



Freedom of the Will and No-Self in Buddhism

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Abstract The Buddha, unlike the *Upaniṣadic* or *Brahmanical* way, has avoided the concept of the self, and it seems to be left with limited conceptual possibilities for free will and moral responsibility. Now, the question is, if the self is crucial for free will, then how can free will be conceptualized in the Buddhist ‘no-self’ (*anattā*) doctrine. Nevertheless, the Buddha accepts a dynamic notion of *cetanā* (intention/volition), and it explicitly implies that he rejects the ultimate or absolute freedom of the will, but not the minimal power of free will. It seems that the Buddha’s view shifts from agent causation (independent ownership) to a causal sequence of impersonal processes (psychophysical factors). This paper claims to shed clarity on ‘whether free will is viable in the context of the *anattāvāda* in Buddhism.’ It mainly studies the secondary sources (even though it has also discussed the primary sources) and their interpretations of freedom of the will and how it further does argue for a compatibility approach of free will in Buddhist thought.

Keywords Anattā · Paṭiccasamuppāda · Freedom of the will · Agent causation · Impersonal processes

Abbreviations

AN Aṅguttara Nikāya

BṛU Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

Dhp Dhammapada

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| DN | Dīgha Nikāya |
| Ja | Jātaka |
| KN | Khuddaka Nikāya |
| MN | Majjhima Nikāya |
| SN | Saṃyutta Nikāya |
| ud | Udana |
| UIA | Unconstrained intentional action |
| UC | Unrestrained choice |

Introduction

Young Siddhārtha or Gautama Buddha¹ was seeking for an answer to a key question, which concerned the existential fact of suffering, i.e., why is the human existence visualized as the disease, aging, and death? On the one hand, his teaching gives an open space to many religious practices and also does argue as a kind of philosophy and, on the other hand, teaches us a methodology for self-development. The Buddha's teaching is concerned with the problem of suffering (*dukkha*), that is known as the existential suffering—the suffering of bondage to the cycle of repeated birth and death, and the human suffering can cease from the transient individual manifestations. His teaching is fundamentally related to the four noble truths² (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*)—the intrinsic nature of human existence—which is intrinsically characterized by '*dukkha*' and the *dukkha* arises because of the continuous positive and negative cravings for something. His teaching is further focused on the continuous practices of the 'noble eightfold paths' (*ariyo aṣṭhaṅgiko maggo*).³ The Buddha advocates the development of the meditative states known as *jhāna* (meditation), and this emphasis led to the development of methods of study and practices, which strongly asserted the significance and understanding the concentrated insight or wisdom (*paññā*). It entails that the actual goal of Buddhist meditation is the combination of both *jhāna* and *paññā*. It is also called as '*Dhamma Eye*'⁴ (vision of truth) and seen as the basis of the awakening (*Bodhi*). According to

¹ The word 'Buddha' means 'awake' and adverts to the time of the Buddha's enlightenment. However, the Buddha's teaching generally derives from the collection of texts known as the *tipitaka* (three baskets): the canonical writings of early Buddhism, namely *Vinaya Pitaka* (rule of discipline), *Sutta Pitaka* (utterances of Buddha himself), and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (critical interpretation or discussion).

² The four noble truths include: (1) Life is full of suffering (*dukkha*), (2) Suffering involves a chain of causes (*dukkha-samudaya*), (3) Suffering can cease (*dukkha-nirodha*), and (4) There is a way which leads to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-magga*), and that way is known as the *Aṣṭhaṅgiko maggo*.

³ The noble eightfold paths deal with all the aspect of a life, including the ethical, psychological, epistemological, and practical in nature, namely: (1) right views/knowledge (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), (2) right resolve/determination (*sammā-sankappa*), (3) right speech/control of speech (*sammā-vācā*), (4) right conduct/abstention from wrong action (*sammā-kammanta*), (5) right livelihood/maintaining life by the honest means (*sammā-ājīva*), (6) right effort/constant endeavor to maintain moral progress (*sammā-vāyāma*), (7) right mindfulness/constant remembrance of the nature of things (*sammā-sati*), and (8) right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*). There are mainly three essential points of the eightfold path which consists of three sections: (i) Conduct (*sīla*), (ii) Concentration (*samādhi*), and (iii) Wisdom (*paññā*).

⁴ See *Kitagiri Sutta*: At Kitagiri (MN 70), *Kuṭṭhi Sutta*: The Leper (KN, Ud 5.3), *Dhammapada*: The Path of Dhamma.

the early Buddhists, the teaching of Buddha was taught in two levels (Craig 1998, 52): One is the simple way of the good life—advocating both the practice of generosity and moral restraint,⁵ and another is capable of understanding more profound four noble truths.

The Buddha's teaching of the fundamental formula of the *Paṭiccasamuppāda-vāda* (Dependent Arising) is: 'When there is this, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases' (Bodhi 1995, p. 2). Therefore, the Buddhist teaching of dependent arising violates the libertarian sense of free will (i.e., self-caused/independent autonomy) because whenever we do an action (intentional/voluntary or unintentional/involuntary), the consequence happens when the other conditions are present (one might say, it seems as if an ad infinitum).

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*⁶: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion (SN 56.11), the Buddha elaborates the significant role of the four noble truths and the eightfold paths and these paths are known as *Majjhimāpaṭipada* (middle way)⁷—avoids the extremes of both self-indulgence and self-mortification—which produces insight knowledge and that knowledge leads to peace, wisdom, and *nibbāna*. In the *Majjhima Nikaya* 22 Discourse, the Buddha says that 'Just as the ocean is penetrated by only one taste, the taste of salt, so my doctrine has only one taste, the taste of salvation' (George 45). However, both the 'understanding of the four noble truths' and the 'practicing of the eightfold paths' are the main mottos of the Buddha's teaching of *nibbāna* (blowing out/liberation). He is not primarily concerned with being (ontology), i.e., whether the existence of the suffering is real or not. Rather, he is searching to know the reason of suffering for alleviation from it, i.e., how could we know or understand that the suffering is real or not, and what is the reason behind this suffering, and so, his focus of the investigation shifts from mere ontology to existential query.

