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Volition, Action, and Skill in Indian Buddhist Philosophy

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There is suffering but none who suffer, 
there is action but no agent, 
there is nibbāna but no one who is released, 
there is a Path but no goer on it. 

Visuddhimagga

3.1 Introduction

On initial analysis, Indian Buddhist philosophers seem to have an inconsistent set of commitments with regard to the nature of action. First, they are committed to the reality of karman (Skt: action), which concerns the moral quality of actions and the short- and long-term effects of those actions on the agent. Skillful or wholesome (kuśala) actions will tend to have positive consequences for oneself, while unskillful or unwholesome (akusāla) actions will tend to have negative consequences. Second, they are committed to an understanding of karma as deeply connected with intention or volition (cetāna). Third, they are committed to the idea that, through Buddhist practice, one may become liberated from the afflictions of craving, aversion, and ignorance and achieve nirvāna. Thus, it is not surprising that relationship between volition, action, and the results of action for the agent constitutes a central theme of Indian Buddhist philosophy. Yet, fourth, while Buddhist philosophers are committed to the reality of action and its results, they are also committed to the unreality of any substantial self or agent of actions. How can one affirm the reality of volition, action, efficacious practice, and liberation, while denying the existence of agents, practitioners, or liberated beings? Reconciling the doctrine of no-self (anātman) with an account of agency and karma was a central task of great Buddhist philosophers such as Vasubandhu (fl. 4th to 5th centuries CE). This chapter will discuss Buddhist philosophy of action in the context of their views of the self, general ontology, ethics, and soteriology. After discussing some important preliminaries, section 3.2 will examine the connection between intention, action, and the skillful. Section 3.3 takes up the Buddhist account of agency without agents. Section 3.4 examines the important Buddhist idea of skillful means (upāya-kauśalya) in ethics and soteriology. Section 3.5 will discuss the thorny issue of the discontinuity between awakened and unawakened forms of action.
### 3.2 Volition, action, and the skillful

The Buddhist project centrally concerns understanding and removing the causes and conditions that give rise to and perpetuate suffering (*duḥkha*). Indeed, the basic analysis of the human situation is that we are trapped in *saṃsāra*, a self-reinforcing, self-perpetuating cycle of frustration and dissatisfaction not just within a single lifetime, but across multiple lifetimes. As the Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva, in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, memorably characterizes the *saṃsāric* predicament of sentient beings: “Hoping to escape suffering, it is to suffering that they run. In the desire for happiness, out of delusion, they destroy their own happiness, like an enemy” (Śāntideva 1995: 7). *Saṃsāra* here includes a mode of psychological functioning wherein our attempts to attain happiness and avoid suffering are self-defeating. The root causes of this sorry situation are the three poisons of attraction (*rāgā*), aversion (*dveṣā*), and delusion (*mohā*), which are dysfunctional forms of our basic conative framework, on the basis of which we respond to changing circumstances, seeking happiness and trying to avoid suffering. Because these basic forms of reaction are distorted or dysfunctional, as long as we are bound to them, our attempts to secure the lasting happiness we desire are doomed to fail. And yet, on the Buddhist view, because suffering is dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpāna*)—that is, it arises on the basis of specific causes and conditions—by understanding and removing its causes, one can be free of suffering.

Thus, action (*kriyā, karman*) plays a central role in the classical Buddhist analysis of the human situation and its prescribed path to liberation from *saṃsāra*. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha states, “Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior” (Bodhi 2005: 166). Individual beings perform actions, but also originate (in part) from their own prior actions. They are bound to their actions both in the sense that they are heirs of their prior actions, and in that they cannot escape the future consequences of their actions. Finally, the moral quality of their actions, rather than social or religious categories such as caste, marks individuals as superior or inferior. Indeed, only in the moral quality of one’s actions can one find refuge from the suffering of *saṃsāra*.

