

From *The Philosopher*, Volume LXXXII No. 1



Dukkha, Inaction, and Nirvana: Suffering, Weariness, and Death?

A look at Nietzsche's Criticisms of Buddhist Philosophy

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Comparisons between Buddhism and the various schools of existentialism have revealed a number of parallels. Such studies have frequently centered on each tradition's metaphysical approach and the fact that they all appear to share some form of phenomenological methodology. In the area of ethics, however, existentialism and Buddhism generally seem to differ radically. This difference is the most marked in the case of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is interpreted nowadays as having been a major pioneer of existentialism in the western world, and certainly deals with many of the same problems and even takes positions similar to those that emerge in Buddhist philosophy. In places, however, he explicitly attacks the Buddhist ethical prescription as

diametrically opposed to his own doctrine of life-affirmation. For Nietzsche was not uninformed when it came to Buddhism. Some scholars claim that he '...was probably one of the best read and most solidly grounded in Buddhism for his time among Europeans'. Be that as it may, when philosophers juxtapose their own views against others, it becomes imperative to determine to what extent they understand and accurately depict the ideas they are attacking.

When it comes to Nietzsche's criticisms of Buddhism, such an investigation uncovers what seems to be a misunderstanding of the real meaning of Buddhist doctrine; and one not limited to Nietzsche alone, but common to much of the lay-level understanding of this religion in the West. My goals here, then, will be to address this misunderstanding by examining three important Buddhist concepts at its center: dukkha, inaction, and Nirvana. By focusing on the meaning of these concepts for Buddhists, I do not hope to reconcile Nietzsche with Buddhism in any way, but only to identify a few areas wherein his understanding of it was misconceived. Furthermore, by selecting these three areas for analysis, I do not mean to preclude that there are other important elements of Buddhism that need analysis in light of Nietzsche's critiques.

At the end, I hope it will be seen that the possibilities for comparative study between these two philosophies are rich and numerous, even if the present project is meant only as a beginning look into the relationship between them with a view to a clearer understanding of the Buddhist concepts in question. The first step necessary to this analysis will be to briefly outline an important position that is shared by

Nietzschean and Buddhist doctrine. Next, I will present Nietzsche's criticism of the Buddhist response to this position, his description of this response and how it differs from his own. Lastly, I will examine the concepts of dukkha, inaction, and Nirvana and show how Nietzsche's understanding of these concepts plays a part in his misconception of Buddhism.

An interesting thing about the comparison between Nietzsche and the Buddha, as just alluded to, is that they begin from a common notion about the nature of the world and the human condition. These commonalities have to do with their epistemological views and their nihilistic attitudes toward metaphysical issues.

A dialogue in the Sutta-Nipata presents the Buddha responding as follows to an enquiry on competing metaphysical theories. 'Apart from consciousness', he says, 'no divers truths exist. Mere sophistry declares this 'true' and that view 'false'.' A similar notion appears in Nietzsche's *Will to Power*:

'Judging is our oldest faith; it is our habit of believing this to be true or false, of asserting or denying, our certainty that something is thus and not otherwise, our belief that we really 'know' what is believed to be true in all judgments?'

The products of this 'habit of believing', for both Buddha and Nietzsche, include substance, self, universals, and duration. Both philosophers radically deny the reality of these things in favor of a dynamic, interdependent stream of phenomenon that lacks any objective basis whatsoever. Instead, underneath our

perceptions there is only what the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna called *sunyata*, and what Nietzsche referred to as the 'abyss', a void beyond the categories of being and nothing, true and false.

This 'emptiness' is the human condition to which both Buddhism and Nietzsche respond. The subtleties and complexities of this view in both philosophies run deep enough to write volumes about, and the focus of this study is limited to the controversy over their respective responses; the answer to the question of appropriate praxis in the face of such an existence. The Buddha is said to have become aware of the fleeting, temporal nature of reality through his first encounters with a sick man, an old man, and a dead man. Nietzsche refers to what he interprets as the Buddha's reaction in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

'There are those with consumption of the soul: hardly are they born when they begin to die and to long for doctrines of weariness and renunciation. They would like to be dead, and we should welcome their wish. Let us beware of waking the dead and disturbing these living coffins! They encounter a sick man or an old man or a corpse and immediately they say, 'Life is refuted'. But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only this one face of existence.'

