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### Symposium on *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?*

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# Symposium on *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?*

Rick Repetti<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 25, is a symposium on the anthology, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* (Repetti), and on the topic reflected by that title, more broadly, based on an Author Meets Critics session of the 2018 American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting organized by Christian Coseru. To orient readers new to the topic, I first sketch what some of the issues are regarding Buddhist perspectives on free will. Second, I briefly describe the anthology, and third, I introduce the several contributions to this symposium. As I am sympathetic to most of the papers here, I only respond briefly to them in this introduction, giving some reasons for my approval. Two papers here, however, are significantly critical of either the anthology as a whole (Brent), or critical of my contributions

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to it (Meyers). I respond separately to each of them in the last two papers in the symposium. Together with this introduction, all the included papers are original.

### Précis

This special issue of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* is a symposium devoted broadly to the subject of Buddhist perspectives on free will. The symposium grew out of what was originally to be an “Author Meets Critics” panel on that topic, where I was the author, the critics were Marie Friquegnon and Michael Brent, the chair (also session organizer) was Christian Coseru, and the book was the edited collection, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* The panel was scheduled to be held at the 2018 Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association (APA) in Savannah, Georgia in January of this year. However, due to inclement weather, the event was cancelled.

Daniel Cozort, general editor of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics (JBE)*, was gracious enough to allow me to salvage most of the efforts that went into preparing for that panel, originally organized and to be chaired by Christian Coseru, by agreeing to publish the panel papers and allow me to be the special issue editor. Whereas such conference panels are typically constrained by time to permit a few presenters, each with a limited amount of time, followed by the author’s response(s), this broader venue enabled us to open up the discussion to longer papers, additional presenters, and to papers more broadly covering the topic of Buddhist perspectives on free will. The resulting several papers turned out to be enough to constitute the equivalent of an edited collection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This Symposium could have as easily been published as a second volume to the edited collection. However, in light of the generosity of support offered to me by this journal

Thus, this special *JBE* issue contains modified versions of those three original panel papers written by Michael Brent, Karin Meyers, and Marie Friquegnon, as well as four additional papers written by Katie Javanaud, Asaf Federman and Oren Ergas, Jonathan Gold, and James Luisi; they either address particular articles, themes, or arguments from *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will*, the collection as a whole, or just the topic of possible Buddhist views on free will in general. My individual responses to only two of those papers—one critical paper by Michael Brent, whose manuscript targets most of the papers in the edited collection, and another by Karin Meyers, whose paper is directed primarily at my own contributions to the edited collection—will follow those seven papers in the symposium. My brief, approving responses to the other papers will be included in this introduction to the symposium.

I encourage the authors of all the papers presented here, as well as our readers, to submit short responses to these papers, using the “Comments” feature on this website, which functions as an interactive blog. Or, if anyone is so inclined, more substantive (article-length) responses may be submitted directly to the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* for consideration for formal publication.<sup>3</sup>

Before I sketch what each of the present papers is about, it would be helpful to briefly discuss the edited collection that serves as the focal point for most of them, and to say a few things about the issues that in-

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throughout my years of working with it, I thought it fitting to bring this work here, where most of my publications on the subject were originally well-received and greatly supported throughout the peer review and editorial processes. Another reason for publishing this collection here is the greater accessibility of the *JBE*, as well as its interactive functionality as a blog, enabling reader commentary.

<sup>3</sup> Two other scholars, Arindam Chakrabarti and Daniel Breyer, each (separately) agreed to submit papers to this collection, but they were unable to complete them on time. Those papers might be published here separately, later.

form it. That is, what are the issues connected with the question of Buddhist perspectives on free will? By first sketching those, readers otherwise unfamiliar with this subject ought to be able to enter into it here.

### **What Do, or Can, Buddhists Think about Free Will?**

That is the question, and it is more problematic than meets the eye. There are many problems lurking beneath it, some less obvious than others. I will only sketch some of these problems here, not only to bring readers into the discussion, but also to demonstrate the complexity of the free will *problems* (note the plural) in Buddhism, and to show how the issue is just as complex, if not more complex, than the free will problem in Western philosophy.

