

Letting go of the “I”: Nietzsche, Suicidal Nihilism, and the Bodhisattva Ideal

Concomitant with Nietzsche's distinction between higher and lower types is his preference for one type of society over another. That is, when choosing between an egalitarian privileging of the majority and a more elitist privileging of the few, Nietzsche chooses the latter.¹ It is the higher types, the creative geniuses, e.g., Goethe and Beethoven, who should stand on the backs of the masses, as it is the higher types who create high culture. It is in this context that Nietzsche carries out his revaluation of values, particularly, his revaluation of the value of suffering. Nietzsche sees the privileging of compassion in Christianity and Buddhism, for example, as a devaluing of suffering, and a privileging of the well-being of the masses. In his view, it is the few, the profoundly suffering creative geniuses, who are the higher types, and who should be privileged. This privileging of higher types is simultaneously an affirmation of the positive value of suffering and an affirmation of *life* with all of its suffering.

However, this is not merely a matter of giving pride of place to the suffering artist. Nietzsche has a rather complex and nuanced understanding of suffering, the problems it presents, and the need for it in the constitution of human greatness. So, for example, he recognizes that the problem of suffering is not suffering itself, but its meaning; that is, our ability to answer the question: why do I suffer? For, Nietzsche thinks, if one cannot find a satisfactory answer to that question, then one is destined to fall into suicidal nihilism. This ultimately underlies his concern with the death of God, for it is through religions like Christianity (and Buddhism), Nietzsche believes, that suffering has most robustly been given meaning. It is through what Nietzsche calls “the ascetic ideal”— which we might paraphrase as the ideal characterized by “poverty, chastity, and humility”—that the Christian gives meaning to her suffering.² Why does she suffer? Because

¹ *Genealogy of Morals*, I §16.

² *Genealogy of Morals*, III §8.

she is sinful and transgresses the ascetic ideal. And thereby she realizes her guilt and is openly willing to inflict cruelty, i.e., even more suffering, upon herself. And thereby she does not succumb to suicidal nihilism.

Of the many things that Nietzsche gives himself credit for, one of his greatest achievements, he thinks, is his discovery of an alternative ideal, one that will, if not imbue suffering with meaning, at least remove the possibility of suicidal nihilism. And this he thinks is hugely important because of the death of God and the ensuing secularization of society. The alternative ideal that he offers is none other than the idea of the eternal recurrence, i.e., the idea that every aspect, every detail, every moment, every joy, every sorrow, every last thing that constitutes one's lived life occurs an infinite number of times in the eternal cycling of the universe—time is infinitely circular, not linear.³ If one can affirm such a possibility, if one has the ability to will that one's ever recurring life be exactly as it is through each repetition, then one must be able to affirm suffering, no matter how great. And through this radical affirmation suicidal nihilism is negated, Nietzsche thinks. But, of course, it is only the higher type who is capable of such a radical affirmation. Among other reasons, it is this inability of the lower type to affirm the eternal recurrence, that prompts Nietzsche to write such things as, "Christianity, it seems to me, is still needed by most people in old Europe even today."⁴ For Nietzsche is sensitive to the terrible consequences of a culture-wide nihilism. This is not enough, however, to redeem Christianity in Nietzsche's eyes, for, if nothing else, the ascetic ideal also brings, "fresh suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, more life-destructive suffering: it [places] all suffering under the perspective of *guilt*..."⁵

³ *Ecce Homo*, "Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic," 313; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56.

⁴ *The Gay Science*, V §347.

⁵ *Genealogy of Morals*, III §28.

At this point, we should raise an important question: are these two ideals, the ascetic and the eternal recurrence, the only ways to handle suicidal nihilism? One approach would be to look for cultures that both did *not* employ the ascetic ideal and did *not* succumb to suicidal nihilism. A possible example of such a culture might be the ancient Greeks. According to Nietzsche, the Greek gods did not create a framework that explains suffering in terms of sin but rather one that largely attributes it to foolishness. However, Nietzsche writes:

Even this disturbance in the head...presented a problem: "how is it possible? how could it actually have happened to heads such as *we* have, we men of aristocratic descent, of the best society, happy, well-constituted, noble, and virtuous?"—thus the noble Greek asked themselves for centuries in the face of every incomprehensible atrocity or wantonness with which one of their kind had polluted himself. "He must have been deluded by a *god*," they concluded finally, shaking their heads ... This expedient is *typical* of the Greeks ... In this way the gods served in those days to justify man to a certain extent even in his wickedness, they served as the originators of evil—in those days they took upon themselves, not the punishment, but what is *nobler*, the guilt.⁶

It is not clear, but perhaps it is not that the capriciousness of the gods gives meaning to suffering, but rather it “merely” gives a (partial) causal explanation of why some horrors occur. And this in such a way that the guilt, the bad conscience, that characterizes the use of the ascetic ideal does not occur.

