

Free Will in Buddhism and Western Philosophy

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1. Introduction

From the beginning of western philosophy the possibility of a human free will has been contentiously debated. Today the literature regarding the free will problem and offered solutions is vast and conflicting. A short overview is available at Wikipedia¹, a more comprehensive account of the thinking of mainly contemporary English speaking philosophers regarding this topic, as well as regarding other philosophical areas, is likewise available on the internet at *The Information Philosopher*², summarized in a book titled *Free Will. The Scandal in Philosophy*³. Corresponding literature related to the Buddhist way of thinking is referred to in chapter 3.

In early Buddhism the possibility of a free will has not been discussed. Neither in the Nikāyas, the early Buddhist texts of Theravāda-Buddhism, nor in the scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism the free will problem is mentioned. It was only when people from the West started to get interested in Buddhism that the possibility of a free will had become a topic.

The present article is meant to provide an easily understandable introduction into the dilemma; it is not a treatise fulfilling academic requirements. At first a few definitions from a western point of view are given, followed by introducing some basics regarding the free will question from a western and Buddhist perspective. The discussion of the Buddhist viewpoint is based mainly on the Theravāda-Buddhist scriptures. The interested reader will find additional material in the quoted literature.

In order to understand the discussion regarding the Buddhist position it is necessary to have some elementary knowledge of the Buddhist teachings on Non-Self (*anattā*), Dependent Origination (*paticca-samuppāda*) and *Karma*. Introductions in these three topics are available free of charge by the author of the present article as well (see Chapter 6. About the Author, Publications, on page 15).

As I cannot read the early Buddhist texts written in Pāli, Sanskrit⁴ or some Chinese language, I have to rely on translations of these early texts and their commentaries into English or German language. Any misinterpretation of these texts or commentaries as well as of some difficult to understand philosophical texts and any peculiar use of the English language (I am not a native English speaker) is solely the responsibility of the author and I sincerely apologise for any mistake that may have occurred.

Sometimes I've commented inside a quotation. These comments are clearly marked in [\[square brackets\]](#) and/or in blue colour. Pāli terms and common Buddhist terms are printed in *italics*.

Any comment, suggestion, critique regarding this paper is welcome.

¹ Wikipedia. Free Will, see Literature / 1 /

² The Information Philosopher/Freedom/Problem, see Literature / 2 /

³ Bob Doyle. *Free Will. The Scandal in Philosophy*, see Literature / 3 /

⁴ Early Buddhist scriptures use either Pāli or Sanskrit, two closely related literary languages of ancient India.

2. Free will from a western perspective

2.1 Definitions

The Encarta⁵ encyclopaedia gives the following definition of the human will:

“Will (philosophy and psychology), capacity to choose among alternative courses of action and to act on the choice made, particularly when the action is directed toward a specific goal or is governed by definite ideals and principles of conduct. Willed behavior contrasts with behavior stemming from instinct, impulse, reflex, or habit, none of which involves conscious choice among alternatives. Willed behavior contrasts also with the vacillations manifested by alternating choices among conflicting alternatives.”

Arthur Schopenhauer⁶, a German philosopher (1788-1860), writes: “When a human being wills, he wills something; his act of will is always directed towards an object and is conceivable only in reference to such.”

According to Wikipedia⁷ there is no generally accepted definition of the term *freedom*. Schopenhauer⁸ defines: “Freedom is the absence of everything that impedes and obstructs.” In his *Prize Essay on the Freedom of Will* (see / 5 / pages 521-527 and 624-627) he distinguishes three subcategories of freedom, which I summarize as follows:

1. **Physical freedom** (freedom of action) is the absence of material obstacles of every kind. The actions of animals and human beings are voluntary and proceed only from their will. This category comprises political freedoms like freedom of assembly and freedom of speech as well as religious freedom.
2. **Intellectual freedom.** Cognition, perception is not impaired. The person is able to recognize events and motives as they are present in the ‘outer’ world. For example there are no distortions due to insanity, dementia, alcohol, drugs etc.
3. **Moral freedom.** While physical freedom is related to material obstacles, moral freedom implies that people can make their decisions unimpeded by threats, promises, dangers ... according to their will.

The intellectual freedom is of little importance for our discussion of the freedom of will. Here we have to deal primarily with the moral and to a lesser extend with the physical aspect of freedom.

