

30 STRIKES FOR NIETZSCHE: ZEN AND THE OVERMAN

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Nineteenth Century German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had a complicated and contentious relationship with Buddhism. At times, he offers praising words, especially when making comparisons to Christianity. Despite this, Nietzsche ultimately holds Buddhism in low esteem, castigating it as decadent and nihilistic. For Nietzsche, Buddhism leads to an eventual rejection of life, a yearning to be nothing, and a denial of the will to live. This paper will first attempt to display that Nietzsche's indictment of Buddhism is inaccurate and unfounded. Buddhism suffers neither from the condition of decadence nor from nihilism as Nietzsche understood them. Rather, it is life-affirming. After this defense, the paper will move to show that there are several important philosophical areas in which Nietzsche and Buddhism, particularly the Zen school of Buddhism, display considerable agreement. These areas include metaphysics of concepts, the relational nature of things, objects, and people, the structure of the self, and the ever-important subject of morality. It is my contention that, upon examining relevant stances and viewpoints in these areas, it will be seen that Nietzsche's ideal way of living is not so different than the Buddhist's.

"Decadence," in Nietzschean terms, is closely related to his distinction between the master and slave moralities. A decadent philosophy, like a slave morality, springs from an inherent defect. When one is unable to realize one's aims or desires, the decadent philosophy can serve as a method of self-preservation. Thus, for Nietzsche, weakness is the ultimate root of decadence.¹ Out of this weakness comes a great defiance with respect to reality. This rejection finally leads a person to accept what is harmful in place of what is beneficial. Fighting against natural instincts and indeed, victory over them, is damaging to the psyche and is the path that leads to decadence, which is never affirmative, but always responds through negation.² When not powerful enough to exercise their will in the world, the decadent person withdraws in some fashion, seeking to balance the scales of the pleasure they instinctively crave

¹ George De Huszar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of All Values," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6, no. 3 (1945): 259, www.jstor.org/stable/2707290.

² Michael Silk, "Nietzsche, Decadence, and the Greeks," *New Literary History* 35, no. 4 (2004): 594, <http://www.jstor.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/20057862>.

and the pains that are unavoidable as a result. This withdrawal is caused by the belief that there is an inextricable link between pleasure and pain, and a desire to minimize negative experiences by way of minimizing total experiences. Examples of philosophies that Nietzsche would have called decadent can be seen throughout human history: Stoicism, Epicureanism, and others that posit an unbreakable bond between pleasure and pain. It is only at the cost of life itself that adversity can be avoided.³

Nietzsche makes a distinction between those who suffer from decadence and those who are free of it in *Beyond Good and Evil* when he writes, “Wisdom: that seems to the populace to be a kind of flight, a means and artifice for withdrawing successfully from a bad game; but the *genuine* philosopher - does it not seem to *us*, my friends? Lives ‘unphilosophically’ and ‘unwisely,’ above all, *imprudently*, and feels the obligation and burden of a hundred attempts and temptations of life - he risks *himself* constantly, he plays *this* bad game.”⁴ Here we can see his demarcation made clear. To the general population, including those who seek to use Buddhism selfishly, it seems the wiser choice to reject the world. If the deck is indeed stacked, why play? As Nietzsche predicted, his answer does seem unwise. The person free of decadence understands the nature of the game at hand, the tribulations involved, and perhaps even the futility of their efforts. However, this person refuses to deny reality; it’s the only game in town, and they want to play.

In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche specifically criticizes Buddhism for suffering from decadence. He goes on to write that Buddhist lessons and practice are predicated upon the fact that Buddhists are particularly sensitive and susceptible to pain.⁵ However, when we examine Buddhist teachings we see that they are actually tools to remove the pessimism that is caused by decadence, and also the will towards decadence.

³ De Huszar, 262, 265.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Translated by Helen Zimmern, Introduction by Costica Bradatan, (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc, 2007), 96.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, Penguin Books, 1954), 586-590.

Relating an account of his experience before he attained enlightenment, the Buddha gives a firsthand testimonial about the suffering caused by a decadent mindset:

I thought, Why don't I grit my teeth, press my tongue against my palate, and use my mind to repress my mind? Then, as a wrestler might take hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than he, and, in order to restrain and coerce that person, he has to hold him down constantly without letting go for a moment, so I gritted my teeth, pressed my tongue against my palate, and used my mind to suppress my mind. As I did this, I was bathed in sweat. Although I was not lacking in strength, although I maintained mindfulness and did not fall from mindfulness, my body and my mind were not at peace, and I was exhausted by these efforts. This practice caused other feelings of pain to arise in me besides the pain associated with the austerities, and I was not able to tame my mind.⁶

Here, the pre-enlightenment Gautama sought domination over his mind and the world explicitly. At this point in Gautama's life, Nietzsche's charge of decadence may have carried more weight. A component of Gautama's ascension to Buddhahood was the realization that this type of craving for power *over* the world is actually a cause of much suffering. This type of decadent desire can be understood in Buddhist terms through an analysis of two primary causes of suffering, the craving to be and the craving to not be. Like all concepts in Buddhism, these cravings are and ought to be thought of as interrelated; a desire to not be quick to anger can be seen as a step towards being more patient. Gautama's realization regarding these cravings, underpinning the Second Noble Truth, which is concerned with the arising of suffering, is that the moment these desires are created as a reaction to the world is the moment suffering is created along with them. Because these desires are defined by an already existing relation to the world, they are to be renounced.⁷ We can see the parallel here to Nietzsche's thought. Seeking to balance any pleasures and pains as Nietzsche would have prohibited would necessarily relate one's desire to those feelings; attempts

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*, (Berkeley, Parallax Press, 1998), 14.

⁷ Ajahn Sumedho, *The Four Noble Truths*, (London, Amaravati Publications, 1992), 28-30.

to be free of these relational desires and the potentially negative feelings that arise out of them is the path that Buddhism endorses.

In one Buddhist tale, the demon Mara visits the Buddha and complains of his nature as a demon. His demonic minions are in revolt, and he is losing his high status. The Buddha responds in kind, bemoaning the fact that some people come to him to seek personal gain, and selfishly misuse his teachings. The discussion culminates with the Buddha offering to trade places with Mara, which Mara declines. The Buddha then advises Mara to obey his nature as best he can.⁸ This story contains a lesson demonstrating that Buddhism contains the same wariness of the decadent condition as did Nietzsche. The farcical offer made by the Buddha to trade places with Mara is meant to force Mara to realize his own failure to resist Nietzschean decadence. The understanding gained, that it would be impossible for the Buddha and Mara to trade places and a desire towards this is foolish, is a wholehearted rejection of decadence and the ensuing mindset. Rather than seeking victory over one's instincts, denying them, one must instead affirm them.

