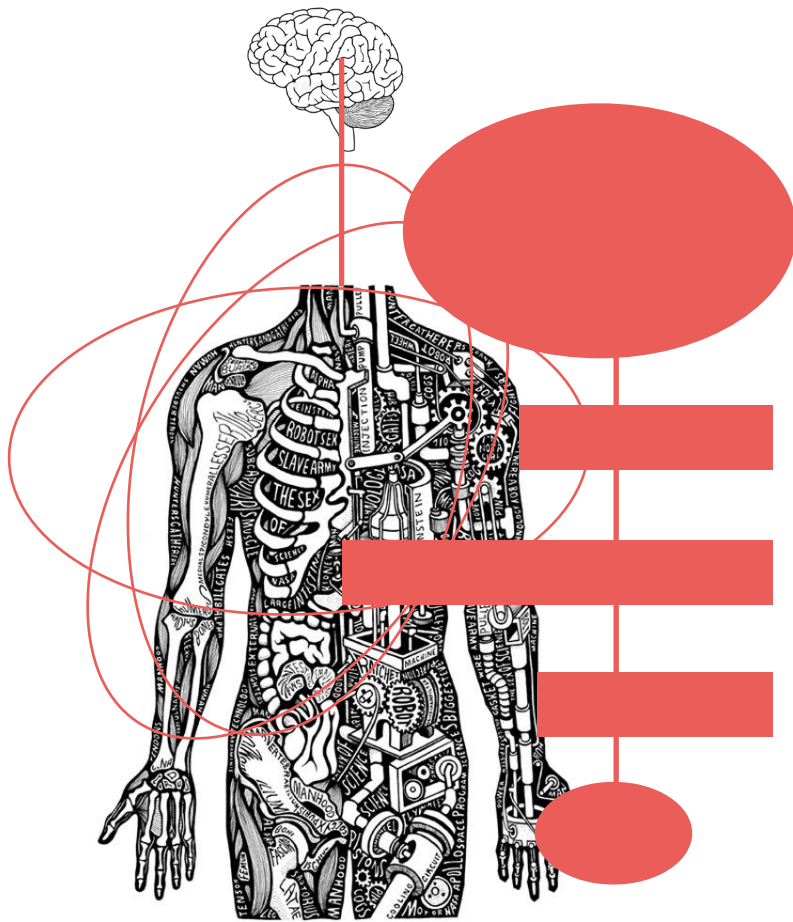


HOW A BUDDHA ACTS: Laying Bricks for a Buddhist Theory of Action



MUKUND MAITHANI

ABSTRACT

Buddhist philosophers generally hold that concepts like “I” and “me,” while useful in everyday life, are ultimately meaningless. Under this view, there would be no “agents” because it is meaningless to say “I did so and so....” How do we explain the occurrence of actions without referring to agents? I argue that Cappelen and Dever’s Action Inventory Model (AIM) is a useful resource for developing a Buddhist theory of action. In response to an objection that AIM cannot explain a buddha’s action, I show that a slightly tweaked version of AIM succeeds in explaining how a buddha acts.



I. THE PUZZLE: A THEORY OF ACTION WITHOUT AN AGENT

The phrase “agentless action” might sound absurd. We usually think that an action is done by someone: namely, the agent. Suppose that you are eating a burger and I am eating an egg roll. Both of us are acting but I am the agent of the egg-roll-eating action while you are the agent of the burger-eating action. It seems that agents are related to actions in some special way; they can call an action exclusively their own.

Some Buddhists, however, would question this conceptual relation between an agent and action. No action is ultimately mine or yours, according to some Buddhists. Ultimately, as for how things actually are, the self, the “I,” is an illusion. We are psychological and physical entities that change and grow over time. Our hair greys, eyes get weaker, neurons die, and beliefs shift. One mistakenly takes our complex psychophysical parts as one enduring whole or person that holds a permanent identity across time.¹ There is actually nothing that the concept “I” refers to. Hence, while there is action there is ultimately no agent.

Conventionally, however, the concept “I” is a useful fiction or designator for practical purposes in the world. If we did not communicate or think about certain things in the first-person, ordinary living and language would become extremely difficult.

For the Buddhist, there is action but no agent, such that it is simply conventional to say “I did this.” The puzzle is: how do we explain one’s action, or why one acted a particular way, in Buddhist terms without referring to an agent?

