



## Nietzsche and Buddhism

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## NIETZSCHE AND BUDDHISM

BENJAMIN A. ELMAN<sup>1</sup>

In India our religions will never take root. The ancient wisdom of the human race will not be displaced by what happened in Galilee. On the contrary, Indian philosophy streams back to Europe, and will produce a fundamental change in our knowledge and thought. (Schopenhauer, WAW, IV/63)

My aim in this article is to discuss and analyze the role Buddhism played in the thought and writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). One of the most persistent twentieth-century debates concerning Nietzsche's philosophy is over the question of whether or not Nietzsche was a nihilist. Western commentators have seen this as one of the keys to understanding "what Nietzsche means." Given the problems inherent in any attempt to understand Nietzsche's thought—e.g., Karl Jaspers points out, "All statements seem to be annulled by other statements. Self-contradiction is the fundamental ingredient in Nietzsche's thought. For nearly every single one of Nietzsche's judgments, one can also find an opposite"—it seems to me that an analysis of Nietzsche's understanding of Buddhism and an inquiry into the frequently heard claims that Buddh-

<sup>1</sup> Citations of the works listed under the following abbreviations will be included in the text itself after quotations, summaries, or direct references to the texts concerned.

- AC *The Antichrist* (1888), trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1963).  
BGE *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), translated by Kaufmann (New York, 1966).  
BT *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, 1956).  
EC *Ecce Homo* (1888), trans. Kaufmann (New York, 1969).  
GM *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. Kaufmann (New York, 1969).  
GS *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887), trans. Kaufmann (New York, 1974).  
SE *Schopenhauer As Educator* (1874), trans. Adrian Collins in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, Vol. 5, Part II (London, 1909-1911).  
TS *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), trans. Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche*.  
WAW *The World As Will and Idea* (1813), by Arthur Schopenhauer, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp (Garden City, 1961).  
WP *The Will To Power* (collected notes 1883-1888), ed. Kaufmann, trans. Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale (New York, 1967).

All citations unless otherwise indicated will refer to sections and subsections or to sections and then pages in order to facilitate reference to German editions or other translations. P refers to Preface. For EC and TS, citations will refer to pages only.

ism itself is guilty of nihilism cannot help but shed light on the place of nihilism in Nietzsche's philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

This claim is not argued on the basis of Nietzsche's explicit attacks on Buddhism along with Christianity as nihilistic religions (Nietzsche, *AC*, 20) or because an analysis of Buddhism by comparison will help us to understand whether Nietzsche was in fact a nihilist. Nietzsche's relation to Buddhism goes much deeper than that, and it is my contention that Buddhism lies at the center of any attempt to interpret "what Nietzsche means."

It has been the understandable case that most western commentators in discussing European and American philosophers of the last century have looked at them chiefly in terms of the cultural and intellectual milieu from which they arose. Nineteenth-century European intellectual history is usually discussed in terms of the influences of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Karl Marx (1818-1883), and Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the latter to the degree that Social Darwinism resulted from his biological theories via Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), etc. As a result, Nietzsche has been approached and appropriated as a product of late nineteenth-century European philosophy, owing his chief influences to the men cited above.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There are now two main schools of thought about this. Walter Kaufmann and others feel that Nietzsche's aims were positively oriented and that, therefore, labelling Nietzsche a nihilist overlooks the centrality of his doctrines of the will to power, the *Uebermensch*, and eternal recurrence, and fails to take into account the dominant place rational argumentation holds in Nietzsche's writings. See, e.g., GS, 287n. Others, such as Albert Camus and Arthur Danto, argue that Nietzsche was a nihilist; Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), 65-80, and Danto, *Nietzsche As Philosopher* (New York, 1965), 19-35, 191n. Nietzsche at times indicated that he thought of himself as a nihilist (WP, 25; EH, p. 224), and he made a distinction between active and passive nihilism (WP, 22, 23; BGE, 208, 209, 210). We should note, however, that nihilism, as it has been used in our everyday speech, usually means something like the total rejection of religious beliefs or moral principles. In this sense it is used in close affinity with atheism and skepticism. See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971 in 2 vols.), I/1927. On the philosophic level, nihilism has been defined as "an extreme form of skepticism involving the denial of all existence." In these terms, nihilism as a response to the meaninglessness of life is akin to "nothingness." It was in this sense that Max Müller contended that Buddhism is nihilistic, and others argued that David Hume was a nihilist because he denied everything and affirmed nothing. See also *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967), V/514-17. Camus and Danto use a more sophisticated meaning of nihilism: all of our concepts and ideas are projected on the world; the "world" is simply our way of organizing our perceptions; hence, there are many truths and no truth. Here perspectivism and nihilism come very close to each other. In the pages that follow, I will use nihilism according to its more common philosophic meaning, unless otherwise indicated. As a result, I do not feel that either Nietzsche's philosophy or Buddhism can be considered nihilistic, i.e., denying existence and affirming nothingness. This does not mean, however, that I categorically disagree with Camus or Danto. There is no intent here to deny the importance of perspectivism in Nietzsche's thought.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. James Tufts

This approach is generally correct and justifiable to the degree that it attempts to understand Nietzsche in relation to his immediate European predecessors, but to the degree that it imposes the philosophic blinders perpetuated by the Europe ocentric bias found in many western philosophy departments, whether conscious or unconscious, this approach should be modified. There are vistas of thought lurking in Nietzsche's writings that make cross-cultural leaps from the apostle Paul to the Code of Manu (Nietzsche, AC, 57) and from Jesus to the Buddha (AC, 42).