The Buddha, unlike the *Brahmanical* or *Upaniṣadic*⁸ or Cartesian⁹ ways, has avoided the concept of self, and there seems to be a limited possibility for individual

⁵ This level indicates the importance of 'self-control' and its enhancement (our emphasis).

⁶ This Sutta includes the central teaching of the four noble truths, dependent arising, middle way, impermanence, no-self, and the wheel of *Dhamma* is in a motion (*Dhamma* eye—whatever is subject to origination in this world, is all subject to cessation—is the central teaching of the Buddha).

⁷ The concept of 'middle way' leads to calm, to direct knowledge or self-awakening, to unbinding through the noble eightfold paths.

⁸ In the BrU 3.7.22. See Patrick Olivelle (1998). The ontology of the Upaniṣads is very different from that suggested by Descartes. However, both the descriptions of the inner control share the following some features: (1) The inner controller or the true essence of being is the soul, (2) it controls the body, and (3) it is different from the body.

⁹ Descartes in the 1993 of *Meditation on First Philosophy*, in the Meditation VI: Of the Existence of Material Things, and of the Real Distinction between the Soul and Body of Man (97) states:

There is a great difference between the mind and the body. The body of its nature is endlessly divisible, but the mind completely indivisible: when I consider the mind or myself, I am purely a thinking thing; I can distinguish no parts in myself but understand myself to be a thing that is entirely one and complete. And, although the whole appears to be united with the whole body, if the foot is cut off, or the arm, or any other part of the body, I know (*cognosco*) that nothing is therefore subtracted from the mind.

choice(s) and moral responsibility. Nevertheless, he accepts a dynamic notion of *cetana* (intention/volition)—to represent, to reflect, and to think (body, speech, and thought/intellect) the possibilities—and it explicitly implies the rejection of the ultimate or absolute free will, because everything is conditioned by something and it further follows like a series of causal relations, but not the minimal power of free will, because the practice of the eightfold paths requires sort of freedom of the will to becoming a taint-free monk who is freed (*vimuttaṃ*) of delusion and unwholesome states of mind. It seems that the Buddha's view shifts from agent causation (independent ownership) to a causal sequence of impersonal processes (psychophysical factors). Even if, we look at some *Suttas* (Discourse) like *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: The Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10), *Brahmajāla Sutta*: The All-embracing Net of Views (DN 1), *Maha-parinibbāna Sutta*: Last Days of the Buddha (DN 16), and so on and so forth, the Buddha has emphasized the role of free will for exercising an action. Similarly, in the *Vimuttimaggā* (Path of Freedom), the Buddha's approach to free will is 'an agent's ability to control action when it is absent of coercion, constraint, limitation, and bondage and with his focus on the mental limitations. Similarly, in the *Dhammapada*: The Path of Dhamma, free action is understood as to be 'freed from all defilements,' 'freed from impediments and clinging,' and freed from all suffering.' However, the Buddha's teaching is highly anthropocentric in understanding the intrinsic nature of suffering. He does not directly liberate people, yet he teaches them how to get freedom (*vimokkha*)¹⁰ from suffering, and we have the capacity to be free and enlightened from *samsāra* because he himself has grasped the lived experience of *nibbāna*.

The most common confusion in Buddhism is, *whether the Buddha at all considers the theory of free will or not*, due to the *anattāvāda*—the denial of substantial selfhood. There are varied views on 'whether the human actions are free or determined¹¹ or indetermined¹² or graced by any supernatural powers.'¹³ This paper claims to shed clarity on 'whether free will¹⁴ is viable in the context of the

Footnote 9 continued

Descartes in the 1931 further (233–234) puts:

It (freedom of the will) is the greatest perfection in man to be able to act by its [the will's] means that is freely, and by so doing we are in a peculiar way masters of our actions and thereby merit praise or blame.

¹⁰ See DN III.262, 288, MN III.222, AN IV. 349.

¹¹ Determinism holds that every action is determined by the prior causes. It is the thesis that the past determines a unique future,' as Peter Inwagen holds (1983, p. 2). Deterministic approach accepts that everything in the world is fixed or determined, no room for free will.

¹² Indeterminism does hold that every action is undetermined, i.e., every action is a matter of chance or random.

¹³ It entails that every event is a necessary result of the will of God or any kind of divinity, who determines and controls everything that happens in the universe.

¹⁴ The concept 'free will' or 'freedom of the will' is outlined as independent power or ability of an agent from the causal determinants. It conveys the power of rational agents to choose a course of action from the various alternatives and must be absent of both internal and external constraints (any kind of pressure, the influence of drugs, hypnosis, abnormal, psychological or physical highly unstable) when she or he chooses to act.

anattāvāda in Buddhist thought.’ It mainly studies the secondary sources (even though it has also discussed the primary sources) and their interpretations of freedom of the will and how it further does argue for a compatibility approach of free will. Before starting to discuss this ongoing debate of the theory of free will in Buddhism, we shall continue with a short sketch of the Buddha’s teaching of the focal doctrines.

A Glimpse of Buddhist Doctrines of Paṭiccasamuppāda and Anattā

The Buddha’s approach of the four noble truths is the fundamental of his teaching of the existence of suffering, and the wheel of suffering connects the axis of causation. The doctrine of ‘Dependent Arising’ or ‘Dependent Origination’ (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) is the most fundamental doctrine of causality, which is known as the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. The term ‘arising’ indicates to one’s vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light (SN XII. 65, II. 105). The *Mahānidāna Sutta*: The Great Discourse on Causation is the most detailed of the Buddha’s discourse dealing with dependent arising, and this *sutta* is viewed within the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The Buddha says that ‘He who sees dependent arising sees the *Dhamma*¹⁵; he who sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent arising’ (MN I. 28, 191). Whenever a particular event occurs (the cause), it is followed by another particular event (the effect), and the reality is understood as a series of causal relations between successive or consecutive events, which is known as the theory of ‘Conditionality.’

