

The Overman and the *Arahant*: Models of Human Perfection in Nietzsche and Buddhism

Introduction

Nietzsche and Buddhism have many striking similarities and differences that merit close investigation. It is well known that Nietzsche looks at Buddhism through a perspective informed by his readings of certain Eastern texts which were beginning to become available in his time (Morrison, 1997; Brobjer, 2004). Nietzsche's thought on its own also merits a comparison with what Buddhism has to say on a range of topics (Elman, 1983; Priest, 2007; Dumoulin, 1991). 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 (Mistry, 1981; Morrison, 1997; Parkes, 2000a, 2000b; Morrison, 2000). Nonetheless, his thoughts bear certain characteristics that reveal deep insights when compared with Buddhism. (There is also an attempt to link Nietzsche's thought and Buddhism in environmental philosophy; see Parkes, 2005.) What I plan to do in the paper, then, is not so much to point out Nietzsche's errors in his understanding of Buddhism, but to compare one broad aspect of Nietzsche's views with that of Buddhism. In this respect one might need to differentiate between the Buddhism as understood by Nietzsche (what he says when he refers to 'Buddhism' in his texts) and Buddhism as actually understood through the texts and scriptures and practiced by

Buddhists today (Morrison, 1997).

One of the interesting points of comparison between Nietzsche and the Buddhist refers to what could be regarded as the ideal or model of human perfection. That is, what is the ideal, the very paradigm, of a human being which one human should aspire to become? This question occupies Nietzsche strongly, and it is well known that his doctrine of the *Übermensch*, literally translated as the overman, represents what he believes to be the ideal of what a human being should eventually become. Nietzsche is not talking so much of the evolutionary aspect of human beings whereby it is expected that human beings will evolve to become overmen as of presenting an ideal of what an ordinary human being could, and should, become. In this aspect Nietzsche shares much with the Buddha when the latter presented his own ideal of human perfection. When Shakyamuni Buddha had attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, what he found was a way toward this ideal of perfection that anybody could, and should, eventually attain. This idea is represented by that of the *arahant*, literally one who has vanquished all defilements, i.e., those things or mindsets that cloud the mind so that the mind become embroiled in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth known as *samsāra*. The reason why Prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, or the Awakened One, renounced his luxurious, princely life and took on the life of an ascetic was precisely that he felt dissatisfied with the ways things were for him, and for all other people. 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, and he spent the remaining forty-five years of his life tirelessly teaching everyone who cared to listen how to practice oneself in order to

attain this state. Those who have already attained the state are then called “*arahants*.”

So it appears that at least the motivation of Nietzsche and the Buddha is quite similar. Both were dissatisfied with the ways things were that surrounded them at the moment and searched for a better alternative. Furthermore, one could also pay attention to the way these ideal conditions for a human being are presented. For Nietzsche the overman has taken aristocratic values, the master morality as opposed to the more common values of the mass, i.e., the slave morality (Nietzsche, 1998, pp. 153-155). Nietzsche’s view is perhaps that the aristocratic values in question do not necessarily belong to the actual upper class who are rich and powerful, but an ordinary person who is not so rich or powerful can indeed become an overman through his effort and understanding. Since actually overcoming one’s own habitual state is a rare phenomenon, Nietzsche views it as really *aristocratic* since the literal meaning of aristocracy is the rule by the best, whose number is always rare. Here the best does not have to be rich, descend from powerful families, skillful or physically attractive or powerful (though these qualities do not themselves detract one from being an overman), but one must possess a necessary quality, that is, the confidence in one’s own ability to create values for oneself so that one does not merely follow the dictates of others.

The *arahants*, in quite the same vein, are not aristocratic in the sense that they belong to a higher caste distinguished by birth or the like. The main difference between the *arahant* and the brahmin is that one has to be born the latter, as the brahmin is a caste. What was really revolutionary about the Buddha’s teaching was that he set out to destroy the belief in caste system. The ability to attain arahatship, to realize the ideal of Buddhism, is open to everyone, be they of the highest or the lowest caste. Indeed ranks

among the monks are defined not by birth or level of knowledge, but by how long one has already been a monk. A junior monk has always to pay respect to one more senior (one becomes more senior by having become monk for a longer period of time) even though the senior one is from the lowest caste. When we consider how strongly the caste system was held and how the belief took hold in all aspects of people's life in the Buddha's time, then we see the Buddha's work to be nothing short of world shaking.

