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MORALITY BEFORE KNOWLEDGE

Yoga, science, and the continuity of consciousness: Toward a trans-materialist psychology

Divya Sharma[1,2,*]
[1] *School of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy & Comparative Religions, Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar 803116, India;*
[2] *School of Languages and Literature/Humanities, Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar 803116, India.*
*Correspondence: divya.sharma@nalandauniv.edu.in

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ABSTRACT

Background: The contemporary secularization of Yoga, understood as the excision of its metaphysical foundations to render the tradition acceptable to Western empirical materialism, has produced a conceptual lacuna in the study of psychological development. Reductionist frameworks dismiss Karma and Rebirth (*saṃsāra*) as culturally contingent myths; yet such dismissal risks a category error, applying descriptive physical criteria to what is fundamentally a normative and axiological system. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary philosophical methodology integrating systematic conceptual analysis, critical literature review, and cross-traditional comparative philosophy. Sources include classical Indian texts in established scholarly translations, contemporary literature in consciousness science and quantum information theory, and empirical research on claimed past-life memories. **Findings:** The analysis shows that Karma and Rebirth may be understood as rational postulates of moral equilibrium and mental continuity, fulfilling a regulative function structurally analogous to Kant's postulates of practical reason. The Yogic constructs of *cit* (consciousness as ontologically primary) and *saṃskāras* (cognitive imprints that may be modelled as informational states) are shown to be consonant with, though not proven by, findings in quantum physics concerning the observer effect and the conservation of information. Critical review of the empirical literature on past-life memory and associated biological correlates reveals prima facie evidence that, while beset by methodological limitations, resists straightforward dismissal. These findings are limited by the speculative status of the quantum-informational analogy, the methodological weaknesses of past-life research, and the divergence between Buddhist and *Pātañjala* accounts of the self. **Conclusion:** The multi-life framework provides a philosophically coherent architecture for moral agency, long-term character development, psychological resilience, and collective social responsibility, functions which, it is hypothesized, single-lifetime models address less fully. Reclaiming these doctrines in academically rigorous form opens a productive trajectory toward what this paper terms Trans-Materialist Psychology. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This paper offers a systematic integration, not previously attempted in the literature reviewed, of Yogic and Buddhist accounts of the mental continuum with Kantian practical philosophy, quantum information theory, and contemporary consciousness science, grounding Karma and Rebirth as foundational constructs of a trans-materialist psychology.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist philosophy; Kantian postulates; karma; mental continuum; *Pātañjala* Yoga.

1. Introduction

Over the past century, Yoga has undergone a transformation of considerable scope in the Western cultural imagination. What was historically a comprehensive soteriological and psychological discipline has been progressively reconceived as a modality of physical

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wellness. De Michelis (2004) characterizes this process as the naturalization of Yoga, by which its traditional metaphysical commitments, most centrally the doctrines of Karma and Rebirth, are systematically excised in order to render the tradition palatable to secular, materialist sensibilities. Recent sociological scholarship has extended this analysis considerably. Di Placido et al. (2022) document the manner in which modern postural yoga has become embedded within a nexus of health, spirituality, and neoliberal self-optimization, such that the practice is legitimated principally through its measurable contribution to individual wellbeing and economic productivity. Di Placido (2022) argues further that modern yoga research has itself constituted a discursive formation whose organizing categories tend to reproduce, rather than to interrogate, this secularizing framing. While the reconfiguration has undoubtedly enlarged Yoga's popular reach, it has also introduced a theoretical incoherence that merits scholarly attention: the ethical and psychological logic internal to Yogic practice is inseparable from the very doctrines that contemporary presentations have sought to abandon.

Classical Yoga is not, in its own self-understanding, a technique of bodily conditioning. It is a graduated soteriological programme in which posture occupies a subordinate and preparatory position relative to ethical restraint, sensory withdrawal, and sustained meditative absorption. Coward (2002) demonstrates that the Yogic account of mind is organized throughout around the transformation of latent dispositional material, and that its practices are intelligible only in relation to that end. The system presupposes that the practitioner's present psychological condition is the sedimented residue of prior intentional action, and that the purpose of practice is the progressive attenuation and eventual dissolution of that residue. Remove the presupposition and the practices remain, but their rationale becomes obscure: the discipline is reduced to a set of techniques in search of a justification, and the justification most readily available within a secular frame, namely the reduction of physiological stress markers, is markedly narrower than the one the tradition itself supplies.

The doctrines of Karma and Rebirth received their systematic elaboration across the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions over a period of many centuries, and the philosophical literature reflects substantial internal disagreement about their formulation. Krishan (1997) traces the historical development of the doctrine across these traditions and demonstrates that the apparent unity of the concept conceals significant divergence in its technical articulation. Reichenbach (1990) subjects the doctrine to sustained analytic scrutiny, addressing questions of causal mechanism, moral proportionality, and the compatibility of karmic determination with free agency. Bilimoria (2007) develops a Mīmāṃsā response to the problem of evil, treating the karmic ordering of suffering as an account that does not require appeal to divine agency. What unites these treatments, notwithstanding their differences, is the claim that intentional action possesses a moral valence that is causally efficacious beyond the immediate circumstances of its performance, and that this efficacy operates across a temporal horizon exceeding the individual biological lifespan.