The name for this extended feedback loop between the quality of actions and the downstream effects of those actions for the agent is *karma-vipāka* (‘action and result’). That is, the Buddhist theory of karma deals with the short- and long-term effects of actions for the agent of those actions. *Kuśala* (skillful, wholesome) actions will tend to have positive consequences for oneself, while *akusala* (unskillful, unwholesome) actions will tend to have negative consequences. It is thus claimed that there is a reliable causal connection between *kuśala* action and long-term well-being, a claim that is at the center of Buddhist ethics and soteriology. It should be noted here that the term ‘*kuśala*’ (Pāli: *kusala*) is used in a variety of ways in Buddhist texts. The term can mean ‘healthy,’ ‘good,’ ‘blameless,’ ‘skillful,’ ‘conducive to happiness,’ ‘harmless,’ or ‘conducive to liberation’ (Cousins 1996). Further, both actions and the psychological states that are the roots of action can be *kuśala* or *akusala*. For instance, in the Pāli canon we see, “whatever action is of the nature (pakataṃ) of greed (or hatred, or delusion), born of greed, caused by it, that action is [akusala], it is with fault/blameable (sāvajjānti), it ripens in pain (*dukkhatipākaṃ*)” (Harvey 2010/2011: 178). In contrast, an action that arises from non-greed (etc.) “is [kusala], it is faultless/blameless, it ripens in happiness” (Harvey 2010/2011: 178). *Kuśala* roots and actions arise from wise attention (Pāli: *yoniso-manasikāra-hetuka*) which is directly linked to notions of skill and skillfulness. As L. S. Cousins (1996) points out, *kuśala* has as one of its root meanings ‘intelligent,’ ‘produced by skill,’ and ‘produced from wisdom’ and these connotations are included in the moral sense of the term. Wise attention is a trainable quality of mind, indeed a quality that Buddhism is centrally concerned with training. The practitioner can be more or less adept in
Volition, action, and skill

her deployment of attention and this is directly linked to the moral qualities of her actions and states of mind. Moreover, she can be more or less skillful in her moral discipline (śīla), which is again linked to how well trained and controlled is her mind. As Peter Harvey puts it,

*Kusala* states come from wise skill and contribute to wise skill, and are both morally and spiritually wholesome: morally faultless, nourishing further wholesome states, healthily without greed, hatred or delusion, and contributing to the end of these. They bring no harm to anyone, and lead to happiness for the agent of them.

*Harvey 2010/2011: 207–208*

Furthermore, the Buddhist theory of karma emphasizes the deep interdependence of action and character. *Kusala* actions plant karmic seeds (bijā) in one’s psyche that, given the appropriate internal and external conditions, grow into negative consequences (phala ‘fruit,’ vipāka ‘result’) for the agent. That is, one’s actions affect one’s character, habits, and dispositions over the long term. As a part of Buddhist moral psychology, karma theory focuses on the often subtle and intricate feedback mechanisms in the human psyche, emphasizing the ways in which action, intention, and character are mutually reinforcing (MacKenzie 2013).

Now, as mentioned in section 3.1, a central factor in the Buddhist account of the nature and moral quality of action is *cetanā*, ‘intending’ or ‘volition.’ Again, the Buddha states that “Intending (*cetanā*) is karma . . . Having intended, one acts through body, speech, and mind” (Bodhi 2005: 146). Likewise, the Abhidharma philosopher, Vasubandhu, says that *karma* is “*cetanā* and that which arises from it,” that is, further actions of body, speech, and mind (Pradhan 1975: 192). What, then, is *cetanā* in Buddhist thought? Most fundamentally, it is the orientation of a mind or mental event (citta) toward an object or goal (Meyers 2014: 46). This can include both conscious, reflective goal-orientation as well as more basic appetitive or conative impulses. Thus, both feeling hungry at the sight of an apple and subsequently deciding to take a bite are instances of *cetanā*. Further, in Buddhist Abhidharma, *cetanā* is one of the omnipresent mental factors (citta) alongside hedonic valence (vedanā), cognition (sajñā), attention (manasikāra), and sensory contact (sparśa). On this view, each moment of experience is grounded in and arises from on-going (somato)-sensory contact between the sentient being and its environment and is structured by affective, cognitive, conative, and attentional factors. These factors, while analytically divisible, are mutually specifying and reinforcing, and typically operate below the level of reflective attention.

