

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

The following will attempt to show a philosophical 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 compos-

ite 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Lopez. “Buddhism in Practice,” in *Asian Religions in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold, Martin. *Thor: Myth to Marvel*. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 59.

theological/ philosophical ideas may seem to be irrelevant highbrow fabrications if not in some way reified in actual religious practice. However, the problem with any study of Scandinavian mythology and religious belief is the desperate lack of any such reliable sources that would provide us with a fair example of what the religious practices of Viking Scandinavia really were. In Hilda Ellis' book, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*, there is an attempt to indeed gain insight into Scandinavian spiritual treatment of the dead, but can only do so by investigation and oblique hints based on literary sources, whose problems I have mentioned above.<sup>3</sup> Any text written down pertaining to the oral tradition of Scandinavia was done in a Christian context, for an audience being influenced by Christianity, and so any depiction of ritual practice in this literature might be exaggerated or told in such a way to prove the inefficacy of the older tradition.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, including religious practice would be no better than providing good guesses based on a subject whose relevance may not exist in this context. Thus, ritual will not be mentioned in this essay if only because discussion of it increases the danger of distorting our view on the Viking conception of their cosmos. The texts were chosen with these considerations in mind.

The *Voluspa* was compiled in 1270 by an unknown redactor into the *Elder Edda*, which is a collection of Scandinavian myths and hero poems compiled to preserve Icelandic culture when the Christianization of Scandinavia was already well underway.<sup>5</sup> The *Elder Edda* is the primary source for work that is the least altered through a Christian lens concerning the gods and heroes of the Vikings.<sup>6</sup> The *Voluspa* is the first myth presented in the *Elder Edda*, mostly likely because it presents the epic cosmological narrative of the Norsemen's gods. What is fortunate about the *Voluspa* is that its Christian

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.<sup>7</sup> The *Abhidharma* also is 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.<sup>8</sup> It proceeds by giving a massive and detailed account of the prin-

<sup>3</sup> Hilda Roderick Ellis, introduction to; *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*. (New York: Green Wood Press, 1968), i.

<sup>4</sup> The famous Younger Edda of Snorri Sturluson is rife with this Christian agenda, yet it remains the most widely used, and most famous source of Viking mythology. Odin loses a contest of knowledge of the cosmos when he cannot answer the final question of his Christian inquisitor.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Orchard, introduction to; "The Voluspa", *In the Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*. trans, Andy Orchard. (New York: Penguin: 2011), vx. (all subsequent reference to the Voluspa and to other texts in the Elder Edda as translated by Andy Orchard will simply read their title, Voluspa for example, with the corresponding stanza number).

<sup>6</sup> Orchard, *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*, xv.

<sup>7</sup> Rupert Gettin. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

ciples of the Buddhist cosmos as understood in the early Nikayas/ Agamas.<sup>9</sup> This is a cosmos constituted of the causal relationships between physical and mental events.<sup>10</sup> The *Abhidharma* systematizes this cosmos through a demonstration of all the possible realms of existence and their correlative psychology.<sup>11</sup> Each realm of existence in this cosmos is tied to specific mental conditions. Moreover, our mental conditions determine into which realm of existence we will next be reborn.<sup>12</sup> Our first task is to see how the Buddhist cosmos in the *Abhidharma* texts correspond to the themes we are going to find in the *Voluspa*.

The first two Noble Truths of Buddhism state that life is suffering (*duhka*) and that suffering is caused by craving (*trnsa*).<sup>13</sup> *Duhka* means dis-ease, and we experience dis-ease when we encounter change.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> For example the god-realm, which is detailed as the most stratified, is separated into more than six different categories.<sup>16</sup> Yet those god-realms belong the World of the Five Senses, in which the remaining five basic realms exist.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Conze, trans. "The Questions of King Melina", in *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin Publishing, 1959), 151.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Prebish and Damien Keown. "The Dharma", In *Introducing Buddhism, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 43.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Conze, trans. *Buddhist Scriptures*. (London: Penguin Publishing, 1959), 221.

<sup>16</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 117. "the Masters of the Creations of Others, Those Who Delight in Creation, the contented, the Yama Gods, the thirty three gods and the gods of the four kings..." 17 Ibid., 116. The human realm, animal realm, angry god realm, hell-beings realm and hungry ghost realm

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 118.