Everything is conditioned by something, and some conditions similarly cause even our suffering, i.e., birth. The Buddha has beautifully mentioned the chain of causation (from cause to effect) through the following twelve links. The doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* contains both the second noble truth (*dukkha-samudaya*) and the third noble truth (*dukkha-nirodha*). On the one hand, the second noble truth concerns ‘the cause of suffering’ (*saṃsāra*)¹⁶ and it is figured out as the twelve links

¹⁵ The etymologically the Sanskrit term ‘*Dharma*’ (*Pāli*: *Dhamma*) is derived from the root ‘*dhṛ*’—to hold, to support, to maintain (Olivelle 2009). The notion of ‘*Dharma*’ implies movements, change, dynamic qualities, the chief characteristics to natural law, whereas ‘*a-dharma*’ signifies the law of statics, and non-motion. Initially, the principle of *Dharma* was applied to cosmological theory and also to social rules by which the community, the gods, and the universe were held together (Stutley and Stutley 1986, 76). However, the Buddhist understanding of *Dhamma* is a form of transformative way, because the Buddha was against of *Upaniṣads* or *Brahmanical* tradition, and also against of caste or *varṇa* system. In Buddhism, *Dhamma* was used in a way of teaching of the ultimate truth of suffering and *nibbāna* through *Sangha* (community) for the welfare of the whole humankind. The Buddha’s first sermon—*Dhmmacakkappavattana Sutta*: Setting in Motion of the Dhamma, he explained the four noble truths and the eightfold paths in details. In Buddhism, the wheel is a significant symbol and it is often used to epitomize the *Dhamma*.

¹⁶ *Samsāra* is a type of existence experienced by all unenlightened persons who are bounded in the perceptual cycle of the rebirth process. *Saṃsāric* existence is conditioned by three marks, namely: (1) Suffering (*dukkha*): existential suffering is the fundamental in nature, (2) Impermanence (*anicca*): as there is no permanence, there is no stability. *Saṃsāric* existence is in a constant state of change, like Heraclitus’ understanding of ‘flux’ or becoming, and (3) No-Self (*anāta*): it outlines that there is nothing that has a permanent self.

of causal chain of dependent arising, which is called as the wheel of rebirth or the wheel of becoming (*jarā-maraṇa-cakka* or *bhava-cakka*), because it connects with the ‘karma theory,’ namely: (1) Ignorance (*avijjā*) → (2) Impressions (*saṅkhāra*) → (3) The initial consciousness of the embryo (*viññāna*) → (4) The embryonic organism—mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*) → (5) Six organs of knowledge (*ṣaḷāyatana*) → (6) Sense contact (*phassa*) → (7) Sense experience (*vedanā*) → (8) Thirst (*taṇhā*) → (9) Clinging (*upādāna*) → (10) Tendency to be born (*bhava*) → (11) Rebirth (*jāti*) → (12) Old age and death (*jarā-maraṇa*). These links are not a linear causal sequence; still, it describes certain aspects of reality as products of conditioning. In a simpler way, we can understand that the *Paṭiccasamuppādavāda* explicates how the different kinds of activity in our life depend upon each other and we requisite to comprehend its dependency without gaps and we would like to say that this ‘dependency without gaps’ is similar to late Steve Jobs’ understanding of ‘connect the dots.’¹⁷ Jobs expressed his experiences that ‘You cannot connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down and it has made all the difference in my life.’¹⁸ It shows that how the dots do eventually connect and similarly, how our activities in daily life will depend and connect to each other eventually. If any one of these conditions is absent, then the rebirth of the next life is not possible. As an account of the causal structure of the cycle of repeated birth and death, dependent arising appears in the *suttas* in diverse formulations, and the formulation has two sides (Bodhi 1995, 3): One shows the *sequence of origination*, and the other shows the *sequence of cessation*. These twelve links (Thera Thera 1956, Ch. 8, pp. 398–402) include our past, present, and future life that means, the present life can be explained by the reference to its past condition and future effect. Therefore, the first two links (1 and 2) refer to the past life, whereas the middle eight links (3–10) represent the present life, and similarly, the last two links (11 and 12) indicate to the future life. On the other hand, the third noble truth (cessation of suffering) can be stopped, when the ignorance of regarding oneself as a substantial permanent ego is dispelled by the right knowledge, and then the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is abolished. This doctrine is expressed in the formula that ‘when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.’ The suffering ultimately occurs due to the ignorance and ignorance is the root cause of suffering, and it is stopped through the continuous practices of the eightfold paths. However, *Paṭiccasamuppādavāda* when viewed from relativity when *samsāra*, whereas it has viewed from reality when *nibbāna*. Nevertheless, the dependent arising is assigned as a significant doctrine of the Buddha’s philosophy because of two reasons (Bodhi 1995, 2):

¹⁷ Jobs’ Wired Magazine Interview 1996, he had explained the ‘Broad Life Experiences, Importance of’: A lot of people in our industry have not had very diverse experiences. So they do not have enough *dots to connect* (our emphasis), and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader of one’s own understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have. See George Beahm 2011, p. 24.

¹⁸ Jobs, Steve. ‘Steve Jobs Stanford Commencement Speech 2005.’ *Pee Standing Up*. March 2006. www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIR-jKKp3NA. Accessed 10 April 2016.

1. It provides the primary ontological principle to understand the nature of being.
2. It provides the framework that guides a causal account of the origination and cessation of suffering.

These two contributions come together in the thesis that makes the Buddha's teaching a '*doctrine of awakening*.' The first reason or the ontological principle contributed by dependent arising is the arising of phenomena in dependence on conditions. Whatever comes into being originated through conditions, stands with the support of conditions, and ceases when its conditions cease—specific conditionality¹⁹ (*idappaccayatā*) (Ibid). This principle of *specific conditionality* entails that whenever the condition is present, the outcome happens, regardless of anyone realizing it or not. Though the cycle of repeated birth and death has no beginning or first point, no cause outside itself, it does have a distinct generative structure, and a set of conditions internal to itself, which keeps it in motion; and the teaching of dependent arising opens this set of conditions.²⁰

As we have seen that Buddhist philosophy says that 'nothing is unconditional, self-existent, and permanent'²¹ in this world, rather everything is impermanence.²² Everything is subject to change and decay. Everything originates from some condition, and it dissolves when the condition ceases to be. The doctrine of the dependent arising yields Buddhist theory of the transitory nature of things, and so, it is known as Momentariness²³ (*Kṣaṇikavāda*): Everything is conditional, relative, subject to birth and death, impermanent, and dependent existence, it exists for one partless-moment only, last not even for short periods of time. And, because it is

¹⁹ Specific conditionality holds that phenomena of a given type originate only through the conditions appropriate to some other types and deals primarily with structures. The arising of phenomena is depending on specific conditions, and it correlates phenomena as they belong to *types*. Dependent arising is specific to human experience, but causality in general is not limited to that (Bodhi 1995).

