

Free Will: Is Free Will viable in the Buddhist Context of Non-Self and Causality?

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Abstract

The concept, that everyone has the capacity to choose or control one's own decision is universally accepted and deeply intuited. In Western philosophy, this is widely known as 'free will'. Though this idea is intensely grounded, it appears as a huge religio-philosophical notion that is understood to be threatened by some early and pre-modern religious theories, such as the theory of fate, God's will, fortuity, and causation. Although Buddhism, which teaches the nature of action and causation, explicitly rejected various forms of theories that denied one's effort and free will, some scholars argue that free will has a clear contrast with the central doctrines of Buddhism. The problems arise especially with the teachings of 'Non-self' (Pāli: anatta, Skt.: anātma) and 'Dependent Co-origination' (Pāli: paṭicca-samuppāda, Skt.: pratītyasamutpāda). This paper aims to discuss the Buddhist perspectives on 'free will', scholarly denunciations of them and the fundamental Buddhist philosophy and free will.

Keywords: Free Will, Volition, Non-self, Dependent Origination, Nirvāṇa

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යමෙකු ගන්නා තීරණය කුමක් ද යන්න තෝරා ගැනීමට හෝ පාලනය කිරීමට සෑම කෙනෙකුටම හැකියාවක් ඇත යන සංකල්පය විශ්වීය වශයෙන් පිළිගත් ගැඹුරු සංකල්පයකි. බටහිර දර්ශනයේ දී එය ස්වච්ඡන්දතාව ලෙස හැඳින්වේ. මෙම අදහස දැඩි ලෙස පදනම් වූවත්, ඉරණම පිළිබඳ න්‍යාය, දෙවියන් වහන්සේගේ කැමැත්ත, වාසනාව සහ හේතු වැනි සමහර මුල් කාලීන හා පූර්ව-නූතන මූලධර්ම න්‍යාය මඟින් තර්ජනයට ලක් වූ ආගමික හා දාර්ශනික ක්‍රියාවක් බව පෙනේ. ක්‍රියාවේ ස්වභාවය සහ හේතුඵලවාදය පිළිබඳව විචාරශීලීව බොහෝ දේ උගන්වන බුදු දහම, කෙනෙකුගේ උත්සාහය සහ ස්වච්ඡන්දතා ප්‍රතික්ෂේප කළ විවිධ ආකාරයේ න්‍යායන් හා ආගමික ඉගැන්වීම් පැහැදිලිවම ප්‍රතික්ෂේප කළ නමුත් සමහර විද්වතුන් තර්ක කරනුයේ ස්වච්ඡන්දතා බුදු දහමේ කේන්ද්‍රීය මූලධර්ම සමඟ පැහැදිලි පරස්පරතාවක් ඇති බවයි. විශේෂයෙන් ගැටලු සහගත බවක් විද්‍යාමාන වනුයේ අනාත්මතාවාදය හා ප්‍රතීත්‍යසමුත්පාදවාදය යන ඉගැන්වීම් සමඟ ය. මෙම ලිපියෙහි අරමුණු වන්නේ ස්වච්ඡන්දතාව පිළිබඳ බෞද්ධ දෘෂ්ටිකෝණය අධ්‍යයනය කිරීම සහ ස්වච්ඡන්දතාව හා මූලික බෞද්ධ ඉගැන්වීම් පිළිබඳව විද්වත් මතිමතාන්තර සාකච්ඡා කිරීමයි.

යතුරු පද: ස්වච්ඡන්දතාව, චේතනාව, අනාත්මතාව, හේතුඵලතාව, නිර්වාණය

Introduction

Every person has the subjective impression of making a choice that is widely known as free will or freedom of choice and decision making. The concept of free will is generally accepted as one of the significant threefold notions in Ethics: freedom of thinking or free-thinking, responsibility, and free will. Buddhism equally emphasises those ethical norms as fundamental human privileges.

Although an exact corresponding Buddhist terminology for free will cannot be seen in the Buddhist literature, the terms that bear resemblance are not wholly absent in Buddhism. In Buddhism, volition (*cetanā*) plays a dynamic role in the action, but only voluntary action is considered as a valid action (*cetanāham bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*). Depending on one's intention and free will deed gets the measure of wholesome or unwholesome, right or wrong, or good or bad. This study primarily discusses the Buddhist view of 'free will' and some related arguments. Although Buddhism admits the great importance of free will in terms of socio-religious life and the course of the soteriological path, some argue that the notion of free will has a clear contrast with the fundamental Buddhist doctrines. Some Western intellects contend that there is no room for the concept of free will in Buddhism whatsoever since its central philosophy lies on the doctrine of the absence of an immortal Self (Pāli: *anatta*, Skt: *anātma*). Another argument is that 'Buddhism is an archetype of either hard or soft determinism because its full emphasis is given to the Dependent Co-origination' (Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*, Skt: *pratītyasamutpāda*), which explains the interdependency of origination, as well as cessation of every phenomenon. Therefore, nothing is autonomous. It is, thus, believed that these doctrines naturally negate the idea of free will.