Care should be taken not to conclude that Buddhism leads one to believe that they ought to perpetuate harmful vices, or follow their natural instincts towards that which is harmful. Rather, Buddhism advocates that one must not make that choice based on the circumstances of their environment. Markedly, Zen Buddhism promotes this type of unilateral affirmation. This type of affirmation must not be relative to any pre-existing affirmation, and cannot contain any inherent opposite to which it has a connection.⁹ This preferred type of choosing is a far cry from the pessimistic withdrawal from existence that is implied by Nietzsche's decadence. In a parallel, the moment of awakening in Buddhism is accompanied by a freedom from all illusory sensations. When one is so enlightened, one is able to make choices free of relation to those concepts and any resulting emotions that arise as a result of that relation.¹⁰

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Mud, No Lotus*, (Berkeley, Parallax Press, 2014), 49-52.

⁹ D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (New York, Grove Press, 1964), 38, 55-6.

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, Translated by Albert and Jean Low, Introduction by Philip Kapleau, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974, 41.

This is one of the most resounding rejections of the claim that Buddhism endorses a decadent worldview.

If one is free of all impeding relations, then one can't possibly make choices out of decadence.

Another parable that exhibits the hostility Buddhism holds for choices made out of decadence concerns a monk's method of instruction. To all of his disciple monks the master proclaimed that, regardless of their behavior in the hall, whether they remained silent or spoke, each would receive thirty strikes from his stick.¹¹ The goal of this lesson is not to beat the students senseless, but to give them the true freedom to decide whether or not to make any utterances without fear of punishment. The power conferred here is that of affirmation; whether the disciple speaks or remains silent, the choice is meant to be theirs, independent of the master. Similar to Nietzsche's genuine philosopher playing the bad game, the disciple can invent no alternate possibility for which to strive. It is impossible to avoid the thirty coming strikes. To comprehend the Buddhist outlook in this manner is to understand that to practice Buddhism is to implicitly agree to Nietzsche's playing of this "bad game."

Based upon the accusations made, Nietzsche's own prescriptions towards avoiding a life of decadence, and an analysis of the above Buddhist teachings and lessons, we can confidently conclude that decadence is not a quality that is inherent to Buddhism. Rather than suffer as a result of a purely reactionary mindset, Buddhism implores one to choose out of one's own volition. While there are undeniably countless teachings related to all schools of Buddhism that rely on negation, this negation is not one that is borne out of decadence, as this negation is meant to be used as a skillful means towards realizing deeper truths on the path towards enlightenment - negation is not the end itself. But a lack of decadence does not imply a necessary lack of nihilism, though Nietzsche very often paired the conditions. Nietzsche hardly stands alone in his assertion that Buddhism is a nihilistic religion. With its main teachings including the notions of nonself, nonexistence, and extinguishing, it is understandable that Buddhism suffers from a popular reputation as purely negative. In the following section I will analyze

¹¹ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 38.

several of Nietzsche's specific criticisms of Buddhism with respect to nihilism and exhibit their failure to apply in light of proper understanding of Buddhist principles.

Nietzsche's body of work contains multiple references to Buddhism as nihilistic. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche categorizes the demands of Buddhism as aiming at nothingness, standing antithetical to life and existence.¹² Again in *The Antichrist*, there are accusations of nihilism, alongside those of decadence.¹³ Nietzsche claims in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that the Buddhist yearns for nothingness, *nirvana*, claims that the end result of this yearning would be a state of hypnotism and hibernation for man.¹⁴ Many accusations of nihilism are found throughout *The Will to Power*, with perhaps the most concrete describing Buddhism as passively nihilistic with the aim of acting as a salve for those who are suffering.¹⁵ All of these accusations display a critical misunderstanding of the Buddhist concept of nothingness, *nirvana*, and Buddhist intent; had Nietzsche been less dismissive of these principles, and instead had properly understood them, he would have seen that they may in fact form the basis for the active nihilism for which he advocated in that same passage in *Will to Power*.

First, let us consider from *Genealogy* the notion that Buddhism contains a demand for nothingness, which should not be synonymized with *nirvana*. The concept of nothingness posited by Buddhism can be traced to the assertion of nonself.¹⁶ A proper comprehension of nonself is necessary in order to distinguish between the truths of nothingness and *nirvana*. Buddhist thought contends that because everything that exists bears the mark of impermanence, there is no being or thing that contains a separate and distinct Self that is unique and intrinsic. The Buddhist notion of nonself can be illustrated through deconstruction¹⁷ If we attempt to deconstruct an object, let us take a wooden desk as our

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Horace B. Samuel, introduction by Costica Bradatan, (New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2006), 61.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 586

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 98.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, Vintage Books, 1968), 18.

¹⁶ Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 101.

¹⁷ Hanh, *Heart*, 129.

example, we see that when we attempt to locate an unchanging Self, our efforts quickly unravel; the desk is made only of non-desk elements. The wood is sourced from trees, which grow from light and water, which have their causes, *ad infinitum*. The aforementioned impermanence of all things also implies that there is no Self that can be imbued into anything that will be an enduring Self. In fact, there is nothing that remains the same for even two consecutive *ksanas*, the shortest period of time in the Buddhist canon.¹⁸

Upon understanding nonself in one case, a generalization is made, and the Buddhist maintains that nonself applies to everything, living or otherwise. This conclusion is embodied in the *Prajnaparamita-Hridaya Sutra* succinctly: “Thus, Sariputra, all things have the character of emptiness, they have no beginning, no end...”¹⁹ From this position, we can better understand the Buddhist concept of nothingness as a way of simply asserting the impermanence and ensuing nonself of all things. The insight of nothingness is not meant to inspire an extinguishing of the Self out of some desire towards a metaphysically blissful state. Nothingness demonstrates that there is and *never was* an independent Self that requires extinguishing.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes that that which teaches negation will lead to a resultant state of hypnosis in man, akin to hibernation in some animals, a subtle jab considering *nirvana* has been described as an awakening.²⁰ However, in Buddhism, negation is merely used as a skillful means. In at least one lecture, the Buddha referred to his teachings of impermanence and nonexistence as a raft, meant for crossing and not for carrying.²¹ To make negation the focus and end of one’s life, instead of simply a means of understanding, would be to aim at nothingness in the way that Nietzsche outlines. Impermanence and nonexistence are not meant to be worshipped as the ends in themselves, but used as tools to realize *nirvana*. Upon comprehension of *nirvana*, Nietzsche’s prediction of hibernation as a result of negation carries no weight.

¹⁸ Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 35.

¹⁹ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 20-1.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 98. Nietzsche begins this section by asking whether an “ascetic” can serve as a physician, another point of confirmation that Nietzsche is associating Buddhism with his criticisms in this passage, as the Buddha was often referred to as a physician or doctor.

²¹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (New York, Grove Press, 1959), 12.

While *nirvana* can be defined as “extinguishing” and “cessation,” it should not be viewed as seeking to deny or negate life and existence. *Nirvana* is instead the extinguishing of clinging to what we believe we know about all notions and concepts. In the *Heart Sutra*, it is repeated time and again that there is no birth and no death.²² The inevitable conclusion of this annihilation of concepts come by negation, as *nirvana* is the logical end of impermanence and nonself taken to the extreme. Wherever one begins, proceeding via the methods of impermanence and nonself, one faces both an infinite regression and progression to the destruction of all ideas. This is not a symptom of nihilism in Buddhism. Rather, it should be thought of as simply seeking the destruction of all definitions.