#### *Can There Be Agency without an Agent-Self?*

Today, most people in the West are minimally aware that Buddhism is typically known to espouse the view that the self is something of an illusion, whatever that ultimately means. But it could mean different things, and to different traditions and scholars within Buddhist philosophy, it *does* mean different things. It could just mean that the self exists, for example, but not in the way it seems to exist. By analogy, there are sunrises and rainbows, but they do not exist in the way they seem to exist, at least not in the way they seem for those uneducated about earth-spin and the way clouds function to refract electromagnetic wavelengths within the visible range. Rainbows are illusory, and so are sunrises; they still exist, just not in the way ordinary perception presents them to our understanding.

In any case, upon reflection, if I consider this claim about the illusory nature of the self, in conjunction with the idea that the things that I do are *up to me*, that is, that I act freely, or with free will, then the question immediately arises: How can *my* actions be *mine*, or genuinely up to *me* if *I*—an alleged *self*—am subject to an illusion about whether or what *I am*? That's the first and perhaps the foremost problem facing the question of whether there can be free will within Buddhism. Hence, the subtitle of the anthology under question: *Agentless Agency*? That is, how can there be *agency* (free will) without an *agent* (a self), or *self*-rule (autonomy) with a *self*? For this reason, many Buddhist philosophers, scholars, *Dharma* teachers,<sup>4</sup> and followers of Buddhism simply reject the concept of free will as an illusion: If there is no self, there can be no autonomous self.

Others, however, disagree, as do I. To make a simple analogy: suppose the no-self doctrine is correct, however that doctrine may be understood (as sketched above, say, with sunrises and rainbows). Suppose, technically speaking, *speaking* is usually understood to require a *speaker*. It would not necessarily follow from the no-self doctrine that there is no speech. Instead, one could simply jettison the old idea that speech requires a speaker, or alter one's understanding of what it means to be a speaker, e.g., the person speaking. Intuitively, that makes more sense than denying that there is speech. For to deny that there is speech is to commit a performative contradiction: it requires speech to deny that there is speech. There are many other ways to make out an intelli-

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike, but somewhat similar to, the Hindu meaning of the term, “the *Dharma*” is the Buddhist term for Buddhism, the truth as espoused by Buddhists, or the way or path of Buddhism, among related meanings. Thus, *Dharma* teachers include Buddhas, other enlightened beings, meditation masters, advanced meditation practitioners, and others who espouse the *Dharma*, whether in *sutras*, sermons, lectures, or other formats. It is believed that even hearing the *Dharma* is the result of, and brings, propitious circumstances or good karma.

ble position to the effect that there may be agency without an agent, by analogy. Whether any such ways of doing so are sound is the question.

The no-self doctrine poses, in my view, the main free will problem in Buddhism, but there are others. Let us review some of them.

### *Can There Be Karma and Rebirth without an Agent-Self?*

Another problem has to do with the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and is closely related to the question posed to the Buddha by the Brahmins inquiring how it was possible for karma and reincarnation (Buddhists prefer to refer to this as *rebirth*) to occur in the absence of a self or soul whose karma it is and who is reborn. If there is no agent-self, so to speak, how can there be karma and rebirth? Karma is technically intention, volition, and/or volitional action, and free will may be described as autonomous choice, and/or as autonomous action, both of which may be considered forms of volitional action. But if there is no agent, how can there be choice, volition, action, and karma? Whose karma is it, and who is reborn? How can the term, which implies being born again, apply to what appears to be two non-identical beings, since the term implies one being, who was born before, being born again? If there is no identity between them, there is no basis for the idea that birth has occurred *again*.

This question has been addressed, from the time of the Buddha himself, although not emphasizing the agency side as much as the issue of how there can be karma and rebirth without a self whose karma it is, and who or what is reborn. But surely there is a link between the karma issue and agency: karma is volition, and free will is a kind of volitional freedom. Some understand karma to be iron-clad and thus unavoidable or inevitable, rightly or wrongly, but it is easy to see how such a view of karma could give rise to a free will question: If everything we experience is the inevitable result of karma, beginningless karma, no less, how can



there be free will? But if there is no free will, then why is anyone responsible for what they do, even karmically? Likewise, if everything is karmic, how is it that the Buddhist path can allegedly reverse the stream and lead to liberation?

It is not emphasized enough, in my view, that the Buddha rejected several forms of fatalism or, as I prefer to lump them together, inevitabilisms: inevitable causation by gods, fate, matter, chance, and, most notably, karma. Thus, the Buddha implicitly believed in some sort of non-inevitabilism, or evitabilism, when it comes to volition.