Guy Welbon has been exploring the impact of Buddhism on Nietzsche's philosophy. He points out that Nietzsche probably learned Sanskrit while at Leipzig from 1865 to 1868, where he studied under Max Müller's (1823-1900) first teacher, Hermann Brockhaus (1806-1877). According to Welbon, Nietzsche, as a result of his training, was probably one of the best read and most solidly grounded in Buddhism for his time among Europeans.

Welbon goes on to draw possible parallels between Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence and the Buddhist vale of *Samsara* (phenomena) existence, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and the Buddhist *bodhisattva* (one who refuses to gain release from the phenomenal world until all other sentient beings have done so before him), and Nietzsche's program for the transvaluation of all values and the Buddhist Nirvana. Welbon concludes: "I am insisting that there is no basic conflict between Nietzsche and Buddhism on several important issues, and that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that Nietzsche's presentations do witness Buddhist influences."<sup>4</sup>

What were the primary questions that Nietzsche struggled with in his writings? As early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, he began to grapple with the "horror of individual existence" in relation to his conception of Dionysiac art (BT, 17). There, Nietzsche praised the courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer for their victory "over the optimistic foundations of logic, which form the underpinnings of our culture" (BT, 18), and he praised Schopenhauer as an unparalleled "knight" in search of truth (BT, 20). In *Schopenhauer As Educator* Nietzsche wrote: "Where are now the types of moral excellence and fame for all our generation—learned and unlearned, high and low—the visible abstract of constructive ethics for this age? Where has vanished all the reflection on moral questions that has occupied every great developed society at all epochs?" (SE, 2).

In *The Gay Science*, we find the following passage: "Schopenhauer's question immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: *Has existence any*

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(New York, 1958), Vol. II, *passim*, Crane Brinton, *The Shaping of Modern Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), *passim*, and Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, 1974, 4th ed.), 121-207.

<sup>4</sup> Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago, 1968), 185-89.

*meaning at all?* It will require a few centuries before this question can even be heard completely and in its full depth” (*GS*, 357). After completing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche stated the problems he was concerned with:

What was at stake was the value of morality—and over this I had to come to terms almost exclusively with my great teacher Schopenhauer to whom that book of mine, the passion and the concealed contradiction of that book, addressed itself as if to a contemporary (—for that book, too, was a “polemic”). What was especially at stake was the value of the “unegoistic,” the instincts of pity, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, which Schopenhauer had guilded, deified, and projected into a beyond for so long that at last they became for him “value-in-itself,” on the basis of which he said No to life and to himself. But it was against precisely these instincts that there spoke from me an ever more fundamental mistrust, an ever more corrosive skepticism. It was precisely here that I saw the great danger to mankind, its sublimest enticement and seduction—but to what? to nothingness?—it was precisely here that I saw the beginning of the end, the dead stop, a retrospective weariness, the will turning against life, the tender and sorrowful signs of the ultimate illness; I understood the ever spreading morality of pity that had seized even on philosophers and made them ill, as the most sinister symptom of a European culture that had itself become sinister, perhaps as its by-pass to a new Buddhism? to a Buddhism for Europeans? to nihilism? (*GM*, P/5)

He echoed this passage in *Ecce Homo*: “The question concerning the origin of moral values is for me a question of the very first rank because it is crucial for the future of humanity” (*EH*, p. 291).

That Nietzsche considered the question of morality as the paramount problem he had confronted seems clear (cf. *GM*, P/3). All other problems reduced to this question. Wherever he looked—science, asceticism, truth, God—he saw moral valuations that attempted to come to terms with the meaning of human existence (*WP*, 301). A number of questions grew out of this basic orientation: How can nihilism be overcome? What are the conditions for a healthy culture? What harm has come to mankind as a result of its morals and morality? How can life be affirmed if there is no absolute truth? (*WP*, 301).

