

Nietzsche's Views Aligned with Buddhism:

Is Nietzsche's Übermensch a Buddha?

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The concept and practice of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* could be shown to be either one in the very same or nearly all too similar to the philosophies of Buddhist teachings, as Nietzsche indicates many comparable ideas on intricate Buddhist concepts. First, it is important to define both what Nietzsche's ideas of the *Übermensch* were as well as some of the basic principals in Buddhism to show the similarities and differences between the two. There are many variations of Nietzsche's concept 'Übermensch,' the literal German translation is 'Overman,' while at the same time 'Superman.' The commonly used translation of the *Übermensch*, 'Superman' does not portray the exact definition, in most opinions, as the name has already been used for a superhero and therefore will not be used. 'Übermensch' or 'Overman' will be utilized interchangeably as they convey a more proper expression of what the term means.

Moreover, in Buddhism, there are many sects and facets that view concepts differently. For my purposes, the original teachings of the first Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, from his script *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, will be used today as they are more universal throughout all Buddhist sects, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. And then by using Nietzsche's book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, this paper will explain how Nietzsche and Gautama Buddha, drew many of the same conclusions and observations to life's natural chaos: that much of life leads to suffering and this is what needs to be overcome.

Nietzsche's Übermensch

The vast majority of Nietzsche's work that has been translated into English has been done so by a man named Walter Kaufmann Ph. D., who "was Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University" for thirty-three years (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982). In his book *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Kaufmann shares "that Nietzsche did not coin the word *Übermensch*," the term is a derivative of and in reference to a writer named Lucian from "the second century A.D." and his "hyperanthropos" (2013). And after years of novel-writing and reading, Nietzsche formed the idea of the Übermensch firstly, and in my opinion most firmly, in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Kaufmann explains the idea quite cleverly with this: "The Übermensch at any rate cannot be dissociated from the conception of Überwindung, of overcoming. 'Man is something that should be overcome' – and the man who has overcome himself has become an overman" (Kaufmann, Nehamas, ProQuest, 2013). This concept concerning the Überwindung (overcoming) could only be recognized by someone who can read Nietzsche's philosophy in his original language, German, and explains largely what the idea of the Übermensch is – overcoming man, over man, the Overman.

Using an example from the early 2000s TV show, *The Sopranos*, Stanford University's Philosophy Talk radio shows a case in which the rebellious teenage son found some of Nietzsche's teachings and then "he refuses to get confirmed as a Catholic, citing Nietzsche's claims that God is dead and life is meaningless" (2004). And then also shared this: "Nietzsche thought that the fact that life is ultimately absurd was not a reason for angst but a cause for celebration, self-creation, and artistic fervor" (Philosophy Talk, 2004). Highlighting that there

have been times where Nietzsche's ideas on the *Übermensch* have been confused with someone who can simply do whatever it is that they want to do, rather than a push to see beyond the systems of the church, society, or government.

Buddhism

There may be similarities that can be seen when comparing the thoughts and teachings of Nietzsche with the philosophies of Buddhism. It is said that "Nietzsche may have erroneous views on Buddhism, which could have been improved had Nietzsche been exposed to the level of scholarship on Buddhism as available today ... Nonetheless, his thoughts bear certain characteristics that reveal deep insights when compared with Buddhism" (Hongladarom, 2011). Largely, both Nietzsche's works and Buddhist thought and teachings encompass how one ought to practice their life and where (or who) they ought to work toward: for Nietzsche, it is the *Übermensch*; and for Buddhists, it is the Buddha. The first Buddha and founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, thought that "there needed to be a way out of the endless round of birth, old age and death that he was seeing around him. A way toward a better life which was free from all these. What he eventually found was just such a way" (Hongladarom, 2011), and it was all too similar to what Nietzsche describes in his books as the practice of becoming the *Übermensch*.

