One central aspect of the transition from Vedic religion to the formative stages of Hinduism, which is coincident with the rise of Buddhism, is the redefinition of the role of mediator. In the Vedic model, Agni, the personification of the ritual fire, acted as the intermediary between the human sacrificer and the supernatural entities that he sought to propitiate through ritual, specifically gods and ancestors. The religious experts of this period in both traditions substituted human mediators for the divine mediator. My aim in this paper is to describe some tools they used to accomplish this. Since the efforts of both traditions are best illustrated in the texts that address the rituals of ancestor worship, I primarily employ the Brahmanical texts that describe the śrāddha and Buddhist texts that treat the offerings to petas.

I address three main themes in the appropriation of the role of mediator: 1. the substitution of human mediators for Agni; 2. the importance of the qualifications of the human mediator (this I only touch on briefly); and 3. a metaphor shared by both traditions and deployed to advocate the new human model of mediation.

In the oldest Vedic ritual, Agni mediated between the sacrificer and the divine. Agni’s role as the mediator between the sacrificer and the gods is well known; he connects the human sacrificer with his supernatural counterpart, not only transferring the food to the gods and Ancestors, but bringing the gods to the ritual space and even transferring the deceased to the next world (RV 10.14). The very first hymn of the Rg Veda describes Agni’s role as mediator. [item 1]

2. Agni must be invoked by the Sages—both those past and present. He will convey the gods here.
3. Through Agni, the sacrifice will attain wealth, a prosperity day after day, which brings glory and many heros.
4. O Agni, the sacrifice, the ceremony which you encompass on every side—that very one goes to the gods. RV 1.1.2–4

Agni brings the gods to the ritual space and brings the sacrifice to the gods. It is through him that the rewards of sacrifice, prosperity and sons, are won.

In one of the funeral hymns of the Rg Veda Agni’s role as intermediary in both rituals to the gods and those to the ancestors is stated explicitly. [item 2]

11 Agni, the carrier of corpses, will sacrifice to the Ancestors, who grow strong in the truth.
Indeed he will also proclaim the sacrificial foods to the gods and to the Ancestors.
12 Desiring we lay you down; desiring we kindle you together.
Desiring, fetch the desiring Ancestors to eat the sacrificial food. RV 10.16.11–12

Agni carries the corpses to heaven, and he carries the sacrifice to the ancestors. Agni also acts as the intermediary for both offerings of food to the gods and to the ancestors. Finally, Agni even brings the Ancestors to the ritual so that they can consume the offerings made in the ritual. His role as divine intermediary is the foundation of the exchange enacted in Vedic sacrifice and it is clear that here he is the mediator for both divine and ancestral rites.

But the appeal of large-scale sacrifice in the Vedic world began to wane and the religious experts invested in the Vedic ritual system found their role in the religious life waning as well. The religious experts created a new role for a human actor to fill; a man who possessed the proper character could stand in the place of Agni as intermediary.

This new role for the religious elite, specifically the Brahmin, is most clear in the domestic rituals of the Gṛhyasūtras. Most often the injunction to feed Brahmins occurs quite plainly at the end of the description of a ritual. Item 3 is an example from Śāṅkhāyana [item 3].

At the conclusion of rites (there is) the feeding of Brahmins. ŚGS 1.2.1
Beyond feeding of Brahmins as a customary part of the domestic ritual one manifestation of the feeding of Brahmins takes on particular import for this study: the feeding of a Brahmin who stands in for the deceased.

The authors of the Gṛhyasūtras most often expressed the Brahmins’ role of mediator as a direct replacement. Āśvalāyana (and Śāṅkhāyana) tells us that the Brahmin stands in for the deceased father during the śrāddha [item 4].

He should cause Brāhmaṇas who are endowed with fame, character, and (good) behavior, or with one (of these), who were informed at the proper time, who have bathed, who are purified to their feet, who have sipped water to sit down as the Ancestors (pitrvad), with their faces to the north, one for one, two for two, or three for three. ĀśGS 4.7.2

The author uses the term pitrvad, ‘as the Ancestors’; the Brahmins accept oblations that the sacrificer makes during the ritual on the Ancestors behalf. The Brahmins physically stand in for the Ancestors in the Gṛhyasūtras; Śāṅkhāyana describes one aspect of the ritual like this [item 5]:

3 Having strewn an uneven number of water vessels with sesamum,
4 He should pour (the water) on the Brahmins’ hands, assigning it (to the ancestors) with “This for you so-and-so!”
5 After this they are adorned.
6 Having saluted them and put the food in the fire,
7 He should feed them, assigning it (to the ancestors) with “This is for you so-and-so!” SGS 4.1.3–7

The householder washes the Brahmins as the Ancestors were washed in the older ritual, and feeds the Brahmins, as the Ancestors were in the older ritual. The Brahmins not only symbolically represent the Ancestors, they actually receive the offerings made to the Ancestors; they mediate the exchange between son and father, between householder and ancestor.
Quoting a Brāhmaṇa, Āśvalāyana reiterates Agni’s role as mediator with respect to gods, but appropriates his duties as mediator for the Ancestors to a human intermediary, a Brahmin [item 6].

