

Reevaluating Nietzsche and Buddhism: Active and Passive Nihilism

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Abstract: The focus of this paper will be to analyze and challenge the accuracy of the overall attitude which Nietzsche asserted in his works in regards to Buddhism as well as the certain beliefs he ascribed to Buddhist philosophy and its practices. I will specifically focus on the Buddhist concept of Nirvana and the philosophy of action. It is not to say that Nietzsche was uneducated in Buddhist thought, however in comparison with Buddhist scripture as well as with more developed interpretations of Buddhism it is evident that Nietzsche did not have a full understanding of certain significant concepts, and overall viewed Buddhism pessimistically. The main point which will be discussed is that through his misapprehensions, Nietzsche was led to establish the grounds to reject and deprecate Buddhism as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. Nietzsche misinterprets Buddhist beliefs such as Nirvana to be, like the God of Christianity, a “will to nothingness,” withdrawing the individual from the present world.

It is well-known that the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche draw a significant influence from Eastern thought; more specifically, Buddhism. Although Nietzsche, for the most part, discusses Buddhism sporadically throughout his works, his general themes and beliefs share numerous similarities to key concepts within Buddhist thought. Although Nietzsche recognizes the beneficial aspects of Buddhist philosophy, his conclusive attitude is to reject Buddhism, denouncing it as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. It is of foremost importance to note that Nietzsche could only interpret Buddhism based on his cultural and historical orientation. It is not to say that Nietzsche was uneducated in Buddhist thought, however in comparison with Buddhist scripture as well as with more developed interpretations of Buddhism it is evident that Nietzsche did not have a full understanding of certain significant concepts, and overall viewed Buddhism pessimistically. The main point which will be discussed is that through his misapprehensions Nietzsche was led to establish the grounds to reject and deprecate Buddhism as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. Nietzsche misinterprets Buddhist beliefs such as Nirvana as a will to nothingness, withdrawing the individual from the present world and also denounced Buddhism for its ascetic, inactive practices. Following this argument, it is necessary to understand that Buddhist concepts often do not have a strict literal definition; they are frequently used

metaphorically and moreover they are typically described in contexts which are unaccustomed to the West.¹ Therefore, interpretations of Buddhist teachings may differ slightly between sources. These differences allude to the two main existing branches of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. The Mahayana school of Buddhism is considered to be an “expansion” of the Theravada and has recently become the more prominent movement. Therefore, the Buddhist doctrines in which interpretations differ slightly between schools will adhere to the Mahayana.

During the time of Nietzsche’s writing, Eastern philosophy was just beginning to diffuse into Western language and comprehension. Buddhist thought had not dispersed throughout Europe as thoroughly as it has today. Publications and teachings of Buddhism were very limited, and as a result of this, misinterpretations inevitably developed in the West. In *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, Benjamin A. Elman explains that Nietzsche began his introduction to Eastern philosophy under the influence of Schopenhauer and in a way, was predisposed to react to Buddhism in terms of his close reading of Schopenhauer. Heinrich Dumoulin also claims that “[Nietzsche] owes his understanding of Buddhism entirely to Schopenhauer and to the manner in which he understood Schopenhauer.”² According to Dumoulin, Schopenhauer did in fact have a considerable influence on the German interpretation of Buddhism; however it was not very balanced or accurate. Other sources instead blame the inadequacy of the information regarding Buddhism that was available to Nietzsche at the time of his writing. In a different work also titled *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, Freny Mistry states: “Nietzsche’s interpretations of Buddhism

¹ “Almost everyone in the West grows up completely persuaded that one understands something when it is has been given a name, framed in a theory, established coherently into the funded mass of reliable knowledge, and tested in its truth or falsity in cleverly devised experimental situations. Buddhism has to be understood on completely personal and practical grounds” (Jacobson 1966, 40). The similarities between Nietzsche’s view regarding truth and perspectivism and Buddhism are pronounced, as seen in this quotation, expressing the denial of the absolute.

² Dumoulin, Heinrich, “Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas (JSTOR)*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1981), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709187> (accessed October 10, 2008).

are based on translations and secondary sources then available, the unreliability of which owes not least to the paucity of first-hand material on Buddhism accessible to nineteenth-century Europe.”³ Therefore, it is not to say that Nietzsche simply misinterpreted the Buddhist principles, but rather that his poor predisposition of sources combined with his significant influence from Schopenhauer did not allow for precise and thorough interpretations. With this point considered, it is then crucial to examine Nietzsche’s view of nihilism, and how his description compares with the Buddhist beliefs which he condemns.

