Free Will and Buddhism

A reflection on early Buddhism, determinism and Benjamin Libet

[Is there free will?]

An essay by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Introduction

1.1 NO FREE WILL? This essay originally formed Section 3 of the Introduction to **the Atta,kārī Sutta** (A 6.38).[1] However, due to its length (reflecting the importance of the subject), it merits a separate title. This essay and the Atta,kārī Sutta was first inspired by **Ajahn Brahmavamso's** remark in 2004 public talks that there is "no free will or personal choice." The *Dhamma Journal*, publication of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, records Brahmavamso's remark thus, under the subheading "Seeing beyond the doer":

> It seems so obvious that one's self is in control. One takes it for granted that it is one's self that chooses to listen to music, watch TV, or read this. It appears true to experience that it is one's self that generates one's will. Unfortunately, what seems obvious is often untrue.
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> Neuroscientist Benjamin Libet of the University of California in San Francisco asked volunteers to extend one of their arms and, whenever they felt like it, out of their own free will, to flex their wrist. A clock allowed the subjects to note exactly when they decided to act, and by fitting electrodes to their wrists, the start of the action could be timed. More electrodes on the volunteer[s'] scalps recorded a particular brain wave pattern called "the readiness potential" [RP], which occurs just before any complex action and is associated with the brain planning its next move. It was found that the decision to act came *after* the readiness potential![2]
>
> The inescapable conclusion of this experiment is that what we can observe as "the decision to act," what we take to be our own free will, occurs only after the process of action had begun. "Will" does not initiate the action, but is a by-product of the process.
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> Such hard evidence is hard to accept. It goes against one's basic assumptions of life. It even evokes fear inside of some who read this to consider the possibility that they may not be in charge, neither of their body nor their mind. It goes so much against the grain of habitual thinking that such strong scientific evidence is not powerful enough to destroy the illusion of will. **One needs *Jhāna* to see directly** that it is not a self that generates one's will, but an empty process of action, or cause-and-effect. (2004a 5,1:50 f)

Indeed, as a number of Buddhists have approached me about the difficulty of understanding this interesting scientific discovery and Brahmavamso's remarks, I have attempted a commentary in this research paper.

1.2 NO DETERMINISM. A popular definition of karma is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta**[3] (S 11.10):

> Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;
> Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—
> As one has planted the seed, so shall one feel the fruit.[4] (S v903/1:227)

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[1] SD 7.6.

[2] Benjamin Libet, 1985: see biblio below.

[3] Also called **Isayo Samuddaka S** or **Sambara Samuddaka S**. An almost identical saying, "By good works a man becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works evil (*pāpa*)," attributed to the Vedic sage Yajñavalkya and secretly transmitted to another sage, Jāratkārava (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2). See Basham 1989:43 f.

[4] *Yadisaṁ vappate bījaṁ | tādisaṁ harate phalaṁ | kalyāṇa,kārī kalyāṇaṁ | pāpa,kārī ca pāpakaṁ | pavuttaṁ vappate bījaṁ | phalaṁ paccanubhossasî ti.*

This verse or its popular version—"as one sow, so one shall reap"—has often been quoted as a Buddhist article of faith. The interesting point here is that this stanza (*gāthā*), included in **the Sa,gāthā Vagga** (the first chapter) of the Saṁyutta Nikāya, actually belongs to the free floating ancient **gnomic poetry** of India which the Buddhists have preserved.[5] In other words, this is technically not "Buddha Word" (*Buddha,-vacana*) but a popular saying. Only what is truly "well-said" (*subhāsita*)—that which lessens or removes greed, hate and delusion—is regarded as Buddha Word.

The background of this popular "sower's karma" saying is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta** (S 1:227), where a Buddhist myth relates an impending battle between the gods and the asuras ("titans"),[6] the latter (according to the account) dwelled in the great ocean. Some virtuous seers who dwelled on the ocean shore, fearing that the asuras would destroy their hermitage as had occurred before, requested "a guarantee of safety" (*abhaya,dakkhiṇa*) from Sambara, the asura leader. However, Sambara, who detested the seers for being "the hated devotees of Sakra [the lord of the devas]" (*duṭṭhānaṁ sakka,sevinaṁ*), replied, "I will give you only fear!" The terrified seers resorted to putting a curse on Sambara:

> Though we have asked for safety, you give us but fear.
> Having received this from you, may fear without end be yours!
>
> Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be;
> Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer—
> As one has planted the seed, so shall one feel its fruit. (S vv902 f/1:227)

It is said that as soon as Sambara fell asleep, he woke up howling as if struck from all sides by a hundred spears. The other asuras rushed to comfort him until the break of dawn. Henceforth, his sickened mind trembled; hence his other name, Vepa,citti (*cittaṁ vepati*) (SA 1:347).

The "sower's karma," as such, should be understood in its context as a folk saying, are not fully reflective of the Buddhist teaching of karma, especially since such a folk notion may encourage **a determinist or fatalist view of karma**. The Buddhist conception of karma is much more complicated as would be apparent from our study of **the Loṇa,phala Sutta**.[7]

2 A weak determinism

Early in the history of the modern study of Buddhism, in her much neglected essay, "**On the will in Buddhism**" (1898), CAF Rhys Davids complains of how "[t]he critics unversed in the study of the Buddhist Canon in the original" have followed "Schopenhauer's pointing finger" in labeling Buddhism as "Pessimism, Pantheism, Atheism, Nihilism, Quietism, or Apatheia" (1898:47). Rhys Davids explains that a major way these scholars' squint arises is through wholesale reliance on translations (without checking them out against the original texts): "In respect of the language through which they acquire their knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, they are at the mercy of the translator" (1898:47 f).

Even in the last century, world-renowned scholars such as historian Arnold Toynbee assert that "inward peace" in Buddhism seems "unattainable" because desires cannot be given up without cultivating the desire to give them up, and that Buddhism enjoins "the suppression of desires that are ordinarily regarded as being altruistic, such as love and pity."[8] However, even today, the problem of language still

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[5] Winternitz 1933 2:57 f. Another example of the ancient Indian gnomic tradition is **Āḷavaka S** (Sn 1.10), which is a riddle in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form, given by the yaksha Āḷavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192. "Too many cooks spoil the broth" and "Good wine needs no bush" are English gnomes.

[6] "Asuras," (*asurā*), lit "anti-god", variously tr as "titan", "demon". They were once gods in Tāvatiṁsa but fell from their state through being intoxicated with drinks. Their attempted return to Tāvatiṁsa resulted in protracted battles with the gods led by Sakka (S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f).

[7] A 3.99/1:249-253 = SD 3.5 esp Introd (2).

[8] *An Historian's Approach to Religion,* London: Oxford University Press, 1956:64. Qu by Bruce Matthews 1983:77, where he mentions other examples.

test those who try to translate the early Buddhist ideas so that today's mind can understand them. This problem is especially acute in connection with our task at hand, namely, that of understanding the nature of the will and early Buddhism. CAF Rhys Davids sums up the problem in these words:

> As only one of several important instances, I would draw attention to the Buddhist attitude in relation to the volitional side of the human mind. It is not possible to equate in Pali the word "will," either in psychological comprehensiveness, or for its train of bad metaphysic. If however, we lop off the metaphysic, and resolve "will" into the classes of mental states or processes, of which it forms a factor more or less, and which, in it wider or its narrower meaning, it is used to designate, we shall find in Buddhist terminology abundance of suitable words, and in the philosophical treatises an application of them as discriminative as we find among ourselves, and sometimes even more so.
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> There is so far no evidence of a reduction of complex volition into simple conation, such as may be found in our more scientific modern textbooks. There is no such developed psychology to be met with as is implied in the strictly psychological use of carefully distinct terms (such as Appetite, Desire, Deliberate Choice), where a coefficient of bare conation is discerned as involved with feeling of a certain sort, or with both intellect and emotion. But we do find in the Piṭakas is a pretty constant discrimination in the employment of terms connoting volition, between psychological import only and ethical or moral implication.
>
> (CAF Rhys Davids, "On the will in Buddhism,"1898:48 f)

We shall here examine some of the Pāli texts related to the conative or "willing" aspects of early Buddhist psychology. At the end of this essay, we shall continue this discussion of a "conative psychology."

The tide has changed in recent times due to the maturing of modern Buddhist studies. A number of modern scholars have written insightful papers on the question of free will in the Nikāyas.[9] The earliest formulation of the free will question is found in the speculations of the anti-brahminical eremitical *śramaṇa* movement[10] of the 6th-5th century BCE of the central Gangetic plain. The sramanas[11] are generally divided into two groups: the ***kamma,vādī*** or *kiriyā,vādī,* who claim that there would be retribution for human deeds,[12] and the ***akiriyā,vādī*** for whom all human effort is fruitless.[13]

The efficacy of action view (*kamma,vāda*) is that our present condition is partly the result of our deeds in previous lives. Those who reject this view, that is, the non-efficacy of action (*akiriyā,vāda*), believe that all deeds, past, present or future, have no effect on the condition of beings. "Thus, in its extreme forms the [*akiriyā,vādī*] would say that there is actually no causal connection between what a living being does and what he is or becomes, in this or in another life" (Gomez 1975:81 f).

In **the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta** (D 4.6), the Buddha himself is declared to be "one who teaches karma, who teaches (the efficacy of) action" (*kamma,vādī kiriyā,vādī*) (D 4.6/1:115). The Jains, however, appear to

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[9] For useful and easy introductions, see Chinda Chandrkaew, "Buddhist concept of free-will," 1973; Luis O Gomez, "Some aspects of the free-will question in the Nikāyas," 1975; Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics,* 1992:210-222. See biblio for details.

[10] Śramaṇa movement, see eg KN Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge,* 1963:69-168.

[11] This anglicized word is found in modern English dictionaries such as the Webster's 3rd New International.

[12] See, eg: V 1:71 (where erstwhile fire-worshippers are allowed ordination without probation since they are *kamma,vādī*); **Soṇadaṇḍa S** (D 4.6), where the Buddha is declared to be "one who teaches karma, who teaches (the efficacy of) action" (*kamma,vādī kiriya,vādī*) (D 4.6/1:115); **Aññ a,titthiya S** (S 12.24) where Sāriputta declares to the wanderers that the Buddha teaches the efficacy of action (S 12.14/2:33 ff).

[13] The locus classicus is **Sāmaññ a,phala S** (D 2), on the views of the 6 heretical teachers (such as Makkhali Gosāla) (D 2.16-33/1:52-59). The notion that actions are fruitless does not necessarily imply a denial of the law of karma as seen in the threefold classification of non-action (*akiriya*) in **Titth'āyatana S** (A 3.61): our present condition is all due to our past actions; that it is the result of a god's creation; or, that it is by sheer chance (A 3.61.1-4/ 1:173-175) = SD 6.8 (2004). See also S 3:210; A 1:286 (*n'atthi kammaṁ, n'atthi kiriyaṁ, n'atthi viriyaṁ*).

have considered themselves *akiriyā,vādī.*[14] Gomez, in his article, "Some aspects of the free-will question in the Nikāyas," notes:

> The reason is obvious, to the Buddhist what determined the future was not the act itself but the intention of the act.[15] This to the Jain seemed to culminate, by necessity, in moral corruption, for them, they claimed there would be no objective criteria for right and wrong. In a certain sense, they were right in claiming that the Buddhist was not a kriyāvādin; at least we must grant that Buddhism does not represent strict karmavāda, that is, it would not accept a necessary and unqualified relation of cause and effect between an act and its retribution. Evidently the Buddhist would consider certain acts as not retributable.[16] Now, this very question is central to the problem of determinism; whether the human condition is or is not necessarily and absolutely determined. The question whether this predetermination is of one's own doing is ultimately irrelevant if the determination is unqualified.[17] The Buddhist texts, therefore, will often offer a view of karmic causation that could best be described as **"weak" or modified kriyāvāda**: the human condition is not totally or absolutely determined by the deeds of the human agent.
>
> (Gomez 1975:82; emphasis added.)