Within the Western academy, meanwhile, the study of consciousness has undergone a transformation of its own. Chalmers (1996) articulated the distinction between the functional problems of cognition and the hard problem of subjective experience, a distinction that has structured much subsequent debate. The intervening decades have produced a proliferation of competing theoretical frameworks, among them integrated information theory, global neuronal workspace theory, higher-order representational accounts, and predictive-processing models, whose relative merits remain vigorously contested (Seth & Bayne, 2022). Storm et al. (2024) argue that these frameworks may prove partly compatible and may converge upon shared neuronal mechanisms, while Kuhn (2024) maps the full landscape of available explanations along a spectrum extending from eliminative materialism to non-physicalist accounts, and treats questions of survival beyond biological death as belonging properly within that landscape rather than outside it. The absence of theoretical convergence is significant for present purposes. A field that has

not settled the question of what consciousness is, is not in a position to rule out, on evidential grounds, accounts of consciousness that depart from physicalist orthodoxy.

Taken together, these bodies of scholarship establish a state of the art that can be stated with some precision. It is established that modern Yoga has been reconstituted as a wellness practice through a historical and sociological process that scholarship has documented in detail. It is established that the classical Yogic account of psychological transformation is organized around dispositional residue and presupposes a temporal horizon exceeding a single biological life. It is established that Karma and Rebirth were subjected to rigorous philosophical elaboration within Indian traditions and continue to receive serious analytic treatment. And it is established that consciousness science has not converged upon an account of subjective experience, that its leading frameworks remain contested, and that non-physicalist positions retain standing within the mainstream literature. What has not been established, and what has received little systematic attention in the literature reviewed, is whether these findings bear upon one another. The sociology of modern Yoga does not engage the philosophy of Karma; the philosophy of Karma does not engage consciousness science; and consciousness science engages the contemplative traditions principally as a source of experimental protocols rather than as a source of theoretical claims.

The practical stakes of this disconnection are not trivial. Contemporary psychology draws increasingly upon Yogic and broader contemplative traditions; mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and compassion-focused therapy each bear the imprint of disciplines whose underlying anthropology presupposes a mental continuum extending beyond a single biological lifetime (Germer et al., 2013). When these practices are transplanted into a framework from which that presupposition has been removed, their rationale is correspondingly impoverished and their therapeutic reach is constrained. The difficulty is not that secular adaptations fail to produce benefit, since the evidence indicates that they frequently do, but that the account they are able to give of why they produce it is thinner than the account the source tradition offers.

Two gaps therefore emerge from the foregoing survey. The first is conceptual: the scholarly literature on modern Yoga has documented the excision of its metaphysical commitments with considerable care, but has devoted comparatively little attention to reconstructing what is lost in psychological and ethical terms when that excision is performed. The second is interdisciplinary: the philosophical literature on Karma and Rebirth and the scientific literature on consciousness have developed largely in isolation from one another, with the result that neither has been brought systematically to bear upon the other. These gaps matter because the question at issue is not merely historical. If the metaphysical commitments of the contemplative traditions are doing genuine explanatory work, then their removal is not a neutral act of translation but a substantive loss, and one that bears directly upon the theoretical adequacy of the therapeutic practices derived from them.

The purpose of this paper is to address both gaps by reconstructing the Yogic doctrine of the mental continuum as a philosophically defensible position, examining its compatibility with contemporary accounts of consciousness and information, assessing the empirical literature that bears upon it, and drawing out the ethical and psychological consequences that follow. The study proceeds from a directional assumption, stated here so that it may be evaluated against the evidence subsequently presented: that the doctrines of Karma and Rebirth, when reconstructed as regulative postulates rather than as articles of faith, will prove more philosophically defensible than their conventional dismissal allows, and will be found to supply ethical and psychological resources that single-lifetime frameworks cannot generate. The assumption is directional in that it anticipates a positive rather than a null result, and it is falsifiable in principle: it would be disconfirmed were the reconstruction to yield internal incoherence, were the doctrines to prove incompatible with established scientific findings, or were the psychological functions attributed to them to be adequately discharged by secular alternatives. Such alternatives are taken seriously throughout: personal identity has been given a secular psychological-continuity analysis

that likewise dispenses with a substantial self (Parfit, 1984), and individual differences in temperament and disposition are routinely explained by heritability and non-shared environmental influence (Plomin et al., 2016) without recourse to prior lives. The paper accordingly addresses four research questions. RQ1: Can the doctrine of the mental continuum be reconstructed coherently? RQ2: Is it compatible with, as distinct from supported by, contemporary physics and consciousness science? RQ3: What is the evidential status of empirical research on claimed past-life memories? RQ4: Which ethical and psychological functions does the doctrine serve, and can secular frameworks serve them equally well? The paper contends, in short, that a full account of the psychological efficacy of the contemplative traditions requires sustained engagement with the metaphysical commitments they historically presuppose.

The analysis proceeds in five movements. Section 3.1 reconstructs the Yogic metaphysics of the mental continuum, taking care to distinguish it from the substantialist soul-theory it explicitly repudiates and from the annihilationism it equally opposes. Section 3.2 examines points of contact and tension between Yogic accounts of consciousness and contemporary physics and consciousness science. Section 3.3 reviews the empirical research literature bearing on the continuity of consciousness across death. Section 3.4 develops the ethical and moral architecture that the multi-life framework sustains, including its implications for individual agency and collective responsibility. Section 3.5 considers the psychological implications for clinical practice and for human identity formation, and sets out the limitations of the present argument together with directions for future research. Section 3.1 addresses RQ1, Section 3.2 addresses RQ2, Section 3.3 addresses RQ3, and Sections 3.4 and 3.5 address RQ4; Section 4 returns to each question. The term Trans-Materialist Psychology is used here to denote a psychology that retains the evidential standards of empirical science while declining to assume, in advance of evidence, that consciousness and personal continuity are reducible to neural processes. It differs from transpersonal psychology, which is organized principally around altered states and spiritual experience, and from Indian psychology, which works from within a single civilizational tradition; its distinguishing feature is methodological rather than doctrinal, namely the admission of non-reductive hypotheses into the range that empirical standards are permitted to assess. It differs also from the post-materialist programme (Beauregard et al., 2014), which holds that the available evidence already warrants rejecting materialism; Trans-Materialist Psychology makes no such claim, and treats the relation between consciousness and the brain as an open empirical question.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary philosophical methodology that combines systematic conceptual analysis, critical literature review, and cross-traditional comparative philosophy. The primary approach is philosophical reconstruction: the paper recovers the internal logic of classical Indian doctrines of Karma and Rebirth from primary and secondary scholarly sources and subjects these reconstructions to critical evaluation against criteria drawn from Western analytic philosophy of mind, the philosophy of science, and moral philosophy. The study is therefore conceptual rather than empirical in character, and its conclusions are advanced as philosophically defensible positions rather than as demonstrated matters of fact.

