Rick Repetti's Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will

with Christian Coseru, "Free Your Mind: Buddhist Meditation and the Free Will Problem"; Gregg D. Caruso, "Buddhism, Free Will, and Punishment: Taking Buddhist Ethics Seriously"; David Cummiskey, "Ego-less Agency: Dharma-Responsiveness without Kantian Autonomy"; Karin L. Meyers, "Mental Freedom and Freedom of the Loving Heart: Free Will and Buddhist Meditation"*; and Rick Repetti, "A Defense of* Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*."*

MENTAL FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF THE LOVING HEART: FREE WILL AND BUDDHIST MEDITATION

by Karin L. Meyers

Abstract. In *Buddhism, Meditation and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom,* Rick Repetti explains how the dynamics of Buddhist meditation can result in a kind of metacognition and metavolitional control that exceeds what is required for free will and defeats the most powerful forms of free will skepticism. This article argues that although the Buddhist path requires and enhances the kind of mental and volitional control Repetti describes, the central dynamic of the path and meditation is better understood as a process of habituation. This not only involves the dis-identification from mental and emotional content that Repetti discusses—and is commonly emphasized in modern presentations of mindfulness or insight (*vipassanā*) meditation—but also a transformation of the heart that is effected through the complementary psychological and somatic qualities associated with calm abiding (*samatha*) and concentration (*samādhi*) and emphasized in the Pali Nikāyas and commentaries.

Keywords: Buddhism; free will; meditation; self

In *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*, Rick Repetti presents a theory of free will based loosely on Buddhist thought and meditative practice, which he calls "Buddhist soft-compatibilism." He argues that the "titanic" self-control attributed to the Buddhist *ārya*[1] and the evitabilism this entails defeat the most powerful forms of free will skepticism. He cites empirical evidence and his own meditative experience to support the idea that Buddhist meditation may indeed result in greater

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self-control, but focuses primarily on theory, explaining how the dynamics of Buddhist meditation might result in a kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control that exceeds what is required for free will. In addition to his own constructive arguments, Repetti surveys previous work on the subject and offers a primer on the contemporary free will debate—which makes the book accessible to a variety of readers. Together with Repetti's (2016) edited volume and previous articles, *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will* constitutes a significant contribution to scholarship on the topic of free will in Buddhism. This essay offers some suggestions for revision and refinement based on the presentation of meditation in the Pali Nikāyas and commentaries.

The first thing that struck me when reading the book, is the phrase Repetti uses in the subtitle and throughout to describe the kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control he attributes to the Buddhist *ārya*: "mental freedom." He equates this to "mental autonomy" and free will (20–21) and at one point, glosses it as *nirvāṇa* (28). The phrase struck me because there is a very similar sounding one in Pali: *ceto-vimutti*. As will be discussed in more detail below, *ceto-vimutti* can be translated as "mental freedom" (or "liberation of mind"), but is better understood as "freedom of the heart" or, as Maria Heim (2017) puts it, "freedom of the loving heart." It turns out that is not what Repetti has in mind when he speaks of "mental freedom." However, the difference between his idea and the Buddhist one is instructive for what we imagine a Buddhist might say about free will.

Ceto-vimutti (or "freedom of the heart") is the freedom from afflictive emotions (or defilements- *kilesa*) attained through the transformative qualities (or practices)[2] of calm abiding (*samatha*) or concentration (*samādhi*) resulting from the cultivation of four progressive stages of mental-emotional-perceptual refinement called the *jhānas*.[3] Any number of objects can be used to cultivate the *jhānas* and promote this freedom, however, it is especially associated with the "divine abidings" (*brahmavihāras*), that is, the boundless qualities of lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).[4] Although they differ in some details, both the Nikāyas and commentarial literature understand freedom of the heart to be complementary and conducive to the ultimate liberation or "freedom by wisdom" (*paññā-vimutti*) enjoyed by the *arahant*[5] (AN 2:31).[6]

In what follows, I argue that although the Buddhist path requires and enhances the kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control Repetti describes, the central dynamic of the path presented in the Pali Nikāyas is better understood as a process of habituation or (re-)habituation. This process not only involves the kind of dis-identification from mental and emotional content that Repetti discusses—and is commonly emphasized in modern

presentations of mindfulness (*sati*) or insight (*vipassanā*) meditation—but also a transformation of the heart effected through the complementary meditative qualities associated with calm abiding, concentration, and the *jhānas*. The process is also deeply *somatic*—a dimension of Buddhist meditation that Repetti does not address.

Calm abiding, concentration, and the *jhānas* were central to early Buddhist formulations of the path, but lost some of their prominence in the later tradition and have not been much emphasized in modern presentations of Buddhist meditation, which tend to emphasize "dry insight" or insight without the extensive cultivation of concentration. By examining how these practices are supposed to transform the practitioner, we can discern more clearly the roles habituation, affection, and somatic disposition play in the cultivation of the path and freedoms enjoyed by the *arahant*.

In emphasizing differences between the Nīkāyas and Repetti's presentation of meditation, I am not making normative claims about how Buddhists should practice meditation or about the authority of the Nikāyas. The Nikāyas are relevant to Repetti's arguments because the central piece of textual evidence he offers in support of his conception of the "mental freedom" enjoyed by the *ārya* is from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*—and from a sutta that speaks specifically to concentration and the two forms of freedom.

This textual critique points to a deeper concern about Repetti's method. Here and elsewhere,[7] Repetti says that he is not concerned with what Buddhists *have said*, but with what they *can say* about free will. At times, readers familiar with Buddhism may wonder whether the theory he presents is "Buddhist" in any significant sense or his own theory inspired by a select portion of classical and modern Buddhist doctrines and practices as well as by Western philosophical thought about free will. In his piece for this volume, Repetti (2020) indicates that the latter is his intention and suggests that this renders his theory immune from textual-historical critique. However, insofar as Repetti recruits exegesis of Buddhist doctrine in support of his constructive philosophical argument—in order to lay the groundwork for what *Buddhists* can say about free will—it is vulnerable to such critique. Similarly, my argument regarding habituation, affection, and somatic disposition in the Nikāyas is not merely textual; it is also constructive and philosophical. It offers a critique of Repetti's presentation of Buddhist meditative praxis *and* an alternative account of what Buddhists can say about free will.