In everyday language freedom of will can get confused with freedom of action⁹. While a definition of the freedom of action is hardly controversial, no generally accepted description of free will exists. Sometimes a distinction is made between a conditioned and an unconditioned form of the freedom of will.

- **Freedom of action**
A person is free to act if he/she can do what he/she wants to do.
- **Conditioned freedom of will**
A person has a conditioned free will if he/she can act according to his/her personal desires, convictions, tendencies and motives. Even though there seems to be the possibility to choose, the will actually is not free but determined by motives (see below) as it is still possible to ask: Why did you choose this and not something else? The answer can only be: I have chosen this because I am the person I am with my individual character, conditioned by past, present or anticipated future motives in such a way that I had no choice other than to choose what I have chosen. Only if I could be someone else, if I

⁵ Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD], see Literature / 4 /

⁶ Schopenhauer in / 5 /, page 532. Translated by the author.

⁷ Wikipedia. Free Will, see Literature / 1 /

⁸ Schopenhauer in / 5 /, page 521. Translated by the author.

⁹ “Free Will is sometimes called Freedom of Action.” In / 3 /, page 404.

had a different character, I might have been able to choose differently. If one looks a little closer into it one realises that the conditioned free will is nothing but the freedom of action – I can do what I will.

- **Unconditioned freedom of will**

The will of a human being is not necessitated by anything, is in no way determined, not even by his/her desires, convictions, tendencies and motives – actually this would be an effect out of the blue without a cause. An uncaused effect with no regard for earlier conditions is considered absurd and impossible.

Schopenhauer writes:

“As a result of the empirical concept of freedom we have: ‘I am free, if I can *do what I will,*’ and the freedom is already decided by this ‘what I will.’ But now since we are asking about the freedom of *willing* itself, this question should accordingly be expressed as follows: ‘Can you also *will* what you will?’ This appears as if the willing depends on yet another willing lying behind it.”¹⁰ (Italics in the original).

Following these introductory definition we can now approach the question: Why is the possibility of a human free will regarded as being problematic? The opponent of the free will is the principle of cause and effect or the principle of causality: everything that happens must have a cause.

2.2 The principle of cause and effect

The principle of causality is based on the principle of sufficient reason which in a word says: nothing happens without reason. This is so engrained in human cognition that it seems to belong, as the intuition of space (objects are located next to each other) and time (events happen one after another), to the fundamental (a priori) tools of human cognition. Even toddlers ask with *why?* after the cause of an observed or experienced event. According to the principle of sufficient reason one can distinguish three areas where the principle of cause and effect appears in a different form each.

- a) In the empirical, material world the reason is called a cause. With *why?* we ask why something has happened or arose, why something has changed.
- b) Regarding human behaviour we ask with *why?* after the reason or motivation triggering a decision or action.
- c) In respect to human cognition the answer to the question *why?* provides the reason why we regard something as being true. This can be due to logic or experience.

The principle of causality is operating in each of these three areas with the same necessity. As the stone in my hand will fall if I let go of it, as I have to accept the truth of a logical conclusion if the premises are true, so is my wanting, choosing, willing necessitated by the relevant motives.

Humans experience three types of causes¹¹; all of them are changes from a previous state.

1. A **cause** relates to changes in inorganic objects, e.g. on a physical, mechanical or chemical level. It requires physical contact. The effect is in proportion to the cause and governed by natural laws, e.g. the laws of gravity, Newton’s laws of motion, thermodynamics, electrodynamic, etc. From a change of the cause the resulting effect can be calculated and vice versa. Cause and effect are directly related in the present.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer in / 6 /, page 6.

¹¹ Wikipedia. On the Freedom of Will, see Literature / 7 /. Modified by the author.

2. A **stimulus** is a change that produces a reaction in an organism that is devoid of knowledge, such as vegetation, or on a vegetative (subconscious) level in the animal world, e.g. a flower opens when exposed to sunlight, others (e.g. *Mimosa pudica*) close when touched. It requires physical contact. The effect is related to the duration and intensity of the stimulus yet the increase in the intensity of the effect does not always correspond to the increase of the intensity of the cause. For example does an excessive amount of fertiliser not necessarily result in an increased yield but may lead to decreased yields and even to the death of the plant. Stimulus and the resulting effect are directly related in the present.
3. **Motivation** is causality that passes through a knowing mind. The motive needs only to be perceived, no matter how long, how close, or how distinct it appears. For animals, the motive must be immediately present. Humans, however, can also respond to motives that are abstract concepts and mere thoughts. Motives from the past or the anticipated future can have an effect in the present or in the future. Humans are capable of deliberation in which a stronger abstract motive outweighs other motives and determines the will to act with the same necessity that causes the billiard ball to roll when receiving an impact.