²⁰ See also David Kalupahana's interpretation and he argues that 'Everything in this universe comes within the framework of causality' (Kalupahana 1976, p. 30). He further elaborates that 'Nothing in the universe seems to escape these causal explanations, such as the physical, the organic, the psychological, the karmic, and the spiritual' (Ibid). It treats phenomena, not regarding their isolated connections, but in terms of their patterns—recurrent patterns that exhibit the invariableness of law, such as:

Bhikkhus, what is dependent arising? "With birth as condition, aging and death, come to be" - whether Tathāgatas arise or not, that element stands, that structuredness of phenomena, that fixed determination of phenomena, specific conditionality. That a Tathāgata awakens to and comprehends. Having awakened to it and comprehended it, he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, reveals it, analyzes it, and clarifies it, saying it: "See, bhikkhus, with birth as condition aging and death, come to be." The reality is that the undelusiveness, invariability, specific conditionality - this, bhikkhus, is called dependent arising (SN II. 25-26, XII.20).

This verse states that the truth of dependent arising holds independently of the one who recognizes it.

²¹ The conventional belief in permanence (everything is eternal) leads thirst, needs, desires, and unlimited craving for the desirable wishes and again leads to attachments, rebirth, and further leads to the suffering (*dukkha*).

²² The term 'impermanent' is understood in Buddhism as the reality in terms of processes, not substances. Therefore, the Buddha says that everything is impermanent (*sarvam aniccam*) and a constant flux or momentary in nature (i.e., arising, being, and finally perishing).

²³ There are moments of pleasure, moments of satisfaction of desires, and moments of craving of something; however, all such moments are transitory or impermanent in nature.

conditional, it is neither ultimately/absolutely real nor ultimately/absolutely unreal. All phenomenal things hang between reality and nothingness, and it is called by the Buddha as the ‘Middle Path’ (*Majjhimā-Patipadā*), i.e., find a middle way between them, like the ‘Golden Mean’²⁴ of Aristotle. The Buddha himself avoids two extreme views: One is *eternalism*—some reality eternally exists independently of any condition, and another is *nihilism*—something existing can be annihilated. Therefore, the doctrine of dependent arising is the middle way between self and non-self, being and non-being, substance and process (all dualistic affirmations), that is, everything that we perceive has an existence, but it is dependent on something else (cause–effect relationship).

Now, let us explore very briefly about the doctrine of no-self (*Anattāvāda*). When someone asked the Buddha whether the self is different from the body, whether the world is finite or infinite, etc., he avoided these metaphysical questions and mentioned that there is no sufficient evidence which leads to only partial views as Jainism explains the one-sided view of an elephant which described by the five blind persons who touch the different body parts of the elephant. Later on, he explained that these metaphysical questions do not lead to a person to get the ultimate goal, i. e., becoming an *arahant* or getting the Arahantship/Buddhahood.²⁵

Anattā is one of the most significant doctrines of the Buddha’s teaching. The Pāli term ‘*attā*’ is translated as ‘self,’²⁶ and ‘*anattā*’ stands for ‘no-self,’ and it expresses ‘being not self,’ not ‘there is no self.’ There are several theories on the nature of ‘Self,’ yet the Buddhist doctrine of no-self gives an argumentative approach with a comprehension of both ‘part and whole’ (mereology) and ‘psychophysical’ (reductionism) relationships. In the *Sallekha Sutta*: The Discourse on Effacement,²⁷ the Buddha talks about the selfhood, such as:

Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Did I in the past time change from one existence to another? And, that called the fivefold questioning concerning the future, namely; shall I exist in future? Shall I not exist in future? What shall I be in future? How shall I be in future?

According to the Buddhist teaching, the Buddha does not believe in an eternal self/soul/mind, but in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*: The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic (SN III. 66), the Buddha talks about the self, from the psychological

²⁴ Aristotle, like the Buddha’s ‘middle way,’ gives a middle path of an action, what he calls it as a ‘golden mean.’ We should find ourselves our own a moderate position or a relative mean between two extremes, e.g., sleeping too much (excess) and sleeping too less (deficiency). Therefore, both of their views relate to the mindfulness of an action.

²⁵ See Bodhi, Ven. Bhikkhu. ‘Arahants, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas.’ *Legacy Edition*. 30 November 2013. www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/arahantsbodhisattvas.html. Accessed 05 September 2016.

²⁶ The Sanskrit term ‘*atman*’ stands for ‘self.’ We generally consider that the concept ‘selfhood’ to be the condition of being a locus of various psychological states, i.e., being the kind of thing, which possesses and synthesizes such states such that they are co-located. Early Buddhists mention that there is ultimately no self to be found, and there are merely bundles of properties or states beneath which we tend to project the fiction of an enduring self, i.e., fictional self at the conventional level of truth.

²⁷ See *Majjhima Nikāya* 1995.

point of view, is the collection of five aggregates (*pañca-khandhas*), namely: (1) bodily form (*rūpa*): consisting of the different factors which we perceive in this body having form, (2) feelings (*vedanā*): of pleasure, pain, and indifference, (3) perception (*saññā*): understanding and naming, (4) predispositions/tendencies (*saṅkhāras*): generated by the impressions of past experience, and (5) consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The last four are together called as *nāma*. The Buddha has maintained that these five *kandhas* (*nāma-rūpa*) are not the self, rather it connotes that each of these aggregates is not considered also as ‘self,’ such as:

1. The body/form is not self.
2. Feelings are not self.
3. Perceptions are not self.
4. Habitual formations/predispositions are not self, and
5. Consciousness is not self.