To help triangulate this argument in relation to the larger debate about free will in Buddhism, I first discuss some of the points raised by Gregg Caruso and David Cummiskey in this volume.

Moral Responsibility and Desert in Light of Buddhist Soteriology

Caruso argues that Repetti has not sufficiently grappled with the fact that free will is most commonly defined in terms of moral responsibility in the sense of moral desert. Leaving aside the question as to whether moral desert is in fact essential to the idea of "free will," I believe Caruso is correct in his assessment that Buddhists are not particularly concerned with it. Arguably, contemporary philosophical interest in moral desert has its origins in Christian theological concerns about theodicy and just reward or punishment not shared by Buddhists (Meyers 2010; Garfield 2016; Flanagan 2016). Emily McRae essay's on the Tibetan scholar, Tsongkhapa's theory of emotions and choice for Repetti's edited volume nicely illustrates this point. It shows how Buddhist soteriology's *prospective* interest in future freedom rather than *retrospective* interest in an originating cause of action (and thus, ultimate moral responsibility and desert) makes for a significantly different set of concerns about an individual's ability to choose or control their actions and emotions, and a *pragmatic* and *normative* rather than *metaphysical* and *descriptive* approach to ethical action (McRae 2016).

Notably, this pragmatic orientation results in a variety of asymmetries in regard to attributions of responsibility and control in Buddhist texts. For example, we find recommendations to *gain control* over our own anger and resentment by regarding others as *not in control* of their own actions or emotions (Śāntideva 2008, chapter 6; Buddhaghosa 2010, chapter IX); praise of certain morally reactive attitudes that presume responsibility on the part of oneself (e.g., moral shame and apprehension in respect to one's own actions) but condemnation of morally reactive attitudes that presume responsibility on the part of another (e.g., anger and resentment in respect to others) (Meyers 2014); praise of individuals for their wholesome qualities and self-control coupled with the view that others' unwholesome qualities are due to conditions beyond their control (McRae 2016); and the view that our present freedom from conditions is contingent upon understanding our past bondage by them (McRae 2016). These asymmetries reveal a lack of interest in a metaphysics that can account for moral desert and ultimate moral responsibility, but do not argue against the value of taking responsibility for one's actions, or the possibility of free will (under some description) (contra Goodman 2002, 2016). Instead, they paint a picture of action that is entirely consistent with Buddhism's pragmatic interest in freedom from suffering. For Buddhists, the driving question is not "who is responsible?", "who is to blame?", or "who is deserving?", but rather, "what can one do in order to become free from suffering?"

I sympathize with Caruso in wishing Repetti had devoted more attention to how such differences between Buddhist and Christian (or contemporary Western secular) soteriology and ethics might affect what a Buddhist

can say about free will. However, I agree with Repetti (and Cummiskey) that Buddhists have the conceptual resources to explain the kind of control required for some compatibilist (or soft-compatibilist) types of moral responsibility. Like Repetti, I have argued that the control attributed to Buddhist adepts far exceeds what Western philosophers typically imagine free will and moral responsibility to require (Meyers 2010)—minus the strong criterion of moral desert Caruso stipulates as essential. Not only is the Buddhist adept said to exhibit extreme levels of control over internal mental factors but also mind-over-matter control of external material factors (Meyers 2016). As illustrated by the asymmetries discussed above, this view of the human potential for internal and external control is coupled with the view that until persons begin to cultivate the Buddhist path, they typically do not enjoy much control over their emotions or actions (or thoughts or volitions). Moreover, in Buddhism we find the somewhat paradoxical view that greater self-control is acquired, in large part, through realization of no-self, by letting go of grasping onto the ever changing flux of mental and physical phenomena that constitute our experience as "I" and "mine."

Agency and No-Self

As Cummiskey discusses in his article for this volume, Repetti expresses agnosticism and, at times, skepticism regarding the compatibility of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and the idea of agency. The Buddhist doctrine of no-self entails that there is no substantial or enduring agent of action, but does not entail that there is no subjective center of (most/some) experience or that there is no agency or responsibility. As Repetti himself explains in his introduction, to deny the existence of a self as an independent metaphysical entity does not rule out the existence of a "functionally effective, well-integrated collection of processes and abilities typically associated with agency" (6). I take this view of "agentless agency" (also articulated in Repetti 2016) to be more or less consistent with Cummiskey's "ego-less agency" and "minimalist conception of self," as well as with most classical South Asian Buddhist views on action, but elsewhere in the book Repetti equates his own experience of mental autonomy in meditation and the Buddhist Pudgalavādin (or Personnalist) view with the idea of an agent-self, and frames this as at odds with what he calls "the literalist no-self doctrine" (10).

Repetti further suggests that meditative experiences which appear to confirm the truth of no-self may be primed by this doctrine (3, 19). Given that Buddhists understand the experience of no-self to conduce to freedom from suffering, this is arguably part of the design of the Buddhist path. Of course, most Buddhists also take the no-self doctrine to be a true description of how things are and realization of no-self to confirm

this truth. If this exposes a kind of confirmation bias, then the same could be said of meditation experiences that appear to affirm the existence of an autonomous self. Because early Buddhists feared such experiences could lead to a reified view of self and thereby promote subtle clinging and suffering (e.g., DN 1), they took great pains to argue against the necessity and coherence of various metaphysical conceptions of the self, and recommended nonidentification with *all* experiential states (*bhava*). In this way, the term *an-ātman* (or "no-self") can often be profitably read as a prescription to relate to whatever arises as "not-self" rather than as a mere description of how things are (e.g., SN 22:59).