The fact that all conditioned existence (that is, everything "outside" of Nirvana) keeps to the law of conditionality, fully exemplified in the 12-link formula of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), clearly shows that Buddhism teaches <u>determinism</u>, but as Gomez states, this is a "weak" or modified determinism. That is to say, one is not totally determined by one's deeds—an important fact attested in a number of places in the Canon.[18] The main point is that the cycle of dependent arising is *reversible*, that is, the reverse (*paṭiloma*) cycle ends what has arisen from the forward (*anuloma*) cycle.[19] The reversibility of the dependent arising is clearly evident in **the nun Selā's reply** when Māra tries to confuse her:[20]

548 [Māra:] By whom is this figure (*bimba*) made?
Where is the maker of this figure?
Whence has this figure arisen?
Where does the figure cease?

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[14] H Jacobi, *Jaina Sutras* II, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884:309, 316-319, 385; but the Jain stand is by no means clear. In **Soṇakāyana S** (A 4.233), the brahmin Sikha Moggallāna says that the youth Soṇakāyana accuses the Buddha of *akiriya,vāda* and annihilationism, but Soṇakāyana's own allegiances are not mentioned (A 4.233/ 2:232).

[15] See H Jacobi, *Jaina Sutras*, 1884:414 f. The locus classicus for this question is, of course, **Upāli S** (M 2:371 ff). Cf Śrī Sūyagaḍāṁga,sutta (Dvitīyāṁgam) (Sūtrakṛtāṅga,sūtra, the 2nd Aṅga of the Jain Canon with commentaries in Skt by Sīlaṅgācarya (Śīlāṅka) and Harṣakula…), Bombay: Nirnayasagara Press, 1879:323, 927 f. [Gomez's fn, normalized]

[16] See below, the discussion on **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253). See also **(Mūla) Nidāna S** (A 3.33/1:134-136), esp *Yaṁ bhikkhave alobha,kataṁ kammaṁ alobha,jaṁ…lobhe vigate evaṁ taṁ kammaṁ pahīnaṁ hoti ucchinna,mūlaṁ? Tālā,vatthu,kataṁ anabhāvamkataṁ āyatiṁ anuppāda,dhammaṁ…* (A 3.33.2/1:135).

[17] This is clearly the position of some passages in the Nikāyas, such as **Devadaha S** (M 101/2:214-228), discussed later, and the text referred to in [**Sāmaññ,phala S** (D16-33/1:52-59)]. But I am not sure that all Buddhists would concur; cf, for example, Bodhicaryāvatāra and Pañjikā 9.71-73 and the key passage in 6.30-32. [Gomez's fn]

[18] See **Atta,kārī S** (A 6.38) = SD 7.6 Introd esp (3).

[19] That Buddhism teaches karma is a sort of determinism, but it also teaches personal effort (*atta,kārī*). As such, this Buddhist approach here could, in modern philosophical terms, be called **compatibilism** (see Anthony Freeman, 2000:61 f). See also Luis O Gomez 1975:85.

[20] Gomez however thinks that Selā's stanza has a "deterministic ring in the theory of nonself" (1975:86).

549 [Selā:][21] This figure is not made by self-made (*atta,kata*),
Nor is this misery (*agha*) made by another (*para,kata*).
It has come to be dependent on a cause (*hetu*):
With the cause's breakup it will end. (S 15.9/1:134)

The Saṁyutta Commentary says that both "figure" (*bimba*) [548a] refers to individual existence (*atta,-bhāva*), and *agha* [549b] too is individual existence because it is a basis for suffering (SA 1:193).

During the Buddha's time, there are two opposing views as regards to suffering: one is that suffering is caused by oneself (*atta,kata*) [549a], the other is that it is caused by others (*para,kata*) [549b]. The eternalists (*sassata,vādī*), who hold to the former notion, believe that there is a permanent self (soul) transmigrating from life to life, reaping the fruits of its own deeds. The annihilationists (*uccheda,vādī*), especially the materialists, who hold the latter position, believe that one is annihilated at death and nothing survives, so that one's share of suffering and happiness is due entirely to external conditions. A number of suttas in **the Nidāna Saṁyutta** (S 12) discuss this problem, namely, the Acela Kassapa Sutta (S 12.17/2:18-22); the Timbaruka Sutta (S 12.18/2:22 f); the Aññā Titthiya Sutta (S 12.24/2:32-37), and the Bhūmija Sutta (S 12.25/2:37-41).

In **the Sīvaka Sutta** (S 36),[22] the Buddha tells the wanderer Moliya Sīvaka that what one experiences (feels) is not always due to past deeds (*niyati,vāda*, determinism), but could be due to various physical causes: bile disorders, phlegm disorders, wind disorders, a combination, weather change [heat], carelessness, assault [accidents and trauma], and the results of one's karma.

> Now, Sīvaka, when those recluses and brahmins teach such a teaching, who hold such a view: "Whatever a person feels, whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral, all that is due to past deeds"—they deviate from what one should know for oneself, and from the common truth in the world. Therefore, I say that these recluses and brahmins are wrong. (S 36.21/4:230 f)

3 Not everything is due to karma

This "common sense" statement of the Buddha simply points to the obvious fact, as attested in the **Atta,kārī Sutta** (A 6.38),[23] that beings are known to exercise free will in such universal actions as walking about and doing things. This is "the free will of beings" (*sattānaṁ atta,kāro*) (A 6.38.4, 10/3:338).[24]

Another well known text attesting to the "weak" or modified determinism of Buddhism is **the Loṇa,-phala Sutta** (A 3.99), where it is stated,

> **1** (a) "Monks, for one who says thus: 'Whatever karma a person[25] performs, he would experience *that same karma*,'[26] [that is, he reaps as he has sown] there is no living of the holy life, no opportunity for the right ending of suffering.

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[21] For an interpretation of Selā's reply, see **Bhava S** (A 3.76/1:223 f), where it is said that karma is the field, consciousness and craving the moisture "for the consciousness of beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving" for further existence. "The 'cause' (*hetu*), then, is the kammically formative consciousness accompanied by ignorance and craving. When that dissolves through the elimination of ignorance and craving there is no production of aggregates, elements, and sense bases in a future life" (S:B 429 n359). The imagery of seeds and vegetation found in **Bīja S** (S 22.54/3:54 f) also helps to clarify these verses.

[22] See SD 5.6 (2004).

[23] SD 7.6.

[24] See Chinda Chandrkaew 1973:277.

[25] "A person," *ayaṁ puriso,* lit "this person".

[26] *Yathā yathâyaṁ puriso kammaṁ karoti tathā tathā taṁ patisaṁvediyati.* It is possible here that "karma" (*kammaṁ*) also refers to the Vedic sacrifice. In that case, the Buddha is saying that there is no wholesome efficacy in such rituals.

But, monks, for one who says thus: '**Whatever experienceable karma [one that entails a consequence] that a person does, he would experience *the result of that karma* [that is, whatever fruits he reaps, they accord with his karma]**,'[27] there is the living of the holy life, the opportunity for the right ending of suffering.[28]

(b) Here, monks, for a certain person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell. Again, monks, for another[29] person that same slight evil karma is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all.[30]

2 (a) Monks, **what sort of person who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell?**

Here, monks, a certain person is of undeveloped body,[31] undeveloped moral virtue, undeveloped mind, undeveloped wisdom: he is (mentally) limited (*paritta*), he has **a small**[32] **self** (*app'ātuma*)—he dwells small and suffering.[33]

Such a person, monks, is one who has done only a slight evil karma, it might take him to hell.

(b) Monks, **what sort of person is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all?**

Here, monks, a certain person is of developed body, developed moral virtue, developed mind, developed wisdom: he is (mentally) unlimited (*aparitta*), he has **a great self** (*mah'attā*)[34]—he dwells immeasurable (*appamāṇa*).

Such a person, monks, is one who has done that same slight evil karma that is felt right here and now—not in the least does it seem to be abundant at all. (A 3.99.1-2/3:249)[35]

Then follows the famous simile of the salt crystal: when a small grain of salt is dropped into the Ganges river, it makes no difference to her waters, but when a large grain of salt in dropped into a cup of water, it becomes undrinkable due to its salty taste. Even so, one who habitually lives a wholesome life but falls into an occasional moral lapse (the small grain of salt) suffers not its fruit in the hereafter; but the habitual evil-doer suffers the fruit both here and hereafter.

4 Karma, *cetanā* and volition

Damien Keown, in his book *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992), discusses the close similarities between the Buddhist notion of *cetanā* and Aristotle's *prohairesis,* both terms translatable by "moral

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[27] *Yathā **vedanīyaṁ** ayaṁ puriso kammaṁ karoti tathā tathâssa **vipakaṁ** patisaṁvediyati.* "That should be experienced," *vedanīyaṁ*, or "that which should be felt or known". A:ÑB has "But if one says that a person who performs a kammic action (with a result) that is variably experienceable, will reap its result accordingly—in that there will be (a possibility for) the holy life…" (A:ÑB 315 n70). I take "experienceable" (*vedanīyaṁ*) here as qualifying "karma" (*kammaṁ*); that is, to distinguish "experiencable karma" (one's personal action) from the Vedic *karma* or ritual. Gomez renders *vedanīyaṁ* here as that which "do entail a consequence" (1975:83).

[28] Henry Clarke Warren, in the early years of western Buddhist scholarship, gives a very insightful, if somewhat free, tr of this passage [1a]: "O priests, if any one were to say that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. But if anyone says, O priests, that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case, O priests, there is religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery." (*Buddhism in Translations,* 1896:221)

[29] "For another," *ekaccassa,* lit "for a certain (person)."

[30] Be *Nâṇupi khāyati kiṁ bahu-d-eva.* Cf *n'atthi aṇū pi saññā,* "not even a minute perception; not the least" (Sn 802).

[31] "Undeveloped in body," *abhāvita,kāya,* here meaning "resorting to self-torture, not taking care of one's body or health". See **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99) = SD 3.5 Introd.

[32] "Small self" (*app'ātumā*) or "insignificant self" (Harvey 1995:25, 56).

[33] *Appa,dukkha,vihārī.* Comy: *Appakena pi pāpena dukkha,vihārī,* "he dwells in suffering because of the little evil" (AA 2:361). This phrase is clearly to be contrasted with *appamāṇa,vihārī* below.

[34] On the "great self", see **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99) = SD 3.5 Introd (2004).