Therefore, the Buddha never said that ‘the Self (‘I’) does not exist’ (Honderich 2005, p. 113). The Buddha, unlike the *Upaniṣadic* or *Brahmanical* way, denies the permanent or changeless or eternal self, but does not destroy the notion of an empirical self, and he also argues for the continuity of the *kammās* (actions). On the one hand, the question of eternal self is not at all applicable in Buddhist perspective, and on the other hand, the power of causal efficacy (*arthakriyā*) has no issue at all, and we can exercise some sort of freedom of the will for doing an action. The person ‘I’²⁸ is just a bundle of five psychophysical factors; when the *khandhas* dissolve, the Self disappears, and we have death or no life. The self is the name of a causal bundle, which spans countless deaths and births. This reductionist set and the series concept of an individual self/person (*puggala*)²⁹ is called as the doctrine of *anattā*. However, when one person dies, the *kammās* give rise to another union of five *khandhas*, and this process goes on until one attains *nibbāna*. The self is just an epi-phenomenon of the five aggregates, and therefore, there is no room for a permanent or an eternal self.

Even in Buddhist ethical teaching, the Buddha talks about the significant role of *kamma*,³⁰ and the *kamma* includes mainly three dimensions of a person, namely;

²⁸ The concept of ‘I’ or personal identity is a fascinating issue which is raised due to the no-self theory. One can comprehend this issue through not only exhibited in believing that the names designate things but also in believing the validity of perception, memory, and recognition. The names do not simply name a thing, but they help to bring together a large number of precepts under a common concept by virtue of their similarity and thus contribute to the construction of the world. Consider an example of a name of ‘Pujarini.’ Pujarini was at Odisha in 2007 and Pujarini is at IIT Kanpur in 2017 are not the same Pujarini. Because the Buddha contends that the inner factor is a process of changing, but the process is captured by the use of a name. As Heraclitus holds that ‘all things are in motion’—‘No man ever steps in the same river twice.’ Personal identity is only the continuity of becoming. See Bina Gupta, Ch. 6, 2012.

²⁹ See Bhikshu Chāu (1999) and Priestley (1999).

³⁰ In the *Bhava Sutta*: Becoming (AN 3.76), the Buddha talks about the intention of an action and the result of intention of both past and present. If your past and present *kammās* do not contain a particular possibility, a corresponding type of becoming cannot be developed. The only becoming you can experience are those from within the range of possibilities provided by your *kamma*. Thus, the *kamma* is the field, consciousness is the seed, and craving is the moisture. It includes both the cosmological and psychological understanding, i.e., your sense of what you are, focused on a particular desire, and in your personal sense of the world as related to that desire.

physical (body), verbal (speech), and mental (intellect). The mind of each individual takes the essential role in determining one's *kamma*, whether it is either good (happiness) and bad (suffering). The action and the result of that action (*kammaphala*) are intimately tangled to our intentional actions, and later, it leads to rebirth in *samsāra* of repeated cycles of birth and rebirth, but still, the Buddha has introduced the practice of the eightfold paths which can help us to break free from this cycle. According to the *kamma* theory,³¹ even though some of our actions or experiences are the result of the previous births' action, but still, our reaction or response to those actions or experiences is not fully predetermined. We can now determine that how Buddhist free agents (the mindful ones are free) are aware of the possible effects of their actions and so, the Buddha says that 'we are morally responsible only for those actions (volitional action) that we intend.' The Kamma determinism may accommodate freewill by limiting the determinism to the tendencies of choices, but not absolutely determining the choices of the agent, i.e., even though an eternal *attā* has no control over the past kamma and the past karma influences the present activities of the self, but cannot be entirely predicted from that influence. Therefore, the Buddha's view shifts from agent causation (independent ownership) to a causal sequence of impersonal processes (psychophysical factors).

The Buddha, unlike the *Upaniṣads* (the self exists before birth and after death, migrates from one body to another, etc.), has stated that all knowable things (*dhammās*) are *anattā*—a knowing subject cannot objectify itself in order to be known by itself. He criticizes *Brahmanism*, for postulating such transcendent entities as a permanent self (*attā*). The Buddha does not deny the human beings' selves, but that anything exists independently. He does not preclude the continuity of the stream of consciousness, rather life is an unbroken series of states, and each of these states is a continuity³² or coherence of a causal connection which relies on the condition of preceding and then succeeding it. It indicates that he has not stated the ontological position of the Self; rather his focus is to understand one's own cognitive faculties—the focus of the investigation from mere ontology to existential significance—to cognize or realize one's true nature of the self.

Still, one may feel that 'if the acknowledging of the self is so crucial for one's free will or being free, then how should we comprehend the Buddha's claim of no-self theory,' and it raises too many worrisome questions, such as: Do we have some kind or even the possibility of free will? Does it make sense to talk or think about free will, even if there is no permanent and independent self? Is it conventionally appropriate to discuss free will, even if ultimately there is no agent? Is it possible to think about the ultimate goal of *nibbāna* without exercising of free will?

In the *Attakari Sutta: The Self-Doer and Nidāna Sutta: Causes* (AN III. 337–338), Gotama discusses that 'there is no self-doer and there is no other-doer (*natthi attakaro, natthi parakaro*).' It does entail the question that 'Is there an element or principle of initiating or beginning of an action (*arabha-dhatu*)?,' and then it further

³¹ See AN I. 173–175, MN 135–138, *Visuddhimagga* 532, 535.

³² This continuity is dependent on its own conditions and different from that of another moment with dependent on different conditions, e.g., a burning lamp/light and the flame/fire of each moment, and it has been an unbroken succession of the different flames.

extends that if there is no self-doer or no other-doer, then how could one move forward by himself (*sayam abhikkamanto*) or move back by himself (*sayam patikkamanto*). For understanding these, the Buddha says that we need to analysis the *Dhamma* in many ways, i.e., ‘those who have eyes see forms.’ To put it clearly, the comprehension of *Dhamma* has appeared in different ways of presentation; only we have to understand this wisdom (concentrated insight) through the practice of the eightfold paths. We can find out in the *Sutta Pitaka* and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* that the self is not a reality; it is only (1) the conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and (2) the ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*).³³ However, the Buddhist knowledge of reality is based on processes, and so, there is action, but cannot be an ultimate ownership of an action. It appears that the Buddha’s view is shifted from the agent causation (ultimate initiators of action) to a causal sequence of impersonal processes, i.e., interdependent relationship. Therefore, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self excludes the ultimate sense of free will, but the Buddha never overlooked the importance of the minimal sense of free will. However, there are several views of the secondary sources on the theory of free will to scrutinize ‘whether freedom of the will is explicitly recognized or implicitly acknowledged in Buddhist teaching’ and let us explore some of the secondary sources and their interpretations.