This world shaking work of the Buddha points to the conclusion that those who follow the Buddha's path and succeeds appear to have something in common with Nietzsche's overman. Nonetheless, there are a number of important differences. The similarities are, firstly, that to become an *arahant* or an overman does not require one to be well connected, be of good family, receive divine grace, or the like, but it does require one's own effort. This is an important point that is not much emphasized in the literature. Secondly, since Nietzsche has a view very similar to the Buddhist about the metaphysics of the self, the overman and the *arahant* then share similar characteristics in this regard. Nietzsche and the Buddha both believe that what is understood to be the individual self, the ordinary referent of the first person pronoun in ordinary discourse, is nothing but a construction and has no objective status of its own. However, although both appear to subscribe to the same general line of view regarding the self, how this understanding of the self is approached is markedly different in both Nietzsche and the Buddha. Realizing that the self is only a construction, the *arahant*, following the Buddha, totally relinquishes it, retaining only its conventional aspect for purposes of ordinary living. The overman, on the other hand, is still attached significantly to the self even though he realizes that it is only a construction.

The Overman

First of all let us look closely at what Nietzsche has to say regarding the overman. Here is a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, which is a precursor to the kind of view that further develops into the mature one found in *Zarathustra*:

I must insist that we finally stop mistaking philosophical workers or learned people in general for philosophers [T]he task itself calls for something else—it calls for him to *create values* [T]he true philosophers are commanders and lawgivers. They say, ‘This is the way it *should be!*’ Only they decide about mankind’s Where to? And What for? and to do so they employ the preparatory work of all philosophical workers, all subduers of the past. With creative hands they reach towards the future, and everything that is or has existed become their means, their tool, their hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is *creating*, their creating is law-giving, their will to truth is—*will to power* (Nietzsche, 1998, pp. 104-105).

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the overman is that he does create values. The overman does not follow pre-established value systems; instead he creates a new one and becomes a ‘lawgiver’ to mankind. Nietzsche’s point is that, having been able to survey all things from high above the ground and to see things through others’ eyes, the true philosopher creates values for himself and others. As to what kind of values the true philosopher should be creating Nietzsche is silent; it could be any kind of values. The task of judging or evaluating these values then belongs to the one who again soars above

all the conflicts and debates about those values and looks at all value systems and all evaluation attempts as being one and the same, as if these differing value systems are mere specks of land looking alike when seen through the eagle's perspective. Hence the evaluation of the values belong to the soaring one alone, as the criteria used for evaluating also originate from him.

The first reference to *Übermensch* appears in Section 143, Book Three, of *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 191-192). Here Nietzsche discusses the origin of polytheism, saying that it is a projection of the individual's preference of values that originally created polytheism, when the individual denies that the values came from himself, but instead claims that the laws and values ultimately come from the gods and only pass through him. The invention of all kinds of beings, including overmen and undermen, results from this projection by the individual of his own preferences in values. Hence, the word "overmen" (*Übermenschen*) refers to the kind of people that are larger than ordinary human beings, on a par with the gods; these are contrasted with the "undermen" (*Untermenschen*) consisting of dwarfs, satyrs, fairies, devils, and so on (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 191-192). The meaning of *Übermenschen* here is purely physical, and it is not until Nietzsche comes to the Prologue of *Zarathustra*, that he talks about the overman in the metaphysical and normative sense:

"I teach you the *overman*. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"

"All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want

to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment” (Nietzsche, 1954, pp. 124).

Looking at what Nietzsche has to say in the passage alluded to earlier from *The Gay Science* and in Zarathustra’s prologue here, coupled with the passage quoted earlier from *Beyond Good and Evil*, one has a sense that the overman might perhaps be more developed physically than ordinary human beings. (They are *Übermenschen* rather than *Untermenschen*, which leaves the ordinary *Mensch* somewhere in the middle—one could not help thinking of what Nietzsche would react were he able to experience the recent developments in human enhancement technology today.) In addition the overmen are normatively a kind of beings that have already overcome ordinary humans in the sense that they are better and more developed ethically. This is perhaps a dangerous thing to say about Nietzsche, since he tries to distance himself from straightforward ethical judgment, preferring instead to soar above and look at ethical judgments empirically and historically. Nonetheless, one has a sense that the overman has to be more developed ethically than ordinary humans, because otherwise there would be no point in overcoming the latter. To say that the overman is more ethically developed does not mean that the overman follows the same ethical principles that govern the lives of ordinary human beings. Since the overman does create new values, the originality and freshness of the newly created values seem to imply that the old value system does not serve its purposes any more and a new system is needed. As goodness or badness of

things is a function of whether and how well the things in question fulfill their purposes they have been designed for, to realize that the old system no longer serves its purposes and to proclaim new ones would seem to imply that the overman is more developed as he sees the lack in the old system and the need to create a new one. (This is also implied when Nietzsche contrasts philosophical workers and true philosophers. Only the latter are “commanders” and “lawgivers,” but we must not fail to notice that they are also “philosophers.”) What we need to remember here is that for Nietzsche to become better always means that one is better according to one set of values and that there is no objective comparison among the values. That is, there is no sky hook such that ethical systems can be judged eternally.