The principle of cause and effect is a rule observed in nature and the foundation of human cognition. "Causality (also referred to as causation or cause and effect) is the natural or worldly agency or efficacy that connects one process (the *cause*) with another process or state (the *effect*), where the first is partly responsible for the second, and the second is partly dependent on the first."¹² Different causal or natural laws related to specific natural processes are recognized. The principle of cause and effect describes changes of physical and mental states and their respective causes in time but is not concerned with the existence of the objects itself. A change in the state of object A causes a change in the state of object B, but in order for object A to change something else must have changed before and for that one to change another one must have changed before and so on till the beginning of time without being able to point out a first cause in this causal chain. Christianity has undertaken to put an end to the infinite regress by postulating God as the first cause. As infinity cannot be the object of scientific study, the validity of a universal valid principle of causality cannot be proven, it can only be 'believed', and is even challenged by the findings of quantum physics.

Different theories exist regarding the interaction of a free will and the principle of causality. Here we will look briefly at four of these hypotheses:

- **Determinism.** Determinism holds that everything happening in the universe incl. human action and behaviour is clearly determined by unchangeable natural laws. The strong determinism postulates a causal chain that is incessantly and without exception valid for all events from the big bang (the supposed origin of the universe) until today and that the future would be predictable if only we would know all relevant conditions (Laplace's demon¹³). According to this view a free will is impossible. A moderate form of determinism, known as weak or soft determinism, allows for a human free will. According to this moderate form a person is acting freely when he/she wills a certain action but would be able to act otherwise if he/she would will to do so (see Compatibilism).
- **Indeterminism** is the opposite of determinism. This view presumes that events exist which are not completely determined by previous ones, i.e. they are accidental, for example heads or tails when flipping a coin. Indeterminism cannot support the notion of free will as a decision would not be free but accidental.

¹² Wikipedia. Causality, see Literature / 8 /

¹³ Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827), French astronomer and mathematician. Laplace's demon knows the positions, velocities, and forces for all the particles in the universe at a given time. If strong determinism is true, this demon could calculate the state of the universe and everything in it at any time in the past or future.

- **Compatibilism** is a kind of via media between determinism and indeterminism. Adherents of this theory claim that determinism is compatible with free will thus corresponding to the theory of weak or soft determinism. According to compatibilists is a person acting freely when he/she wills a certain action but would be able to act otherwise if he/she would will to do so. As with the soft or weak determinism the freedom in question is merely the physical freedom or the freedom of action.
- **Incompatibilism**, as the name suggests, maintains that a free will and determinism are incompatible. Free according to this view are actions and decisions, which are only determined by myself and not by circumstances which I cannot control.

In order for a state to change several conditions need to come together of which the last one, or perhaps the most significant one, is often referred to as the cause but it takes all conditions to bring about the change. For instance it needs a dry piece of wood, a certain temperature and oxygen to light the piece of wood. The existence of the piece of wood and oxygen alone is not sufficient; it needs an additional condition, the ignition temperature, e.g. a burning match. The arriving of the last condition, the burning match, can now be regarded as the cause for the lighting of the piece of wood, but actually all three conditions are required. When all three of them are present, the change will happen with necessity and without delay. Finally each and every event is caused by more than one condition (of the same value).

Please note: With the exception of certain areas in traditional physics (e.g. mechanics) it is only allowed to infer from the cause to the effect but not from the effect to the cause. One can conclude that the striking of a match has caused a flame but one cannot conclude that a flame is caused by the striking of a match as there are many other possible causes for the arising of a flame (e.g. a lighter or a magnifying glass).

The principle of cause and effect does not include the (religious) idea that everything in the universe is somehow connected with each other. A wooden chair is the result of the work of a carpenter and the existence of a tree. In order for the carpenter to do his work he needs tools, manufactured by someone else, he needs to eat so a baker had to bake bread made from wheat a farmer had to grow which required fertile soil and a conducive climate ... The existence of a tree is dependent on a seed, fertile soil, rain, protection from pests, sunshine, the universe etc. Several causal chains that could be detailed to any degree are imaginable; imaginable are certain contacts of some of these causal chains, but the idea that everything in the universe is somehow, even lawfully, connected with each other is beyond my imagination.

