

6

Atta,kārī Sutta

The Discourse on the Doer of One's Own Deeds | A 6.38

Theme: Are we fated?

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2004¹

I have noticed even people who claim everything is predestined,
and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road.

Stephen Hawking (1942-2018)

1 Fatalism, responsibility, choice

1.1 The Atta,kārī Sutta in the Pāli Text Society text covers exactly an octavo page (divided up over two pages) and the English translation here covers just over an A4 page. Despite its being one of the shortest suttas in the Canon, its statement regarding self-agency and other-agency has important implications in the nature of “free will” in Buddhism, or more exactly, about agency and causality.² [2]

The Sutta has also been translated in the Chinese Āgamas which follows. In essence, the two versions are remarkably close, but the differences are also significant. This is not an easy Sutta to translate, and the Chinese translation tries to keep close to the original text which is evidently older than the Pali text (possibly a common ancient source for both). The comparative “sutta analysis” is found in section 2.

1.2 The long section 3 discusses the significance of the Sutta in terms of **free will**. In modern academic circles, the debate on “free will” (such as that resulting from Libet’s findings),³ “it is commonly assumed on all sides that responsibility implies choice” (Freeman, 2000:61), which has led to various unnecessary philosophical problems.⁴

1.3 In his paper, “Responsibility Without Choice,” Anthony Freeman argues for a compatibilist view that distinguishes responsibility from choice. Freeman gives two case studies to prove his case (here briefly stated):

Case 1. A child runs out in front of a car and is killed. The driver did not choose for the child to run out and no action he might have taken [short of not driving at all] could have prevented the accident. Although the driver might *feel* guilty, he is free from *legal* guilt.

Case 2. Suppose there is an outbreak of a deadly disease. Without inoculation there is a 90% chance that a child would die. There is a 1% chance that the treatment itself would prove fatal. A parent chooses to have her child inoculated but it turns out to be the one-in-a-hundred fatality. Although the mother

¹ I would like to record my thanks to **Dr Roderick S Bucknell** for his encouragement and very helpful comments on the Chinese in these translations. Dr Bucknell is Assoc Professor at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

² See a separate detailed study on **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7 (this vol).

³ See **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7 (12) & biblio there.

⁴ Eg, hardcore determinists like neuroscientists Colin Blakemore (*The Mind Machine*, London: BBC, 1988) and philosopher Ted Honderich (*How Free Are you?* Oxford: OUP, 1993) conclude that since all things are physically determined, there is no choice and therefore no personal responsibility. On the other hand, defenders of genuine free will, like philosopher Robert Kane (*The Significance of Freewill*, NY: OUP, 1996) and High Court judge David Hodgson (*The Mind Matters*, Oxford: OUP, 1991), argue to the contrary, claiming that since personal responsibility underpins our whole system of ethics and law, it cannot be abandoned and that therefore determinism must be false. In the middle are the compatibilists, who accept the fact of physical determinism but still maintain that people are responsible for their action (Dan Dennet, *Elbow Room*, 1984:162).

blames herself for the child's death, because it was her positive decision to give the fatal injection, no court would find her legally responsible for the death.

For the case I am making, it is not necessary to claim that these scenarios would always obtain, only that they might in some cases. Nor is it necessary to claim that there is never a link between choice and culpability, only that there does not have to be such a link. I believe that my two examples are sufficient to demonstrate that third-person innocence and first-person guilt are both possible with or without choice being present. The view that responsibility entails choice, and vice versa, is thus false.

My second line of attack against the common assumption that choice and responsibility are mutually entailed concerns the role of the conscious agent in causality. David Hume pointed long ago [*An Enquiry into Human Understanding*, 1748] that, even if in nature event B consistently follows event A on every observed occasion, to say that event A *causes* event B is to go beyond observation. It is to make up a human story about the two observable events. In short, causality is a function of psychology, not of physics. It is our way of interpreting events, not a feature of events in themselves. In general, however, the world has gone its merry way in blissful ignorance of David Hume. (Freeman, 2000:63)

2 Causality and agency

2.1 The Atta,kārī Sutta is a short discourse on causality and agency, and is a clear statement on the efficacy of personal effort. Here, **causality** refers to a karmic action we (or anyone) have initiated, and such an action has karmic consequences. This is only one "link" in a complex karmic network of multiple causes and conditions. For, all actions work in concert with other actions, producing a network of results. This is called conditionality.

2.2 Agency, on the other hand, refers to how an action or set of actions we do affects others. For example, we hear a Dharma talk (action), and inspired by it, we go on to meditate (result). The Dharma speaker is an "agent," so to speak, to our being motivated to meditate. A better Buddhist explanation is that the agency here is the *teaching* (not the person) of the Dharma teacher who motivated us. In short, it is possible to move others to goodness. It is for this reason that the Buddha teaches us the Dharma: we can be moved to act in a way that would transform us into awakened beings.⁵

2.3 The efficacy of **action view** (*kamma,vāda*) is that our present condition is partly the result of our deeds in previous lives. Those who reject this view, that is, the non-efficacy of action (*akiriyā,vāda*), believe that all deeds, past, present or future, have no effect on the condition of beings. "Thus, in its extreme forms the [*akiriyā,vādī*] would say that there is actually no causal connection between what a living being does and what he is or becomes, in this or in another life" (Gomez 1975:81 f).

