

Does Free Will Really Exist?

Taught by Teacher Zhen-Li: updated edition

“Does free will really exist?” Someone raised a question: “In the Buddha dharma, all fruitions are based on causes and conditions. Since all fruitions are based on previous causes and conditions, then we are limited by previous causes and conditions. As we are confined by causes and conditions as well as karmic retributions, do we still have the so-called free will?”

This is not a question that can be easily answered; it is also a subject matter that cannot be understood by many people. In Volume 9 of the *Long Agama Sutra*, the Buddha said: “What is the solution to the two difficulties? Because of causes and conditions, sentient beings become defiled; because of causes and conditions, sentient beings attain purity.” In other words, since previous causes and conditions have been limited, our karmic retributions would have been determined. Then how can some people attain purity? Why is it that some people can never attain liberation and remain impure? This is a difficult question which is very hard for sentient beings to find an answer for. Moreover, even if we are in the scientific age of the twenty-first century, there are still many questions about the structure of a human body and a great deal of speculation is generated after going through research.

For example, people in the modern science of cranial neurology also study the relationship between human awareness and the brain. After studying our brain, they discover that the structure of this matter

of human brain can generate cognition; there is a corresponding relationship between matter and the cognition of mind.

If we say that the mind is confined by our brain, then do we still have the so-called free will? It means that our awareness is actually controlled by matter. Therefore, if someone wants to have some extraordinary states, he would take some hallucinogen to generate psychedelic, wonderful states. If we look at our mind and will in this way, then they are under the control of matter! Then how can the theory of the so-called free will exist? On the contrary, one may say: "If our mind is influenced by this matter, then obviously, the conscious mind is not real."

How should we come to understand these things? Let us first look at some basic views of the scientists of cranial neurology, particularly a view mentioned in an article published in *World Magazine* within the recent years.

In Issue 464 of *World Magazine*, it states: "Recently, the scientists of neurology also discovered that free will is an illusion. Five hundred milliseconds before one makes a decision, his brain has already been activated. It is not until two hundred milliseconds pass before an action occurs does our mental consciousness start to recognize it. We consider ourselves as the master of our behavior; actually, we are still subject to the norms of the brain." (*World Magazine*, Issue 464)

In other words, the scientists studied our brain and discovered a fact as a result: When our mind decides to do something, in our brain there is a so-called time frame for the functions of mental consciousness.

The study discovers that within the time frame of the functions of mental consciousness, although we are aware that we have already

made a decision, before we make the decision, that is, before the time frame of the functions of mental consciousness, the brain has already been activated. After the brain is activated, a function takes place within the scope of the functions of consciousness in our brain, and then action follows.

It is generally believed that the so-called free will means that our mental consciousness makes decisions. However, the above citation indicates that before the time frame of the functions of mental consciousness, the matter of brain has already been activated. After the brain is activated, the mental consciousness starts to function, and then action follows.

Therefore, from this perspective, scientists believe that people think that there is the so-called free will and they can be the master of their action, which in fact is an illusion! From a scientific point of view, we are manipulated by matter because before the time frame of the functions of consciousness, the brain has already been activated, which causes the mental consciousness to function, and then action follows.

This phenomenon that scientists have observed and measured is really a fact. In that case, how should we look at this from the perspective of Buddha dharma? The brain, which is called the form-skandha (or form aggregate) in the Buddha dharma, belongs to matter. However, we are composed of not only matter but also the so-called mind. In the Buddha dharma, this mind is divided into four kinds, including sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness [vijñāna], which are the so-called sensation-skandha, perception-skandha, formation-skandha, and consciousness-skandha. In other words, a person is composed of the form-skandha as well as sensation,

perception, formation, and consciousness. In the phenomenal world, man is composed of two major categories of dharma, matter and mind. In the Buddha dharma, from the perspective that the aggregates [skandha], sense-fields [āyatana], and elements [dhātu] are composed of matter and mental factors, this is a no-self phenomenon because it is a fact that the “self” does not exist.