For Nietzsche, nihilism is a period of realization and reconstruction, a collapse of the foundation of specific values in which an individual casts suspicion on conventional moralities and ideals carried by the “herd.” Nihilism is the stage which leads to the creation of new values based on the will to power; the multiple, competing drives within an individual. It is important to note, however, that Nietzsche is not rejecting all values, necessarily, but more specifically the values which the individual finds to be harmful to life. It is when “we have placed the highest value in the conceptions of end or purpose, unity and truth, and we have inserted these values into the world: now we have to take them out again, and the world looks worthless to us” (Reyburn 1948, 387). In *Will To Power*, Nietzsche describes nihilism as ambiguous; it can be a sign of increased power of the spirit (active nihilism), or it can be a decline and recession of the power of the spirit (passive nihilism). For active nihilism, the sign of strength, “the previous goals have become incommensurate.” (Nietzsche 1967, 17-18). Active nihilism places a specific focus and value on the present life of the individual. The individual must take the necessary actions to recreate the values which they seek by understanding the process of deconstructing, re-imagining and re-creating values. Nietzsche wants to emphasize to the individual that the

³ Mistry, Freny, *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 9.

present world is the only world that will exist for them and that they have the freedom and power to seek values which are most fitting to their life. He wants to show that life is not to be denied, but unconditionally affirmed. Active nihilism is not to be considered an end in any way; rather, it is the transitional stage in which the individual accepts that there is no inherent meaning in the universe and proceeds to use that to initiate the recreation of ideals and goals for themselves. Nietzsche divided nihilism into various other categories, placing Buddhism as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. For Nietzsche, passive spiritual nihilism is characterized by an inability to create new values and the lack of reaction within their present world. Ultimately, passive nihilism defaces the individual and is associated with asceticism and the lack of value placed in the present reality of the individual. According to Nietzsche, the passive spiritual nihilist instead withdraws from the world when faced with the uncertainty of inherent meaning. In the *Will To Power*, Nietzsche describes passive nihilism as “the weary nihilism that no longer attacks; its most famous form, Buddhism; a passive nihilism, a sign of weakness. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that the previous goals and values become incommensurate and no longer are believed” (Nietzsche 1967, 18). Benjamin A Elman, in his publication regarding Nietzsche and Buddhism, writes: “Nietzsche concluded that Buddhism represented a nihilistic withdrawal from existence and a desire for a different mode of being” (Elman 679). The nihilistic withdrawal from existence which is being alluded to from this quotation is the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, which Nietzsche viewed pessimistically. Nietzsche considered Nirvana to reflect a will to nothingness and denounced Buddhist practices as passive asceticism. Furthermore, Nietzsche challenged that this will to nothingness through Nirvana devalued the individual and was not an affirmation towards the present life. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche describes Nirvana as an “innocent rhetoric, which belongs to the realm of the religio-moral

idiosyncrasy” and that it has “the tendency of hostility to life” (Nietzsche 2000, 8). It is in part through Nietzsche’s harsh and misconstrued interpretation of Nirvana which contributes to his reasoning for placing it as a form of passive spiritual nihilism. To begin the examination of Nirvana, it is necessary to examine Mahayana Buddhism and the significance which it carries in elucidating the belief.

Through the course of Buddhist history, like other disciplines of religion or spirituality, there have been different interpretations and uses of text which have inevitably led to the branching off of various distinct schools. D.T. Suzuki, in her *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, notes that within a few hundred years after the death of the Buddha, more than twenty different schools existed within Buddhism, all of which claimed to the orthodox teachings (Suzuki 1963, 1-2). Among these schools, one significant branch stood out in the way that it followed the teachings of the Buddha and was comprehensive in its principles and more liberal in its interpretations. *The Teachings of The Compassionate Buddha* explains that the “Mahayana doctrines could only be revealed later to those who had reached the point where they could understand and follow them”⁴. Mahayana is defined as “great vehicle” and Hinayana “small or inferior vehicle.” It was by the Mahayana that this definition was attributed; reflecting a rejection of the “conservative efforts to literally preserve the monastic rules and traditions” of Hinayanism (Suzuki 1963, 4). Suzuki also claims that the followers of Hinayanism refused to consent to the Mahayanist doctrine as the genuine teaching of Buddha and insisted that there could not be any other Buddhism than their own (Suzuki 1963, 3). Unfortunately, in Western nations what is commonly associated with Buddhism is the doctrine of Hinayanism. A