The ontological position adopted here is one of methodological openness rather than prior commitment. The analysis neither presupposes that consciousness is reducible to neural process nor assumes that it is not; it treats the question as unsettled and examines what follows for Yogic psychology under each alternative. The epistemological stance is correspondingly pluralist: philosophical argument, empirical investigation, and first-person contemplative report are treated as distinct sources of evidence with distinct warrants and distinct limitations, none of which is assumed to be reducible to another. This framing is adopted because the subject matter sits at the intersection of three literatures that operate

with incompatible default assumptions, and any analysis that adopted the default assumptions of one would prejudge the questions at issue with the other two.

Relevant literature was identified through keyword searches of philosophical, psychological, and scientific databases, including PhilPapers, Scopus, PsycINFO, and JSTOR, using combinations of the terms karma, rebirth, *saṃskāra*, mental continuum, *citta-santāna*, consciousness, integrated information, past-life memory, and reincarnation, supplemented by backward citation tracing from key works; works were included where they offered a substantive philosophical, scientific, or empirical treatment of the doctrines or questions under examination. Source selection was governed by three criteria. First, classical Indian philosophical texts, including the *Yoga Sūtra* with the commentary attributed to *Vyāsa*, were accessed through established scholarly translations and authoritative secondary commentaries (Bryant, 2009; Rhys Davids, 1890; Stcherbatsky, 1923; Waldron, 2003). Second, scientific literature was selected for its relevance to the philosophy of consciousness and information theory, rather than as constituting empirical endorsement of the doctrines under examination (Albantakis et al., 2023; Braunstein & Pati, 2007; Capra, 1975; Stapp, 2007; Tononi, 2004). Third, empirical research on past-life memory was selected with attention to methodological rigour, incorporating primary investigative studies (Stevenson, 1997), systematic assessments of the field as a whole (Moraes et al., 2022), syntheses by its principal investigators (Tucker, 2005), and critical evaluations of that work (Edwards, 1996; Martin & Augustine, 2015).

The theoretical components of the comparative analysis are drawn from established methods in cross-traditional philosophy of religion (Coward, 2002), applying analogical reasoning to identify structural parallels between Indian and Western philosophical frameworks (Kant, 1996; Reichenbach, 1990). Analogical claims are assessed against a stated criterion: a structural parallel is admitted where two frameworks assign the same logical role to a doctrine within an argument, and is rejected where the resemblance is confined to surface vocabulary. Sanskrit technical terms are given in italics with diacritical marks; the naturalized English forms Karma, Yoga, and Rebirth are left unmarked. Throughout the analysis, a critical-constructive stance is maintained. Claims are advanced as philosophically defensible positions rather than established empirical facts, counter-arguments are engaged directly rather than set aside, and the limitations of each line of argument are stated at the point at which they arise rather than deferred to a concluding qualification. Competing arguments are evaluated against four criteria: internal coherence, consistency with established scientific findings, explanatory scope, and the availability of rival explanations of equal or greater parsimony. The analysis further distinguishes three levels of claim (doctrinal interpretation, philosophical argument, and empirical evidence) and specifies in each case whether a doctrine is merely compatible with, positively supported by, or demonstrated by the evidence considered. Only the first of these relations is claimed for the quantum-physical material, and none beyond the second for the empirical literature.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The metaphysics of the mental continuum

Any philosophical reconstruction of the Yogic account of Rebirth must begin by confronting what Waldron (2003) identifies as the paradox of continuity. If there is no permanent, unchanging self, then precisely what is it that persists from one life to the next? The question is posed here in its Buddhist form, and the answer reconstructed below is likewise Buddhist in provenance, drawing on the *Yogācāra* elaboration of the mental stream that Waldron examines. This requires a clarification the interdisciplinary literature frequently elides. The metaphysical positions grouped under the term Yogic are not uniform. Classical Yoga in its *Pātañjala-Sāṃkhya* formulation affirms *puruṣa*, an eternal witness-consciousness ontologically distinct from the mutable *citta* belonging to *prakṛti*; Advaita Vedānta likewise affirms a permanent self, *ātman*, identical with Brahman, denying