[35] See SD 3.5 (2004).

choice." One important common characteristic is that "in both cases the excellence of reason is to be found in intuitive insight and the excellence of the emotions in moral perfection" (1992:211). In other words, there is an overlapping and interconnection between reason and emotion, between the cognitive and affective powers of the psyche.[36]

> The impulse for action, however, comes not from the intellectual faculties but from the non-rational part of the psyche, or the emotions. In terms of the *Abhidhamma* analysis, these twin intellectual and emotional operations would seem to be embraced by the group of six "specific" (*pakiṇṇaka*) psychic functions (*cetasikas*), namely, "applied thought" (*vitakka*), "sustained thought" (*vicāra*), "resolution" (*adhimokkha*), "courage" (*viriya*), "joy" (*pīti*) and "desire" (*chanda*).[37] These two complementary processes are fused in ***cetanā,*** the compass-needle of moral choice which is deflected in accordance with the psychic field around it. Assuming that one both understands what is good and also desires it, the moral course will lie towards virtue (*kusala*) and final perfection (nirvana).
>
> (Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics,* 1992:212 f; emphasis added)

Y Karunaratna, in his article on "Cetanā" in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism,* notes that

> *Cetanā* or the will is conditioned by affective and cognitive elements (*vedanā, saññā*) and may either function as the closely directed effort on the part of the individual or it may function, as it often does, without conscious deliberation by him… (*Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*: cetanā, 90)

Cetanā is often translated as "volition" or "intention," both of which is taken only in their purely cognitive sense, would give them a false and inaccurate narrowness. But since words are the meanings we tag onto them, we can use words meaningfully.[38] In **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9),[39] the Buddha declares to the householder Citta that he (the Buddha) uses words, terms and language as a skilful means:

> For, Citta, these are merely common names, common expressions, common usages, common designations in the world that the Tathāgata [Thus Come] uses without attachment to them."[40]
>
> (D 14.55/1:202)

Due to the lack of common English words to translate such technical Buddhist terms as *cetanā*, we can use English near-synonyms by clearly re-defining them in our own usage within the Buddhist context. Having said that, we can translate *cetanā* as "volition" or "intention," defining it as "the choice, conscious or unconscious, to act based on a thought or a feeling," or as the Attha,sālinī puts it: "That which intends is called ***cetanā*:** the meaning is that it directs to itself related mental states as objects" (*cetayatî ti cetanā, saddhiṁ attanā sampayutta,dhamme ārammaṇe abhisandahatî ti attho*, DhsA 111). Damien Keown makes a helpful note:

> We may note, however, that what is put into effect need not be physical action, and that the use of the term "volition" may not always be inaccurate. The Buddha seems to have held the view that the process of *cetanā* was followed by a *praxis* of some kind, and that deliberation (*cetayitvā*) was followed by action (*kammaṁ karoti*). However, he distinguishes three types of *praxis*: bodily

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[36] See eg Bruce Matthews 1975 & 1983.

[37] On the meanings of these terms, see DhsA 142-145.

[38] Padmasiri de Silva, while acknowledging that *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra* are often synonymous, and "suggests the idea of volition" (1979:78),thinks they cannot be adequately rendered into English as "will" or "volition" (1979:79). He suggests translating *saṅkhāra* as "conative dispositions" (1979:78).

[39] See SD 7.14 (2005). On how the Buddha redefines various brahminical terms to effectively communicate with to his audience, see AK Warder 1956, Joanna Jurewicz 1995, 2000, & KR Norman 1991c.

[40] *Loka,samaññā loka,niruttiyo loka,vohārā loka,paññattiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasan ti,* lit "These are names of the world, expressions of the world, usages in the world, designations in the world…" See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 14.55/1:202) = SD 7.14 Introd (1) (2005).

> (*kāyasā*) [sic],[41] vocal (*vācāsā*) [sic] and mental (*manasā*). *Cetanā,* then, reaches a terminus with moral implications, but the morally determinative *praxis* may be purely mental in form. When *cetanā* is used in this sense the translation of it by "volition" may not be misleading.
>
> (Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics,* 1992:220)

Cetanā, as such, is not the "will" as taken in the modern philosophical sense, but is the mind behind the act (bodily, verbal or mental) rooted in an immoral intention (*lobha,* greed; *dosa,* hate; *moha,* delusion) or rooted in a moral intention (*alobha,* non-greed = generosity; *adosa,* non-hate = lovingkindness; *amoha,* non-delusion = wisdom). How did the notion of the will as we knew it arise then?

6 The origin of the "will"

One of the ancient theistic shadows that still lurks in English and other western languages is the notion of "free will." Even the Bible and ancient Greek philosophers do not have any word for "will," but speak rather of "choice," that is, decisions regarding what to do stemming from reasoning of what we need and how to get it, or else from irrational wants. In other words, choice is the result of some combination of reason and desire, rather than an exercise of the "will." A number of western scholars have shown that it was **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430), a dominant personality of the western Church during his time, who "was, in fact, the inventor of our modern notion of the will"[42] and "the first philosopher of the will."[43] One of his reasons for his invention of the notion of "will" (*voluntas*) was to explain the origin of evil and sin, which Augustine traced back to a primeval "perversion of the will."[44]

Augustine had the deep conviction that if people are evil it is their fault, not God's or the world's. For Augustine, all God's creation (including free will) is good—"all that is, is good."[45] However, when this free will is used to turn away from God, it is a sin. Whereas sin is caused by the act of free will, virtue, on the other hand, is not the result of human will, but of God's grace. In other words, evil arose from what is good! Of course, Augustine's philosophical situation here is more complicated. Understandably, even modern Christian theologians have great difficulty with Augustine's theology of free will.[46]

Neither Aristotle's *prohairesis* nor the Buddhist *cetanā*—both translatable as "moral choice"—are pure abstract volitions. Aristotle is sometimes criticized for failing to develop an adequate theory of the will, but most modern philosophers think that Aristotle "did not do so badly without it."[47] Anthony Kenny replies to this charge as follows:

> The criticism of Aristotle depends upon a certain view of the nature of the will. According to a view familiar in modern philosophical tradition, the will is a phenomenon of introspective consciousness. Volition is a mental event which precedes and causes certain human actions: its presence or absence makes the difference between voluntary actions. The freedom of the will is to be located in the indeterminacy of these internal volitions. The occurrence of volitions, and their freedom from causal control, is a matter of intimate experience….

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[41] This Pali word and the next do not exist, and should respectively be *kāyena* and *vācāya.*

[42] Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity,* University of California, 1982:144, also 123, 127; & Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, 1988:156 ff. See also foll n.

[43] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* 2: "Willing," NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978:84-110. John Hick says that "St Augustine…has probably done more than any other writer after St Paul to shape the structure of orthodox Christian belief…for Augustine's influence was exerted at an earlier and more plastic stage in the growth of the Christian mind…" (J Hick, *Evil and the Good of Love,* London: Macmillan, 1985:37). See also Hick 1985:59-69.

[44] *Confessions* 7:15.22: The perverted will is "twisted away from you, O God, the highest substance, to lower things." Perversion = *per* (wrong way) + *versus* (turning).

[45] *Confessions* 7:15.28.

[46] Damien Keown notes, "It is likely that the origination of the philosophical concept of the will by Augustine was influenced and facilitated by the Latin language and its comparative lack of psychological refinement," and qu A Dihle (1982:132 ff) where this problem is discussed at length.

[47] WFR Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980:163. Qu by Keown 1992:215.

> It is true that this account of the will is not to be found in Aristotle. This is not to Aristotle's discredit, for this whole conception of volition and freedom has been subjected, in our own time, to decisive criticism by philosophers such as Ryle and Wittgenstein. Philosophers who accept the criticisms of this school have attempted to build afresh a philosophical theory of the springs of human action which will be free of the confusions involved in the theory familiar in modern philosophical tradition. The resulting new structures bear a remarkable resemblance to what we find in Aristotle's *Ethics*. (Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will,* Yale, 1979:vii f)[48]

Modern Buddhist scholars are themselves aware of the absence of "free will" in Buddhism, and that as such it is also free from its philosophical problems. Y Karunaratna, for example, writes:[49]

> The expression "freedom of the *will*" or its equivalent is not found in the *suttas* or other authentic texts recording the teachings of the Buddha and its use in modern expositions only reflects an un-stated wish to interpret Buddhist thought in terms of the categories of Western thought.
> (Karunaratna, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*: cetanā, p91)

In summary, we can say that since the Buddha's teaching does not subscribe to the notion of the will (which is a later theistic invention), Buddhism does not subscribe to the notion of "free will." This is not because the Buddha does not teach that one has a moral choice in one's actions, but simply that both the notion of the "will" and connected idea of "free will" are both later theistic inventions that are narrow and problematic which even most modern philosophers reject.

7 The "will" in early Buddhism

Due to the limitation of the psychological vocabulary in English, the Pāli term *cetanā* is often rendered as "will," although it is just as often translated as "intention" or "volition." The Anglo-Saxon word "**will**" has the advantages of being the shortest and simplest of the three terms, and as such should be adopted, taking care to note its proper application in Buddhism. Sue Hamilton makes this insightful observation:

> In the *Khandha Saṁyutta,* the *saṅkhāra-k,khandha* is defined as the six groups of volitional activity.[50] Once again the sixfold classification is according to the connection of the six senses with their corresponding six objects. Significantly, this definition of the *saṅkhāra-k,khandha* clearly separates what in the West would probably be called "will" from the other mental states.[51] In Buddhism, the teaching that karma is intention makes it particularly important that this be clearly defined: the nature, presence or absence of volitional states determine the way in which, and the extent to which, one is "bound."
> (Hamilton, *Identity and Experience,* 1996:71; Pāli normalized)

The nature of the volition or will (***cetanā***) can be further teased out from the Buddha's famous definition of karma:

> I say, monks, that karma is volition. Having willed, one acts through the body, through speech and through the mind. (A 3:425; cf D3:104)

"At first sight," notes Sue Hamilton, "the second sentence here appears to have the rather odd meaning of 'having willed (mental activity), one acts through the mind (more undifferentiated mental activity).' But this is a context in which the will is clearly distinguished from thoughts, and so the definition of karma

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[48] Qu by Keown 1992:215. See op cit 1992:214-218 for a discussion on "The Will."

[49] Qu by Keown 1992:216, 218, who also qu Padmasiri de Silva, *Introduction to Buddhist Psychology,* 1979:78.

[50] *Katamā ca bhikkhave saṅkhārā? Cha-y-ime bhikkhave cetanā,kāyā* (S 3:60) [Hamilton's fn].

[51] "I am using 'will' in a general commonsense way and do not imply any technical meaning which may be associated with specific philosophies" [Hamilton's fn].

means: '*Bhikkhus,* I say that action is the will. It is according to one's will that what are referred to as bodily actions, speech and thoughts take place." (1996:109)

The ***saṅkhārā*** (*saṁ* + √*kṛ,* to do) are so called because they volitionally construct conditioned states.[52] They volitionally construct the conditioned states that are the body, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness, that is, the five aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*) (S 3:87). This passage clearly shows that the individual's will determines his future existence: "one's volitions are the instrumental factor in the coming-to-be of the entire human being."[53] **The Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** is instructive here where Mahā Kaccāna (with the Buddha's approval) makes this important observation that is the heart of the sutta:

> [54]Friends, dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. **The meeting of the three is contact.**[55] With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one **[112]** perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about.[56] What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates.[57] What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation[58] impacts one regarding past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye.[59]
>
> Friends, dependent on the ear and sounds, ear-consciousness arises….
>
> Friends, dependent on the nose and smells, nose-consciousness arises….
>
> Friends, dependent on the tongue and tastes, tongue-consciousness arises….
>
> Friends, dependent on the body and touches, body-consciousness arises….
>
> Friends, dependent on the mind[60] and mind-objects, mind-consciousness[61] arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally prolifer-

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[52] *Saṅkhataṁ abhisaṅkharotî ti bhikkhave tasmā saṅkhārâ ti vuccanti* (S 3:87).

[53] Sue Hamilton 1979:71 & fn: "Collins (1982:202) translated *saṅkhataṁ abhisaṅkharotî ti tasmā saṅkhāra* as '(people) form a construction, thus they are "formations".' Though this translation may be philosophically correct, it makes no mention either of the *khandha* the passage is defining or of the role of the volitions in the constructing of an individual."