Research Questions

The research questions it is intended to discuss in this paper are: What is Early Buddhist concept of free will? And, Can free will be Justifiable in the context of the doctrine of Non-Self and Dependent Co-origination?

Aims of the Research

The main objective of this study is to comprehend the true meaning of the early Buddhist understanding of the ‘free will’ theory. Further, it aims to examine whether free will is a valid concept in the Buddhist contexts of Non-Self and Causality or it has no meaning in the Buddhist philosophical setting.

Research Methodology

This is a library-based study, hence, the data for this research will be fundamentally collected from relevant primary and secondary sources. The study is, therefore, conducted by means of both early Buddhist suttas and their Commentarial explanations. Also, Some early Mahāyāna sutras and commentaries will be particularly studied here. Besides, as secondary sources, some selected important works done by both Western and Eastern scholars will be studied.

Importance of the Research

This present paper will be significant in several aspects. In particular, readers will accumulate adequate knowledge about early Buddhist understanding on the theory of free will and will be aware of the Western scholars’ counterarguments about the Buddhist doctrine of free will theory. Also, this study will facilitate readers to have relevant and sufficient information on some of the fundamental philosophical notion of early Buddhism as well as their parallel Mahāyāna concepts that, in turn, may help to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the basic Buddhist principles.

Discussion

The Buddhist View on Free Will

Numerous early Buddhist discourses emphasise the freedom of choice. The Buddha, on the one hand, clearly rejected a sort of free will that was not a force, which transcended physical energy and carried out the action of the soul that one could have maximum control over one's will, the will of one's verbal, physical and mental actions. On the other hand, he precisely accentuates that person should be capable of controlling his/her actions in conformity with one's will when there are no constraints, coercions, or compulsions on either planning or performance. In other words, the less one's mind is tainted or limited by outflows (kilesa or kleśa), the greater freedom of will one enjoys. In particular, the choices one makes cannot be considered as ultimately free as long as they are motivated by desire (taṇhādāso) or delusion associated with the belief of an autonomous and permanent 'Self'. The Madhupiṇḍika Sutta and Raṭṭhapāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya is a clear-cut example of how one becomes a slave of his defiled thoughts and emotions (ūno loke attitto taṇhādāso). Thus, when one leads his path towards soteriology, one needs to have freedom of will, because liberation ultimately requires the full eradication of all volitional activities (kammakkhaya and kammanirodha, M.82). What is more, all volitional activities give some kind of results or rebirth, thus, the enlightened noble person does not do any volitional either wholesome or unwholesome action. S. K. Nanayakkara remarks that nirvana would be impossible without free will. This implies that, unlike other religions, Buddhist salvation necessitates a certain capacity or power to choose or control his actions and choices.

The Buddha rejected all forms of biological and physiological fatalism, the theory of divine creation, and fortuitism because they are harmful to oneself and others, having no value in personal and social responsibility and restricting the freedom of thinking, free will, and spirituality. He advocated that everyone should have the freedom of making choices and performing their actions unreservedly. If his actions and decisions were pre-determined by fate, an omniscient God, or by a determined pattern, he would have no free will over his decisions. In the Devadaha Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya and the Brahmajāla Sutta and Sāmaññaphala Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Buddha categorically criticized all types of views of physiological, psychological, and natural deterministic theories (abhijāti-hetu or vāda, niyativāda, pubbekata-hetu, and sabhāva-hetu), creation theories (issaranimmāna-hetu) and indeterministic theories or tychism (adhicca-samuppanna-vādi) that indicate no value for human actions and mental cultivation. In particular, the Devadaha Sutta discloses the Buddha's denial of the deterministic principles that are to some extent compatible with some western theories. The causal theories that are negated in the Sutta are as follows:

Whatever experiences one has experienced are caused by his past karma (pubbekata-hetu)

- Whatever experiences one has experienced are pre-determined by a divine creation (issara nimmāṇa-hetu)
- Whatever experiences one has experienced are caused by circumstances and nature (saṅgati bhava-hetu)

- Whatever experiences one has experienced are caused by a class or classes of birth (abhijāti-hetu)
- Whatever experiences one has experienced are caused by the exertion here and now (diṭṭha dhammupakkama-hetu).