The ancient script *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, explains the first teaching that Gautama Buddha gave after reaching his initial point of enlightenment and carries the fundamental precepts of what Buddhism has become (Harvey, 2007). In most variations, the script opens with the Middle Path, describing it as "a way of knowing the world without illusion, grief, or suffering ... then presents a teaching about Four Noble Truths: the truths of suffering,

the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering” (Eckel, 2005). This is the path of the Buddha. Other translations and adaptations of the Four Noble Truths can be found written as such: life is suffering, suffering comes from attachments and desires, attachments and desires can be ceased, and this is through The Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path, as its name implies, is eight points in which a Buddhist practitioner is compelled to follow, “beginning with ‘right understanding’ and ending with ‘right concentration’ – all eight of which can be arranged in a way to have three major guidelines for the practitioner: to have the right “moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom” (Eckel, 2005). And these paths direct Buddhists toward a life of moderation, where they are in the constant practice of seeing beyond social constructs that lead people to attachments, desires, and eventual sufferings.

A Comparison Using *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Throughout the book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is speaking to people in a fictional town square through a known religious figure called ‘Zarathustra’ (1982). This is ironic enough as Nietzsche generally wants to direct the reader away from religious collectives but more than often he writes in a way that would intrigue those who he would want to change. In the second part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there is a chapter called “On the Tarantulas” – in this chapter, Nietzsche gives a substantial critique on who he calls “tarantulas,” and these are people who he views are obsessed with preaching about inequality, when in fact they would be their very worst if they were the ones with the power (1982). These types of people have revenge coursing through their veins, just as a tarantula has poison, revenge can be just as gruesome (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982). In this chapter, along with the whole book, it can be seen how

Nietzsche believes people ought to act as well as how far aligned his views are with the Buddhist teachings mentioned above.

Taking the example from Stanford University's Philosophy Talk radio, where the teenage son was using Nietzschean logic to talk his parents out of his going to church and being christened, this is an act that Nietzsche himself was all too aware of:

“My friends, I do not want to be mixed up and confused with others. Some preach my doctrine of life and are at the same time preachers of equality and tarantulas. Although they are sitting in their holes, these poisonous spiders, with their backs turned on life, they speak in favor of life, but only because they wish to hurt. They wish to hurt those who have power, for among these the preaching of death is still most at home”
(Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982, pp. 212-213).

Even during Nietzsche's life, people were spinning his words around to make either him sound foolish or the person quoting him sound smarter. And in either case, Nietzsche believes this to be a farce and a ploy to seek their venomous revenge against those who hurt them. In the case of the teenage son, he was only setting out to hurt his parents and gain power over them: by stating that “God is dead and life is meaningless,” he is creating a newfound meaning of power to hold against those he wants to seek revenge on. Using Nietzsche's thoughts here, the teenager is asking for equality in the decision-making in the house (in his religion) but would more than likely use the power in the very same way the parents are, as a form of revenge on them.

What Nietzsche could have employed here as his parable, rather than tarantulas, is the ancient Greek myth of sirens; Nietzsche himself was a philologist in ancient texts and is, to a

great degree, describing a siren to equality. In the second component of “On the Tarantulas,” out of two, Nietzsche speaks of being bitten by the tarantula – and just as Odysseus did as he heard the sirens, Nietzsche asks “to keep me from whirling, my friends, tie me tight to this column” (1982). What can be said is that we are all tarantulas, we are all bitten by tarantulas, we can all hear the sirens of equality and the revenge for it. But has men, we must overcome this feeling, Nietzsche himself needs to hold himself down with a pillar to keep his calm: and this is the practice of his Overman.

The last line to the given paragraph (“the preaching of death is still most at home”) is in reference to a previous chapter in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, called “On the Preachers of Death” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982). “They encounter a sick man or an old man or a corpse, and immediately they say, ‘Life is refuted.’ But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only this one face of existence” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982, p. 157) – these preachers negate life and promote moving beyond it as a goal; simply more tarantulas that revenge over the power that they do not have. “‘Life is only suffering,’ others say, and do not lie: see to it then, that you cease! See to it, then, that the life which is only suffering ceases!” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982, p. 157). Here one can see Nietzsche directly quoting Buddhist teachings, the first of the Four Noble Truths, and then he tells the preachers that they are the ones who suffer.