We find Nietzsche troubled by religious and philosophic questions simultaneously. His view of himself as a philosopher was to “first determine the Whither and For What of man” (*BGE*, 211). He was “waiting for a philosophic *physician* in the exceptional sense of that word,” one who would reveal that all philosophizing hitherto had not been concerned with “truth” but rather with “health, future, growth, power, life” (*GS*, P/2). It was on this level that Buddhism played an important part in the development of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

#### SCHOPENHAUER AND NIETZSCHE

I belong to those readers of Schopenhauer who know perfectly well, after they have turned the first page, that they will read all the others and listen to every

word that he has spoken. My trust in him sprang to life at once, and has been the same for nine years. I understood him as though he had written for me (this is the most intelligible though a rather foolish and conceited way of expressing it). (Nietzsche, *SE*, 2)

One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil. (Nietzsche, *TS*, I/190)

Schopenhauer published *The World As Will and Idea* in 1813. In that work he stated: "Since . . . this whole work is only the unfolding of a single thought, it follows that all its parts have the most intimate connection with each other . . . every part of the whole work is related to every other part and presupposes it" (*WAW*, IV/54). He did not mince words, nor did he question the validity of what he was describing. His vision was complete, each part relating and being the consequence of every other part.

Schopenhauer began by contending that the world-out-there is conditioned through a subject and exists only for the subject as an idea. He admitted that he was indebted to George Berkeley (1685-1753) and Vedantic philosophy for the realization that matter had no abiding essence independent of mental perception. With regard to the world-out-there, we only know that we have ideas of it (*WAW*, I/1). Schopenhauer saw the relative existence of ideas as part of the eternal flux of things, empty as a dream, whose reality was hidden from mortals by *Maya*, the veil of deception (I/3). Schopenhauer's intention was not to discover "whence or wherefore the world exists, but merely what the world is" (I/12).

He then proceeded to explain that there was a pure knowing subject—the thing-in-itself—that gives significance to our ideas (II/17). This inner subject he described as "will," and he regarded it as the inner mechanism of man's being. The body was the objectification of the will (II/18). The will appeared in every blind force of nature and preconsidered action of man. Voluntary movements are only visible aspects of individual acts of will. The recognition of will proceeded from the most immediate consciousness of each of us and was intuitively evident (II/22).

Until this point Schopenhauer was consciously following the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena. What followed, however, was an ethics that Kant had never dreamed of. Schopenhauer claimed that the will to live preys upon itself in a blind striving for existence, without end or aim (II/28). The inner nature of will was characterized by eternal becoming and endless flux, leading to a "fearful ennui that paralyzes life" (II/29).

Schopenhauer concluded from his analysis of the will to live that suffering was the essence of life. He saw suffering as an obstacle placed between the will and its aim. Because all efforts of will arose from its constant dissatisfaction with its present state, there could be no end to striving; therefore, there could be no end to suffering either (IV/56). Existence, for Schopenhauer, was a constant dying. Life was like the

swing of a pendulum between pain and ennui. It was "a dream-like staggering through the four ages of life to death, accompanied by a series of trivial thoughts" (IV/58).

To this vale of sorrow, Schopenhauer contended that only the complete denial of the will could bring relief from suffering (IV/68). Voluntary and thorough asceticism (of which Schopenhauer was himself incapable!) became, for Schopenhauer, the first step to release from the phenomenal world. When this denial of the will to live was complete, the world of restless desire would vanish into nothing. The vanity and emptiness of action resulted from an investigation of the ethical significance of the will. In the final pages of his work, Schopenhauer accepted the full consequences of his philosophy:

... 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 (IV/71)

Schopenhauer is a good example of the refractory nature of the European understanding of Buddhism and Vedanta (particularly the Advaita non-dualism tradition) in the nineteenth century. He could not have borrowed the Buddhist and Vedantic philosophies in toto, given the infancy of research on "Oriental" thought at the time *The World As Will and Idea* was published. He seems to have had a pessimistic vision of life that predated any acquaintance with Buddhist and Vedantic philosophies. Schopenhauer's reading of the *Upanishads* and Buddhist works in German and English seems to have supplied only the final confirmation (or so he thought) for his metaphysics of pessimism.<sup>5</sup>

That Schopenhauer regarded Buddhism and Vedanta as confirmations of his pessimism is extremely important in the understanding of Nietzsche's writings. Nietzsche began his acquaintance with Oriental philosophies under the influence of Schopenhauer. He was predisposed to react to Buddhism in terms of his close reading of Schopenhauer. To get at Nietzsche's view of Buddhism, and the central place it held in his thought, we have to come to grips first with his understanding of Schopenhauer.

In *Schopenhauer As Educator* Nietzsche at first praised Schopenhauer's honesty, joy, and consistency (SE, 2). Nietzsche attacked university professors such as Kant who had held to their university positions and submitted to the regulations of the state and society around them

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Cf. R.J. Hollingdale's "Introduction," in Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. by Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 31.

(*SE*, 3, 6). In opposition to them, Nietzsche admired the loneliness and independence represented by Schopenhauer's philosophic career. This, for Nietzsche, was the only way to come to grips with the skepticism and relativity first enunciated by Kant (*SE*, 3). Schopenhauer was the physician who had seen through the health and sickness of his time (*SE*, 6).