⁴ Burt, E. A., *The Teachings of The Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 126.

significant reason for this is that the Hinayana scriptures are written in Pali, and it was through this language that the first knowledge of Buddhism was acquired by those seeking to explore and comprehend Eastern culture and philosophy. However, since the concept of Nirvana was not specifically defined in Buddhist scripture or teachings of the Buddha, it must be examined in the context in which it has been used. The word itself is a problematic metaphor in the way that it suggests what Nirvana is *not*, but does not address a definitive meaning. This gray area is still highly debated matter among different disciplines within Buddhism; however the Mahayana Buddhists have attempted to provide clarity and ameliorate the discrepancy. Upon a more effective research it will become evident that Nietzsche overlooks the optimistic philosophy rooted in concepts such as Nirvana, and does not give consideration to its vast context.

Nietzsche's inaccurate views regarding Nirvana may be contrasted by first comparing his views with modern and well regarded interpretations of Buddhist doctrines as well as by evaluating the context in which Nirvana has been used for many years in Buddhist text. Modern publishing regarding Buddhism has contributed to a more accurate understanding of Buddhism, elucidating its profound beliefs and concepts; the first and most significant of which will be discussed is Nirvana. In the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Nirvana is defined as the process of accomplishing and experiencing freedom from the unquenchable thirst of desire and the pains of repeated births, lives and deaths. Although Nirvana can be used to describe the stage of enlightenment preceding the liberation and freedom from the physical world (death), the concept extends even further in its ambiguity. In the context of the Mahayana, Nirvana can be expressed as a profound mental state in which individual personalities not only maintain, but advance to a high and refined level, existing in the present reality. The "extinction of the flame," a metaphor used to illustrate Nirvana, may be interpreted in various different ways, such as the "freedom

from a way of thinking, a type of self-definition and self-consciousness (and freedom from the attitudes generated by this way of thinking)” (Buswell 2003, 601). It is a misconception that extinguishing these negative qualities of human behavior implies a complete extinguishing of the individual. Nirvana must be viewed as the “cooling off” which occurs after an extinguishing. “What is extinguished on the attainment of nirvana is simply that self-centered, self-assertive life to which unenlightened man tends to cling as if it were the highest good and the final security. The truly ‘real’ is not extinguished when nirvana is reached: rather, the real is then attained” (Ross 1981, 30). This passage by Nancy Wilson Ross contends that Nirvana should be understood metaphorically rather than in a strict literal sense, such as Nietzsche did. The following passage from the *Therigatha*, the ninth book of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* is often used to depict the metaphorical understanding of Nirvana: “As I pull down the wick-pin and put out the flame of the lamp, ah, indeed, it is like my mind made free!” In this context extinction means relief, calm, rest and not the annihilation of being (Buswell 2003, 601). Understood in this sense, it follows that the post-Nirvana individual can exist in the same reality as before, but in an enlightened state. “[Nirvana] is not a state of ultimate extinction. Neither is there a cessation of perception and feeling. On the contrary, perception is raised to a supersensory dimensions and called “supra-perception” (Jacobson 1966, 147-148). Although Buddhist eschew from the concept of a “self,” it should in no way be interpreted as a means of devaluing the individual, or a metaphysical level which implies that discernible characteristics of individuals do not exist. Rather, it is a different lens for examining the way human beings comprehend the surrounding world. “A Buddha, however remote in age or however great in origin, will be individual, for the perfection of knowledge and wisdom is the perfection of personality and that is a Buddha.”⁵

⁵ Takakusu, Junjiro, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: Office Appliance Co., Ltd), 149.