It says in a Brāhmaṇa, “The gods have Agni as their mouth, the Ancestors have the hand as their mouth.” ĀśGS 4.7.22

As Agni mediates between the sacrificer and the gods, so does the Brahmin mediate between the householder and his ancestors. The author’s understanding of the metaphor rests on their conception of Agni as the mediator in ritual.

In the discussion of the śrāddha in his Dharmaśūtra, Āpastamba makes the substitution of the human mediator for the divine mediator explicit:

[item 7]

In this (ritual) the Ancestors are the divinity, but the Brahmins stand in for the offerorial fire. ĀpDhS 2.16.3

The Brahmins stands in for Agni and, as Agni does, convey the oblations to the ancestors. This passage highlights the transition that this paper seeks to show: the substitution of the Brahmin for Agni, that is, the substitution of a human mediator for the divine mediator.

Like the Brahmins, the Buddhist authors looked to the ritual fire as an exemplar intermediary. The Buddha is identified with the sacrificial fire in the Theragāthā [Item 8]:

I sacrifice to the fire worthy of dakṣinā; I venerate the Tathāgata. Thag 343cd

The Buddha is metaphorically equated to the fire and venerated as worthy of dakṣinā. The dakṣinā is the sacrificial gift of the Vedic sacrificial model. Here it serves as a model for other forms of religious giving.

Beyond this explicit substitution of the Buddha for the ritual fire, the later tradition appears to simply assert that the Buddha, or the Saṅgha in his place, are the proper
recipients of gifts, particularly of gifts to the deceased, but I will show that this too is related to the substitution of a human mediator for the divine mediator Agni.

One of the narratives in the Petavatthu, “The Ghosts Outside the Walls” (Pv 1.5) illustrates this. In this tale a king presents a ritual meal to the Buddha while his deceased ancestors, who now petas, watch on. To their dismay the king fails to dedicate the meal to them. In grief the petas roam about the king’s home wailing and making terrifying noises. The Buddha, through his supernatural insight, understands and explains the situation to the king. The king immediately invites the Buddha to a second meal the next day. That day he dedicated the offerings to his deceased ancestors and gave them to the Buddha, who concludes with these verses [item 9].

23 Neither weeping, nor sorrow, nor or any other lamentation benefits the petas even though their relatives persist.
24 But this gift, made and firmly planted in the Saṅgha, will serve, with immediate effect, their long term benefit.
25 Now this duty to one’s relatives has been pointed out and the highest honor has been paid to the petas; strength has been dedicated to the monks and not trifling the meritorious deed pursued by you. Pv 1.523–25

The Buddha explicitly states the Saṅgha’s role as mediator between the living and the dead, between a householder and a supernatural being. The gifts made to the Saṅgha benefit the deceased person to whom the ritual was dedicated.

The details of the gifts made illustrate the parallels between the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions and show that this is a Buddhist rite of ancestor worship. The gifts made to the noisy petas are food, clothing, and lodging, the same gifts made in the śrāddha of the Brahmanical tradition. The parallel is clear: in the Brahmanical tradition the householder gives food to the learned Brahmin and through him, feeds his ancestors; in the Buddhist narratives, the householder feeds the Buddha, and through him, feeds his ancestors. The ancestral offerings made into the fire in the oldest rituals of ancestor
worship are now offered to human intermediaries, the learned Brahmin in Brahmanical tradition, and the Buddha or the Saṅgha in Buddhist tradition.

But the importance of this comparison is not merely this parallel. The Buddhist narratives highlight the Buddhist tradition’s efforts to advocate their own religious experts as superior. In “The Ghosts outside the Walls,” the king gave rice gruel and hard and soft foods, but the ghosts received heavenly versions of the same and were refreshed (piñitindriyā). He gave clothing and lodging, but the ghosts received heavenly clothing and palaces. The Buddhist author tries to show that the Buddhist mediator is better qualified than his Brahmanical counterpart.

The importance of the qualities of the recipient of any act of religious giving is of supreme importance and the concern over the qualifications for the role of mediator, nascent in these Buddhist narratives, is explicit in other parts of texts from both traditions. The Brahmanical authors produce extensive lists that describe the ideal Brahmin to be invited to the ancestral ritual and the Buddhists include long diatribes on the failing of Brahmins as well as narratives that demonstrate the power of the Buddha. To sum up, the primary concerns throughout are moral character and knowledge; the knowledge valued though is different. For the Brahmins it is specifically Vedic learning. For the Buddhists, the knowledge valued is that born of the insight achieving through enlightenment.