When I leave the house and a roof tile is falling on my head, this seems to be accidental or coincidental rather than a causal link (except I'd banged the door so forcefully that the tile came off due to the vibration).

An example shall now demonstrate how the human will is influenced by motives.

Example

Imagine you are hiking from one village to another. There is a mountain between both villages and the path bifurcates at the foot of this mountain. One path is crossing the mountain, the other is leading around it. While the path across the mountain is shorter and less time consuming, it is more arduous to walk. You are healthy and able to walk any of both paths. Arriving at the bifurcation you have to decide which path to take. Are you in this situation completely free to choose to cross the mountain or to walk around it?

Your immediate answer might be: "Yes, I am absolutely free in my decision. I can do what I will. If I choose to walk across the mountain, I walk across it and if I want to walk around it, I can do that as well." This answer is obviously correct. *If you want* to cross the mountain, you *can do* that; that's the freedom of action or physical freedom. But when asking about the freedom of will we ask, if, under the given cir-

circumstances in this specific situation, you could choose either of both paths; the question is if your choice is free, undetermined, arbitrary or if it is influenced or determined by something.

According to the principle of causality there is no effect without a cause. Regarding the human will this means that there is no willing, wanting, choosing without a corresponding motivation. The choice whether to cross the mountain or to walk around it is therefore not based on an arbitrary free will but dependent on motives. Our cognition or intellect provides different motives in favour for both alternatives. Reason (wisdom) evaluates, thinks it over and presents its findings to the will to make a decision, e.g. as follows:

Variation 1

The track across the mountain is shorter but more exhausting than the path around it and besides the weather is hot. The route around the mountain takes more time but follows a small stream through a shady forest – very pleasant; on the other hand it is late in the afternoon already ...

These are a few possible motives pondered by reason and offered to the will; the latter then making a decision which under the given circumstances in the present situation and in accordance with my character cannot be otherwise – I decide to take the path across the mountain and that's what is going to happen.

Variation 2

A week later I find myself again at that bifurcation. The night before I didn't sleep well, I woke up early and I'm feeling tired. My character hasn't changed over the week, but this time I decide, maybe because I'm curious and want to know the path around the mountain as well, to walk around the mountain. Again a choice which, given the circumstances in the present situation, could not be otherwise. The strongest motive determines my will (choice). In Variation 1 this might have been the late time of the day, in Variation 2 my tiredness or my curiosity.

Variation 3

Now a group of hikers is faced with this situation. Some of them have a very active character, others are less energetic and more cautious. In general the more active ones would take the track across, the less energetic ones the path around the mountain, but as a matter of course their choices depend on the circumstances and their individual character. A hiker with a tendency for challenges and adventures nevertheless may choose the more comfortable path, maybe because he wants to accompany a friend, and a cautious, more leisurely hiker who wants to train his body, may choose the more exhausting path across the mountain.

2.3 Is it possible to develop or change, to become a different person if we do not have a free will?

Our actions are determined by our will yet our will isn't free in its decisions but governed by the circumstances in the present situation (motives) and our character; they finally depend on what kind of person I am. To me the character of a human being, after having been consolidated during childhood and youth, doesn't change much with age but even if I cannot become a different person, I may be able to make a different decision in a similar situation (exactly the same situation will most likely not occur again). How can that be possible? It is possible by becoming more reasonable, by developing some wisdom and thus becoming able to appraise events (motives) differently. Sense impressions reach the mind via the sense organs where they are processed, resulting in representations of the perceived. The 'reason' called capability of human beings is able to form concepts of the perceived representations and to combine them with other concepts, to draw conclusions, to recognize rules and principles. We can think, can combine

and test different possible behaviour and actions and their likely results merely in the mind and present them to the will to make a decision. We are able to learn from past experiences and to apply this to current and future decisions. Thus we can develop a certain degree of wisdom by means of experience, education, meditation, etc. This wisdom allows to assess motives differently which, as long as my cognitive functions are not impaired, e.g. by drugs or dementia, does not force me to repeat unwholesome decisions even if my character hasn't changed.

