

Degrees of Freedom: The Buddha's Implied Views on the (Im)possibility of Free Will

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ABSTRACT: The following discussion of free will is based upon an analysis of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* and the views of the analytic philosopher Harry Frankfurt. I argue that the implied views of the Buddha of the Pali *suttas* are inconsistent with the notion of a metaphysically free will as promulgated by western philosophers seeking to ground judgments of moral responsibility. Interestingly, however, human beings are regarded as morally responsible for their actions. Further, the Buddha clearly did advocate the possibility of *spiritual* freedom. In tracing the connections among these ideas I rely on a distinction drawn between the notions of freedom of the person, freedom of the will, and freedom of action. Freedom in Buddhism is a function of a person's knowledge and admits of degrees depending on the level of spiritual development attained.

1. Some basic distinctions

The Buddha's position on human freedom is a unique one, implying the denial of a metaphysically free will while simultaneously asserting moral responsibility and the possibility of freedom in a spiritual sense.¹ To explain this stance I will examine some of the implications of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, (*Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-self*) comparing these with an influential account of free will provided by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt.

In discussing the concept of freedom one of the most basic distinctions western philosophers have drawn is that between *empirical* and *metaphysical* freedom. Empirical freedom refers to the ability to act as one wants. Formulated negatively, it can be understood in terms of the absence of constraints obstructing an individual's ability to do as they like. The notion of 'constraint' can be understood as either *external* or *internal* to the agent. Philosophers have distinguished different sets of constraints in spelling out particular understandings of freedom. Political philosophers, for example, have focused on external restrictions such as those imposed by governments, political classes, and material conditions. Psychologically minded thinkers, by contrast, have emphasized internal constraints such as compulsions, obsessive thoughts, depression, confusion and so on.

For philosophers working in the area of metaethics, however, it is the idea of *metaphysical* freedom that has been seemed most germane. Metaphysical freedom, like

¹ The position taken in this paper can be found in Adam 2011, where it is framed against the views of Harvey 2007. Here I sharpen the argument, with little reference to Harvey's position.

empirical freedom, can be understood negatively as an absence of constraints. In this case, however, the constraint is understood *in abstracto* -- as causality itself. Moral responsibility is thought to require some kind of freedom from, or exception to, the necessity and universality that characterize the normal cause and effect operations of nature (Van Inwagen 1982). Attaching a clear meaning to such a notion has, however, proven problematic. Two basic approaches have been attempted. The first asserts that a metaphysically free will would entail the proposition that at least some of one's actions or decisions are *uncaused*. This approach has been thoroughly criticized as implying randomness rather than freedom (Dennett 1985). It will not be dealt with here. The present discussion will, however, have relevance to a second kind of account, one that has proven much more resilient. In this view, to assert metaphysical freedom is to assert that at least some of one's actions or decisions are *self-caused*.

One final distinction must be observed at the outset. We can enumerate three principal subjects to which the predicate of freedom has been taken to apply, *viz.*, persons, wills, and actions. Conceptually, freedom of *the will* seems to stand between freedom of *the person* and freedom of *action*. In point of fact, authors typically slide between these three manners of speaking about freedom assuming that to talk of one is to talk of the others and that the predication of freedom to one *eo ipso* implies a statement of the same truth value for the others. As we shall see, however, this is not necessarily the case – at least not from within the framework of basic Buddhist soteriology.

2. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*

The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* is the Buddha's second sermon, delivered to his first five disciples at the Deer Park in Sarnath. Here the Buddha systematically argues against the possibility of identifying the self with any of the five psycho-physical aggregates that together constitute a person. While this *sutta* is not normally considered as addressing the matter of free will, its teachings do have implications that bear on this topic. For the Buddha suggests that none among the aggregates can be identified with the self because none among them are *subject to control*. Beginning with the body or form (*rūpa*) the Buddha states:

Bhikkhus, form is non-self. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.' But because form is non-self, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'² (SN III 66)

An identical line of reasoning is offered for each of the aggregates. To appreciate the implications for the idea of free will we need to see that the Buddha is here relying on a conceptual connection between the notion of self and the notion of *control*. If there

² Translations are those of Bodhi.

were a self, he asserts, it would be that aspect of the person over which one would have control. We do not have control over any of the aggregates. The five aggregates are all that a person is. Therefore there is no self (*anattā*).