More detailed accounts of contemporary causal theories in ancient India can be found in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, where the Buddha criticized the harmful and futile nature of those principles. Thus, it is obvious that the Buddha castoffs concept of free will exists outside the causal connection, and by the same token, it also announces that one can choose and take responsibility for their choice. In another discourse of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN I 173-175), the Buddha stated that one breaks free of the past patterns of conditioning. To do so is not a matter of going beyond conditions, but of cultivating a more wholesome, skilful, wise set of conditions. And, it further asserts the way of becoming free, which is as follows: Determining to keep certain ethical precepts (sīla) would help to cultivate moral restraint and weaken bad habits of behaviour and guard the sense faculties. Developing inner clam (samādhi) would lead to build greater inner resilience and mental clarity, thereby bringing about a clearer and freer inner space. Cultivating wisdom (paññā) would begin to see phenomenal reality, which is impermanent (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta). Therefore, the true sense of free will over one's choices comes with the eradication of the outflows (kilesa-s) and developing mental qualities (bhāvanā). In this regard, Federman observes:

Buddhism rejects the concept that free will exists outside the causal nexus, and at the same time, it affirms that people can choose and take responsibility for their choices. Choosing the right action is not derived from a supernatural or super-casual origin. It is derived from wise contemplation over the possible consequences. This wisdom enables free will and is a faculty that can be developed. What limits free will is not causality itself, but various mental compulsions. The kind of free will that the Buddha taught is the acquired ability for clear reflection and wise choice that emerges with their eradication (Federman, 2010: 9).

The above passages indicate that though Buddhism contradicts the pre-deterministic and indeterministic theories, it does not mean the rejection of theories of conditionality wholesale. The numerous discourses illustrate the significance of holding personal responsibility for one's activities, free will, freedom of thinking, personal effort, and so on. Of course, it is a fact that every individual's action is caused by a multitude of causal conditions in its ultimate sense. However, Buddhism asserts that the psychological factors of volition play a crucial role in one's choice. The first two verses of the Dhammapada illustrate how one's intention judges his or her actions and retributions. Jayatilleke makes a clear explanation on this point. It states:

By free will in a Buddhist context, it is not meant that there is a will, choice or decision which is unaffected by causal factors that affect it. But that volitional act or will, choice or decision while being conditioned by such factors, are not wholly shaped or strictly determined by them, since there is in man 'an element of initiative' (*ārabhadhātu*) or 'personal action' (*purisakāro*) or 'individual action'

(attakāro) which can within the limit, restrict the factors that affect it (Jayatilleke, 2008: 7-8).

The emphasis is given to the internal features of action. Volition is a psychological factor that implies that a person's activities are subject to the conditions responsible for his actions. The Buddha, in the Vassakāra Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, stated that “He thinks whatever thought he wants (ākaṅkhati) to think and does not think (nākaṅkhati) a thought he does not want to think (vitakketi); he resolves (saṅkappeti) in whatever way he wants to resolve, and does not have a resolve (saṅkappa) he does not want; thus he has attained mental mastery over the ways of thought” (A II. 36-37). In addition, the Buddha, in the Vitakkasanthāna Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, rendered five different methods to discontinue the arising of thoughts, which are associated with desire, hatred and delusion. Through proper training of those five approaches, one is able to become a master of thoughts and attain concentration (samādhi).

In the Attakārī Sutta (A III. 337-338), the Buddha said that there is an element of initiating (ārabba-dhātu), an element of endeavour (parakkama-dhātu), an element of volitional effect (upakkama-dhātu), and that living beings act in various ways, and that Buddhism accepts the concept of free will. In this Sutta, the Buddha addressing a Brahmin, who said that ‘there is no free will within him (natthi-attakāro) or other (natthi-parakāro)’, states that ‘If there was no such thing call freedom of will, how he could approach to the Buddha and go away from the Buddha without having any external effect.’ And, he further articulates ‘there is such thing as ‘an element of initiative’ (ārabba-dhātu) and as a result, it is possible to observe how living things on the initiative,

which is called the free will of man (sattānaṃ attakāro).’ Also, he stresses that there is ‘an element of origination’ (ārabha-dhātu), ‘an element of exertion (nikkhama-dhatu), an element of endeavour (parakkama-dhātu), ‘an element of strength’ (thāma-dhātu), ‘an element of perseverance’ (ṭhiti-dhātu), and ‘element of a volitional effort’ (upakkama-dhātu) which allows people to act differently according to their own will, and this shows that there is such a thing as free will (Jayatilleke, 1970; 258).

