If Nietzsche Only Knew

ABSTRACT: This paper compares Buddhism with the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and speculates how he would have reacted to Buddhism if he had understood it more accurately. I will focus the discussion on two central philosophies of Buddhism, which Nietzsche misinterpreted: Nirvana and suffering. It will be shown through an examination of selected writings and key philosophies of Nietzsche that if he had a better understanding of Nirvana and suffering then he would have been significantly more favorable towards Buddhism and would have found it to have close similarities to his own beliefs.

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While it is evident that Friedrich Nietzsche misconstrued the philosophies of Buddhism, a topic which remains of interest is how Nietzsche would have reacted to Buddhism with a correct interpretation. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to compare Buddhism with the philosophies of Nietzsche and to show how he might have responded to the particular concepts and beliefs which would have influenced his reaction.

This paper will discuss two central philosophies of Buddhism which Nietzsche misinterpreted: Nirvana and suffering. It will be shown that based on his own philosophies, if Nietzsche had understood Nirvana and suffering correctly, he would have been significantly more favorable towards Buddhism and would have found it to bear close similarity to his own beliefs.

As an introduction to the issue, it is important to understand that during the late 19th century in Europe, Eastern philosophy was still beginning to diffuse into Western language and comprehension. First-hand material had not dispersed throughout Europe and disciplines such as Buddhism were misrepresented through second-hand sources. As a result, incorrect interpretations inevitably developed in the West during the time of Nietzsche's writing.

Additionally, in *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, Benjamin A. Elman explains that Nietzsche began his introduction to Eastern philosophy under the influence of Schopenhauer, and in a way, was predisposed to react to Buddhism in terms of his close reading of Schopenhauer. Heinrich Dumoulin also confirms this position in his work, claiming that "[Nietzsche] owes his understanding of Buddhism entirely to Schopenhauer and to the manner in which he understood Schopenhauer."[1] According to Dumoulin, Schopenhauer did in fact have a considerable influence on the German interpretation of Buddhism; however, his interpretations were not very balanced or accurate because of the limited understanding of Eastern philosophy during that time.

In a different work also titled *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, Freny Mistry states, "Nietzsche's interpretations of Buddhism are based on translations and secondary sources then available, the unreliability of which owes not least to the paucity of first-hand material on Buddhism accessible to nineteenth-century Europe."[2] Therefore, we cannot to say that Nietzsche simply did not understand the Buddhist principles, but rather that the poor predisposition of his sources combined with his significant influence from Schopenhauer did not allow for precise and thorough interpretations.

The first part in this paper will discuss Nietzsche's misunderstanding of Nirvana in comparison with more accurate interpretations of those Buddhist philosophies. It has been shown through multiple sources that Nirvana in no way implies an extinguishing of individuality. Contrary to early Western interpretations, the state of Nirvana is intended to be practiced within the surrounding world. Enlightenment is reflected through compassionate engagement with other individuals as opposed to being enjoyed simply for ascetic, self-interested purposes that remove the individual from society and from the conditions of the present reality.

> What is extinguished on the attainment of nirvana is simply that self-centered, self-assertive life to which unenlightened man tends to cling as if it were the highest good and the final security. The truly 'real' is not extinguished when nirvana is reached: rather, the real is then attained.[3]

What has also been clarified through more accurate interpretations of the Buddhist philosophies and teachings is that Buddhism by no means advocates a dogmatic travel of the Noble Eight Fold Path to attain Nirvana. Part of the beauty within the philosophies of Buddhism is that there are multiple ways in which they may be expressed, an aspect that encourages non-harming individuality for each Buddhist. In her recent work, Sallie King elaborates on this point:

> The Buddha never asked anyone to believe anything on his authority. On the contrary, he urged people to look into everything they were told, including the teachings of the multiple religious teachers

1. Heinrich Dumoulin, "Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1981).
2. Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981): 9.
3. Nancy Ross, Buddhism: *A Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Random House, 1981): 30.

> circulating in India at the time; to observe their own lives and mind; and to believe something only when they were convinced of it on the basis of their own personal experiential knowledge.[4]

It is here that one may understand the first significant affinity between Nietzsche and Buddhism, as the idea conveyed in this passage is similar to the genealogical critique that Nietzsche advocated passionately in his own philosophies.

