



## Karma, Determinism, and Free Will in Buddhist Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines how Buddhism views karma while comparing its teachings to Western philosophies including Libertarianism and Hard Determinism and Compatibilism. Buddhist teachings of *kammassakatā* and *paṭicca-samuppāda* demonstrate strong similarities with the principles of Compatibilism because they maintain ethical responsibility through causal conditions. The research uses the *Tiṭhāyatana Sutta* and both *Attakāri Sutta* and *Nibbedhika Sutta* to demonstrate that Buddhism does not accept a concept of either fatalism or unconditional freedom. The theory maintains human agency by showing how actions naturally emerge through specific conditions even while it defends ethical responsibility among people.

**Keywords:** karma, free will, determinism, moral responsibility, *kammassakatā*, dependent origination, Compatibilism, Buddhism, volition, causal conditions.

The conversation about moral responsibility in Western philosophy leads to simultaneous evaluations of determining factors and personal choice. Determinism established itself through rational means against fatalism since fatalists believe divine decrees determine all human destiny. According to Democritus "everything happens for a reason and arises out of necessity" which seduced rational philosophers of his time. According to natural law determinism every event which exists creates doubts about the existence of moral responsibility. Epicurus introduced atomic swerve for the random movement (*clinamen*) while Aristotle affirmed some actions come from human agency. Throughout Western philosophy the basic components of free will authority were first proposed by these thinkers (Kane 1996, 23–26).

Western philosophical discourse maintains an essential disagreement regarding determinism as a causal theory of event prediction against free will which describes personal choice autonomy. Under Libertarian philosophy free will takes precedence over all deterministic arguments. Compatibilism describes a doctrine which presents free will as something that exists alongside determinism. Hard Determinism rejects free will as a concept even though it does not exist. The 2009 survey of contemporary philosophers shows that Compatibilists represent 59% of their number while Libertarians constitute 13% and Hard Determinists make up the remaining 12% (Bourget and Chalmers 2014).

Various discussions about determinism depend on Laplace's demonstration as a theoretical construct. According to Laplace an omniscient entity could use Newtonian physics to forecast the future while understanding precise atomic positions and velocities exactly (Laplace 1951, 3–4). The current interpretations of consciousness by modern neuroscience provide further backing for this kind of interpretation. In their view conscious will manifests as a product of illusion.

Compatibilists who unite concept of responsibility with determinism consider it an essential element in their frameworks. The murder of Prince Kanaung by Myin Khon and Myin Khon Taing prompts the inquiry about whether their actions were fixed from the time of the Big Bang. Compatibilists state that moral responsibility depends on two fundamental requirements consisting of having alternative possibilities as well as deliberate choice control. According to this two-stage free will model randomness generates authentic options but voluntary decisions make possible accountable decisions (Kane 1996, 87–88).

Buddhism has a belief system that shares similarities with moral responsibility through *kammassakatā*. The Buddhist concept of *kamma* represents intentional act types which include thoughts and words and deeds and the word *sakatā* implies "ownership." A person possesses action ownership through *kammassakatā* (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* [AN] 6.63). One needs a conceptual understanding of "adequate determinism" to interpret the Buddhist teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda* as dependent origination (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* [SN] 12.1–65).

The Buddha introduces in *MN 98* the *Vasala* doctrine showing that society defines people through what they accomplish beyond their birth background. People identify individuals by their actions rather than their birth status regardless if they work as farmers, merchants, thieves or soldiers (*Majjhima Nikāya* [MN] 98).

The world operates under a karmic system of moral order in which everything comes into existence through dependent origination (*SN 12.20*). Through the *Tiṭhāyatana Sutta* (*AN 3.62*) the Buddha challenges three deterministic systems including *pubbekatahetuvāda* (determinism by past actions) and *issarakatahetuvāda* (divine creationism) and *ahetukavāda* (random indeterminism). The Buddha determined these theories devoid ethical value which negates individual responsibility (Bodhi 2012, *AN 3.62*).

The *Attakāri Sutta* (AN 6.38) presents additional valuable information. A brahmin stated personal volition did not exist so the Buddha asked him to choose movement between forward or backward directions. Through this conversation the Buddha deduced that human beings possess freedom to make choices following the brahmin's agreement to move forward and backward whenever he wanted (Bodhi 2012, AN 6.38). This explanation matches Western views about choosing alternative options.

According to the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (AN 6.63) "Intention (*cetana*) is *kamma*." *Cetana* signifies volitional intention that creates *saṅkhāra* (volitional formations). Subject to intention individuals can perform actions that remain separate from complete physical determination. Buddhism validates the entire two-stage free will model which contemplates volitional intent and the existence of multiple action choices (Bodhi 2012, AN 6.63).

The term "free" in Buddhist understanding of free will does not indicate absolute freedom from causal factors. According to dependent origination all things originate from their causes (SN 12.2). Freedom exists within a set of conditions which restrict a state of absolute freedom. According to dependent origination *bhava* receiving its form from *upādāna* (clinging) creates becoming. *Bhava* describes both situations of existence together with their two categories *kammabhava* (intentional becoming) and *upapattibhava* (resultant existence) (SN 12.25). The decision to work as a farmer defines *kammabhava* but living life as a farmer creates *upapattibhava* conditions. Voluntary action exists despite being influenced by different types of attachments to pleasure along with views and rituals and self-perceptions (Gethin 1998, 140–145).

Buddhism accepts free will although it describes this liberation as a will that functions under conditions. The ability to make voluntary decisions exists even though all choices and actions originate from existing causes and attachments. The view of Buddhism about free will matches Compatibilism beliefs while remaining separate from both Libertarianism and Hard Determinism concepts.

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