Nonetheless, the freedom that Buddhists appraise is not the freedom to do whatever one desires, but freedom in searching for one’s ultimate happiness, being free from the suffering of self-centred desire or will – it is to search what is wholesome (kiṃ kusala gavesi), which had also been the Buddha’s ultimate quest, according to the Ariyapariyesana Sutta. As observed by Maxwell (1984), the Buddhist ideal of freedom is the capacity to achieve what is of value in a range of circumstances. Worldly beings are not entirely free, but constrained by various mental afflictions; As long as people’s choices are influenced by those afflictions, they remain in bondage to their resultant suffering. However, Buddhism asserts that suffering and its conditions too are impermanent (anicca in Pāli; anitya in Skt.), consequently, each individual has the capacity to change it through developing and establishing wise attention (yonisomanasikāra). Moreover, unlike other religious philosophers, Buddhism has introduced a non-sectarian self-evaluation method or a psychological filter to measure one’s desired activities. In the well-celebrated discourse on the Kālāmas, the Buddha admonished the Kālāmas to make a self-evaluation or reflection on will before performing it verbally, physically or mentally. According to the Kesaputtiya Sutta, it is said that

one should have freedom to choose a path and one's choice or decision should not be affected by the ten doubtful factors (dasa kaṅkhāniyaṭṭhāna). The Sutta unfold these points as thus:

Come Kālāmas, not be gone by tradition (aural), not be gone by lineage, not be gone by hearsay, not be gone by scriptural authority, not be gone by logic or reasoning, not be gone by inference, not be gone by reasoned thought, not be gone by acceptance of a view after pondering on it, not be gone by seeming ability, not be gone by the thought “this recluse is our teacher” or “this recluse is respected by us. (etha tumhe kālāma, mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭaka sampadānena, mā takkaheṭu, mā nayahetu, mā ākāraparivitakkena, mā diṭṭhinijjhānakkhantiyā, mā bhabbarūpatāya, mā samano no garu-ti.) (A I. 189-193).

The Sutta thus clearly and rightly remarks on how Buddhism particularly values one's freedom of choices and decision making. The Sutta goes further stressing the responsibility for the choice or decision one makes freely. It provides a universal filter that measures one's volition whether it is wholesome or unwholesome, or good or bad. The method of evaluation is explained that if any volitional actions are blameable or censured by wise, and the consequence of those actions brings about harm and suffering to the doer and others, then those activities are unwholesome and bad and should be abandoned. Or if they are otherwise, then they should be known as wholesome and fully undertaken. “Yadā tumhe kālāma attanāva jāneyyāta ime dhammā akusalā, ime dhammā sāvajjā, ime dhammā viññūgarahitā, ime dhammā samatta samādinna ahiṭāya dukkhāya saṃvattatī ti - atha tumhe kālāma pajaheyyāta ti.”

(A I. 190). Hence, it is obvious that Buddhism assertedly values peoples' freedom of will. However, the freedom of will is necessary to reflect wisely and utilize for the sake of well-being, happiness of both doers as well as others, which conduce to a person's moral life, mental cultivation and spiritual liberation.

The moral and spiritual dimension of the free will is explicitly expounded in the Rāhulovāda Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. There, the Buddha instructed Rāhula to reflect before, during and after performing any intentional action in order not to be led those actions by his habits and dispositions. Rāhula was further advised to be questioned himself that 'would this physical activity that I desire to perform (kattukāmo) cause harm to me, or others or both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with a painful result?' (Idaṃ kho kāyakammaṃ attabyābādhāya pi saṃvatteyya, parabyābādhā pi saṃvatteyya, ubhayabyābādhāya pi saṃvatteyya). The Buddha stressed that a person's physical, verbal, and mental activities are to be made with repeated reflection (paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā kāyena... vācāya... manasā kammam kātabbam). The careful reflection on desirous actions and their consequences will lead to wise and moral actions, which will bring well-being and happiness to both parties. It is because those wisely reflected acts are motivated by compassion (karuṇā) and loving-kindness (mettā).

Gomez (1975) states in his paper 'Some Aspects of the Free-Will Question in the Nikāyas' that though the Buddha refuted the free will that controls the soul over one's physical actions and absolute freedom of will. He emphasises the significance of individual effort, intention, desire spirituality.

“Buddhists deny the existence of an independent controlling power as well as the idea that actions are entirely determined by external conditions, they arrive at a middle way, a kind of control whereby liberation results from individual effort” (Gomez, 1975: 81). It is thus clear the early Buddhist perspective of the concept of free will. It implicitly contests the ultimate freedom of will, however, the minimal power of free will does not deny it. Buddhism categorically refutes all existing causal theories of pre-determinism, fatalism, indeterminism, and creation of God, asserting those theories have no value to do what should be done and to avoid doing what should not be done, nor do they make an effort in this respect (A I. 174-175). Thus, the Buddhist view of free will shifts from agent causation to a causal sequence of an impersonal process where the notion of free will is established. Buddhism explicitly indicates that one enables to achieve ultimate free will by eradicating all mental afflictions, where the nirvāṇa is attained, the unconditioned (asaṅkhata) state of spirituality. In particular, unlike other religions, the ultimate level of Buddhist soteriology can be accomplished by everyone who is sincerely committed to his or her spiritual cultivation.