In his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki elaborates on the sort of negation that is employed by Buddhism. As negation, it affirms by way of transcending logical dualism. In Buddhist thought, immersion in logical dualism will lead to a state of continued ignorance. It is because of this ignorant outlook that Buddhism appears to negate as it affirms. What Buddhism negates then is the application of limitations and definitions as it, at the same time, affirms the underlying absolute Truth.²³ At its end, the Buddhist negation is not a nihilistic negation proclaiming literal nothingness, but an affirmation that is beyond natural linguistic constraints.

This method of conceptual annihilation would not have been altogether foreign to Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s fascination with the Greek pre-Socratics, specifically Heraclitus, is well-documented.²⁴ Beyond this popular acknowledgement, the link is also self-professed. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche states, “I retained some doubt in the case of *Heraclitus*, in whose proximity I feel altogether warmer and better than anywhere else. The affirmation of passing away *and destroying*, which is the decisive feature of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; *becoming*, along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of *being* - all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to

²² Hanh, *Heart*, 137

²³ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 21-23.

²⁴ A. H. J. Knight, "Nietzsche and Epicurean Philosophy," *Philosophy* 8, no. 32 (1933): 431.
<http://www.jstor.org/colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/3746535>.

date.”²⁵ One of the more famous aphorisms attributed to Heraclitus tells us, “And the up and the down is one and the same thing: The way up and down is one and the same.”²⁶ Many aphorisms attributed to Heraclitus contain similar references to the unity of opposites. The similarity between Buddhism’s rejection of logical dualism and Heraclitus’ conceptualization of antitheses is expressly noted in an essay by D. T. Suzuki concerning Zen Buddhism and nihilism.²⁷ Heraclitus was not a Buddhist, but here he was beginning to comprehend the truth of *nirvana*. ‘Up’ has no Self that can exist independently of ‘down.’ Both must arise together, and lacking one, neither is. So it is for all notions.

Now that we see there is no metaphysical relationship to be had with *nirvana*, we can turn to the concern of what is to be done upon the realization of *nirvana*. Does Buddhism promote a passive nihilism, as Nietzsche charges? Is the ultimate lesson that one should do nothing, rather than do something?

First, we look to the Buddhist Five Remembrances. The first four are concerned with impermanence and nonself, but the fifth is notably different. It states, “My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.”²⁸ The lesson in this remembrance is another conclusion of nonself. In the absence of anything that can be said to contain an unchanging Self, the only thing that can be truly said to exist *is* action and consequence. Interbeing. To aim at the disintegration in such a way that Nietzsche ascribes to Buddhism is to aim at a negation of the absolute Truth. While it is doubtful that Buddhism would unequivocally prohibit personal isolation, the decision to isolate must not, as discussed before, be predicated upon some violent reaction to reality.

This question of, “what is left after negation?” is not one that is constrained to non-Buddhists. Suzuki considers what may happen should a disciple ask this question of a master, presuming that the

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*. Translated, edited, and with commentary by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, Vintage Books, 1967), 273.

²⁶ G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments - A Critical Study*, introduction, text, and translation by G. S. Kirk, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1954), 105.

²⁷ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 22.

²⁸ Hanh, *Heart*, 124.

master may strike the student and demand an explanation for what the strike was, if not nothing.²⁹ The lesson may be harsh, but it appears effective; once the extinguishing of all concepts is realized, all that belongs to reality is action. Yesterday may definitively not exist, but yesterday undeniably happened. In another relation, Suzuki gives us the following:

When Hyakujo wished to decide who would be the next chief of Tai-kuei-shan monastery, he called in two of his chief disciples, and producing a pitcher, which a Buddhist monk generally carries about him, said to them, “Do not call it a pitcher, but tell me what it is.” The first one replied, “It cannot be called a piece of wood.” The Abbot did not consider the reply quite to the mark; thereupon the second one came forward, lightly pushed the pitcher down, and without making any remark quietly left the room. He was chosen to be the new abbot...³⁰

Here is an insight in plain practice, with no elaboration given or necessary. The first monk, while advanced in his practice, is nonetheless still bound by negation. The pitcher is not a piece of wood, but simple negation still falls short of realizing truth. The second monk exhibits understanding in his reply. To negate still means to define and, necessarily, limit; therefore, the only truth that exists in tandem with the truth of *nirvana* is action.

If Nietzsche is determined to name Buddhism nihilistic, then the above demonstrates that it advocates a type of nihilism of which Nietzsche would approve, a nihilism that leads one to invert all negation, affirm, and act. This stands in contrast to the description that Nietzsche gives in *Will to Power* of Buddhism as “weary,” “a passive nihilism,” and “worn out, exhausted.” But Nietzsche was clearly convinced that Buddhism was afflicted with nihilism and the aforementioned decadence, regardless of any praise he may have given to Buddhism *contra* Christianity. Why was Nietzsche so committed to this idea, despite such parallels in Nietzsche’s own thinking and that of those he admired?

²⁹ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 21

³⁰ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 40-1

There are several potential explanations for Nietzsche's mischaracterizations of Buddhist notions and Buddhism itself. A simple position, yet one that cannot be discarded, is that Nietzsche simply lacked the ability to fully grasp the truths of Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, as a result of the constraints of language and cultural ideology.³¹ While it is possible that these barriers were never truly overcome by Nietzsche, I believe that Nietzsche held the truths of Buddhism in higher esteem than he may have even himself believed. As late as *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes:

With the highest respect, I except the name of *Heraclitus*. When the rest of the philosophic folk rejected the testimony of the senses because they showed multiplicity and change, he rejected their testimony because they showed things as if they had permanence and unity...what we *make* of their testimony, that alone introduces lies; for example, the lie of unity, the lie of thinghood, of substance, of permanence. "Reason" is the cause of our falsification of the testimony of the senses. Insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, and change, they do not lie. But Heraclitus will remain eternally right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction.³²

The reason that Nietzsche speaks of in this passage directly correlates with the concept of logical dualism explored earlier. This and similar passages in his later writings serve to demonstrate that if there were indeed insurmountable restrictions on Nietzsche's interpretations of Buddhist concepts such as nothingness and *nirvana*, they were more likely based in language than in culture.

Additionally, it must be considered that many of Nietzsche's misconceptions and reservations concerning Buddhism likely came as a result of the profound impact that Schopenhauer had on Nietzsche's development as a philosopher. Schopenhauer had a well-known admiration for Buddhism and Nietzsche would have gleaned much of his knowledge of Buddhism from Schopenhauer. While Schopenhauer's writings have been understood to portray a far deeper comprehension of Buddhism than

³¹ Brian Schroeder, "Dancing Through Nothing: Nietzsche, the Kyoto School, and Transcendence," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 37 (2009): 51, <http://www.jstor.org/colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/20717958>.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, Penguin Books, 1954), 480-1.