Therefore, we can obtain a conclusion from this phenomenon studied by the scientists of cranial neurology: If we observe the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements of human beings in this way, in fact the so-called self does not exist. Certainly, some people would have a lot of misconceptions after going through the study of scientists. One of the misconception will be: if this is the case with human beings, then life is just a probability! Before one’s mental consciousness starts to function, the brain has already been activated; the activation of brain is a probability. Based on this kind of interpretation, human action is not predictable and is just a probability. Some people will even push the issue to an extreme and think that the Buddha’s manifestation in the world to attain Buddhahood in fact is also a probability. As a matter of fact, all of these ideas are wrong. Although man is composed of matter and mind based on the observation of the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements; after the formation, there is still a true dharma called the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha behind the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements. The eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha is the real foundation of the formation of all the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements. With the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha, our matter, which is our physical body, and even our mind is generated. Therefore, the foundation of our matter, which is the form-skandha, together with the four mental dharmas of sensation,

perception, formation, and consciousness are actually brought forth by the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha.

As for the realm of mental consciousness, before the mental consciousness starts to function, the brain is activated; however, scientists do not know what the activation is. But from the view of the Buddha dharma, it is the decision made by the seventh consciousness, which is the manas. After the manas makes the decision, the decision of mental consciousness is triggered, which results in action. From the point of view of Buddha dharma, this is a dharma of no-self.

In Volume 3 of the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutra [Samyukta Agama]*, it states: “Form is suffering; sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness are suffering. Form is no-self; sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness are no-self.” The translation is as follows: Matter (the form-skandha) is a dharma of suffering. Why? Because it is an impermanent, non-everlasting dharma. The mental dharmas of sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness are also dharmas of suffering because they cannot last forever, either. All the five aggregates of form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness, which are human beings or life observed by average people no matter if they are human or animal, are sufferings because they are impermanent and no-self.

Then why is there still a “self”? That “self” in fact is called the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha. Simply because the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha is an everlasting dharma which is neither arising nor ceasing in the dharma-realm, it is very hard for people to perceive; therefore, people say that the eighth consciousness also has the no-self nature. Only with the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha can the five aggregates of sentient beings exist. If we

observe and think from this perspective, do we have free will or not after all? Yet, what is called free will?

In fact, man has free will. In Volume 3 of the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutra*, there is a teaching which can answer the question of the two difficulties: “Because of causes and conditions, sentient beings become defiled; because of causes and conditions, sentient beings attain purity.” (Miscellaneous Agama Sutra, Volume 3)

In Volume 3 of the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutra*, it further explains why some sentient beings become defiled because of causes and conditions and why some sentient beings can even attain purity in the future because of causes and conditions. Let us look at what the sutra states: “Mahanama! By what causes and conditions do sentient beings become defiled? By what causes and conditions do sentient beings attain purity? Mahanama! If form is not always suffering, is not happy, is not according to one’s wish, is not nurtured by happiness, and is away from happiness, sentient beings should not therefore delight in and be attached to it. Mahanama! Because form is not always suffering, is not happy, is according to one’s wish, is nurtured by happiness, and is not away from happiness, sentient beings develop defiled attachment to form. Because of defiled attachment, they are tied. Being tied, they have afflictions Mahanama! This is why sentient beings become defiled because of causes and conditions.”

In the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutra*, the Buddha taught us that the dharma of matter, the form dharma, is not always suffering; is not always unhappy; is nurtured by happiness; is not grown along with happiness; and is not away from happiness. In other words, form is neither always suffering nor always unhappiness; sometimes it grows along with happiness and nurtures along with happiness; moreover,

sometimes it is not separated from happiness. Because of this reason, sentient beings like it. Because they like it, they become attached to it. After having attachment, they cannot liberate themselves and start to have afflictions. The Buddha said this means that because of causes and conditions, sentient beings become defiled. Sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness should also be observed in the same way. (The sutra text is omitted; it is not quoted.)