However, according to Brian Leiter, when Nietzsche says, for example, "Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human *animal*, had no meaning so far"⁷, "...there is no distinction drawn here between the era of the Homeric Greeks, or the Romans, and the 'Christian' era, i.e., the ascetic era which encompasses the modern world as well."⁸ From this, Leiter concludes that the Greeks and Romans suffered and were themselves at risk for suicidal nihilism. Whether he is right about this is, I think, still an open question, one that deserves to be investigated. However, I want to take a different tack. What I want to do is to question whether a “device,” i.e., an ideal, is

⁶ *Genealogy of Morals*, II §23.

⁷ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

⁸ Leiter 2002, 285.

needed to either give suffering meaning, as the ascetic ideal is supposed to do, or to direct us to affirm life so passionately that we affirm it in the face of the greatest suffering, as the eternal recurrence is supposed to do.

Consider these at first enigmatic lines from the 13th century Japan Zen Master Dōgen, “To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening.”⁹ The meaning of these lines is dense and rich, however, a central point that they make is that we suffer, i.e., are in delusion, when we engage things with our Selves at the center, i.e., when our actions revolve around self-concern. The Mahayana figure of the bodhisattva is a paradigmatic representation of a selfless life, since it is the bodhisattva’s purpose to bring all others across, out of suffering, before they themselves crossover once and for all into Nirvana—or so we might put it, though such a formulation can be seen as problematic from Dōgen’s perspective, separating as it does practice and enlightenment. Be that as it may, what I want to suggest is that a necessary condition for the suicidal nihilism that concerns Nietzsche is the kind of self-concern that Dōgen labels as delusion in the above lines. When Nietzsche writes that man’s problem, “was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, ‘*why* do I suffer?’ ... The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far—”¹⁰ we can see that the culprit is that “I” in the question “why do *I* suffer?”¹¹ The bodhisattva’s question is not, “why do I suffer?”—

⁹ Dōgen 2012, 29.

¹⁰ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

¹¹ It should be noted that Nietzsche’s German does not use “I/ich” in this passage. Instead, he writes: “...aber nicht das Leiden selbst war sein Problem, sondern dass die Antwort fehlte für den Schrei der Frage “wozu leiden?” The possessive pronoun “sein” here refers to the “Mensch, das Thier Mensch” (“Man, the animal Man”). So, *humanity*’s question is/was “to what end suffering?” However, while this could be understood in a variety of ways, it does not seem to mean, “Why does humanity *qua* humanity, as a whole, suffer?” but rather, “Why do I, as an individual member of humanity, suffer?” The former may be taken to imply the latter but it is only the latter that would seem to directly court suicidal nihilism.

after all, as intimate as she is with the Four Noble Truths, she understands the origin, the why, of suffering—but rather the question, "How can I help others transform their suffering?"

Judaism and Christianity are, of course, not the only religions that Nietzsche thinks are problematic. While he praises Buddhism over Christianity, nevertheless, Nietzsche still writes of them both that they, "...are to be reckoned among the nihilistic religions—they are both *décadence* religions...."¹² Nietzsche sees Buddhism as preferable to Christianity but still nihilistic in its condemnation of life and this world,¹³ i.e., in its condemnation of suffering, and its extolling of compassion/pity (*Mitleid*).¹⁴ However, it is not my intent to examine further Nietzsche's exact views concerning Buddhism or their accuracy beyond considering the implications of the bodhisattva ideal for his claims about nihilism. To this latter end, I want to sketch a picture of the bodhisattva ideal, one that avoids suicidal nihilism by avoiding one of its necessary conditions, namely, egoism, by which I mean living a life with self-concern at the center.

Let's continue by looking at the concept of the bodhisattva in more detail, particularly as it is found in Dōgen's Zen. We might say that the bodhisattva is defined by the bodhisattva's vow. One translation of which is:

Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken them.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to transform them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to comprehend them.
The awakened way is incomparable; I vow to embody it.¹⁵

Most people do not feel the suffering of others enough to be moved to nihilism if the suffering of others cannot be explained.

¹² *Antichrist* §20.