When it comes to understanding the nature of action, Abhidharma thinkers distinguished two types. First is the volition or intending itself (*cetanākarman*), seen as a form of mental action. This category of mental actions includes deliberation (*gatīcetanā*), decision (*niscayacetanā*), and movement volition (*kriyācetanā*). Second is action issuing from volition (*cetanāyitvākarman*). This category includes bodily actions (*kāyākarman*) and vocal actions (*vīkārman*). On this account, an individual may find herself, for instance, desiring a mango in a market, but realizing she has no money. She may then consider stealing the mango and, surmising that no one is looking, form the intention to steal it. And yet, perhaps out of fear of being caught, she may not be able to get her hand to reach out and grab the mango. Within a few seconds, however, she has formed a proper movement volition, and her hand darts out, grabs the mango, and she leaves the store having successfully stolen the irresistible fruit. In this scenario, she has experienced a basic attraction to the mango, deliberated, decided, formed an intention to move her body, and engaged in the relevant bodily actions. Moreover, from a Buddhist point of view, her actions have an undeniable moral quality. Her intention to steal is itself morally unwholesome (*akusala*), as is her subsequent bodily action of stealing. According to the Sautrāntika school of...
Abhidharma, both the intending and the subsequent theft plant seeds (bījā), which then ‘perfume’ or condition (vāsanā) her psyche. When the relevant future conditions arise, these karmic seeds will bear fruit (vipākakaphala) as negative karmic consequences for her as the agent of the unwholesome actions. In effect, what these Buddhist thinkers appear to be describing is a process of psychological conditioning, whereby an agent’s intentions and actions shape her character in positive or negative ways, and which lead her to have certain positive or negative types of experiences (MacKenzie 2013).

A central idea in the Buddhist project is that an understanding of the dependent arising of suffering will allow practitioners to act more effectively so as to reduce or avoid further suffering. In addition, methods of cultivation (bhāvana) with regard to one’s own mental and bodily states, processes, and habits is thought to increase one’s self-awareness and capacity for self-control. On the classical Abhidharma view, the cultivation of mindfulness (smṛti) is closely linked to ethical vigilance (apramāda) and insight (vipaśyāna) (Dunne 2011). The basis of the method of mindfulness is the development of attention regulation through the cultivation of smṛti (focus or attentional stability) and sampajānya (meta-awareness or introspective vigilance). Smṛti is the capacity to hold one’s attention on an object, such as the breath or bodily sensations. Sampajānya is the capacity to monitor the quality of one’s focus on the object of attention. In cultivating the joint operation of smṛti and sampajānya, the practitioner is supposed to develop a calm, focused mind and the increased level of attention to her mental life is supposed to bring a clearer comprehension of her own mental processes. This leads to the cultivation of apramāda (ethical vigilance or heedfulness). Here the increased awareness of one’s intentions and positive and negative mental states allows one better to keep actions of body, speech, and mind in accord with one’s ethical commitments and spiritual goals. Last, one develops penetrating insight (vipaśyāna) into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and self-less nature of the phenomena constituting one’s mind-body complex (nāma-rūpa).

Furthermore, this process of bhāvana involves the intentional cultivation of a range of positive traits and capacities, such as mindfulness (smṛti), confidence or faith (śraddhā), energy (vīrya), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā). In addition, increased awareness and self-control are linked to development of the cardinal virtues of benevolence (maitrī), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekṣā). In short, there is fundamental connection between attentional, affective, and conative self-regulation and the cultivation of virtue as well as psychological and spiritual freedom.

### 3.3 Actions, agency, agents

The above account makes liberal reference to intentions, actions, agents, and various capacities—attention, deliberation, decision, self-control—associated with agency. Yet, this account of the Buddhist path as one in which individuals, through training, come to gain increasing awareness and self-mastery, leading ultimately to awakening (bodhi) or spiritual freedom, seems to be in significant tension with the central Buddhist doctrine of anātman or no-self. As the Vissudhimagga boldly states, “There is suffering but none who suffer, there is action but no agent, there is nibbāna but no one who is released, there is a Path [to release] but no goer on it” (Buddhagosa 1991: 97).

The doctrine of no-self (anātman) is perhaps the best known and most controversial aspect of Buddhist thought. The understanding and philosophical deployment of this doctrine varies significantly in the Buddhist tradition. Here I will focus on what Mark Siderits (1997) terms “Buddhist Reductionism” associated primarily with Abhidharma. First and
Volition, action, and skill

foremost, the doctrine of no-self is a rejection of the ātman, the enduring substantial self. On this view, the ‘self’ (ātman) is not just another term for the empirical person (pudgala, jīva), but is rather the substantial, essential core of the person—the inner self whose existence grounds the identity of the person. Within the Brahmanical religious and philosophical traditions, the ātman is generally given a strongly metaphysical interpretation. It is the unitary, essentially unchanging, eternal, spiritual substance that is said to be one’s true self. However, the ultimate target of the theory of no-self is not just the rarefied spiritual conception of self commonly defended by various Brahmanical schools. It includes any notion of the self as a distinct enduring thing.