Is Free Will Justifiable in the Context of the Doctrine of Non-Self and Dependent Co-origination?

The Doctrine of Non-self

The doctrine of non-self (Pāli: anattavāda, Skt.: anātmavāda) is the most distinguished Buddhist teaching, which makes Buddhism differ from other religions and philosophies, hence, this doctrine of non-self in Buddhism stands as an exclusive philosophy among the ancient Indian religious teachings as well as all the other contemporary

philosophical systems. According to the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (S III. 66), all configurations (saṃskhārā) are marked by three universal characteristics of existence (tilakkhaṇa) which are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and non-self (anatta). Although the first two factors of transience and suffering may be taught in some other religions, the ‘non-self’, the third characteristic, is unique to Buddhism. Focusing on this crucial principle of the absence of everlasting substance, the Buddha explained that nothing can be taken as permanent, independent and blissful as everything is configured in various factors of configurations. That is lucidly disclosed in the doctrine of the ‘twelve-linked formula of the Dependent Co-arising’ (paṭiccasamuppāda). Thus, a single cause of existence (theistical theories) is not accepted in Buddhism. Nevertheless, due to ignorance, ignorance of the Four Noble Truths (Pāli: catu-ariya-sacca; Skt.: catu-ārya-sattya), and especially ignorance of arising and vanishing of the five aggregates, people advocate that a sort of substantial entity (Pāli: atta, Skt.: ātma) exists within the name, matter and consciousness (nāma, rūpa saha viññāna) that remains unchanged and transmits from one life to another. Buddhism, however, does not support this concept. The Buddha admonished Mogharāja to abandon self-centred view and look upon the world as empty, which can make one go beyond death (“Suññato lokaṃ avekkhassu, Mogharāja sadā sato; attānudiṭṭhiṃ ūhacca, evaṃ maccutaro siyā.” (S. 1116-1119). Here the term ‘empty’ is used to indicate the emptiness of the eternal self or the absence of independent essence. In another discourse of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, we can find the use of the term ‘empty’ (suñña) in early Buddhism. “Forms... Eye-consciousness... Eye contact is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self. The ear is empty... The nose is empty... The tongue is empty... The body

is empty... The intellect is empty of a self or anything about a self. Ideas... Intellect-consciousness... Intellect-contact is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self. Thus it is said that the world is empty.” (S IV. 54). This in turn makes a proper understanding of the Buddhist setting on the notion of non-self.

The notion of ‘self’ or inherent identity within the corporeal body is a dominant pre-Buddhist religious as well as philosophical concept that has been the crucial matter for many religious and philosophical debates over epochs. Unlike Buddhism, all the other Brahminic and Śramanic religious philosophers generally acknowledged the theory of an eternal or a quasi-eternal soul inhabiting every being. According to the Vedic and Vedāntic teachings, there is an everlasting inner subject in every person who goes from one life to another. For instance, as it is stated in the Kaṭhapanośad: “The self is the Omniscient Lord. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, eternal, and imperishable; though the body is destroyed, he is not killed,...” (KP II. 5-8). Thus, in the religious context, worldly persons steadfastly believe in a fixed personality within an assembly of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhās). The Cūla-Saccaka Sutta is a clear-cut example, which reveals how the soul-doctrine dominates in Indian religious cultures.

Just as any seeds that exhibit growth, increase, and proliferation, all do so in dependence on the earth; or just as any activities requiring strength that are done, all are done in dependence on the earth; in the same way, Master Gotama, an individual with form as self, taking a stance on the form, produces merit or demerit. An individual with feeling as self... with perception as self... with fabrications as self...

with consciousness as self, taking a stance on consciousness, produces merit or demerit (M I. 237).

It is unambiguous from the above paragraph that people consider this assemblage of the five aggregates or any part of them as ‘Self’. People, due to ignorance, subjectively construct; “this is mine” (etaṃ mama); “this am I”, (eso ‘hamasmi); and “this is myself” (eso me attā). Since his or her empirical configurations are based on the five clinging-aggregates (pañca-upādākkhandhās), what he can deem as self is also the five aggregates. The discourse on Leash (the Gaddula Sutta) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya provides a clear exposition revealing how an ordinary person falsely conceptualises these aggregates as self. The Sutta describes it: “Just as a dog who was tied up on a leash was bound to a strong pillar, stands close to that pillar, sits down close to that pillar and lies down close to that pillar, so too, the uninstructed person regards the five aggregates as ‘mine’, ‘I, and ‘myself. If he walks, he walks close to matter, feeling, perception, configurations, or consciousness. If he stands, he stands... If he sits down, he sits down... If he lies down, he lies down close to matter, feeling, perception, configurations or consciousness.” (S III. 151). Thus, he believes in the notion of an immoral soul inwardly and outwardly.