Responsibility

Even though a free will doesn't exist, we feel that we are the owner of our actions, that we are responsible for our deeds, e.g. we are conscience-stricken about having done something wrong. Even if we are totally convinced of the necessity by which our actions occur, we do not try to put the blame on the motives. Given the character we have and the circumstances around we admittedly could not act differently, but other people, other characters would have been able to act in a very different way. We and others hold our character, that is ourselves, accountable for our deeds, not the motives because the same motives will lead to different actions in people with different characters.

This "I will" or "I want" that accompanies my actions let me acknowledge them as 'mine' and consequently let me feel responsible for them. In the same way we hold others responsible for their deeds as well as long as their intellectual freedom isn't impaired, i.e. as long as they couldn't be regarded as being irresponsible due to threats, drugs, insanity etc. – our entire law system rests on this.

To me an unconditioned human free will is impossible, but this topic has been discussed very controversial for ages. Especially Christianity is in need of a human free will because an all-knowing, almighty and all-compassionate God, responsible for the world and everything in it, should not be held accountable for the world's evil as well. The fictitious free will hands the blame to humanity.

With the discoveries in the field of biology in the midst of the 19th century (e.g. Charles Darwin, mutation, evolutionary biology) and progresses in physics (quantum mechanics) at the beginning of the 20th century new arguments entered the free will debate. Findings in the area of quantum physics (uncertainty principle, indeterminacy, chance?) questioned the strong form of determinism, yet for events experienced by human beings living on earth Newton's laws of motion and the laws of thermodynamics are still valid. Indeterminism in the micro cosmos may well be compatible with determinism in the macro cosmos¹⁴. In all of human technology, in cars, bridges, planes, buildings, etc. quantum effects may be at work, but the average behaviour of trillions and trillions of atoms still allows for their safe construction with conventional methods without taking quantum effects into account – the principle of cause and effect still proves to be valid and to me the same holds true for the dependence of the will on the motives.

¹⁴ "Lois de Broglie, Nobel prize for physics 1929, who made groundbreaking contributions to quantum theory said: *'As the concepts of quantum mechanics are of no importance in the macro cosmos and the resulting inaccuracy of predictions is far below the accuracy of measurements in the macro cosmos, these microcosmic influences are kind of 'masked'. Despite an accepted indeterminism in the micro cosmos the macro cosmos behaves as if a strong determinism was in effect.'*" [Quoted in Philippe Büttner / 9 /. Modified translation by the author.]

3. Free will in (Theravāda) Buddhism

The possibility of a human free will is mainly discussed among western Buddhists (scholars) and quite a number of publications on this topic have been made available by them.¹⁵

Three Buddhist teachings are of particular interest regarding the free will problem:

1. **The principle of causality or the law of conditionality** (*idappaccayatā* in Pāli).

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, a prominent Buddhist monk in Thailand of the last century regarded this principle as “the highest, the most important aspect of the Buddhist religion”¹⁶ and two pages further on he writes “After all, it’s the ultimate, it creates and controls everything, and exists in everything”.¹⁷ Regarding processes in the human mind the principle of cause and effect is known as the law of *Dependent Origination* or *Dependent Arising* (*Paticcasamuppāda*).¹⁸

As mentioned on page 6 several conditions need to come together for a certain state to change; there is not just a single cause – maybe a main cause and at least a few contributing factors. Especially mental processes arise due to complex and sometimes difficult to know conditions. This lack of transparency or ability to realize the causal conditions involved may then easily be regarded as chance or as free will.

2. **The law of karma** and its results.

“Karma means ‘action’ or ‘doing’; whatever one does, says, or thinks is a *karma*. In Buddhism the term *karma* is used specifically for intentional or wilful actions of body, speech and mind. *Karma* is a cause, never the effect or result of an action. The intentional actions of body, speech and mind bring about a fruit or result (*vipāka*) either within the present life, or in the context of a future birth.”¹⁹ The Buddha said: “It is volition [*cetanā*], bhikkhus, that I call kamma [*karma*]. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind.”²⁰ The principle of causality is universally valid while the law of *karma* is restricted to intentional human actions and their consequences – thus the law of *karma* can be regarded a subcategory of the law of conditionality. It is true though that the *karmic* law is not as rigidly deterministic as is the principle of causation itself or as is *Dependent Origination* because the *karmic* effect of a deed is not determined solely by the deed itself, but also by accompanying factors like the nature (character) of the person who commits the deed and by the circumstances in which it is committed. Actually the workings of *karma*, the relation between a deed and its fruit, belong to one of the four unthinkable or unconceivable²¹ (*acinteyya* in Pāli) in Buddhism.