[54] *Cakkhuñ ca āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu,viññāṇaṁ, tiṇṇaṁ saṅgati phasso, phassa,paccayā vedanā, yaṁ vedeti taṁ sañjānāti, yaṁ sañjānāti taṁ vitakketi, yaṁ vitakketi taṁ papañceti, yaṁ papañceti tato,-nidānaṁ purisaṁ papañca,saññā,saṅkhā samudācaranti atītânagata,paccuppannesu cakkhu,viññeyyesu rūpesu.* A passage similar to this section is found in **the Pariññā S** (S 35.60) where, however, the learned noble disciple becomes disillusioned (*nibbindati*) with the contact arising from sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness (also using the sentence, *tinnaṁ saṅgati phasso* [16]), and as such "becomes dispassionate (*virajjati*); through dispassion, he is liberated (*vimuccati*); through liberation, he understands, 'Clinging has been fully understood by me.'" (S 35.60/4:32 f). **The Mahā Hatthi,padôpama S** (M 28) closes with a similar, beginning with the statement: "If, friends, internally **the eye** is unimpaired [intact] but no external forms come into its range, and there is no appropriate conscious engagement [appropriate act of attention] (*tajjo samannāhāro hoti*), then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness" (M 28.27-38/1:190 f). On Ñāṇananda's notion of the three phases of mental proliferation, see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (2).

[55] *Tiṇṇaṁ saṅgati phasso.* For a discussion on this passage, see Bucknell 1999:318 f f.

[56] "One thinks about," *vitakketi.* On how when thinking stops, desires do not arise, see **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21.2.2/2:277).

[57] This verse up to here is also found in **(Samuday'atthaṅgama) Loka S** (A 12.44/2:71-73) and **(Sabb'upādāna) Pariññā S** (S 35.60/4:32 f) in different contexts.

[58] *Papañca,saññā,saṅkhā,* see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (3).

[59] This important passage is the earliest statement on the Buddhist theory of perception. See **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (4) above.

[60] "The mind," *mana.* Here Comy glosses as *bhavaṅga,citta* (MA 2:79), the life-continuum, sometimes called the unconscious or sub-conscious.

[61] "Mind-consciousness," *mano,viññāṇa.* Here Comy glosses as "advertence" (*āvajjana*) and impulsion (*javana*) (MA 2:77).

ates. What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation impacts one regarding past, future and present mind-objects cognizable through the mind. (M 18.16/1:111 f = SD 6.14, 2004)

From this passage we can note that sensory activity comprises a triad of sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness. In his Majjhima translation manuscript, Ñāṇamoli makes this insightful observation:

The meeting of eye, form, and eye-consciousness is called contact. Contact, according to dependent origination [*paṭicca,samuppāda*], is the principal condition for feeling. Feeling and perception are inseparable [M 43.9/1:293].[62] What is perceived as "this" is thought about in its differences and is thus diversified from "that" and from "me", This diversification—involving craving for form, wrong view about permanence of form, etc, and the conceit "I am"—leads to preoccupation with calculating the desirability of past and present forms with a view to obtaining desirable forms in the future. (M:ÑB 1205 n232)

The Mahā Hatthi,padôpama Sutta (M 28) closes with a similar analysis of the eighteen elements (the 6 sense-organs, and 6 sense-objects and 6 sense-consciousnesses) as does **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18.16), beginning with the statement:

If, friends, internally **the eye** is unimpaired [intact] but no external forms come into its range, and there is no appropriate conscious engagement [appropriate act of attention] (*tajjo samannā-hāro hoti*), then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness. (M 28.27-38/1:190 f)

However, when there is an appropriate conscious engagement, then the sense is stimulated. **The Madhu,-piṇḍika Sutta** continues, showing how from such a sense-stimulus, that is, contact (*phassa*), there arises feeling and so on:

Indeed, friends, when there is the eye, a visual form and eye-consciousness [and, mutatis mutandis, all the other four sense-organs, and their respective objects and consciousnesses], it is possible to discern **contact**.[63]

That being the case, when there is contact, it is possible to discern **feeling**.

That being the case, when there is feeling, it is possible to discern **perception**.

That being the case, when there is perception, it is possible to discern **thinking**.

That being the case, when there is thinking, it is possible to discern **the impact of perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation**. (M 18.17a/1:112 = SD 6.14, 2004)

In terms of the aggregates (*khandha*), **feeling** (*vedanā*) here can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, but **formation** (*saṅkhāra*) is only involved if there is a volition related to the feeling. For this reason, in **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), Sāriputta instructs Mahā Koṭṭhita thus:

Feeling, perception and consciousness, āvuso—these states are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate any of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one cognizes. (M 43.9/1:293)

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[62] **Mahā Vedalla S.**

[63] *So vat'āvuso cakkhusmiṁ sati rūpe sati cakkhu,viññāṇe sati phassa,paññattiṁ paññāpessatī ti ṭhānaṁ.*. Comy says that this passage shows the entire round of existence (*vaṭṭā*) by way of the 12 sense-bases. The next section [18] shows the cessation of the round (*vivaṭṭa*) by the negation of the 12 sense-bases. (MA 2:78). The structure *paññattiṁ paññāpessati* (lit "he describes the description," "he defines the definition") is idiomatic, meaning simply "he describes; he defines". Paraphrased, this sentence may also read "It is possible to define contact as the meeting of sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness."

However, it is interesting that the sutta does not say that formations (*saṅkhārā*) are similarly inseparable. In other words, one has a choice with formations, whether to let them arise or not.[64] In this connection, there is a useful term *abhisaṅkhāra*, often rendered as "accumulation" (of karma), of which **the Parivimaṁsana Sutta** (S 12.51/2:80-84) says there are three kinds: meritorious accumulation (*puññâbhisaṅkhāra*), demeritorious accumulation (*apuññâbhisaṅkhāra*) and unshakable accumulation (*āneñjâbhisaṅkhāra*).[65] Meritorious actions (*puññaṁ saṅkhāraṁ*) brings on to rebirth in a place of merit, a happy state (here referring to the human state and the form worlds). Demeritorious actions (*apuñña saṅkhāraṁ*) brings one to a place of demerit, a suffering state. The practice of unshakable mindfulness (*āneñjaṁ saṅkhāraṁ*) leads one to rebirth in the formless states.[66]

All this only occurs to one who has "gone to ignorance" (*āvijjâgato*). The arhat, however, has transcended both merit and demerit (*puñña,pāpa,pahīṇa*, Dh 39), and has no need even of the unshakable birth. However, great caution is needed here not to misunderstand that an arhat is "beyond good and evil" in the sense that he is not subject to ethical standards and moral virtue. What is meant here is that the arhat does not think or act in terms of merit and demerit, the workings of *saṅkhāra,* but is beyond such habitual moral swings of the unawakened. Yet the arhat is a truly morally virtuous and liberated being.

8 Volition and latent tendencies

From the discussion thus far, we can see how formations (*saṅkhāra*) creates karma through one's mind of good (*puñña*) or evil (*apuñña*) behind one's deeds, and in this way becomes a support for future lives. How formations shape one's future life is explained in **the Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta** (M 120). In fact, the term *saṅkār'upapatti* means "rebirth according to *saṅkhārā*." *Saṅkhāra* is the creator of our world.[67]

The unawakened mind creates its own world, that is, the workings of the six senses and one's reacting to them.[68] If such an unawakened person were to perceive (*sañjānāti*) any feeling (*vedanā*) or thinking (*vitakka*), it would be immediately coloured by internal narrative, and this would inexorably lead to mental proliferation (*papañca*), a very complex level of experience tainted by one's desires and prejudices)—a state that is synonymous with mental formations (*saṅkhārā*).[69] The last stage of this process is clearly detailed in the first statement of the short **Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

> Monks, what one intends (*ceteti*), and what one plans (*pakappeti*), and when one has a habitual tendency (*anuseti*)[70]—this is a mental object [basis] (*ārammaṇa*) that supports consciousness.
>
> When there is a mental object [basis], there is a support for consciousness.
>
> When consciousness has a support and grows, there is further **generation of rebirth**.
>
> When there is the further generation of rebirth, there further arise birth,[71] decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair.
>
> Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering. (S 12.38.2/2:65 f)[72]

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[64] See Sue Hamilton 1996:72, 91-95.

[65] See also D 3:217 = Pm 2:178; S 2:82; Nm 1:90, 180, 334, 430, 2: 217, 244, 253; Pm 1:124; Vbh 135, 137. These 3 kinds of karmic accumulation are discussed at Vbh 135. **The Āneñja,sappāya S** (M 2:262 f) explains in detail how *viññāṇa* becomes *āneñjūpaga,* "brings one to the unshakable," ie the formless realms. See also S:B 765 n136.

[66] Curiously, Ajahn Brahmavaṁso, in his essay, "Paṭicca-samuppāda: Dependent origination" renders *āneñja* as "being something in-between" *puñña* and *apuñña* (2002:26).

[67] See Ajahn Brahmavaṁso 2002:25 f.

[68] On the "world" here, see **Sabba S** (35.23/4:15) = SD 7.1 (2005).

[69] On the theory of perception involved here, see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (4) (2004).

[70] That is, one habitually does something whether out of unwholesome motivation or wholesome motivation, or even without intention.

[71] "Birth" (*jāti*), omitted in PTS ed.

Mental proliferation (*papañca*) or conceiving (*maññanā*) are mental constructs created by the power of **the latent tendencies** (*anusaya*), also translated as "underlying tendencies" and "latent dispositions." The suttas give a list of seven **latent tendencies** (*anusayā*), namely:[73]

1. sensual desire (*kāma,rāga*);
2. aversion (*paṭigha*);
3. wrong view (*diṭṭhi*);
4. spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*);
5. conceit (*māna*);
6. desire for existence (*bhava,rāga*); and
7. ignorance (*avijjā*).

They are also listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33),[74] **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18),[75] **the Cha,chakka Sutta** (M 148),[76] **the Anusaya Sutta** (A 7.11 & 12/4:8 f) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh 383). They are deeply embedded in one's mind through past habitual deeds and can only be uprooted on attaining the path. An older list is probably the one listing the three latent tendencies of aversion (*paṭigha*), lust (*rāga*), and ignorance (*avijjā*).[77] **The Sall'atthena Sutta** (S 36.6)[78] goes on to say how

(a) when one shows aversion towards painful feeling, the latent tendency of aversion (*paṭighânusaya*) arises;
(b) when one delights in sensual pleasure, the latent tendency of lust (*rāgânusaya*) arises;
(c) when one does not understand such feelings according to reality, the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijj'ānusaya*) arises. (S 36.6.8/4:208)

These mental constructs build up the latent tendencies, leading to stronger and more tenacious defilements that motivate more unwholesome thoughts, speech and actions, all of which in turn reinforce one's negative attitudes and habits in a vicious cycle. Latent tendencies, as such, are our psychological biases that ultimately shape our character and actions, that is, they are the unawakened "human nature." These tendencies lie dormant deep in our unconscious ready to rear their ugly heads at any stimulation or provocation.

What is even more interesting—in terms of free will and determinism in early Buddhism—is this second statement of the **Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

> If, monks, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one is still driven by latent tendencies[79] (*anuseti*)—this is a mental basis that supports consciousness.
>
> When there is a mental basis, there is a support for consciousness.
>
> When consciousness has a support and grows, there is **further [continued] arising of rebirth**.

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[72] See **Cetanā Sutta 1-3** = SD 7.6abc & S:B 757 n112.

[73] It is interesting to note that 4 of the latent tendencies (in bold print)—sensual desire, wrong view, desire for existence and ignorance—form the four "mental cankers" (*āsava*) (D 2:81; Vbh 373). Three of them (without "wrong views") are mentioned at S 4:256.

[74] D 33.2.3(12)/3:254, 282.

[75] M 18.8/1:110. See SD 6.14 Introd (5) (2004).

[76] M 148.28/3:285.

[77] See **Sallatthena S** (S 36.6/4:207-210) = SD 5.5 (2004). See also **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (5) "Latent tendencies" (2004).