Nevertheless, the Buddhist perspective on this matter is unambiguous. All configurations are devoid of self (sabbe dhammā anatta). The ephemeral and deceptive nature of the five bundles of grasping is expressed in numerous early Buddhist discourses. Buddhism has used several methods to negate the notion of a permeant soul internally and externally. But with the negation of the personal agency, the problem of free will is put forward. If there is not an agent or self within

oneself, how would it be possible to discuss the concept of free will in Buddhism? Or who is free to take any action if it teaches the non-existence of self? Before the discussion of this matter, let us briefly explore the doctrine of Dependent Co-arising (paṭiccasamuppāda).

The Doctrine of Conditionality

The causal theories that prevailed at the time of the Buddha have been sketchily described in the earlier passages, and a space is provided here to elucidate the Buddhist teaching on causality. In Buddhism, the doctrine of dependent co-origination is a key philosophy that is the true nature of the world. According to this principle, nothing exists independently, therefore, everything is relative. In other words, every event is followed by a series of causal relations. Nothing arises or ceases independently. In particular, Buddhism asserts a multitude of causes and effects. Although in the Nikāya literature, this teaching is explained in diverse formulations, they are presented to show how suffering is gradually originated dependent on various causes and conditions, and how suffering is conditionally ceased. This theory of conditionality is introduced to educate a few philosophical matters of life: According to Bodhi (1995), this describes the causal structure of the cycle of repeated birth and death and the origin of suffering and cessation of suffering.

The significance of this Dharma is frequently seen when the Buddha expressed his experience of enlightenment. The Buddha stressed that in order to attain enlightenment, one must understand the profound meaning of the paṭiccasamuppāda. In the Mahāhatthipadoma Sutta and the Mahānidāna Sutta, the Buddha emphasised that “One who

sees the Dependent co-arising sees a thing (dhamma) and one who sees a thing (dhamma) sees the Dependent Co-arising” (M I. 184; D II. 55). Also, it further shows how either physical or mental things arise and cease in the world. In presenting this profound doctrine, which is a discovery of the Buddha, yet not an innovation, the Buddha negated two extreme views: the view of externalism (*sāssatadiṭṭhi*) and the view of annihilation (*ucchedadiṭṭhi*). The *Kaccānagotta Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* instructs *Kaccāna*: “The world proceeds on duality, of the view of existence and the view of non-existence. ...Not approaching either extreme the *Tathāgata* teaches the doctrine by the middle.” (S II. 17). Hence, this doctrine is known as the ‘middle doctrine’ of Buddhism. Moreover, the Buddhist theory of causation denies the theory of ‘self-causation’, ‘external causation’ and ‘fortuitous theory’ as well, stressing that nothing arises from nothing, nothing arises from a single cause, but everything arises and ceases depending on many causes and conditions. Thus, Buddhism thoroughly highlights the plurality of conditionality.

The sole purpose of presenting this doctrine is to explain how suffering comes to be dependently and how to liberate from suffering by abandoning its causes and conditions. In the *Dasabala Sutta*, the fundamental formula of the dependent origination explains how things arise and cease relatively. “*Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*” (when this is, this is), “*Imasmiṃ asti idaṃ na hoti*” (when this is not, this is not). And “*Imassa uppādā idaṃ uppajjati* (on this arising, this arises); “*Imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirodhati*” (on this ceasing, this ceases) (S II. 28). This abstract structural form of this doctrine provides us with a clear picture of the nature of the relation that subsists between causes and effects. In short,

it illustrates how things arise and cease simultaneously and mutually depending on numerous conditions.

Also, this doctrine openly and categorically refutes the validity of the orthodox doctrine of Self (attavāda or ātmavāda). The discourse of Vajira illustrates this with a simile thus: “This is a heap of sheer constructions. No being is found here. Once the parts are assembled, the word ‘chariot’ is used. So, when the aggregates are present, the convention is ‘a being.” (S I. 134). In short, according to this law of nature, the formation and dissolution of every physical, as well as mental phenomenon caused by manifold conditions are therefore relative, empty, not-self, as well as not independent. Similar to the doctrine of non-self, there are some scholarly arguments regarding the doctrine of conditionality and free will. They argue: If there is no such thing called ‘agent’ or ‘person’, then who is free to perform? Or how is free will possible or how can choice or decision be up to one’s will if everything is relative? Or does Buddhism teach another type of soft or hard Determinism? Or does free will mean something independent of conditions? None of the questions can be answered with black and white answers, thus, the following passages will make room to study these matters.

