



Causality and freedom in Buddhism

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Abstract

The concept of freedom is prevalent in modern society. It is of a freedom from external limitations or restrictions, including freedom from limitations or restrictions placed by our fellow humans or nature. But this is not real freedom. We want to liberate ourselves from enslavement. It also closely tied with the concept of liberty. From a Buddhist perspective, freedom begins with generosity (*dana*), which leads to moral living (*sila*), which in turn leads to mindfulness (*bhavana*). This is what creates true freedom and happiness in Buddhist philosophy. But some skeptics of free will argue that if our choices are causally determined in accordance with universal law or determinism, then we are not really free. Determinism leaves open only one possible outcome for each event in the series of events necessitated by prior conditions in accordance with unbreakable laws. If only one event is possible in each moment, an agent cannot bring about anything other than what was already determined. And if an agent can never do otherwise (than what he or she was determined to do), then the agent cannot be correctly considered morally responsible for his or her actions. This is the main problem of free will

Buddha 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 related 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 truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*)—the intrinsic nature of human existence—which is basically characterized by '*dukkha*' and the *dukkha* arises because of the continuous positive and negative desires for something.

The most common confusion may arise 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.

Key Word: Freedom, Determinism, Samsara, Nirvana, Law of Karma, Suffering, Spiritual insight.

Introduction:

Human beings always want freedom, but the concept itself has many different meanings. The concept of freedom is prevalent in modern society. It is of a freedom from external limitations or restrictions, including freedom from limitations or restrictions placed by our fellow humans or nature. But this is not real freedom. We want to liberate ourselves from enslavement. It also closely tied with the concept of liberty. From a Buddhist perspective, freedom begins with generosity (*dana*), which leads to moral living (*sila*), which in turn leads to mindfulness (*bhavana*). This is what creates true freedom and happiness in Buddhist philosophy. But some skeptics of free will argue that if our choices are causally determined in accordance with universal law or determinism, then we are not really free. Determinism leaves open only one possible outcome for each event in the series of events necessitated by prior conditions in accordance with unbreakable laws. If only one event is possible in each moment, an agent cannot bring about anything other than what was already determined. And if an agent can never do otherwise (than what he or she was determined to do), then the agent cannot be correctly

considered morally responsible for his or her actions. This is the main problem of free will. It is the most related problems of free will which are based on this implication, directly or indirectly in the Buddhist philosophy.

Buddha 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 related 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 truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni)—the intrinsic nature of human existence—which is basically characterized by 'dukkha' and the dukkha arises because of the continuous positive and negative desires for something.

His teaching is further focused on the continuous practices of the 'noble eightfold paths'. 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-karmanta), (5) right livelihood/maintaining life by the honest means (sammā-ājīva), (6) right effort/constant endeavor to maintain moral progress (sammāvāyāma), (7) right mindfulness/constant remembrance of the nature of things (sammā-smṛiti), 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 (Jñāna). Buddha has emphasized the role of free will for exercising an action. In the Path of Freedom 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. 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 from suffering, and we have the capacity to be free and enlightened from saṃsāra because he himself has achieved the lived experience of nirvana.

The concept of 'middle way' leads to calm, to direct knowledge or self-awakening, to unbinding through the noble eightfold paths. The most common confusion may arise 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 that issue whether the human actions are free or determined or undetermined or graced by any supernatural powers. This will also discuss in this paper.

