

Atta,kārī Sutta

The Discourse on the Doer of One's Own Deeds

[Is there free will?]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.38/3:337 f)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2004

I would like to record my thanks to Dr Rod Bucknell¹ for his encouragement and very helpful comments on the Chinese in these translations.

Introduction

1 Free will, responsibility, choice

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.² The sutta is also 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. 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 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 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

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² For a more detailed study, see “Free Will and Buddhism,” SD 7.7 (this vol).

³ See **Free Will and Buddhism** = SD 7.7 (12).

⁴ For example, 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).

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.⁷

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 first dhyana. In the second usage, it means “dharmas that make up *nekkhamma*”—or, the “elements of renunciation”—that is, the totality of skillful states.⁸

Hence, according to the Vibhaṅga, there are two usages or “modes of exposition” (*kathā*) here: the “totality” (*sabba.saṅgāhika*) 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 *unmixed* sense, or the “elements” of a state, in the *totality* sense. In the case of the six terms used in the Atta,kārī Sutta, the latter is meant.

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Āgama-Nikāya Comparative Study

4 Chinese Āgama version

Sā 459 = T2.117

大正新修大藏經 Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō
CBETA CD ed

[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	Forest	near Śrāvastī.

⁷ *Kilesa, kāmam sandhāya kāma, paṭisaṃyuttā dhātu kāma, dhātu: kāma, vitakkass’etaṃ nāmam. Vatthu, kāmam sandhāya kāmo yeva dhātu kāma, dhātu, kāmāvacara, dhammānam etaṃ nāma* (VbhA 74).

⁸ *Nekkhammam vuccati lobhā nikkhantattā alobho. Nīvaraṇehi nikkhantattā paṭhama-j, jhānam. Sabbākusalehi nikkhantattā sabba, kusalam. Nekkhamma, paṭisaṃyuttā dhātu nekkhamma, dhātu, nekkhamma, vitakkass’etaṃ nāmam, nekkhammam 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.

[03] 時。有婆羅門來詣佛所。與世尊⁹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 pólómén lái yì fó suǒ yǔ Shìzūn miàn xiàng wèiláo yǐ. 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。我不与相見。汝今自來。」

fó gào pólómén. 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]."

[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」

pólómén 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)¹⁰

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 pólómén 「wǒ jīn wèn rǔ. suí yì dá wǒ. pólómén yú yì yún hé.
 Buddha | tell | the brahmin | I | 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 | imitating | realm

Do sentient beings have **the element of initiating?**¹¹

⁹世尊, Skt *bhagavat*, "Blessed One"; sometimes also *loka, jyeṣṭha*, "eldest in the world."

¹⁰耶 yé, a question tag that could be rendered in English simply as "?"

令諸眾生知作方便耶
令諸眾生知作方便耶」

ling zhū zhòng shēng zhī zuò fāngbiàn yé
cause|all|sentient beings|know|do|initiating|(tag)

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

[10] 婆羅門言。瞿曇。有眾生方便界¹²。令諸眾生知作方便也
婆羅門言：「瞿曇。有眾生方便界。令諸眾生知作方便也」

pólúómén yán Qútán yǒu zhòng shēng fāngbiàn jiè. ling zhū zhòngshēng zhī zuò fāngbiàn yé
The brahmin|say|Gautama|there are|sentient beings|initiating|realm|cause|all|sentient being|know|do|initiating|(tag)¹³

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

[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 pólúómén. ruò yǒu fāngbiàn jiè ling 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。
是則眾生自作。是則他作。

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.

¹¹ 方便 usu means “skillful means” (upaya or upaya, *kausalya*).

¹² 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.”

¹³ 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).

婆羅門。於意云何。有眾生^a安住界。^b堅固界。^c出界。^d造作界。
 婆罗门。于意云何。有众生 安住界。 坚固界。 出界。 造作界。

pólómén. 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。
 婆罗门白佛：「有众生安住界。坚固界。出界。造作界。」

pólómén 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」 佛告婆罗门：「若彼安住界。坚固界。出界。」

lìng zhū zhòngshēng zhī yǒu zào zuò [17] Fó gào pólómén. 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 |

What causes all beings to know that 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 zào zuò 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 sentient beings to know that there are those who act—this *is* self-agency, this *is* other-agency!

[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。世間多事。」

pólómén bái Fó. yǒu zhòngshēng zì zuò. yǒu tā zuò. Qútán, shì jiān duō shì
 The brahmin | say | 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
佛告婆羅門：「世間多事。宜知是時」

Fō gào pólúómén. 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.”¹⁴

[21] 時。彼婆羅門聞佛所說。歡喜隨喜。從座起去。
時。彼婆羅門聞佛所說。歡喜隨喜。從座起去。

shí. bǐ pólúómén 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).¹⁵ 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 give as follows:¹⁶

	Chinese Āgama ¹⁷	Atta,kārī Sutta	Usual Pāli tr
	the element of:	the element of:	the element of:
(1) <i>ārambha,dhātu</i> [§3b] ¹⁸	(1) 方便界 ¹⁹ [~ initiating]	~ initiating an action	~ initiative
(2) <i>nikkama,dhātu</i> [§6]	(4) 出界 ~ emerging	~ stepping away	~ endeavour
(3) <i>parakkama,dhātu</i> [§7]	[] ²⁰ —	~ 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] ²¹	(3) 堅固界 ~ firmness	~ stopping	~ enduring [duration]
(6) <i>upakkama,dhātu</i> [§10] ²²	(5) 造作界 [~ acting]	~ approaching	~ undertaking.