2.4 The teaching on the efficacy of action is mentioned in greater detail in **the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta** (D 4,6), where the Buddha declare himself to be "one who teaches karma, who teaches (the efficacy of) action" (*kamma,vādī kiriyā,vādī*) (D 4,6/1:115). Similarly, in **the Añña,titthiya Sutta** (S 12.24), Sāriputta declares to the wanderers that the Buddha teaches the efficacy of action (S 12.14/2:33 ff).

⁵ On self-effort and other-effort, see SD 48.1 (6.6.2.6).

A threefold classification of non-action (*akiriya*) in the **Titth'āyatana Sutta** (A 3.61): our present condition is all due to our past actions; that it is the result of a god's creation; or, that it is by sheer chance (A 3.61.1-4).⁶

2.5 Strictly speaking, the Attakārī Sutta is not about free will, but rather about *fatalism*. Philosophically, free will can only operate in a deterministic situation. If we do A, then it always follows that B will occur. If the situation is indeterministic, we will have no way of knowing how our actions will result. Fatalism, on the other hand, is an ethical view that *choice is meaningless*.

2.6 Makkhali Gosāla's *niyati, vāda* is fatalism, which the Buddha rejects because Gosāla claims that purification happens without cause or condition within the individual (D 2).⁷ Furthermore, like the brahmin in the Attakārī Sutta, he claims that there is neither human agency (*atta, kāra*), nor effort (*virīya*), nor human exertion (*purisa, parakkama*) (id).⁸ Here, we are dealing with the ethics of *what we can or cannot do*.

2.7 As scholars of philosophy, like **Asaf Federman**, have noted, "The Buddhist rejection of this view is not a rejection of deterministic theory of causality but a rejection of fatalism." (2010:13).⁹ It should be noted that the Attakārī Sutta is not discussing philosophy, but rejecting the view (especially that of Gosāla and of the brahmin in this Sutta) purporting or suggesting that we are all fated, so that no effort possible for spiritual purification and liberation. The Buddha teaches the contrary: we can help ourselves. Indeed, if we do not, no one can help us (Dh 160, 380).

3 Dhātu

3.1 The Attakārī Sutta (A 6.38) speaks of *ārambha, dhātu* [§3b], *nikkama, dhātu* [§6], *parakkama, dhātu* [§7], *thāma, dhātu* [§8], *ṭhiti, dhātu* [§9], and *upakkama, dhātu* [§10]. The common term here is, of course **dhātu**, which however, although translated as "element," is not used in the usual physical sense. **Gethin** helpfully points out¹⁰ a passage in the **Vibhaṅga** that throws some light on this point. In its chapter in the Analysis of the Elements (Dhātu, vibhaṅga) (ch 3), the Vibhaṅga discusses the following set of terms:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| • <i>kāma, dhātu</i> | the element of sensual desire, | |
| • <i>vyāpāda, dhātu</i> | the element of ill will, | |
| • <i>vihimsa, dhātu</i> | the element of violence, | |
| • <i>nekkhamma, dhātu</i> | the element of renunciation, | |
| • <i>avyāpāda, dhātu</i> | the element of non-ill will, and | |
| • <i>avihimsa, dhātu</i> | the element of non-violence. | (Vbh 182/86 f) |

3.2 The Vibhaṅga Commentary asserts that the Vibhaṅga offers two distinct ways of taking each of these six compounds. Thus, **kāma, dhātu** is either a "*dhātu* connected with *kāma*" (*kāma, paṭisaṃyuttā dhātu*), or the "*dhātu that is kāma*" (*kāma yeva dhātu*); and there are the same two possibilities for the rest.

⁶ A 3.61.1-4/1:173-175), SD 6.8 (2004). See also S 3:210; A 1:286 (*n'atthi kammaṃ, n'atthi kiriyaṃ, n'atthi viriyaṃ*).

⁷ **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,20/1:53), SD 8.10.

⁸ **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,20/1:54), SD 8.10.

⁹ For a helpful analysis showing that while free will is incompatible with fatalism ("inevitability"), but is compatible with determinism, see Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, London: Allen Lane, 2003. See also **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7.

¹⁰ 2001:192 f.

With regard to the first usage, *dhātu* means “thought” (*takka, vitakka, saṅkappa*), and with regard to the second, *dhātu* means dharmas or “states” (*dhammā*) or a dharma or “a state” (*dhammaṃ*). (VbhA 74-76)

3.3 Similarly, in the case of *kāma, dhātu* and ***nekkhamma, dhātu***, the two terms *kāma* and *nekkhamma* should be differently understood. According to the first usage, *kāma* is desire as active defilement (*kilesa, kāma*), and in the second usage, it is the object of that desire (*vatthu, kāma*). Thus, *kāma, dhātu* is either a “thought connected with desire”—an “element of desire”—or the totality of dharmas—the “elements of desire”—that make up the sense-sphere since these are the objects of that same desire.¹¹

As regards *nekkhamma, dhātu*, in the first usage, it means “thought connected with *nekkhamma*” where *nekkhamma* can be taken either as “non-greed” or the 1st dhyana. In the second usage, it means “dharmas that make up *nekkhamma*”—or, the “elements of renunciation”—that is, the totality of skillful states.¹²

3.4 Hence, according to the Vibhaṅga, there are two usages or “modes of exposition” (*kathā*) here: the “totality” (*sabba.sāṅgāhika*) and the “unmixed” (*asambhinna*).