Although Repetti's honesty about his own ambivalence and agnosticism in regard to the truth of the doctrine of no-self is refreshing, the philosophical reasons for his doubt are unclear. He never defines the "literalist no-self doctrine" to which he objects, nor does he clarify how a proper (nonliteralist?) understanding of the doctrine might differ. He frequently mentions that the Buddhist Pudgalavādins (or Personnalists) might have a more congenial view (e.g., 10, 19–21, 28–29, 95), but it is not exactly clear what he takes their view to be. In this regard, it would have been helpful if he had discussed how he understands the Pudgalavādins to conceive the person (*pudgala*) in relation to the psycho-physical aggregates and whether or how their Buddhist critics are correct in saying this conception of the person constitutes a self (*ātman*).[8]

Vasubandhu's arguments against the Pudgalvādins are particularly relevant. Vasubandhu not only argues that their notion of a person amounts to a self, but much along the lines of Repetti's explanation of agentless agency in the introduction, he argues that agency does not require a real person (or self).[9] Moreover, in the course of his critique of the Pudgalavādins, Vasubandhu offers a direct counter-argument to Repetti's "causal-ontological" argument that the reality of agency may imply a real interdependent agent (Repetti 2018a, 163–65). Given that Vasubandhu's view is the *locus classicus* for Indo-Tibetan critique of the Pudgalavādins and the likely source the causal-ontological principle that underpins Repetti's argument, a discussion of Vasubandhu would have made good contextual sense, and would have helped clarify why Repetti's doubts the view of agentless agency he presents in the introduction.

In sum, although I am sympathetic to the idea that the Pudgalavādins might account for something missing in more reductive accounts of the person such as Vasubandhu's (I made a similar suggestion in Repetti's edited volume, Meyers 2016), I found it difficult to pin down exactly why Repetti finds the subjective experience of autonomy in meditation potentially inconsistent with the doctrine of no-self and/or the "literalist doctrine of no-self." As Cummiskey points out in this volume, the doctrine of dependent origination explains the construction of a (minimalist) self and our experience of suffering in the absence of a permanent and independent

self. In theory, it can also explain our sense of autonomy and feeling of being apart or above our mental and physical processes in some meditative states.

Buddhist Soft-Compatiblism, Dharma-Responsiveness, and Source Autonomy

Repetti uses Mele's term "soft-compatiblism" to describe the free will or "mental freedom" enjoyed by the *ārya* independent of the truth of causal determinism. Soft-compatibilism is conceived in response to the "hard incompatibilist" thesis that free will and moral responsibility are inconsistent with both determinism and indeterminism (for Buddhist versions, see Goodman 2016; Caruso 2020). Although Repetti classifies my view regarding what Buddhists can say about free will under the broader category of "semicompatibilism" (section 3.8), I have argued that Buddhists have the resources to account for personal agency, self-control, and moral responsibility in a way that is neutral with respect to the truth of causal determinism. Like Repetti, I have also characterized the agency cultivated via the practice of the Buddhist path as a kind of dharma-responsiveness analogous to John Fisher's reasons-responsiveness (Meyers 2010, 257ff; 2014). However, the application of the terms *soft-compatibilism* and *dharma-responsiveness*, which I think are quite useful, are Repetti's.

For his part, Repetti argues that meditation helps make one reasons-responsive in the sense that it makes one responsive to the Buddha's teaching or Dharma and enables one to choose actions in accordance with these teachings over nondharmic actions (154). He later discusses how this relates to Harry Frankfurt's conception of first and second order volitions and meta-volitional control (170–72). In his essay, Cummiskey points out that Repetti overlooks how Fischer's emphasis on the causal *history* of the mechanism issuing in action constitutes a critique of Frankfurt's structural (atemporal) account of first and second order volitions (see Fischer 2006). He explains that as a mechanism of metacognitive control, meditation itself must be Dharma-responsive, and argues (against Repetti's suggestion that Buddhist meditation might imply a self or does not rule it out) that this includes responsiveness to key elements of the Buddhist path such as insight into impermanence, dependent origination, and no-self, as well as to virtues like compassion and the other divine abidings (*brahmavihāras*).

Given that Buddhists are generally more interested in *prospective freedom* than *retrospective responsibility* (as discussed above), I agree with Cummiskey that it does not matter for Buddhists if the causal history that results in action is sufficient to establish what Repetti calls "source autonomy"(157). In other words, in the context of Buddhist soteriology it does not matter if the reasons to which one is responsive are ultimately one's *own* reasons. What matters is that these reasons promote freedom from suffering, that

is, that they are Dharmic reasons. This point is underscored by the fact that some Buddhist texts describe the potential for purification (and thus, liberation) as explicitly external to the ordinary defiled mind. For example, in his *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* (1. 45–49), the fourth century Mahāyāna Buddhist scholar, Asaṅga describes this potential as resulting from the purity of the sphere of reality (*dharmadhātu*) from which the Buddha's speech flows (Asaṅga 2019). Not all Buddhist traditions draw such a clear distinction between the internal (and defiled) constitution of the suffering individual's psycho-physical stream and the external (and pure) factors that persuade that stream toward freedom, but the fact that such a distinction is possible within the context of Buddhism demonstrates that the idea of source autonomy (similar to ultimate moral responsibility) may not have much relevance to Buddhist soteriology.