The Buddhists did not explicitly concern themselves with creating a philosophical theory of action.² Moreover, the very idea of building a Buddhist theory of action based on our broad understanding of Western theories of action is questionable—like trying to fit Buddhist ethical views in terms of theories of virtue ethics or consequentialism.³ Under this understanding, charges of misappropriation from a Western-traditional lens can fall into one’s hand easily.

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- 1 E.g., Jonardon Ganeri and Peter Adamson, *Classical Indian Philosophy: A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 285; Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 32-68.
 - 2 Mark Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionist Action Theory,” in *A Mirror is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 276.
 - 3 Christopher Gowans, “Buddhist Moral Thought and Western Moral Philosophy,” in *A Mirror is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53.

I agree with the charge when it is due, but I would like to avoid the charge at present. My engagement with the concerned puzzle is a harmless philosophical and comparative exercise. I do not mean to claim that we have to interpret Buddhist ideas of action through a Western theory of action. I simply offer an example of a possibly fruitful philosophical conversation between different philosophical traditions. Some Buddhist philosophers may find in Cappelen and Dever’s theory a tempting model to support their idea that there are actions but no agents.⁴ On the other hand, philosophers in the Western tradition, such as Cappelen and Dever, might find the Buddhist’s rejection of indexicality in actions illuminating, through its conceptual richness and disagreement with the orthodox view.⁵ Lastly, if the aforementioned reasons fail to convince, as Siderits puts it, an action theory that omits agents altogether might be of some interest in its own right.⁶

In this paper, I suggest that it is possible to construct a Buddhist theory of action using Cappelen and Dever’s Action Inventory Model (AIM).⁷ I argue that a revised version, AIM-2, is a helpful model for a Buddhist theory of action. I begin Section Two by explaining AIM and arguing that it is a strong candidate for helping us construct a Buddhist theory of action. In Section Three, I consider two objections to my suggestion concerning whether AIM can explain the actions of a buddha. I respond to these objections in Section Four. I conclude that AIM-2, a modified but compatible version of AIM, succeeds in explaining a buddha’s action.

II. CAPPELEN AND DEVER’S ACTION INVENTORY MODEL

Cappelen and Dever ask whether there exists a necessary connection between agency and indexicality. By indexicality, they refer to the self-locating attitudes which reference the first-person point of view—for example, words such as I, mine, there, and now. They argue that indexicality does not play an essential role in explaining and rationalizing actions. Their view runs contrary to the orthodox view, which maintains that indexical concepts are essential to explain actions.⁸

The orthodox view holds an intuitive appeal. Consider an example: Suhesh is sitting at a park. He sees that people are frantically running around and clearing out of the area. Someone screams at him, “A hungry leopard in the park!” Suhesh has multiple third-person beliefs about

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- 4 Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever, *The Inessential Indexical: On the Philosophical Insignificance of Perspective and the First Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 49-56.
 - 5 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 30-37.
 - 6 Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionist Action Theory,” 277.
 - 7 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 50.
 - 8 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 31.



the situation. He believes “a hungry leopard can eat a human,” “Suhesh is a human,” and “Suhesh would never prefer to be eaten by a hungry leopard.” However, unless Suhesh believes that “I am Suhesh,” it seems unclear what would prompt him to leave the park for his safety. According to the orthodox view then, indexicality is a key concept to reveal what motivates someone to act in a certain way.⁹

Without using indexical concepts, Cappelen and Dever face a similar burden as the Buddhist to explain why a person acts in a certain way.¹⁰ Here, they propose that AIM helps them explain action and, as I will conclude, helps the Buddhist.

Cappelen and Dever's AIM responds to the “Selection Problem,” which is that everyone has many third-person beliefs and desires about the world—not all of these prompt or result in an action. The question is: which ones produce action and which ones do not? For a theory of action, we need a “filtering mechanism” to pick out which thing or things are relevant to the explanation for why an action occurred.¹¹

For holders of the orthodox view—that indexicality is essential to explaining agency—the self-locating, ego-centric attitudes are the filtering mechanisms. In other words, our first-person beliefs and desires, like “I want cake” and “I can get the cake by opening the fridge,” give us reasons to act in a certain way. According to the orthodox view, third-person data like “it is a chocolate cake” or “the cake is in the fridge” by themselves do not move us to act if we do not locate ourselves within the given situations.