Nietzsche, Schopenhauer nonetheless bears a responsibility for Buddhism's pessimistic and stoic reputation.³³ Schopenhauer's interpretation of *nirvana* as annihilationist would have heavily influenced how Nietzsche saw the concept.³⁴ In light of Nietzsche's eventual rejection of much of Schopenhauer's thought, and the level of understanding that Nietzsche displays of Buddhism, it is possible that a number of Nietzsche's criticisms of Buddhism are simply projected criticisms of Schopenhauer's philosophy.

Given this examination, I believe it can be concluded that Buddhism suffers neither from the decadence that Nietzsche so abhors nor from the passive nihilism which he fears. Quite the contrary, many Buddhist principles are either in agreement with Nietzsche's own expressed philosophy or reminiscent of those that Nietzsche personally admired. If Buddhism appears as apathetic towards the world, it is because it promotes the type of pure action that comes as a result of freedom *from* Nietzsche's decadence. While Buddhism certainly annihilates, and may seem to seek to annihilate everything, the manner in which it does so simultaneously affirms all that exists in precisely the same instant. Free of these afflictions, it is my contention that Nietzsche should hold the Buddha in esteem similar to the way in which he does Heraclitus.

One of the areas in which there is considerable agreement between Buddhism and Nietzsche is in the realm of metaphysics. Generally speaking, Nietzsche and the Buddha both maintained that metaphysical concerns were not of particular relevance or importance. We will see shortly that Nietzsche ultimately claims that the world in which we live is the only world, but he does concede that it is logically possible that some metaphysical world apart from our own does exist. However, despite this concession, Nietzsche argues that even if a metaphysical world did exist, we would be so far removed and distant from it that it would have absolutely no bearing on our lives. As such, any purported knowledge regarding

³³ Heinrich Dumoulin, "Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 3 (1981): 467, www.jstor.org/stable/2709187.

³⁴ J. Jeffrey Franklin, "BUDDHISM AND MODERN EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM: JEAN-PAUL SARTRE MEETS NAGARJUNA," *Religion & Literature* 44, no. 1 (2012): 77. <http://www.jstor.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/23347059>.

a metaphysical world would be quite worthless to us.³⁵ Beyond worthlessness, we have already explored the notion that focus on an other world, such as a separate afterlife, is for Nietzsche a danger that leads to decadence. The Buddha had similar reservations when it came to metaphysical questions. Often, when a question with a metaphysical nature was put before him, the Buddha would simply refuse to say anything at all in response. One such sutta states:

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One: “Now then, Master Gotama, is there a self?”

When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

“Then is there no self?”

A second time, the Blessed One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, “Why, lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?”

“Ānanda, if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmans who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those contemplatives & brahmans who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of consciousness]. If I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?”

“No, lord.”

“And if I—being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self I used to have now not exist?’”³⁶

The Buddha’s reluctance to engage in such discussion, and his response to his attendant belies a position in line with Nietzsche’s. While the Buddha’s positions related to many of these questions are clear, and they have been preserved by Buddhists, it is not altogether

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, translated by Reginald John Hollingdale, introduction by Richard Schacht, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

³⁶ Thanissaro. “To Ananda, Ananda Sutta,” Dhamma Talks, acc 4/1/2019, https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN44_10.html.

beneficial to contemplate such metaphysical questions at length. Such rumination on questions of this nature, such as the problem of the existence of a self, has the potential to lead a person to be confused, alternating between the possible answers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Our time would be better spent carrying out action in the world, as opposed to fretting over metaphysical implications.

Both Buddhism and Nietzsche also hold that drawing a distinction between the sensible world and some other, ideal, world can cause problems, especially when the ideal world is considered preferable to the world that we inhabit. For Nietzsche, preferring an “true” world over the apparent world is one of the main causes of decadent worldviews, which, as discussed earlier, lead to a renunciation of this world. Nietzsche and Zen are similarly concerned with metaphysical anxiety, and examine questions related to this distinction between our apparent world and the imagined true world. Where does this notion of separation come from? Why does it seem to be a true distinction? Additionally, both consider the implications of living in a manner that prioritizes a conceptual world over reality as we perceive it.

According to Nietzsche, the modern Western metaphysical tradition that delineates between our world, the apparent world, and an ideal, “true,” world, has its roots in Plato. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche maintains that Plato performed a reversal in values by developing his philosophy of the Forms, eternal and unchanging absolutes from which our world is derived. Holding that concepts are somehow more real than our constantly changing universe, Plato drastically reinterpreted the world and promoted that interpretation in his philosophical dialogues. Nietzsche writes that this revaluation resulted in the consideration that the concepts are what are fundamental, rather than the world that we interact with. Nietzsche though, dismisses this notion of a ‘true’ world outright.³⁷ An apparently stable position that he held throughout his philosophical life, Nietzsche maintains that the idea of a true world is nothing but a

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 306.

human invention. Indeed, he goes so far to call it a curse on humanity, one that has resulted in an improper revaluation of values as well as decadent lifestyles.³⁸

In Zen, the notion of an eternal, unchanging world is also *concepta non grata*. Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki holds that the human affinity for conceptualization and the recognition of logic together contribute to the error of positing an abstract, ideal world. He argues that in recognizing apparent contradictions, humans conceived of a world without those contradictions. But, we commit an error when we assume that such a world must exist on some other, metaphysical plane.³⁹ So where do these assumptions of an eternal world come from? For Suzuki, and other zen adherents, this assumption is simply a mistake of bad logic, our reasoning running away with itself.

Suzuki writes that it is the intellect that defines things, divides them, and then polarizes. In a sense, the intellect creates from a whole concept a discrete spectrum, along which judgements can be made. The seemingly opposing ends are a mere effect of intellectual construct, and should not be taken as representative of reality.⁴⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh echoes this concern regarding the preference for concepts over what they are meant to represent, stating that conceptualization is not the proper method for grasping the nature of reality. He agrees with Suzuki in that by conceptualizing, what we are doing is cutting and dividing reality into apparently discrete parts, but these parts are never meant to be independent of one another. This division is what keeps concepts from representing reality as it is, due to the fact that none of the concepts captures the entire picture, so to speak. Therefore, knowledge of reality that is absolutely conceptual is an erroneous notion.⁴¹

Similar to the Zen masters, Nietzsche also concludes that it is a failure of logic, applied to the realm of metaphysics, that gives us the eternal world. This logic implies that, for some concept A, the

³⁸ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 218.

³⁹ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "The Philosophy of Zen," *Philosophy East and West* 1, no. 2 (1951): 10-11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396845>.