Nietzsche considered Schopenhauer's ideal genius as the highest product of a life that said yes to life. He went on to discuss three "images of man" that were available to the nineteenth century as examples for men to follow and transform their lives: Rousseau (1712-1778) as a social revolutionary was calculated to breathe the most fire and impress the most people; Goethe (1749-1832) as a contemplative man was misunderstood by the "herd" but managed to survive his boredom with life through his recollection of the great and memorable things in the past; Schopenhauer's genius took upon himself the suffering needed to reach for the truth, and this served to enable him to quench his individual will in order to prepare for the transformation of his being, for which his reward was absorption into Nirvana (*SE*, 4).

In *Schopenhauer As Educator*, Nietzsche went on to contend that philosophers, artists, and saints, in the image of Schopenhauer's ideal genius, had cast out the beast in themselves by means of an ecstatic leap of joy (*SE*, 5). He argued that the migrations of men through the wildernesses of the world, the cities they had founded, and the wars they had waged were all continuations of the beast in them. Schopenhauer's state of total self-consciousness, according to Nietzsche, should not be allowed to return to a state of unconscious instinct (*SE*, 5). Nature needed the saint not as an individual but as the spring for sympathy and intimacy with all living things. It was therefore the duty of mankind to provide the circumstances favorable to the birth of the new redeemer (*SE*, 6). There was a need to see to it that conscious will would replace blind instinct.

For Nietzsche, writing at this time, Christianity was one of the manifestations of the pure saint, but because of its association with the state, it had become sick at heart, degenerate, and antagonistic to its original aim (*SE*, 6). Science was cold and dry, ignorant of any deep feeling of dissatisfaction and yearning for the truth. A sincere will to truth could not lie in the pure, cold, and aimless knowledge of science, a purposeless and unmotivating mass of knowledge that could give no clue to the health or sickness of culture (*SE*, 6). [In the end,] Nietzsche concluded that the life of the state or the progress in the universities mattered little in comparison with the mundane life of philosophy (*SE*, 8).

Nietzsche in 1874 had accepted Schopenhauer's depiction of the will to live and the need to overcome the animalistic tendencies inherent in the instincts. He regarded Schopenhauer's genius as the ideal that men should follow to transform their lives. While not as ponderously pessi-



mistic as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche at this time did agree that it was necessary to overcome the pressures of state and society in order to reach for the truth and gain release from the horror of instinctual life devoid of reasons:

Every one is apt to discover a limitation in himself, in his gifts of intellect as well as his moral will, that fills him with yearning and melancholy; and as he strives after holiness through a consciousness of sin, so, as an intellectual being, he has a deep longing after the "genius" in himself. This is the root of all culture; and if we say this means the aspiration of man to be "born again" as saint and genius, I know that one need not be a Buddhist to understand the myth (*SE*, 6).

These were all doctrines and points of view Nietzsche was bound to renounce vehemently in the following years. His insights into the decadence of Christianity, the coldness of science, and the need to question all "truths" were however elements of his philosophy that never changed; he simply added newer and what he thought more appropriate points of view to them. In the changes that we find in the more mature corpus of Nietzsche's writings, there was much that he left behind and much that he took along in his quest for the meaning of human existence. In the process, he came to grips with Buddhism: "The gates of Indian antiquity are being opened, and the scholars have no more idea of the most imperishable works of the Indians—their philosophies— than a beast has of playing the harp; though Schopenhauer thinks that the acquaintance with Indian philosophy is one of the greatest advantages possessed by our century" (*SE*, 8).

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche wrote:

One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid *blond beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness: the Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility, the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings—they all shared this need. (*GM*, I/11)

Clearly Nietzsche's thinking had changed dramatically. He now asked: "How is the denial of the will possible? how is the saint possible?" (*BGE*, 47). Contending that the Buddha and Schopenhauer were "under the spell and delusion of morality" (*BGE*, 56), Nietzsche went on to describe Schopenhauer's "mystical embarrassments": the unprovable doctrine of the One Will; the denial of the individual; the plurality of individuals as mere appearance; the nonsense about pity; and the claim that dying is the real purpose of existence (*GS*, 99). He accused Schopenhauer of remaining stuck in a Christian-ascetic moral perspective, even though he had renounced any faith in God (*GS*, 357).

With regard to the instincts and their relation to conscious behavior, Nietzsche no longer thought that they could be overcome. He argued that being conscious was not the opposite of what is instinctive. Thinking itself was secretly guided and formed into certain channels by the instincts (BGE, 3). All moralities were “merely a sign language of the affects” (BGE, 187), i.e., the instincts had been redirected and sublimated into moral values (WP, 289).

Although he described the complicated nature of willing—a complex of sensation and thinking taking place in the phenomena of the inner world—Nietzsche now affirmed the will, in direct contradiction to Schopenhauer (BGE, 16-20). According to Nietzsche, the act of willing liberates man because to will is to create (TS, III/318). Those who would not affirm the world as it is, he accused of nihilism and decadence. The enemies to a healthy culture were Schopenhauer, Christianity, and Buddhism (AC, 7).