#### *Is Agency Inconsistent with Buddhist Causation?*

Another free will problem within Buddhism concerns the broader Buddhist conception of causation. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, which holds, roughly, that whatever arises depends on causal conditions, and is often thought to be functionally similar to (if not, for some, identical with) the Western scientific/philosophical doctrine of determinism, which holds, roughly, that whatever arises depends *lawfully* on causal conditions.

There are some significant differences in these doctrines, and there are different versions of both, and thus Buddhist scholars and Western philosophers disagree on the proper interpretation of each, but there is enough resemblance between them to lead some contributors to this discussion to conclude that, if Buddhist causation is deterministic, then, just as in Western philosophy, this poses a challenge to belief in free will: How can a choice be free if it is the lawfully necessary consequence of previous causal conditions?

A related question is: If everything is causally conditioned, then how can enlightenment, which is described as unconditioned and cause-

less, be brought about by that which is conditioned? One metaphorical reply is to see enlightenment as our underlying Buddha nature, obscured by ignorance, not brought about but revealed by removing the obscuration.

*Is Free Will Possible in Light of the Buddha's Alleged Omniscience?*

Yet another problem concerns the Buddha's alleged omniscience, which is sometimes described as restricted to whatever the Buddha turns his attentive gaze, such as the past and future lives of particular sentient beings. This problem resembles the problem of divine foreknowledge in Western theology: If an omniscient being (God, the Buddha, or anyone, for that matter) impeccably foreknows that I will choose X in the future, how could that choice be free? For the choice to be truly free, it seems we must be able to bring about either of the two or more alternatives that constitute the choice, but if only one outcome is already known by an all-knowing being that cannot be falsified, then the other alternative was never truly available. None of the contributors in this symposium address this particular problem, although it is touched upon briefly in the anthology (Harvey 163-165).

*Can a Non-Agent Make the Choice and Efforts to Follow the Buddhist Path?*

Another problem concerns the problematic idea of how anyone can choose to follow the Buddhist path, or make the heroic efforts required to traverse it, if no one has free will. Rather than make the sort of Olympic-training-level efforts that are prescribed in order to follow the Buddhist Eightfold Path, if there is no free will, what reason is there for anyone to try, when instead it would be easier to just sit back and wait to become enlightened, since when that happens is not *up to one*. Even

some of the Buddhist sages have seen and addressed this problem, which is why it is addressed here in the symposium and in the anthology.

*If There Are No Agent-Selves, How Can Buddhist Titans of Mind-Control Exist?*

A more pressing problem concerns how Buddhism can account for the titanic autonomy-like powers of its meditation adepts if there is no free will, akin to imagining how someone can lift three hundred pounds but cannot lift ten pounds. If making effort is hard to explain absent free will, then explaining the successful cultivation of titanic skills after the sustained exertion of Olympic athlete level efforts over decades, if not lifetimes, is even more difficult. Self-mastery without a self: the very verbal formulation outwardly displays its internal conflict. This issue is addressed in detail in the anthology, and to a significant extent here.

*Is There Free Will in Either of the Two Truths?*

Another problem has to do with the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths, one conventional or relative, the other ultimate or absolute. This doctrine is interpreted in different ways by earlier and later Buddhists. Simplifying greatly, early Buddhist foundationalist reductionists view momentary, psychophysical atomistic tropes as the ultimate reals, and everything else that is composite, partite, and constructed out of them, as only conventionally real, since there are no wholes above and apart from their parts. For them, the person is no more than a composite construction of all of its aggregated, momentary components, and so is its alleged autonomy, but none of these are ultimately real. Also simplifying (greatly), later Buddhists reject even the foundationalist idea that the atomistic tropes are real, so for them everything is equally and only conventionally real. The only ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.

Alternately put, the idea is that everything is empty of essence, independent-being, or self-nature. Thus, for them, persons and free will are, at best, only conventionally real, and there are disputes among later Buddhist schools even about what things count as conventionally real.

In both early and later Buddhist views, however, conventional reality is not ultimately real, so ultimately there is no free will. If so, however, all the above problems become all the more pressing. Again, there are divergent understandings of the two truths doctrine within Buddhism, further complicating this question.

### **The Edited Collection, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will***

There are other problems with free will within Buddhism, but the above sketch ought to suffice to provide the context for what follows. Let us turn now to sketch the anthology that forms the focal point for this symposium.