only the ultimate reality of the empirical ego. Neither tradition holds that nothing permanent underlies the person. It is Buddhist thought, and *Abhidharma* and *Yogācāra* analysis in particular, that dispenses with a substantial self entirely and accounts for continuity through causally connected mental events alone. Classical Indian thought addresses the paradox through the concept of the mental continuum (*citta-santāna*), a temporally extended, causally connected stream of mental events that constitutes personal identity without requiring a numerically identical substance persisting beneath it. The model reconstructed here is therefore Buddhist rather than *Pātañjala* in its strict lineage. It is adopted because, dispensing with a substantial carrier, it is least vulnerable to the objection that rebirth doctrines simply reintroduce a Cartesian soul, and correspondingly most amenable to the informational analysis pursued in Section 3.2. Where the argument nevertheless bears upon classical Yoga, the point of contact is the shared account of dispositional residue and its progressive attenuation through practice, which both traditions describe in closely parallel terms notwithstanding their divergence on the status of the self. The *Yoga Sūtra* itself locates the karmic store (*karmāśaya*) in afflicted action and holds that it ripens as birth, lifespan, and experience (YS 2.12–2.13), affirms that direct perception of *saṃskāras* yields knowledge of previous births (YS 3.18), and maintains that latent impressions (*vāsanā*) persist in continuity even when separated by birth, place, and time (YS 4.9) (Bryant, 2009). Significantly, in the *Pātañjala* system it is *citta*, not the inactive *puruṣa*, that bears this residue; the two traditions therefore agree that the carrier of karmic continuity is a mutable mental structure rather than an unchanging self, and differ on whether a witness-consciousness stands beyond it. The present paper treats them comparatively on this basis rather than as a single system.

The analogy most frequently employed in both Buddhist and Yogic literature is that of a flame transferred from one candle to another. The second flame is causally continuous with the first in that it derives its existence and character from the causal action of the first; it is not, however, numerically identical to it. As Rhys Davids (1890) observed in his rendering of the *Milindapañha*, the tradition explicitly resists the inference that continuity entails sameness of substance. Identity across time is a matter of relational and causal connection rather than substantial persistence. A complementary analogy, widely employed by commentators on the *Abhidharma*, likens the process to the transfer of kinetic energy between colliding bodies: the motion of the second body is fully explained by its causal relation to the first, and no material substance need migrate between them. The underlying analysis, in which apparent persistence is resolved into a succession of momentary elements, is set out systematically by Stcherbatsky (1923). The Yogic claim is structurally identical. Karmic momentum accumulated through intentional action (*cetanā*) in one life determines the nature and conditions of the next, without presupposing a Cartesian soul as its carrier. A terminological distinction should be registered here, since the two concepts are often conflated in the comparative literature. *Cetanā* denotes volition or intention, and it is in this sense that *Abhidharma* identifies volition with Karma itself. Consciousness understood as ontologically fundamental is a separate notion, designated *cit* or *caitanya*, belonging to the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* and *Advaita* traditions rather than to Buddhist analysis. This paper uses *cetanā* exclusively in the volitional sense and *cit* for the primacy-of-consciousness claim.

These analogies do philosophical work of a specific and limited kind. They establish that causal continuity without substantial identity is a coherent notion, which is what the tradition requires; they do not establish that any such continuity in fact obtains across biological death. The distinction matters because a recurrent criticism holds that the mental continuum model purchases coherence at the price of content, a stream sufficiently attenuated to avoid substantialism being too attenuated to bear the weight of moral responsibility. The Yogic response is that the same objection applies with equal force within a single lifetime, where the intuition that the adult bears responsibility for the acts of the adolescent survives the observation that no unchanging substance connects them.

The mechanism of continuity is supplied by the concept of *saṃskāras*, a term that may be rendered as impressions or formations. Every intentional mental and physical action

leaves a dispositional trace within the mental stream, a latent tendency that subsequently shapes perception, motivation, and behaviour. Coward (2002) describes *saṃskāras* as constituting the deep psychological grammar of personality, noting their capacity to account for the striking divergences in character, aptitude, and emotional disposition observed among individuals raised in substantially identical environments, as well as for phobias, relational patterns, and perceptual sensitivities that appear to lack any adequate causal explanation within the present lifetime. Such differences are, however, substantially explained within conventional psychology by the heritability of temperament, non-shared environmental influences (Plomin et al., 2016), and, in the case of phobias, evolutionarily prepared learning (Öhman & Mineka, 2001); the *saṃskāra* account is offered here as an interpretive alternative rather than as a superior explanation. *Saṃskāras* are best understood not as physical inscriptions in neural tissue but as structured informational states, that is, patterns of causal disposition inhering in the mental stream. This characterization is offered as a heuristic analogy. As the discussion in Section 3.2 will indicate, it finds a potential, if partial, parallel in quantum-physical accounts of information conservation, though the limits of that parallel are acknowledged throughout the analysis.

A philosophically distinctive feature of both Yogic and Buddhist accounts is their explicit rejection of two symmetrically extreme positions. Eternalism holds that a permanent, numerically identical soul transmigrates unchanged; nihilism holds that nothing survives biological death. The Middle Way position, as Karunamuni (2015) notes, is more defensible than either. Eternalism is incompatible with the observable reality of psychological change across a single lifetime; nihilism cannot ground the moral continuity required to make sense of responsibility, merit, and culpability. The mental continuum model preserves that continuity by maintaining the same causal stream as the locus of responsibility, without the metaphysical permanence the evidence of change disconfirms.

The practical stakes of this theoretical choice are considerable. If the entire arc of character formation and the acquisition of ethical wisdom must be completed within a single biological lifetime, the most demanding Yogic programmes of self-cultivation are, for most practitioners, not merely difficult but constitutively unrealizable. Within the tradition's own ethical logic, therefore, Rebirth functions not as an optional embellishment but as a presupposition of the Yogic ethical project; whether that project must be completed for practice to be worthwhile is a separate question, to which secular frameworks give a negative answer.

3.2 The scientific bridge: consciousness, physics, and information

Any attempt to place Yogic metaphysics in dialogue with modern science must navigate between two unprofitable extremes: a reductive scientism treating empirical reducibility as the sole criterion of cognitive significance, and a pseudo-scientific apologetics appropriating the vocabulary of physics to lend unearned authority to spiritual claims. This section attempts an intermediate position, identifying structural analogies while remaining candid about the inferential gaps separating analogy from demonstration.