Bhikkhu Bodhi makes some observations about the basis of this argument. The selflessness of the aggregates is demonstrated:

...on the ground that they are insusceptible to the exercise of mastery (*avassavattitā*). If anything is to count as our 'self' it must be subject to our volitional control; since, however, we cannot bend the five aggregates to our will, they are all subject to affliction and therefore cannot be our self.³

Thus if there were a self, whatever it might be, we would be able to control its states. In the above passage, concerning *rūpa*, we would choose not to suffer and to be well in our bodies if we could; this is our natural wish and predisposition. Nevertheless, we remain afflicted and disposed to affliction. Suffering is inherent to *rūpa*. We cannot simply wish it away. If *rūpa* were the self we would be able to do this. It is important to notice that the sense in which we are said we to lack control over *rūpa* is one of *direct* control over its *states*, in particular its state of being subject to *affliction*. In the passage above there is no denial of the idea that we *can do* as we wish with respect to the actions we perform with our bodies; the denial is of the notion that we *can be* as we wish with respect to the presence or absence of affliction. The wish that the Buddha describes as impossible to fulfill is "Let my form *be* thus, let my form *not be* thus," not "Let my form *do* thus, let my form *not do* thus". If free will is simply understood as the empirical ability of persons to act voluntarily or to do as they want, the Buddha's position here does not imply any denial of this. All it suggests is that we cannot directly wish away the suffering associated with the first aggregate. In fact, the Buddha's teachings are premised on the idea that *it is possible* to do something about suffering; indeed we *can* eliminate it. But we cannot simply do away with it *directly*.

Are we then to conclude that Buddhist doctrine implies a qualified free will, one in which we can *do* as we will if not actually *be* as we will immediately, according to our wishes? Is this the end of the story? Actually, the Buddha's implied position turns out to be considerably more complex than this.

To understand how this is so, we need to revisit the concept of 'the will'. Let us follow **others** in tentatively identifying the English language concept *will* with the Pali concept *cetanā* (Harvey: 47). However inexact this match may be, the concept of the will must correspond to *some* aspect(s) of the five aggregates -- and this is actually all we need to proceed with our argument. *Cetanā* is considered part of the fourth aggregate, *saṅkhāra*. The latter term is commonly translated as 'volitional formations,' a heading

³ Bodhi: 1066-67. He also writes "...the aggregates are suffering because they tend to affliction and cannot be made to conform to our desires" (842).

meant to capture those mental events that direct one's actions -- physical, mental and vocal. It would appear, then, that *volitional* formations constitute the very aggregate in virtue of which action is *voluntary*. Keeping this understanding in mind allows us to raise a deeper question regarding the will's freedom. For, as mentioned, an analysis identical to that carried out on *rūpa* is applied to each aggregate in turn -- including *saṅkhāra*.

Volitional formations are non-self. For if, bhikkhus, volitional formations were self, they would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of volitional formations: 'Let my volitional formations be thus; let my volitional formations not be thus.' But because volitional formations are non-self, volitional formations lead to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of volitional formations: 'Let my volitional formations be thus; let my volitional formations not be thus.' (SN III 67)

Thus it would appear that the very aggregate that includes the will is itself not subject to control. Following our analysis with respect to *rūpa*, the lack of freedom here consists in our inability to make *saṅkhāra* unafflicted directly by wishing it to be so.⁴ This seems a critical consideration; it suggests that the very mental factors determining the morality of actions are themselves not subject to control. The mental states that direct our actions -- the desires, attitudes, and values we identify with -- are *themselves* not under control. Thus it appears that we are unfree with respect to what we *will*, rather than with regard to what we *do*.

If this is indeed the implication then it seems that the Buddha would likely not have disagreed with the assertion famously attributed to Schopenhauer: "A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants."⁵ The Buddhist analysis suggests that the issue of free will is not simply a first-order problem as to whether we can do what we want. There is a much deeper concern -- one that turns on *second-order* considerations as to whether we can be what we want to be, or, put another way, whether we can have the wills we want to have. The issue of the will's freedom is a question regarding whether we have freedom with respect to our own constitutions. The Buddha's answer appears to be negative. While it may be that we can be judged empirically free to the extent that we can do as we want, we are not metaphysically free in the sense of being able to directly determine the constellation of factors that the mind identifies with, and out of which our actions emerge. The reason for this assertion is clear: the will is not subject to control because, quite simply, there is no one over and above the shifting configuration of mental factors to do the controlling. There is no controller. There is no one (i.e. no final independent unity) holding the reigns. There is no self.