Conceptualizing the Theory of Freedom of the Will—in the Secondary Sources

Neo-Compatibilist³⁴ Asaf Federman points out that ‘We tend to think that agents somehow transcend natural causation by their ability to choose freely. If we also believe that agents are part of the natural order, we face a paradox, i.e., the problem of free will’ (2010, 1). If this issue applies to Buddhist thought of reality, which describes that ‘it as a series of causal relations between processes,’ then there will be no place for personal choice or responsibility or retribution. It involves an alternative claim that either Buddhism allows free will or no free will. Federman further mentions this claim suggested by Buddhist scholars into two particular questions, namely: (Q1) ‘Do we have free will?’ Buddhist answer is ‘of course we do not have free will,’ and so, there is no room for autonomous decision and (Q2) Did the Buddha teach free will? Buddhist answer is ‘yes, we have free will,’ and hence, we are responsible for our actions or decisions.³⁵ He says that not only is the so-called ‘free will’ not free, but also even the very idea of free will (like the ideas of God, soul, justice, reward, and punishment) is not free from conditions.

³³ The ‘conventional truth’ is the conventional sense of reality: the self or living being is only conforming to the conventions of the world, and the ‘ultimate truth’ is the ultimate sense of reality: the self is only the aggregates of materiality or the self-as-aggregates of the material qualities (*rūpakkhanda*) in reality; it is not self but merely physical phenomena.

³⁴ For Federman, Buddhists are neo-compatibilists, because they hold that (1) the causal determinism is true, (2) the ability to do otherwise is not necessary for moral responsibility, and (3) one is morally responsible as one controls action in conformity with his or her will when there are no compulsions, coercions, or constraints that limit performance (9).

³⁵ See Gombrich 2006, 1st Lecture, p. 7.

Nevertheless, Federman (pp. 11, 3) additionally elucidates between the following questions that (1) Does free will mean something that is ‘*independent of conditions*’—independent of cause and effect, and (2) does free will mean the ‘*opposite of fatalism*’? The former question characterizes free will as a power that belongs to the soul that transcends the physical and has ultimate control over the body (which is rejected by the Buddha), whereas the latter one states that free will as the agent’s ability to control action in conformity with will when there are no restrictions (which is acknowledged by the Buddha). Here, we need to observe that how Buddhist methodologies move from the articulation in question (1) *vis-à-vis* the articulation in question (2).

Gier and Kjellberg (2004) express that Buddhism is silent about the problem of free will because its conceptual approach is different from the modern approach of free will. Similarly, Luis Gómez (1975) points out the issue of free will as a conflict between choice and determinism and so, Buddhism proposes a ‘middle way’ between these two, whereas Mark Siderits’ argument supports Buddhist compatibilism.³⁶ He (1987, 153) argues that personal freedom and psychological determinism relate to each other like ‘two ships (*personal freedom*: human are free in that they are able to act on those choices reached through deliberation and *psychological determinism*: a person-series is caused by some prior physical or psychological state) passing each other in the night—and one of the two is a submarine.’ He also accepts that Buddhist no-self notion entails the absence of the possibility of free will: ‘If ultimately there are no persons but only physical and mental events in a complex causal series, then the ultimate truth about “us” must be that “we” are not free’ (158). Later, he tries to suggest that believing in freedom is necessary because otherwise there would be no explaining the utility of the conception of freedom or self-control.

On one perspective, Dennett (2003) supports the compatibilist approach to the problem of free will. He does oppose the *Brahmanical* or *Upaniṣadic* or Cartesian notion of the self (the ultimate inner controller of the body, i.e., *antarayāmin* (Upaniṣadic term) and the center of perception) but approaches a dynamic notion of intention, i.e., the agent’s cognitive ability to reflect, plan, and control). And, on the other perspective, the psychologist Wegner (2002, 1) gives an anti-Cartesian account of free will and states that ‘free will cannot and does not exist as an active, conscious causal power. Although we feel that we have control of our actions, but that is just an illusion.’ He further explains that actions and choices are primarily produced by brains, and the brain does not transcend causality and therefore cannot be genuinely free. However, Dennett (1984) provides a cognitive perspective of free will as a kind of self-control that is to represent, to reflect, and to imagine possibilities. He further points out that free will is our imperfect ability to control ourselves, to direct ourselves toward the imagined goal. In this sense, free will is necessarily a property of an agent who wants something and who can drive himself in the direction of fulfilling the desire (52). He expresses that free will is incompatible with fatalism (he calls it as

³⁶ Compatibilist argues that free will and determinism are compatible, e.g., Thomas Hobbes who defined that a free man is one who finds ‘no stop in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to do’ and agents are more free when they have less limited by constraints, coercions, compulsions, or lack of opportunities. See also Robert Kane (2005, p. 13).

an *inevitability*), and it is compatible with determinism. However, the Buddha's understanding of fate is defined, unlike Dennett, as *not inevitable* because we as human beings can alter the path or change the direction of our lives and the eightfold path is that possibility to attain that embodied freedom. The nuances of Buddhist thinking describe the conceptual changes from 'the absolute freedom of the will' to 'the minimal sense of freedom of the will.'

The Buddha rejects the *Upaniṣadic* or Cartesian³⁷ concept of the self—who is the inner controller and realizing the self (*attā*) one attains self-mastery, has denied the self not only as a basis of perception but also as the center of control—and it is replaced by a dynamic volitional or intentional process, which is embedded in causality, i.e., dependent on the agent's cognitive of self-control and moral choices. And, henceforth, there might be a more or less possibility of individual choice, moral responsibility, reward or punishment. It seems that Buddhist teaching neither supports the theory of indeterminism³⁸ nor fatalism³⁹ nor strict or hard determinism. Therefore, *nibbāna*⁴⁰ could be extracted to the notions of compatibilist or semi-compatibilist or libertarian sense of free will, even these notions of free will requires an agent who can monitor the mental constraints.