Mental Freedom and Freedom of the (Loving) Heart

> He thinks whatever thought he wants to think and does not think a thought he does not want to think; he resolves in whatever way he wants to resolve, and does not have a resolve he does not want; thus, he has attained mental mastery over the ways of thought.
>
> AN 4:35 as quoted by Repetti (2018a, 9)[10]

Repetti cites this passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's *Vassakāra Sutta* in his introduction and periodically throughout *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will* in order to illustrate the kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control enjoyed by the *ārya*, which Repetti calls "mental freedom." As mentioned above, this sounds a lot like the Pali term *ceto-vimutti,* which could be translated as "mental freedom," but is better understood as "freedom of the (loving) heart." Because *ceto-vimutti* is referenced a few sentences after the above passage, it is easy to get the impression that Repetti's "mental freedom" is meant to be a translation of the Pali term. However, the Pali idea is quite different.

The Pali or Sanskrit *citta* and other terms derived from the verbal root √*cit*—including the *ceto* in *ceto-vimutti*—encompass affection as well as cognition and volition/conation. In this way, the mind (*citta* or *ceto*) is really a heart-mind and its physical base is the center of the chest rather than the head. Notably, the word *cetanā*—which is often translated as "intention" or "volition"—is definitional of action or karma and is a verbal noun derived from this same root. According to the Pali commentarial tradition, *cetanā* serves a kind of executive function insofar as it works alongside and directs other affective, cognitive, and volitional factors toward an object or goal (Buddhaghosa 2010, 470–71). However, it too is subject to conditioning insofar as it is informed by a variety of psychological factors and dispositions and sensitive to reasons (Meyers 2010, chapters 4–5). In this way, on the

Buddhist view, volition is a heart-mind activity that involves the *entire personality*. As will be discussed below, this is critical to how we conceive of metavolitional control in this system—and can help us decide whether and in what sense it involves autonomy or requires an agent-self.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, *ceto-vimutti,* or "freedom of the (loving) heart" is the freedom from defilements (*kilesas*)—primarily affective disorders—that is cultivated through the development of calm abiding (*samatha*) and concentration (*samādhi*). It complements "freedom by wisdom" (*paññā-vimutti*) or the realization of nirvana (*nibbāna*) attained via insight into the nature and dynamics of suffering—and is often presented as a necessary but not sufficient condition for this freedom.

By contrast, Repetti's "mental freedom" refers to the freedom to have the sort of mind or volition one wants to have. According to his view, the Buddhist practitioner increasingly enjoys this kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control as they progress on the path, and it becomes fully manifest in their realization of nirvana. Given the qualities attributed to an *arahant* in Buddhist texts, I agree with Repetti that the *ārya* (and especially, the *arahant*) can be said to enjoy a "titanic" level of self-control. However, I would identify *habituation* rather than metavolitional control as the central dynamic of the path, and would emphasize affection and somatic ease as primary drivers of the cultivation of freedom from suffering and self-control—alongside the kind of metacognitive observation Repetti describes. As a result, I am less worried than Repetti about the distinctive ontological-causal reality of agents and "source autonomy" (the idea that one is the ultimate source of one's actions or choices). To help articulate this difference, it will be useful to review Repetti's presentation of the path, and of Right View and meditation, in particular.

Right View and Meditation in the Buddhist Path

In describing the path (152–59), Repetti rightly notes its comprehensiveness. Although his focus is on the freedom cultivated through the dispassionate and "detached" (or "nonattached"[11]) observation of mental states ("thoughts, volitions, emotions, sensations, perceptions, and so on," 154) commonly associated with modern mindfulness (*sati*) or insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, he also speaks to the importance of the tranquility and clarity cultivated through the practice of concentration (*samādhi*), and, to a lesser extent, the importance of ethical discipline (*sīla*). However, his re-description of the path (in terms of five primary elements instead of the standard eight or three[12]) and of Right View, in particular, is overly cognicentric. This seems to inform his conception of "mental freedom" and may result from an underestimation of the role of concentration in the cultivation of the path.

The first factor in the standard presentation of the eightfold path is Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*). In the Nikāyas, this is defined in relation to karma and rebirth (which concern the dynamics of suffering) or the Four Noble Truths (which concern the nature, origin and ending of suffering). Repetti says that he interprets view "more broadly to include any thought, belief, doctrine, model, theory, perspective, paradigm, judgment, cognition, perception, or element of information" and then summarizes this as "beliefs—thoughts one takes to be true" (154–55). He then glosses Right View as "Right Belief" and draws on Descartes to define the latter as an impersonal, impartial perspective on one's thoughts (155). This re-definition of Right View is both broader and narrower than the Buddhist idea. It is broader in that it dissociates Right View from its central concern with suffering and the ending of suffering (e.g., DN 22, MN 117), and narrower in that it defines Right View in regard to one subelement of the psycho-physical complex, that is, thought and belief.

Repetti then offers another definition (or refinement?) of "Right Belief" as bringing beliefs into accord with the Dharma, and tracking truths relevant to practicing the Dharma (155). This sounds more like the Buddhist idea but shares in the cognicentrism of the first definition: "To the extent that views or beliefs are our primary orientating cognitive elements, forming a metaphorical reality map by reference to which we form judgments about what is worthy of pursuit, attention, intentional action, and effort, bringing belief under the discriminative wisdom of the meditative mind is a strategic way to grab control of the metaphorical steering wheel of our lives" (155).

If I understand correctly, Repetti offers this interpretation of meditative practice and Right View in order to account for the metacognitive process whereby a person is able to discern and become responsive to the Dharma or "dharmic reasons" for action, and override contrary first order volitions (155). According to Repetti, this Dharma-responsiveness is what enables a practitioner to enjoy metacognitive and metavolitional control (to have the mind and will they want) and ultimately leads to "spontaneously perfect Dharma-responsiveness." A key part of this is the ability to bring beliefs into accord with the truth or "truth-responsiveness": "if P is true, one is inclined to believe P, and if P is false, one is inclined not to" (155).