3. Harry Frankfurt meets the Buddha

⁴ Sayadaw (49) indicates how we would change our volitional formations if we could: we would make them all wholesome (*kusala*) and not unwholesome (*akusala*).

⁵ Quoted in Einstein (1982: 8).

Second-order considerations are also critically important in the well-known analysis of free will provided by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt:

Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. Many animals appear to have the capacity for... 'desires of the first order', which are simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another. No animal other than man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires. (Frankfurt: 82-83)

Frankfurt's observations concerning the self-reflective powers of human beings seem directly pertinent to the Buddhist analysis, where they find an obvious resonance in the human ability to reflect upon and have desires concerning the aggregates. Frankfurt aims to provide a coherent account of free will in terms of the capacity to form second-order volitions about one's first-order desires. He identifies the will with the first-order desire that actually moves, or would move, an individual to act. This he terms the agent's 'effective desire'.⁶

(The notion of the will) is the notion of an *effective* desire---one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action. Thus the notion of the will is not coextensive with what an agent intends to do. For even though an agent may have a settled intention to do X, he may none the less do something else instead of doing X because, despite his intention, his desire to do X proves to be weaker or less effective than some conflicting desire. (Frankfurt: 84)

Frankfurt's account turns on the notion that one acts freely only if one wants to be moved by the desire that actually does move one to act. If one does not want to be moved to act by that desire, but is nevertheless moved by it, then the will is unfree. Frankfurt employs the example of an unwilling drug addict. In analyzing the addict's condition one must understand that the agent is the subject of conflicting first-order desires: he both wants and does not want to take the drug. In indulging his habit, however, he is being moved to act in a way that he wishes not to. His desire to take the drug on these occasions, because it is effective in moving him to act, is to be identified with his will. And in this case it is unfree. It is unfree precisely because the agent has a negative second-order volition towards it, i.e. a desire that this desire not move him to act.⁷ In cases where this is not so, which is to say, in cases where one wants to be moved by the desire that actually is effective in moving one to act, the will is free.

⁶ The concept of will as effective desire is traceable as far back as Locke (1690). See: 313-315.

⁷ Frankfurt defines second-order *volitions* as a type of second-order desire. Second-order desires are simply desires concerning one's first-order desires. Second-order volitions are second-order desires that have as their object the *efficacy* of one's first-order desires. This is an important qualification, as one can have a second-order desire for a first-order desire without wanting the latter to be effective. We can imagine, for example, that the drug addict wants to have the desire to give up drugs while simultaneously

Frankfurt's version of free will makes sense of some common intuitions regarding our everyday actions. Most of us, most of the time, are moved to act by ordinary desires that we want to have move us. Hence, on Frankfurt's analysis, most of our actions are freely willed. This way of thinking about things makes sense of these instances in which we 'feel free' in acting and are therefore willing to take responsibility for what we do. Our actions reflect our choices and the values we identify with. In brief, they reflect 'who we are' (or at least who we take ourselves to be). We do think of such actions as freely willed.

On the other hand, Frankfurt's account is not without its counterintuitive aspects. As we have seen, the identification of the will with one's effective desire entails a denial of free will to Frankfurt's addict. This runs against our intuition that persons are always in possession of a free will -- even when their actions are compelled. In such cases we usually say that one is acting against one's own will, which is thought of as remaining free even when one is forced to act against it.

There is, in fact, another well-attested understanding of the will that would support this latter intuition. According to this understanding, in saying that one wills something, there is no implication of effort. If, contra Frankfurt, we conceive of the will as the desire (or set of desires) that one *most identifies with* -- as opposed to one's effective desire -- we can maintain that while the unwilling addict's *action* is not free, his will, which he is unable to act upon, remains so. The notion of will is here connected to one's deepest wishes and values -- even one's self-concept. The manner in which Bodhi speaks of the will above seems to reflect this usage: the will is identified with a very deep desire indeed, the desire to be free from affliction -- ineffective though this is. In this way of speaking, persons can lack free will only in cases where they lack a desire (or set of desires and preferences) that they identify with -- a circumstance that would seem applicable only to the unconscious (or, just possibly, the enlightened).