⁴⁰ D. T. Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, edited by Christmas Humphreys, (London: Rider & Company, 1982), 13-14

⁴¹ Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 84-88.

antithetical concept not-A exists. Therefore, given that there is the imperfect world that we partake in, there is also an ideal, perfect world. Additionally, Nietzsche holds that this logical implication conveniently also serves to placate our wish for there to be such a perfect world in existence.⁴² Thus, logic and reason have failed humanity, and we have decided that reality as we perceive it is false. Moreover, the reasons on which we base this judgement of falseness, such as change and perceived contradiction, are what actually constitute its reality.⁴³ Nietzsche sees in this line of reasoning the same thought from which man invented an ego out of his separate drives.⁴⁴

Nietzsche continues in this vein, holding that there are no absolute concepts that can serve as forms for derivation, but rather that there is nothing that is not conditioned by the existence of another. Take for example, the following:

The world, apart from our condition of living in it, the world that we have not reduced to our being, our logic and psychological prejudices, does not exist as a world “in-itself”; it is essentially a world of relationships⁴⁵

Indeed, Nietzsche maintains even that we cannot have any relationship with a thing beyond that of a relational one; any sort of possession is an absurdity.⁴⁶ Instead, everything that is is conditionally tied to everything else. The world is, in a manner of speaking, a self-sustaining, interdependent web of existence. Everything is divided and separate, but is also in a sense unified through this mutually conditional relationship.

The Buddhist notion of the interdependence of all things closely mirrors this conditional tying that Nietzsche envisions, and for similar reasons regarding the illusion of antitheses. The idea of nothingness, or nonself, that was described earlier, is what eventually leads to the realization of the

⁴² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 310-311

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 315

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 308 -309

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 306

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 306, 313

interdependence of all things. In *Zen Keys*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that, as everything is interdependent, the existence of something implies the existence of everything. Additionally, because of this interdependence, our conceptualization of antitheses is rooted in error. As such, the true nature of reality is not represented by this type conceptualization.⁴⁷ Suzuki explains the logical paradox of antitheses, and how it results in a union rather than a division, and reveals the nature of interdependence.

To define the concept “F”, there must be at least one other thing that is “not F.” Because of this, the concept “not-F” is required for “F” to have its “F-ness.” Therefore, Zen holds that, within “F” is already “not-F,” for if this were not the case, there would be no genesis for “not-F,” and neither concept would exist. This is a relatively classic conundrum in philosophy, generally posed as “how can something originate from its opposite?” According to Suzuki, this apparent contradiction is just another malfunctioning of formal logic, and it is a flaw in human reasoning to attempt to reduce “true” existence to an abstract plane free from these contradictions.⁴⁸

To have the realization of this interdependent nature of reality is to experience and realize *sunyata*, which is sometimes translated as ‘emptiness.’ In an essay on Zen philosophy, D.T. Suzuki describes the world as being one of relativities. Similarly, the apparent antitheses that so often appear contradictory are not so. Reminiscent of Nietzsche, Suzuki holds the mystifying culprit to be none other than logic, specifically dualism. When we apply logic to the world, we conceptualize and divide, and move further away from experiencing *sunyata*. While logic may be a necessary tool for living our daily lives, it is also necessary to eschew logic if we truly wish to achieve this experience. Again, this notion of emptiness, or ‘no-thing-ness’ is considered to be what makes all of reality possible. Everything is conditioned by the existence of everything else present in the universe.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 36-38.

⁴⁸ Suzuki, “Philosophy of Zen,” 10.

⁴⁹ Suzuki, “Philosophy of Zen,” 4-5.

When we *do* fall prey to our logical presuppositions, the consequences can be dire, for both Nietzsche and Zen. Nietzsche, as discussed earlier, believed that striving to be closer to a world of ideas results in turning away from this world. We become decadent and uninterested in our lives, preferring ideas to reality. Eventually, death becomes preferable to life. For Zen, when we place our belief in something that is thought to be eternal, we fall victim to the suffering that is connected to conditioned states. A desire for these conditioned states will eventually lead one to desire for things to remain as they are, which we have determined Buddhism forbids, even in consecutive instants. This clinging to the current or desired state is an enormous cause of suffering. For Buddhists, one of the most severe conditioned states is identification with any type of ego or self.

This subject, the notion of the Self, is Another area in which there is much agreement between Nietzsche and Buddhism. To the point, both maintain that there is nothing of humans that might be thought of as a particular Self, no lasting 'I'.

Buddhism describes a very particular type of suffering that is caused by conditioned states. Perhaps the most dangerous of these states is identification with an 'I' or ego. To hold the viewpoint that there is a continuous, unchanging identity does nothing more than invite future suffering. Instead, Buddhism claims that we are nothing more than a combination of sensations, the Five Aggregates.

The First Aggregate is that of Matter or Form. This is the entire physical universe and our interpretations of it, to include our sensory input as given by our bodies. It also contains some thoughts and ideas, which are in the realm of mind-objects.⁵⁰ The Second Aggregate is that of sensations. This includes our original sensations as well as our feelings about the input that we receive from our sense organs, whether we are pleased, upset, or ambivalent. The six types of sensations that Buddhism says humans experience are the visible, audible, olfactory, tastable, tangible, and mental. Mental sensations again relate to ideas, thoughts, and mind-objects.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Walpola, *Buddha*, 20-21

⁵¹ Walpola, *Buddha*, 21

The Third Aggregate is the Aggregate of Perceptions. Akin to the Second Aggregate, perceptions are formed by way of our six forms of sensory contact with the external world.⁵² Our perceptions are impermanent as well as subjective; they are influenced by our current feelings and can therefore be erroneously shaped.⁵³ The Fourth Aggregate is the Aggregate of Mental Formations. This domain includes all of our mental activity and volitional activity, as well as our will before we take action.⁵⁴

The Fifth Aggregate is consciousness. Again, for each of the six types of sensory input, there is a type of consciousness. As an example, there would be a type of olfactory consciousness, with a fragrance as the object of that consciousness and the nose as its basis. Since each type of consciousness is dependent upon its sensations, the six are independent of each other.⁵⁵ It follows that were one to become blind, they would no longer be capable of visual consciousness.

The most important facet that is common to all of the above Aggregates is their impermanence. Our physical bodies age and die over a lifetime, our sensations come and go more frequently, and we may even be deprived of various types of consciousness as we live and age. Given that a person is nothing more than the combination of these Aggregates, there is no room for any enduring component that can truly be called a Self. What, then, is the cause of our confusion?

We saw earlier that in Buddhism, nothing remains the same in two consecutive *ksanas*, or instants. This alone is a clue that points to the eventual realization that there is no enduring ego. However, due to the nature of perceptual experience and consciousness, the Five Aggregates come together in a person to be experienced in a continuous fashion. The stringing together of individual moments in consciousness gives the impression that they are being experienced by a persistent ego. However, there is

⁵² Walpola, *Buddha*, 22

⁵³ Hanh, *Heart*, 53, 179.

⁵⁴ Walpola, *Buddha*, 22

⁵⁵ Walpola, *Buddha*, 23-25

nothing other than the action, or moment, itself.⁵⁶ With this in mind, we can find a more Buddhist formulation of ‘I think, therefore I am,’ in ‘A thought occurs.’