Having broken through to the problem of morality—under what conditions did man devise value judgments?—Nietzsche began to approach Schopenhauer in terms of new questions. He now asked: “what does it mean when a genuine *philosopher* pays homage to the ascetic ideal . . . ?” (GM, III/5). He saw Schopenhauer’s philosophy as involuntary and unconscious autobiography (BGE, 6). In affirming nothingness and the ascetic ideal, Schopenhauer, according to Nietzsche, was seeking release from sexual torment (GM, III/6). In Schopenhauer, the dominating instinct of spirituality that lay behind the philosopher’s irritation with sensuality prevailed. This was the chief energy of his nature; all other drives were placed under its command (GM, III/8).

Nietzsche associated Christianity and Buddhism with Schopenhauer in his attack. Christianity was the religion of pity, which, like Schopenhauer’s negation of life, was the practice of nihilism, according to Nietzsche (AC, 7). He contended that pity persuaded men to nothingness and that this invariably was called God or Nirvāna. Equating Buddhism with the antisensualistic metaphysics of the priests, Nietzsche concluded that Buddhism represented a nihilistic withdrawal from existence and a desire for a different mode of being (GM, II/22).

In place of the artist, saint, philosopher, or genius, Nietzsche proposed the *Uebermensch* as the proper goal for man. The *Uebermensch*, in a Dionysian justification of life, affirmed the world and regarded the will as “the earth’s most beautiful plant” (TS, IV/392). The *Uebermensch* said yes to existence and created his own good and evil. By overcoming the great nausea for man, he could accept the most nihilistic of all doctrines—the eternal recurrence—and still reach for eternal joy:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, “You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!”

then you wanted all back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you loved the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore; and to woe too, you say: go but return! For all joy wants—eternity (*TS*, IV/435).

### NIETZSCHE AND BUDDHISM

This [revenge is forbidden for the sick] was comprehended by that profound physiologist, the Buddha. His "religion" should rather be called a kind of *hygiene*, lest it be confused with such pitiable phenomena as Christianity: its effectiveness was made conditional on the victory over *ressentiment*. To liberate the soul from this is the first step toward recovery. "Not by enmity is enmity ended; by friendliness enmity is ended": these words stand at the beginning of the doctrine of the Buddha. It is not morality that speaks thus; thus speaks physiology (Nietzsche, *EH*, 230-31).

But a Christianity intended above all to soothe diseased nerves has really *no need* of that fearful solution of a "God on the cross": which is why Buddhism is silently gaining ground everywhere in Europe (Nietzsche, *WP*, 240).

In contrast to his critique of Christianity, Nietzsche's mention of Buddhism, for the most part, occurs only sporadically in his writings. Buddhism, as a result, has been seen as peripheral to his philosophy. In *The Antichrist*, however, Nietzsche did point out those aspects of Buddhism that he admired and respected. Apart from these few pages, and a few shorter passages variously found in his works, Nietzsche attacked Buddhism as if it were a spectre haunting Europe. His fear was that the rise of pessimism in Europe would culminate in the triumph of the weary and passive nihilism that Buddhism and Schopenhauer represented (*WP*, 23). He recognized the development of European pessimism as preparatory for a Buddhistic movement, but he feared that this could only lead to a form of European Buddhism (*WP*, 55, 82). The nihilistic catastrophe, which according to Nietzsche had ruined Indian culture, would repeat itself in the West (*WP*, 64). This he sought to redirect.

At times he wavered about this trend even while he thought that a European Buddhism might be indispensable (*WP*, 132). He could not be sure whether the triumph of nihilism would be an ascending or descending movement of life (*WP*, 113A). Perhaps nothing would be more useful than a thoroughgoing nihilism (*WP*, 247). From his standpoint, he recognized that European pessimism was still in its early stages (*WP*, 31). Nietzsche's doubts, however, were only mentioned in the notebooks that he never published. Were it not for these notes and *The Antichrist*, one might conclude that Nietzsche's position on Buddhism was wholly negative.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche never wavered from his position that Buddhism, like Christianity, was a nihilistic religion representing pessimism

and decadence (*WP*, 220). In his comparison of Christianity with Buddhism, however, he argued that "Buddhism is a hundred times more realistic than Christianity" (*AC*, 20). It had disposed of the concept of God and as such was the only positivistic religion in history. According to Nietzsche, it was based, however, on an excessive susceptibility to pain and overspiritualization, which had subordinated the individual to the impersonal.

Prayer, asceticism, and compulsion were ruled out by the Buddha, Nietzsche continued. The Buddha's doctrine was opposed to the feelings of revenge, antipathy, and *ressentiment* (*WP*, 204). He did not try to make suffering respectable by attributing a moral cause for it; he simply described the phenomenon of suffering itself (*AC*, 23; *WP*, 154, 155). In the manner of a great physiologist, the Buddha, according to Nietzsche, had been able to cleanse the suffering spiritual wound without further infecting it with doctrines such as sin and damnation, as Christians had done (*WP*, 342; *GM*, III/21, 22).