For by taking the sensual desire element, the ill will and violence elements are taken as well; but these are shown as two by deriving each from the sense-desire element. This, in the first, place is the totality [all-inclusive] exposition here. But by leaving out the ill will and violence elements, all the rest is the sensual desire element; thus, this is the unmixed exposition. (VbhA 75)

In short, *dhātu* can mean an “element” (a certain state), in the *umixed* sense, or the “elements” of a state, in the *totality* sense. In the case of the 6 terms used in the Atta, kārī Sutta, the latter is meant.

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¹¹ *Kilesa, kāmaṃ sandhāya kāma, paṭisaṃyuttā dhātu kāma, dhātu: kāma, vitakkass’etaṃ nāmaṃ. Vatthu, kāmaṃ sandhāya kāmo yeva dhātu kāma, dhātu, kāmāvacara, dhammānaṃ etaṃ nāma* (VbhA 74).

¹² *Nekkhammaṃ vuccati lobhā nikkhantattā alobho. Nīvaraṇehi nikkhantattā paṭhama-j, jhānaṃ. Sabbākusalehi nikkhantattā sabba, kusalaṃ. Nekkhamma, paṭisaṃyuttā dhātu nekkhamma, dhātu, nekkhamma, vitakkass’etaṃ nāmaṃ, nekkhammaṃ eva dhātu nekkhamma, dhātu, sabbassāpi kusalass’etaṃ* (VbhA 74). It is clear at Vbh 86 that *nekkhamma* as *sabbe kusalā dhammā* is restricted to the second usage (Gethin 2001:193 n12). See further Gethin 2001:193 f for the rest of this analysis.

Āgama-Nikāya Comparative Study4 Chinese Āgama version**SĀ 459 = T2.117**

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[7] (四五九) 459 [0117c]

[02] 如是我聞 一時。佛住舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園
 如是我聞 一時。佛住舍卫国祇树给孤独园
 rú shì wǒ wén yì shí. Fó zhù Shěwèiguó Zhǐshù Jīgūdúyuán
 Thus | there is | I | hear One time. | Buddha | stay | at Śrāvastī | Jeta Forest | Anāthapiṇḍada's park.
 Thus have I heard At one time the Buddha was staying at Anāthapiṇḍada's Park in Jeta's Forest near Śrāvastī.

[03] 時。有婆羅門來詣佛所。與世尊¹³面相慰勞已。於一面住。

时。有婆罗门来诣佛所。与世尊面相慰劳已。于一面住。

shí. yǒu póluómén lái yì fó suǒ yǔ shìzūn miàn xiàng wèiláoyǐ. yǔ yí miàn zhù

At that time | there is | brahmin | come | visit | Buddha | residence | with | world-honoured | face | each other | greet | already | at | one | side | stay

At that time, a brahmin approached the Buddha's residence, and having exchanged greetings with the World Honoured One, he remained at one side,

白佛言。眾生非自作。非他作

白佛言：「眾生非自作。非他作」

bái fó yán: zhòngshēng fēi zì zuò. fēi tā zuò.

say | Buddha | word | sentient beings | not | self doing || not | other | doing ||

and said this to the Buddha: "Sentient beings have neither self-agency [deed done by oneself] nor other-agency [deed done by another]."

[05] 佛告婆羅門。如是論者。我不與相見。汝今自來。

佛告婆罗门：「如是论者。我不与相见。汝今自来。」

Fó gào póluómén. rú shì lùn zhě. wǒ bù yǔ xiāng jiàn. rǔ jīn zì lái.

Buddha | say | to the brahmin | like | this | say | who | I | not | with (him) | each other | see | you | now | self | come

The Buddha told the brahmin, "I have never (before) met a person who has spoken thus. You have yourself come to tell me that there is neither self-agency [deed done by oneself]."

而言我非自作。非他作

而言我非自作。非他作」

ér yán wǒ fēi zì zuò fēi tā zuò

and | say | I | not | self | doing | not | other | doing ||

nor other-agency [deed done by another]."

¹³ 世尊, Skt *bhagavat*, "Blessed One"; sometimes also *loka.jyeṣṭha*, "eldest in the world."

[06] 婆羅門言。云何。瞿曇。眾生為自作。為他作耶

婆罗门言：「云何。瞿曇。众生为自作。为他作耶」

pólúómén yán. yún hé qútán zhòngshēng wéi zì zuò wèi tā zuò yé

The brahmin | said | say | why | Gautama | sentient beings | do | self | doing | do | other | doing | (tag)¹⁴

The brahmin said, “Tell me why? Gautama, do sentient beings have self-agency, do they have other-agency?”

[08] 佛告婆羅門。我今問汝。隨意答我。婆羅門。於意云何。

佛告婆罗门：「我今问汝。随意答我。婆罗门。于意云何。

Fó gào pólúómén 「wǒ jīn wèn rǔ. suí yì dá wǒ. pólúómén yú yì yún hé.

Buddha | tell | the brahmin | | now | ask | you | follow | wish | answer | me | brahmin | in | thought | say | what

The Buddha told the brahmin, “Brahmin, now I ask you, answer as you please. What do you think?

有眾生方便界。

有众生方便界。

yǒu zhòng shēng fāngbiàn jiè.

| is | sentient beings | initiating | realm

Do sentient beings have **the element of initiating**?¹⁵

令諸眾生知作方便耶

令诸众生知作方便耶」

lìng zhū zhòng shēng zhī zuò fāngbiàn yé

cause | all | sentient beings | know | do | initiating | (tag)

What causes sentient beings to know how to initiate (a deed)?”