Nirvana can be described as a profound mental state in which individual personalities not only maintain, but also develop to a high and refined level. The individual continues to exist within the present reality, living by the wisdom of his or her own experience while practicing *kusala* (wholesome acts, thought or speech, or action motivated by compassion, self-discipline and awareness) in society and the surrounding world.[5] The individual lives by values that he or she has created based on his or her understanding of reality, seeing through what is referred to as *maya* in Eastern thought—the illusory conception of the world—and asserting oneself in the direction of his or her own experiential truths with compassion and awareness.

Nietzsche's response to Buddhism, if he understood Nirvana correctly, would be favorable if one examines the dimensions of the active nihilist—the "increased power of the spirit," which Nietzsche held as the exemplary figure of a strong individual.[6] The active nihilist in the face of the death of God must take the necessary actions to re-create meaning within his or her life. For Nietzsche, this is accomplished through the process of deconstructing, re-imagining and re-creating values that are most fitting to the present reality as it is.

Through the philosophy of the active nihilist, Nietzsche wanted to show that life is not to be denied but unconditionally affirmed and embraced. He believed that one should engage reality as it is and live according to one's own values as determined by his or her experience. Active nihilism is not to be considered an end in any way; rather, it is the transitional stage in which the individual accepts that there is no inherent meaning in the universe and proceeds to use that belief to initiate the re-creation of ideals and goals for him or herself. It is from the stage of the active nihilist that an individual may strive for the heights of the supreme free spirit, the *Ubermensch*.

Similar to Nietzsche's active nihilist, Buddhist philosophy advocates that one is to live in the present moment, acknowledging and accepting reality as it is. Buddhism also revolves around the idea of establishing values and truth based on the experience of the individual, transcending the duality conditioning of society (*maya*) and establishing goals for oneself. For Buddhism, those goals reflect compassion and awareness, which are applied to society as to the individual. This may be confirmed by the fact that after the Buddha attained Nirvana, he spent around forty-five years being active and progressively applying wisdom with compassion and concern for the well-being of those others around him.[7] Nietzsche would certainly agree with Buddhist philosophy on the issue of transcending the

4. Sallie B. King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism," (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009): 17.
5. As opposed to *akusala*: unwholesome acts, thought or speech, or action motivated by greed, hostility or delusion.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power* (New York: Random House, 1967): 22.
7. Robert G. Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 43.

conditions of society, or the "herd values," and instead establishing values based on truth acquired from that person's own experience.

Further agreement between Nietzsche and Buddhism can be understood through Nietzsche's belief in the "revaluation of all values [as a] formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity."[8] Buddhism is a path of self-control which aims to bring the individual in harmony with his/herself and the surrounding world. It is not focused on the Self in an egocentric context, but rather in the way that an individual develops an awareness of thought, action, and speech so that he or she may understand which of those aspects reflect wholesome qualities/skillful action (*kusala*) or unwholesome qualities/unskillful action (*akusala*). The discipline and awareness of oneself is not a rigid form of constant self-judgment, it is remaining mindful of one's own feelings, mind activity, and practices, and more importantly, being aware of how those aspects of the individual reflect in the interconnectedness of the surrounding world.

Through the practice of skillful actions, mindfulness, spiritual development, and self-discipline, the liberation from the Buddhist path to Nirvana requires strength and continual self-mastery. Nietzsche would have been fond of these tenets. Therefore, it seems legitimate to say that he would be favorable to Buddhism in that regard.

The clearest disagreement between Nietzsche and Buddhism which should be identified at this point is that Nietzsche would not have agreed with the Buddhist philosophy of transcending the egocentric attitude. Nietzsche does not express ideas about the individual living as part of the greater whole of humanity and would not agree with the Buddhist philosophy of viewing oneself as an equal among other sentient beings while still remaining a unique and powerful individual. There not only appears to be a hierarchy in Nietzsche's philosophies of individuality, but there is basically no mention of communalism or harmonious cooperation within a healthily functioning social environment.