3. **The teaching of non-self** (*anattā*). Buddhism denies an eternal self, a soul or substance, which is the essence or core of any particular thing, residing permanently in an object. This teaching sets Buddhism apart from all other religions which in some form or another postulate a permanent self or soul.

¹⁵ For example: Peter Harvey / 10 /, Riccardo Repetti / 11 /, Piya Tan / 12 /.

¹⁶ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu in / 13 /, page 1.

¹⁷ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu in / 13 /, page 3.

¹⁸ An introduction into Dependent Origination is available in my article *The Here-and-Now-Interpretation of Dependent Origination*. See Literature / 14/.

¹⁹ Khun Reinhard in / 15 /

²⁰ AN VI.63, Nibbedhika Sutta in / 16 /, page 963

²¹ “Bhikkhus, there are these four inconceivable matters that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive them would reap either madness or frustration. What four?

(1) The domain of the Buddhas is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.

(2) The domain of one in jhana [[meditative absorption](#)] is an inconceivable matter ...

(3) The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter ...

(4) Speculation about the world [[e.g. beginning or end](#)] is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.”

[The book of Fours, AN 77, II 80, page 463 in / 16 /]

Buddhism teaches the law of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) as well as responsibility for one's own intentional actions, the law of *karma*. While the law of conditionality implies that whatever happens in nature does so due to previous causes, the law of *karma* rests on voluntary, wilful actions of body, speech and mind for which the 'doer' will be held responsible. While the law of conditionality seems to imply that there is nothing like a free will, the law of *karma* is hardly imaginable without a free will.

In the cycle of *Dependent Origination* the will (*cetanā*) appears several times in different dependencies, thus pointing to a net of relevant conditions. First the will, denoted as Mental Formation (*saṅkhāra*), appears as being caused by Ignorance (*avijjā*) which itself is dependent on the Taints (*āsava*)²². One of the Taints is sensual desire (*kamāsava*), a form of willing. Then we find the will (*cetanā*) as element of Name & Form (*nāma-rūpa*), this time dependent on consciousness (*viññāna*), which itself is dependent on Mental Formation, and finally we meet the will as Craving (*tanhā*), depending on Feeling (*vedanā*). With all these reliances of the will, to me the cycle of *Dependent Origination* does not allow for a free will but it allows for the freedom of action.

The teaching of non-self (*anattā*) throws up the question: who or what wills if there is no unchangeable core, no self, no soul, no 'person'? The Buddhist answer: As there is no self, there is nobody who wills; there is only a process of willing. All there is is ceaseless change (*aniccā*) of mental and physical processes; the one who wills is merely a concept without any equivalent in reality. All mental and physical events exist merely for an instant; they had a different existence in the preceding moment and will have changed in the next one.

All mental and physical phenomena are subjected to more than one condition or natural law, are interwoven in a net of conditions without which nothing could change, come in to existence or cease to be. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu writes: „... there isn't anything that's self-existent. There's mutual dependence, cause and effect, that is, everything is a condition for something else. All things operate in dependence on conditions.”²³ The conclusion is: if free will means, that the will (*cetanā*) is independent of conditions, then such a free will cannot exist.

According to the principle of conditionality and the teaching of non-self the world and everything in it is enmeshed in a net of conditions. How can that be reconciled with a free will necessitated by the law of *karma* and its results? The historical Buddha taught about *karma* and *Dependent Origination* but has not discussed the possibility of a human free will. In the *Culakammavibhanga Sutta* he taught: “Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.”²⁴, that is he has talked about the freedom of action in this sutta, not about the freedom of will.

Following the teachings of *idappaccayatā/paticcasuppāda* (conditionality) and *anattā* (non-self) freedom of will is an illusion and regarding the teaching of *karma* and its results (*karma-vipāka*) the Buddha talked about the freedom of action. Freedom of action now is even compatible with strong determinism (I can do what I want) where the will itself can be determined. In Buddhism there is no contradiction between the three principles: conditionality, non-self and *karma*. Here the will or intention (*cetanā*) isn't free but entangled in a complex flow of conditions which themselves are dependent on other conditions as it is obvious in the cycle of *Dependent Arising* (this is why this cycle is sometimes called *Dependent Co-arising*). On one hand our decisions are dependent on these conditions, but at the same time, while act-

²² “And what are the taints, what is the origin of the taints, what is the cessation of the taints, what is the way leading to the cessation of the taints? There are these three taints: the taint of sensual desire [*kamāsava*], the taint of being [*bhavāsava*], and the taint of ignorance [*avijjāsava*]. With the arising of ignorance there is the arising of the taints. With the cessation of ignorance there is the cessation of the taints.”