[10] 婆羅門言。瞿曇。有眾生方便界¹⁶。令諸眾生知作方便也

婆罗门言：「瞿曇。有众生方便界。令诸众生知作方便也」

pólúómén yán qútán yǒu zhòng shēng fāngbiàn jiè. lìng zhū zhòngshēng zhī zuò fāngbiàn yě

The brahmin | says | Gautama | there are | sentient beings | initiating | realm | cause | all | sentient being | know | do | initiating | (tag)¹⁷

The brahmin said, “Gautama, you mean that sentient beings have initiative, and that all sentient beings are able to initiate (a deed)?”

¹⁴ 耶 yé, a question tag that could be rendered in English simply as “?”

¹⁵ 方便 *usu* means “skillful means” (*upaya* or *upaya, kauśalya*).

¹⁶ 界 [py] jie4, [wg] chieh, [ko] kye, [ja] カイ kai (*dhātu*), “world,” “realm.” (1) Boundary, environment, realm. For example, the ‘three realms’ of desire, form and formlessness. (2) World. (3) The essential nature of the individual existence of things, as for example in the term *fajie* 法界. Essence, substance, original nature. The aspect of things as inherent, inborn from previous lifetimes, as opposed to conditioning from the present lifetime. (4) That which supports or sustains. Principle. (5) Discrimination; that which discriminates this and that, giving order in place of confusion. (6) Category, class, species; delimitation, division, kind, type. (7) Element. The compositional elements of human existence, or of perception. (8) The 18 realms 十八界, that is the 18 compositional elements of human existence: the six faculties, the six objects and the six cognitive functions. (9) The compositional elements of the universe: earth, air, water, fire, wind and consciousness. (10) ‘Seeds.’ In both Huayan and Consciousness-only theory, the seeds in the *ālaya-vijñāna* are sometimes called 界, meaning ‘element’ or ‘cause.’ (瑜伽論 T1579.30.478c) [Source: *Dictionary of Buddhist Terms*]. Here, the most likely meaning of 界 is (7) “element.”

¹⁷ 也 yě, a **tag** is applied in a number of ways: (1) **Question tag**, which conveys a negative or positive orientation, eg *That was good, wasn't it?* In spoken Chinese, this can be rendered as 呢 ne. (2) **Statement tag** (at end of sentence) indicates emphasis, resolution, judgement, eg *That was good, that was.* (3) **Imperative mood** (at end of a narrative sentence), expresses a tone of command, exhortation, prohibition; like final 呢 in spoken Chinese. In English, this tone is expressed by such modal verbs as “should,” “can,” “must,” etc. (4) **Reflective caesura** (in a cpd sentence, at the end of 1st clause), expresses a tone of reflective caesura (pause for thought) to mark a transition to the text immediately following. In spoken Chinese, this can be rendered as 啊 a. In English, sometimes “filler words” like “so” serve the same function in a sentence. (5) **Coordination** (within a sentence) shows equivalence btw subject and predicate, eg, “It is good, it is!” (similar to 2).

[11] 佛告婆羅門。若有方便界。令諸眾生知有方便者。

佛告婆羅門：「若有方便界。令諸眾生知有方便者。」

Fó gào póluómén. ruò yǒu fāngbiàn jiè lìng zhū zhòngshēng zhī yǒu fāngbiàn zhě.

Buddha | tell | the brahmin | if | there is | initiating | realm | cause | all | sentient beings | know | there is | initiating | (unquote).

The Buddha told the brahmin, “If there is effort [initiative], then there are **doers of effort** [ie initiators] amongst sentient beings—

是則眾生自作。是則他作。

是则众生自作。是则他作。

shì zé zhòng shēng zì zuò shì zé tā zuò.

this | then | sentient beings | self | do | this | then | other | do |

this is self-agency, this is other-agency.

婆羅門。於意云何。有眾生「安住界。」堅固界。「出界。」造作界。

婆羅門。于意云何。有众生安住界。坚固界。出界。造作界。

póluómén. yú yì yún hé. yǒu zhòngshēng ānzhùjiè jiān'gùjiè chūjiè zàozuòjiè

| brahmin | regarding | think | say | what | are | sentient beings | staying still realm | firmness realm | emerging realm | acting realm.

Brahmin, what do you think? Are there (a) **the element of staying still**, (b) **the element of firmness**, (c) **the element of emerging**, (d) **the element of acting**,

令彼眾生知有造作耶

令彼众生知有造作耶」

lìng bǐ zhòngshēng zhī yǒu zào zuò yé.

cause | other | sentient beings | know | have | make | do | (question tag)

that let other beings know there is an action?”

[15] 婆羅門白佛。有眾生安住界。堅固界。出界。造作界。

婆羅門白佛：「有众生安住界。坚固界。出界。造作界。」

póluómén bái fó yǒu zhòngshēng ānzhùjiè jiān'gùjiè chūjiè zàozuòjiè

The brahmin | says | to Buddha | there are | sentient beings | staying still realm | firmness realm | emerging realm | acting realm.