Throughout “On the Preachers of Death,” Nietzsche is declaring to these preachers that if it is death that is their goal, then “if only they pass away quickly” (1982, p. 158). Meaning, when he says “See to it, then, that the life which is only suffering ceases!” he is speaking to the preachers of death, and not Buddhists, because it is the preachers who suffer and not the

Buddhists. By stating that “Life is only suffering,” one is bringing affirmation to life as a natural phenomenon and moving past what brings about suffering. While stating “Life is refuted,” is only negating life and bring about more suffering as it makes all natural phenomenon a battle and point of inequality. This concept can be seen more explicitly in the book written directly after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche pulls a lot of ideas from both Christianity and Buddhism.

Another point in which the Four Noble Truths can be found in “On the Tarantulas,” is where Nietzsche repeats again:

“I do not wish to be mixed up and confused with these preachers of equality. For, to *me* justice speaks thus: ‘Men are not equal.’ Nor shall they become equal! What would my love for the overman be if I spoke otherwise? ... Life wants to build itself up into the heights with pillars and steps; it wants to look into vast distances and out toward stirring beauties: therefore it requires steps and contradiction among the steps and climbers. Life wants to climb and to overcome itself climbing” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, 1982, p. 213).

If re-worded here, Nietzsche is nearly formulating the exact conclusion that Gautama Buddha did in his Four Noble Truths. (1) “Men are not equal,” affirms that life is suffering. (2) “Nor shall they become equal,” asserts that inequality is as natural to life as attachments and desires are, and it is they that make it so no two men will even perceive to be equal to one another. “The grass is always greener,” (a common American expression) holds truth because people perceive great value in the color of their grass – and because no two yards will ever look the same, people will

never feel that they are equal to one another. But it is this attachment to the values we set upon things that causes our suffering for when we do not have them.

(3) “Life wants to climb and to overcome itself climbing,” Nietzsche wants to show here and shake into the people so badly that inequality and the suffering that comes from it is what gives life its satisfaction. Nevertheless, people preach that death would be better or bite others with their bitter revenge toward inequality, rather than see the good that comes with misfortune by detaching from the odd values set upon natural phenomenon. And then finally, (4): The Fourth Noble Truth in Buddhism is The Eightfold Path, which is far more complex than the first three but still can be encompassed in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Firstly, in every chapter, Nietzsche shows how an *Urbmensch* ought to have the “right understanding” of life and the “right concentration” toward one’s motivations (although, it is with much less “moral conduct” than in Buddhist scripts), he does point his readers in a direction of wisdom, mindfulness, and overcoming life’s many sirens to attachments and desires – what makes death the goal to some and a simple fact of life to others.

Secondly, if we go back to a portion of the first quote taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Although they are sitting in their holes, these poisonous spiders, with their backs turned on life, they speak in favor of life, but only because they wish to hurt. They wish to hurt those who have power,” opposite to the Eightfold Path, Nietzsche shows the reader the wrong concentration and where it may lead: to become a reclused, boiling pot of revenge, rather than to become someone who is over their sirens.

Conclusion

While it cannot be made perfectly clear to what facts of Buddhism Nietzsche had wrong in his works, it can be revealed that Nietzsche came to many of the same conclusions to life that the first Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, had in his *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. And with some differences still, becoming either the *Urbmensch* or the Buddha would be the goal to life, this would be someone who affirms to themselves that most social constructs of value are merely obsolete; that most moments in natural chaos are made to be stepping stones of what life has to offer. In taking from Christianity: misfortune is a test from God that He has set for us to become better people. Nietzsche's views fall very closely in line with this, alongside Buddhist teachings, but without all of the moral values that Christianity sets onto life's many glorious expressions. Both the *Urbmensch* and the Buddha are in opposition to tarantulas and the preachers of death as they work in unison with life rather than impatiently waiting for it to end or to gain revenge on whoever caused them to suffer. Both Nietzsche's *Urbmensch* and Gautama Buddha's teaching of becoming a Buddha have moved beyond what is called "suffering" to find a new, more enjoyable way to live life: by affirming it to be as it is.

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