After having published a handful of my own articles on this topic in this journal between 2010 and 2014, Daniel Cozort, general editor of *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, suggested that I had enough material for a book. Routledge agreed and published the edited collection *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?* in 2017, and then published my monograph on the same subject, *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*, in 2018, the latter text of which contains a much more comprehensive treatment of my own view of the subject, as well as a critical review of all the other papers in the former text. There is only so much that can be expressed in an article or chapter, and only so many possible alternatives and potential objections that may be raised or responded to within such parameters. Thus, readers interested in a more complete account of my own view of the subject are directed to the

monograph, which unfortunately saw print only after the original APA Author Meets Critics panel was scheduled to convene, and just around the time the present papers were already mostly composed, in which case many of the critical points raised in some of the present papers were already forestalled, preempted, or otherwise foreclosed in the monograph.<sup>5</sup>

The edited collection under review here, then, contains a substantive preface and introduction, and seventeen chapters in the following order, written by Christopher W. Gowans, me, Charles Goodman, Jay Garfield, Owen Flanagan, Galen Strawson, Susan Blackmore, Christian Coseru, Marie Friquegnon, B. Alan Wallace, Martin T. Adam, Mark Siderits, Ben Abelson, Peter Harvey, Emily McRae, Karin Meyers, and a final chapter by me. A few of these were revised versions of earlier papers, but the bulk were originally written for the collection. The sixteen authors altogether reflect a divergence of views among scholars and philosophers of Buddhism that parallels that of Western philosophers who specialize in free will, and the collection of articles constitutes the bulk of extant scholarship on the topic, with a few exceptions, including my own recently published monograph, the first entirely devoted to the question of Buddhism and free will. Likewise, the anthology was the first collection of essays on Buddhism and free will.

Before the publication of the anthology, little had been written explicitly on the topic of Buddhist perspectives on free will, at most around a dozen or so articles, beginning in the latter half of the Twentieth century, some published in this journal (including one of my own, plus my own four critiques of most of them). The anthology reflects the

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<sup>5</sup> Another “Author Meets Critics” session, this time devoted to the above-mentioned monograph, will be held at the January 7-10, 2019 meeting of the APA Eastern Division in New York City, both organized and to be chaired by Christian Coseru.

lack of consensus in the Buddhist philosophical community about whether the subject of free will is even a legitimate subject matter for Buddhism, given the fairly widespread interpretation of the Buddhist view of the self as illusory, the fairly divergent metaphysics to be found in the different Buddhist traditions, and the different understandings of agency thereof, among many other points of contention.

My own contributions to the edited collection were threefold. First, as the editor, I tried (*Preface; Introduction*) to introduce the issues connected with attempting a Buddhist position on free will to be raised in the divergent contributions in a manner that revealed their philosophical complexity, some ways in which they do and/or do not parallel Western philosophical understanding, some ways in which these apparently orthogonal conceptual differences may be seen as problematizing the basic concepts in the discussion, and noting general features of some of the representatively divergent approaches and conceptions. Second, I contributed one chapter (*Why*) defending the idea that there can and ought to be a Buddhist theory of free will. This is contrary to the view that Javanaud describes in her contribution here as Buddhist “skepticism” about free will (not to suggest that Javanaud is such a skeptic), reflected in varying degrees by contributors Blackmore, Flanagan, Garfield, Goodman, Gowans, Strawson, and others, who suggest there can be no free will in Buddhism because there is no self in Buddhism. Third, I contributed a chapter (*Agentless*) arguing for a particular theory of free will that I think is available to Buddhists, based primarily on three things: (1) the Buddha’s own rejection of a variety of inevitabilist doctrines (inevitable causation by fate, gods, matter, chance, karma, etc.), (2) the sort of mind-mastery attainable through Buddhist meditative practices, by comparison with which the allegedly “strong” (perhaps the strongest) Western philosophical conception of free will, namely, the libertarian’s “leeway” autonomy, the so-called *ability to do otherwise* under identical conditions, and “source” autonomy, the ability to have it that one’s

choices and actions are *up to oneself*, appear facile, and (3) the fact that an analysis of the meditation virtuoso's mental autonomy enables the Buddhist free will theorist to challenge, if not defeat, all of the most powerful Western analytic philosophical arguments against free will: the Consequence Argument, the Manipulation Argument, the Randomness Argument, the Luck Argument, and the Impossibility Argument.