In other words, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness as well as the materialistic form-skandha (form aggregate) all follow the same principle; because of this reason, the sutra states that sentient beings become defiled. The physical body or the mental dharmas of sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness are not always suffering; they still have a little bit of happiness. Just because of that little bit of happiness, sentient beings like it and become attached to it, and then they are tied. This is the defilement generated because sentient beings have the causes and conditions.

The Buddha continued to say why some sentient beings can attain purity. Then the Buddha taught Mahanama: “Mahanama! What are the causes and conditions for sentient beings to become pure? Mahanama! If form is always happy; is not suffering; is not accompanied by suffering; is not nurtured by worry; and is away from suffering; sentient beings should not become disgusted because of form. Mahanama! Because form is not always happy; is suffering, is accompanied by suffering; is nurtured by worry; and is not away from suffering; sentient beings are weary of form. Because of weariness, dislike arises. Because of dislike, they attain liberation Mahanama! This is why sentient beings become pure because of causes and conditions.” (*Miscellaneous Agama Sutra, Volume 3*)

In other words, the Buddha explained form- this dharma of matter. If it is always happy, is not always suffering, and is not nurtured in accord with suffering, sentient beings would not be weary of it. However, this form dharma-- our dharma of matter--is not always happy and sometimes it has suffering, so it is suffering, it also grows along with suffering, it is nurtured by worry, and it is not away from suffering. Because of this, sentient beings would be weary of matter. Because of being weary, they would start to experience dislike. They dislike the thought of being together with the dharma of matter forever, so they would attain liberation finally! The Buddha said that sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness should be observed in the same way, too. Therefore, sentient beings can attain purity because of causes and conditions.

In summary, the dharma of matter or the mental dharmas of sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness actually have suffering as well as happiness. Since suffering and happiness are mixed together and sentient beings are greedy for the part of happiness, defilement is therefore generated! As a result of not willing to get rid of greed, sentient beings transmigrate in the cycle of births-and-deaths. Because of the dharma nature of the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha and sentient beings' greed for the five aggregates, the eighth consciousness would continuously generate the five aggregates, that is, it would help us to be born one life after another. But some people can find that this physical body, which is a dharma of matter, is not forever happy and is accompanied by suffering! For example, the suffering of illness or the suffering in the state of death when one is dying, which are the suffering of being reluctant to part with dependents as well as the fear due to not knowing the state after

death. Therefore, we also know that our physical body and mind are always accompanied by suffering and happiness together. Moreover, this suffering or happiness also nurtures our physical body and mind; therefore, our mind together with our physical body would be nurtured continuously. Because of the observation of this fact, some people would be weary of matter and mind, and then they are willing to liberate themselves.

Therefore, the Buddha taught us what free will is; in other words, we can make choices. After all, do we want to see the happiness which is mixed with suffering and become attached to it? Or, because we can see that after all happiness is not separated from suffering, we are willing to abandon it. The wealth, fame, status, rights, and so on in the world all consist of happiness; however, all of them consist of a great deal of suffering as well. Which cognition should we choose in order to make decisions? Being able to choose one's own cognition is called free will! Therefore, we human beings have free will. Therefore, in the *Journal of True Enlightenment* published by the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association, it states: "Sentient beings' being able to make decisions about performing good or evil deeds is the freedom of will. After good or evil deeds determine the place of rebirth after death, they limit one's will to receive more suffering or more happiness and one's emotional, intellectual, and rational ability as well, which is the unfree part of the will. It is a fact that the will is both free and not free at the same time. All sentient beings rely on their free will to determine the lack of freedom of the will itself." (*Journal of True Enlightenment*, Issue 1, page 44)

In other words, man has no freedom in some areas, that is, the will lacks freedom in some areas. For example, some people are born in

poor families; because they are limited by environment, even if they want to have material enjoyment, they cannot get it. Therefore, we can understand that the good and evil deeds we did in the past determine the scope of our free will in this life. However, since our free will, which can choose between good and evil, determines the broad range of our free will in our future lives, we can have more choices. The above simply explains that all sentient beings make their own choices by free will within different range of freedom.

