

The Metaphysics of Suffering: The Convergence of Buddhist and Upanishadic Doctrines in Schopenhauer's Philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of suffering is an unique contribution from Indian philosophy but not alien to the western thought. This concept was developed and elaborated in the form of various types of doctrines by Schopenhauer, Leibniz and others. In the 19th century Schopenhauer discussed his doctrine, which found a wide acceptance by a large section of thinkers of east and west. Here it is very interesting to note that Schopenhauer is in close agreement with the Buddhistic doctrine of suffering. In fact Schopenhauer himself revealed the truth in one of his well-known works. "The world as will and Idea", "If I were to take the result of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I would be obliged to concede to Buddhism. The pre-eminence over the rest. In any case it must be a satisfaction to me to see my teaching in such close agreement with a religion which the majority of mankind hold as their own." He further confesses that already as youth of seventeen he was "as possessed by the sorrows of the world as was Buddha in his youth at the sight of illness, old age, pain and death. When he got acquainted with Hindu philosophy, he found that the "Hindus have long ago learned the lesson of nature which shows that death is the great reprimand which the will to live, or more especially, egoism, which is essential to this, receives through the course of nature; and it may be conceived as a punishment for our existence. We are not at bottom something that we ought not to be therefore we cease to be. But disappearing as individuals we remain in the great all" in spite of time, death and decay, we are still altogether.

Key Words: Buddhism, intelligent, Hindu philosophy, mankind, realisation, religion

Introduction

Schopenhauer has vividly described the misery of life as follows: "Having awakened to life from the night of unconsciousness the will finds itself as an individual in an infinite and endless world among innumerable individuals all striving, suffering, erring, and as though passing through a frightful dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Until then, however, its wishes are unlimited, its claim inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire begets a new one." Life is deeply steeped in suffering and one cannot escape it. Schopenhauer admits that suffering is present in the animal kingdom as well, but it increases in proportion to the increase in consciousness and reaches its highest degree in man. The more intelligent the man, is the more his phenomenal existence is a constant transition into death, a constant dying. Schopenhauer insisted that the twin realisations of transitory ness and the inevitability of death were the prime source of those questions which a man may address to the world, its nature and his place in it. Suffering and misery in life were the occasions for metaphysical and ethical enquiry. Philosophical wonder springs in the individual not only by the higher development of the intellect but also by the knowledge of death, along with which, is the

consideration of the suffering and misery of life, which gives the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and metaphysical explanation of the world. If our life were to be endless and painless, it would perhaps occur to no one to ask why the world exists. From this point onwards the analogies between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Indian, particularly the Buddhist, speculations are striking.

No philosophy in the west has given such an elaborate presentation of empirical and metaphysical pessimism as Schopenhauer. "If we wish to call the philosophy of life, we must acknowledge that, though a doctrine of life, it is a condemnation of life it is philosophy not so much of life as of anti-life " His system is a system of metaphysical pessimism, for him pessimism does not consist simply in the empirical observation that human life contains more misery than joy but is based on a metaphysical doctrine concerning the ultimate nature of reality. He says not only that human life contains more misery than happiness, but also that human life must be dominated by suffering, since it is the impression, the objectification of a blind will, essentially at variance with itself.

Schopenhauer arrived at the conclusion that the entire world of ideas, the world of phenomena, is but a world of objectified will. While the world as Idea was the internal, dynamic and the most fundamental aspect of existence. Just as a magic lantern shows many different pictures, but it is only one and the same flame that makes them all visible, so with all the many different phenomena which together fill the world, it is only the one will that appears, as everything is its visibility, its objectivity, it remains unmoved in the midst of this change. As Schopenhauer says, the world in all its multiplicity of its parts and forms, is the manifestation, the objectivity, of the one will to live.

Now, this will is a blind and restless striving without intelligent aim. It is unsatisfied longing which shows itself most poignantly in human life, in man's perpetual struggle for happiness, which lies only in the future, the supposed attachment which soon vanishes. For Schopenhauer, as for Buddhism, happiness or pleasure is only negative in character while suffering and pain are the prevalent and dominant notes of life. Only pain and want can be felt positively, and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative. For both life is nothing but a tragedy, and optimism is an unwarranted delusion.

The will being the source of all suffering Schopenhauer counselled men to quell its power either through aesthetic contemplation and altruistic acts or more radically and permanently through the ascetic attitude recommended by Hinduism and Christianity. The first is a temporary escape, an oasis in the desert, while the other is a perennial river. It is in his recognition of the first way, the way of art, Significance of suffering that Schopenhauer scores against the Indian philosophers, including the Buddhists. In aesthetic contemplation, he believes that man becomes the disinterested observer. "When I regard the beautiful object neither as itself an object of desire nor as a stimulant to desire, I become disinterested spectator, freed, temporarily at least, from the slavery of the will." This theory of temporary escape through aesthetic contemplation, whether of natural objects or of works of art, is linked by Schopenhauer with a metaphysical theory of what he calls platonic ideas.