Cappelen and Dever, however, disagree with the orthodox view and argue that indexical expressions are not necessary to explain why one acts the way one does. According to AIM, every agent has an “action inventory,” which is the range of actions they can practically perform in a given situation. An agent looks to match their intention to act with an action available from this inventory. For example, I take a penalty kick in a football game, with the intention to score a goal past the keeper. The available actions are plenty—I can kick the ball to the left-bottom corner, to the right-top corner, to the middle of the goal, and so on. I could also choose to start dancing on the spot instead. According to AIM, when my intention to score a goal matches one of the available and appropriate actions, I act.

Cappelen and Dever anticipate an objection at this point. One could argue that in this case, it still seems like we have to refer to a first-person view to explain actions. In the penalty kick example, I have to consider

swinging my leg, having the correct posture, and other factors that may reference my position in space. Using indexical concepts, therefore, seems unavoidable in explaining how one acted the way one did.

Cappelen and Dever would respond as follows. We do not really go through any process of deliberation—or consider conceptual thoughts like “it is me who is kicking this ball”—before acting in a certain way.¹² They claim that “available actions have already been thought about” by the time agents make their move. They say that we are “embedded agents” who are capable of directly engaging with things in our physical environment. That is, while we have the ability to engage with our own thoughts, we are not bound by a step-by-step thought process—with either self-locating attitudes or third-person beliefs—before we act. Therefore, indexical concepts are not necessary in our explanation of how actions occur. Certainly, however, we think that there are attitudes that motivate actions. So, how do our beliefs or third-person concepts lead to actions that are available and appropriate in a given situation?

Recall the Selection Problem: which beliefs or desires prompt action and which ones do not? According to AIM, the “filtering mechanism” includes the physical and psychological constraints of the agent. Certain actions are produced because the agent's intention to act matches the respective available and appropriate action—the action is appropriate when it helps the agent achieve the intended goal. On the other hand, the intention to act might not translate to action because the agent is physically and/or psychologically unable to find an available action. For example, Mansi intends to perform a back-flip but her knees are weak, and she has never done a back-flip before. In such a case, the intention to act and the available action would not match, and the action would not occur.¹³

Given that AIM does not require reference to ego-centric and self-locating attitudes to explain action, I suggest that AIM is a fitting model for developing a Buddhist theory of action. Unlike some Buddhists, however, Cappelen and Dever do not say that an agent does not exist. Rather, Cappelen and Dever are concerned with explaining action without referring to the agent's indexicality.

Nonetheless, when a Buddhist says that ultimately there is no agent, they are not saying that there is no psychophysical entity that can move around or pick stuff up. For example, what Buddhaghosa specifically rejects is a “controller self.” Jonardon Ganeri and Peter Adamson suggest the following way to look at Buddhaghosa's view: our bodies operate in the way a self-driving car operates through the complex mechanisms

9 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 38.

10 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 30-31.

11 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 50.

12 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 51.

13 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 50.



and interactions of its parts—there is no need for a driver as a locus of the car’s action. In a human, as in a mechanical doll, there is nothing isolated inside of us that controls or coordinates all the other parts.¹⁴

We could understand Buddhaghosa’s claim that there is action, but no agent as follows. What we call an “agent” is a complex and ever-changing psychophysical entity. For such a complex and ever-changing entity, it ultimately does not make sense to say “I am doing so and so” because the “I” does not really exist. Therefore, a Buddhist theory of action would require that we exclude indexical concepts like “I,” “me,” or “mine” in explaining one’s action.

III. TWO OBJECTIONS TO AIM’S SUITABILITY AS A BUDDHIST THEORY OF ACTION

Before I explain why AIM can be suitable for a Buddhist theory of action, I will consider two early objections. I will advance my argument for AIM’s suitability as a Buddhist theory of action by addressing them.

The first objection is as follows: because AIM avoids reference to first-person beliefs and desires, it needs to reference to third-person beliefs and desires. An enlightened being, a buddha, is not supposed to have conceptual mental content like beliefs or desires.¹⁵ A buddha has realized the ultimate reality—how the world exists independently of our conventions and concepts—and experiences the world accordingly. Therefore, a buddha’s action cannot be prompted or rationalized by their beliefs and desires—be they first-person or third-person.