Following the stage of active nihilism, Nietzsche advocates the figure of the *Ubermensch*, exemplified in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Reflecting on Zarathustra in his final work, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes his *Ubermensch* figure in a very similar manner to the Buddhist who seeks to see through *maya* and engage reality as it is:

> It is here and nowhere else that one must make a start to comprehend what Zarathustra wants: this type of man that he conceives, conceives reality as it is, being strong enough to do so; this type is not estranged or removed from reality but is reality itself and exemplifies all that is terrible and questionable in it.[9]

But what is to follow after one conceives reality as it is or sees through the veil of *maya*? For Buddhism, the fruits of liberation are applied to the surrounding world rather than enjoyed selfishly in an escape to a world of their own, away from the realities of society. In her work, King describes Buddhism as "a system that supplies wholesome causes and conditions to

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Why I Am a Destiny", in *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989): section 1.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Why I Am Destiny", in *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989): section 5.

this process of human change so that we can maximize our opportunity for development in a positive direction," a system which is applied in an individual and social context.[10] Nietzsche similarly recognizes the power of compassion and good will in his works. Though it is not the focus of his arguments and does not allude to any concrete ideas on human solidarity/social function, this recognition still holds significance in suggesting similarities between his own views and Buddhist philosophy.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche's "monument of rigorous self-discipline" gives recognition to the softer side of human nature and the significance that it may hold. In one passage, Nietzsche describes "[k]indness and love" as "the most curative herbs and agents in human intercourse."[11] In the following passage, he comments on good will, stating that among "the small but endlessly abundant and therefore very effective things that science ought to heed more than the great, rare things, is goodwill." According to Nietzsche, good "nature, friendliness, and courtesy of the heart are ever-flowing tributaries of the selfless drive and have made much greater contributions to culture than those much more famous expressions of this drive, called pity, charity, and self-sacrifice."[12]

Furthermore, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche gleefully describes "how Zarathustra descends and says to everyone what is most good-natured! How gently he handles even his antagonists, the priests, and suffers of them *with* them![13] These passages may seem out of place among his other more radical writings, but this may be because in most of his works, Nietzsche focused on criticizing current morals and values and advocating an assertive individual who breaks through them. The "post-assertive" individual, the perfect "free spirit," or "the supreme type of all beings" is reflected through Zarathustra.[14]

It is evident through the character Zarathustra that Nietzsche understood the need to give back to others, a philosophy which is fundamental to Buddhism. In this passage, Zarathustra expresses to his disciples, "you compel all things to come to you and into you, that they may flow back again from your fountain as the gifts of your love," but also warns of those who attempt to take advantage of those who give, that "sickness speaks from such craving, and invisible degeneration.[15] As shown in this passage, Nietzsche makes a strong distinction between good will and pity/charity.

Throughout his works, Nietzsche passionately denounces Christian pity, agreeing with Schopenhauer that "by means of pity, life is denied and made more worthy of denial."[16] In Buddhism, the compassion is not of pity/charity in the sense that the giver feels superior, or views the recipient as inferior, but the sense of being moved out of love to aid beings who are in need and to care for their welfare as a fellow human being. Pity and compassion may be further distinguished by describing pity as giving not out of love and caring, but out of a sense of obligation or duty. Based on the earlier passages

10. King, 20.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984): section 48.
12. Ibid: section 49.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", in *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989): section 6.
14. Ibid.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Gift-Giving Virtue", in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005): section 1.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000): section 7.

concerning love and good will, as well as the words of Zarathustra, Nietzsche would agree with Buddhism in this respect as well.

Another disagreement that arises in relation to the *Ubermensch*/Nirvana figure is who is able to, or who should attain this supreme state. Buddhism holds that everyone possesses the Buddha nature, but few are able to unveil it. Naturally, few people will desire to pursue this state of being, but nevertheless, Buddhists view the path of liberation open to each and every individual. Nietzsche would agree that such a figure will only be attainable for some, but contrary to Buddhism, he may argue that the higher type should only be for a select few individuals, instead of holding the philosophy of helping everyone attain that stage.

A second concept to discuss is the idea of suffering. Nietzsche describes the experience of suffering as the "ultimate liberator of the spirit" which "make[s] us more profound," and which allows one "to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain."[17] As a reaction to the Buddhist philosophy of suffering, most of Nietzsche's beliefs suggest that he would argue by extinguishing the harmful qualities of human behavior (*akusala)* on the Eight Fold Path. Buddhists conflict with Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati* (love of fate) because they pursue a path leading to the cessation of suffering rather than accepting those experiences as a necessary aspect of the continual transformation of the individual. Nietzsche would argue that one should embrace life by exerting his or her will in the face of continual life suffering and painful obstacles, reveling in all the fate of present life.