One problem with this presentation of Right View is that although nonattached observation of beliefs and thoughts is conducive to practicing sense restraint, gaining control over one's emotions and actions, and ultimately attaining liberating insight into the nature and dynamics of suffering, Buddhist meditation also involves much observation and cultivation of noncognitive elements (e.g., affect, somatic disposition, and as other qualities of mind related to concentration and freedom from suffering). Another problem is that emphasis on the centrality of

thought and true belief obscures the roles of habit, affection, and somatic disposition in becoming responsive to the Dharma.

More importantly, Right *View* simply does not mean Right *Belief*. Although the Four Noble Truths are "truths," they are not primarily propositions to which one is encouraged to assent, but a diagnosis of a disease (craving) and prescription for its cure (the path). This is why each truth is presented in relation to an action: suffering is to be thoroughly *understood*, craving (or the cause of suffering) is to be *relinquished*, the cessation of suffering is to be *realized*, and the path to the cessation of suffering is to be *cultivated* (SN 56:11; Bodhi 2000b, 1844–45). The value of Four Noble Truths as *truths* is determined to a large extent by the efficacy of these actions in regard to the elimination of suffering. In this way, Right View entails a proper orientation to (and application of) the Buddha's *prescriptions* as much as it does correct *description* of how things are. Repetti's conception of truth-responsiveness does not seem sufficiently attuned to this pragmatic dimension of Right View.

According to the Nikāyas, Right View is cultivated in dependence on the wisdom of others (namely, the Buddha and his representatives) and wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), which means thorough examination for oneself (Anālayo 2012, 96). The latter includes assessment of whether an action is likely to conduce to freedom from suffering and the ability to distinguish between "wholesome" factors conducive to freedom and "unwholesome" factors that promote suffering (MN 117, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 935).

Although nonattached observation of thoughts and beliefs contributes to the clear identification of wholesome and unwholesome factors (or *dharmas*), in classical descriptions of Buddhist meditation the focus of wise attention is not thought or belief, but rather, the deeper, more subterranean psychological, emotional, and physiological drivers of thought and action. For instance, in the "Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness" (MN 10), we find a progressive cultivation of mindfulness in respect to: (1) the body (which includes contemplation of the subjective experience of the body as well as affective and cognitive orientations to the body), (2) feeling (*vedanā*) in the sense of hedonic reaction to sensory input and thoughts, (3) mind (*citta*), and (4) *dhammas*—primarily, the five hindrances to concentration (sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and skeptical doubt) and the mental factors conducive to liberation (mindfulness, investigation of dharmas, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity).[13]

The third category, mind (*citta*), concerns thoughts—but indirectly and not in terms of the truth of their contents (i.e., not as beliefs). The primary focus of attention when establishing of mindfulness in regard to the mind is the relative wholesomeness of mental qualities, namely, those that

pertain to more ordinary states of mind (e.g., lust, anger, delusion and their opposites) and those that pertain to the cultivation of concentration (e.g., degree of distraction, focus, vastness, attainment) (Anālayo 2013, chapter VIII). Such qualities may inform thought or be informed by thought, but thought is not the focus of attention. In other *suttas* where thought is a focus, the emphasis is again on the wholesome or unwholesome qualities associated with thoughts rather than the truth their contents (or beliefs).[14]

In sum, by tending to the more subterranean aspects of the psycho-physical organism and choosing with right effort and wise attention to feed or starve certain qualities (*dhammas* or *dharmas*), the mind becomes purified and less susceptible to unwholesome qualities or defilements. Dis-identification with thoughts facilitates clear observation of these qualities, but concerns true belief only indirectly. Moreover, while Repetti suggests that meditation involves polishing the *conscious* mind (155), much of it concerns learning to observe and cultivating qualities that ordinarily lay below the surface of conscious awareness. This is why I recommend replacing Repetti's concept of capital "D" Dharma-responsiveness with small "d" dharma-responsiveness.

Small "d" Dharma-Responsiveness

In English language writing on Buddhism "Dharma" with a capital "D" refers to the Buddha's teaching as a whole and is the more widely known use of the term. However, in the Nikāyas and Abhidhamma we frequently find the term *dhammas* in the plural—which is rendered in English with a lowercase "d." In this usage, *dhamma* (or *dharma* in Sanskrit) means a quality—and implicitly, a quality that does not inhere in a substance (*dharmin*), such as a self (Gethin 2004b). *Dhammas* can and do include any psycho-physical quality, but the *dhammas* with which Buddhists are most concerned are those mental qualities most relevant to suffering and the cessation of suffering—such as the five hindrances and seven factors of liberation mentioned above.

It is significant that the term D/dharma in Sanskrit has both a descriptive and prescriptive sense. Rupert Gethin has suggested that the use of the singular, *Dharma* to refer to the Buddha's teaching may have derived from an earlier use of the plural, *dharmas* for the Buddha's prescriptions or teaching*s* (Gethin 2004b). If this is right, we could define the neologism, "dharma-responsiveness" as encompassing responsiveness to wholesome *dharmas* as reasons for action, both in the sense of responsiveness to wholesome qualities or mental factors and responsiveness to the Buddha's prescriptions for ending suffering.

Elaborating on this, we could describe dharma-responsiveness as including *recognition* of a mental quality (as wholesome or unwholesome) as well as the *decision* to apply a prescription in regard to it (such as nourishing

or starving it). It could also refer to the way in which actions issue from wholesome *dharmas* as a result of *habituation* (i.e., training in the path) without any conscious awareness, deliberation, or volitional override. As emphasized above, the critical point for Buddhists is not whether the reason for action is ultimately one's own reason or one is the ultimate source of the action (as in Repetti's account of metavolitional control[15]), but whether the action issues from the *right* sort of *dharmas* (i.e., wholesome ones).