Adding on to the first objection, the second objection states: a buddha cannot have intention like non-enlightened beings because the latter’s kind of intention is conceptual in content.¹⁶ Jay Garfield adds that intention intervenes between perception and action for non-enlightened beings, while a buddha’s action is spontaneous and direct—a buddha does not intend before acting.¹⁷ As per AIM, an action occurs when the intention to act and available action match; if there is no intention, an available action apparently has nothing to match with. Hence, a buddha can never act on AIM’s account; this conclusion is unacceptable.

One may argue that a theory of action acceptable to the Buddhist must at least accommodate an explanation of a buddha’s action—as a buddha is supposed to be the major upholder of certain Buddhist

principles. Since AIM is unable to explain a buddha’s action, the objector concludes that AIM is not a fitting model for a Buddhist theory of action.

IV. RESPONSES TO THE OBJECTIONS AND ARGUMENT FOR AIM-2

I reply to the first objection: AIM can explain a buddha’s action even if the buddha does not have conceptual mental content. A buddha is a psychophysical entity operating in the world. The lack of conceptual mental content need not be a problem because AIM takes into consideration the physical and psychological constraints of the agent. If a buddha is constrained by the lack of conceptual content, this constraint should not by itself rule out the possibility of AIM explaining a buddha’s action.

But is it possible to be able to act without conceptual content in one’s mental activity? In Paul Griffiths’s view, a buddha does act physically, verbally, and mentally in the world.¹⁸ By “mentally,” he refers to the working of a buddha’s *citta*—roughly translated as mind. A buddha’s mind is also referred to as *bodhicitta*, an awakened mind.¹⁹ So, it is not that a buddha has no mental activity whatsoever. The buddha’s mental activity, however, has a radically different nature from that of a non-awakened being. Therefore, the fact that a buddha’s mental activity excludes conceptual content, unlike non-awakened beings, does not mean that a buddha cannot act in the world as non-awakened beings do.

While there are available actions for a buddha and the lack of conceptual mental content is unproblematic, there is still no intention to act, which is required for AIM’s explanation of how actions occur. How then do we respond to the second objection?

I suggest a minimalist reading of the concept “intention” here. I borrow this understanding from Donald Davidson’s concept of a “pro-attitude.”²⁰ For Davidson, a pro-attitude broadly refers to an inclination to act. This inclination to act is not what we typically consider as desire. For instance, desire is often associated with an active urge towards doing something, an ego-centric attachment to or for something, or a want of an object. Davidson says that pro-attitude broadly includes desires, wants, and urges—insofar as they are understood as attitudes of an agent directed towards doing an action. He adds that even the most “passing

14 Ganeri and Adamson, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, 280–81.

15 E.g., Jay Garfield, “Hey, Buddha! Don’t Think! Just Act!—A Response to Bronwyn Finnigan,” *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 1 (2011): 179, 10.1353/pew.2011.0002; Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 103.

16 E.g. Garfield, “Hey, Buddha!,” 179; Griffiths, *Being Buddha*, 103.

17 Garfield, “Hey, Buddha!,” 179.

18 Griffiths, *Being Buddha*, 102.

19 Jay Garfield, “What is it like to be a bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 334, <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/jiabs/article/view/9285>.

20 Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 3.



fancy that prompts a unique action” counts as pro-attitude.²¹ For example, a pro-attitude could count as love for one’s child as well as a sudden wish to smoke. Pro-attitude is therefore a broad and accommodative concept, in the sense that any sort of inclinations or attitudes that are directed towards acting can qualify as pro-attitudes.

I suggest that a buddha experiences pro-attitudes. A pro-attitude need not be conceptual like desires, beliefs, or intentions, as we commonly understand these terms. A pro-attitude could still be responsible in a way for producing an action. For example, a spontaneous inclination towards saving my infant child drowning in a bathtub or mindlessly opening Facebook on my phone to scroll down its feed could be counted as pro-attitudes. It seems that certain actions do not really require deliberate consideration to occur.