[*Sammāditthi Sutta*, MN 9.70, i 55, page 144 in / 17 /]

²³ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu in / 13 /, page 5.

²⁴ MN 135, *Culakammavibhanga Sutta*, in / 17 /, page 1053.

ing in the present, new conditions are generated as is demonstrated in the cycle of *Dependent Origination* and the law of *karma* and its results. The deeper we understand these conditions and their interactions, the better is our chance to escape our old and well-practised habits. The knowledge regarding this conditionality is already a condition that can help to produce more sound states of mind.

3.1 Is mental development on the path to liberation possible without a free will?

The goal of Buddhism is the realization of *nirvana*, is to develop the mind to an extent that it becomes free from all suffering. But how is mental development possible without the freedom of will? Our starting point is the 'here and now'. At this moment we are a certain 'person'²⁵ with certain attributes developed throughout our past. Admittedly we do not have freedom of will but at least a freedom of action as our will is determined by our ignorance, character, conscious and subconscious likes and dislikes, feelings, cultural makeup, natural and manmade environment etc. – in summary: the will is dependent on motives that have an effect on him – and we are subject to the law of conditionality which includes the law of *karma* and its results. Despite all of these dependencies mental development can happen along the following pattern:

We receive data from our environment via our sense-organs, process them as laid down in the formula known as *Dependent Origination*, make a decision and act accordingly. The action depends on our decision, on our will and the latter is dependent on the motives that determine it. Now, it is not that we are determined in our choosing, our desires and decisions and the ensuing actions from birth onwards for all of our life. On the one hand our will is dependent on many conditions and external circumstances and on the other hand does the law of *karma* and its results not determine our actions with absolute necessity. The historical Buddha refuted not only the idea that all happiness and suffering is directed by a Supreme Being, but the belief that all happiness and suffering arise from previous *karma* as well.²⁶ *Karma* is no unavoidable destiny, the present not completely defined by the past. Presently generated *karma*, present action, is not the result of past *karma* but determined by our current self-directed actions and therefore it is possible to shape our future. How can we achieve change of our present intentions and behaviour? On the one hand we can develop worldly wisdom by experiencing and reflecting on all the events happening to us throughout our lives, on the other hand by gaining insight into the true nature of life by means of mental training, i.e. by meditation, and by developing the *Noble Eightfold Path*. Accumulated worldly wisdom and insight in union with Right view or Right Understanding, an element of the *Noble Eightfold Path*, allows for a different evaluation of motives even if the character has not changed and thus we can arrive at more wholesome decisions and behaviour. These wholesome decisions become *karmic* relevant causes, resulting in future positive development and in this way the mind can little by little get reformed and purified. Strengthening mindfulness and concentration helps to become aware of our states of mind, subconscious actions diminish and finally can be avoided, thus reducing *karmic* negative behaviour. The teaching of *Dependent Origination* refers us to the sixth element of this cycle called Contact. We have to guard the sense doors, being aware of the present sense-contact. We need to

²⁵ Actually a 'person' does not exist in Buddhism. Instead we find five processes of nature, known as the *Five Aggregates (khandhas)*, consisting of an ever-changing body and four ever-changing mental factors (feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness).

²⁶ "Now when those ascetics and brahmins hold such a doctrine and view as this, 'Whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, all that is caused by what was done in the past,' they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore I say that this is wrong on the part of those ascetics and brahmins."
[*Vedanasamyutta*, SN 36.21, page 1279 in / 18 /]

have a sufficient amount of mindfulness and concentration to be aware when a sense-organ meets the appropriate sense-object and we have to have sufficient wisdom to respond wisely to this contact.

Finally we would like to free ourselves at least from unwholesome willing and wanting if not from any kind of wanting at all. The goal is to free ourselves from any unwise wanting, willing, craving – many names for the same troublemaker – leading to *dukkha* and to realize the unconditioned, *nirvana*. The minds of the Buddha and enlightened beings have realized the unconditioned and thus their acts of will are unconditioned, free, as well. At the same time their willing is, with the exception of wanting to eat, moving the limbs of the body, etc., basically extinct.