It bears repeating, and also expounding on, that analysis of the meditation virtuoso's skills reveals that the Buddhist conception of mental autonomy is significantly stronger and more robust than even the strongest Western philosophical conception of free will, advocated by various proponents of leeway and source autonomy. Wallace, McRae, and Meyers make similar points about the titanic and supernormal, if not supernatural, abilities of the meditation master or enlightened being, although they do not use this analysis to argue for the theory of free will that I propose. Although I do argue for that theory in my latter chapter in the edited collection, as I have elsewhere (*Possibility; Freedom*), and in the monograph (*Buddhism*) I develop these arguments in much greater detail, concluding that Western conceptions of strong free will are relatively minor features of a much broader and more powerful form of *mental freedom, freedom of the mind, or mental autonomy*, including not only *freedom of the will* and *freedom of action*, along lines adumbrated originally by Harry Frankfurt, but also *freedom of emotion* (which McRae makes clear in the edited collection), *freedom of attention* (which Federman and Ergas make clear in the present collection), *freedom of thought* (which the Buddha himself made clear), and *freedom of perception* (which Gold arguably makes clear in the present collection), among other forms of freedom connected with any and all actually or potentially voluntary behavior, with the latter qualifier referring to the sorts of supernormal abilities of yogis to control otherwise uncontrolled autonomic nervous system phenomena.

Arguably, Buddhist mental freedom may also be thought to include freedom from the self, and/or freedom of the self. For, in deconstructing the self, deconditioning the ego-volitional complex that typically feeds the self, and revising our understanding of the dynamic mechanics of the self-appropriating process, we are able to free ourselves from the unwholesome, mindless (ignorant) volitional complex (exemplified by the extremes of attraction and aversion, respectively, as greed and hatred) identified as the primary source of our pathology. To keep in line with the phraseology of being able to have the mental state, volitions, emotions, etc., that one wants as constituting forms of freedom ranging over those phenomena, freedom of the self is the ability to have the sort of self that one wants to have, namely, a dharmic or enlightened one, understood pragmatically as functionally responsive to dharmic reasons and conditions and understood metaphysically in insubstantial terms, as opposed to a deluded, illusory sense of self as an immaterial executive homunculus driving the mind-body and demanding that its impulses be satisfied.<sup>6</sup>

Having sketched the topic and the edited collection that serve as the focus of this special issue, let me briefly describe each of the contributions to this symposium. They are presented in a loosely-related sequence, insofar as in some cases certain themes may be seen to justify placing one after the other. Again, I will respond to only two of them in my concluding contributions here.

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<sup>6</sup> I develop the idea of these freedoms of the mind (of volition, of emotion, of attention, of perception, of the self, etc.) in “Freedom of the Mind: Buddhist Soft Compatibilism,” presently a draft.



**Katie Javanaud**

Katie Javanaud's contribution, "Tracing the Trajectory of Buddhist Free Will Theorizing," raises the level of the discussion presented in *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* by categorizing the papers and positions according to a useful set of distinctions. Thus, Javanaud distinguishes between those who are sceptical of the project of presenting a Buddhist theory of free will at all, and those who are not. She further distinguishes among the latter, those who think Buddhism admits of an affirmative theory of free will and those who think Buddhism admits of a negative theory. She also calls attention to the need for deeper analysis, for example, on the issue of the extent to which the Buddhist conception of dependent origination is homologous with or orthogonal to the Western (deterministic) view of causation.

As we will see, Jonathan Gold, James Luisi, and Karin Meyers each contribute different analyses of the Buddhist conception of causation and/or dependent origination, implicitly answering Javanaud's call for such clarification, albeit not in a way that forms any consensus. I argued in my later contribution to the anthology (*Agentless*) that the specifics of causation do not actually matter for purposes of the theory of free will that I proposed, but I also address the issue here (*Me*) in my reply to Meyers.

**Michael Brent**

In his "Confessions of a Deluded Westerner," Michael Brent arguably pushes against Buddhism from the other side. Coming at this from a more critical, Western analytic perspective, Brent critiques almost the entire collection of papers in the anthology on the grounds that they fail to identify what Western philosophers consider necessary and sufficient conditions that are definitive or constitutive of the concept of free will.