As Buddhaghosa explains, 'there is no real production, there is only interdependence' (Conze 1962, p. 149). Similarly, according to the Buddha, as Stcherbatsky (1993, 133) points out that 'There is free action, there is retribution, but I see no agent that passes out of one set of momentary elements into another one, except the (connection) of those elements.'⁴¹ The doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* expresses that

³⁷ Descartes in the 1993 of 'Meditations on First Philosophy' states that 'Free Will as a Godly Power that belongs in the soul.' He further in the Meditation IV: Of the Truth and the False (75–76) says:

Regarding myself more closely considering what are my errors, I answer that they depend on a combination of two causes: (1) the faculty of knowledge that rests in me (understanding), and (2) the power of choice or free will (will)... I cannot complain that God has not given me a free choice or a will which is sufficient, ample and perfect since as a matter of fact I am conscious of a will so extended as to be subject to no limits. ... It is free will alone or liberty of choice which I find to be so great in me that I can conceive no other idea to be more great; it is indeed the case that it is for the most part this will that causes me to know that in some manner I bear the image and similitude of God. For although the power of will incomparably greater in God than in me, both by reason of the knowledge and the power, which conjoined with it, render it stronger and more efficacious, and by reason of its object, in as much as in God it extends to a great many things; it nevertheless does not seem to me greater if I consider it formally and precisely in itself: for the faculty of will consists alone in our having the power of choosing to do a thing or choosing not to do it, or rather it consists alone in the fact that in order to affirm or deny, pursue or shun those things placed before us by the understanding, we act so that we are unconscious that any outside force constrains us in doing so. For in order that I should be indifferent as to the choice of one or the other of two contraries; but contrariwise the more I lean to the one - whether I recognize clearly that the reasons of the good and true are to be found in it, or whether God so disposes my inward thought - the more freely do I choose and embrace it. And, undoubtedly both divine grace and natural knowledge, far from diminishing my liberty, rather increase it and strengthen it.

³⁸ See DN I. 28, 52, SN II. 22.

³⁹ See DN I. 28, 53, 54, DN II. 19, 20, SN II. 22, MN II. 124, AN I. 173-175, AN III. 338.

⁴⁰ The term '*Nibbāna*' is understood as the absence of mental constraint. See Kalupahana 1992, p. 91.

⁴¹ *Asti karmāsti vipākah kāraṅkas tu, nopalabhyate ya imāms'ca skhandhān; niḥsipaty anyāms' ca skandhān, pratisaṃdadhāty anyatra dharmasamketāt.* See it is also cited by Shimon Edelman 2008, p. 477.

the result of an action is possible if both the cause and condition are present; otherwise, the effect cannot be visualized (i.e., the presence of the cause and condition imply the presence of the effect). Therefore, the Buddha rejects the self-causing agents, not *self-governing or self-controlling to oneself* (our emphasis), for becoming an *arahant* or attaining *nibbāna*. Even after the *nibbāna*, one should continue her or his practices of the eightfold paths, mindfulness meditation, and also teach to others about the substantial purpose of insight knowledge.

Whether Determinism, or Indeterminism, or Libertarianism Would be Applicable in Buddhist Teaching?

There are various conceptual implications of the theory of free will, in the context of the conceptual connection between the notions of ‘self,’ ‘self-control,’ and ‘moral responsibility.’ Let us analyze—whether free will is applicable even if there is no-self—the conceptual connection in the following ways:

Conceptual Connection 1 (*Modus Ponens*), p: ‘no-self’ and q: ‘no independent agent’:

1. If there is no self, there is no independent agent. ($p \rightarrow q$)
2. There is no self, according to the Buddha. (p)
3. Therefore, there is no independent agent. (q)

Conceptual Connection 2 (*Modus Ponens*), p: ‘no autonomous agent’ and q: ‘no self-controlling-controller’:

1. If there is no autonomous agent, there is no self-controlling-controller. ($p \rightarrow q$)
2. There is no autonomous agent, according to Buddhism. (p)
3. Therefore, we do not have control over any of the five aggregates (self-as-aggregates) or there is no self-controlling-controller. (q)

Conceptual Connection 3 (*Transitivity*), p: ‘no self,’ q: ‘no agent,’ and r: ‘no moral responsibility’:

1. If there is no self, there is no agent. ($p \rightarrow q$)
2. If there is no agent, there is no moral responsibility who can be ascribed. ($q \rightarrow r$)
3. Therefore, if there is no self, there is no moral responsibility. ($p \rightarrow r$)

Conceptual Connection 4 (*Transitivity*), p: ‘no self’ and q: ‘no one who can realize of oneself,’ and r: ‘no-embodied freedom’:

1. If there is no self, there is no one who can realize of oneself. ($p \rightarrow q$)
2. If no one can realize of oneself, there is no possibility of realizing the embodied freedom (*nibbāna*). ($q \rightarrow r$)

3. Therefore, if there is no self, there is no possibility of realizing the *nibbāna*.
($p \rightarrow r$)

If we accept these above four conclusions, then the ultimate goal of Buddhism would collapse, i.e., ‘how is embodied freedom possible?’ We first have to understand these four conceptual implications in Buddhism, how the Buddha does explain the doctrine of no-self in his teaching. He does not claim that the denial of the substantial selfhood does not imply the non-existence of (metaphysical) self, rather an empirical self (*Attakari Sutta*, AN 6.38). We can point out that the similar sequence of causes and conditions can be found in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, but in the *Mahāli Sutta*: To Mahali (SN III. 68-70) explicitly establishes this issue, where the Buddha gives an answer to Mahali that ‘what is the cause, the requisite condition for the purification of beings?’ and ‘how is being purified with cause, with requisite condition?’ as follows:

Mahali, if form (similarly applicable to other four aggregates) were exclusively pleasurable - followed by pleasure, infused with pleasure and not infused with stress - beings would not be disenchanting with form. However, because the form is also stressful - followed by stress, infused with stress and not infused with pleasure - beings are disenchanting with form. Through disenchantment, they grow dispassionate. Through dispassion, they are purified. This is the cause; this is the requisite condition, for the purification of beings. And, this is how beings are purified with cause, with requisite condition.⁴²

We would say that these four conclusions can further entail in two ways: (1) no aspect of a person is *wholly autonomous* (both in the conventional and the ultimate level of truth) and there is no permanent self, due to the momentariness nature of reality. And, (2) none among the five aggregates together are *subject to control*,⁴³ as per the impermanence of each of the aggregates: although the self does not explicitly control the aggregates, it does associate the existence of self-as-aggregates with the ability to control. It hints that Buddhist denial of self does not support the ultimate sense of free will, rather does support the minimal exercise of free will or self-control or moral responsibility.