¹⁴ *Yassa dāni tvaṃ kāmāṃ maññasī ti.* This is stock; see: **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (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).

¹⁵ “Free will,” see next section for detailed discussion.

¹⁶ For a useful comparative study of Attakārī S & its Chinese Āgama counterpart, see Choong 2000:145-149.

¹⁷ Topics within [square brackets] have no Pali counterpart here. For the trs in this column, I follow Choong 2000:148.

¹⁸ 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 three 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*).

¹⁹ 方便 normally means “skillful means” (*upaya* or *upaya,kauśalya*).

²⁰ 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*.

²¹ Se *dhiti,dhātu*.

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:

<p><u>A 6.38 (Atta,kārī Sutta)</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 		<p><u>SĀ 459 (Chinese Āgama)</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. dhātu of effort 2. dhātu of staying still 3. dhātu of firmness 4. dhātu of emerging 5. dhātu of acting
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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)

Sujato²³ suggests, on the basis of Chinese terminology and dictionaries, the following correspondences (differing from the above):

	<u>Chinese Āgama</u>	<u>Atta,kārī Sutta</u>	<u>Usual Pāli tr</u>
	the element of...	the element of...	the element of...
(1) <i>ārambha,dhātu</i> [3b] (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”) [3b], the Chinese translation has 方便界 “effort,” which essentially means an initiative.²⁴ 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.”²⁵

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

²² CPD: “principle of acting.”

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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.”

²⁵ J Pérez-Remón, *Self and Non-self in Early Buddhism*. Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980:54.

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 Guṇabhadra²⁶ 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 [§§3b, 4-6], as part of the Buddha’s answer that there is self-agency. In **the (Āhāra) Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2)²⁷ and **the Āhāra Sutta** (S 46.51),²⁸ 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.²⁹

5.2 INTERNAL ANALYSIS. KN 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 atta,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” (*thiti,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)

Ārambha,dhātu (vl *ārabbha,dhātu* = *ārabbha* (ger of *ārādheti*, he accomplishes, achieve, effects) + *dhātu* (element, property, condition, source). The Āṅguttara Commentary glosses *dhātu* as *sabhāva*, “essence” (AA 3:366).³⁰ Here *dhātu*³¹ is used in the sense of a 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)

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ S 46.13/5:66.

²⁸ S 46.51/5:104 = SD 5.15.

²⁹ On *parakkama*, see **Tāyana S** (S 2.8 = v271). See also S:B 387 n154.

³⁰ See S 5:66 = 104, 105, 107 = (*paṭhama, viriyāṇṇ*, 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.

³¹ See §1 (Sā 45a.10) n on *dhātu*.

This passage from **the Kāya Sutta** (S 46.2) helps throw some light on the six phrase of the Attakāri 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?

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)

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).

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 Attakāri 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.

The Attakāri 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 three discourses, **Cetanā Sutta 1-3** (S 12.38-40/2:65-67),³² closely related to the Attakāri Sutta, say that karma and rebirth arises through one's latent tendencies, and not just through intentional acts.

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³² See §§6abc below.

The Discourse on the Doer of One's Own Deeds

(A 6.38/3:337 f)

[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 say thus, I see thus,³³ [338] that there is no action of one's own [self-agency], that there is no action done by others [other agency].”³⁴

3a “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.’**”³⁵

3b (1) What do you think, brahmin? Does the element of initiative (*ārambha, dhātu*) exist?”³⁶

“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].”³⁷

“Yes, sir.”

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

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

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

8 (5) What do you think, brahmin? Does the element of stopping [enduring, duration] (*ṭhiti, dhātu*) exist?”³⁸...

9 (6) What do you think, brahmin? Does the element of approaching³⁹ (*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 teach such a teaching nor hold 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.’”

³³ “I say thus, I see thus,” *evaṃ, vādiṃ evaṃ, diṭṭhiṃ*; alt tr “I am one who hold, thus doctrine, this view.”

³⁴ *Ahañ hi bho Gotama evaṃ, vādī evaṃ, diṭṭhi n'atthi atta, kāro n'atthi para, kāro ti.*

³⁵ *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 Recluseship*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1989:69 f.

³⁶ *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 (1) above.

³⁷ *Yāṃ kho brahmaṇa ārabba, dhātuyā sati ārabba, vanto sattā paññāyanti, ayaṃ sattānaṃ atta, kāro, ayaṃ para, kāro.*

³⁸ *Se dhiti, dhātu.*

³⁹ CPD: “principle of acting.”

12 “Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, Master Gotama! Just as, venerable sir, 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—

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