He argues that the various conceptions, abilities, or elements of agency identified in the anthology not only do not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for autonomy, but at most, they only constitute components or aspects of *intentional action* in general, not all of which are *free*. He presents what he (implicitly) takes to be definitive of free will, namely, what we may call (i) “leeway autonomy,” the ability to have done otherwise than what one did, and (ii) “source autonomy,” the ability to have one’s actions originate from oneself in such a way that they are entirely *up to oneself*. Distinctive of these, on his analysis, is *effort*, on which elsewhere (*Agent*) he bases his own agent-causal conception of intentional action, a conception he argues is independent of the question of free will. Insofar as *effort* figures centrally in Brent’s model of intentional action, it shares an emphasis with Jonathan Gold’s analysis, as we shall see below.

Brent’s core idea (in *Confessions*) seems to be that the agent is the cause of free action, just as the agent is the cause of intentional action, but those free intentional actions are only those that exhibit leeway and/or source autonomy. He argues, more importantly, that because Buddhism rejects the reality of the self, i.e., the *agent*, there can be no intentional action whatsoever, and thus no species of it, such that any intentional actions are free.

This is not a novel view, and as noted above, a handful of the contributors to the edited collection argued there can be no free will if there is no self. Brent is aware of this, so his critique may be considered to target those other views, like mine, Harvey’s, and Wallace’s, etc., that constitute the majority of views in the anthology, which allow that there can be free will even if there is no metaphysically substantive self, but only a conventional, empirical one. I will respond to some of Brent’s criticisms in my separate reply (*Us*) to his contribution to this collection, so I will defer any further remarks for now.

**Asaf Federman and Oren Ergas**

Although Asaf Federman and Oren Ergas did not contribute to the anthology, they may be counted among the majority of compatibilist views reflected there. In “The Healing Paradox of Controlled Behavior: A Perspective from Mindfulness-Based Interventions,” Federman and Ergas raise the level of the discussion as they analyze in detail some of the progressive stages undergone by practitioners of Buddhism-based, but secular, mindfulness-based meditation practices and related therapeutic interventions. They present an analysis of the process that involves what they describe as a *paradox of control*, my analysis of which suggests that their model counts as a counterexample to Brent's claim that there cannot be agentless agency.

They note, at an early stage in the meditative process, concentration is developed through practice, and involves a direct form of mental control over attention. However, at a later stage of practice, one develops a kind of non-control or “choiceless awareness” that nevertheless indirectly enables an increase in the ability to control how one responds to the contents of consciousness. Their insightful contribution resembles the sort of Buddhist-meditation-based analysis of free will that I presented in this journal in 2010 (*Theory*), and which I presented again, but in much greater detail, in my just-published monograph (*Buddhism*).

Their detailed analysis of how mindfulness-based interventions help individuals overcome psychopathologies and gain heightened degrees of self-regulative abilities not only fits well with my suggestions for a Buddhist theory of free will, but displays the extent to which secular mindfulness practices satisfy the dharmic imperative of reducing suffering and engendering growth in insight. These benefits of their analysis, on my reading, also count as counterexamples to the ever-increasing

blowback against secular mindfulness, first popularized by David Loy and Ron Purser in their coining of the term “McMindfulness.”<sup>7</sup>

### Jonathan Gold

Jonathan Gold’s contribution, “Freedom through Cumulative Moral Cultivation: Heroic Willpower (*Vīrya*),” also raises the level of the discussion, insofar as he offers a very close analysis of the chain of dependent origination, beginning with the ordinary person’s hearing the teachings of the *Dharma* and culminating with the attainment of total mental freedom or enlightenment. In that analysis, Gold emphasizes the crucial role of *effort*, which implicitly suggests some sort of free will. (Recall that Brent, an advocate of libertarian criteria for free will, places effort at the core of his analysis of intentional action.)

However, although Gold delineates the causal sequence of dependent origination (that guides the practitioner to total freedom) within an intuitively explanatory narrative analysis, the explanatory sequence of the transformative progressions detailed in his account gives the *implicit* impression that the sequence is otherwise (mostly) deterministic, although he does not explicitly emphasize determinism.