For Nietzsche, one should engage reality as it is and challenge situations of suffering and misfortune by persevering through the experience. However, he also asserted that one should reflect upon the conditions of that suffering so that one might strengthen oneself against future possibilities of similar situations. He states, "The higher man is distinguished from the lower by his fearlessness and his readiness to challenge misfortune."[18] However, challenge may imply that one is not only objectively engaging a misfortunate reality, but that one is using what was learned from past experiences to manage responses to the misfortune. It is in this way that the individual may control reactions fueled by emotions, and while acknowledging and accepting the misfortune, is not as detrimentally affected by misfortune and suffering.

Nietzsche asserts that suffering has great potential for self-transformation, but also suggests in some passages that a strong individual should seek to remove the causes or conditions for misfortune or should alter his perception of that suffering so that he is not. He describes how, "When a misfortune strikes us, we can overcome it either by removing its causes or else by changing the effect it has on our feelings" and that "The more a person tends to reinterpret and justify, the less will he confront the causes of the misfortune and eliminate them."[19]

Nietzsche may have agreed with Buddhism more than he realized in the way they both perceive misfortune and suffering as an inevitable condition of human existence, maintaining that those experiences hold the potential to be utilized

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974): 35-36.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Religious Life," *Human, All Too Human* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984): section 108.
19. Ibid., 129

in a transformative and productive way, depending on the reaction of the individual to the experience. A reaction includes the level of reflection that is undertaken regarding the conditions surrounding that suffering, the causes of the suffering, as well as how the individual responds emotionally to the experience.

Although it would appear Nietzsche and Buddhism diverge on the issue of suffering since the Four Noble Truths strives for the cessation of suffering through the Eight Fold Path, Nietzsche does, in fact, show that he is partial to the idea of an individual asserting control of possible misfortune through addressing the roots of suffering with the intention to remove them.

Nietzsche does not necessarily maintain that individual growth cannot occur without continually defeating obstacles of hardship and suffering, but that one should engage reality as it is, rather than avoiding those situations. Then one should challenge with self-discipline and acceptance of the experience. This approach is very similar to Buddhism in the way Buddhists do not strive to immunize themselves or withdraw from pain and loss, as Nietzsche believed; rather, Buddhists acknowledge and accept *annica*, impermanence, as an inevitable characteristic of human existence.

Buddhists believe that human suffering is rooted within the delusory belief in the fixed or permanent, such as emotions (happiness, fulfillment) or physical objects (people, possessions). When an individual erroneously believes in enduringness, he or she will not accept the fact of impermanence, and as a result, experience *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is described as:

> The nonfact between what humans want (unending pleasure and security) and what conditioned existence gives us (a mix of pleasure and pain, plus constant change where we look for some unchanging certainties upon which to base our security).[20]

When removing the causes and conditions of suffering, the individual must detach him or herself from the cravings for constant happiness and fulfilled desires, for permanence in an imperfect and transient world.

Based on his beliefs regarding pleasure and the dangers of a person seeking only happiness, Nietzsche would have had to agree with the Buddhist philosophy of engaging suffering. Naturally, there are obstacles to overcome in existence, but like Nietzsche, Buddhism attempts to perceive these obstacles not necessarily as inevitable suffering, but as the "awry wheel"; the opportunity for refinement and increased awareness of the individual in relation to the world around him or her.

For Buddhism, it comes from an alteration of state of mind, understanding and accepting change, loss, and difficulties while practicing *kusala*, skillful actions to influence a healthy environment. Given the discussion presented here, it is evident that Nietzsche would have reacted much more favorably to Buddhism if he had correctly understood the philosophies of Nirvana and suffering. ✦

20. She explains further that "*dukkha* includes all mundane suffering (illness, hunger, fear, and physical and mental pain), but it also goes beyond it to include the fundamental human dis-ease: our inability to be satisfied with life, our constant craving for more and better." King, 20.