In The Tao of Physics, Capra (1975) identifies philosophical parallels between quantum mechanics and Eastern metaphysical traditions. Its central thesis, that quantum field theory dissolves the classical picture of isolated substantial objects in favour of dynamic relational patterns, resonates with the Yogic claim that individual consciousness is not self-enclosed but a node within a larger field of mutual dependence. Of particular relevance is the observer effect. On some interpretations of quantum mechanics, measurement is not a passive registration of independently antecedent facts but an active process partly determining the state it records (Rosenblum & Kuttner, 2011); the formalism itself, however, does not require that the measuring agent be conscious. Stapp (2007) argues from this that consciousness is not an epiphenomenal byproduct but a causally efficacious participant in the constitution of physical reality, a position structurally congruent with the claim, common to *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* and *Advaita* though not to Buddhist analysis, that consciousness (*cit*) is ontologically primary rather than derivative. The convergence cuts

across the divide identified in Section 3.1: the informational reading of *saṃskāras* developed here is Buddhist in provenance, whereas the primacy-of-consciousness claim belongs to the substantialist traditions. This paper does not attempt to reconcile them, and notes only that contemporary physics is neutral between them.

A further, if qualified, point of contact is provided by the no-hiding theorem (Braunstein & Pati, 2007), which establishes that when quantum information disappears from one subsystem it must reside in full within the remainder of the universe, and cannot be concealed in correlations between them. This is a conservation result of a specific and limited kind rather than a general law of the conservation of information, and the distinction matters for what follows. If information is conserved in this sense across physical transformations, then the informational content of a mental life need not be regarded as simply annihilated at biological death; it may in principle persist in non-local form. Information conservation in this sense, however, applies equally to every physical system, to a burned book no less than to a mind, and therefore cannot by itself distinguish the persistence of a person from the dispersal of any other physical structure. Within this speculative model *saṃskāras* would be understood not as memories stored in cerebral networks but as encoded informational states within a field exceeding the individual brain in extension.

These parallels must be held with caution, and the objections stated plainly. First, quantum effects are characteristically confined to subatomic scales, and no established mechanism has been identified by which quantum-level phenomena would give rise to macroscopic consciousness effects of the kind Yogic psychology describes. Proposals such as the orchestrated objective reduction hypothesis (Hameroff & Penrose, 1996), which seek to bridge this gap, remain speculative and are disputed on grounds of physical plausibility, most influentially on the argument that decoherence times in warm neural tissue are orders of magnitude too short to sustain the required quantum states (Tegmark, 2000). Second, the inference from information conservation to the preservation of personal identity involves a conceptual step of considerable magnitude: conservation does not entail preservation of the specific organizational structures, such as autobiographical memory and dispositional character, that constitute personal identity. Third, reading quantum mechanics as implying an irreducible role for consciousness remains a minority position within physics and its philosophy. These limitations are central to an honest assessment. The modest claim warranted is that Yogic metaphysics is not rendered scientifically incredible by contemporary physics, not that physics provides confirmatory evidence for it.

A more direct and technically developed point of engagement with contemporary consciousness science is provided by Integrated Information Theory. In its original formulation, Tononi (2004) proposed that consciousness is identical with a specific kind of integrated informational structure, quantified by the measure phi, and is accordingly substrate-independent: any physical system that instantiates the requisite informational organization is, by hypothesis, conscious. The theory has since undergone substantial technical revision, and its current formulation derives the properties of phenomenal existence from a set of phenomenological axioms and their corresponding physical postulates (Albantakis et al., 2023). While the theory does not directly entail the survival of consciousness beyond biological death, it does entail that consciousness is not reducible to any particular biological implementation, which constitutes a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the Yogic account of the mental continuum.

The standing of Integrated Information Theory is, however, contested, and honesty requires that the contest be reported rather than elided. The theory has attracted sustained criticism concerning the tractability of its central measure and the falsifiability of its predictions. Seth & Bayne (2022) situate it among several competing frameworks without according it priority, while Storm et al. (2024) argue for an integrative, multiscale perspective treating the leading theories as partly compatible descriptions at different levels rather than mutually exclusive rivals. The significance for the present argument is indirect but real. The Yogic claim does not depend on the vindication of any particular theory of consciousness; it depends on the weaker proposition that the question remains

open. Kuhn (2024), mapping available explanations across a spectrum from eliminative materialism through non-reductive physicalism to panpsychist and non-physicalist accounts, demonstrates that the space of positions taken seriously in the contemporary literature is considerably wider than a reductionist framing suggests, and that their implications for survival beyond death are treated as legitimate subjects of inquiry. The consolidation of consciousness studies as an independent research programme (Chalmers, 1996) has thus opened conceptual space in which the Yogic claim that consciousness is not a product of the brain may be examined as a hypothesis, though not one the field currently supports.

3.3 Empirical evidence: memory, birthmarks, and past-life research

The most sustained scientific investigation bearing on continuity of consciousness beyond death is the research programme initiated by Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia. Over four decades, Stevenson and his collaborators documented more than 2,500 cases of young children who reported detailed memories apparently referring to previous lives. His most stringent findings, presented in Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect, concern cases in which, he reports, children bore birthmarks or congenital birth defects whose location corresponded to the reported fatal wounds of the deceased individual they claimed to recall, with the correspondence in some instances checked against autopsy records. Stevenson's methodology included systematic attempts at independent verification of factual claims, controls for the possibility of prior exposure to relevant information, and careful documentation of the correspondence between reported wounds and biological marks through medical records (Stevenson, 1997).