Philosophical discussions of free will appear to be divisible into these two very different ways of conceiving the will. Obviously, these two conceptions of the will imply two different ways of talking about *free* will. It is, therefore, essential to be clear which concept is being assumed. It would seem that we are faced with a choice of locutions. In one, freedom of the will is conceptually bound to freedom of action: one's will is free if and only if one's action is free. In the other, freedom of the will is tied to freedom of the person, and indeed to the very concept of identity and personhood. In the latter manner of speaking, it is possible for one to act unfreely even while retaining one's free will.

Two further difficulties with Frankfurt's account seem particularly relevant to our present concerns. The first is that an individual's second-order desires and volitions are

wanting this desire not to be effective. "If I didn't want to give up drugs at least a little bit," he might reason, "then friends wouldn't sympathize and lend me money."

not consistent through time. In some cases they are even in direct conflict from one time to the next. Desires change depending on a great variety of internal and external conditions. We are inconsistent as to what we want our will to be. Which of one's various 'selves' is to be identified as one's true self? On what possible basis? This issue is clearly relevant in the Buddhist context.

A moment's reflection reveals a second problem: an infinite regress threatens to develop when the predication of freedom is made to turn on the presence of higher order volitions. If the will's freedom is dependent on a second-order volition, are we then free with respect to that second-order volition? Do we not then require a third-order volition to ensure the freedom of the second? We thus seem to be faced with the prospect of an infinite number of higher order volitions, each needed to guarantee the freedom of the ones below.

One could, of course, respond to this by saying that as a point of empirical fact all we ever really do have are desires of the first and second-order or, at most, the third-order. If we choose to speak of further, higher order desires, it is not clear that we would be referring to anything at all. At some point there is no further "I want"; we simply find ourselves with certain basic desires, values and preferences that are not chosen or even necessarily consciously entertained. Incompatibilist determinists argue that the causes that give rise to these mental states are not subject to control; they are, if one traces them back far enough, *impersonal* in nature (e.g. historical, genetic, cultural, etc.) Even if our present awareness can reflect on and evaluate our choices, the thoughts, values and desires entering into such evaluations are ultimately beyond our control. The Buddhist position would appear to accord with this perspective. Whether one identifies the will with one's effective desires or the desires that one most identifies with, in the end there is no final, independent person where the chain of causes and conditions miraculously find their origin. In the last analysis it is not possible to have it of the will, 'Let my will be thus, let my will not be thus.'

4. *The foundation of morality*

If this is so, should we then conclude that the Buddhist position, like that of the incompatibilist determinist, undermines the foundations of moral responsibility? If there is no self to which responsibility may ultimately be attributed, is there then no moral responsibility at all? Interestingly, from the Buddhist perspective the answer to this question is negative. In fact, the Buddha's teachings imply a very unusual view (from a western philosophical perspective): while the will is not metaphysically free, morally responsibility is just a fact about the way things are. Although ultimately there is no self, persons' actions do have results that accord with the moral character of those actions. Just as *moral causality* is one kind of causality operating in the universe, so too *moral responsibility* is simply one kind of causal responsibility. Like it or not, results flow from actions; happiness and suffering are the results of moral (*kusala*) and immoral (*akusala*) actions. Such action (*kamma*) is distinguishable as mental, physical, and vocal behavior

willingly done (i.e. accompanied by *cetanā*); this is the key factor in determining moral responsibility. *Freedom* of the will is not. The point is that the action is voluntary, not that the will is metaphysically free in some way. Universal causality is not considered a constraint or obstacle to moral responsibility from the Buddhist perspective; it is, rather, a requirement.⁸

5. Degrees of freedom.

Freedom in Buddhism is not understood as a quality of the *will*. If there is no independent source of volitions over and above our mental, physical and vocal actions then there certainly cannot be free will in any ultimate sense. Indeed it is precisely from the higher perspective that the will can be seen to be unfree. Our lack of free will logically follows from the Buddhist position on the ontology of the self. There is no independent self. Just as the self is known to be a delusion, so too must free will be seen. No self, no free will.