We find Nietzsche bending over backwards to paint Buddhism in a bright light—as if to prove how much contempt he has for Christianity. He used the Code of Manu in much the same way (*AC*, 57; *WP*, 142, 143, 145). Nietzsche employed the more agreeable doctrines he found in Buddhism to drive Christianity further into the ground. In comparison to Buddhism, Christianity was a degenerate religion (*WP*, 154).

In order to salvage Jesus as an innocent redeemer figure in Jewish history, Nietzsche claimed that Jesus' death on the cross symbolized the beginnings of a "Buddhistic peace movement," subverted by the apostle Paul, who had created the great lie of personal immortality as a means to destroy man's reasoning powers and thereby to link bind men to the paganist mystery doctrine of Christianity (*AC*, 42-49; *WP*, 167).

Despite this somewhat positive picture of Buddhism, [there is] [no doubt that] Nietzsche could not find in Buddhism a way of affirming his 'everlasting yea.' The tone of his remarks about Buddhism in *The Antichrist* was positive, but his condemnation of its goals remained intact. Buddhism, like the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Christianity, led men away from this world and turned them toward nothingness. It denied the value of all human endeavors and affirmed that it is better to die than to live (*WP*, 685).

The accusation that Buddhism is pessimistic and nihilistic has been made since Europeans first came into contact with India. Max Müller made this a principal theme in his studies of Buddhism, and this view is still widely held today. Arthur Danto, for example, affirms this view when he argues that Nietzsche's nihilism must be distinguished from the Buddhistic nihilism of emptiness. He goes on to place Buddhism and Schopenhauer within the context of what he calls "Oriental pessimism."<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of our present understanding of Buddhism, we know

<sup>6</sup> A. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, 28. Cf. Welbon, 65-27.

that any simplistic group of adjectives cannot be applied monolithically to the complex matrix of Buddhist schools and doctrines in India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia that have come to light in the West since the initial breakthroughs in nineteenth-century research. If we argue that Buddhism is pessimistic and antisensualistic, what are we to make of the Tibetan Tantras? If we contend that Buddhism categorically annihilates the self, what are we to make of the Personalist Controversy?<sup>7</sup>

These texts do not form the principal parts of the corpus of Buddhist thought; still, it has to be pointed out that the development of Buddhism from India to East and Southeast Asia is a much more complex problem than nineteenth-century and many twentieth-century commentators realized. The Mādhyamika school founded by Nāgārjuna (ca. A.D. 150-250) has been brought up by critics as the most nihilistic of all Buddhist schools. The central doctrine of this school is *śūnyata* now translated as “emptiness.” It was this term that earlier western commentators had rendered as “nothingness.” The reason for the change in translation lies at the heart of our problem.

When western commentators translated *śūnyata* as “nothingness,” they were predisposed to interpret Nagarjuna’s claim that “all is *śūnyata* as a denial of the world and that, as a result, Nirvāna was a flight into nothingness. Accused of this position in his own time, Nāgārjuna replied that this was an incorrect understanding of what *śūnyata* referred to: “Is not *śūnyata* proved because of the fact that there is no self-existence in existing things?”<sup>8</sup>

*Nāgārjuna’s opponents and European critics, including Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, had based their accounts on the premise that śūnyata was the opposite of real existence, hence the translation of “nothingness.”* We find, however, that nihilism was one of the philosophic positions that Buddha and Nāgārjuna himself attacked. He contended that a nihilistic interpretation does not get at the significance of *śūnyata* because such a view thinks that the word refers to the world itself. *śūnyata*, according to Nāgārjuna, was not a description of a state of nothingness, a “vacuity,” but, rather, only a designation. It was always used adjectivally.

If we can recognize that Nāgārjuna understood *śūnyata* as the descriptive claim that all phenomenal existence is conditional, transitory, and devoid of a permanent self or substance, we can see how he avoided the extremes of nihilism and eternalism. Although the negative reasoning

<sup>7</sup> T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: 1955), 15. In “Saraha’s Treasury of Songs” (ca. A.D. 9th century), we find many hedonistic passages. See Edward Conze, et al. (trans.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York, 1964), 227. The Personalists argued: “The Sutra only says that it is a perversion to mistake a notself for a self; but it does not say that it is a perversion to recognize a self as a self.” See Conze (trans.), *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), 194.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Inada, *Nagarjuna. A Translation of his Mulamadhyamikakarika with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo: 1970), 154-59. Cf. Frederick Streng, *Emptiness. A Study In Religious Meaning* (Nashville, 1967), 77-78, 223.