Rejecting the existence of the substantial self, “Buddhist Reductionists hold, then, that the existence of a person just consists in the occurrence of a causal series of psycho-physical elements” (Siderits 2016: 265). These psycho-physical elements are grouped into five skandhas (bundles or aggregates): material form (rūpa), affect (vedanā), perception and cognition (saṃjñā), conditioning and volition (saṃskāra), and consciousness (vijñāna). The skandhas are not to be taken as independent things, but instead are seen as interdependent aspects of a causally and functionally integrated psycho-physical (nāma-rūpa) system or process (skandhasantāna, an ‘aggregate-stream’ or ‘bundle-continuum’). The dynamic system of the skandhas has no enduring self at its center, and the system itself is not an enduring substance. Rather it is a complex process ultimately composed of ephemeral physical and mental events.

On the Buddhist Reductionist analysis, the existence of the individual person just consists in the existence the right kind of system of subpersonal events. Persons are conventionally real (saṃvṛtisat), but not ultimately, irreducibly real (paramārthasat). Furthermore, given their rejection of the enduring substantial self and their reductionist account of persons, it should not come as a surprise that Buddhist Reductionists also reject agent causality. Ontologically, there being no enduring substantial entity that could exercise agent-causal power, our naive sense that we and others are such agents is an illusion. Just as Buddhist Reductionist thinkers reject the self and reduce the person to a complex stream of events, so too they will give an account of action, not in agent-causal, but in event-causal terms. For instance, Vasubandhu in chapter 9 of the Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya confronts the objection:

[Opponent:] If there is no self, who is the agent of an action, and who is the recipient of the consequences of the action?
[Vasubandhu:] What do you mean by “agent” and “recipient?”
[Opponent:] He who acts is the agent; he who receives is the recipient … In common usage, for example, Devadatta is said to have the independent power of bathing, sitting, walking, and so on.
[Vasubandhu:] What being are you calling “Devadatta?” Is he the self? But that’s just what you have to prove! Now, is he the totality of the five aggregates? We would consider that to be the agent. Action is of three types: bodily, vocal, and mental. Bodily action is dependent on the functioning of the mind. The functioning of the mind as regards the body is dependent on its own causes in the same way. Nothing has any kind of independence … Whatever is the principal cause of an action, that is called the “agent.” And the self has no causal efficacy at all. Therefore, the self should not be considered an agent. From memory arises intention; from intention, thought; from thought, exertion; from exertion, a wind in the body; and from this wind comes the action. What does the self do in this process?

Goodman 2009: 305
According to Vasubandhu, then, the locus of agency is not an enduring self, but a highly complex psycho-physical system (the ‘five aggregates’). Despite our sense that proper names, the first-person pronoun, and terms like ‘agent’ refer to an enduring self that is the locus of experience and will, these terms in fact refer to an interlocking network of events. In explaining action, we need only refer to the mental and physical events (memories, intentions, bodily impulses) that arise within a relatively causally and functionally integrated system. As Vasubandhu asks, ‘What does the self do in this process?’

On the Buddhist analysis, the sense of being a stable self arises from and is sustained by a complex set of impersonal causes and conditions, which are not transparent to the system itself. The sense of self functions as a kind of user illusion and it is ultimately maladaptive according to Buddhist thought. The system comes to represent and experience itself as if there were a homuncular, enduring self that is an owner, subject, and agent. Yet, this representation of a self obscures the complex psycho-physical processes that actually drive experience and action.

In this regard, then, Buddhist thinkers like Vasubandhu are similar to contemporary skeptics concerning the experience of agency. For example, Daniel Wegner writes:

> The real causal sequence underlying human behavior involves a massively complicated set of mechanisms … Each of our actions is really the culmination of an intricate set of physical and mental processes … The illusion of conscious will may be a misapprehension of the mechanistic causal relations underlying our own behavior that comes from looking at ourselves by means of a mental explanatory system. We don’t see our own gears turning because we’re busy reading our minds.