This is a difficult point. It is not, perhaps, irrelevant that the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* was not addressed to an audience of ordinary people (*puthujjanas*), but to a small group of “learners” or disciples in higher training (*sekha*) -- individuals who had already attained the higher perspective that sees things as they really are. There is an important sense in which such individuals, beginning with the stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), are free already. They are free from the delusion of self. The notion of the *sekha* is defined in terms of having undergone a transformative insight into the truth of no self. The five disciples are said to have experienced this insight some days earlier, upon hearing the Buddha's first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*.⁹ Upon hearing the second it is said that they became fully liberated beings or *arahats* (Bodhi: 1066). These considerations provide a clue as to how freedom in Buddhism might be best understood.

Freedom is a predicate of persons and consists in an absence of suffering and its causes. It is dependent on the state of knowledge of the agent. The ultimate aim of Buddhism is freedom from suffering and rebirth -- realities that, first and foremost, are to be *understood*. Thus freedom implies knowing, and then abandoning, the causes and conditions that give rise to suffering and rebirth (*paticcasamuppāda*). The delusion that there is a self lies at the basis of this chain of causes. The insight that there is no self allows the mind to become free.

Different degrees of knowledge and mental purity are attributable to the various kinds of agent within the Buddhist soteriological framework; corresponding levels of freedom

⁸ One might well ask how it is that if the aggregates are ultimately beyond our control we could ever begin to strive for the ending of suffering. The Buddha's response is found in the *Mahali Sutta* (SN III 70). See: Adam 2011.

⁹ Hence the unstated assumption in the Buddha's second sermon -- that the five aggregates are all that a person is.

may be attributed to them accordingly.¹⁰ The *puthujjana* cannot be called a free person, operating within the deluded perspective of being an independent actor in control of her life in *saṃsāra*. Although such an agent may be reflexively aware of her actions, and although such actions may be voluntary, they occur in the context of the basic delusion of 'self,' whence they are regarded as originating independently. Thus the ordinary person's mind is inevitably trapped in delusion, conflicting desires, and suffering.

The *sekha* is free in one important respect, having rid herself of the delusion of self, and with it, it should be noticed, any notion of possessing an independent will. Being irreversibly oriented away from suffering and its causes, the *sekha* can be accurately described as consistently having the desires she wants to have. An internal order has been established; such a person cannot do otherwise than act in a way that leads to *nibbāna*. Freedom here is clearly a function of knowledge, rather than of a capacity to do or choose otherwise. Although the mind of the *sekha* remains obscured to some degree, constrained by residual mental fetters (*saṃyojana*), the complete freedom of *nibbāna* is assured.¹¹ If we apply Frankfurt's analysis of the will, an *empirically* 'free' will can be attributed to the *sekha* insofar as she has the effective desires she wants to have. Thus one could also say that her *actions* are free, and this dovetails nicely with the Buddhist view that they are informed by the realization of *anattā* and the prospect of *nibbāna*.

The *arahat* has realized *nibbāna*. She is free from all fetters and any trace of self-centred desire; indeed because she no longer reaps the results of her acts and will not be reborn, there is an important sense in which she is seen as *free from action* itself.

In conclusion, freedom in Buddhism can best be characterized negatively in terms of freedom from constraints upon a person -- either internal or external depending on one's focus. That is to say, to the extent that different categories of agent are free to varying degrees from the internal constraints of delusion and other fetters, so too are they free externally in relation to *saṃsāra*. The *puthujjana* is not free from the delusion of self or from *saṃsāra*. The *sekha* is free from the delusion of self but not yet free from all fetters and from *saṃsāra*. The *arahat* is free from all internal constraints and thus also from *saṃsāra*. Such a person is describable as being *free from action*. In fact, being free from all self-centered desire, the *arahat* can rightly be described as *being free from the will* -- as opposed to *possessing freedom of the will*. To see *this* is to recognize that Buddhist perspectives on freedom emerge from a very different set of paradigms than those that inform most western philosophical discussions of the free will problem.

Abbreviations

¹⁰ See Adam 2005 and 2008 for discussions of different classes of agent in relation to key moral vocabulary, principally *kusala-akusala*, *puñña-apuñña*, and *sukka-kaṇha*.

¹¹ Ten distinct fetters are progressively eliminated along the supermundane path; corresponding degrees of freedom are attributable to the various subcategories of *sekha*, i.e. the stream-enterer, once-returner (*sakadāgāmin*), and non-returner (*anāgāmin*).

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