The brahmin said to the Buddha, “Sentient beings have the element of staying still, the element of firmness, the element of emerging, the element of acting,

令諸¹⁸眾生知有造作 [17] 佛告婆羅門。若彼安住界。堅固界。出界。

令诸众生知有造作」佛告婆羅門：「若彼安住界。坚固界。出界。」

lìng zhū zhòngshēng zhī yǒu zàozuò fó gào póluómén. ruò bǐ ānzhùjiè jiān'gùjiè chūjiè

cause | all | sentient beings | know | is | acting || The Buddha | tells | brahmin | if | other | remaining realm | firmness realm | emerging realm

which lets it be known that, amongst sentient beings there is acting.” The Buddha told the brahmin, “If sentient beings have the element of staying still, the element of firmness, the element of emerging,

造作界。令諸眾生知有造作者。是則眾生自作。是則他作

造作界。令诸众生知有造作者。是则众生自作。是则他作」

zàozuòjiè lìng zhū zhòngshēng zhī yǒu zàozuò zhě. shì zé zhòngshēng zì zuò. shì zé tā zuò

acting realm | cause | all | sentient beings | know | there is | acting | (unquote) | this | then | sentient beings | self | do | this | then | other | do

the element of acting, and (this) causes all sentient beings to know that there are those who act—this *is* self-agency, this *is* other-agency!”

¹⁸ 諸 often also serves as a phonetic contraction of 之乎, which it might have been here. Then, 諸 would function much like English prepositions, connecting the verb and its object. In these constructions, 之 is a pronoun (sometimes the noun it replaces is a tag, like the “it” of “it’s raining”) and 乎 is an all-purpose preposition of sorts. I thank Che Garcia (China) for this suggestion (2015).

[19] 婆羅門 白 佛。 有 眾生 自 作。 有 他 作。 瞿曇。 世 間 多 事。

婆罗门 白 佛：「有 众生 自 作。 有 他 作。 瞿曇。 世 间 多 事。

póluómén bái fó. yǒu zhòngshēng zì zuò. yǒu tā zuò. Qútán, shì jiān duō shì

The brahmin | says | to Buddha | there are | sentient beings | self | do | there are | other | do | Gautama | the world | much | affairs |

The brahmin said to the Buddha, “Sentient beings *do* have self-agency and other-agency. Gautama, there is much to be done in the world.

今 當 請 辭

今 当 请 辞」

jīn dāng qǐng cí

now | must | take leave | |

I must now take my leave.”

[20] 佛 告 婆 羅 門。 世 間 多 事。 宜 知 是 時

佛 告 婆 罗 门：「世 间 多 事。 宜 知 是 时」

Fō gào póluómén. shì jiān duō shì. yí zhī shì shí

Buddha | said | to brahmin | the world | much | affair. Suitable | know | this | time |

The Buddha told the brahmin, “There is much to be done in the world. Do what you think it is now the time to do.”¹⁹

[21] 時。 彼 婆 羅 門 聞 佛 所 說。 歡 喜 隨 喜。 從 座 起 去。

时。 彼 婆 罗 门 闻 佛 所 说。 欢 喜 随 喜。 从 座 起 去。

shí. bǐ póluómén wén fó suǒ shuō huān xǐ suí xǐ cóng zuò qǐ qù.

Then | that | brahmin | heard | Buddha | what | said | happy | rejoiced | from | seat | rose | left.

Then the brahmin, having heard what the Buddha said, was happy and rejoiced. Then, he rose from his seat and left.

— evaṃ —

5 Sutta analysis

5.1 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In this short but important Sutta, the Buddha makes a clear statement on **free will**. This Sutta should be studied alongside others like **the Devadaha Sutta** (M 101/2:214-228) and **the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta** (D 4.6-/1:115).²⁰ The Atta,kārī Sutta contains a unique set of six phrases used by the Buddha to show the questioner that we (self and others) are agents of actions, that is we do things (most things anyway) from our own decision to do so. Possible connections between the six Pali phrases and the Chinese Āgama terms (T 2.117 = SĀ 459), and their translations, are given as follows:²¹

¹⁹ *Yassa dāni tvaṃ kālaṃ maññasī ti*. This is stock; see: **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,101/1:85), **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.6/2:104) and **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90,17/2:132 f).

²⁰ “Free will,” see next section for detailed discussion.

²¹ For a useful comparative study of Attakārī S & its Chinese Āgama counterpart, see Choong 2000:145-149.

	Chinese Āgama²²	Atta,kārī Sutta	Translation
	the element of:	the element of:	the element of:
(1) <i>ārambha,dhātu</i> [§3b] ²³	(1) 方便界 ²⁴ [~ initiating]	~ initiating an action	~ initiative
(2) <i>nikkama,dhātu</i> [§6]	(4) 出界 ~ emerging	~ stepping away	~ endeavour
(3) <i>parakkama,dhātu</i> [§7] [] ²⁵	—	~ stepping forward	~ exertion
(4) <i>thāma,dhātu</i> [§8]	(2) 安住界 ~ staying still	~ standing (still)	~ strength [power]
(5) <i>ṭhiti,dhātu</i> [§9] ²⁶	(3) 堅固界 ~ firmness	~ stopping	~ enduring [duration]
(6) <i>upakkama,dhātu</i> [§10] ²⁷	(5) 造作界 [~ acting]	~ approaching	~ undertaking.

CHOONG Mun-keat, in *The Fundamental Teachings of Early Buddhism*, gives this concordance table, giving the original placements of the elements (using Choong’s translations), and where it is easier to see their counterparts:

A 6.38 (Atta,kārī Sutta)

1. dhātu of initiating
2. dhātu of stepping away
3. dhātu of stepping forward
4. dhātu of firmness
5. dhātu of standing still
6. dhātu of stepping toward

SĀ 459 (Chinese Āgama)

1. dhātu of effort
2. dhātu of staying still
3. dhātu of firmness
4. dhātu of emerging
5. dhātu of acting

Choong makes this concluding note of his comparative study of the Dhātu Saṃyutta in the Pali and the Āgama generally, and of the Atta,kārī Sutta and its Chinese Āgama counterpart specifically, thus:

The comparison of the Dhātu Saṃyutta and the Jie Xiangying of [the Saṃyukta Āgama] has revealed that *dhātu* is used to mean various different things in different contexts, including:

“set of conditions responsible for initiating the chain of conditioned arising,”

“natural individual characteristic or ethical quality,”

“meditative attainment,” and

“material element.”