Let us briefly analyze which approach would be more suitable to tackle the issue of freedom of the will.

- A. If determinism is true, (i) then our free action which we feel as our free choice will not be possible because everything is previously fixed (free will is impossible), and therefore, we are not considered as free agents. And, (ii) if determinism is true and everything is previously fixed, still it does not undermine agent’s moral responsibility for his actions.

⁴² *Tasmā tiha bhikkhava, yaṃ kiñci rūpaṃ atitānāgatapaccuppannaṃ, ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā, olārikam vā sukhumaṃ vā, hīnaṃ vā pañītaṃ vā, yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbaṃ rūpaṃ, netam mama, nesohamasmi. Na me so attāti, evamevaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya datṭhabbam.*

⁴³ See *Cūḷa-Sacca Sutta* and *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*.

- B. If Indeterminism is true, (i) the cause of our actions and choices is random and chaotic (determinism is false), and therefore, we do not have the power of ‘up-to-us.’ And, (ii) if indeterminism is true, and everything is random, still it does not undermine agent’s moral responsibility for his actions.
- C. If free will is true, (i) our actions and choices are not previously determined (determinism is false) and (ii) our actions and choices cannot be random (indeterminism is false), and therefore, we have the ability to do otherwise (free will is possible).

The application of ‘A’ connects to Buddhist doctrines of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* and *Aṣṭāṅgikamārga*, and it indicates that the problem of moral responsibility in relation to the deterministic thesis is not a bigger problem, and it seems as if the Buddha accepts a soft determinism (compatibilism). Whereas the application of ‘B’ is closely connected with the Buddha’s teaching of *the efficacy of human effort*, where he neither supports indeterminism nor fatalism nor strict/hard determinism, similarly, the application of ‘C’ links to the *embodied freedom* because without free will, no one can achieve the final goal of *nibbāna* or free from the bondage of suffering and it hints to a libertarian approach. However, the first two (‘A’ and ‘B’) approaches exclude the ultimate sense of free will, not the minimal application of free will, whereas the application of ‘C’ excludes the libertarian sense of free will, because it is understood as the independent nature of *agent-caused* or *self-caused*, and therefore, it cannot conceivably hold in Buddhism due to the *Paṭiccasamuppādavāda*—interdependence in nature.

In the *Samyuktāgama*, the cow-herding Kuru people ask the Buddha, ‘what is the discourse on emptiness in its ultimate meaning?’ The Buddha said, ‘When the eye arises, there is no place from which it comes; when it ceases, there is no place to which it goes. Thus, the eye, being not real, arises; having arisen, it ceases completely. It is a result of the previous action, but it has no doer’ (SA 335).⁴⁴ Likewise, in the *Mūlamadhyamakārika* (Ch. 8, p. 186), Nāgārjuna states that ‘an agent proceeds depending upon the action and the action proceeds depending upon the agent. We do not perceive any other way of establishing them.’ It says that in the conventional usage as a self is merely conforming to the conventions of the world and so, there is no way to nullify the possibility of free will approach. In brief, we would say that the Buddha’s main purpose of the teaching is to continue practicing ‘to do good,’ ‘to purify one’s mind from the evil or any form of defilements’ and realizing that practice is the only reality. However, the broad picture of Buddhism avoids the rigid/strict/hard determinism, fatalism, indeterminism, libertarianism as well. Rather, we do support to argue that the Buddha’s teaching embraces a compatibility (between *Paṭiccasamuppāda* and *Aṣṭāṅgikamārga*) approach of free will, that is, self-governing or self-controlling to oneself, not self-causing agents.

⁴⁴ *Samyuktāgama*: The Discourse on Emptiness in its Ultimate Meaning, Trans. Choong Mun-Keat (Wei-Keat), 1999.

Conclusion

The Buddha's thought is primarily emphasized to the significance of axiological and teleological aspect of life. The 'suffering' is an experiential or existential reality, and 'freedom' is meant as an understanding of that reality and then abandoning the causes and the requisite conditions of suffering within oneself, as the Buddha holds. The existential suffering is the suffering of the bondage of the cycle of repeated birth and death.

The Buddha rejects the Cartesian and Brahmanical understanding of self because these positions have no significant role in individual choices and (moral) responsibility. His rejection of Gosāla's fatalism is similar to the rejection of hard determinism and leads to the defense of free will. For him, in the conventional sense of reality, the self or living being is only conforming to the conventions of the world; whereas in the ultimate sense of reality, the self is only the aggregate of materiality or the self-as-aggregates of the material qualities (*rūpakkhanda*), it is not self, but merely the physical phenomena. The self is a continuous flux or becoming of impersonal processes.

The Buddha explicitly discards the absolute free will or ultimate self-control or ultimate bearers of moral responsibility, but not the minimal power of free will, self-control or moral responsibility; and so, his view shifts from the agent causation (independent ownership) to the causal sequence of impersonal processes (psychophysical factors). He also avoids the notion of fatalism, hard determinism, indeterminism, and libertarianism. However, we do support to argue that the Buddha's teaching embraces the compatibility approach of free will (*Paṭīcasamuppāda* and *Aṣṭāṅgikamārga*). Therefore, the Buddha says that 'He who sees dependent arising sees the *Dhamma*; he who sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent arising' (MN I. 28, 191).

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