Wegner 2002: 26–27

For both Wegner and Vasubandhu, our experience of ourselves as conscious agents obscures the incredibly complex causes and conditions that give rise to our actions. For Vasubandhu, agency is a psycho-physical process with no substance at its base or center. “From memory,” he writes, “arises intention; from intention, thought; from thought, exertion; from exertion, a wind in the body; and from this wind comes the action” (Goodman 2009: 305). The self is not the agent. If one wants to use the term ‘agent,’ on Vasubandhu’s account, one can apply the term to the complex system or process as a whole, or to the principal cause of the action. What counts as the agent will be a matter of general usage or explanatory utility, but in either case, there is no substantial thing that is the agent. Furthermore, both thinkers agree that we interpret both others and ourselves through the framework of agency. Our (mis-)interpretation of ourselves and others as enduring, conscious, agental selves is of a piece. Indeed, according to Vasubandhu, the fundamental basis for our false construction of the world of everyday experience is the representational (vijñapti) construction of entities (bhava-kalpanā) such as the self, others, and objects.

The Buddhist Reductionist account of agentless agency (Repetti 2017) involves a strategy of stepwise reduction. First, the naive experience and discourse of enduring agental selves is reductively analyzed in terms of complex impersonal psycho-physical systems (the five aggregates). On this analysis, there is no enduring self and no centralized locus of agency. Instead, agency is explained in terms of the causal and functional connections within the system and between the system and its environment. Second, the psycho-physical system itself is analyzed into ontologically simple, momentary mental and physical events called dhammas. This is the level of fundamental ontology (paramārthaśat), relative to which categories such as ‘person,’ ‘agent,’ ‘psycho-physical system,’ or ‘stream of consciousness’ (cittasanthāna) are treated as pragmatic constructs (saṃvṛtisat).
3.4 Wisdom and skillful means

As discussed in section 3.2, on the Buddhist account, a morally fitting action (or habit, trait, etc.) is termed *kusala*, while an unfitting or inappropriate action is *akusala*. More specifically, *kusala* action involves a sensitive responsiveness to the agent’s situation and integrates attentional, cognitive, affective, and motivational factors. The morally adept agent is attentive to the morally salient features of the situation, including her own thoughts, feelings, desires, and so on. She has an accurate cognitive grasp of the situation. Her affective response is appropriate and she is motivated to act virtuously in the situation at hand. For instance, the agent senses and attends to her friend’s distress, understands the problem, feels compassion, and is motivated to help in a way that will ease her friend’s suffering. Moreover, note that the fundamental criterion here is the mitigation of suffering and the facilitation of genuine happiness (*sukha*) and freedom (*mukti*).

In addition, in this account, there is a tight connection between skillfulness and *wisdom* (*prajñā*). Wisdom here is first and foremost deep insight into the impermanent (*anitya*), unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*), and selfless or insubstantial (*anātman*) nature of reality. This wisdom guides and constrains the development and exercise of the cardinal virtues, such as the four immeasurable qualities benevolence, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity mentioned above. Furthermore, in the later Mahāyāna tradition, the ideal agent or *bodhisattva* (being aimed at awakening) is characterized by the perfection of great compassion (*mahā-karunā*), and skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*). Grounded in an altruistic concern to liberate all beings (*bodhicitta*), the bodhisattva path is constituted by the cultivation of the six perfections (*pāramitā*) of generosity (*dāna*), moral discipline (*śīla*), forbearance (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), meditative stability (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). The sixth perfection of wisdom is often considered the highest of the virtues and concerns the cultivation and integration of theoretical understanding, experiential insight, and practical wisdom. As in the earlier tradition, wisdom here serves to guide and unify the other perfections. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* states:

> For this perfection of wisdom directs the six perfections, guides, leads, instructs, and advises them, is their genetrix and nurse. Because if they are deprived of the perfection of wisdom, the first five perfections do not come under the concept of perfections, and they do not deserve to be called “perfections.”