In general, the common shared meaning component of the term *dhātu* can be identified as “natural condition.” Unshared teachings regarding *dhātu* are widespread and some of them are substantial. They are likely to represent later sectarian developments.... (2000:149)

²² Topics within [square brackets] have no Pali counterpart here. For the trs in this column, I follow Choong 2000:148.

²³ These first three are the stages in the cultivation of effort. The initiative element (*ārambha,dhātu*) is the first rousing of energy; the persistent element or endeavour (*nikkama,dhātu*) is the intermediate, where the energy has overcome laziness; and the exertive element (*parakkama,dhātu*), the most advanced stage, where the energy is unbreakable. These 3 stages are mentioned in **Nīvaraṇa Pahāna S** (A 1.2.8/3:4 @ SD 16.3) as the way of overcoming sloth and torpor (*thīna,middha*).

²⁴ 方便 normally means “skillful means” (*upaya* or *upaya,kauśalya*).

²⁵ Apparently, in SĀ 459 (T 2.117) 安住界, that also has the sense of “strength,” conflates the senses of *thāma,dhātu* and *parakkama,dhātu*.

²⁶ Se *dhiti,dhātu*.

²⁷ CPD: “principle of acting.”

Sujato²⁸ suggests, on the basis of Chinese terminology and dictionaries, the following correspondences (differing from the above):

	Chinese Āgama	Atta,kārī Sutta	Usual Pāli tr
	the element of ...	the element of ...	the element of ...
(1) <i>ārambha,dhātu</i> [3.2] (5) 造作界	~ acting	~ approaching	~ undertaking
(3) <i>parakkama,dhātu</i> [7] (3) 堅固界	~ firmness	~ stopping	~ enduring [duration]
(6) <i>upakkama,dhātu</i> [10] (1) 方便界	~ initiating	~ initiating an action	~ initiative.

A significant difference in the two texts is where the Pali sutta has *ārambha,dhātu* (“element of initiative”) [3.2], the Chinese translation has 方便界 “effort,” which essentially means an initiative.²⁹ Another difficult term here is the polysemous *dhātu*, that I have here rendered as “element,” which while having the sense of a physical state, also bears the connotation of “aspect.” Joaquín Pérez-Remón, on the other hand, interestingly renders *dhātu* here as “potentiality.”³⁰

The Chinese sequence of the physical actions appears more natural, thus: “the element of staying still,” 安住界, “the element of firmness” 堅固界, and “the element of emerging” 出界. However, the Pali has *upakkama,dhātu* (“element of approaching”) is rendered in the Chinese as 造作界 “the element of acting.” The Chinese version does not have *parakkama,dhātu* (“stepping forward”). It is likely that 安住界 (“the element of staying still”), where 安住 also has the sense of “strength,” conflates the senses of *thāma,dhātu* and *parakkama,dhātu*, where *thāma* (strength) and *parakkama* (energy) overlap in some area. We can notice here the difficulty that the translator Guṇabhadra³¹ or his co-workers faced in trying to construe the meanings of this set of words.

It should be noted here that *ārambha,dhātu*, *nikkama,dhātu* and *parakkama,dhātu* are respectively the 3 phases of effort: the initial phase, intermediate phase (gathering strength through overcoming sloth) and full intensity phase respectively: this is quoted by the Majjhima Commentary (MA 1:284). The Atta,kārī Sutta here uses these words in a literal sense [§§3.2, 4-6], as part of the Buddha’s answer that there is self-agency. In **the (Āhāra) Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2)³² and **the (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Āhāra Sutta** (S 46.51),³³ the Buddha says that these three phases of effort are “food” (*āhāra*) for “the arising of the unarisen awakening factor of effort (*virīya.sambojjhaṅga*),” that is, they conduce to one’s spiritual energy in working towards awakening.³⁴

²⁸ During the “Roots: Sutta Workshop,” Buddhist Fellowship Centre, Singapore, 29th Oct 2005. This is, for Singapore, the first comparative workshop on the earliest Buddhist literature, esp the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas, led by Sujato.

²⁹ I had originally rendered 方便 as “skillful means,” but have followed Rod Bucknell’s note: “方便. This often means *effort*; eg right effort (in 8-fold path) is either 正方便 or 正精進” (personal communication). Choong has here tr it as “initiative.”

³⁰ J Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-self in Early Buddhism*. Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980:54.

³¹ Guṇabhadra (314-618) was an important translator of central Indian origin, who traveled to Sri Lanka and later arrived by sea in China during Liu Song 劉宋 period (420-479) in southern China. While there he did most of his translation of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna texts, incl Śrīmālā,devī Sūtra and Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. He translated **Saṃyukta Āgama** (T2.1-373) into Chinese in 443 CE.

³² S 46.13/5:66 (SD 62.9).

³³ S 46.51/5:104 (SD 7.15).

³⁴ On *parakkama*, see **Tāyana S** (S 2.8 = 271*). See also S:B 387 n154.