Manu expresses the importance of verifying the qualifications of the Brahmin invited to the ritual of ancestor worship [item 10].

A man who knows the Law must never probe into the qualifications of a Brahmin at a rite to the gods; when he undertakes an ancestral rite, however, he should diligently probe into his qualifications. (Olivelle) MDhŚ 3.149

Understanding the Brahmin’s role as a mediator illuminates the reason for this regulation. The Brahmins fed at the divine rite do not actually mediate between the householder and
the gods; Agni does. The Brahmins who stand in for the Ancestors, however, are mediating for the ancestors directly. Whereas one cannot question Agni’s authority to act as mediator, the householder must examine the Brahmin’s qualities to ensure that he is qualified to act as mediator. The success of the rite that feeds the Ancestors depends on it.

The idea that the benefit yielded from an offering rests on the merit of the intermediary occurs throughout the texts in both traditions and is expressed in a shared metaphor, the metaphor of the field and the seed. This metaphor also highlights the interrelated nature of the two intellectual traditions.

In the *Petavatthu* we hear this metaphor from the mouth of Aṅkura, a ghost who is suffering because he failed to make religious gifts during his life [item 11].

As a seed planted on a sterile field, even many (seeds),
neither becomes abundant fruit nor pleases the planter;
In the same way a plentiful gift, bestowed upon one of bad moral character
Neither becomes abundant fruit nor pleases the giver. *Pv II.9*68–70

The importance of the metaphor for the decision about who receives the gifts of the householder could not be more clear: only offerings made to worthy men bear fruit. In the Brahmanical tradition this metaphor is found in the *Mānavadharmāsāstra*. (see also *MBh* 13.90.37) [item 12]

142 As a sower reaps no harvest when he sows his seeds on barren soil, so a giver earns no reward when he gives his oblation to a man ignorant of the Veda. 143 A sacrificial gift given to a learned man according to the rule makes both the givers and the receivers partake of its rewards both here and in the hereafter. (Olivelle) *MDhŚ* 3.142–143

That both a Buddhist and a Brahmin author employ this metaphor strengthens the sense that the two traditions are interdependent; I argue in my dissertation that these authors occupy a single discursive space. They are engaged in the same exercise of identity construction, sometimes using the same language.
Another example of this overlap in argumentative style and substance occurs in an extension of this field metaphor: the formula that describes the Buddha or the Saṅgha as the unsurpassed field of merit. The formula occurs in many places through the Pāli Canon, in a consistent fashion, for example item 13:

bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho āhuṇeyyo pāhuṇeyyo dakkhiṇeyyo aṅjalinaranīyo anuttaram puññakhettam lokass ā’ti A 1.208

The Assembly of Disciples of the Lord is worthy of sacrifice, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of veneration, an unsurpassed field of merit for the world.

I suggest this formula is constructed to appropriate all avenues of mediation, all the possible ways that a religious expert could mediate for the householder. The word āhuṇeyyo, worthy of sacrifice, shifts the offering made in sacrifice to offerings made unto the Saṅgha. The term pāhuṇeyyo, worthy of hospitality, indicates that the Saṅgha, not only Brahmins, are worthy of hospitality and, more significantly, are capable of bestowing the merit that derives from offering hospitality. The third term, dakkhiṇeyyo, worthy of offerings, performs the same substitution, but for different offerings, including the śrāddha. The term aṅjalinaranīyo, worthy of veneration, appears to indicate the respect due a teacher.

The word āhuṇeyyo, worthy to be offered to, derives from the same verbal root, āhu, as the Sanskrit term āhavanīya, the name of the eastern fire of the Vedic ritual. We saw this in the quote from Āpastamba. Employing this term in the formula describing the Saṅgha explicitly associates it with Agni, the ritual fire.

The sum of these adjectives describing the Buddha or the Saṅgha cover the full spectrum of householder religion. Only three duties occur across all expressions of the householder’s ritual obligations: hospitality, propitiation of the divine, and ancestor worship. The Buddhist formula addresses all three. The Buddhist authors cleverly
constructed this formula, to put it crudely, to advertise their efficacy as recipients of all sorts of religious offerings: One stop for all your merit-making needs.

While there is no explicit construction of the perfect mediator in the Brahmanical tradition, this is most likely due to the Brahmins self conception of themselves as the hegemonic discourse, which would never deign to admit to competition. But the competition is clear in the texts of both traditions.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Brahmin and Buddhist experts both sought to appropriate the role of mediator, wresting it from the divine hands of Agni, displacing him as the mediator for the ancestors.

Thank you