4. Summary

The possibility of a human free will is a controversial discussed topic, mainly because those involved cannot agree on a common definition regarding the characteristics of a free will, but also because it is not possible to prove the principle of causality or the concepts of determinism, indeterminism and others as being true. They share the impossibility to get proven to be true with scientific theories which finally are just hypothesized, often well confirmed, which are regarded as being valid only for as long as they do not get modified (or cancelled) by new discoveries. “Albert Einstein is reported to have said something that can be paraphrased into: No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong.”²⁷

A free will independent of desires, convictions, tendencies and motivations, that is an unconditioned free will – and to me only such a will would deserve to be called *free* – does not exist, but the freedom of will is in very high esteem with human beings and they are reluctant to give up the conviction that their will is unbound. They are supported in their view by basically all religions, which, by doing so, justify and demand moral responsibility and all of our worldly law finally relies on the freedom of will. To me this seems to be one reason why the freedom of action has been elevated (by definition) to serve as the freedom of will. As a result the question is no longer *if* freedom of will is possible but *under which circumstances* this freedom would be imaginable. How can the idea of an unconditioned free will, of determinism or indeterminism be weakened or modified so that at least an appearance of freedom of will, a relative or conditioned freedom of will, can survive? Fittingly the possibility to choose is often equated with the freedom of will, but only rarely it is asked after the reason (motives) for one’s choice. The will does the choosing, but the will itself and consequently its decisions are determined by motives. I choose to walk across instead of around the mountain – I can do what I want – but that’s merely the freedom of action, not the freedom of will.

It seems that like the idea of a self or soul is illusive, the possibility of an unconditioned free will is a misconception as well. While the illusion of a permanent self causes problems to human beings – they experience grief, sorrow, suffering (*dukkha*) – the misconception of an unconditioned freedom of will actually has some positive aspects as it leads human beings to ethical responsible behaviour. Even without a free will a person can develop further, can grow more attentive, sensible and wiser, thus recognizing the active motives and judging them differently, and therefore being able to change its behaviour – for that the undoubted freedom of action is sufficient.

²⁷ Wikipedia. Falsifiability, see Literature / 19 /

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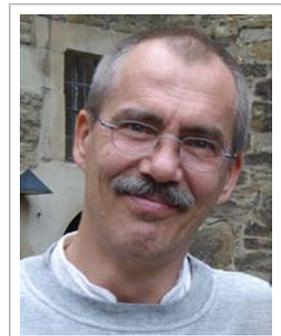
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6. About the author

My name is Reinhard Hölscher. In Thailand I'm politely addressed as Khun Reinhard.

For many years now I'm living in southern Thailand, studying Buddhism, practising meditation, teaching yoga and sharing my knowledge and experience regarding both *Theravāda* Buddhism and Hatha-Yoga with a large number of foreign students.

In 1995 I've started to participate in the monthly 10-day meditation retreats at the International Dharma Hermitage of Wat Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, Thailand. First as a participant, then as a helper, yoga teacher and coordinator, and later I've given talks during these retreats. Between 1995 and today I've altogether spent more than seven years at the International Dharma Hermitage.



Khun Reinhard

Together with my wife we are now offering the course 'Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation' at a small meditation centre in Hua Hin (Thailand). Detailed information about this course is available on our website at:

<http://www.meditationinhuahin.org>

Another interest of mine is yoga. I have practised Hatha Yoga for 48 years and taught it for more than 17 years after yoga teacher training in 2000 at the Vivekananda Ashram near Bangalore in India. During my lessons I have introduced more than 2,000 women and men to the basics of Hatha-Yoga. Most were taught in 10-day courses.

Information, articles and books regarding my meditation and yoga experiences are available on my website at:

<http://www.khunreinhard.com>

Publications [\(back to page 2\)](#)

eBooks (available in PDF, EPUP, MOBI ... - format; in both English and German language)

- [An Engineer turned Meditation Teacher - 20 years fascinated by Suan Mokkh -](#)
- [Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation](#)
- [Enjoy Hatha Yoga – 2nd Edition](#)

Articles (PDF, free of charge, most but not all in both English and German language)

- [Non-Self and the Five Aggregates](#)
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