Nirvana should be understood as the pinnacle of individual growth and as a period in which we finally are able to detach ourselves from harmful desires and characteristics. It is the emergence of an enlightened man after a path of constant reassessment. If we accept Nietzsche's criticisms that the goal of Nirvana is pessimistic and ultimately devalues individualism then it would create a contradiction with keystone beliefs within Buddhism such as the Eight-Fold Path⁶. The Buddhist Eight-Fold Path strives for the growth and perpetual development within the individual based on their experiences through life, including direct action and mind practices. Nowhere within the Eight-Fold Path does it indicate that all progress of the individual shall be lost upon completion of the path to Nirvana. It would appear to be contradictory that Buddhism would strive for such a positive, continual growth of the individual and personality only to lose all progress by "[leading] men away from the world and [turning] them towards nothingness" as Nietzsche contended (Elman 681). One cannot directly accuse Nietzsche for completely failing to understand an ambiguous and vast belief such as Nirvana due to its lack of a concrete, doctrinal definition. The error which Nietzsche commits is his accusation that Buddhism ultimately devalues the individual and withdraws them from action in the present reality through goals such as Nirvana. Nirvana must be understood as a goal which encourages the creation of a more perfect, refined individual in the present reality. Although its final stage is signified through the death of the individual, this should not dismiss the stages of enlightenment that may be attained in present reality of the individual. "Nirvana, according to Buddhists, does not

⁶ The Eight-Fold Path includes the following steps: Right views (or understanding), Right purpose (or aspiration), Right speech, Right conduct, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right kind of awareness (or mindfulness) and Right concentration (or meditation). It is crucial to also note that "right" is not considered by some modern scholars to be an adequate interpretation of the word originally used in the context, and furthermore that "right," implies a duality which is not characteristic of Buddhist thought (Ross 1981, 24). The concept of seeking a "more perfect" quality is the general intention within each step, a concept which can be considered parallel to Nietzsche's steps for becoming a free spirit as described in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

signify an annihilation of consciousness nor a temporal or permanent suppression of mentation, as imagined by some; but it is the annihilation of the notion of ego-substance and of all desires that arise from this erroneous conception” (Suzuki 1963, 51). Buddhism is driven by the aspiration to free its practitioners from the results of their actions, also known as rebirth or reincarnation.

Nietzsche also argued that Buddhism, like Christianity was a “religion representing pessimism and decadence” (Elman 680-681). Nietzsche described Buddhism to be an effort, through restraint from action, to escape suffering and pass into nothingness. However, these accusations stem from inadequate explanations of Nirvana, a discrepancy which can be resolved with an effective examination of the teachings of Buddha. The following quotation of the Buddha is from the *Udāna*, Buddhist scripture from the *Pali Canon*, a vast body of literature:

*“They shun the dust of the triple world,
And in ascetic practice their safety they seek :
Incapable of love and sympathy are they,
For on Nirvana abides their thought”*

In repudiation of this ascetic practice, the Buddha is quoted for this response:

*“Arouse thy will, supreme and great,
Practise love and sympathy, give joy and protection
Thy love like unto space
Be it without discrimination, without limitation”* (Suzuki 1963, 53).

In response to the inaction and disconnection from reality practiced by some monks as shown in this passage, the Buddha set forth the other significant aspect in understanding Nirvana: to practice love, sympathy and joy. It is a harsh generalization that Buddhism represents escapism

and weakness through ascetic practices; this common misconception can be resolved by understanding action and its imperative role in Buddhist philosophy. “Buddhism does not identify bodily and mental motion, but desire, as the cause of karmic consequences” (Buswell 2003, 416). The doctrine of karma and the Buddhist path to liberation are evidently linked. “[the] rejection of extreme ascetic practices...owe [its] origin to the specifically Buddhist understanding of karma” (Buswell 2003, 416). The understanding of action as a benefit and way of advancement for the individual personality exists through two significant doctrines: the Eight-Fold Path and the Four Noble Truths⁷. To more effectively understand the Buddhist beliefs regarding karmic action and suffering, the more accurate term, “Dukkha,” must be presented. Dukkha is the Sanskrit word commonly translated as 'suffering'. Its full meaning, however, is much more extensive. Although Nietzsche does not specifically mention the concept of Dukkha, its explanation will illustrate a more accurate Buddhist view regarding suffering. Nancy Wilson Ross writes an excellent interpretation of the concept: “[Dukkha] refers to an ill-made axle and therefore implies a wheel that is awry. Dukkha seen as awryness or out-of-kilterness clearly implies the possibility of correction” (Ross 1981, 31). Buddhists use Dukkha to gain new perspectives about life as well as provide the opportunity to refine a more correct way of living. Examined in these terms, it is evident that within Dukkha resonates a hopeful optimism by reminding individuals to always look towards a possibility of correction, a way to progress and better the state of their being. It is not simply a pessimistic observation of the inevitability of suffering, as Nietzsche holds it; it is a philosophic belief expressing that with suffering comes the opportunity for progression and change through the action and will of the