By paying such close attention to the movement between the links in the chain of dependent origination, Gold’s paper furthers the interests of Javanaud’s suggestion regarding a clarification of the nature of Buddhist causation, on the one hand, but does not exactly answer the question explicitly, on the other hand, insofar as his analysis focuses on the sort of causation that figures in the path, but it does not focus on the

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<sup>7</sup> For a collection of such criticisms, see Purser, Forbes, and Burke, eds., whose collection includes my own counter-critique in defense of secular mindfulness (*Matters*).

nature of causation in general. And insofar as Gold emphasizes the role of effort, he also furthers the discussion put forth by Brent. It is an interesting question how the two views may be combined, if at all.

Again, like Brent, Gold presses the issue of *effort* as centrally relevant to the question of free will, insofar as he is implicitly associating effort with agency, but, like Federman and Ergas, he does so in a nuanced, almost paradoxical way. Gold details the dependently originating progression from the worldling's hearing of the *Dharma* to the final phase of the contemplative virtuoso attaining enlightenment, in a way that I think is consistent with my own analysis, but one that I imagine hard determinists (incompatibilists who accept determinism and thus reject free will) could conceivably adopt to support their rejection of free will. Arguably, Gold's analysis does not seem to rely on anything that the free will advocate seems to require. In all, Gold raises the level of the discussion, and his analysis raises many interesting questions.

### **James Luisi**

James Luisi's contribution, "Buddhist Philosophy, Free Will, and Artificial Intelligence," delivers a novel perspective from his work on artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing (QC), and related scientific fields to bear on the possible positions on free will open to Buddhist philosophy. Luisi argues that the sort of causality involved in AI and QC is neither strictly rigidly deterministic, nor strictly chaotically indeterministic, but a (middle way) combination of both that circumvents the traditional Western philosophical binary dichotomy of either (i) determinism (thus no alternatives, and thus no free will), versus (ii) indeterminism (thus randomness, thus nothing is *up to me*, and thus no free will), rendering the alleged dichotomy either false or superfluous. In this regard, his analysis furthers the discussion of the nature of causation called for by

Javanaud, although more directly or immediately on the Western scientific side, but with implications that Luisi applies to the Buddhist side. Thus, Luisi argues that his analysis supports what I originally described as *wiggly determinism*, but what I have subsequently revised to describe as *wiggly causation*,<sup>8</sup> a conception consistent with Buddhism and which makes room for free will.

However, as I am only minimally familiar with AI, QC, and the like, I cannot speak with confidence to the elements of Luisi's arguments that rest directly on those ideas. But I can say that if his account of such matters is accurate, then his arguments ought to prove interesting to anyone taken in by the Western philosophical binary of determinism versus indeterminism. An additionally interesting component of Luisi's contribution is his inclusion of a few brief, ironic exchanges between *speaking neurons*, introducing a refreshing element of humor that he has employed fruitfully in his books on AI (*Sensitive*) and enterprise architecture (*Pragmatic*).

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<sup>8</sup> In a paper (Repetti *Earlier*) critiquing the views of some earlier contemporary period Buddhist scholars, such as Francis Story, David Kalupahana, Rahula Walpola, and Luis Gomez, I described their attempts to get around the determinism/indeterminism binary and dichotomy as *wiggly determinism* because, I argued, they had to accept one or the other, for one iota of indeterminism renders a world indeterministic, in which case there either is or is not an element of indeterminism in a world. If there is, it is an indeterministic world; if not, it is a deterministic world. Those writers claimed Buddhist causation is neither rigidly deterministic, not chaotically random, but they seemed to favor determinism over indeterminism, based on dependent origination; hence, my somewhat critical description, *wiggly determinism*, which, I argued, was probably equivalent to soft determinism, the view that determinism is true but not inevitabilist. After discussing the issue with Luisi (*Personal*), however, I realized it makes sense to think a world can be partly deterministic and partly indeterministic; hence, my new, not-critical description, *wiggly causation*.

**Karin Meyers**

Karin Meyers's contribution, "False Friends: Dependent Origination and the Perils of Analogy in Cross-Cultural Philosophy," may be described as offering two major components, one positive and one negative, the latter breaks into three subcomponents. Her positive contribution is an astute analysis of the history of the concept of dependent origination throughout the development of (mostly Early) Buddhism over the centuries, and a fairly thorough answer to Javanaud's call for further clarification thereof, similar to Gold's analysis regarding what is narrowly relevant to the path. Meyers's analysis of dependent origination may be seen as the basis for part of her negative contribution, which latter may be divided in three parts: (i) a critique of the idea that dependent origination may be identified—or even reasonably compared—with the Western conception of deterministic causation; (ii) a critique of various of my own ideas in *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will*; and (iii) a critique of some of the other ideas in that collection. The first two critiques seem to take up the bulk of her analysis.