¹³ See, for example, the *Gay Science* §346.

¹⁴ See, for example, the *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface §5.

¹⁵ Tanahashi 2015, 30.

As Hee-Jin Kim notes, “These vows are recited, reflected upon, and meditated on, by monastics, day and night, to such an extent that the lives of monastics are, in essence, the *embodiment* of vows.”¹⁶ The bodhisattva takes this vow so seriously that she delays “final enlightenment” and returns birth after birth to help free sentient beings from suffering.

There are two senses of bodhisattva in play with Dōgen and Mahayana Buddhism more generally. That is, there is the bodhisattva as a way of practicing Buddhism, i.e., the pursuit of liberation for all; and there is the bodhisattva as an “object of faith and devotion.”¹⁷ In his fascicle “Avalokiteshvara,”¹⁸ Dōgen venerates the mythical bodhisattva of great compassion, Avalokiteshvara. He is said to have a thousand arms and eyes. He is:

"One who perceives the cries of the world," ... This bodhisattva is regarded as the parent of all buddhas. Do not assume that this bodhisattva has not mastered the way as much as buddhas. In fact, Avalokiteshvara was True Dharma Illumination Tathagata in a previous life.¹⁹

So many arms (hands) and eyes are representative of Avalokiteshvara’s ability to extend his “infinite compassion” to all beings.²⁰ Given Dōgen’s identification of Avalokiteshvara as the “parent of all buddhas” and given that he is the bodhisattva of great compassion, it is not hard to see why Kim would conclude that, “The essence of the bodhisattva ideal [is] great compassion.”

Importantly, Kim continues:

[The bodhisattva ideal] was [for Dōgen] the reconciliation of the dualistic opposites of self and nonself, sentient and insentient, Buddhas and sentient beings, man and woman, and so forth. As Dōgen stated, “The way of the bodhisattva is ‘I am Thusness; you are Thusness.’” The identity of “I” and “you” in thusness [emptiness/Buddha-nature], rather than identity in substance, status, or the like, was the fundamental metaphysical and religious ground of great compassion. This was why Dōgen said that when we study

¹⁶ Kim 2004, 204. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Kim 2004, 204.

¹⁸ Avalokiteshvara is also the central speaker in the *Heart Sutra*.

¹⁹ Dōgen 2012, 397-98.

²⁰ Kim 2004, 207.

ourselves thoroughly, we understand others thoroughly as well; as a result, we cast off the self and other.²¹

A bodhisattva, a Buddha, realizes the suffering of others as her own and is moved to free the other from suffering just as much as she would be moved to free herself from suffering if she were not a Buddhist. The bodhisattva way, the Buddha Way for Dōgen, is the embodiment of compassion for the suffering of other beings, a suffering that is recognized as one's own, in the dual sense of "just like the kind of suffering I experience" and in the sense of non-duality, the idea that given two seemingly different things, e.g., the sun and the lives it sustains, we can *neither* appropriately describe them as separate *nor* as identical; they are, as Dōgen wonderfully puts it, "...not one, not different; although not different, not the same; although not the same, not many."²² Thus, in the context of emptiness, acts of compassion, which are through and through every action of a bodhisattva who embodies emptiness through the care and attention to everything done, said, and thought, is the expression of the two sides of reality, form and emptiness, in a single, compassionate action.

It is important to note that compassionate action in Buddhism is not merely a matter of teaching the Dharma, i.e., Buddhist teachings. Consider the social movement of engaged Buddhism. A prominent advocate of engaged Buddhism, Alan Senauke, writes:

It is hard to define engaged Buddhism. But I think it has to do with a willingness to see how deeply people suffer; to understand how we have fashioned whole systems of suffering out of gender, race, caste, class, ability, and so on; and to know that interdependently and individually we co-create this suffering. Looking around we plainly see a world at war, a planet in peril.

Some days, I call this engaged Buddhism; on other days I think it is just plain Buddhism — walking the Bodhisattva path, embracing the suffering of beings by taking responsibility for them.²³

²¹ Kim 2004, 208. We will see below in detail what is meant by reconciling these opposites, including what is meant by the reconciliation of the sentient and insentient.

²² Dōgen 2012, 451. Interpolation mine.

²³ Senauke 2010, iii.