Causality and freedom: 'Causality' and 'freedom' are central to discussions in Philosophy of action. Causality and freedom have been addressed from ontological as well as ethical perspectives. Ontologically, causality refers to the dynamics of changes signifying the way there is continual success of cause and effect. Needless to say that cause and effect are relative terms. That which is a cause in relation to the effect can be seen as the effect in relation to its antecedent which is the cause. The relationship between cause and effect is one of necessity such that given the cause effect can be predicted in advance and given the effect the cause can be inferred retrospectively. Causal necessity leaves no room for human freedom. Therefore moral judgments cannot be passed on the causal process in the state of nature. 'Freedom' on the other hand is a moral concept. Freedom of will makes sense only in human domain, because human beings are endowed with autonomy of will. Given the circumstances, different individual are free to act differently. Prima facie Causality and freedom do not go hand in hand. State of nature is understood and explained in terms of causal laws whereas it is the freedom of will which defines the distinctiveness of human action. The distinction between action and event is fundamental. Event is causally determined whereas action is determined by free will. In other words an event is caused whereas action is willed. Morality makes sense only in the area of human actions, because human agents have autonomy of will. The 'will' can be used and abused as well on account of which the moral judgments are rendered meaningful.

Causality and determinism: Causality goes hand in hand with determinism. There is no room for freedom in so far as the state of nature is concerned. Man cannot will things into existence. Things happen, because of the causal necessities. In other words given the antecedents the consequence follows and given the consequence the antecedents can be reconstructed. Moral judgment cannot be passed on events. It is wrong to say the earthquake is immoral. The events cannot be judged to be good or bad, desirable or undesirable. As the causal sequence in the state of nature, there is a uniform sequence in the moral domain. The law of karma states that as is the action, so is the reaction (karma-phala). As cause and effect that the action, (karma) and reaction (pratikarma) are also determined by certain deterministic laws. This is the karmic law. In other words when causality reigns in the state of nature, moral laws reign supreme in karmic domain. No wicked action goes unpunished and no virtuous action goes unrewarded. Man is free to do action but he has no right to determine the consequence of action. Under this interpretation causality and freedom are conceptually antithetical. It does not mean that the advocates of freedom deny causality. All that they argue is that despite the causal reinforcement, man is endowed with freedom to act in the way one chooses to act. So freedom of will and choice define uniqueness of human agent.

Pratityasamutpada: Causality and freedom

Causality refers to the state of causal sequence in the state of nature. Our ignorance about the cause of a phenomenon does not mean that it is uncaused. Science is a progressive mark in towards discovering the causal dynamics in the state of nature. Bacon rightly observed that ‘knowledge is power’. By the knowledge of the causality man can regulate nature predict cause of events in the state of nature. Buddhists also point to the deterministic sequence in respect of action of human beings. Just as cause and effect are necessarily related action and reaction also follow deterministic pattern. While advocating causality and determinism in the state of nature Buddhist observe “Asmin sati idam bhavati ” this being that appears .

Causality is applied in the state of nature and in the realm of morality. “Ksanikbhada” is the Buddhist view that things are impermanent. Since change is the only unchangeable law of the universe all that human beings can propose to do is to discover the karmic sequence. Antecedent and consequences in form of action and its results do take place independent the nature of the action. As very nature of reality determine the cause and effect the nature of moral ontology determines the sequence of action and reaction. As is the action, so is the reaction. Since consequence is determined by antecedent it holds out the possibility that by preventing the cause by preventing effect.

Buddhists recommend in causal model to explain the wheel of life (bhavacakra). It explains how the past, present and future are Causally related. We are what we are because of our earning in the past and therefore the future depends on our actions in this life. Man is the designer of his own destiny. This leaves room for autonomy of will and self-effort of human agent to escape from cycle of birth and death which has been termed as bondage leading to suffering. Buddhists deny the existence of a soul, because they advocate theory of impermanence. Since everything is transitory there is nothing like ‘soul’ as it was emphasized by traditional thinkers. According to traditional thinkers Soul is beyond causal change. Soul is a non-physical entity which endures repeated births and deaths. So the soul is nothing but the aggregation of five components. But the apparent paradox is that there is no soul. Buddhist are under obligation to explain how as rebirth possible. It will be explained how theory of no soul, (anatamavada) can be reconciled with the concept of rebirth by the notion of ‘continuity’.