This question whether the overman is indeed more ethical than ordinary human is noted by Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, who argues that Nietzsche’s account of the overman is beset by an unresolved contradiction between the “wise man” and “strong man” models. According to the former, the overman is portrayed by Nietzsche in such a way that “man’s greatness consists in the absolutization of his perspective.” The “most powerful man,” writes Nietzsche, “would have to be the most evil, in as much as he carries his ideal against the ideals of other men and remakes them in his own image” (*Will to Power*, Section 1026, from Nietzsche, 1967, p. 531). However, the overman also is “one who withdraws from no possible knowledge. . . . He should learn to see in various kinds of perspectives, with more and more eyes, omitting nothing ever known, even the most contradictory things” (Müller-Lauter, 1999, pp. 73-75, cited in Davis, 2004, p. 124). The tension, in other words, is between the absolute freedom of the will to power to do anything as it pleases, hammering one’s own individual perspective onto the

world, and the recognition that there are countless other perspectives all deserving attention and respect. Müller-Lauter argues that although Nietzsche seems to come close to reconciling the two, in the end he cannot do it because it is not conceivable how a pluralistic standpoint of the “wise man” could emerge from that of the “strong man” (Müller-Lauter, 1999, pp. 73-75, cited in Davis, 2004, p. 124). Davis also argues that the insights obtained from Zen Buddhism could provide a bridge where the two notions of the overman could be joined together. The Zen master, according to Davis, is a master both “in” and “of” servitude (Davis, 2004, p. 128). The master is a lord and a servant at the same time and he is good and skillful at both, since from the standpoint of Emptiness, the master realizes that there is no individual ego and he does not find any essential differences between himself and others.

The Arahant

The *arahant* is one who has totally vanquished all causes that would lead to further entanglement in the cycle of birth and rebirth or *saṃsāra*. He follows the teachings of the Buddha and succeeds in practicing and realizing the Buddha’s aim in his teaching. Let us look at one passage from the Pāli canon, which represents the Buddha’s original teaching. In this passage, taken from the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, the Buddha is teaching about the root cause of liberation from all sufferings, or of *nibbāna*. More specifically, he talks about what exactly is an “*arahant*” or one who has totally liberated himself from the bond of sufferings. Here the Buddha is telling his disciples:

A monk who is a Worthy One, devoid of mental fermentations—who has

attained completion, finished the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming, and is released through right knowledge—directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he does not conceive things about earth, does not conceive things in earth, does not conceive things coming out of earth, does not conceive earth as ‘mine,’ does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has comprehended it, I tell you. (Thanissaro, 1998).

This is a difficult passage, but it tells us directly what it means for one to be an *arahant*, i.e., one who has totally been released from the bond of sufferings that ties one to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth known as *samsāra*. Here a monk is a “worthy one” in so far as he has accomplished the most important, indeed the only task, that is assigned him, the task of becoming liberated and attained *nibbāna*. One who has attained *nibbāna* thus has already “attained completion, finished the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming, and is released through right knowledge.” In fact this is a stock phrase found throughout the entire Pāli canon to refer to those who have successfully followed the Buddha’s teachings and become liberated from the bondage. What the *arahant* does to achieve this status is that he is “devoid of mental fermentations.” That is, he is free from adventitious thoughts formed within his mind. This does not mean that the monk is totally devoid of any thoughts—that would mean that the monk is unconscious, but it means that the monk does not fall into the trap of reifying or substantiating the thoughts, believing that their content are real, objective and substantial. Hence the Buddha instructs his disciple to know “earth directly as earth”

and not to form any thoughts or conceptions of the earth. And then the Buddha goes on in the Sutta to other elements, including attainments of various meditative stages, as well as *nibbāna* itself. To know “earth directly as earth” means that the monk or the practitioner should regard things as they really are and not form any conceptual thoughts about them. But since conceptual thoughts are necessary for language and communication, the instruction is that the practitioner should not fall prey to these thoughts, believing that they are real and substantial. That would be a cause of suffering and an obstacle toward realizing the state of arahatship. In fact the Buddha does not just teach his disciples to regard earth as earth only, but in the Sutta he is giving a whole range of examples of mental objects which should not be taken to be substantial so as to become a seed for mental fermentations. Earth here is only one element among the familiar others. The Sutta also mentions the whole range of meditative stages and levels of attainments which the monks are expected to achieve; the idea is that none of these stages and levels should not be regarded as substantial—the monks should not regard any of these stages and levels as existing on their own lest they become proud of it and fall back into *samsāra*. Even *nibbāna* itself, the state of total extinguishing of all defilements, is also included in the list. The monks who have already attained the total extinguishing relinquish even *nibbāna* itself when *nibbāna* is considered as a self-subsisting entity.