Nietzsche explores this concept in the first essay of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he is critical of philosophers who have come before him. Over the course of several sections related to metaphysics, Nietzsche deconstructs a sentence that philosophers have taken as an “immediate certainty”: ‘I think.’ He claims that, upon inspection, even that short phrase dregs up many metaphysical questions, such as ‘where did the ego come from,’ and ‘why is it that ego is considered the cause of thought.’⁵⁷

Continuing in this line of questioning, Nietzsche points out that thoughts come of their own accord, and are not expressly willed into being. Thus, to utter the phrase ‘I think’ is just an exercise of the ego, and a misrepresentation of what actually occurs. Moreover, the concession that most philosophers will give, that it is not ‘I’ who thinks, but ‘one thinks,’ is not a concession at all. This ‘one,’ for Nietzsche, still involves interpretation of the action from an outside perspective that doesn’t really exist. ‘One’ is nothing more than a linguistic retreat from ‘I,’ and a more intellectually honest philosopher would be inclined also to dispense with it altogether.⁵⁸

Ultimately, Nietzsche arrived at an explanation for this natural human inclination to believe in an abiding self that is strikingly similar to the aforementioned Buddhist reasoning. It is because we perceive our consciousness to be a consistent, near-constant state that we identify it as our center.⁵⁹ Rather than identifying with the mere phenomenon of consciousness, Nietzsche seems to hold that we are simultaneously more and less than that consciousness.

Nietzsche’s description of what constitutes a human being also seems to rhyme closely with what the Buddhist says. Every person is simply an amalgamation. For Nietzsche, this comes in the form of

⁵⁶ G. P. Malalasekera, “The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West*, no. 14 (1964): 147-149, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396982>.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 16.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 16-17.

⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, Random House, Inc., 1974), 85

what he calls drives. These drives arise and fall, and may reappear, but they are not unchanging, not eternal, and are certainly not all-encompassing.⁶⁰ The single, continual 'I' for Nietzsche, like Buddhism, is nothing more than a fabrication. While we are more than simple consciousness, these drives do not reach the level of being called a Self.

For Nietzsche, these individual drives that make up a 'person' could include those things that are still instinctual in humans, our other impulses, inclinations, and generally, whatever might serve to motivate action. Further, the actions that are taken belong to person as well. These drives are in continual flux, each competing with the rest for supremacy, an expression of Nietzsche's overall philosophy of will to power. This final result of constructing this person is a combination of seemings, actions, and effects. In effect, Nietzsche condenses the the notion of a person into the sum total of their doings.⁶¹ Upon a closer examination of the Buddhist Second, Third and Fourth Aggregates, we will see how Nietzsche's version of a self is compatible with being a combination of these Aggregates.

The Second Aggregate is sensations. In a manner of speaking, this aggregate is made up of the raw data that we receive from our sense organs, and our immediate reactions to them. The aggregate of sensations influences the Third Aggregate, which is that of perceptions. This aggregate includes conceptualization, taking notice of subject and object, as well as giving names, which I believe would include value judgements.⁶² Both of these in turn inform the Fourth Aggregate, which is that of mental formations. In fact, they are themselves mental formations, but are given their own category as Aggregates due to their extreme relevance. These mental formations, of which there are forty-nine in addition to the two exceptions, are all innate within a person and manifest at different times.⁶³ The Fourth Aggregate also includes volition, whether in will or action. This is also the Aggregate from which karma

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 266-272

⁶¹ Steven D. Hales, "Recent Work on Nietzsche," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2000): 327, <http://www.jstor.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/20010008>.

⁶² Hanh, *Heart*, 178-180

⁶³ Hanh, *Heart*, 180

is borne. The Buddha said “O bhikkhus, it is volition that I call karma. Having willed, one acts through body, speech, and mind.”⁶⁴

With all of this in mind, I believe that Nietzsche’s bundle of competing drives can be thought of as fitting squarely within the categories of these Aggregates. In particular, the drives themselves seem to fall within the scope of the Aggregate of Mental Formations. Both Nietzsche’s drives and Buddhism’s mental formations are the aspect that serves to motivate willed action. We have already seen that all that ultimately belongs to the Buddhist world is action, which is an expression of these volitional mental formations. Nietzsche’s bundle of drives functions in the same manner, expressing their will to power through action in the world.

One challenge to the notion of the Five Aggregates representing all that is a self comes in the form of demanding an executive, and upon examination, it seems as though it would apply to Nietzsche’s theory of drives as well. This challenge is based on the principle of anti-reflexivity, which states that an agent cannot operate on itself, a principle that is accepted by Buddhism. Since each of the Five Aggregates are impermanent and can be actively changed, it appears to follow that there must be something external to each of the aggregates that is able to act on them. It is this actor that must constitute the Self. The Buddhist response is one that is in agreement with Nietzsche’s self of drives. Even though none of the Aggregates can work on itself, there is nothing that would prevent one from acting on another. This reply is also compatible with Nietzsche’s philosophy of the drives, given that they can at times be at odds with each other within a person.⁶⁵

It has been noted before that Nietzsche may have in fact been influenced in his philosophical development regarding the self by his studies of Buddhism, offering praise especially concerning the concept of non-self.⁶⁶ Regardless of whether or not Nietzsche’s eventual position was heavily influenced

⁶⁴ Walpola, *Buddha*, 22

⁶⁵ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy - An Introduction*, (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2007), 47-50.

⁶⁶ Hales, 328.

by Buddhism in his conceptualization of the self, the two traditions are in close agreement with one another. We have seen that both deny the presence of a continuous ego, or 'I.' Additionally, their positive statements appear in parallel. A person is not to be considered anything other than a coming together of interpretations about the world, and the actions that are taken by the person with respect to the world.

In addition to his philosophy with respect to the individual person, Nietzsche also takes his idea of selflessness even further, claiming that, in the study of mankind, former philosophers have made an exception of man with respect to nature. In *Human, all too Human*, Nietzsche states that philosophers study man as something that has remained the same throughout history, which is a terrible point of departure for investigation.⁶⁷ Making humanity a kind of static entity leaves no room for change or development. This changing, or becoming, is a characteristic of everything that exists in the universe, which includes humanity by default. There are echoes of this viewpoint when Nietzsche states that, while Western civilization has generally held the ancient Greeks in high esteem, we absolutely would not even *begin* to truly understand the Greeks as they lived, and may even find ourselves a little more than taken aback by some of the more strength-focused elements of their culture. As far removed as we are today, we would have very little frame of reference in which to understand the Greeks as Greeks. Our world is not their world, and judgements we could make about their lives would be founded on very little, especially moral judgements.⁶⁸

Morality, and the relationship that one should have with morality, is a topic that concerned Nietzsche greatly throughout his entire productive life. One of his most famous theories is his conceptualization of two types of morality - the master morality and the slave, or herd morality. As it would only be necessary to serve as a descriptive foil to the master morality, the notion of a herd morality will not be explored here in depth; suffice it to say that for Nietzsche, the herd moralities exist to serve the

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Human*, 12.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 1954), 33, 35.

needs of the majority of civilization, functioning mainly as a salve, a refuge for those who have fallen into decadence, or some other similarly poor condition. In contrast, expression of the master morality is not at all a reactionary process, but one of spontaneous affirmation.