5.2 INTERNAL ANALYSIS

5.2.1 Element of initiative

K N Jayatilleke, in his article, “The basis of Buddhist ethics” (1971), says that as a result of **an element of initiative** (*ārambha,dhātu*),

one can observe beings acting with initiative, and this says the Buddha is what is called “the free will of people [beings]” (*sattānaṃ attā,kāro*). He also goes on to say that there is an “element of origination” (*nikkama,dhātu*), an “element of endeavour” (*parakkama,dhātu*), an “element of strength” (*thāma,dhātu*), an “element of perseverance” (*ṭhiti,dhātu*), and “an element of volitional effort” (*upakkama,dhātu*), which makes beings of their own accord act in various ways and that this showed there was such a thing as free will (A 3:337 f). (Jayatilleke 1971:54)

5.2.2 Property of initiative

5.2.2.1 *Ārambha,dhātu* (v *ārabba,dhātu* = *ārabba* (ger of *ārādheti*, he accomplishes, achieve, effects) + *dhātu* (element, property, condition, source). The Aṅguttara Commentary glosses *dhātu* as *sa-bhāva*, “essence” (AA 3:366).³⁵ Here *dhātu*³⁶ is used in the sense of the properties of physical and mental action, as in the “18 elements” (*aṭṭhārasa dhātuyo*), comprising the 6 sense-bases and their respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses, that is:

	<u>Sense-base</u>	<u>Sense-object</u>	<u>Sense-consciousness</u>
Eye:	<i>cakkhu,dhātu</i>	<i>rūpa,dhātu</i>	<i>cakkhu,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>
Ear:	<i>sota,dhātu</i>	<i>sadda,dhātu</i>	<i>sota,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>
Nose:	<i>ghāna,dhātu</i>	<i>gandha,dhātu</i>	<i>ghāna,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>
Tongue:	<i>jivhā,dhātu</i>	<i>rasa,dhātu</i>	<i>jivhā,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>
Body:	<i>kāya,dhātu</i>	<i>phoṭṭhabba,dhātu</i>	<i>kāya,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>
Mind:	<i>mano,dhātu</i>	<i>dhamma,dhātu</i>	<i>mano,viññāṇa,dhātu</i>

(Vbh 87; Vism 484; Abhs 7.8 = Abhs:SR 183 = Abhs:BRS 287)

The elements are called *dhātu* because they bear (*dhārenti*) their own intrinsic natures. The 18 elements are obtained from the 12 bases by dividing the mind base into the 7 elements of consciousness (see III, §21). In all other respects, the bases and the elements are identical. For a correlation of the aggregates, bases, and elements with the four ultimate realities, see Table 7.4. (Abhs:SR 287: Guide to §37)

5.2.2.2 This passage from **the Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2) helps throw some light on the 6 phrases of the Attakārī Sutta:

And what, monks, is the food for the arising of the unarisen **awakening-factor of effort** (*virīya,sambojjhaṅga*) and for the fulfillment by the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of effort?

³⁵ See S 5:66 = 104, 105, 107 = (*paṭhama,viriyarū*, SA 3:141), qu by Vism 4.52/131; MA 1:284, 292, commented at Vism 4.53/132; A 1:4 (AA 1:48=MA), 3:338 (AA 3:366); UA 233; ItA 2:180; Vism 486 f; ThaA 2:105.

³⁶ See §1 (Sā 45a.10) n on *dhātu*.

There are, monks, the element of initiative (*ārambha,dhātu*), the element of endeavour [persistence] (*nikkama,dhātu*), the element of exertion (*parakkama,dhātu*): frequently giving proper attention to them ... (S 46.2/5:66)

5.2.2.3 The element of initiative (*ārambha.dhātu*), then, refers to our ability or will to initiate action through any of the 6 sense faculties, usually in the wholesome sense. In an important way, it refers to our exercise of free will in an effort to act, even grow, in a moral or spiritual way. The failure to exert oneself with such an initiative would be the result of either “hard determinism,” that is, the view of fatalism (that what will happen will happen, and nothing we do or do not do will make any difference), or indeterminism (that anything can happen no matter what we do or do not do). Either way, we have resigned ourselves to the notion that we have no control whatsoever over our actions and destiny.³⁷

5.2.2.4 Early Buddhism rejects both notions, and instead prescribes **right effort** (*sammā vāyāma*), that is, taking the initiative to restrain oneself from any unarisen unwholesome act, to abandon any arisen unwholesome act, to cultivate unarisen wholesome act, and to maintain any arisen wholesome act. These form the first of the three factors of mental cultivation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration). When practised on their own, they are each known as “striving” or “esertion” (*padhāna*), or, collectively, “right striving” (*samma-p,padhāna*).³⁸

5.2.3 A similar passage is found in **the Āhāra Sutta** (S 46.51):

And what, monks, is food for the arising of the unarisen **awakening factor of effort** (*dhamma,vicaya,sambojjhaṅga*) and for the growth and abundance of the arisen awakening factor of dharma-discernment?

There are, monks, the element of initiative, the element of exertion and the element of strength. Frequently giving skillful attention to them: this is food for the arising of the unarisen awakening factor of effort and for the growth and abundance of the arisen awakening factor of effort. (S 46.51,10(3)/5:102-107), SD 5.15 §§10(3) & 22(3)

The Commentaries explain that “**the element of initiative**” (*ārambha,dhātu*) is the initial rousing of effort; “the element of endeavour [persistence]” is the intermediate phase of effort, when the effort becomes stronger; “the element of exertion” is effort at full intensity, when it becomes insuperable (SA 3:141). These are the three stages of the building up of effort (such as for the overcoming of sloth and torpor) (MA 1:283 f).

