and acting on it produce kar-
mic merit, and so accordance of intentionality
and action are not simply enough to achieve
enlightenment.

Similarly, the ascension to Valhalla is dictat-
ed only by the action determined by a fear-
less victor’s mentality. The cowardly who shy
away from war in fear of death, clinging to life
to die of old age and sickness, like the vio-
lent and hateful person who is reborn into the
cold realm of the sick and cowardly dead.
The make up of their life governs where they shall
be remade when dead. The quote above from the Havamal showed that immortality is
acquired through deed, but the Havamal also
tells us that one must be mirthful until the time
of death. Victory is not winning the battle,
but being able to still laugh in defeat, and that
is what people will sing about. The Einherjar
are not great because they win at Ragnarok,
they are great because they loose with the vic-
tor’s mentality. Consequently, to be chosen
to enter Valhalla demands this heroic action
and state of mind as the Einherjar eventually
face the same oblivion but one a much grander
scale. And it is by tempting the heroic path that
one can truly reconcile such a fate.

The Third and Fourth Nobles Truths tell us that
there is an end to suffering and there is a path
that leads to that end. This is the Noble Eight-
fold Path. It attempts to cultivate Wisdom
(prajna), Morality (sila), and Meditation
(samadhi) to attain enlightenment. Along
the path must come acceptance, under-
standing, and contentment concerning all
The Noble Truths. It is at the moment when

61 Jesse Byok, trans, The Prose Edda, xviii.
64 Ibid., 120. The five conditions for an unwholesome
act of killing are “there must be a living creature,
one must know the creature is living, one must
intend to kill the creature, one must perform the
necessary action and finally the creature must
actually die.”
65 Voluspa, stanza 39. “me false and murderous men/
and those who gull another’s faithfulllest girl/ ther-
ee Spite-Striker [the nidhoggr] sucks on the bodies
of the dead.”
66 Havamal, stanza 16. “A senseless man thinks to
love forever/ if he bewares a war/ but old age wont
grant him a truce,/ whatever spears may grant.”
67 Havamal, stanza 15 “Silent and prudent a prince-
ling should be/ also bold in battle/ merry and
mirthful each man should be, until the time of
his death,”
68 Orchard, The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore,
xviii.
69 Charles Prebish and Damien Keown, “The
Dharma,” 51. right view, right resolve-wisdom-
right speech, right action, right livelihood-morality-right effort, right mindfulness, right medita-
A final consideration we can bring up here is that, along with a failure to include a discussion of ritual and practice, we have left Theravadin concepts on indeed what nirvana, and its attainment, is. However, as this is the ultimate question, and a most perplexing one if we dare to delve into other Buddhist (Mahayanist and Vajrayanist) theories concerning it, and for the majority of sentient beings in the Theravadin view its tens of thousands of rebirths off, then we might not need to discuss it here.

What we have been able to examine, however, is that the Viking mythology as told in the Voluspa is philosophically compatible concerning the Buddhist theme of cosmic impermanence and anatman as presented in the Theravadin Abhidharma. Beyond this, we were also able to see how karma and causal connection come into play in dictating rebirth into Valhalla by being dependent on the intentionality of action in the same way that rebirth into the realms of existence is causally connected to the mental makeup of the skandas in the previous life in the Abhidharma tradition. While perhaps in their fullest forms, the two systems of thought could not be reconciled, parsed as such allows to see how two seemingly opposite systems can share a common understanding of the realities concerning the conditions of existence. Ultimately what we see in the Abhidharma and Norse literature is are world views that attempts to reconcile impermanence and change as not only being a mark of human existence, and the reality of the cosmos. Consequently, with a lack of permanence and eternal promises, we see that both traditions place an accent on living in between birth and death with action and intent in accordance with each other. If our intentions manifested through our actions work within an impermanent and mutable universe,
we can transcend those eventualities through by means of our imminent actions when they are informed by an intent that has already embraced the consequences and restraint of an ultimately finite existence.


56 Ibid. 315.

57 Jesse Byok, trans, The Prose Edda xviii.