Nirvana: freedom beyond causality: Buddhists on the one hand advocate causal determinism in the physical domain and strict moral determinism in the moral domain. At the same time they also argue in the favor of the possibility of escaping from this deterministic cycle in the karmic domain. The so called object is nothing but the series of changing instants. Life is the series of changing states. The past determines the present and present

determines the future. It appears that there is no room for freedom the present is strictly determined by the karmic effects of the past and present determines the future. Human beings an apparently helpless victims to the strict moral determinism. But the freedoms of will is karmic domain is accepted the Buddhist framework. Self-effort can prevent the cause and thereby it can prevent the effect. Just as a lamp burns subject to availability of oxygen in atmosphere the fire and wick. If any of the conditions of the wick be withdrawn fire will not there. Similarly suffering has a cause. Suffering is due to the fact that one is subject to life cycle. Buddhists argue that one can escape to a vantage point and go beyond the karmic cycle by preventing the cause. Thus there remain moral possibility of overcoming the primary ignorance.

The root cause of 'bhavachakra' is primary ignorance which sustains the karmic cycle. By overcoming the elemental ignorance through proper knowledge one can escape to the state where there is no more subject to the cycle of birth and death. This is the ontological interpretation of suffering in the Buddhism.

The ethical imperatives of Buddhism make a case for an existential state which is termed as nirvana. Nirvana is not negative state. It does not refer to absence of suffering but a presence of positivity. Buddha's last word lit a lamp unto thyself simply suggests that one has to work out of liberation. There is no room for divine intervention. Buddha silence to the ten metaphysical questions is significant because he wanted people at large to address the universal phenomena of suffering. Freedom of will is nothing but capacity for self-determination. Buddha underlines eightfold path to attain liberation. It does not refer to transcendental state because it can be attained here and now. When ignorance is overcome then the chains which based on bhavachakra stop to be functional.

Karmic determinism and nirvana

Our discussion of the law of karma would be incomplete without consideration of the relation of the law of karma to human liberation. Our current existence, governed by the law of karma, must be transcended into something higher. The goal of life is liberation from the misery and suffering which accompany the cycle of rebirths. This can only occur when we have exhausted our accumulated karma and have terminated that with which we are afflicted: ignorance (which takes the non-eternal, impure, painful and not-self to be eternal, pure, and pleasurable and the self), egoism, attachment to pleasure, aversion to pain, and love of life. Termination of these occurs by removing ignorance (attaining knowledge of ourselves in regard to our true nature and knowledge of the causes of birth, becoming, craving, feeling, and consciousness), attaining freedom from desires, cravings, and passions, and eliminating egoism and self-concern. Karma, then, is not the final word, only the preliminary word, the word characterizing conscious existence apart from or prior to final liberation.

Nirvana as the highest state is consistent with the karmic determinism in form the life cycle. The nature of elemental ignorance and how having overcome it one can prevent the other spokes of the wheel. The karmic dynamism in Buddhist perspective is explained with the nature of eightfold path emphasizing nature of self-effort and show how they are mutually supportive of the self-effort. Life cycle through the advocate the favor of transcendence the state with beyond the dynamic of empirical cycle, they do not favor the thesis is supernatural. They deny transcendental state and there is no room for any transcendental intervention.

Conclusion

Buddhist concept of nirvana, State of perfection stands distinct as concept of liberation or mukti emphasized in other systems. It will bring into focus of Buddhist concept of liberation (nirvana) and spell out ethical constructs and show how ethics is parasitic on ontology and how Buddhist notion of causality and freedom one finds unique synthesis of a metaphysics, axiology as well as pragmatics. 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. 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. 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 and indeterminism. However, we do support to argue that the Buddha's teaching embraces the compatibility approach of free will i.e dependent origination and eightfold path.

Lastly we can say that freedom means to attain nirvana which is the transformed state of consciousness i.e. free of the obsession with me and mine. In order to achieve the state of freedom one has to extinguish the triple fire of greed, hatred and delusion which leads us to rebirth. The state of freedom in Buddhism is a psychological and ethical reality. It is a transformed state of personality characterize by peace and deep spiritual insight.

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