[78] See SD 5.5 (2004).

[79] "**But one still has a habitual tendency**" (*atha ce anuseti*): the latent tendencies are included because they have not been abandoned here in the resultants of the three planes, in the limited functional states (the five-door adverting and mind-door adverting cittas), and in form. As long as the latent tendencies exist, they become a condition for the karmic consciousness; for there is no way to prevent its arising. See **Cetanā S** = SD 7.6a Introd (3) for more details.

When there is the further arising of rebirth, there further arise birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair.

Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.[80] (S 12.38.3/2:65 f)[81]

Cetanā Sutta 1 statement 2. The Saṁyutta Commentary (SA 2:71) explains the second statement of the sutta in this manner. This statement refers to the moment when there is occurrence of any (wholesome or unwholesome) volition of the 3 planes (*bhūmi*),[82] and no occurrence of mental fabrications of craving and views. By "**but one still has a habitual tendency**" (*atha ce anuseti*) is meant that the latent tendencies are included because they have not been abandoned here in the resultants of the three planes, in the limited functional states (the five-door adverting and mind-door adverting cittas),[83] and in form. As long as the latent tendencies exist, they become a condition for the karmic consciousness; for there is no way to prevent its arising.

The Saṁyutta Porāṇa Ṭīkā says that this second statement shows that wholesome and unwholesome karma capable of producing rebirth is accumulated in the preliminary stage (of the path of practice), and that <u>even without planning (through craving and views)</u>, the volitions of insight meditation in a meditator who has seen the dangers in existence are still conditioned by the latent tendencies and are capable of generating rebirth. It is also stated to show that even when wholesome and unwholesome states are not occurring there is still an establishing of karmic consciousness with latent defilements as condition; for so long as these have not been abandoned, they lie latent in the existing resultants of the three planes, etc. In other words, without mindfulness and wisdom one has practically no real over one's actions and their consequences.

9 How "the will" creates karma

Habitually reinforced over many lives, the latent tendencies become deeply embedded in an individual's nature. Moved by any of these latent tendencies, one consciously or unconsciously, wittingly or unwittingly, acts on one's own initiative or on being prompted by others.[84] A passage in **the Bhūmija Sutta** (S 12.25), repeated in **the Sañcetanā Sutta** (A 4.171), should be studied with **the Atta,kārī Sutta** (A 6.38), since the passage discusses self-effort and other-effort in greater detail. The relevant section is quoted here in abridged form:

Ānanda, where there is the body, because of bodily volition (*kāya,sañcetanā*), pleasure and pain arise internally. Ānanda, where there is speech, because of verbal volition (*vacī,sañcetanā*), pleasure and pain arise internally.Ānanda, where there is the mind, because of mental volition (*mano,sañcetanā*), pleasure and pain arise internally—and with ignorance as condition.[85]

Ānanda, <u>by oneself</u> [on one's own initiative] (*sāmaṁ*), one generates that **bodily volitional formation** (*kāya,saṅkhāra*), conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally. Or, Ānanda, <u>prompted by others</u> (*pare*), one generates the bodily volitional formation, conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

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[80] Comy says that this section refers to the moment when there is occurrence of volition of the 3 planes, and no occurrence of mental fabrications of craving and views (SA 2:71). See **Cetanā S** = SD 7.6a Introd (3) nn for further discussion.

[81] For further discussion, see **Cetanā Sutta 1-3** = SD 7.6abc & S:B 757 n112.

[82] **The 3 planes** (*bhūmi*), which the Suttas call "existences" (*bhava*), ie, sense-existence or sense sphere (*kāma,-bhava*), the form existence or form sphere (*rūpa,bhava*) and the formless existence or formless sphere (*arūpa,bhava*) (D 3:215; M 1:294). In the suttas, 4 planes (*bhūmi*) are also mentioned, ie, the sensuous plane (*kāmâvacara,bhūmi*), the form plane (*rūpâvacara,bhūmi*), and the formless plane (*arūpâvacara,bhūmi*) (Pm 1:83).

[83] That is, they arise even before one is ever conscious of them. On the cognitive process (*citta,vīthi*), see Abhs: BRS 4.1-30/149-184 (ch 4). See diagram below.

[84] See Sue Hamilton 1996:76 f, 109.

[85] Here I take *avijjā,paccayā ca* (vl *vā*) as belonging the end of the first para, following the Aṅguttara reading and Bhikkhu's Bodhi's advice (S:B 748 n77).

Ānanda, one mindfully [deliberately] (*sampajāno*) generates bodily volitional formations, conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally; or, unmindfully [undeliberately] (*asampajāno*), one generates the bodily volitional formation, conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Ānanda, by oneself,…or, prompted by others, one generates **verbal volitional formation** (*vacī,saṅkhāra*)…

Ānanda, one mindfully…or, unmindfully generates verbal volitional formations conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Ānanda, by oneself,…or, prompted by others, one generates **mental volitional formation** (*mano,saṅkhāra*)[86]…

Ānanda, one mindfully…or, unmindfully generates mental volitional formations conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.

Ānanda, ignorance is attended by [subject to][87] these states.[88] But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance, the body does not exist conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally. Speech does not exist conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally. The mind does not exist conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.[89]

The field does not exist, the ground does not exist, the base does not exist, the foundation does not exist, conditioned by which pleasure and pain arise internally.[90]

(S 12.25.13-19/2:39 f = A 4.171/2:157-159; cf A 3.60.3/1:171)

The Saṁyutta Commentary says that here the Buddha's instruction is to show that pleasure and pain do not arise with contact alone as condition, but with other conditions as well. In this case, the bodily, verbal and mental volitions are the karmically effective volitions that function as conditions for the resultant pleasure and pain. The Commentary goes on to identify the three volitional formations with the three types of volitions mentioned in the sutta. One generates (*abhisaṅkharoti*) these formations [that is, one does karmically charged actions] "on one's own initiative" (*sāmaṁ*) when one acts without any inducement by others, with an unprompted mind (*asaṅkhārika,citta*). One acts mindfully (*sampajāno*) when one acts with a knowledge of karma and its fruits; and unmindfully (*asampajāno*) when one acts without such knowledge[91] (SA 2:57 f). In simpler terms, this means that even when one commits an act out of *ignor-*

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[86] Although the term *mano,saṅkhāra* is used here, from the context it is clearly synonymous with *citta,saṅkhāra* in connection with the *saṅkhāra* link of dependent arising, as at **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2.14/2:4) = SD 5.15 (2004). However, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, "[t]here is justification for identifying the [*citta,saṅkhāra* here] with the *cittasaṅkhāra* at [**Kāma,bhū S,** S 41.6/4:293,17] and [**Cūḷa Vedalla S,** M 44.15/1:301,28-29], defined as *saññā* and *vedanā*" (S:B 749 n79).

[87] *Anupatita* (DhA 3:463), pp of *anu-patati,* to run after, to follow, to pursue; to fall on or into, to attack (acc) (D 1:56 = M 1:517 = S 3:211).

[88] Comy says that **ignorance** is attended by these states under the heading of decisive support (*upanissaya*) since they are understood in the phrase "With ignorance as condition, volitional forms." On the interpretation of *paṭicca,samuppāda* in the light of the 24 conditional relations (*paccaya*), see Vism 17; see also Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, 3rd ed 1971:159-173.

[89] Comy: That the body does not exist which, if it existed, would enable pleasure and pain to arise conditioned by bodily volition, The same method of explanation applies to speech and the mind. (Question:) "But an arhat acts, speaks and thinks; so, how is it that his body, etc, do not exist?" (Reply:) "In the sense that they do not generate karmic results. For the deeds done by an arhat are neither wholesome nor unwholesome karma, but merely functional (*kiriya,matta*)." As such, it is said of him, "The body, etc, do not exist" (SA 2:58). "An alternative explanation might be simply that with the elimination of ignorance there will be no further arising of the five aggregates, the basis of all experience, and thus no further experiencing of pleasure and pain" (S:B 749 n81). On the arhat's **functional consciousness** (*kriya,citta*), see Abhs 1.15 = Abhs:BRS 50.

[90] Comy: There is no *field* (*khetta*) in the sense of a place of growth; no *land* (*vatthu*) in the sense of a support; no *base* (*āyatana*) in the sense of a condition; no *foundation* (*adhikaraṇa*) in the sense of a cause (SA 2:59).

[91] This passage may be the locus classicus for the Abhidhamma distinction between *sa,saṅkhārika,citta* and *asaṅkhārika,citta*: see Abhs 1.4 = Abhs:BRS 32 ff.

ance (*avijjā*) (that is, without any conscious intention, good or evil), it is still karmically potent. In fact, here we can freely render *sampajāna* as "consciously deliberate" and *asampajāna* as "unconsciously deliberate." This latter state is forced by the latent tendencies.

The Majjhima Commentary on the **Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44.15/1:301) explains that the bodily formation and the mental formation are said to be formations "bound up" with the body (*kāya,paṭibaddhā*) and the mind (*citta,paṭibaddhā*) in the sense that they are *formed* respectively by the body and by the mind, while the verbal formation is a formation in the sense that it *forms* speech (MA 2:366). If these formations arise through the three doors of action, then, that is where they are at their formative stage, and as such their most vulnerable.

The first step towards breaking this samsara, therefore, is to restrain the senses which involves stopping at the bare sense-experience without plastering it over with layers of colourful meanings that are purely subjective. A classic example of the instruction is **sense-restraint** (*indriya,saṁvara*) is the one the Buddha gives to the monk Māluṅkyā,putta as recorded in **the Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (S 35.95):[92]

> Māluṅkyāputta, regarding what is seen, heard, sensed and cognized by you,
> in the seen will be only the seen;
> in the heard there will only be the heard;
> in the sensed there will only be the sensed;
> in the cognized there will only be the cognized. (S 35.95.13/4:73)

In doing so, the practitioner "unwills" himself against accumulating formations, and so cuts down his latent tendencies, that would otherwise induce the willing of more formations. As such, Sue Hamilton concludes,

> one could, and ultimately should, experience feelings *without* any concomitant volitions: an *arahant* is able to experience pleasant and unpleasant feelings while remaining entirely detached from them. This is stated in the *Vedanā Saṁyutta*, where we read that the well-taught Ariyan disciple has no repugnance for painful feeling, or delight in sensual pleasure [**Sallatthena Sutta,** S 4:209].[93] The process of analyzing the person into *khandhas* shows how this is a constitutional possibility. (Hamilton, *Identity and Experience,* 1996:72)

10 The efficacy of one's effort

While rejecting the notions of the "will" and "free will," early Buddhism also rejects strict determineism [3.1]. Avoiding the extremes of free will (one's conduct is under the control of one's volition) and of strict determinism (events in our history and our lives are fixed or predestined), the Buddha teaches the efficacy of one's effort, that is, the doctrine of karma (*kamma,vāda*), or in simpler terms, the effectiveness of human effort.

If human action were only the results of past actions or the fiat of a creator God, then our present actions and experiences would all be predetermined, and any effort on our part would be pointless since all effort have been predetermined. In **the Devadaha Sutta** (M 101), the Buddha says:

> Monks, there are some recluses and brahmins who speak thus and hold this view, that whatever a person feels, whether pleasure or pain or a neutral feeling, all this is caused by past karma [deeds].[94] Thus they claim that by means of austerities they put an end to past karma, that they abstain from performing any new deeds (in the present), that there is no inflow (of karma) into the

[92] See **Maluṅkyāputta S** (S 35.39.12/4:72 f) = SD 5.9 (2004).

[93] Hamilton mistakenly gives the reference in her footnote as "M 4:209."