On this view, dharma-responsiveness might sometimes involve metavolitional control, that is, the ability to choose a higher order (or "dharmic") volition over a lower "nondharmic" one, as in Repetti's account, but what enables this is the presence of wholesome mental factors, such as, the kind of discernment and nonattachment Repetti describes as well as affective, somatic and perceptual qualities (which I will say more about below). Emphasizing the role wholesome small "d" *dharmas* play in the cultivation of the self-control enjoyed by the *arahant* underscores the fact that there is no autonomous or independent self responsible for action on the Buddhist view—even if there is a person who acts.[16] It also helps clarify the fact that if certain combinations of wholesome factors are present, there is no need for metacognitive or metavolitional control. For instance, if one's body and mind are suffused with joy (*pīti*) there is no need to override any thought or impulse to anger. Anger simply cannot gain a foothold in a mind (and body) in such a state. This is freedom of the heart. However, the kind of metacognitive and metavolitional control Repetti describes does appear to play a role in cultivation of this freedom. An analysis of the *Vassakāra sutta* may help illustrate this.

Freedom in the *Vassakāra sutta*

In the *Vassakāra sutta* (AN 4:35), the Brahman Vassakāra describes the qualities of a great man (*mahāpurisa*) of great wisdom according to the Brahmanical ideal of a well-educated and responsible householder (AN 4:35, PTS AN ii.36). When Vessakāra asks the Buddha if he agrees, the Buddha offers a description the "great man" in terms of qualities cultivated by the Buddhist path and fully manifest in the *arahant*. The first quality is that the *arahant* benefits a great number of people (rather than a single household) insofar as they teach the Dharma. The second quality is that the *arahant* "thinks whatever thought (*vitakka*) they want to think and does not think what they do not want to think; they resolve whatever resolve (*saṅkalpa*) they want and not what they do not want. The result is mental mastery [*ceto-vasippatta*] over the ways of thought [*vitakkapatha*]" (AN 4:35, PTS AN ii.36). Recall that this is the passage Repetti cites in order to illustrate the mental freedom enjoyed by the *ārya*.[17]

The term translated here as "thought" is *vitakka*. *Vitakka* has a broad range of meanings and often refers to something like thought in the sense

of the internal verbalization of an idea (Cousins 1992; Anālayo 2009). That *vitakka* is paired with resolve or intention (*saṅkappa*) in this passage suggests that here *vitakka* is the thought that informs action. In this context, the ability to think whatever thought one wants (and not think what one does not want) would seem to imply a kind of metacognitive control that would issue in optimal self-control in regard to action. However, this is a bit tricky in the case of the *arahant*, who has perfected the Buddhist path.

As the second member of the eightfold path, Right Resolve (*sammā-saṅkappa*) is typically defined as renunciation of sensual desire, lack of ill-will, and harmlessness. For the *arahant*, the ability to resolve what one wants (and not what one does not want) means the ability to act only in accordance with these attitudes. This does not involve overriding contrary (defied or "nondharmic") volition because the personality of the *arahant* is habituated to respond only to wholesome qualities or *dharmas*.[18] It's not clear to me that this is accurately described as metavolitional control in the sense of choosing a second order volition over a first, given that no unwholesome volition is present in the *arahant*'s mental stream. However, in the course of cultivating Right Resolve, an ordinary person must frequently exercise something like this kind of metavolitional control.

In the context of the development of *samādhi*, *vitakka* has a more specialized meaning of "applied thought" or (as I prefer) "applied attention," which refers to the willful application of the mind to a meditation object. Applied attention involves a kind of efforting, but as concentration develops, this effort becomes more attenuated and disappears entirely upon attainment of the second *jhāna*. It takes a fair amount of effort to apply attention to the meditation object in the early stages of the development of concentration, and involves a tremendous degree of metacognitive monitoring and metavolitional control or override to keep it there. However, as in the case of action, the mastery of concentration enjoyed by the *arahant* is devoid of such struggle.

It is not entirely clear whether *vitakka* in this *sutta* refers to the thought that informs action more generally (as is suggested by its coupling with resolve or *saṅkappa*) or to applied attention in the context of concentration. It is possible that both senses are intended, for, the next passage, describing the third quality enjoyed by the *arahant*, speaks directly to their mastery of concentration: "They gain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the four *jhānas* that constitute the higher mind and are pleasant dwellings in this very life" (PTS AN ii.36).

The fourth and final quality is the two freedoms mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the freedom of the heart cultivated through concentration, and freedom by wisdom, cultivated through insight: "With the destruction of the taints, they dwell in the stainless freedom of the heart (*cetovimutti*) and freedom by wisdom (*paññāvimutti*), having directly realized these for themselves here and now" (PTS AN ii.36). Although all

four qualities highlighted in this *sutta* are already perfected in the *arahant*, the arrangement of the qualities speaks to the progressive cultivation of the Buddhist path according to the threefold model, wherein mastery of ethical discipline supports the development of concentration, and concentration the development of wisdom.

Concentration and Freedom of the Heart

Repetti acknowledges that states of concentration are important to the development of insight, but he suggests that the differences between these states are not relevant to his account of mental freedom (153). This may be true, but such differences are relevant to how freedom (from suffering) and self-control are cultivated according to classical models of the Buddhist path, and thus, would seem to be relevant to what we imagine a Buddhist might say about free will.

In the Pali commentarial literature, concentration is often analyzed into states that involve applied attention (*vitakka*) and those that do not. They are also analyzed according to depth of concentration and the subject of meditation. Although all practices of calm abiding are aimed at transforming the personality through the purification of the defilements and other freedom inhibiting qualities of mind (e.g., dullness, agitation, boundedness), the subject of meditation and degree of concentration developed determine the kind of transformation and freedom effected through the practice. For example, meditation on the disgustingness of food helps free one from craving related to food. By contrast, absorption in the various *kasiṇas*[19] conduce to freedom and purification of perception in regard to colors and material elements.