*Wright 2009: 218*

Development in wisdom also includes the cultivation of skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*). The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* states, “Wisdom not integrated with skillful means is bondage, but wisdom integrated with skillful means is liberation. Skillful means not integrated with wisdom is bondage, but skillful means integrated with wisdom is liberation” (Thurman 1976: 46). *Upāya-kauśalya* (or *upāya* for short) here is a form of practical wisdom, especially concerning how best to facilitate awakening in others. In the ethical context, *upāya* is a sensitive responsiveness to the concrete moral situation. It is a form of moral skillfulness that goes beyond the mere application of rules or precepts, and indeed is the aspect of wisdom needed to discern when rules or precepts are permissibly broken. In the context of teaching the *dharma*, *upāya* involves the ability to find the right teaching and the right method of teaching for the particular needs, temperament, and situation of the students (see Garfield and Priest, Chapter 1 in this volume).
In the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti, though a layperson, is depicted as the model of the union of nondualistic wisdom and skillful means. Indeed, his skillfulness is so great that he is able to teach the dharma to everyone from prostitutes to highly advanced monks (see Garfield and Priest, Chapter 1 in this volume). In his everyday life, he moves fluidly and effectively in the worlds of business, politics, education, the arts, religion, and even the seedier domains of life. In each context, Vimalakīrti is depicted as flexibly responsive to the situation at hand, the roles of those involved, the needs and interests of others, and the often subtle ways the situation affords opportunities to teach the dharma in words or in action. In particular, he encourages others to move beyond the four forms of attachment traditionally delineated in the Buddhist tradition. He encourages laypeople to give up attachment to sensual pleasures. He encourages his fellow spiritual practitioners to let go of attachment to fixed views that hinder their practice or teaching; attachment to ethical precepts and rituals that compromise skillful responsiveness; and attachment to fixed views of self and others that obscure the deeper truth of nonduality. In each case, the unskillful is seen as a form of rigidity or attachment to fixed patterns of thought, perception, or action, while the skillful is seen as a form of flexible responsiveness to the needs of others in the situation at hand.

3.5 Selflessness and liberated action

As we have seen so far in our discussion, in Buddhist thought, the ideal agent’s attentional, cognitive, affective, and motivational capacities are so refined that she is able to respond flexibly to the situation at hand with great wisdom and compassion. And this optimal agency is the result of training in the Buddhist eightfold path. That is, through the cultivation of wisdom (prajñā), ethical discipline (śīla), and meditation (bhāvanā), one attenuates akuśala states, such as greed or hatred, and develops kuśala states such as equanimity or kindness. Indeed, the highly developed agent is said to be spontaneous (apratīkta) and effortless (anābhogā) in her actions.

Now, given the above description of the ideal agent, it may seem that the Buddhist account involves a fairly straightforward form of cultivated expertise, like the virtuoso musician who has trained diligently for decades and can now ‘just play’ spontaneously, effortlessly, yet expertly. Things are not so straightforward, however, because on the Buddhist account, awakened or ideal agency is fundamentally different from everyday agency. Awakened action is radically spontaneous. An awakened being acts utterly without cetanā (volition, intention), without effort, and without discursive-conceptual deliberation (vikalpa). As the Ratnagotravibhāga puts it, a Buddha’s action is “free from constructive thought, without effort, and has nothing on which to stand, inside or out” (Griffiths 1994: 105). On this view, an awakened being does not form an explicit intention or will to benefit other beings. Rather, she spontaneously responds to the needs of other beings. Indeed, it is not just that the awakened individual need not act from cetanā, she cannot. Cetanā, recall, drives karma and an awakened one has, by definition, transcended the production of both good and bad karma. On the Buddhist view, awakened activity is trans-volitional. But if awakened activity does not arise from cetanā, from what does it arise? According to one text, it arises from an “awareness that does what needs to be done” (kṛtyānuṣṭhānajñāna) that enacts “what benefits beings in all world-realms” (Griffiths, 1994: 101).

Awakened action is effortless in that, because it is optimally skillful, the action is unforced. Here effort is only required if there is a potential mismatch between the nature of the situation and the response. In the case of ideal action, however, the response fits smoothly with the situation and so the action has an effortless or unforced quality. However, effort here
Volition, action, and skill

should not be confused with energy or vigor (vīrya) which is one of the six virtues the awakened individual has, by definition, perfected. Indeed, a Buddha is traditionally said to display boundless, unimpeded energy directed at the benefit of all sentient beings. Awakened action is free from constructive thought and deliberation, because a Buddha does not need to deliberate or plan the best course of action. Instead she sees what needs to be done and does it. On this account, deliberation, thought, and planning are done under conditions of practical uncertainty, whereas the ideal agent always knows the right thing to do. Finally, an awakened agent “has nothing on which to stand, inside or out” (Griffiths 1994: 105). That is, a Buddha does not rely on reified constructions of self, other, or world. Ordinary agents rely on conventional constructions such as ‘self,’ ‘agent,’ ‘object,’ or ‘other.’ A Buddha, in contrast, sees things as they are (yathābhūtadarśanam), and so sees beyond these constructs and does not deploy them as a basis for action.