On one hand, from the Buddhist perspective, even if there were no systems of oppression revolving around gender, race, etc., people would still suffer profoundly due, we might say, to their ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, etc. Hence, the emphasis in Buddhism on spreading the Dharma. But as Senauke points out, we cannot ignore the various systems of oppression that compound people's suffering. The compassionate activity of the bodhisattva extends beyond teaching those who are under the boot of the oppressor how to avoid experiencing that heavy boot as suffering. And, of course, the same should be said for the non-systemic kinds of suffering that humans are subject to and which do not result "merely" from ignorance of the Dharma.

So we can see in this brief exposition how the bodhisattva ideal may function as an alternative ideal to both the ascetic ideal and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Both of those perspectives assume a stance of self-interest, as both engage the claim that "man's" problem, "was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, 'why do I suffer?'"²⁴ Alternatively, we might say that the bodhisattva's question is not, "why do I suffer?" but rather, "How can I help others transform their suffering?" And given the non-duality actualized by the bodhisattva's practice, that question can be reformulated as, "How can we transform our suffering, the suffering of the world?" There is no room in this context for the suicidal nihilism that concerns Nietzsche to arise. For consider, in summary, that the compassion of the bodhisattva, 1) transforms the self-concern at the root of Nietzsche's suicidal nihilism into the concern for the suffering of the other who simultaneously is not other; 2) incorporates Buddhist soteriology, which includes the idea that suffering is at root due to the misapprehension of reality, i.e., apprehending reality as non-empty; and this involves, 3) the recognition that the cause of one's suffering, not necessarily its meaning, is attachment to concern with one's individual suffering. Thus, if suicidal nihilism is the result of not being able to answer the

²⁴ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

question, “Why do I suffer?” and if the bodhisattva ideal is a rejection of exactly that question, as outlined above, the threat of suicidal nihilism is dissipated.

Before closing, I want to consider the objection that the bodhisattva ideal is not a third option, but merely collapses into, or is an instance of, the ascetic ideal. It is certainly correct that the ascetic ideal concerns a kind of self-denial—one is to embrace, e.g., poverty, chastity, humility—and Buddhism advocates a kind of self-denial, albeit a “middle way” form that is not extreme.²⁵ Moreover, the ascetic ideal gives meaning to suffering, according to Nietzsche, because the sufferer realizes her suffering is her own fault. And in Buddhism one can say that one’s suffering is also one’s fault, due to one’s ignorance and delusion; ignorance and delusion that cannot be removed except by one’s own, individual effort. However, as accurate as such parallels are, we must realize that the latter description of Buddhism, which centers on the responsibility of an isolated individual, is from the perspective of ignorance. That is, it is the kind of thing said to or by someone who is not far along the Buddhist path. Once one is further down the path, so to speak, the individualism implied by saying each of us is responsible for her own ignorance is transformed as one’s understanding of the emptiness, i.e., the interdependent and transitory nature, of reality deepens. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes in “We Are the Beaters; We are the Beaten” in regard to the Rodney King police beating in the 1990s, he did the beating himself; yet he is also non-dual with Rodney King, receiving the beating himself.²⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, King, and the actions of the police are all interdependent—the beating of King, his suffering, is non-dual with the suffering of the police, the actions of Thich Nhat Hanh, etc. Similarly, the ignorance and delusion of the police is Thich Nhat Hanh’s, King’s, mine, and yours. In the context of emptiness, we are all responsible for all of it, not any single individual.

²⁵ Though it may seem extreme from the perspective of hyper-consumption, wealth, and comfort found in contemporary “first world” countries.

²⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh 1991.

Thus, Buddhism does not present an ascetic ideal that is to be used by an isolated individual to take their suffering upon themselves as their individual responsibility. In the bodhisattva's embrace, there is no "I" taking center stage, no gravity of self pulling in nihilist self-concern.

Bibliography

- Dōgen. 2012. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 1991. "We Are the Beaters; We are the Beaten." *Los Angeles Times*, April 15th.
- Kim, Hee-Jin. 2004. *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Leiter, Brian. 2002. *Nietzsche on Morality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nietzsche Texts:
- Twilight of the Idols; The Anti-Christ*. 1990. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin Books.
- Beyond Good and Evil*. 1992. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Trans. and Ed. Walter Kaufman. New York: The Modern Library.
- The Gay Science*. 1974. Trans. Walter Kaufman. New York: Vintage Books.
- On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo*. 1967. Trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.
- Senauke, Alan. 2010. *The Bodhisattva's Embrace: Dispatches from Engaged Buddhism's Front Lines*. Berkeley: Clear View Press.
- Tanahashi, Kazuaki. 2015. *Zen Chants: Thirty-Five Essential Texts with Commentary*. Boston & London: Shambhala.