that Nāgārjuna employed made it appear that he was verging on the edge of nihilism, his ulterior purpose was religious. He attempted to clear away all obstacles—including reason itself—that stood in the way of the realization of the reality that transcended ordinary, phenomenal existence. Nāgārjuna rejected all reasons and positions not because he was a pessimist or a nihilist but because reality was inaccessible to reason and ordinary perception. By rejecting, the four alternatives to every problem—being, non-being, both being and non-being, and neither being nor non-being—he hoped to make it possible to understand the primacy of “emptiness” as a description of ourselves and the world. Nāgārjuna did not deny reality *per se*; he only denied doctrines about it.<sup>9</sup>

Nirvāna for the Buddhist is not an escape from the world, as western commentators on Nietzsche have continued to argue. In order to make it possible to experience Nirvāna, one begins with an investigation into the suffering inherent in life, but the quest does not end with this important insight. The experience of Nirvāna is not based on a question of pessimism or optimism. One overcomes pleasure and pain, pessimism and optimism, before beginning a mindful examination of one’s self and reality as perceived by the self. Upon examination, one realizes that there is no self but only the combination of mental and physical states (*skandhas*) that have been designated as a person when looked at *in toto*. Only when individuals realize the emptiness of the self and all experience can they free themselves from suffering and impermanence.<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of this power of mindfulness and acting in accordance with the Eight-fold Path, one can begin a transition to a higher level of experience. For Buddhists this means that not only is the self devoid of permanent existence but that reality perceived through consciousness is empty as well. A process that started as what seemed to be a negative and pessimistic analysis of life leads one to the awakening necessary for the positive experience of Nirvāna. This was as far as language, thought, and action could carry you. In no sense was this an annihilation of all human passions or aspirations. In Mircea Eliade’s words, an enlightened one was in complete control “liberated while living.”<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Nietzsche, as well as Schopenhauer, entertained inaccurate views of Buddhism. At the heart of these misconceptions lay Nietzsche’s close relation to and sharp reaction against Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Nietzsche agreed and disagreed with many of Schopenhauer’s

<sup>9</sup> Richard Robinson has explained: “Emptiness is not a term outside the expressional system, but is simply the key term within it. Those who would hypostatize emptiness are confusing the symbol system with the fact system. . . . The term ‘absolute truth’ is part of the descriptive order, not part of the factual order. Like all other expressions, it is empty, but it has a peculiar relation within the system of designations. It symbolizes non-system, a surd within the system of constructs.” See *Early Madhyamika in India and China* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1967), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 277. Cf. Welbon, 188-89. See also Mircea Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, 1970), 12-14, 33-35.

<sup>11</sup> Eliade, *Yoga*, 166.

formulations as he matured, but he never questioned that Schopenhauer's insight into life was the same as the Buddha's. Because Schopenhauer was the vehicle by which Nietzsche came to appreciate Buddhism, we find that many of his misconceptions concerning Buddhism resulted from Schopenhauer's influence. In most cases where we find Nietzsche discussing Buddhism, we invariably find a reference to Schopenhauer as well.

Nietzsche could understand Buddhism only in terms of his own cultural situation and historical orientation. It was a slow process, but little by little Oriental religions and philosophies have asserted their presence in the dialogue of western discourse. Nietzsche wrote at a time when this process of interchange was just beginning. One of his college friends, Paul Deussen (1845-1919), was destined to become a pioneer in the translation of Vedānta texts into German.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche's misconceptions of Buddhism were an important element in his attempt to find positive answers to the questions he posed for himself. Perhaps the most serious misreading we find in Nietzsche's account of Buddhism was his inability to recognize that the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness was an initiatory stage leading to a reawakening. Although Schopenhauer mentioned this, he did not recognize the significance of what he was saying, nor did he place any store in the meditative techniques employed by the Buddhists. Upon closer examination we find that Buddhism continues the religious symbolism of initiation that is found in all religions—an anticipatory "death" in order to ensure "birth" into a sanctified life. If one does not recognize this in Nirvana, then one misses the crux of what Buddhism is aiming towards. When understood in its own terms, Buddhism cannot be dismissed as pessimistic or nihilistic.<sup>13</sup>

When we examine some of the answers Nietzsche formulated in response to the questions he was asking, we find that he was very close to some basic doctrines found in Buddhism. This should not be surprising, given Nietzsche's respect for the Buddha and our own realization that Buddhism concerns itself with one of the basic problems with which Nietzsche was grappling: the structure and meaning of the human condition.

In his analysis of the self, Nietzsche contended: "the subject is only a fiction: the ego of which one speaks when one censures egoism does not exist at all" (*WP*, 370). Zarathustra said: "... soul is only a word for something about the body" (*TS*, I/146). In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche described the "soul superstition, which in the form of the subject and ego superstition, has not yet ceased to do mischief" (*BGE*, Preface). He blamed this concept of the soul on a "seduction by grammar"

<sup>12</sup> Welbon, 184-85.

<sup>13</sup> Eliade, 5-6, 362-63.

and “audacious generalization.” The ego, for Nietzsche, was only a term for the conceptual synthesis of man’s nature (WP, 371, 549).

