

On the medical paradigm: *Stoics and Buddhists. A comparative approach*

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Since the far night of the first ages of humankind, where our memory cannot easily go and our imagination has difficulties picturing, human beings faced death and suffering. Throughout this time, as they encountered suffering, they imagined ways to deal with it. The Stoic and the Buddhist doctrines could be regarded as two representative ways of Western and Eastern thinking about dealing with the problem of suffering. One of the main preoccupations of both of these doctrines was the development of technologies or methods designed to give human beings the means to liberate themselves from suffering. These ancient philosophies had an enduring echo and their influence is still alive in both, what we roughly choose to call, Western and Eastern cultures. This is one of the reasons why, it is interesting to compare these two cultures from a philosophical perspective. We should indeed try to hear again, with our modern ears, the teachings of these doctrines developed at their time and see what contribution they can make today. These philosophies both possessed a universal vocation as each proposed that every human being is capable of achieving a state exempt of suffering. Facing the problems of human existence and human mortality, Stoics and Buddhists developed very complex theories of these realities. Yet, those theories were not only destined to inform their disciples but also to form them in a certain way. Therefore, maybe it is in the realm of ethics where a philosophical encounter between Stoicism and Buddhism could take Place¹. I would like to gropingly stress here one of the possible ways of comparing Stoicism and Buddhism.

I suggest that it is possible to observe one common paradigm at work in the Stoic and Buddhist doctrines. This paradigm is of medical inspiration. From the Stoic perspective the human being is a mix (*krasis*) between the soul (*pneuma*) and the body (*soma*). Therefore the Stoics believed there was a clear analogy between the illness of the soul and that of the body. This first analogy allowed a second one related to the methods used to heal the illness. The ancient Stoics tried to develop technologies, based

especially on the use of inward and outward discourse, destined to treat the suffering caused by the illness². For instance, Epictetus' school of philosophy was more than a place where one could follow teachings and acquire knowledge; it was a hospital (*iatreion*) for one's soul (FOUCAULT, 1984, 71).

In the Buddhist's case, the medical paradigm is also present from the very beginning. When he achieved the enlightenment (*bodhi*), Siddhārtha Gautama, known as Shākyamuni (the sage of the Shākya), realised the truth under four aspects which are the Four Noble Truths (*catvāryāryasatyāni*), exposed for the first time in front of his disciples in Benares: the truth of suffering (*duḥkhasatya*), the truth of the origin of suffering (*duḥkhasamudayasatya*), the truth of cessation of suffering (*nirodhasatya*) and the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*mārgasatya*). The manner of presenting these four truths allows us to see that a medical paradigm is also at work in the Buddhist approach of suffering. Shākyamuni himself was regarded as a person who could heal sufferings of the soul as he could those of the body. His method proceeds in a medical manner by noting the existence of suffering, looking for the cause of suffering, affirming the possibility of healing and showing the way to do it (ELIADE 1983). The Buddhist method is situated between two extreme positions: one searching for happiness through the means of sensual pleasure (hedonism), the other by ascetic means (ascetism). Therefore, this way is called the Middle Way. The fourth truth, also known as the Eightfold Path³, is the Buddhist Way *par excellence* leading to the destruction of the cause of suffering. This path is formed by sapience (*prajñā*), virtue (*śīla*) and mental discipline (*samādhi*). These three aspects are intimately linked to one another and every one of them has an essential role to play in the dissolution of suffering. Together they form the basis of the psychosomatic Buddhist discipline.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Stoicism. As stated by some of the scholars, the philosophy itself was conceived in ancient Greece not only as a simple discourse