The field has continued to develop since Stevenson's death, and its present condition has been characterized with some precision. Moraes et al. (2022) conducted a scoping review of the peer-reviewed literature, screening six scientific databases and identifying seventy-eight observational studies of claimed past-life memories. Their bibliometric analysis establishes several features of the field that bear directly on its evidential standing. Publication activity peaked between 1990 and 2010; Asia was by a considerable margin the most investigated region; the substantial majority of investigations concerned children; and the case report was the predominant study design, with cross-sectional, case-control, and cohort designs representing a comparatively small proportion of the total. The review further notes that a majority of the journals publishing this work belong to the parapsychological and anomalous-phenomena literature rather than to mainstream psychiatry and psychology, with correspondingly modest citation impact.

These findings are double-edged, and both edges should be acknowledged. On one hand, they establish that a substantial and methodologically varied body of peer-reviewed investigation exists, which is not what a characterization of the field as mere anecdote would predict. On the other, the predominance of case reports over controlled designs, and the concentration of publication within specialist venues, indicate a research programme that has not achieved the methodological maturity or the disciplinary integration that would allow its findings to be assessed by the ordinary standards of the psychological sciences. Recent work has begun to address the first of these deficits. Moraes et al. (2024) present a case investigation combining first-hand witness interviews with documentary analysis and radiological examination, illustrating a methodological standard more demanding than that of the earlier case literature. Pehlivanova et al. (2024) report the first follow-up investigation of American adults who had been studied as children in connection with claimed past-life memories, finding that these individuals lead unremarkable adult lives, that the majority no longer report access to the memories in question, and that the phenomenon shows no association with pathological dissociation.

A scholarly assessment nevertheless requires honest acknowledgement of the methodological objections raised against this literature. Critical reviewers (Edwards, 1996; Martin & Augustine, 2015), and in part the investigators themselves (Tucker, 2005), note several significant limitations. The case corpus is disproportionately drawn from cultural

contexts where belief in reincarnation is already prevalent, which may influence both the generation of reports and the interpretive framework of investigators. The matching of birthmarks to reported wounds was not conducted under double-blind conditions, leaving it vulnerable to confirmation bias. The interval between the events of a claimed previous life and their systematic investigation commonly spans years or decades, during which contamination of testimony cannot be reliably excluded. Alternative hypotheses, among them cryptomnesia and chance correspondence, cannot in all cases be ruled out. These concerns can be organized under three headings. With respect to verification, the principal procedures (interviews with the child's family and the previous person's family, documentary records, and medical or autopsy reports) are typically applied after the two families have made contact, so that independent pre-contact documentation of the child's statements is available in only a minority of cases. With respect to selection, cases enter the corpus through family or community report rather than systematic sampling, and are drawn predominantly from cultures in which reincarnation is expected, so that the corpus cannot indicate how frequently such claims arise or fail to be verified. With respect to alternative explanations, cryptomnesia, parental and cultural shaping of the child's narrative, and chance correspondence (given the large number of deceased persons against whom vague statements might be matched) each predict a proportion of apparent matches without any continuity of consciousness. These are substantive concerns. What they establish is that the evidence is not decisive; whether it retains residual value depends on the subset of cases with documented pre-contact statements, which future research should prioritize.

Two further objections, developed most systematically by Edwards (1996), warrant direct acknowledgement. The first is demographic: human population has risen from a few hundred million at the start of the common era to some eight billion, and any rebirth model must account for the corresponding proliferation of mental continua. Responses within the tradition invoke rebirth across non-human and non-terrestrial realms, but these are difficult to assess empirically and the objection retains force. The second concerns the general absence of past-life memory, which Edwards takes to undermine the claim that anything psychologically continuous survives. The mental-continuum model has a partial answer, locating continuity in dispositional structure rather than episodic recall, and the follow-up literature indicating that such memories typically fade in adulthood (Pehlivanova et al., 2024) is consistent with that reading. Neither response is decisive, and the objections are recorded here as unresolved rather than answered.

3.4 The ethical and moral architecture

Among the most philosophically compelling arguments for the multi-life framework is one that is ethical rather than empirical. Reichenbach (1990) articulates it precisely. If a single lifetime constitutes the complete moral ledger, the universe as observed appears radically unjust: persons of established virtue suffer catastrophic misfortune through no discernible fault, while persons of evident moral failure enjoy security and longevity. A consistently materialist ethics has three available responses, to deny that the universe is just, to attribute apparent injustice to incomplete knowledge of long-range natural consequences, or to invoke moral luck. None fully satisfies the intuitions that ground and animate the practices of praise, blame, and moral aspiration. The Yogic framework offers a fourth possibility: that the universe is ordered justly, but that justice operates across a temporal scale exceeding any single life. Karma, understood as the natural law by which intentional actions shape the character of the agent and thereby that agent's subsequent experience, provides a coherent account of moral equilibrium at this extended scale (Bilimoria, 2007; Krishan, 1997).

The most widespread misinterpretation of Karma construes it as fatalism: the view that present circumstances are wholly determined by past actions and that the scope for genuine agency is negligible. This inverts the actual logic of the doctrine. If present circumstances are partly the product of prior intentional actions, and future circumstances will be partly constituted by present ones, the doctrine entails not the futility but the supreme practical

importance of present moral effort. Reichenbach (1990) makes the related point that karmic causation is best understood as operating alongside, rather than in place of, ordinary physical and social causation, so that the doctrine underdetermines rather than fixes the circumstances of any particular life.