⁷ The Four Noble Truths outline the following: 1. Suffering is inevitable 2. The origins of suffering are attachment 3. The cessation of suffering is attainable 4. The Eight-Fold Path to the cessation of suffering

individual, ultimately overcoming the suffering at hand. The cessation of suffering can be attained through the undoing of desire and conceptual attachment, as practiced in the Eight-Fold Path, which Ross describes as the middle path “between the two extremes of easy illusion and self indulgence (Ross 1981, 76).” Throughout the steps of the Eight-Fold path comes immense action and thought from the individual, all with the optimistic goal of continual reevaluation and development.

It may be inferred that Nietzsche would argue that by extinguishing the negative qualities of human behavior on the path to Nirvana, it is in fact annihilating an aspect from the individual which is essential for refinement of the self. Furthermore, Nietzsche would challenge that suffering is a necessary component for the self-transformation of an individual. It appears that Nietzsche is interpreting the concept of “suffering” in a much broader manner, maintaining that individual growth cannot occur without defeating obstacles of suffering. Buddhists understand suffering to be caused by an individual’s attachment to desire, passion, infatuation, pursuit of wealth, and status and popularity. Since the objects of our attachment are impermanent, their loss is inevitable, thus suffering will necessarily follow. However, through human activity, which can be on the level of mental, physical or spiritual exercises, an individual may unmake their conceptual attachment to the causes of suffering. The individual is still present to experience reality and its incessant imperfections, allowing for self-transformation and enhancement of the individual. Inevitably there are obstacles to overcome, however Buddhism attempts to perceive these obstacles not necessarily as suffering, but as the “awry wheel”; the opportunity for refinement through inevitable conditions of life.

“[For Nietzsche,] Nirvana is not ultimate happiness but the substitute of which some of the weak dream who are incapable of achieving that state of joyous power which they, too,

would prefer if they had the strength to attain it (Kauffman 1956, 242).” The passages show how Nietzsche fails to fully acknowledge the extraordinary strength of the individual that is required on the Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana. Practices such as meditation are a constant mental and spiritual development exercise within the Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana. Meditation is not simply a means of escape and inaction; it is the constant practice of mindfulness which in turn, affects our actions. Without exercising the mind, the individual cannot be expected to effectively and clearly and carry out their actions.

“The more fully the origins of behavior are understood, the freer the individual becomes, until at last, under the discipline of the highest levels of meditation the individual transcends the causal matrix entirely, i.e. enters [Nirvana] in his present lifetime. All unconscious drives have been perceived in full awareness and heightened mindfulness” (Jacobson 1966, 93). This passage alludes to the mindfulness and insight which are emphasized to aid the individual in refining themselves. There is even a special attention towards the simple, sustained exercise of observing one’s breath because it is believed to be capable of great mental achievements (Ross 84). Another significant point to evaluate is that to embrace a belief which emphasizes the perpetual growth within the individual by constantly re-evaluating and refining the qualities which are hostile to life would seem parallel to Nietzsche’s view expressed in *The Antichrist*: “[f]reedom from every kind of conviction *belongs* to strength, to the *ability* to open one’s eyes freely...”⁸ It seems that this passage is perfectly appropriate to allude to the freedom of constrictions which are sought to be rid of on the path to Nirvana. The passage may also relate to the freedom from a conviction such as suffering, as described in the Four Noble Truths. It is

⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Antichrist*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 86.

one of many similarities that can be drawn between Nietzsche and Buddhist philosophy. With the concluding interpretations of Nirvana and Dukkha, I find that Nietzsche is incorrect in denouncing Buddhism as a form of passive spiritual nihilism, as his interpretations prove to be inaccurate and strict to a pessimistic point of view. Even after speculating a rebuttal on the behalf of Nietzsche, I still do not find his argument valid due to the evident misapprehensions regarding Buddhism.

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