The most serious types of conceptual formations, indeed their root cause, is the formation of the concept of one’s own self, acting as referent to the first-person pronoun “I.” The Buddha’s injunction that one avoid mental fermentations does also include the fermentation of the concept of the ego or the subject. That is the root cause of all

sufferings because it sets the putative self, so constructed out of this conceptual fermentation, out of everything that functions as its object or content of its thoughts. Sufferings then ensue because there would then arise to cherish and protect this alleged self that is now believed to be real. Since things do not follow the dictate of the self, sufferings result as frustrations, dissatisfaction, sense of lack, and so on.

The Two Models Considered Together

It is interesting to know how one who is an adept at avoiding mental fermentations and seeing earth, among others, as earth would qualify as a Nietzschean overman. The comparison hinges on the role suffering plays as well as attitude toward suffering in either kind of humans. For the *arahant*, avoiding mental fermentations and seeing things as they exactly are without the distortions of conceptual thoughts is necessary for overcoming the bond of suffering so that one does not have to be born again. However, none of these is necessary for being a overman. The purpose of becoming an overman, an *Übermensch*, is not to overcome suffering, but to overcome the common and ordinary condition of being a human itself.

One big difference between the *arahant* and the overman centers around the self. For the *arahant*, the purpose is to eliminate conceptions of the self as inherently existing, independent from other contextual factors. This is a key to eliminating suffering. However, by becoming a new kind of human being, the overman does affirm the self. By claiming that a defining quality of the overman is to create new values, it would seem that there would be a self that does the creating. Instead of coming to realize that the self of whatever kind is ultimately an illusion, the overman proclaims his own self through

the projection of his will to power, and by doing so implying that the self is bigger and more developed than those of ordinary people. It is this aggrandized self of the overman that functions as the basis for the aristocratic value that Nietzsche talks about. Jim Hanson talks about this point when he discusses the “Power-I” or “Higher-I” that binds the various mental episodes together so they belong to one and the same person, as well as become the basis of the Nietzschean will that Buddhism should emulate (Hanson, 2008). It is the I of the overman, more powerful and higher than ordinary I’s, so argues Hanson, that provides the drive behind *nibbāna* as “active becoming” rather than “passive being” which serves humanity better (Hanson, 2008, p. 244).

This, however, seems to contradict many passages in Nietzsche’s work where he argues that the self is only a construction. Alexander Nehamas writes: “Nietzsche believes that nothing is left over beyond the sum total of the features and characteristics associated with each object and that no person remains beyond the totality of its experiences and actions” (Nehamas, 1985, p. 155). The self for Nietzsche is nothing over and above episodes, both mental and physical, that together make up a person. Nehamas also cites a key passage: “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming: the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed [or doing: *Thun*]—the deed is everything ... our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language and has not disposed of that little changeling, the ‘subject’ (the atom, for example, is such a changeling, as is the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’)” (*On the Genealogy of Moral*, I, 13, cited in Nehamas, 1985, pp. 154-155). This point has a lot of similarities with the Buddhist tenet. The self for Buddhism is also a fiction added to the myriad mental and physical episodes that all together make up a human person. These episodes are known as the five

aggregates, namely form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*) perception (*saññā*), mental formation (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). These aggregates are necessarily components of any conception of an individual self; there is nothing to the self beyond these five aggregates, and these aggregates are always sufficient in constituting a self. The idea, then, is that the aggregates here are not necessarily tied up with one another; they only occur together as long as there is a functioning body and mind complex, such as a human person, and since they are necessary and sufficient for the self and since each of the aggregates can be analyzed further, the self then is understood to be nothing more than a construct, something arising out of these co-arising factors due to causes and conditions in the past. Hence the self is a “fiction added to the deed,” albeit a very persistent fiction.

Nonetheless, if the self can be analyzed away into smaller components as discussed above, what and who is the basis of the will to power that creates value and lays out new paths for truths? If the self is in fact a fiction, then Hanson’s “Power-I” is also a fiction. Hanson argues that Nietzsche’s overman and the “Power-I” can be helpful to the notion of *nibbāna* in Buddhism in making it more active. But the concept of *nibbāna* does not imply that it is in itself passive. In fact, however, *nibbāna* can be a very active notion. The idea of the active *nibbāna* may be more prominent in Mahayana Buddhism. Nāgārjuna, in *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Nagarjuna, 1995, p. 75), says that there is not a slightest difference between *nibbāna* and *saṃsāra*. That is, the only type of difference between the two is not in the province of ontology. Ontologically speaking, *nibbāna* and *saṃsāra* are one and the same (See also Loy, 1983). One might put it also that the terms ‘*nibbāna*’ and ‘*saṃsāra*’ always denote