Nietzsche criticized Buddhism for many of the same faults he attributed to Christianity, though he showed more respect for the former as being more realistic and opposed to revenge

(he believed Christianity was a manifestation of latent resentment). He praised Buddhism for setting out to treat 'suffering' as opposed to 'sin', but believed the treatment itself represented a surrender of life, and ultimately a weaker response to the human condition than his own. In the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, he contrasts his interpretation of Buddhism (along with Schopenhauer, a major contributor to this interpretation) with a general sketch of his own ideal response:

'Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing, as I have, to think pessimism through to its depths and liberate it from the half-Christian, half-German narrowness and simplicity in which it has finally presented itself to our century, namely, in the form of Schopenhauer's philosophy; whoever has really, with an Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye, looked into, down into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking - beyond good and evil and no longer, like the Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and delusion of morality - may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity...'

These passages illustrate Nietzsche's

interpretation of Buddhism as a life-negating philosophy that seeks to escape an existence dominated by suffering. In *The Gay Science* and *Will to Power*, Nietzsche comments on Buddhism further, characterising it as an effort to withdraw from pain into an 'Oriental Nothing - called Nirvana', by way of following the maxim 'One must not act'. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche categorizes Buddhism as one among a group of ideologies that promote '...nihilistic turning away from life, a longing for nothingness, or for life's 'opposite', for a different sort of 'being' According to Nietzsche, Buddhism can be described as an effort, through restraint from action, to escape suffering and pass into absolute non-existence. But is this description accurate?

Dukkha is the Sanskrit word commonly translated as 'suffering'. Its full meaning, however, is much more extensive, and this has important implications for the interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, because it is an integral constituent in the articulation of the fundamental Buddhist doctrine, the Four Noble Truths, as expressed in the Vinayapitaka:

'And this, monks, is the Noble Truth of dukkha: birth is dukkha, and old age is dukkha, and disease is dukkha, and dying is dukkha, association from what is not dear is dukkha, separation from what is dear is dukkha, not getting what you want is dukkha - in short, the five aggregates of grasping are dukkha.'

Understood simply as 'suffering', the word dukkha in this central Buddhist passage expresses only simple pessimism. The common translation of dukkha as suffering has

quite likely been the cause of a great deal of misunderstanding on the part of the non-Buddhist world. In fact, 'dukkha' comes in three flavors. The first is *dukkha-dukkhata*, suffering qua suffering in its direct physical and mental manifestations. The second is *vapirinama-dukkha*, or suffering through transformation. This refers to the awareness that one's happiness is highly contingent and dependent on factors beyond one's control. Though you may be happy now, it could change at any moment, and this is due to the ungrounded and fluctuating nature of existence itself.

The most important type of dukkha, however, is *sankhara-dukkha*, an existential incompleteness due to spiritual ignorance. This incompleteness arises from being limited to one's own contingent and unenlightened perspective. Panna is the word used to refer to the transcendental consciousness of those who have attained enlightenment and are thereby free from *sankhara-dukkha* and existentially complete. For those who have attained Panna, even the most blissful existence as a deva in one of the Buddhist Heavens would seem to be a miserable Hell. This is because any of these existences of a relative nature (more or less blissful, painful, etc.) are only results of the spiritual ignorance that results in *sankhara-dukkha*.

Interpreted in this way, it is easy to begin to see how the statement of the First Noble Truth takes on a much deeper meaning than was assumed by Nietzsche. Not only are birth, death, and disease painful, they are products of spiritual ignorance. To say that they are 'dukkha' implies that they are, as co-dependently arising oppositions, ultimately unreal. It is not, therefore, merely pain that the Buddhist wants

to overcome, but the perspective within which these illusions (as well as their happy counterparts) are taken to be real. Perhaps the most compelling evidence that the primary motivation behind Buddhism is not simply suffering qua suffering is the fact that out of the 121 classes of conscious experience listed in Buddhist psychology, only three have to do with pain, while 63 are joyful. Both the joyful and the painful, however, are considered *sankhara-dukkha* - products of spiritual ignorance.