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.<sup>20</sup> Built around Ygddrasil, the world-tree, they created a cosmos composed of nine worlds, in which dwell the gods, giants, humans, and other mythological creatures.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> It is here where the gods, the world, and the whole cosmos comes to an end in a final battle.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> Yet Loki is also the blood brother to Odin, and shares many of Odin’s traits.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> Order and cho-

<sup>20</sup> *Voluspa*, stanza 4.

<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that right away the creation of the world is produced through acts of violence, and the lord of that world 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.

<sup>22</sup> *Voluspa*, stanza 31. “O saw Baldr, the blood stained god,/Odin’s son, his fate fully settled;”

<sup>23</sup> Jesse Byok, trans, *The Prose Edda*. (New York: Penguin, 2005), 13. More popular than the Elder Edda, is the *Younger Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson. His *Younger*, or *Prose Edda* was written in thirteenth century Iceland just as the *Elder Edda* was, yet he was a priest. Despite taking some creative liberties (liking Thor to being a descendent of the line of Troy among others), *Ragnarok* is a constant reminder in his texts. However, this can be either due to it being truly that important to the mythology, or because Sturluson wanted to accent the diminishing power, and the eventual end, of the old gods, in face of the new Christian god.

<sup>24</sup> He is also the patron god of the jarls, the ruling warrior class, and the lord of the slain who join him in Valholl to fight each day, and drink each night until *Ragnarok*.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Crossley Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: Gods of the Vikings*. (New York: Penguin, 1993), xxix. He is also the father of the wolf who devours Odin, and of the serpent whose venomous blood kills Thor.

<sup>26</sup> E.O.G Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. (London: Holt Reinhart and Winston, 1964), 131. Loki is also the mother to Odin mighty horse sleipnir, who is crucial in Odin’s endless hunts for knowledge concerning *Ragnarok*. Loki like Odin changes sex and shape, uses magic and guile over brawn and has the capability to show some wisdom.

<sup>27</sup> Martin., *Thor: Myth to Marvel*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Crossley Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: Gods of the Vikings*, xxix.

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.<sup>29</sup> 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 Ygddrasil survives the destruction of *Ragnarok* and from there life, like in the Buddhist cosmos, is born anew. What persists along with Ygddrasil is the *nidhoggr*, a dragon which has since the beginning of time gnawed at its roots.<sup>30</sup> Despite its seeming immortality, Ygddrasil 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.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Ygddrasil is the very trembling heart of the nine worlds.

The value of the *nidhoggr* is a little more discreet. It, like Ygddrasil, is a looming and a passive player in the cosmological narrative. Yet the last line in the *Voluspa* is reserved for the evil dragon.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> While Ygddrasil 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 Ygddrasil forever hounded by death and change, symbolized by the *nidhoggr*. Ygddrasil 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

<sup>29</sup> James Livingston. "Cosmogony: Origin of the Natural and Social Order," in *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 61. "Models can represent the enduring structures of the cosmic order which myths dramatize in narrative form."

<sup>30</sup> Elis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*. 172-173.

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> *Voluspa*. Stanzas, 36. 66 ,and, *Grinismal*, stanzas 32, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Martin., *Thor: Myth to Marvel*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> *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 Nidhog];"

<sup>35</sup> 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*.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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).<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> In dying along side 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.<sup>40</sup> Looking at the five skandas, notice that physicality is outnumbered by mental actions.<sup>41</sup> Intent behind action is thus more important than action itself, as the intent dictates the merit of the action.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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.”<sup>45</sup> Thus Odin might be faulted from the

tion.”

<sup>36</sup> *Voluspa*, stanza 30.

<sup>37</sup> *Havamal*, stanza 76.

<sup>38</sup> Crossley Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths: Gods of the Viking*, xix “A desire for fame was crucial to the Norseman. In the absence of beliefs about a timeless afterlife, it represented his only hope of immortality.”

<sup>39</sup> Lopez, “Buddhism in Practice”, 67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Prebish and Damien Keown, “The *Dharma*”, 56. “Material form, feelings and sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness...”