one and the same reality—our own perceptible reality in which we find ourselves. The difference lies in how that reality is understood and approached; that is, if reality is viewed without any “mental fermentations” discussed above in the paper, then it is *nibbāna*, but if it is viewed with all sorts of fermentations and fabrications, then it is not. In other words, the ‘I’ of the *arahant* or the Buddha is always there, since even arahants or Buddhas also have to talk and to carry on day to day living, which necessitate referring to the first person. But what the indexical ‘I’ is understood as referring to is not a kind of self-subsisting subject or soul that persists through time and is there inherently in itself, but something whose existence always depends on a number of causes and conditions. It is one and the same reality, one in which the arahants and the Buddhas find themselves, but it is how the I’s and the reality itself is understood to be that distinguishes them from ordinary, unenlightened people. For the Buddhas and arahants this same reality is *nibbāna*, and for the rest of us it is ordinary *saṃsāra*. If *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* are indeed one and the same, and since *saṃsāra* is just this ordinary world with all sorts of activities going on, then *nibbāna* can well be full of activities in this sense. Furthermore, the lifework of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama, who spent the entire forty-five years after his attainment of Enlightenment to teach people how to become released from suffering, attests to the fact that *nibbāna* is anything but static. A Buddha, a bodhisattva, or an *arahant* does not have to stay inside a cave doing nothing after realizing Enlightenment, but they continue to carry on hard work in order to benefit the most number of sentient beings.

Before we go on, however, let us add a note here about the two main traditions of Buddhism, namely the Theravāda and Mahāyāna, and see how they view the relation

between *nibbāna* and *samsāra* discussed here. This view of the dynamic *nibbāna* is not limited only to the later Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the earlier form of Buddhism, this view is also there. The Buddha always tells his disciples to work hard, and not to be lazy, even after they have attained Liberation. He once told his disciples to go about and propagate the teachings, forbidding any two monks to go in the same direction.

Furthermore, one can work hard for the benefits of all beings without carrying the baggage of the individual self, which implies that one can remain in *nibbāna* while engaging actively in affairs of the world for the benefits of beings. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of Thailand's most revered monks (and being a Thai monk a staunchly Theravādin), once taught that to work with "empty mind" (*cit waan* in Thai), i.e., the mind that is devoid of "mental fermentations" such as the thought that there is one's own individual ego and also devoid of defilements such as greed, anger and delusion, is much better suited to do all kinds of work than the mind that is still afflicted by the defilements (Buddhadasa 2010; 2005). He says: "You should take to yourselves the principle that one should live with empty mind. You should work with the empty mind; eat with the empty mind; you should go on living just as if you are already dead. ... Then maintain this condition and carry it on. You should do it for the sake of the world, gods and humans. ... Everything else has already been solved, so what is left is only to work for the benefits of others" (Buddhadasa, 2005). Thus, instead of carrying a "Power-I," the *arahant* works better for the benefits of others without being burdened by the sense of self. Neither the empirical sense of my own experiences of the self, or the more general notion of higher order self which may be regarded as necessary for being the subject of meditative experiences will do, because we have already seen from the *Mūlapariyāya*

Sutta earlier in the paper that the Buddha warns against taking any meditative absorption to be real and substantial, and this certainly includes any conception of either the empirical or the higher-order selves too.

Even though the Buddha and Nietzsche have roughly similar views on the constitution of the self, there are a number of differences between the overman and the *arahant* on this point. The overman may realize that there is indeed no self, that the self is adventitious upon the various mental representations that he entertains, including the ongoing constitutions of his own physical body. Nonetheless, he does not realize that it is precisely this understanding that there is no inherent self that is the root cause of sufferings and wandering in *samsāra*. The overman does not seek to avoid or become “released” from suffering; on the contrary he rejoices in it. Here one comes to Nietzsche’s very important point of about the Eternal Recurrence. The idea, as is well known, is that the overman does not care whether the situation he is finding himself now will happen again and again infinitely in the far future and has indeed happened infinitely many times in the past. To him that does not matter; what matters is that he still finds meanings in it, even though he knows full well that everything will come back to the very same stage again in the future. Believing that it is one and the same person that existed countlessly many times in the past and will recur time after time again, the overman still remains joyful.

But what would the *arahant* react if he also finds himself in the same situation where everything will return to the exact same condition? One of the important points in the teachings on meditation is that the practitioner or the meditator should be focusing only on the now and not worry about either the past or the future. The past is already

gone, so there is no use to worry about it; the future has not yet arrived, so it is non-existent hence no cause for worrying. The attention is put entirely on the very precise moment of the now, on things as they are happening at the moment of attentive consciousness. Furthermore, according to Nāgārjuna, time is illusory any way (Loy, 1986), as it is constructed, as are all other things, through conceptual apparatus and “mental fermentations,” to use the language of the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* discussed earlier. Time itself is empty. If this is so, then the *arahant* would also not care whether he will eventually return time and time again. That would not be a cause for worrying because all of the returns lie either in the past or the future, so are inconsequential. What matters is the now; only the now is real. The now is real no matter how many times it has happened in the past. When the attention is put totally on the moment of the now, it does not matter whether the content of this attention has already happened or not.