Although all subjects of concentration involve the temporary suppression and gradual weakening of the defilements, "freedom of the heart" is most closely associated with the *brahmavihāras* or "divine abidings" (lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). While modern interpreters (e.g., Cummiskey 2020) often present these as prosocial virtues, in the Nikāyas and Pali commentarial literature they are primarily understood as meditative states that conduce to freedom from suffering for the individual who cultivates them. However, they do relate to social virtues insofar as they are intensifications and expansions of qualities felt in lesser degree and scope in ordinary human relationships (Heim 2017), and insofar as their valorization of mental states would seem to have implications for how one should endeavor to relate to others if one wishes to be free from suffering.

As with other subjects of meditation, the divine abidings may serve as the basis for more discursive and effortful contemplations, or can be developed to a level of absorption (*jhāna*) or engagement[20] whereby they constitute palpably distinct forms freedom. For instance, absorption in

loving kindness constitutes an escape from (*nissaraṇa*) or temporary suppression of ill-will (*vyāpāda*). Although complete eradication of ill-will and other defilements may require insight into their nature as impermanent, suffering, and not self, sustained cultivation of loving kindness makes it so that ill-will cannot easily invade the mind. The other three divine abidings lead to other forms of freedom of the heart: compassion destroys vexation (*vihesā*); sympathetic joy destroys discontent (*arati*); and equanimity destroys passion (*rāga*) (DN 33, Anālayo 2012, 290). The affective qualities associated with powerful states of concentration suffuse the mind such that one also enjoys varying degrees of their freedoms and acts according to their persuasions outside of the context of formal meditation. Moreover, one need not cultivate them to the level of absorption in order to enjoy some degree of the freedoms they offer.

The freedoms cultivated through these meditative states are affective in nature, but they do not merely transform affect. Phenomenologically, the divine abidings involve a kind of boundlessness as the mind radiates or experiences the divine abode permeating all directions without borders or limits. Other forms of absorption have a similar kind of boundlessness and all-pervasiveness, but with flavors related to their own objects. Time spent in such states helps undermine identification with or clinging to a spatially and temporally bounded stream of psycho-physical aggregates and thereby conduces to the realization of no-self (unless one identifies with some aspect of these states as self—which would be wrong concentration from a Buddhist perspective).

There is much more one could say about the myriad forms of freedom cultivated through distinctive states of concentration, but this should suffice to illustrate something of their role in the path.[20] In sum, such states do not merely produce the clarity and tranquility of mind required for dispassionate and nonattached observation of thoughts and other mental states, but *transform* the mind on both superliminal and subliminal levels such that it naturally inclines toward wholesome *dharmas*, which promotes freedom from suffering.

In the commentarial literature this process is understood as a kind of purification in which the defilements are weakened and ultimately destroyed by wisdom. Because purification occurs as a result of the gradual cultivation of wholesome qualities and is a natural byproduct of concentration, I believe it is better understood as a process of habituation or (re-)habituation than of metavolitional control. As indicated above, a strong degree of metavolitional control is needed in order to cultivate concentration in the first place and to engage in the kind of ethical discipline (restraint) that supports the development of concentration. However, as one cultivates the path, unwholesome volitions (i.e., volitions informed by unwholesome factors) become fewer and farther between. Owing to the purification of mind they eventually lose their power to influence the

mind and cease to manifest such that there is no need to override them by exercising metavolitional control.

As indicated above, dispassion and nonattachment of the kind Repetti describes plays an important role in this process of purification. However, a *hedonic* principle also operates. As they mature and begin to enjoy the fruits of their practice, the practitioner gravitates toward states of tranquility, clarity, and lovingkindness or "freedom(s) of the heart" simply because these states are more pleasant than states of disturbance, confusion, and ill-will. The *arahant* does not have to exert titanic control over their mental states in order to enjoy these wholesome qualities because they are thoroughly habituated to them.

Although Buddhists schools debate whether the wholesome pleasures attendant to concentration are more physical or more mental in nature (or physical in their manifestation but mental in their cause), the Nikāyas clearly present some form of somatic pleasure distinct from sensual enjoyment as conducive to the development of the path. This is illustrated by the stock description of the first level of absorption (*jhāna*) in the Nikāyas:

> When he sees that the five hindrances have been given up in himself, gladness arises, and when one is glad, joy arises. When the mind is joyful, the body becomes tranquil, and when the body is tranquil one experiences happiness; the mind of someone who is happy becomes concentrated. Completely secluded from sense desires and unwholesome qualities, he lives having attained the joy and happiness of the first absorption, which is accompanied by thinking and examining, and born of seclusion. He suffuses, fills, soaks, and drenches this very body with the joy and happiness that come from seclusion, so that there is no part of his body that is untouched by that joy and happiness.
>
> It is as if a skilled bath attendant or his pupil were to sprinkle bath powder into a bronze dish, and then knead it together adding the water drop by drop so that the ball of soap absorbed and soaked up the moisture until it was saturated with moisture, yet not quite dripping. In exactly the same way the monk suffuses, fills, soaks, and drenches this very body with the joy and happiness that come from seclusion, so that there is no part of his body that is untouched by that joy and happiness. (Gethin 2008, 28)

According to the logic of Buddhist practice, as the mind withdraws from its ordinary habits of seeking sensual pleasure, a kind of joy (*pīti*) with distinct somatic qualities manifests—as does a form of happiness (*sukha*), which is a bit more subtle and mental in nature. As the mind becomes more refined, joy falls away (in the third *jhāna*), and (in the fourth *jhāna*) happiness gives way to equanimity (*upekkhā*). However, the stock descriptions of all four *jhānas* speak to the somatic experience of concentration. This is critical to understanding freedom and habituation in the Buddhist context because the development of concentration and freedom of the heart rely on our natural inclination toward pleasure and happiness. In essence,

the feedback loop between mental and bodily pleasure helps lure the mind away from ordinary sensual desires and habits of greed, hatred, and delusion. As the mind inclines toward the freedom, ease, and enjoyment found in the temporary suppression of these habits, one becomes (re-)habituated toward wholesome dharmas and the personality transforms to be ever more responsive to "dharmic reasons." This process is supported by nonattached observation of thought and belief, but involves much else.