If we agree that a buddha has pro-attitudes to act in a certain way, and these attitudes are non-conceptual, we may try to replace the “intention to act” in the AIM with a “pro-attitude to act.” I call this tweaked Action Inventory Model AIM-2. In that case, as per AIM-2, a buddha’s action must occur when an available action and a pro-attitude to act accordingly matches. But it remains to be seen what sort of attitudes, unlike third-person beliefs, desires, and intention to act, might prompt a buddha’s action. What sort of pro-attitudes could a buddha have?

Griffiths provides an example of a possible pro-attitude; he writes that a buddha’s awareness of what needs to be done results eventually in a respective action. What needs to be done in this case is whatever benefits the other living beings in the world by reducing their suffering.²² This benevolent inspiration to act is also compatible with the required cultivation of the four divine attitudes in strands of Theravada Buddhism. These states, considered as the good roots for conduct and action, are *karuṇa* (care or compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), *upekṣā* (equanimity), and *mettā* (loving-kindness).²³ Garfield chooses to translate *karuṇa* as care rather than compassion because, upon his reading, *karuṇa* refers not only to an emotive response to others and their suffering but a commitment to act and relieve said suffering.²⁴

So, one of the pro-attitudes to act for a buddha would be to care for one’s fellow beings. I am not claiming, by suggesting this particular pro-attitude for a buddha, that a buddha will always—24 hours a day, 7 days a week—be caring for or benefiting someone through their actions.

As AIM-2 suggests based on the principles of AIM, one acts when the pro-attitude, an available action and an appropriate situation join together.

If a buddha sees a person injured on the side of the road, their pro-attitude to act compassionately would match their ability in this appropriate situation to tend to the person. On the other hand, it would of course not make sense if a buddha reaches out to every single person on the road to look for a potential way to help—assuming that everything is going well for the present people. Neither would we want to say that a buddha will always have the capacity to help someone who is in need. AIM-2 considers the physical and psychological constraints of the agent in any situation in their ability to act. If a buddha has caught the flu and is bed-ridden for a week, although the pro-attitude to act compassionately and care for others remains, those pro-attitudes will not result in actions.

Therefore, according to AIM-2, a buddha’s action would occur when their pro-attitude to act matches with an available action. AIM-2 is able to explain a buddha’s action and does not require references to self-centric attitudes to explain it, regardless of whether one is a buddha or a non-awakened being. A non-awakened being too has pro-attitudes, although many of these pro-attitudes might be of a different kind compared to a buddha’s. So, AIM-2 might be helpful in developing a potentially more detailed Buddhist theory of action.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have suggested a modified version of Cappelen and Dever’s Action Inventory Model to work as a fitting model for developing a Buddhist theory of action. My modification of AIM was motivated by the goal of explaining a buddha’s action. AIM requires the agent to eventually act on their intentions, whereas a buddha is not supposed to have intentions like non-awakened beings do. I proposed that we think of a buddha as having “pro-attitudes” to act in a certain way when the pro-attitude matches the available action and the situation. One of the possible pro-attitudes that I suggested in this paper is a pro-attitude to actively care for and tend to the suffering of other beings.

I claimed earlier that my proposal for AIM-2 in this paper is an attempt to bring a non-Western philosophical theory of action in conversation with a Buddhist view of action. It would be interesting to develop AIM-2 further and explore its compatibility with various strands of Buddhist thought and views on action. Cappelen and Dever themselves claim to take AIM “pretty loosely”—they say they are interested in the possibility of the model rather than, let us say, how accurate the model

21 Davidson, *Essays on Actions*, 4.

22 Griffiths, *Being Buddha*, 101.

23 Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 289.

24 Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 289; Garfield, “Bodhisattva,” 339.



really is.²⁵ This might come across as a surprising admission. However, given the Buddhist suggestion that our concept of an “agent” might not exactly be a reliable one—recall the analogy that we are like self-driving cars with our complex psycho-physical parts and functioning—we could certainly entertain the inspiration to look for a theory of action that does not need any self-centric agents.



Mukund Maithani is a fourth-year advanced major in philosophy at Ashoka University in Sonipat, India. He completed a minor in Creative Writing. His philosophical interests include topics in moral philosophy, Indian philosophy, philosophy of mind, and comparative philosophy. Outside of the world of philosophy, Mukund also likes playing badminton, eating bread omelette, and walking around Ashoka’s campus.

25 Cappelen and Dever, *Inessential Indexical*, 50.