[94] This doctrine ascribed to the Jains is also criticized by the Buddha in **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21/4:230 f) = SD 5.6 (2005) and **Titth'āyatana S** (A 3.61/1:173 f) = SD 6.8 (2005). The Buddhist teaching is that feeling arises not as a result of past karma but a concomitant of present action, and also recognizes feelings that are neither karmically active nor karmic results.

> future. Because there is no inflow (of karma) (*anavassava*) into the future, there is the extinction of karma; with the extinction of karma, there is the extinction of suffering; with the extinction of suffering, there is the extinction of feeling; with the extinction of feeling, suffering will be exhausted. (M 101.2/2:214)[95]

The Buddha totally rejects this notion, giving these reasons amongst others:[96]

> When you have an intense undertaking or make intense effort, do you then feel a sharp, severe and painful feeling associated with the undertaking? Or, again, when you do not have an intense undertaking or make an intense effort, do you then not feel a sharp, severe and painful feeling associated with the undertaking? (M 101.12/2:219)[97]

To this the Nigaṇṭhas, of course, have to answer yes to the first question and no the second, whereupon the Buddha declares the necessary implications that if this were so, then how could the Nigaṇṭhas possibly claim that "whatever a person feels, whether pleasure or pain or a neutral feeling, all this is caused by past karma"?[98] Gomez summarizes the argument as follows:

> Only if the opposite were true, that is, if intense effort and the nigaṇṭha austerities were not accompanied by equally intense pain, only then would it be true that whatever a man experiences is the result of previous deeds. For if the intense effort and application, which austerities require, bring about a correspondingly painful feeling here and now, that very fact proves that one does have experiences brought about by one's own effort in this very life. (Gomez 1975:84)

The arising of suffering lies in the mind of craving and attachment. Yet this very same mind can be trained, controlled and free. One of the most important tools for freeing the mind is **dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) where our sufferings are shown to be rooted in ignorance, caught in a cycle of immediate causes and effects, providing the conditions for continued suffering. One can, however, reverse the cycle and break it forever.[99]

11 Implications of moral choice

Karma is intention: when we act with a wholesome mind, the act is wholesome; when we act with an unwholesome mind, the act is unwholesome. Intention (*cetanā*), as such, is morally determinative, and an action without intention is not morally charged. This idea was revolutionary in the Buddha's own time but not unique to Buddhism in our own time.

> This is not an idea which is peculiar to Buddhism. The English criminal law, for example, considers both the mental state of the accused and his overt actions. It draws a distinction between the *mens rea* and the *actus reus*: the latter is the physical action and the former is "the state of mind which much be present in an accused if his overt action is to constitute a crime, and if he is to be held responsible for it." [David Walker, *The Oxford Companion to Law.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970]. (Keown 1992:222)

However, if motive alone is the measure of rightness and goodness, then such ethics and morality would lack compassion and spirituality. In the early 20th century, Louis de la Vallée Poussin points out,

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[95] See also D 2:230; M 1:93; A 1:134-136, 249-253, 2:230-232.

[96] See **Devadaha S** (M 101) for all the arguments.

[97] *Yasmiṁ vo samaye tippo upakkamo hoti tippaṁ padhānaṁ, tippā tamhi samaye opakkamikā dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vediyatha. Yasmiṁ pana vo pana samaye na tippo upakkamo hoti na tippaṁ padhānaṁ, tippā tamhi samaye opakkamikā dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vediyatha.*

[98] M 101.13-14/2:219 f.

[99] On dependent arising, see SD 5.14-17 (2004), esp 16.

following the Abhidharma,kośa, for example, the ritual sacrifice of animals is not meritorious merely because brahmins believe it to be so; nor is euthanasia for aged parents morally right even though it is the custom in certain countries.[100]

> Volition is mental action: it gives rise to two actions, bodily and vocal action.
>
> [Bhaṣya:] Volition is called mental action; that which arises from volition,[101] namely action which has been willed, is made up of two other actions, bodily and vocal action.
>
> (Abhidharmakośa Bhāsyaṁ 4.1cd = Abhk:Pr 552)

The distinction between intention (*cetanā*) and action (*kamma*) is only for ethical consideration, but as we have seen, they are both really one. So too are actions of body, speech and mind part of the same process called a "person." In this sense, we are what we do (Dh 165): we are the result of our karma, the heirs to our karma, the owners of our karma (M 135.4/3:135). Karma as *cetanā* (intention, volition) has a broad sense of not only understanding the virtue or the vice of an action, but that one fully *is* the action—body, mind and heart. Keown gives the following helpful illustration:

> Generosity and the other virtues involve not merely the bare realization that a practice is good, but also the instantiation of the practice. The implementation depends upon a personal commitment which involves more than purely intellectual assent to its goodness. In short, *cetanā* describes not merely intention but the total posture of the personality, both cognitive and affective. (Keown, 1992:213)

At this point, we need to examine intention and action a little deeper. While it is true that the moral worth of an action depends on its intention—good begets good, evil begets evil—however, this does not mean that the mere absence of an intention frees one from moral accountability. For example, if one sees a child in danger of drowning, but does not help to save him (when one can swim and there is no one else around), claiming that one has no ill intention towards the child, it is clear that one has no compassion at all. [See 1987 report from a Malaysian newspaper here.]

Or, one could, with "good intention," give money to a poor drug addict who will use it to buy more drugs. Or, one could keep the precepts with a wrong motive, such as with the aim of gaining magical powers. As such, intention alone is not the criterion of moral rightness. The Abhidharma,kośa gives many examples showing that even deeds done with a good intention are wrongful if they are rooted in delusion (*moha*) (Abhk 4.68d).

In early Buddhism, intention is no different from the three unwholesome roots (*akusala,mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion and the three wholesome roots (*kusala,-mūla*) of lovingkindness, generosity and wisdom (D 3:275; It 45). As such, "intention" is not merely a matter of "good intention" or of "no intention" to act (mentally, verbally, bodily), but refers to a *state of*

Girl drowns as watchers haggle over rescue money

[Reported in The Star, 18 Aug 1987.]

BEIJING, Wed. — A Chinese schoolgirl drowned in a lake last month as 40 to 50 people stood by, some haggling over how much money it was worth to rescue her, an official newspaper reported today.

Zhang Yinqian, 14, got into trouble while swimming, the daily said. A friend failed to help and shouted to the people nearby.

"Who will give me money if I save her?" one replied.

"Even 200 or 300 yuan ($137.5 to $200) would be no good," said another.

"There are too many Chinese, you should let her die," said a third.

Finally, a man tried to save Zhang but couldn't. Her body was found later after family and teachers paid to get it out of the lake.

The *People's Daily* said the girl's death had raised a furore in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. — Reuter.

[100] Poussin, *La Morale Bouddhique.* Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1927:30 [cf Abhk 4.68d = Abhk:Pr 645 ff]. Qu by Keown 1992:221.

[101] For the Jains, mental action is only semi-action (*aḍḍha,kamma*) (M 1:372; Abhk 4.105, 73ab; Uvāsakadasaō 2, App 2, p18; SBE 14:83,l 165, 179, 242, 315). [Pruden's fn]

mind, that is, whether one's action is *motivated* by greed or by non-greed, by hate or by non-hate, by delusion or by non-delusion. In short, *intention is motivation*, what moves one to act.

In this sense, one has "free will," that is, one can consciously choose between action and non-action, good and evil. And yet, the extent of free will is not the same in everyone. This limitation is due to one's personal habits and tendencies. If one is habitually an evil-doer, one has a greater propensity for evil acts. The habitual good person has a greater tendency for good deeds. By this very same fact, one can say that there is after all no such thing as "free will," since whatever one does is motivated by one's latent tendencies. Only the saint who has transcended or destroyed his latent tendencies really has free will.

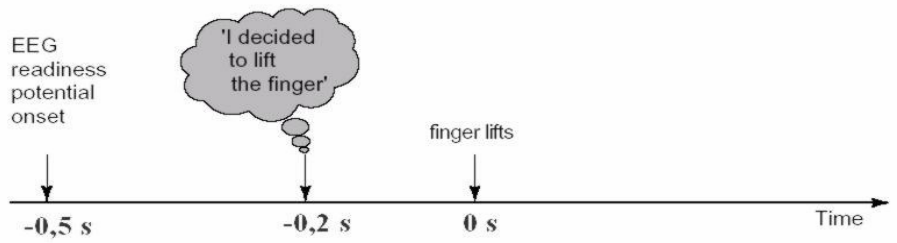
In other words, the unawakened being is really helpless in habitually reacting to thoughts and external stimuli in negative ways. And yet the radiant mind (*pabhassara citta*) lies at the heart of all sentient beings. Despite one's seeming helplessness and ignorance, one can still touch this radiant mind, beginning with one's awareness that there is this spiritual potential. As such, everyone can change for the better. The purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to provide the motivation and environment for healing and caring, for positive change and spiritual liberation. David Loy, in his insightful study of Aṅgulimāla, entitled "How to reform a serial killer" (2000), applies this Buddhist insight to our own times by arguing for the need for restorative rather than punitive justice in his discussion of "intention" and karma:

> One modern approach to *karma* is to understand it in terms of what Buddhism calls *saṅkhāras,* our "mental formations," especially habitual tendencies. These are best understood not as tendencies we have, but as tendencies we *are*: instead of being "my" habits, their interaction is what constitutes my sense of "me." But that does not mean that they are ineradicable: unwholesome *saṅkhāras* are to be differentiated from the liberatory possibilities that are available to all of us if we follow the path of replacing them with more wholesome mental tendencies.
>
> The point of this interpretation is that we are punished not for our sins, but by them. People suffer or benefit not for what they have done, but for what they have become, and what we mindfully do is what makes us what we are. This conflation makes little sense if *karma* is understood dualistically as a kind of moral "dirt" attached to me, but it makes a great deal of sense if I am my habitual intentions, for then the important spiritual issue is the development of those intentions. In that case, my actions and my intentions build/rebuild my character just as food is assimilated to build/rebuild my physical body. If *karma* is this psychological truth about how we construct ourselves—about how my sense-of-self is constructed by "my" greed, ill-will, and delusion—then we can no longer accept the juridical presupposition of a completely self-determined subject wholly responsible for its own actions. Again, we can no longer justify punishment as retributive, but must shift the focus of criminal justice to education and reformation.
>
> (David Loy, "How to reform a serial killer," 2000:156 f)

For our present purposes of discussing the nature of free will in Buddhism, we can follow up from Loy's insights by saying that since we construct ourselves or "selves" through our own actions/intentions, we can therefore ourselves deconstruct them. What prevents us from doing so is a lack of self-knowledge, a lack that is aggravated when we push this personal responsibility onto an external agency by blaming others, or most deleterious of all, by surrendering our will to a superhuman deity, a god, gods, or God.

12 Benjamin Libet and free will

In 1965, Hans H Kornhuber and Lüder Deecke investigated the correlations between arbitrary movements of hand and foot (such as, a person opening or closing his hand) and electrical activities in the brain (EEG). They discovered a rather strange phenomenon: <u>even 1 second *before* the hand (or foot) is moved, there is EEG activity</u>, which they called "Bereitschaftspotential" (readiness potential or RP), here illustrated:



[Source: http:www.blutner.de/philom/consc/consc.html]

In 1983, Benjamin Libet, from the Medical Centre of the University of California at San Francisco, fascinated by this finding, asked a very important question: *If a simple action like moving our hand us prepared for more than half a second in our brain, at what moment do we consciously decide to perform this action?* Libet and his colleagues, in their findings on "backward referral in time," published in the 1980s,[102] reported that the EEG results showed that the cortex became active with a "readiness potential" (RP) of 350 milliseconds before the reported awareness of a "wish to move," and an average RP of 550 before the actual movement begins.