The master morality is not one that seeks rationalization, it merely seeks its realization in the world. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche seems to instinctualize the master morality, comparing it to faith of a sort, whereas the faculty of reason, employed by members of the herd, serves to critique that faith by way of questioning. Nietzsche makes reference to Socrates, elevated in the text as the chief historical proponent of reason, a walking example of the questioning employed by the herd morality. In many dialogues, Socrates' verbal sparring partners give simplistic answers to Socrates' questions, and often there seems to be little thought put into them by the speaker. Rather than being pitiable, Nietzsche suggests that these shallow answers are instead expressing the master morality.⁶⁹ They spring forth, shamelessly proclaiming what is beautiful, or what is just. This type of morality, this affirmative spirit, does not concern itself with any type of universality. The highest type of person is the type of person who can create, with respect to himself, his own good and evil, and do so without much concern for their benefit to others.⁷⁰

This affirmative spirit is also promoted in Zen practice, in both descriptive terms and moral terms. In his writing on Zen, Suzuki describes a type of affirmative worldview that forbids any other interpretation. He argues that since applying concepts to the world is naturally restrictive, doing so in a moral sense is necessarily limiting. These definitive practices divide things off, rather than take part in any creative process. On the other hand, Zen is concerned with affirming things as they are brought before us, which Suzuki argues is upsetting to our normal intellectual mode of interpretation. Zen, according to Suzuki, encourages us to overcome the traditional, existing concepts related to morality such as good,

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, 79.

⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 1954), 306.

evil, virtuous or vicious, and not be bound to a smaller world.⁷¹ This outlook with respect to morality is an application of the ideas explored earlier regarding concepts. Applying reasoning to morality creates a falsely constructed polarized spectrum, and judgements based on that spectrum will be thusly overly restrictive.

Just because morality is considered from a subjective point of view does not lessen its importance. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche maintains that one should approach the problem of morality as one ought approach every other problem - with full conviction. One must have a personal attachment to the issue being considered, a great passion, if one is to make any real progress in the area of self-development.⁷² Additionally, given that any individual's experiences in the world are subjective, their relationship with morality would therefore also be a personal one. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that one should carefully keep one's own virtues to oneself, and not attempt to share them in common with anyone else. He writes of these individual virtues: "...there is little prudence in it, and least of all the reason of all men. But this bird built its nest with me."⁷³

Here there is also some implication that these virtues, being beyond reasoning and seemingly beyond ultimate control, are of non-decadent nature. They are spontaneous, like the answers of Socrates' interlocutors. Nietzsche makes another metaphorical reference to the relationship between an individual and morality by comparing an individual's morality to their own personal sun, from which comes all affirmation. He argues that the proper philosopher realizes that an infinite number of these suns, moral sources, should be created and that one should not judge themselves based on the moral source of another.⁷⁴

This same personal sun must be what casts each Zen practitioner's shadow, the metaphorical personal attachment to Zen described by D.T. Suzuki. In *Living by Zen*, Suzuki considers that there are

⁷¹ Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, 13-14

⁷² Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 283-284.

⁷³ Nietzsche, "Zarathustra," 148

⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 231-232.

myriad ways to attain satori, the state of Zen-consciousness, or enlightenment.⁷⁵ This attitude towards the personal pursuit of enlightenment appears to be borne of the Buddhist tendency towards transcending traditional definitions and ideologies, even ideologies that are Buddhist in origin. Suzuki relates a lesson that is demonstrative of the Zen attitude towards morality:

In the monastery of Nansen monks of the eastern wing quarrelled with those of the western wing over the possession of a cat. The master seized it and lifting it before the disputing monks, said, "If any of you can say something to save the poor animal, I will let it go." As nobody came forward to utter a word of affirmation Nansen cut the object of dispute in two, thus putting an end forever to an unproductive quarrelling over "yours" and "mine." Later on Joshu came back from an outing and Nansen put the case before him, and asked what he would have done to save the animal. Joshu without further ado took off his straw sandals and, putting them on his head, went out. Seeing this, Nansen said, "If you were here at the time you would have saved the cat."⁷⁶

It seems like the killing of a cat to settle a dispute should be antithetical to Buddhism's principles, especially that of compassion. But, based on Nansen's eventual response that Joshu would have saved the cat, the killing was neither a foregone conclusion, nor without purpose. Nansen, in his threat, was attempting to lead his monks to a moment of enlightenment. Although he had killed an innocent cat, it was threatened, plausibly, out of a deep caring for his students, and a desire for one or more of them to attain satori.

Ultimately, Nansen appears to have failed in this attempt, and bears responsibility for the violence that he committed. While killing is clearly not consistent with compassionate practice, the entirety of Nansen's motivation and actions *are* consistent with Zen's outlook regarding the individual nature of morality with respect to actions. Given that he was the master at a Zen monastery, it would be fair to assume that it was intention to lead his students to enlightenment, and not just slaughter a cat.

⁷⁵ Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, 125.

⁷⁶ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 41

Indeed, this viewpoint is upheld by D.T. Suzuki in several places. In an essay concerning the nature of the relationship between morality and Zen practice, he writes that there is considered to be no objective standard for moral action, as the concept of morality belongs to the finite world. Instead, the primary concern lies with the genesis for that action in its motivation. Zen, as a branch of Buddhism, does still recognize morality and its value in our lives, it simply holds that moral claims should only be evaluated from a subjective frame of reference.⁷⁷ Again considering Nansen's case, given that he was the monastery leader, it is likely that he was trying to spark some insight in one of the monks. The position that an action's motivation is inherently more important than the specific action itself is poignantly echoed by Nietzsche when he states "What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil."

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As with Zen though, we should not think that Nietzsche would necessarily endorse a moral free-for-all. In *Human, all too Human*, Nietzsche maintains his teleological view of man's development with respect to morality. He writes that those individuals that act out of cruelty are not to be considered at the same developmental level as modern man. Specifically, he says:

We have to regard men who are cruel as stages of *earlier cultures* which have remained behind: the deeper formations in the mountain of mankind which are otherwise hidden are here for once laid open. They are...men whose brain has, through some chance or other in the course of hereditary transmission, failed to develop in a sensitive and multifarious a way as is normal.⁷⁹

Here, we can see that for Nietzsche, people who take actions out of cruelty are likely not able to know any better. Cruel behavior, or reasoned out maliciousness, would ultimately be classified as decadent and symptomatic of a slave morality.

⁷⁷ D.T. Suzuki, "Basic Thoughts Underlying Eastern Ethical and Social Practice," *Philosophy East and West* 9, no. 1/2 (1959): 60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1397211>.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 68.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Human*, 36.