<sup>42</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 143. “.. it is the mental events that are crucially determinative of the nature of new patterns of events... the workings of karma, of action and result, are essentially a matter on intention.”

<sup>43</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

start and the entire violent history between the gods and the giants, culminating to *Ragnarok*, is really the giants settling a primordial blood debt.<sup>46</sup> *Ragnarok*, and the fate of the gods, can be seen as causally connected to that first primordial act. Like overwhelming and prevalent hellish actions or mental states causally condition rebirth in the hell-realm, so did Odin's first act of creation through violence, condition 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 violent 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 constitution. This is the fundamental "principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology" that the *Abhidharma* texts so specifically detail in their understanding of the Buddhist cosmos.<sup>47</sup> Yet mentality alone is not enough, as bad merit is accumulated only if "an action's being [is] performed with full intention and full awareness of what one is doing."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, intent and acting on it produce karmic merit, and so accordance of intentionality and action are not simply enough to achieve enlightenment.

Similarly, the ascension to Valhalla is dictated only by the action determined by a fearless 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 violent and hateful person who is reborn into the hell realm, do not go to Valhalla, but Hel, the cold realm of the sick and cowardly dead. The make up of their life governs where they shall be remade when dead.<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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 victor's mentality.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> Along the path must come acceptance, understanding, and contentment concerning all The Noble Truths. It is at the moment when

<sup>45</sup> Jesse Byok, trans, *The Prose Edda*, xviii.

<sup>46</sup> Orchard, *The Elder Edda*, a book of Viking Lore, 269.

<sup>47</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 119.

<sup>48</sup> *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."

<sup>49</sup> *Voluspa*, stanza 39. "me false and murderous men/ and those who gull another's faithfullest girl;/ ther-ee Spite-Striker [the *nidhoggr*] sucks on the bodies of the dead."

<sup>50</sup> *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."

<sup>51</sup> *Havamal*, stanza 15 "Silent and prudent a princeling should be/ also bold in battle/ merry and mirthful each man should be, until the time of his death,"

<sup>52</sup> Orchard, *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*, xviii.

<sup>53</sup> 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-

one truly understands all four that enlightenment is achieved (very simply put). Thus there must be a reconciliation and acceptance of change and impermanence.<sup>54</sup> Acceptance of the truths of existence goes beyond merely knowing them, but inherently understanding and accepting them without striving to as *nirvana* is not achieved with the intention to achieve it. The very same is true in the Viking world. As we saw above, the myths attempt to communicate the inseparability of existence, mortality and change. Yet while the Vikings had no *nirvana* to attain, they had something else, and this was the idea of heroism.<sup>55</sup> Edith Hamilton explains that “the only sustaining support possible for the human spirit, the one pure unsullied good men can hope to attain, is heroism, and heroism depends on lost causes.”<sup>56</sup> This is the usual conception of Odin, the he has knowledge of the coming of *Ragnarok*, and it is a day that he must forestall, but cannot prevent.<sup>57</sup> His struggle is heroic as the outcome does not bear as much importance as the manner in which his death is faced. Odin and the Einherjar are heroic because they are aware that they cannot win their struggle but meet the giants in battle nevertheless. Impermanence and no-self must be present for the heroic condition to manifest itself, because without the tragic and total loss of one’s self in dying, the heroic quality in that death is lost. Like the accumulation of bad karmic merit, the heroic act requires awareness of impermanence, intent to meet the enemy despite death and finally to accept death and die smiling. For the Buddhist, the way to end suffering is the Noble Eight-Fold path, and for the Vikings it is a heroic death that needs the same level of acceptance of no-self and impermanence, as inevitably, even in Valhalla, one will face an eternal extinction. Thus, human can only achieve the state of hero-hood by dying, but must smile as death accepts them, and they it.

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 out 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.

tion-meditation.

<sup>54</sup> Edward, Conze trans. "The Heart Sutra," in *Buddhist Scriptures*. (London: Penguin Publishing, 1959.) 163. "In the absence of any thought-coverings he [the Bodhisattva] has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains nirvana."

<sup>55</sup> Edith Hamilton. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. (New York: Grand General Publishing, 1969), 315.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 315.

<sup>57</sup> Jesse Byok, trans, *The Prose Edda* xviii.

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