But if this is so, then there could still be an affinity with the overman, only that the overman does not have to do meditation and does not realize this out of the meditative state. Another point of difference, however, is that in Buddhism once one is released from *saṃsāra*, one does not have to come back again. The path from an ordinary sentient being to an enlightened one seems to be one way in Buddhism. Hence Mistry is mistaken when he says that the *arahant* will have “re-existence,” because the *arahant* will never return to *saṃsāra*. (Mistry, 1981, p. 197). This status of the *arahant* as a non-returner seems to be contradicted by the Eternal Recurrence. If I used to be an enlightened buddha or *arahant* in the past, then what is the point of my practicing right now? I can wait and will eventually become a buddha no matter what. There is also a teaching in Buddhism that every sentient being is deep down inside

already a buddha. This is not emphasized in Theravāda but is a key teaching in the Mahāyāna tradition. Hence, it could be the case that I used to be a buddha in the past and then assume the form of an ordinary human being in this lifetime, only to return to the state of being a buddha again in the future (viewed from my standpoint at the present). If the Eternal Recurrence is true, then there would be no essential distinction between my present condition as an unenlightened human being and my buddhahood; that, however, is also in accordance with the teaching on Buddha Nature in Mahāyāna where every sentient being—human, bird, fish, god, hell being, and so on—is essentially an enlightened buddha. That does not mean, however, that one does not have to practice, as the focus of attention must always be at the now.

So where are the similarities and the differences? One way to answer this would be to look at the status of the Eternal Recurrence. Is Nietzsche positing this doctrine merely as an hypothesis in order to find out what would happen if the Recurrence were true? Or is Nietzsche pronouncing as a matter of cosmological fact that the Recurrence is indeed happening? The key passage in *The Gay Science* (Book IV, Section 341) seems to point toward the former alternative: “What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence’” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 273). The key words here are “What if,” which would make this statement into a form of a rhetorical question. But if it is a question, then Nietzsche is not asserting the doctrine out right. He is posing a

challenge: If the world is such that the Recurrence is true, would you still remain joyful?

Here the *arahant*'s and the Buddha's answer would definitely be yes, because being enlightened they are joyful all the time no matter the circumstances. As their attention is always focused on the now, they do not care whether it is true or false that the environment they find themselves in at the moment has in fact happened countless many times in the past and will do so countless many times in the future. They also do not care whether it is they themselves who existed in the past or who will exist in the future countless many times, because they have totally abandoned any trace of attachment to the self, realizing that it is ultimately an illusion. Hence the overman and the *arahant* (and the Buddha) are not so much different from each other after all, except that the overman still regards the one who existed in the past as they themselves. Thus, it is in the conception of the self that the overman differs from the *arahant*: The overman retains his own self, whereas the *arahant* totally abandons it. The overman, consequently, cannot become a buddha or an *arahant* unless he abandons his attachment to the self shown in the belief that it is ontologically he himself who eternally recurs in the eternally recurring universe. But if this is the case, then Morrison's view (1997, p. 225) that the overman could become a buddha if Nietzsche learned more about Buddhism seems to be quite premature. It is a speculative matter whether Nietzsche would accept the total abandonment of the self in Buddhism to be a key ingredient in the overman.

Another aspect of the difference concerns how such a realization of joy is achieved. For the *arahant* and the Buddha the realization is the result of practice including meditation (*samādhi*), abiding by rules of *sīla* (roughly translated as morality)

and realization of wisdom (*paññā*). For the overman, it is perhaps to realize the contextual and perspectival nature of all values, and to realize that they are only expressions of the will to power. Thus there could also be another issue of comparison here. As the overman comes to the state of joy over the realization of the Eternal Recurrence through understanding that all values are ultimately expressions of the will to power, the overman is then more attached to his own sense of self than is the *arahant* or the Buddha. After all, realizing that all evaluative act comes from the will to power does not seem to be as conducive to compassionate feelings toward all sentient beings universally as is the Buddha's path of morality, meditation and wisdom.