To put Meyers's contributions in a positive light, I take it that what motivates her three critiques, and her positive analysis of dependent origination that her critique in (i) above rests upon, is a noble desire to protect the textual core of canonical Buddhism in its original meaning to non-Western Buddhists, against some of the less textually-based, more liberal, Western philosophical interpretations and/or applications of Buddhist ideas as they may be found reflected in the work of some of the contributors to the edited collection, including, if not particularly, my own work. Philosophical criticism may be understood as a form of flattery, insofar as it at least dignifies the ideas being critiqued as worthy of engagement, assessment, and (theoretically) open to revision. To her credit, Meyers attempts to dignify my ideas in these ways, and she also points out many ways in which we arrive at similar conclusions, in which

my own contributions to the collection have raised the level of the discussion, as well as ways in which the collection as a whole constitutes a valuable contribution to the literature, among other compliments. I attempt to dignify her ideas equally when I respond to her many critical claims in my concluding contribution here (*Me*). I will postpone any further remarks about her contribution until then.

### Marie Friquegnon

Marie Friquegnon expands on the presentation she gave in her original contribution to *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will* (Repetti), which introduced three ways of understanding the concept of freedom in Buddhism, and applies that understanding to some of the other contributions in that collection. In “A Role for Primordial Wisdom in the Buddhist Free Will Controversy,” Friquegnon goes on to analyze Śāntideva’s teaching about the bodhisattva who, employing (the doctrine of) skillful means,<sup>9</sup> kills a pirate to prevent the pirate from murdering 500 men on a ship, who themselves happened to be advanced along the bodhisattva path, in order to spare the pirate from the terrible karma he would otherwise incur.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This doctrine may be understood as resembling *act utilitarianism*, the ethical view that the morally best action is whichever action, under the unique circumstances, brings about the greatest overall positive consequences for the greater number of sentient beings affected by the action, among the set of possible alternative actions, all things considered. In the case of skillful means, this doctrine may be seen as a wild card that only spiritually advanced Buddhists may use to break the otherwise standard ethical rules that ordinarily govern the behavior of Buddhists, if and only if the advanced Buddhist is bypassing the rule specifically to the benefit of others who would predictably suffer if the advanced Buddhist did not deploy skillful means to such better ends.

<sup>10</sup> According to Buddhist lore, harming anyone or anything connected with the *Dharma*, such as a Buddha, arhat (enlightened being), or bodhisattva, magnifies one’s negative



To explain and resolve problems with these sorts of cases, Friquegnon introduces the idea that primordial wisdom may be understood as a *hypothetical construct*, a notion she explains in a way that renders it, to my thinking, similar to the idea of a theoretical posit, and she makes an analogy between the Buddhist idea of the divine (implicitly reflected in the facially-problematic goodness of the murdering bodhisattva) with what she takes to be Aquinas's use of similar reasoning, about how a being beyond human comprehension, namely, God, could have human-like qualities, such as benevolence. Friquegnon claims, similarly, that the advanced meditator experiences something analogous (to the inherent goodness of primordial wisdom) in nondual states of meditation: although the experience is nondual, somewhat paradoxically, the practitioner senses inherent goodness. Ultimately, she treats the freedom that consists of enlightenment, which she sees reflected in primordial wisdom, as central to the highest Buddhist understanding of freedom.

## Conclusion

Together, these papers significantly advance the discussion reflected in *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will*, and each raises the level of the discussion, some in similar ways, others in different ways. Again, this JBE symposium may be seen to function as a second volume to the original col-

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karma exponentially. Thus, the amount of bad karma this pirate would accrue by murdering 500 bodhisattvas is immense. In this example, killing the pirate in order to spare him this terrible misfortune is considered merciful. It also resembles utilitarian (consequentialist) arguments in favor of murdering young Adolph Hitler, torturing terrorists bent on mass destruction, and the like. For a sustained, interesting argument along such lines to the conclusion that Buddhist ethics is a form of negative consequentialism, see Goodman (*Consequences*).

lection of seventeen papers. I leave it up to the reader to assess the relative merits of each contribution here. I also reiterate my suggestion to participate in the discussion by supplying short comments to the blog using the Comment feature, or longer responses as articles to be submitted to the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.

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