This point has a notable parallel in Kant's moral philosophy. Kant argued that, while the immortality of the soul admits of no demonstration by theoretical reason, it must be postulated by practical reason, since morality requires the possibility of completing the infinite task of virtue, and that completion requires unlimited time (Kant, 1996). The structural parallel between the Kantian and Yogic frameworks is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Structural parallels and substantive differences between Kantian practical postulates and Indian metaphysical doctrines

Kant's postulate	Indian counterpart	Shared logical role	Key difference
Free will (autonomy)	Volition (*cetanā*)	Moral agency requires genuine choice	Kantian freedom is noumenal and outside natural causality; *cetanā* operates within conditioned causality
God (guarantor of moral order)	The law of Karma	Just correspondence between virtue and outcome	Kant's God is a personal, rational guarantor; Karma is an impersonal law requiring no agent (Bilimoria, 2007)
Immortality of the soul	Rebirth (*saṃsāra*)	Time sufficient for virtue's completion	Kant envisages endless progress by the same self; Rebirth breaks episodic memory and aims at ending the series (*kaivalya/nirvāṇa*)

(Kant, 1996; Krishan, 1997; Bilimoria, 2007; Bryant, 2009)

As the final column of Table 1 indicates, the parallel between the two frameworks is not one of substantive content, since Kant's conception of God as a rational postulate and the Yogic law of Karma as a natural moral principle are considerably different in their theoretical elaboration. The parallel lies rather in logical role: in both cases, doctrines that resist demonstration by theoretical reason are held to be indispensable presuppositions of a coherent and internally consistent moral practice. Kant held that the realization of the highest good requires that virtue and happiness ultimately correspond, and that this correspondence in turn requires both divine guarantee and sufficient time for moral perfection. Yogic thought reaches a structurally analogous conclusion by a different philosophical path, positing rebirth as the temporal condition without which the progressive refinement of character through ethical practice could not, for the great majority of practitioners, reach completion. The analogy satisfies the criterion stated in Section 2: what is shared is the logical function of the doctrine within the argument, not the content of the doctrine itself.

The concept of collective or shared Karma (*sādhāraṇa-karma*) reveals that the Yogic account of moral reality is not reducible to a calculus of individual ledgers. Individuals are understood to be constitutively embedded in families, communities, and broader historical formations, each bearing its own causal trajectory. The implication is morally significant. If the conditions into which a person will be reborn are partly constituted by the collective moral quality of the social world that person helped to shape, then individual ethical interest and collective social engagement are mutually reinforcing rather than competing claims. Within a single-lifetime framework a rational agent may plausibly discount the interests of future generations, since the long-range consequences of present collective choices will materialize beyond that agent's lifespan. Within a multi-life framework the calculation may be altered, and questions of climate justice and institutional integrity may come to appear as matters of enlightened long-term self-interest rather than purely other-regarding altruism (Coward, 2002). Secular accounts, it should be noted, also ground strong concern for future generations: Scheffler (2013) argues that much of what gives present activity its value depends on the continued existence of others after one's death. The multi-life framework is therefore one route to intergenerational concern, not the only one.

3.5 Psychological implications and future directions

The foregoing reconstruction carries implications for clinical practice that warrant explicit articulation. Contemporary psychology and psychiatry operate within an implicit single-life model, tracing trauma, character pathology, and chronic anxiety principally to early developmental experience, neurological constitution, and the ongoing stressor environment. This framework has generated substantial clinical benefit, but its explanatory scope may be incomplete: it may not fully account for phobias, relational configurations, or persistent emotional sensitivities for which no adequate causal history can be reconstructed within the present life (Woolger, 1987). A Yogic approach would treat such presentations as possible expressions of *saṃskāras* accumulated across an extended mental continuum, and would hypothesize that their resolution requires engagement at a depth that purely cognitive or behavioural interventions may not reach. The practice of *citta-śuddhi*, purification of the mind-stuff, is the traditionally prescribed methodology for work at that depth, though its clinical efficacy remains to be established.

Two qualifications are necessary here, and they are not minor. The first is clinical: any therapeutic approach that invites a patient to interpret present distress in terms of events not accessible to ordinary verification carries an evident risk of confabulation, and of the consolidation of narratives that are therapeutically satisfying but factually unfounded. The observation that the single-life model cannot explain everything does not establish that a multi-life model explains the remainder. The second is evidential: the follow-up literature indicates that claimed past-life memories in children are not associated with psychopathology (Pehlivanova et al., 2024), but this finding concerns spontaneous childhood reports and does not extend to memories elicited under therapeutic suggestion in adults, which raise distinct and well-documented methodological concerns, including the shaping of reported past-life identities by hypnotist expectation and cultural belief (Spanos et al., 1991). A responsible Yogic clinical psychology would therefore treat the *saṃskāra* framework as an interpretive resource for understanding the depth and persistence of dispositional patterns, rather than as a licence for the reconstruction of specific biographical content.

Integration with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) illuminates a further dimension. The theory distinguishes introjected motivation, in which behaviour is governed by the desire to avoid guilt or secure reward, from integrated regulation, in which behaviour expresses values the agent has assimilated into a coherent sense of self, and which falls with intrinsic motivation under the broader category of autonomous motivation. The Yogic understanding of Karma, properly apprehended, is a theory of autonomous motivation. The benefit of virtuous action is not external reinforcement distributed in a subsequent life but the immediate transformation of character the action enacts. This reading also disarms a common objection, that karmic doctrines reduce morality to prudential self-interest across an extended timescale: if the reward of virtuous action is the character it produces rather than the circumstances it secures, the objection loses its purchase.