Conclusion

I agree with Repetti that the *arahant* (and to a lesser extent) other categories of *āryas* are presented in the Nikāyas as enjoying extraordinary degrees of control. However, I suggest that habituation rather than metavolitional control is the central dynamic of the Buddhist path, and that although metavolitional control plays a significant role at earlier stages of the path, it is not clear that the freedom enjoyed by the *arahant* is properly characterized as metavolitional control. As suggested above, the *arahant* does not need to override first order volitions. They are incapable of acting from unwholesome motivations and are even said to operate without volition.[21] They can, however, be said to enjoy an extraordinary degree of metacognition (or ability to observe their own mental states) as is implied by their perfection of mindfulness (the seventh limb of the eightfold path).

As Cummiskey argues, according to Fischer it is the *history* of the mechanism issuing in action that makes it responsive to reason and subject to guidance control. In the case of the Buddhist *arahant*, the mechanism is a mind (and body) that has been purified of affective defilements and enjoys insight into the impermanent, suffering and no(t)-self nature of its own constitution and operation. There is an extraordinary degree of agency on display here, but (much as Repetti says in describing agentless agency) no enduring or ultimately unified agent that can be regarded as the ultimate source of volition or action.

Notes

Abbreviations: AN, Aṅguttara Nikāya (translation: Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*); DN, Dīgha Nikāya (translation: Walshe, *Long Discourses*); MN, Majjhima Nikāya (translation: Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses)*; Msg, Mahāyānasaṃgraha (translation: Karl Brunnholzl); SN, Saṃyutta Nikāya (translation: Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*); PTS AN, Pali Text Society edition Aṅguttara Nikāya (edited by Morris).

1. Notes *Ārya* ("noble one") is a Buddhist technical term for an individual who has attained any of four progressive stages of liberation from suffering, culminating in the fully liberated state of *arahant*-hood.

2. While calm abiding (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) are presented as complementary qualities in Nikāyas, they are presented as distinct albeit complementary forms of practice in the commentaries.

3. *Samatha* is the calming or pacification of mind and heart developed through concentration or *samādhi*, literally, the "gathering together" of mental factors. Right *samādhi* (the eight factor of the noble path) is defined as the four *jhānas*.

4. See Anālayo (2012, 45, 166, 289–96).

5. In this essay, I use the broader term *ārya* when discussing Repetti's theory (following his usage), but *arahant* when discussing the optimal freedom cultivated by the Buddhist path. See footnote 1 on the distinction.

6. The commentaries interpret "freedom by wisdom" as a kind of liberation that can be achieved without the prior cultivation of the *jhānas*, i.e., "dry insight" (*sukkha-vipassanā*). However, the Nikāyas do not speak of such an attainment, and present the *jhānas* as the means by which insight is cultivated (Gethin 2004a; Arbel 2016). There is much debate about the nature of the *jhānas* and their relationship to insight among contemporary scholars and practitioners. However, as this essay is primarily concerned with qualities both literatures attribute to the *jhānas*, we need not enter into this dispute. I will note when significant differences of interpretation are relevant.

7. See Meyers (2018a, 2018b) and Repetti (2018b) for a longer discussion of this methodological point.

8. Repetti cites Carpenter 2015 but does not discuss her argument in any detail or the other secondary literature on the topic (e.g., Cousins 1994; Priestley 1999; Lusthaus 2009).

9. In the ninth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, available in several English translations: Pruden (1988), Kapstein (2001, chapter 14), Duerlinger (2003), and Sangpo (2012).

10. Repetti cites the second repetition of this line in a Pali edition of the sutta (PTS AN ii.37), but is quoting an older online translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. I have provided the section and sutta number (AN 4:35), which help locate it in the Pali as well as most English translations (e.g., Bodhi 2012, 423).

11. I prefer "nonattached" to Repetti's "detached," because the latter connotes a slight aversion or apathy not implied by the Buddhist idea.

12. Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration; or Ethical Discipline, Concentration, and Wisdom.

13. While this fourth category varies in content, focus on the hindrances and factors of liberation remains consistent across these variations (Anālayo 2013, 174–76).

14. See, for example, "Discourse on the Stilling of Thoughts" (*Vitakkasaṇṭhāna sutta*, MN 20) and "Discourse on Two Kinds of Thoughts" (*Devadhāvitakka sutta*, MN 19).

15. Repetti argues that the *ārya* "possesses source autonomy because it is her powerful will and control that govern what she even entertains, intends, chooses, and does, as opposed to the power of unregulated desires pushing or pulling her into action" (157).

16. Buddhists hold a range of views on how the person relates the psycho-physical aggregates and self (see Meyers 2016 for a discussion of this in relation to what they might say about free will).

17. My translation differs slightly from the one Repetti quotes, but this does not affect the meaning.

18. The *Sutavā sutta* (AN 9:7) and *Sajjha sutta* (AN 9:8) explain how an *arahant* cannot act from unwholesome motivations or roots, while the *Cetanā sutta* (AN 11:2) explains that no volition is needed for one who is endowed with virtue (*sīlavato*). See Heim (2013) and Devdas (2008) for a discussion of intention/volition (*cetanā*) in relation to the activities of *arahants*.

19. An all-encompassing mental image (of a color or material element) that may be developed on with the support of a physical prop, for example, a colored disc, patty of earth, flame, bowl of water, etc.

20. In this section, I follow the commentarial perspective that *jhāna* is a level *samādhi* involving absorption in a single meditation object. For an argument that this is different than the kind of *jhāna* described in the *suttas*, see Arbel (2016).

21. See footnote 18.

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