Although Buddhism negates the notion of a permanent ‘Self’ within the psychophysical components, it accepts the idea of an empirical self, ‘my-self’. In another word, according to early Buddhist discourses, there is no ‘Self, yet there is ‘my-self’. As G. A. Somaratne (2018) observes “Ignorant as he is of the true state of affairs, the negation that “there is no self for me” misleads the mundane person into thinking that he is devoid of both self and ‘my-self’. The

view that “there is no self for me” thus takes him away from seeing the true state of affairs concerning himself, which is that though there is no self, there yet is ‘my-self’.” Because of this misunderstanding, many Western and even some Buddhist scholars erroneously have interpreted the Buddhist view of free will. In the Attakiriya Sutta (the Discourse on Self-Doer) and the Nidāna Sutta (the Discourse on Causes), when a Brahmin holds a view that there is no self-doer (attakāro) and there is no other-doer (parakāro), the Buddha counterargued that if there is no such thing self-doer or other-doer, how he could come forward by himself (sayam abhikkamanto) and go away (sayam paṭikkamanto) without having any external effect. The Buddha further stressed that an element of initiating (ārabba-dhātu), an element of endeavour (parakkama-dhātu), an element of volitional effect (upakkama-dhātu) make people of their own accord act in various ways. This advocates that Buddhism accepts the concept of free will though it denies the absolute sense of freedom of action. This is further clarified by analysis of the doctrine of two truths, the conventional truth (Pāli; sammuti-sacca, Skt. samvṛti-satya) and the ultimate truth (in Pāli; paramattha-sacca, in Skt. paramārtha-satya) These two Pāli technical terms (sammuti-sacca and paramattha-sacca) cannot be found in the Sutta Piṭaka instead we can find another two terms “nīyattha” and “neyattha”, which to some extent bear resemblant meaning to two former terms respectively. However, it was the Abhidharma traditions that firstly, introduced the doctrine of the Two Truths (sammuti-sacca and paramattha-sacca) and subsequently, this concept was specially developed by Mādhyamaka, a philosophical school of early Mahāyāna. Let us briefly explain the doctrine of the two truths.

The doctrine of the Two Truths is one of the central philosophical thoughts in Mainstream Buddhism as well as the other Buddhist traditions. Particularly, for the Mādhyamikas, the Two Truths are at the heart of the Buddha's philosophy. Nevertheless, the two truths, as we know them today, are not known in the earliest Buddhist thought in India because we cannot find the explicit and direct doctrine or similar terms to the Two Truths within early Buddhist discourses. Scholars believe that the Buddha himself may not have made any explicit reference to the two truths. It is said that the two truths distinction is an innovation of the Abhidharmic traditions, especially, this teaching was well-developed by Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Indian Mādhyamaka school. As mentioned in his book, the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* (henceforth MMK), the two truths are: “Dve satye samupāsritya - buddhanaṃ dharmadesanā, Loka samvṛti satyaṃ ca – satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ” (The Buddha teach the Dharma to rely on the Two Truths, the conventional truth and ultimate truth). Murti (2009) describes this: “Knowledge of the conventional truth informs us how things are conventionally, and thus grounds our epistemic practice in its proper linguistic and conceptual framework. Knowledge of the ultimate truth informs us how things are ultimately, and so takes our minds beyond the bounds of conceptual and linguistic conventions.” The MMK further explains that “Without relying on the conventional truth, the meaning of the ultimate truth cannot be explained, and without realising the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa cannot be achieved.” (Vyavahāra- manśritya – paramārtho na deśyate, Paramārtha- manāgamyā – nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate). This clearly indicates that those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths would fail to understand the Buddha's teaching. Therefore, to realise the true meaning of the teachings, one should lucidly comprehend what is

conventional truth and ultimate truth. To comprehend the Buddhist understanding of free will and the other concepts, it is necessary to know the doctrine of the Two Truths. If the two truths are understood, there is no problem with free will in Buddhism.

As has been observed by Das and Sahu (2018), though Buddhism rejects the ultimate reality of self and phenomena, it does not destroy the meaning of empirical existence. Though things do not ultimately exist, they conventionally exist. Hence, there is an act of will, but cannot be absolute ownership of action. They further state that the Buddha's view is shifted from the agent causation (ultimate initiators of action) to a causal sequence of impersonal processes, i.e., internal relationship. Therefore, the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and the dependent co-arising exclude the ultimate sense of free will, yet it never overlooks the importance of the minimal sense of free will. It is mentioned in the *Paramārtha Śūnyatā Sūtra* (the Discourse on Ultimate Emptiness), "there is a free action, there is retribution, but there is no agent that passes from one set of momentary elements into another one, except the lawful connection of those elements." By the same token, the *Visuddhimagga* (1975) states that there is an action, but there is no doer. The Buddha denied the concept of soul and at the same time teaches freedom of choice, individual responsibility, and personal effort. So, this teaching equally negates the Western theory of Cartesian dualism, the soul serves as an ultimate source of control, which is a very similar idea to the *Upaniṣads*. Nevertheless, Buddhism rejects them and stresses the dynamic volitional process, which is embedded in causality. Thus, free will, in Buddhism, does not mean that there is will that is the independence of conditions, but it is one's effort, endurance,