Nietzsche's view of the Eternal Recurrence is often regarded as nihilistic. In fact if the world is as Nietzsche describes it through the doctrine, then it would be totally nihilistic. If everything that is happening now has in fact happened innumerable many times, and will continue to do so in the future, then all meanings and hopes seem to be lost forever, a perfect recipe for nihilism. However, Nietzsche's point here is that one can avert nihilism even though one is faced with its worst possible case in the Eternal Recurrence, and the overman is just the type of person who can defeat the total nihilism implied in it. The trick is to realize that what appears as "nihilistic" in all this is not in the world itself, but it lies in one's own attitude toward it. In other words, when the world is as bad as described in the Eternal Recurrence, we can avoid becoming embroiled in total nihilism if we think and act and feel like the overman; in short if we become overmen ourselves. Thus, if we view the Eternal Recurrence not as a statement describing a physical phenomenon, but as a hypothetical situation challenging one what one would do in such a situation, then the Eternal Recurrence becomes an ultimate test

of one's anti-nihilistic attitude. The overman and the *arahant* then become wholly anti-nihilistic (indeed, life affirming) types by overcoming the dire situation of the Eternal Recurrence.

However, David Loy argues (Loy, 1996) that the Eternal Recurrence is instead an indication of Nietzsche's failure to get out of the grip of nihilism. As one who lives in the eternally recurring universe cries out for more of the same, Loy sees this as an expression of the lack inside himself that is impossible to fill. Nietzsche, being situated inside the eternally recurring universe, would not find the ultimate joy because in wanting more and more of the same joyous occasion his deep lack inside his own psyche is exposed. There is always a gap between himself and the joyous occasion that he wants to occur again and again. For Loy, Nietzsche can experience true joy only if the gap disappears, only if he in fact becomes identified with the joy, a feat accomplished only by enlightened ones in Buddhism (Loy, 1996). Nevertheless, the overman does not seem to have to become identified with the joyous occasion in order to become liberated from the bondage of the Eternal Recurrence. Realizing that things will just happen in the same way again and again, the overman wants both the joys and the sorrows of the eternally recurring world to happen. When the overman says that he wants more, perhaps what he really wants is that he does not care in the very least that things will return eternally, and he will always remain joyful even though all the joys and sorrows return again and again. For him the joys and the sorrows are of one and the same type. They are all parts of the reality that is being affirmed positively. It is not that overman (or Nietzsche) wants more and more only of the joys and pushes away the sorrows again and again. The content of specific joys, such as the particular joy of listening to this particular piece of

music at this particular moment, is not as important here as the cosmic perception that all joys and sorrows constitute the reality that the overman affirms. Here the overman shares with the *arahant* in not becoming attached to any particular episodes of experience. The *arahant* is not attached to any instance of joy, such as the joy one gets when eating good food. For the *arahant* that is only *vedanā*, or feeling—part of the world that is occasioned by causes and conditions, but no more than that. Moreover, the sorrows, such as the feelings of loss one has when one's close relative dies, and the pain suffered when, for example, one is having a severe case of gingivitis, are also, all of them, parts of the reality that is being positively affirmed. The *arahant* also suffers from the pain of gingivitis as much as anybody else, but he is different from ordinary, unenlightened beings in that he is not disturbed by it. The pain can be very severe—that is the point of it, but the *arahant* suffers only the bodily pain and not the psychological negative attitude that is typically associated with the ordinary person when he is having painful gingivitis. This is so because the *arahant* has successfully relinquished his attachment to the self. For an ordinary person, being in a painful situation is doubly painful because in addition to the physical pain one generally has the feeling of sadness or anger or frustration because of the pain and the disease. These sad and frustrated feelings arise from attachment to the self; when the self is being threatened, as is the case with the gingivitis, it usually reacts with negative attitudes such as anger and so on, which only worsens the situation. The *arahant*, having abandoned self attachment, remains cheerful even in the midst of intense bodily pain. And the overman, affirming everything in the eternally recurring universe, including joys, sorrows and everything else, would perhaps react in the same way. In order to fully experience the joy, one does

not have to become identified with the joy, because even in the midst of intense pain one can also become joyful without becoming identified with the pain. The real joy comes from inside, not from being identified with anything else.

The relation between feeling and the self is made clear in the Buddha's teaching. In the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, one of the most important discourses of the Buddha, there are the following words:

Now, Ananda, in as far as a monk does not assume feeling to be the self, nor the self as oblivious, nor that 'My self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling,' then, not assuming in this way, he is not sustained by anything (does not cling to anything) in the world. Unsustained, he is not agitated. Unagitated, he is totally unbound right within. He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.' (Thanissaro, 1997).

The way to become released from suffering here is that, whenever feeling arises, no matter it is pleasurable, painful, or just plain neutral, the practitioner should not identify the feeling with his self. It is not the self that is experiencing the pain or the pleasure. Thus the monk or the practitioner is not frustrated while experiencing pain, and is not desirous and greedy while experiencing the pleasure. The practitioner should not think to himself that it is he himself that is feeling (either painful or pleasurable or any neutral feeling), because in doing so he becomes attached to the mistaken belief that it is the self that feels, or that the feeling and the self are one and the same.