There is thus a sharp discontinuity between awakened, and even highly skillful yet unawakened action. Recall that, on Vasubandhu’s account of agency, there is a gap between an agent’s first-person experience and naive understanding of her own agency, and the correct, reductionist explanation of that agency. An individual will typically experience herself as an enduring self, the locus of will. Yet, on the Buddhist Reductionist account, there is no such entity. Instead there is a complex system of momentary mental and physical events unfolding according to the principle of dependent co-arising. Despite how it seems from the first-person point of view, terms such as ‘I’ or ‘agent’ do not refer to a self, but rather refer to the impersonal psycho-physical continuum of events. There is thus a gap between the naive first-person experience of agency and the reductionist third-person explanation of it. However, Vasubandhu admits that normal agency might require the naive illusion of the agential self. First, the sense of self (ahamkāra) arises causally within a particular continuum and tracks the events within that continuum and not those in other continuants. A normal agent must be able to tell the difference between ‘her own’ aggregates and those of ‘others,’ otherwise coherent action would be compromised. Second, without a sense of diachronic identity, a normal agent would have no basis for prudential concern. Yet, prudential concern over the positive and negative karmic consequences of one’s actions, and the promised benefit of the Buddhist path itself seem to require the ability to identify with one’s own future. Thus, Vasubandhu argues that this basic sense of self is morally neutral (aryākṛta) because it is consistent with and can support skillful conduct (Hanner 2018).

In contrast, for an awakened agent, there is no gap between her experience and how things are. She therefore does not rely on a constructed sense of self and other to underpin skillful agency. In place of a sense of synchronic and diachronic personal identity, there is an awareness of what needs to be done. In place of explicit volition or intention, there is spontaneous wise and compassionate responsiveness. All this, of course, raises a host of interpretive and philosophical problems that are beyond the scope of this chapter (see Griffiths 1994; Garfield 2006; Finnigan 2011). In the present context, the central question concerns what, according to the Buddhist tradition, makes it possible to move from unawakened to awakened agency?

Here the tradition offers a range of positions on a spectrum between what John Dunne calls constructivist and innateist positions (Dunne 2011). According to the constructivist view, a practitioner must remove negative traits such as greed and ignorance, as well as develop or construct positive traits such as generosity or wisdom. Yet, if sentient beings are so deeply mired in ignorance and maladaptive states, how is this development possible? On this view, human beings possess a set of basic learning and self-regulatory capacities that allow them to both change maladaptive traits and habits and to acquire new more adaptive traits and habits. In this way
the transition from normal to awakened agency is consistent with Hubert Dreyfus’s account of expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999). A novice practitioner will need to deploy explicit rules and precepts (such as the five Buddhist ethical precepts) as a guide and external check on her unwholesome tendencies. Through diligent training, the practitioner is able to attenuate her negative tendencies and internalize and habituate new more wholesome tendencies. Over time the precepts serve less as external checks or guardrails and more as internalized maxims that facilitate skillful coping with complex situations. As the practitioner moves toward expertise, the precepts and other explicit rules recede into the background, now serving primarily as domains of ethical salience, rather than checks on negative tendencies. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus characterize the expert:

The expert not only sees what needs to be achieved; thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations he sees immediately what to do. Thus, the ability to make more subtle and refined discriminations is what distinguishes the expert from the proficient performer … This allows the immediate intuitive situational response that is characteristic of expertise.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999: 109

On the constructivist account, the intuitive situational responsiveness of an awakened agent is a product of long training in which the practitioner develops qualities that were not present in her untrained state. Just as the chess master is not born knowing how to play chess, an individual is not born knowing how to be a Buddha.