or ability to control actions in conformity with will when there are no restrictions. Furthermore, it is clear from the two Buddhist teachings discussed above that Buddhism affirms one's freedom of choice and decision making, but not its ultimate sense. In particular, a person is ultimately free from all the conditional and volitional actions when he or she achieves enlightenment, in which the mind is fully cleansed by all the mental affliction, agitation, and turmoil, thereby enabling him to enjoy total freedom. In addition, for Buddhism, the ultimate free will is to make choice and decision, which is free of all sorts of slavery of mental defilements. It is to gain victory over oneself which is said to be nobler than gaining victory over hundreds of thousands of people (*yo sahasam sahasena samgame jine*; Dh. 102). The freewill neither goes against nor enslaved by worldly convention.

Conclusion

The first part of this paper discussed the Buddhist perspective on the concept of free will in which we have elucidated the Buddhist understanding of this notion. Accordingly, the Buddha never excluded one's freedom and right of will, instead, he leads people to enjoy ultimate freedom that can be achieved by eradication of all mass of mental and physical afflictions. Thus, he refuses the theory of determinism, indeterminism and supernatural power of unseen gods affirming that those theories and beliefs make no significant value in an individual's free will, personal effort and moral responsibility. He, therefore, emphasizes the great importance of cultivating the mind. As discussed above, the Buddha highly encouraged people to acquire sound knowledge which is not influenced by external factors,

and that knowledge should be developed through self-investigation and repeated reflection. So, the freedom one should have in one's choices is emphasised. Concisely, to accomplish Buddhist soteriology, one needs to have freedom of thinking, investigation and choice.

The second part of the paper discussed some ongoing questions pertaining to the Buddhist understanding of free will, and also to what extent, the concept of free will is compatible with the fundamental Buddhist doctrines, particularly, the doctrine of Non-self and Dependent Co-origination. As we have examined, free will is not a valid conception in Buddhism in its ultimate sense (paramattha), where every phenomenon arises and ceases interdependently and relatively. However, in the conventional reality (sammuti-sacca), the possibility of an individual's freedom of choice and decision making is firmly established. Also, the doctrine of Not-self analytically castoffs the absolute existence of an eternal 'Self' within the five aggregates, Buddhism acknowledges the idea of my self. Therefore, the Buddhist doctrine of Non-self and Dependent Co-arising exclude absolute free will, yet it never overlooks the importance of the minimal sense of a person's freedom of actions. Buddhism does believe that man has the ability to make choices and take actions up to his or her, however, man has never ultimately been free as long as he or she goes around a chain of causality. One who breaks the circle of the causal chain (samsara), would experience the ultimate autonomy of his or her actions. And, what limits one's free will is not Causality or Non-self itself, but various psychological compulsions.

End Notes

1. See, S. K Karunaratna, 1979, “Cetanā,” Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. V.
2. (The Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, S III. 66), repeatedly emphasises that “All these components of existence are characterized by change or transience (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and insubstantiality (anatta)
3. “Here, monks the uninstructed mundane person does not understand matter subject to arising objectively, as it truly is, thus: ‘Matter is subject to arising.’ He does not understand matter subject to vanishing objectively, as it truly is, thus: ‘Matter is subject to vanishing.’ He does not understand matter subject to arising and vanishing objectively, as it truly is, thus: ‘Matter is subject to arising and vanishing.’ He does not understand feeling,... perception,... configurations,... consciousness subject to arising,... subject to vanishing,... subject to arising and vanishing objectively, as it truly is, thus: ‘Consciousness is subject to arising and vanishing.’ This is called ignorance, monk, and in this way, one is immersed in ignorance.” (S III. 171).
4. In Brahmanism, the term was used for the soul is ‘Ātman’ or ‘Brahman’ whereas in the Jain context, the term ‘Jīva’ has been referred to as the soul.
5. See the Kāthopaniśad; “The wise man who, by means of concentration on the Self, realises that ancient, effulgent One, who is hard to be seen, unmanifest, hidden and who dwells in the buddhi and rests in the body—he, indeed, leaves joy and sorrow far behind”. “The knowing Self is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting and ancient. It is not killed when the body is killed”. (KP.II.5-8)
6. “If free will implies a will independent of conditions, independent of cause and effect, such a thing does not exist. How can a will, or anything for that matter, arise without conditions, away from cause and effect, when the whole of existence is conditioned and relative and is within the law of cause and effect?” (Rahula, Walpola, 1959: 54-55).