His queries didn't stop at Buddhism alone. He felt that there is something common in both Christianity and old religions of India. For him, Everything which is true in Christianity may also be found in Brahmanism and Buddhism. This expression led Schopenhauer to the opinion that the New Testament must be in some way traceable to an Indian source: its ethical system, its ascetic view of morality, its pessimism, and its avatar, are all thoroughly Indian. The strength of the Indian view and subsequently of Christianity lies in the realisation that a consciousness of the corruption and misery of the world, its need of deliverance and salvation through an Avatar, must go hand in hand with a morality based on self denial and repentance. The strict ethical discipline prescribed (as a necessary step to salvation) by almost all the systems of Indian philosophy bears testimony to this.

What Schopenhauer finds common between the different religions is the fundamental ascetic character which he explained as the denial of the will to live exemplified most vividly in the lives of Hindu and Buddhist saints? In his eyes, the great truth contained in Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism is the need of deliverance from an existence which is given upto suffering and death and the attainableness of this by denial of the will. Asceticism with a view to deliverance is more. Apparent in Hinduism with its doctrine of 'Maya' and Buddhism with its doctrine of 'Nirvana' than in Christianity which teaches that the ultimate reality is 'a personal God. In this regard Schopenhauer's philosophy is more akin to the Hindu and Buddhist doctrines.

Schopenhauer's thought consistently exhibits numerous and almost miraculous coincidence with the basic tenets of Buddhist Philosophy. As he himself said, he contained the triple tradition of "Quietism i.e. the giving up of all willing, asceticism i.e. internal mortification of one's will, and mysticism i.e. consciousness of the identity of one's own inner being with that of all beings, or with the Kernel of the world. "He, like the Buddhists, shows that life in this world is essentially suffering and attributes this suffering to the will to live which is equivalent to 'Trishna' and which involves us in a delusion. He looks for salvation from this world by way of a "denial of the will to live, which is the consequence of the dawning of better knowledge, and by an asceticism and self-renunciation, exemplified in the lives of saints, and so on. Further, his belief in renunciation, his stress on compassion as the basis of morality, his indifference to the achievement of human history as well as his insight into the impermanence of things and into the reasons why Nirvana can be described only negatively, put him in fundamental agreement with Buddha's thought. It is however, on one main point that Schopenhauer differs from the Buddhist. For Schopenhauer the will is the thing-in-itself whereas in Buddhism "carving" operates within the conditioned and phenomenal world, and the unconditioned neumenon lies in 'Nirvana' which is supremely calm as the result of the abolition of craving. Unacquainted with the practice of Yoga. Schopenhauer did not know that at the bottom of every mind there is a calm quietude which is the prototype of 'Nirvana'. "His central metaphysical Thesis," as Conze puts it, "is incompatible not only with Buddhism but also with his own stereological aspirations." The question inevitably arises how the denial of the will whose essential trait consists in assertion is at all possible. Schopenhauer realises himself that "denial of the will is irreconcilable with the earlier explanation of necessity.

Assertion and denial are opposite acts of the same will whose capacity for both is the only true freedom. That the will as such is free "follows from the fact that, according to our view, it is the thing-in-itself. But since the will itself is beyond causality it is impossible for us even to ask for the cause for this change from assertion to denial. Thus a veil of mystery surrounds this problem of why the will either asserts or denies itself, and no human hand will ever be able to lift it. As Schopenhauer himself says, the freedom of the will is precisely what the Christian mystic call the work of grace and the new birth.

According to Schopenhauer, since the selfish will is the root of the all evil and the source of all sorrow man must negate the will and suppress his selfish desires in order to achieve happiness or at least, to be at peace. The individual will is selfish, narrow and is filled with inertia. As a result of this all evil is born out of it and all sorrow and suffering are the natural resultants. Schopenhauer suggests that as long as man will not negate the selfish will he cannot suppress his selfish desires. Unless he suppresses his selfish desires he cannot eliminate sorrow and misery from his life. In this connection we can draw a parallelism between Buddha and Schopenhauer. In Buddha to be born is to do Sin and commit to misery. According to Buddha life is full of misery and the world is also filled with misery and there is no escape except through the path of liberation. The idea of Bodhisattva universalises the concept of service and liberation from misery. In Schopenhauer also it is suggested that the artistic or the philosophic genuineness may be delivered from the selfish will, forgetting himself, loose himself in artistic contemplation or philosophical thought. This method, however, affords only a temporary relief. In Schopenhauer, the individual can also free himself from a selfish will, by contemplating on the wickedness of the worldly futility of all desire and the illusoriness of the individual existence. In this we can discover the line of discussion in Schopenhauer about misery. The traditional view of morality as by contemplating on misery and evil, one can eliminate the Sin. On the other hand, the other view holds that by contemplating upon evil and misery, there cannot be deliverance except it develops further involvement. Concentration upon good, the beautiful may help us in understanding these virtues. Clinging to good authentically implies cessation from evil Thus the later view seems to be more important and significant from the point of view of the new developments in moral philosophy.

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