Among the most practically significant features of the framework is the form of existential security it makes available. Secular culture, shaped by a single-life anthropology, confronts what may be termed the existential fragility problem: if personal identity is wholly constituted by the biological life a person is currently living, mortality represents not a transition but absolute termination. The psychological consequences of this orientation, including chronic existential anxiety and the compulsive pursuit of symbolic immortality, have been extensively documented within terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986). The account of the mental continuum (*citta-santāna*) reconstructed above provides a different relationship to mortality, in which death is the cessation of a particular biological vehicle rather than the extinction of the dispositional stream constituting personal identity. Its potential psychological benefit, a stable sense of identity not contingent upon biological persistence, may represent a distinctive form of existential resilience, of particular relevance in later life and in palliative contexts. Terror management research indicates, however, that secular worldviews can also buffer death

anxiety, so the claim of distinctive benefit is advanced here as a hypothesis for empirical testing rather than an established outcome.

The present paper operates under several limitations that must be stated with candour. The analogy between the mental continuum and quantum-physical information conservation, while structurally suggestive, remains speculative: no established mechanism connects information conservation to the persistence of the macroscopic structures constituting personality and memory. The empirical literature on past-life memory, though not without evidential weight, is beset by methodological challenges precluding definitive conclusions, and its concentration within specialist venues limits the external scrutiny it has received (Moraes et al., 2022). The argument from moral equilibrium establishes a normative desideratum rather than a metaphysical fact: that a just universe would require an extended moral timescale does not establish that the universe is just. Finally, the mental-continuum model reconstructed here is Buddhist in provenance; although classical *Pātañjala* Yoga likewise locates karmic residue in the mutable *citta* (Section 3.1), it additionally affirms an eternal *puruṣa*. The two have been treated as complementary resources for a single argument rather than as a unified system, and a fuller treatment would need to establish whether the informational reading of *saṃskāras* is compatible with a substantialist account of the self, or whether the two constitute genuinely competing frameworks.

Future research should proceed along several complementary lines. Longitudinal neuro-phenomenological studies of advanced practitioners, tracking relationships between sustained *citta-śuddhi* practice and both cognitive resilience and stress biomarkers, would strengthen the empirical basis of the framework. Replication and methodological refinement of Stevenson-type research, incorporating stricter double-blind protocols and the prospective designs the scoping literature identifies as underrepresented, would clarify the evidentiary significance of the existing case corpus. Theoretical work integrating consciousness science with Yogic phenomenology could contribute to a more rigorous trans-materialist psychology than this paper is positioned to provide. Finally, empirical investigation of the psychological correlates of multi-life belief, particularly in geriatric and palliative populations where existential concerns are most salient, would allow the resilience hypothesis advanced here to be tested rather than asserted.

4. Conclusions

The secularization of Yoga, whatever its gains in popular accessibility, involves a conceptual loss that warrants scholarly attention. The doctrines of Karma and Rebirth are not peripheral accretions upon a practice that could survive without them; they constitute the conceptual infrastructure from which Yogic practice derives its ethical logic, its account of the depth and complexity of human character, and its framework for long-term moral and psychological development. This paper has argued for the scholarly reclamation of these doctrines, not as articles of faith placed beyond critical examination, but as philosophically defensible positions that merit serious engagement from psychologists, philosophers of mind, and consciousness scientists.

In answer to the research questions: the mental-continuum doctrine can be reconstructed coherently; Buddhist analysis articulates it in its most defensible form, while *Pātañjala* Yoga shares its account of dispositional residue carried by a mutable *citta* but differs in affirming a witness-consciousness, *puruṣa*, beyond it (RQ1); it is compatible with, but not supported by, contemporary physics and consciousness science (RQ2); the empirical literature on past-life memory is suggestive in a minority of well-documented cases but methodologically inconclusive (RQ3); and the doctrine serves ethical and psychological functions, notably long-horizon moral motivation and existential security, that secular frameworks also address in part, so that any distinctive advantage remains a hypothesis to be tested (RQ4). The case advanced rests on three lines of argument, each of differing evidential strength. Philosophically, the mental continuum model provides a coherent account of personal identity and moral responsibility, navigating between the

inadequacies of substantialist eternalism and nihilistic annihilationism, and performing in practical ethics a function structurally analogous to that which Kant identified in his postulates of practical reason. Scientifically, the framework is not contradicted by the relational and informational account of reality contemporary physics supplies, and the empirical literature on past-life claims, while falling short of proof and constrained by documented limitations, does not warrant the dismissal it commonly receives. Ethically, the multi-life framework provides a coherent foundation for integrating individual moral agency, long-range character development, and collective responsibility across generations. The contribution of this analysis lies in arguing that these lines of argument are mutually compatible: the philosophical reconstruction is internally coherent, the scientific material establishes compatibility rather than support, and the empirical literature remains inconclusive. The ethical and psychological advantages proposed for the multi-life framework are offered as hypotheses for empirical testing rather than as established outcomes. The aspiration animating the inquiry is a Trans-Materialist Psychology: a discipline preserving the methodological rigour of empirical science while acknowledging that experience, identity, and moral agency may require a conceptual vocabulary richer than current physical science alone supplies. Such a psychology would not abandon the standards of evidence that make the discipline a science; it would extend the range of hypotheses those standards are permitted to assess.

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Biography of Author

Divya Sharma, Faculty at Nalanda University, Rajgir, India, is affiliated with the School of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy & Comparative Religions and the School of Languages and Literature/Humanities. Her work specialises in Yoga therapy, with a particular focus on wellness and wellbeing in geriatric populations, ageing, and health, alongside broader interests in Yoga philosophy and the intersections of contemplative traditions with consciousness studies.

- Email: divya.sharma@nalandauniv.edu.in
- ORCID: 0009-0000-1398-414X
- Web of Science ResearcherID: MFI-4746-2025
- Scopus Author ID: 59923820500
- Homepage: N/A