This is remarkably similar to the Buddha’s doctrine of the non-existence of the personal identity or self (*anātman*). According to the Buddha, if a man would make himself the object of his own analysis, then he would discover his own impermanence and emptiness. The components of personal identity could be studied part by part, until there was nothing left to analyze. Only mental and physical states could be located, according to the Buddha. As a result of this strictly empirical analysis, the Buddha concluded that an abiding self was nowhere to be found.<sup>14</sup>

The similarity between Buddhims and Nietzsche on this point should not be taken to mean that Nietzsche was consciously borrowing a Buddhist doctrine. A critique of the notion of personal identity had already been given in Europe by the English philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). Starting from the empirical premise that perceptions appeared as impressions and ideas, Hume searched in vain for the impression that gave rise to the idea of the soul as a distinct substance. Hume contended that perceptions existed first as impressions, and that ideas were causally dependent upon them. Every idea was a less vivid image or copy of the impression to which it corresponded.

Because he could not locate any isolated impression that remained constant and unchanging, Hume concluded that there was no single impression that gave rise to the idea of the soul as an abiding entity. Introspection did not reveal what Hume was looking for. He concluded that the self was nothing more than “a bundle or collection of different perceptions,” a “kind of theater” where perceptions made their entrances and departures, perhaps to return in a different posture.

As far as we presently know, Hume living in the eighteenth century knew little about Buddhism. Nietzsche was familiar with both Hume and Buddhism. Nietzsche’s position on the existence of the self was probably influenced by both accounts. To what extent, however, is not easy to measure with any degree of precision.<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche’s claim that all existence is “actively engaged in interpretation” resulted from his insight that the human intellect could not “avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and *only* in these” (GS, 374). He went on to claim: “There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena—” (BGE, 108; WP, 258). There are similarities between Nietzsche’s claim that there are only perspectives of reality and Nāgārjuna’s contention that everything we say about the world or ourselves is empty of permanence. Both are views contained within a descriptive system. Everything becomes problematic. Neither Nietzsche

<sup>14</sup> Henry Warren (trans.), *Buddhism in Translation* (New York, 1963), 130-31.

<sup>15</sup> Hume, *On Human Nature and the Understanding*, ed. Antony Flew (New York, 1962), 33-34, 259. See, however, Nolan P. Jacobson, “The Possibility of Oriental Influence In Hume’s Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West*, XIX, 1 (January 1969), 17-37.



nor Nāgārjuna, however, concluded that there was no world; neither affirmed nothingness.

Nietzsche's criticism of the spirit of revenge was also similar to the Buddhist opposition to revenge. In *The Antichrist* he pointed out that this doctrine was one of the main features of Buddhism (AC, 20). Zarathustra said: "For *that man be delivered from revenge*, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms" (TS, II/211). Heidegger emphasized this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, and Heidegger's own formulations of "non-willing" and "letting-be" bear the mark of Nietzsche's influence as well as the influence of Oriental philosophies. Nietzsche was aware that with regard to revenge he was in complete agreement with Buddhism.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche's concern for the problem of morality and the meaning of human existence indicates that it is somewhat facile to label him as a "perspectivist," a "cognitivist," or a "noncognitivist," although all of these played at different times important roles in his thought. It seems to me that Nietzsche's approach to truth should be understood as a dominant concern throughout his writings. He contends that truth itself rests upon a faith in truth (GS, 344), and he poses the problem of truth in such a way that the question of truth becomes secondary to the question of the meaning of the need for truth: "And here I again touch on my problem, on our problem, my unknown friends (for as yet I know no friend): what meaning would our whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*?" (GM, III/27) The will to truth led back to the problem of morality (GS, 344).<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche sought the meaning of the human condition in religious and philosophic terms. Because he affirmed the world, Nietzsche was not a nihilist. Nor is Buddhism a nihilistic religion. On these premises, only Schopenhauer was a thorough-going nihilist. The latter's affirmation of nothingness as beyond Brahma and Nirvāna makes this clear.

The discussion above has aimed to show that Buddhism lies at the center of any attempt to understand Nietzsche's thought in its entirety. In discussing Nietzsche's writings, however, I do not mean that Buddhism is more important than Christianity, Kant, Darwin, or Schopenhauer. The assumption that European philosophy was the sole source of Nietzsche's formulations is missing an essential element in his thought. Though Nietzsche was European through and through, he was quite aware of the growing impact of Oriental philosophy on western thought.

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Smith, "A Heideggerian Interpretation of 'The Way of Lao Tzu,'" in *Ching Feng* (Hong Kong), X, 2 (1967), 5-19. See also the special issue of *Philosophy East and West* on Heidegger and Asian Philosophy, XX, No. 3 (July 1979).

<sup>17</sup> On Nietzsche as a "cognitivist," see John Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche. A Study of His metaethics and Epistemology* (Ann Arbor, 1974), 98, 155, 182.