Kamma-niradha is the Sanskrit word for 'cessation of action'. This state is achieved through adherence to the eight-fold path, which guides the Buddhist into *kusala*, or 'skillful action'. Therefore, it is not simply ceasing to perform actions that the Buddhist believes will eventually lead one to his or her goal. Rather, the type of actions that are performed is the deciding factor. Likewise, it is wrong to conclude that just because one has attained Nirvana that one ceases to act. Such a conclusion implies a misconceived interpretation of *kamma-niradha*, as it is understood in Buddhism. This is the misconception Nietzsche seems to have made in characterising Buddhism as being centered on the guideline not to act. That such an interpretation is indeed misconceived is apparent when we consider the life and words of the Buddha. After attaining enlightenment and Nirvana, he continued to lead an active life for the next forty-five years. Again, it is the nature of the action that differentiates the enlightened, described in the following passage from the *Vinayapatika*:

'I, monks, am freed from all snares, both those of devas and

those of men. And you, monks,
are freed from all snares, both
those of devas and those of men.
Go, monks, and wander for the
blessing of the manyfolk, for the
happiness of the manyfolk out of
compassion for the world, for the
welfare, the blessing, the
happiness of devas and men. Let
not two (of you) go by one (way).
Monks, teach the Dhamma which
is lovely at the beginning, lovely in
the middle, and lovely at the end.'

As this passage illustrates, there are certain kinds of actions that are enjoined on the enlightened. However, it is inaccurate to use the word 'enjoined' in this context because the skillful actions are naturally done by the enlightened Buddhist, and are no longer performed as if they are obligations in a code of behavior. Following the Buddhist 'code', the eightfold path, is merely a means to the end of making it obsolete upon enlightenment. This is because of the way 'skillful action' is defined in Buddhism. The action that ceases is not activity in general, but only the unskillful actions that originate in spiritual ignorance. An action originates in spiritual ignorance when it is affected by one of three biases. These biases are sense desire, desire for some future form of existence, and spiritual ignorance. Buddhism further classifies actions into three categories. Wrong actions run counter to the goal of enlightenment and are driven by one or more of the biases. Of right actions there are those that tend toward enlightenment but are still driven by one the biases and those that are completely free of the biases and based on the correct understanding of the enlightened agent.

Examples of the former are actions performed by aspiring Buddhists who have not yet attained enlightenment and behave according to the Buddhist guidelines because they are enjoined on them by the religion itself. Upon enlightenment, the cessation of action that takes place is a cessation of the actions that are driven by the biases and, hence, unenlightened.

By interpreting the Buddhist conception of inaction as a cessation of all action, Nietzsche presented Buddhism as an escapist, and 'weary' ideology. Rightly understood, however, the Buddhist ideal of kamma-niradha actually comes closer to Nietzsche's ideal - being, in his own words, action that is 'beyond good and evil', or outside the moral categories of a dogma. Now that it has become clearer that Buddhism does not involve a retreat simply from pain, and that it does not prescribe complete inertness, we must ask ourselves about the goal toward which its genuine recommendations are directed. The most crucial point of contention over Nietzsche's criticisms of Buddhism might be the question: is Nirvana really an 'Oriental Nothing?' Do Buddhists really seek, by developing panna and performing kamma-niradha, to exterminate themselves beyond the possibility of re-birth?

'Since a Tathagata, even when actually present, is incomprehensible, it is inept to say of him - of the Uttermost Person, the Supernal Person, the Attainer of the Supernal - that after dying the Tathagata is, or is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not...'

(Majjhima-Nikaya)

It is hard to imagine that Nietzsche misinterpreted the concept of Buddhist Nirvana completely inadvertently, given the sheer amount of Theravada literature that exists on the topic. In so many passages, the texts insist that Nirvana transcends the difference between the four sets of categories given above (being, non-being, both, and neither), and that it is therefore inaccurate to say of Nirvana that it is nothingness - and just as inaccurate to conclude that it must be something. Nirvana is postulated as a state quite beyond the realm of reason and language. In the Suttanipata, the Buddha explains:

'There is no measuring of one who has gone to his setting, Upasiva,' said the Blessed One. 'That no longer exists for him by which people might refer to him. When all conditions [dhammas] are removed, then all ways of telling are also removed.'