His concern with the individual nature of morality is another position of Nietzsche's that is stable in his body of work. In the *Antichrist*, he writes contra Kant, saying that "a virtue must be *our own* invention, *our* most necessary self-expression and self-defense: any other kind of virtue is merely a danger." This personal virtue is to be an individual 'categorical imperative.'⁸⁰ In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, perhaps Nietzsche's magnum opus, the theme of individuality is on full display. Early in the work, Zarathustra proclaims that he will be no shepherd for the masses. Rather, he desires companions, fellow individuals with the strength to create their own values for themselves.⁸¹ These new virtues are to be built out of the passions, and each is meant to have their own. Even in discussing your virtue, Zarathustra advises some jealousy and obscurity. Zarathustra refuses to let his passion and virtue become a mere tool for another person⁸²

This insistence on individuality can lead to some situations that may seem jarring for those to ascribe to more traditional moral systems. One display by a Zen master shows just how far Zen may go to prevent such a dilution:

Gutei's favourite response to any question put to him was to lift one of his fingers. His little boy attendant imitated him, and whenever the boy was asked by strangers as to the teaching of the master he would lift his finger. Learning of this, the master one day called the boy in and cut off his finger. The boy in fright and pain tried to run away, but was called back, when the master held up his finger. The boy tried to imitate the master, as was his wont, but the finger was no more there, and then suddenly the significance of it all dawned upon him.⁸³

Again, viewed through a Western moral lens, the above lesson appears to be handed out in a needlessly violent manner, but the purpose in Zen is twofold. First, Suzuki writes that in Zen, to copy is to make oneself a slave.⁸⁴ Much like Zarathustra states, a person cannot affirm, or be a creator, if one is chasing

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 577

⁸¹ Nietzsche, "Zarathustra," 135-136

⁸² Nietzsche, "Zarathustra," 148, 152

⁸³ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 42

⁸⁴ Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 42

after someone else's virtues. Suzuki also warns that we must be careful not to misinterpret this creator/virtue relationship, so as not to become beholden to our own creations, much as Nietzsche reminds us with his original questioning of why moral valuations have reigned supreme in our estimations for so long, especially absolute moral valuations.

Second, this type of repetitive copying of an answer contains in it the danger that people may consider it the only answer. Thich Nhat Hanh writes about a famous monk Joshu (Chao-Chou) who, when asked whether a dog has the Buddha-nature replied 'yes' to one student only to tell another 'no.' Despite any implied logical conundrum, Zen does not hold either of these replies to be an absolute truth. The subjective nature of our experiential world prevents such a truth from existing in it, and both of these answers are meant to be used as means for grasping deeper concepts such as 'nothingness.' This is why the answer of 'no' is not considered misleading by Zen, even though all beings are said to have the Buddha-nature.⁸⁵ Reliance on dogmatic teachings is not something that Zen would seek to make use of or endorse. Nietzsche similarly expresses disdain for dogma in *Twilight of the Idols*, saying "I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity."⁸⁶ One-size-fits-all policies are clearly not something that would be favored by either Zen masters or Nietzsche.

In pursuing this type of unique morality, seeking to be a fellow creator to Zarathustra, a person will naturally, according to Nietzsche, begin to lead a more solitary existence, further away from the general trends of society. In order to handle this type of independence, a person must be exceptionally strong, and therefore, Nietzsche considered it to be the destiny of only a select group of individuals.⁸⁷ Representing this sort of exceptional progress, he writes in *Zarathustra*:

This tree stands lonely here in the mountains; it grew high above man and beast.
And if it wanted to speak it would have nobody who could understand it, so high

⁸⁵ Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 59-60

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, "Twilight," 470

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 29

has it grown. Now it waits and waits - for what is it waiting? It dwells too near the seat of the clouds: surely, it waits for the first lightning.⁸⁸

Someone who manages to progress towards Nietzsche's self-overcoming of the self will likely find it increasingly different to relate to other people, especially those within the herd mentality. But this is not altogether something negative. It is ill advised and likely improbable that one creative individual could relate to another creator's virtue, and a person exhibiting the master morality would not desire to relate to the herd morality. An interesting coincidence of note is that, in Zen, the moment of enlightenment is often referred to metaphorically as a lightning flash.

Zen has also been accused of leading its followers further into solitude. According to Suzuki, this has led to a sense by some that Zen practitioners have abandoned society, similar to Nietzsche's charge of decadence. Although Zen, as a discrete branch of Buddhism, does endorse social consciousness and compassion, the actions that a person takes to bring about forms of these concepts in the world can take many forms due to the nature of Zen and its emphasis on individual interpretation. Based on the particular manifestation of this conscientiousness in action, it is possible that the Zen student may be accused of being detached, or otherwise antisocial.⁸⁹

However, Suzuki gives some evidence that Zen considers there to be some back-and-forth, an interplay of types of social life. Using Zen literature that is rife with references to marketplace activities, or other such crowded social locations. Contrasting such a social atmosphere with monastic life, Suzuki relates that Zen demands both ways of life from its devotees. The monastery is the place where one trains and strengthens oneself, and the marketplace is where one can act in the world.⁹⁰

Though Nietzsche does seem to hold that solitude is at least in some part required for personal growth, there is some evidence as well that he would also agree with this aspect of Zen. Throughout the

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, "Zarathustra," 155

⁸⁹ Suzuki, "Philosophy of Zen," 13-14.

⁹⁰ Suzuki, "Philosophy of Zen," 14-15.

entirety of *Zarathustra*, the character Zarathustra does indeed come down from his mountain to seek followers and speak on subjects to the people. He also retreats from these people and returns to his mountain hermitage at several times in the text. During one of these returns to the mountains, Zarathustra contemplates a distinction between being ‘forsaken’ by society at large for being an outsider and simply being ‘lonely,’ or favoring a lifestyle that is more often solitary.⁹¹ Zarathustra calls himself a wanderer and mountain climber, someone who is not made for the plains, and again says that the trees that grow at the greatest heights strike “hard roots around hard rocks.”⁹²

We must remember though that Nietzsche promotes individual virtues for his strongest types, and also that he considers cruelty a now useless relic of evolution. So, although Nietzsche expresses the requirement of solitude and ‘otherness’ from the herd and general society through Zarathustra’s repeated coming to and going away from civilization, care must be taken to ensure that one does not simply become resentful of society and express a decadent mindset. While Zarathustra often expresses disdain and scorn for the masses, he never seeks to annihilate their way of life. As misguided as he may believe the herd to be, Zarathustra continues to speak to those who will listen in an effort to show them the error of their ways.

Despite Nietzsche’s numerous criticisms of Buddhism, his writing and philosophy more closely paralleled Buddhist thought than he realized. Rather than being decadent and nihilistic, Buddhism, and especially Zen Buddhism, is in agreement with Nietzsche’s writing considerably more than he seems to have appreciated. Metaphysically, impermanence and the lack of a perfect conceptual world on another plane. Interdependence and no things-in-themselves. Belief in a world that is conditioned by relationships. Reason and logic as the culprits behind conceptual misinterpretation of reality. The false appearance of metaphysical antitheses. With regards to any type of persistent self, the Buddhist Aggregates and Nietzsche’s arising drives. Both even advocate for a type of individual expression of morality that

⁹¹ Nietzsche, “Zarathustra,” 295

⁹² Nietzsche, “Zarathustra,” 264, 283

transcends concepts of good and evil, and yet both also regard unnecessary cruelty as a practice of unlearned or unenlightened persons. Both Nietzsche and Zen put forward ways of living that seek to view reality as it is, not as it is desired to be, and not even as we reason and believe it *ought* to be. Far from being guilty of Nietzsche's charges of decadence and nihilism, Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, describe a world that is more in line with Nietzsche's thought than it is antithetical.

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