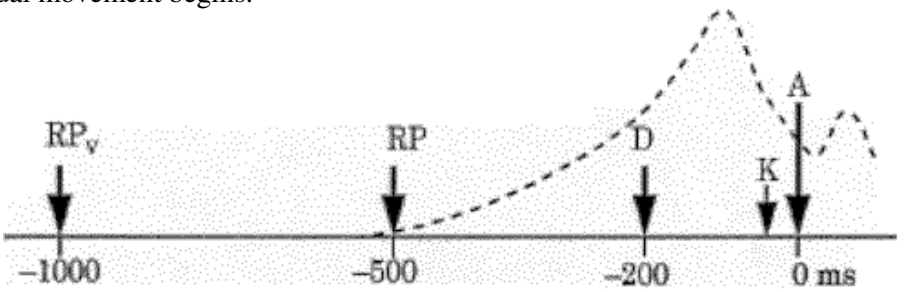


Fig. 1: Sequence of readiness potential (RP), volitional decision (D), and onset of action (A), as well as the control stimulus on the skin (K). If the action is planned ahead, the readiness potential starts already at time RP$_v$. After Libet (1985).

[Source: http:faculty.virginia.edu/consciousness/new_page_8.html]

These experiments imply that consciousness lags behind our experience of the world—that our subjective awareness of a decision occurs measurably later than the actual moment of decision! Libet, however, argued that once events reach neuronal adequacy (ie half a second of activity), they are subjectively referred back to the time of the initial evoked potential. As such, even though consciousness takes half a second to build up, events will still seem to happen in real time.[103]

We commonly experience wishes, desires, decisions to act, or not to act, and take it for granted that it is the conscious experiences themselves that exercise control over our consequent acts. However, Libet (1985) found that one's brain prepares to act not just *before* one acts, but even before one experiences a wish to act![104] In everyday life, we behave as what academics call "naïve realists," that is, we take events

[102] B Libet, "The experimental evidence of subjective referral of a sensory experience backwards in time." *Philosophy of Science* 1981 48:182-197; Libet et al, "Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activity (readiness potential): the unconscious initiation of a free voluntary act." *Brain* 106 1983:623-642. See biblio for other works.

[103] See Susan Blackmore, "The state of the art—the psychology of consciousness," 2001:3 digital ed.

[104] "For example, a simple motor act such as flexing one's wrist is preceded by a negative-going readiness potential (RP) recorded at the scalp around 550 milliseconds. Surprisingly, the readiness potential also precedes the experienced *wish* to act by around 350 milliseconds. This suggests that, like the act itself, the experienced wish (to flex one's wrist) may be one *output* from the (prior) cerebral processes that actually select a given response rather than being the cause of those processes." (Max Velmans, "Preconscious free will," 2003:2 digital ed).

we experience to *be* the events that are actually taking place. In reality, all that we have are experiences *of* something. For everyday experiences, the assumption that the world is just as we experience serves us well. Max Velmans explains:

> When playing billiards, for example, it is safe to assume that the balls are smooth, spherical, coloured, and cause each other to move by mechanical impact. One only has to judge the precise angle at which the white ball hits the red ball to pocket the red. A quantum mechanical description of the microstructure of the balls or of the forces they exert on each other won't improve one's game.
>
> That said, the experienced world is not the world in itself—and it is not our experience of the balls that governs the movement of the balls themselves. Balls as-experienced and their perceived interactions are global representations of autonomously existing entities and their interactions, and conscious representations of such entities or events can only be formed once they exist, or after they have taken place. The same may be said of the events and processes that we experience to occur in our own bodies or minds/brains. When we withdraw a hand quickly from a hot iron, we experience the pain (in the hand) to cause what we do, but the reflex action actually takes place before the experience of pain has time to form. This can also happen with voluntary movements. Suppose, for example, that you are required to press a button as soon as you feel a tactile stimulus applied to your skin. A typical reaction time is 100 ms or so. It takes only a few milliseconds for the skin stimulus to reach the cortical surface, but Libet, et al. (1979) found that awareness of the stimulus takes at least 200 ms to develop. If so, the reaction must take place preconsciously, although we experience ourselves as responding after we feel something touching the skin. The mind/brain requires time to form a conscious representation of a pain or of something touching the skin and of the subsequent response. Although the conscious representations accurately place the cause (the stimulus) before the effect (the response), once the representations are formed, both the stimulus and the response have already taken place.
>
> (Velmans, "How could conscious experience affect the brain?" 2002:10 digital ed)

The Libet work generated much discussion and debate. His ideas, however, were not new. Over 200 years ago, the English philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) pointed that that events that are close together in space and time are more likely than spatio-temporally distant events to be perceived as causally related. Conversely, in terms of probability, as we have it in the Bayes equation, events known to be causally related are more likely to be close in time and space than unrelated events. There are a number of possible explanations of the Libet findings:[105]

(1) <u>The conscious decision to move is an illusion</u>. By the time you are aware of the decision, the mental processes for movement are well underway. [Furthermore, we could also question whether the unusual circumstances of the experiment, with subjects thinking in advance about making a decision, and then making one for no reason whatever, actually represent normal thought processes.]

(2) <u>We have conscious veto over decisions.</u> The plan to move begins outside of awareness. The act cannot be carried out unless you consciously decide to let it proceed.

(3) <u>Dennett's alternative: There is no Cartesian Theater.</u>[106] Thus, there is no one moment at which the decision to move enters awareness. It is fruitless to try to measure the specific time at which

[105] "Free will" (Psy391D, Class 10) 13/10/04, http://courses.umass.edu/psy391d/freewill.html. My additional comments are within brackets.

[106] Theatre metaphors are common in discussions of consciousness, and arguably can be helpful (eg BJ Baars, *In the Theatre of Consciousness: The workspace of the mind.* Oxford: OUP, 1997). "It certainly feels as though I am sitting inside my head and experiencing the events in turn as though they were some kind of show. But this is a big mistake, argues Dennett. While almost everyone rejects outright Cartesian dualism, most psychologists and neuroscientists still believe in some kind of centre, where everything comes together and 'consciousness happens'; some

> awareness of an event occurs. [We are clearly talking about two different time-scales here: the organic time of the brain/mind and the physical time of the body. Organic time is always relative: when we find something interesting, time flies; in a dull situation, our organic time slows down. Organic time, in other words, is a personal sense of time.]

Let us now examine some of **the Buddhist implications** of Libet's work on "backward referral in time." If our subjective awareness of a decision occurs measurably later than the actual moment of decision, this means that we have not really willed it, but that the decision is the result of unconscious conditions. In short, there is no free will involved. We are truly creatures of habit who simply respond to stimuli. Such is clearly the case of the unawakened reactive person who is fettered by the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion. However, we cannot be so certain about the awakened mind of the arhat (for no such experiments have been conducted on them).

The findings of Libet's experiments implies that our brain initiates a "mental volitional act" unconsciously. The Buddhist response here would be that such unconscious reactions are spurred by one's latent tendencies (*anusaya*) [3.6]. Libet's findings are neither novel nor radical in Buddhist terms, but they help present the Buddhist teachings on how the mind works to those unfamiliar with the Buddhist psychological vocabulary and approach. Libet's work is of course important to Buddhists in the sense that it provides the scientific basis for the Buddhist explanation of the mind.

The psychological implication is that consciousness is not a high level authority that gives orders to subordinated instances. The main role of consciousness is a *selective* one, deciding from amongst numerous possibilities suggested by unconscious processes.[107] Max Velmans makes an insightful observation n this connection:

> Just as the interactions amongst experienced billiard balls represent causal sequences in the external world, but are not the events themselves, experienced interactions between our sensations, thoughts, images and actions represent causal sequences within our bodies and brains, but are not the events themselves. The thoughts, images, and feelings that appear in our awareness are both *generated* by processes in our bodies and mind/brains and *represent* the current states of those processes. Thoughts and images represent the ongoing state of play of our cognitive systems; feelings represent our internal (positive and negative) reactions to and judgements about events.[108] (Velmans 2002:11 digital ed)

In simple terms, whatever we are "conscious of" or discern (*vijānāti*) are actually projected states (*saṅkhārā*) in our own minds. Furthermore, such consciousnesses or states are the result of what we actually choose to notice of the numerous phenomena that come within the range of our senses. Peter Harvey, in *Selfless Persons,* quoting LS Cousins, says just this in his comment on the Atta,kārī Sutta: "…karma affects discernment [*viññāṇa*] by determining which of the many phenomena in a person's sensory range are actually *noticed* (1995:152).

The ethical implication is that the role of conscious free will is not to initiate a voluntary act, but rather to *control* whether the act occurs. This role actually concurs with ethical and religious strictures,

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kind of magic finishing line beyond which events 'come into' consciousness, or a centre from where 'my' decisions are made and 'my' instructions sent out. But this cannot be, for the reality of the brain is a massively parallel system with no middle. So, as Dennett puts it, 'When you discard Cartesian dualism, you really must discard the show that would have gone on in the Cartesian Theater, and the audience as well, for neither the show nor the audience is to be found in the brain, and the brain is the only real place there is to look for them.' (Dennett 1991:134) (qu in Susan Blackmore 2001:5 digital ed). Dan Dennett, the American philosopher, points out that the experiments involve at least two mental reporting processes, one to do with the occurrence of the decision, one to do with the state of the clock, which makes any judgement of simultaneity highly problematic.

[107] See http://www.blutner.de/philom/consc/consc.html.

[108] See also B Mangan, "Taking phenomenology seriously: The 'fringe' and its implications for cognitive research." *Consciousness and Cognition* 2,2 1993:89-108.

especially the "negative morality" (*varitta,sīla*) of the Buddhist precepts, for example, "I take upon myself the training-rule *not* to harm life," and so on.

In his writings, Libet apparently does not claim that there is no free will, but simply discussed the "backward referral in time" of our conscious thoughts. Libet, in his abstract to his article, "Do We Have Free Will?" in *The Volitional Brain: Towards a Neuroscience of Free Will* that he co-edited (with Anthony Freeman and Keith Sutherland), remarks:

> Freely voluntary acts are preceded by a specific electrical change in the brain (the "readiness potential," RP) that begins 550 ms before the act. Human subjects became aware of intention to act 350-400 ms after RP starts, but 200 ms before the motor act. The volitional process is therefore initiated unconsciously. But the conscious function could still control the outcome; it can veto the act. Free will is therefore not excluded. These findings put constraints on views of how free will may operate; it would not initiate a voluntary act but it could control performance of the act. The findings also affect views of guilt and responsibility. But the deeper question still remains: Are freely voluntary acts subject to macro-deterministic laws or can they appear without such constraints, non-determined by natural laws and "truly free"?
>
> (Libet, Freeman & Sutherland, *The Volitional Brain,* 1999: abstract)

It is possible to argue that if our actions are already "decided" even before we execute them and that we are only conscious of them after the fact, then there is no such thing as a criminal act, since no one would then intentionally commit a crime! This is of course an over-simplification and misinterpretation of Libet's findings. Max Velmans, however, provides this apt response:

> If I know that an act is unlawful, but consciously choose to commit it, this reflects my state of mind irrespective of whether my conscious awareness of that state is determined by preconscious mental processing. "I" include my unconscious and preconscious mind/brain as well as my conscious experience. This allows one to establish *mens rea* and legal responsibility. I could plead that my conscious decision to commit a crime can't be held responsible, as it was determined preconsciously, by my brain. But then the judge could say: "The court accepts that your conscious decision is not guilty, but we will have to jail your brain!"
>
> (Velmans 2003:14 digital ed)

In closing, it should be said that we all do have choices or free will—as **the Atta,kārī Sutta** (A 6.38)[109] demonstrates—but it is *wisdom* that we need: a fool is more likely to choose foolishly, the wise are more likely to choose wisely. What we need is wisdom, and the choices would take their own proper course. The foolish lack free will when they following their habitual tendencies; the wise enjoy free will as long as they carefully watch the present moment and respond with a wholesome mind.