All points of reference by which one makes descriptions and explanations are products of the unenlightened perspective. Nirvana, since it is beyond this perspective, is beyond description by way of these relative concepts and categories. It can only be understood by way of attainment ? of losing spiritual ignorance in exchange for enlightened understanding. That, according to Buddhism, is why it is so problematic to give an explanation for it. The Buddha replies to the bewilderment expressed by a disciple, Vacchagotta:

'It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this truth, Vaccha, is deep, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful

and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. It is hard for you to understand when you hold to another view, accept another teaching, approve another teaching, pursue a different training, and follow a different teacher.'

Admittedly, having not attained the state of enlightenment described by the Buddhists, I find it perplexing to conceive of. It appears that in order to understand the concept one must transcend rationality itself and operate on some plane completely outside of anything we can imagine. In other words, only the enlightened can understand the goal they have achieved (at which point it ceases to be anything like a 'goal'). Though only a fool denies the reality of a thing based solely on the fact that one has not yet experienced it, it is quite understandable that in so many cases a concept that requires such direct experience should be completely misunderstood by those who have lack the experience. In such a case, one unenlightened onlooker has really no point of reference by which to test the accuracy of another unenlightened explanation. Indeed, it appears that any words used to explain Nirvana, according to the Buddhist postulations, would be horrendous mistakes. And so it is with this in mind that we should examine a statement by Schopenhauer (in *The World as Will and Idea*), who was a major influence on Nietzsche, regarding the subject.

'...We must banish the dark impression of that nothingness which we discern behind all virtue and holiness as their final goal, and

which we fear as children fear the dark; we must not even evade it like the Indians, through myths and meaningless words, such as reabsorption in Brahma, or the Nirvana of the Buddhists. Rather, do we freely acknowledge that what remains after the abolition of will is for all those who are still full of will certainly nothing; but conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this our world, which is so real, with all its suns and milky ways - is nothing.'

Obviously, Schopenhauer, after being so influenced by Hindu and Buddhist ideas about the effect that desire and will has on binding us to continued existence, completely dismissed the perplexing descriptions of Nirvana as 'meaningless words'. Unable to conceive of a state beyond the categories of being and non-being, he concluded that the final state that is entered into after dissolution of the will is complete non-existence. Hence, his diagnosis that the philosophers who postulated inconceivable states were merely 'evading' the nothingness that they feared. Diagnoses of 'psychological dishonesty' such as this became, in some form or other, staples of later existentialist thinkers. Nietzsche, of course, made similar attacks against Christianity as well as Buddhism.

The fact is, Nirvana can only be explained to the 'unenlightened' by negation. The Buddhist texts tell us what it cannot be thought of as, but the only positive descriptions of it tend toward non-existence. An example of this is the simile of the fire that the Buddha uses in his dialogue

with Vacchagotama. He asks whether the fire, when it is extinguished, can be said to have gone north, south, east, or west. Of course, the obvious answer is that the fire no longer exists. Nirvana, however, cannot be described as existing, not existing, both existing and not, or neither existing nor not. For Buddhism, even nothingness is constituted by the relative contingencies that arise co-dependently as samsara.

For Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, nothingness is what is left when these illusions are removed. This explains their sharply opposed responses to the human condition as they understand it. Schopenhauer and, according to Nietzsche, Buddhism, prescribe a surrender into nothingness that can only be actualized by extinction of the will. Nietzsche, on the other hand, asserts an affirmation of the illusion by becoming the creator of it. His überman, by accepting the groundlessness of his own 'truths' and yet maintaining them and continually creating them - wanting to create them over and over again (as opposed to wanting to escape the cycle) - represents an ideal response to existence.

So both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer greatly misunderstood Buddhism, by interpreting Nirvana as non-existence. The Buddhist response to them both would be that they failed to understand the system fully because they failed to adopt Buddhist practices aimed at enlightenment - at which point they would have developed the capacity to conceive of Nirvana. 'Sire, Nirvana is', says the Buddhist disciple, Nagasena, 'cognizable by mind: an ariyan disciple, faring along with a mind that is purified, lofty, straight, without obstructions, without temporal desires, sees Nirvana.'

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