Another key point in the comparison between the two models of perfection concerns the position of the two which is “beyond good and evil.” To be an *arahant* or an overman is to move *beyond good and evil*. However, exactly how either move beyond good and evil is markedly different between the two. For the Buddhist, it means that both “good” and “evil” are conceptual formations which are ultimately empty of their inherent characteristic. One thing is good (or bad) only to the extent that it serves some desired purpose. This point seems to reverberate rather harmoniously with Nietzsche’s own view. However, there is one important difference. In Buddhism to realize things to be empty of their inherent characteristic is a stepping stone toward realizing the supreme goal of the teaching, that is to realize *nibbāna*. Hence to regard the good and the evil as being totally equal does not imply that in Buddhism any behavior is allowed or that one is given a free pass to do anything one likes. On the contrary, if one’s supreme goal is always to become liberated from the bond of suffering, then there is a clear path, outlined by the Buddha for his students, that one needs to follow. On the other hand, Nietzsche’s overman does not have any restriction as to what *kind* of values, what type of *content* of those values that he should, or should not, be creating. This is related to the points discussed above about the self and eternal recurrence. To be “beyond good and evil” means that one does not take a stance on either side. One does not enter the debate, so to speak, between the two; instead one looks at the debate from far above. Even though the *arahant* is beyond good and evil, his movement beyond good and evil is effected by the realization that the “goods” and the “evils” are on a par when it comes to wandering in *saṃsāra*. This is because Buddhism is ambivalent about the meaning of the term “good.” On the one hand, to do “good deeds” (*kusala kamma*) means to do

whatever it is that causes one to be reborn in the heavens; these are contrasted with the “bad deeds” (*akusala kamma*) that result in the opposite. But the *arahant* is beyond both the heavens and hells as he is totally beyond *saṃsāra*. The *arahant* is not going to be born again either in any of the heavens or hells. Nonetheless, there is another sense of “goodness” which is clearly the property of the *arahant*. As *nibbāna* is the supreme goal which everybody should aim at, *nibbāna* is thus understood as the supreme good (*summum bonum*) of Buddhism. In this sense any action that leads to realization of *nibbāna* is a “good” one, even though it is contrasted with the “good” action that leads one to the heavens. We might call the action that leads one to *nibbāna* “good for *nibbāna*” and the other kind “good for the heavens.” The *arahant* has performed the first kind of action; that is why he is an *arahant* now. If he merely performed the latter kind, he would be merely residing in the heavens, but as heavens are part of *saṃsāra*, he is not liberated. On the other hand, the overman does not have to negotiate these different senses of “goodness” as does the Buddhist. The overman is free to create values and laws, but Nietzsche does not seem to provide much content to these freely created values and laws by the overman.

Perhaps what is interesting for the overman is that he does create values out of his own absolute freedom, and it is a secondary matter as to what the *content* of those freely created values is like. To be sure *nibbāna* is not to be identified with any of the heavens, no matter how high up. The heavens are still parts of *saṃsāra*, hence totally different from *nibbāna*. (Nāgārjuna’s point, discussed earlier in the paper, that *nibbāna* and *saṃsāra* are one and the same has to be considered in a different context here. For those who have already attained Enlightenment, *nibbāna* and *saṃsāra* are indeed the

same. But for those who are practicing and who still view the world through the eyes of an ordinary person full of defilements, there is still the need to separate the two from each other. And it is in this context of having to separate the two that is at issue here.) So the *arahant* does “good things” in so far as those good things lead to total destruction of all defilements and to the eventual Liberation. The overman, on the other hand, does not have to follow the same rule.

Conclusion

Let us sum up the differences and similarities between the overman and the *arahant* so far. Although the two have roughly the same conception of the self, the overman does affirm the self, while the *arahant* abandons it. Though realizing that there is no substantial self or soul, the overman still clings to his own constructed self and believes that it is one and the same person that recurs eternally. The *arahant*, on the other hand, operates from the understanding that the whole idea of the individual self is an illusion; thus it does not make sense to either affirm or deny that there is a self in the past and in the future that is one and the same as this present one. Once there is no self, this recurring business becomes essentially meaningless. However, the similarities are no less important. Even though the overman believes that it is he himself who will recur eternally, he remains joyful and affirms this kind of life with full gusto. The *arahant* also remains full of bliss and joy no matter how the external circumstances are like. Furthermore, the *arahant* and the overman are both beyond good and evil. But there is a catch: The *arahant* is totally beyond the kind of “goodness” that leads one only to the heavens, thus confining one inside of *samsāra*. Nonetheless, the *arahant* still does another kind of “good deeds,” one which leads the performer to *nibbāna*. The overman,

on the other hand, is free from both kinds of goodness and is in a sense truly beyond good and evil.

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