In contrast, on the innateist view, the qualities of an awakened agent are thought to be (somehow) already present, even in the unawakened. The movement from unawakened, unskillful agency to awakened, optimally skillful agency does not fundamentally involve the development of new qualities. Rather, it is a matter of progressively clearing away obscurations of the incipient awakened qualities present in the agent. As we find in the Aṅguttara Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, “Luminous, monks, is this mind. And it is defiled by adventitious defilements” (Bodhi 2012: 97). Hence, on this model, one does not acquire qualities such as wisdom and compassionate responsiveness. Rather, one removes negative traits such as ignorance and indifference, thereby allowing the innate qualities of awareness and empathy to unfold. Recall that, on the Buddhist account, the individual is a complex psycho-physical system dynamically evolving depending on a complex network of endogenous and exogenous causes and conditions. Below the level of personal self-representation, the system is characterized by awareness and spontaneous perceptual, affective, and cognitive responsiveness. These endogenous capacities are constitutive of the system as a sentient individual and it is these capacities that are developed into awakened forms of agency. On most versions of the innateist view, there is still ample room for development since the innate qualities are understood to be in incipient form. Buddhist practice, then, is a two-pronged process of removing obscurations and cultivating innate positive qualities of mind and heart. Yet, the basic qualities that constitute awakened agency are quite general. When it comes to specific skills, such as the ability to effectively teach a wide range of students, traditional forms of skill acquisition may be required. An awakened being may naturally display her innate qualities of awareness and compassion, but this does not entail that she will know how to perform brain surgery without medical training. Thus, in the context of an innateist view, skillful means (upāya-kausālya) may be acquired, but fundamental awakened qualities are only developed and expressed.
3.6 Conclusion

Indian Buddhist philosophers are committed to the reality of karma, the causal efficacy and moral centrality of intending, the effectiveness of sustained long-term practice, and the non-existence of any substantial self as a locus of agency. This seemingly inconsistent set of commitments is reconciled through a rejection of an ontology of enduring substances in favor of an ontology of momentary, dependently originated events. There is no substantial, enduring self or agent, because there are no enduring substances at all. What we think of as selves or agents are then reductively analyzed as highly complex systems of mental and physical events. Among these events are intendings which, when coupled in the right way with other mental and physical events, can serve as the principal causes of subsequent mental and physical events. Mental and physical events caused in the right way by intendings are actions. Therefore, our first-person sense that we are enduring selves and agents is mistaken. Despite this mistaken self-understanding, there are processes that are rightly called actions, and mental events play an ineliminable causal role in these processes. On this account, karma refers to both intendings and to the long-term causal connections between certain types of mental or physical events at one time and those at a future time within the same system. Buddhist practice draws on the basic cognitive, affective, attentional, and self-regulative capacities of human beings in order to transform the functioning of those capacities away from maladaptive, dysfunctional patterns of experience and action, and toward more adaptive and functional patterns. This entails an increase in flexible skillful responsiveness toward an ideal of optimal skillfulness that, according to these thinkers, is in some ways quite different from normal forms of agency.

Notes

1 This work was supported in part by the endowment fund of the Colorado State University Department of Philosophy.
2 Bodhicaryāvatāra I.28.
3 Here I am concerned with the psychological dimension of saṃsāra in that psychological states such as craving (tṛṣṇā) and attachment (upādāna) play a crucial role in driving the process of saṃsāra. For further discussion of the psychological dimension of saṃsāra see Garfield (2015, ch. 9) and MacKenzie (2013).
5 The Pāli Dictionary defines kusala as: “clever, skillful, expert; good, right, meritorious.”
6 Damien Keown (1992: 119) distinguishes what he calls the ‘technical’ and the ‘moral’ senses of kusala. He argues against translating kusala as ‘skillful’ in a moral context and prefers ‘virtuous’ or ‘good.’ He sees little conceptual connection between these two senses. In contrast, I side with Cousins (1996) and Harvey (2010/2011) in seeing these senses as intertwined. At the root of the connection is an appeal to the central importance of wise attention and a well-trained, well-controlled, and wise mind more generally as the root of good action. To call an action kusala, then, includes a sense that it is ‘intelligent,’ ‘produced by skill,’ or ‘produced from wisdom.’ Thus my account of the moral sense of kusala includes an important conceptual connection to notions of skill and skillfulness that are also reflected in the Sanskrit and Pāli etymologies of the term.
7 Anguttara Nikāya (AN) 6.63 (A iii.415).
8 Abhidhamkosabhāṣya (AK Bh) IV.1b (192.9).
9 Elements of Buddhist Reductionism can be found in both Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika schools of Abhidharma. See, for example, Vasubandhu’s Abhidhamkosā-bhāṣya (Pradhan 1975) for the articulation and defense of a number of ideas associated with Buddhist Reductionism.
10 AK Bh IX, p. 476.
11 My claim here is not that the Buddhist constructivist account is the same as that of Dreyfus or Heidegger, but only that it is consistent with his general account of the acquisition of expertise.
12 AN I.49 (9). Of course, the proper interpretation of this and other similar passages is a matter of dispute. However, proponents of innateist views often cite them in support of their account.
References