13 Buddhist conative[110] psychology

What Libet observed was that the experienced wish *follows* the readiness potential, but *precedes* the motor act itself (by around 200 milliseconds)—time enough to consciously *veto* the wish before executing it. Libet suggested that the *initiations* of the voluntary act and the accompanying wish are developed preconsciously, but consciousness can then act as a form of censor which decides whether or not to carry out

[109] A 6.38/3:337 f = SD 7.6.

[110] **Conation** refers to that aspect of the mental processes having to do with volition, striving, willing. The term was used historically to represent a basic mental faculty, and until recent times was rarely used. However, with the influence of Buddhist psychology, it is regaining currency along with **affection** (emotion, feeling, mood) and **cognition** (thinking, conceiving, reasoning, imagery, problem-solving, etc). In secular psychology, these are traditionally regarded as the three "mental functions." See AS Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 1985 svv.

the act.[111] Most significantly, Libet's findings seems to support the notion that we are aware of what we want to do, say or think *only after we have done, said or thought it*! Clearly this is the case in an ordinary worldly untrained in mindfulness. In 1998, Richard King, in his paper on "Vijñaptimatratā and the Abhidharma context of early Yogācāra," writes:

> It is important to bear in mind that the Yogācāra conception of *citta/vijñāna* denotes a whole complex of events and processes which cannot be adequately rendered by English terms such as "consciousness" or "mind." The "citta" of *cittamatra* includes within it the conscious apprehendsion of sensory objects (six in all including the *mano-vijñāna*). This is a crucial point to acknowledge since, for the Yogācāra school, the sensory apprehension of objects cannot be divorced from one's consciousness of it (though it is possible to make a purely abstract and theoretical distinction between *vedanā* on the one hand and *vijñāna*, *saṁjñā* and *saṁskāra* on the other when discussing the *skandha*s).
>
> In a sense the Yogācāra position offers the flipside to the standard Abhidharma position that *citta* is intentional, that is, that to be conscious is to be conscious of an object. For the Yogācāra, to postulate an object requires that it is first apprehended by a *citta*. The emphasis here is no longer on the suggestion that *citta* is intentional but rather on the fact that objects of consciousness are just that.
>
> Thus, the thesis of the intentionality of *citta* becomes displaced in the emerging [Yogācāra] philosophy by an emphasis upon the "phenomenalistic" nature of objects. Objects are really dharma-constructs and representations (*vijñapti*), dependent upon the complex processes of *citta* for their appearance. Thus, one can talk of apprehending a sensory object only after one has become conscious of it. Sensory apprehension is thereby subsumed by the Yogācāra analysis under the broader domain of "citta," which, now more clearly than ever, remains too rich and all-embracing a term to be rendered by "mind" or "consciousness."
>
> As well as an awareness of sensory objects, *citta* also denotes the organising faculty of the *manas*, the affective distortion of that process by the defiled mind (*kliṣṭa manas*) as well as the subliminal karmic seeds (*saṁskāra*s) and latent dispositions (*anusaya*) that are collectively known as the *alaya,vijñāna*. The complexity of terms like *citta*, therefore, when combined with the Yogācāra endorsement of the category of rupa-dharma and the acknowledgment that vijnana remains only one of five *skandha*s suggests that it is problematic to interpret the early Yogācāra literature as propounding a form of idealism at least in the sense in which this has commonly been understood in the West. (Richard King, 1998:6 (of 10) digital ed; slightly ed)

In early Buddhist mindfulness exercise, however, such as that taught in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), the practitioner to watch every action, feeling, thought and phenomenon that arise "the present state as it arises, with insight, see each of them" (*paccuppannañ ca yo dhammaṁ, tattha tattha vipassati*, M 3:117), as **the Bhadd'eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131.3) instructs.

The affirmative character of a Buddhist conative psychology is clearly evident in the texts. As Bruce Matthew declares,

> The whole Buddhist path is based to a degree on positive willing. In the Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*) the first factor in the so-called meditation or *samādhi* section[112] is **right effort**

[111] See Velmans 2002:21 n4, digital ed. See also R Karrer, C Warren & R Ruth, "Slow potentials of the brain preceding cued and non-cued movement: Effects of development and retardation," in DA Otto (ed), *Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Event-related Potential Research,* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978 & N Kanttinen & H Lyytinen, "Brain slow waves preceding time-locked visuo-motor performance," *Journal of Sport Sciences* 11 1993:257-266.

[112] On the structure of the threefold training and its canonical sources, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Introd (10d) (2004).

(*sammā,vāyāma*)[113] which indicates that the menal energy of proper attention and desire under-gird meditation: "And what, your reverences, is right effort? As to this…a monk generates desire, endeavours, stirs up energy, exerts his mind (*cittaṁ*), and strives for the non-arising of evil un-skilled states," M 3:251. (Bruce Matthews, *Craving and Salvation,* 1983:78; emphasis added)

In fact, the four right efforts, second only to right view,[114] applies to all the other factors of the noble eightfold path, especially the "training in moral virtue" (*sīla,sikkhā*), comprising right speech, right action and right livelihood, that encompasses the daily lives of both the monastic and the lay.

The Mahā Sakul'udāyī Sutta (M 77) summarizes the Buddha's teaching into the well known list of "seven sets," the third of which is a very proactive set of teachings, namely, the 4 bases of spiritual success (*iddhi,pāda*):[115]

Furthermore, Udāyī, I have taught my disciples the way: my disciples who practise the way cultivate **the four bases of spiritual success [power]** (*cattāro iddhi,pāda*)**.**

(1) Here, Udāyī, a monk cultivates the base of spiritual success, complete with concentration through zeal [desire to act] (*chanda*) and through determined endeavour.[116]

(2) He cultivates the base of spiritual success, complete with concentration through effort (*viriya*) and through determined endeavour.

(3) He cultivates the bases of spiritual success, complete with concentration through mind (*citta*) and through determined endeavour.

(4) He cultivates the base of spiritual success, complete with concentration through investigation (*vīmaṁsā*) and through determined endeavour.

And in this way, many of my disciples dwell having attained to the perfection that is the peak of superknowledge. (M 77.17/2:11)

Bruce Matthews, in his study of *Craving and Salvation* (1983), points to another important aspect of early Buddhism in that "the Sutta Piṭaka emphasizes the significance of positive conation":

This is seen in the clears distinction between unwholesome (*akusala*) and wholesome (*kusala*) desire and volition. This is notably the case with many synonyms for craving (*taṇhā*). The last chapter [2] referred to the "adhesive strip" of *taṇhā,* which describes a number of synonymous volitional factors. These, like *taṇhā,* bind consciousness (*viññāṇa*), mind (*mano*), and "personal-ity"(*citta*) to ignorance and *saṁsāra.* So in M 3:32 we find *chanda* (lust, striving), *rāga* (passion), *upādāna* (grasping) and *anusaya* (inclination), all used synonymously with *taṇhā.* There are as well other lists, such as D 3:238, where *pipāsa* (thirst) and *pariḷāha* (fever of passion) are used

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[113] The **Mahā Sakul'udāyī S** (M 77) defines the 4 right efforts thus: "(1) Furthermore, Udāyī, a monk rouses the desire for the non-arising (*saṁvara padhāna*) of unarisen evil unwholesome states, and endeavours, rouses effort, exerts the mind, and strives; (2) he rouses the desire for the abandoning (*pahāna padhāna*) of arisen evil unwholesome states, and…strives; (3) he rouses the desire of the arising (*bhāvanā padhāna*) of unarisen wholesome states, and…strives; (4) he rouses the desire of the maintaining (*anurakkhanā padhāna*), non-disappearance, strengthening, increase and developing to fulfillment of arisen wholesome states, and…strives. (M 77.16/2:11)

[114] On the primary position and universal relevance of **right view** (*sammā,diṭṭhi*), see **Mahā Cattārīsaka S** (M 117) = SD 6.10 (2004).

[115] Explained in **Iddhi,pāda Saṁyutta** (S 5:268 f). Other references: D 2:213 f, 3:77, 221; M 1:103, 2:11; S 4:365, 5:254-293 passim; A 1:39, 297, 2:256, 3:81 f, 4:464; Vbh 216; Pm 1:111, 113, 2:205. On a simpler level, these four bases of spiritual success power can be paraphrased as: (1) will power; (2) effort or energy; (3) mental focus; (4) reviewing one's progress. These can be applied in a more worldly sense as the four bases of success (in one's enterprises).

[116] "The base of spiritual success, complete with concentration through zeal and through determined endea-vour," *chanda,samādhi,padhāna,saṅkhāra,samannāgataṁmiddhipādaṁ*; Gethin: "the basis of success that is furnished both with concentration gained by means of desire to act, and with forces of endeavour" (2001:81). On *chanda* as the "desire to act," see Gethin 2001:90 f.

synonymously with craving, and in M 1:270 *nandī* (feeling of delight), like craving, is said to come just before grasping in the Series of Dependencies [*paṭicca,samuppāda*].

Some of these synonyms, notably *rāga* and *pariḷāha,* are never used in a positive conative sense. There are, though, instances where both *taṇhā* and other synonyms are used positively to express the reformation and cultivation of will and desire. (1983:78; Pāli refs normalized)

14 Summary

In summary, it should be said that while early Buddhism does not have a notion of "will" in the western philosophical sense [4], it distinguishes between conscious effort and "unconscious" habitual acts through the three doors of the body, speech and the mind. The ubiquitous teaching on mindfulness (*sati*) simply means that one should put forth a *conscious* effort in recognizing phenomena as they arise.

The central teaching of **the Bhadd'eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131) consists in the conscious watching of one's present actions (bodily, verbal and mental), noting them as a doctor would examine a patient, and nursing any unwholesome thought to wholesome health through reflecting on the nature of such actions as expressions of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self:

Let one not go back after[117] the past,
For what is past has passed away,[118]
The present state as it arises,[120]
Nor harbour fond hope for the future.
And the future has not yet come.[119]
With insight, see each of them.
(M 131.3/3:187-189)

In the ultimate analysis, however, we have to say there is really no free will, or there is no need for any will, on the level of the awakened mind, that is, one that fully understands the nature of not-self. Since there is no self, there is none to will, or, put in a positive language: there is none who wills; there is only the willing! We have thus broken free from Plato's cave,[121] and found ourselves in a crowded and noisy city and there is this intra-city driverless train that goes in a huge loop around the island. After a while we realize that we keep passing the same places repeatedly, and we are feeling lost, desperate and bored. So we choose the most likely station, get off, and start walking on our own effort. Despite the crowd—teeming with the helpless, the helpful, the self-helping and those helping themselves—we are basically alone and need to find our own way home to safety.

Only suffering exists, no sufferer is found;
The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there;
Nirvana is, but not the person who enters it;
The path exists, but no traveler is seen on it. (Vism 513)

— — —

[117] "Let one…go back after" (*anvāgameyya*), pot 3 sg of *anvāgameti* (caus of *anvāgacchati* = *anu* + *ā-gaccha-ti*), lit "to let come back," ie to wish something back (CPD).

[118] Alt tr: "For the past is gone."

[119] Alt tr: "And the future is yet unreached."

[120] Comy: One should contemplate each state as it arises by way of the 7 contemplations of insight (ie by way of insight into impermanence, suffering, not-self, disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, relinquishment) (MA 5:1 f).

[121] Plato's cave: see SD 5.6(19d) (2004).

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