5.2.4 At first glance, the psychological sense of these three phrases—*arambha,dhātu*, *nikkama,dhātu*, *parakkama,dhātu*—as found in **the Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2), do not seem applicable to the Atta,kārī Sutta, where all the six terms are clearly used in the sense of normal physical action. However, when examined more closely, we will find that the sixfold formula is actually an expansion of the threefold formula of the Kāya Sutta. The Buddha apparently expands on the three phrases of the Kāya Sutta and applies them on a normal physical level of walking, etc. The Buddha’s import is quite clear: how can one claim there is neither self-agency nor other-agency when one must consciously perform simple actions like walking, standing, moving, etc.

³⁷ See **Free will**, SD 7.7 esp (1.2.4.2).

³⁸ See **Catu Padhāna S** (A 4.14/2:16 f), SD 10.2.

5.2.5 The Attakārī Sutta should be studied with the **Bhūmija Sutta** (S 12.25), which is repeated in the **Sañcetanā Sutta** (A 4.171), since the passage discusses self-effort and other-effort in greater detail. An abridgement of the Sutta is found in the essay on “**Free Will and Buddhism**” (SD 7.7). The 3 discourses, **Cetanā Sutta 1-3** (S 12.38-40/2:65-67),³⁹ closely related to the Attakārī Sutta, say that karma and rebirth arises through one’s latent tendencies, and not just through intentional acts.

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Attakārī Sutta

The Discourse on the Doer of One’s Own Deeds

A 6.38

[337]

1 Now a certain brahmin went up to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side.

Sitting thus as one side, the brahmin said this to the Blessed One:

2 “Master Gotama, I hold such a doctrine, such a view, thus,⁴⁰ [338]

that there is no action of one’s own [self-agency], that there is no action done by others [other agency].”⁴¹

3 “Brahmin, do not say thus, do not see thus—for, I have seen it, I have heard it.

How could one stepping forward, or one stepping back, say thus, ‘There is no action of one’s own; there is no action done by others.’?”⁴²

3.2 (1) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of initiative** (*ārambha, dhātu*) exist?”⁴³

“Yes, sir, it does.”

4 “If there is this element of initiating an action, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are making the initiative: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”⁴⁴

“Yes, sir.”

5 (2) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of stepping away** [“element of endeavour”] (*nikkama, dhātu*) exist?”

“Yes, sir, it does.”

5.2 “If there is this element of stepping away, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are making the initiative: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”

“Yes, sir.”

³⁹ See §§6abc below.

⁴⁰ “I say thus, I see thus,” *evaṃ, vādiṃ evaṃ, diṭṭhiṃ*; alt tr “I am one who hold, thus doctrine, this view.”

⁴¹ *Ahañ hi bho Gotama evaṃ, vādī evaṃ, diṭṭhi n’atthi atta, kāro n’atthi para, kāro ti.*

⁴² *Mā’haṃ brāhmaṇa evaṃ, vādī evaṃ, diṭṭhi adassaṃ vā assosiṃ vā kathaṃ hi nāma sayāṃ abhikkamanto sayāṃ paṭikkamanto evaṃ vakkhati n’atthi atta, kāro n’atthi para, kāro ti.* This is Makkhali Gosāla’s wrong view, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.20/1:53 f) & **Karota S** (S 24.6/3:208 f). Here *vakkhati*, “he will say,” is fut of *vadati*. See also Bodhi, *The Discourse on the Fruits of Reclusheship*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1989:69 f.

⁴³ *Ārambha, dhātu*, vl *ārabbha, dhātu* = *ārabbha* (ger of *ārādheti*, he accomplishes, achieve, effects) + *dhātu* (element, property, condition, source). Comy glosses *dhātu* as *sabhāva*, “essence” (AA 3:366). See Intro (3) above.

⁴⁴ *Yaṃ kho brahmaṇa ārabbha, dhātuyā sati ārabbha, vanto sattā paññāyanti, ayaṃ sattānaṃ atta, kāro, ayaṃ para, kāro.*

6 (3) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of stepping forward** [“element of exertion”] (*parakkama, dhātu*) exist?”

“Yes, sir, it does.”

6.2 “If there is this element of stepping forward, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are making the initiative: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”

“Yes, sir.”

7 (4) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of standing** [power, strength] (*thāma, dhātu*) exist?”

7.2 “If there is this element of standing, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are making the initiative: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”

“Yes, sir.”

8 (5) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of stopping** [enduring, duration] (*ṭhiti, dhātu*) exist?”⁴⁵

8.2 “If there is this element of stopping, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are making the initiative: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”

“Yes, sir.”

9 (6) What do you think, brahmin? Does **the element of approaching**⁴⁶ (*upakkama, dhātu*) exist?”

“Yes, sir, it does.”

10 “Brahmin, if there is this element of approaching, brahmin, then it is evident then that beings are approaching: this is what beings do themselves [self-agency], this is what is done by others [other-agency].”

“Yes, sir.”

11 “Brahmin, I do *not* hold such a doctrine, such a view [*that there is no action of one’s own, that there is no action by others*]. For, I have neither seen nor heard of a situation where one could oneself step forward or one could oneself step back, and yet say, ‘There is no action of one’s own, there is no action by others.’”

12 “Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, Master Gotama! Just as, bhante, if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the Blessed Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

⁴⁵ Se *dhiti, dhātu*.

⁴⁶ CPD: “principle of acting.”

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