servicing to communicate a theoretical conceptual content, supposed to transmit positive knowledge about the reality, but to serve as an act of living (HADOT 1995). No one could claim to be a philosopher without living according to the adopted philosophical discourse. As for the Stoics, they were indeed very fond of the coherence of their philosophical system which contained three major parts: physics, ethics and logic⁴. Each of these parts is inseparable from one another. The disciple has to assimilate them as a whole and to conduct his life conformingly, because each of them is in a formal relation with domains of the reality itself. Physics⁵ relates to the things and events in the universe, conceived as an organic whole. Ethics relates to human actions and conduct; and logic to the human mental activity and discourse on reality. A circular pattern between doctrine and practice can be observed in both Stoic and Buddhist cases and the doctrine is generally conceived as a path which leaves no trace⁶. The point is not only to study and understand the theoretical stances of the doctrine but to assimilate them, which means lead one's life by conforming to the doctrine. Once liberated from any bounds, one no longer perceives the doctrine as something which has to be learned in order to achieve the state of a sage man, any more than one perceives it as something which leads to liberation; the doctrine itself vanishes in the act of living it, as the performance of an actor vanishes in the very act of playing.

Following the medical paradigm which seems to characterise both philosophical doctrines, we can understand that both of them tried to determine the source of suffering. Two notions, the Stoic *pathos* and the Buddhist *duḥkha* (ku 苦), can be drawn near to one another, because both notions express what we could call a kind of disequilibrium in the order of things. For the Stoics, *pathos*, usually translated by passion, is a false opinion which leads to a false judgement (*krisis*). In fact, it is a perversion or a malfunctioning of reason (*logos*) itself. Because of ignorance, one can be misled and make an erroneous evaluation of the situation or condition in which he finds himself in a certain moment of time, forming a wrong view to which he attaches a great value. In the end, the misvaluation leads to suffering. As a matter of fact, the Stoic theory of passion is nothing less than a nosology – a therapeutic device (or therapy) for sick people (GOLDSCHMIDT 1998, 113). Therefore, the starting point of a philosophy can be considered as the realisation of the fact that *pathos* has taken advantage of the

self (FOUCAULT 1984, 70).

Duḥkha is a notion referring to some kind of perturbation as characterising the whole reality; its source is craving (*trṣṇā*, ai 愛) which, at its turn, is determined by ignorance (*avidyā*, mummyō 無明). The notion of *duḥkha* can be also understood as the expression of human suffering. As everything in the realm of reality is considered impermanent and interdependent⁷, craving is any form of attachment and desire of permanence, leading to false views and finally to suffering. However, the work to be done in order to obtain liberation from suffering does not consist in an outward effort to change the conditions prevailing in the surrounding world. That was considered by both Stoics and Buddhists as a vain and foolish effort. Therefore, the effort should concern the self as it happens to be the *locus* of suffering and grief. We could call it, as Foucault emphasised, *the care of the self* (*epimeleia heautou*). If we take the case of one of the most prodigious Zen Buddhist masters, Dōgen, he puts, in the *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏), a clear accent on the personal engagement of the disciple in the practice of the Buddhist way. In *Genjō-kōan* (現成公案) he stated clearly that learning the Buddhist way is nothing else than learning oneself⁸. By that, he tried to show that the practice of the Buddhist doctrine was an abandoning of the erroneous views of reality by discarding erroneous views of self (KIMURA 1991, 330). As for Dōgen the universe is the self and the self is the whole universe⁹. If one gets to understand this as an insight, then he realises the *dharma* in both senses: the Buddhist doctrine and the natural law of the reality. In Dōgen terms, this is *to be experienced* or confirmed by all the dharmas¹⁰. The dharmas are constantly active and must be accepted as such in order to live in accordance with them. Desiring to experience them as they are not, only leads to suffering. The very significance of this confirmation is given by the advent of the liberation from the erroneous views of self and the actual realisation of accord with the *dharma* as a natural law. For the Stoics also, the whole moral problem consists in the actualisation, *hic et nunc*, of the natural law¹¹, the Stoic destiny (*heimarmenē*) (GOLDSCHMIDT 1998, 89). The supreme virtue for a Stoic is indeed the realisation of the accord with the Nature. The required effort is one oriented “against” the self, which means against that form of subjectivity that became ignorant and deformed reality. But rather than the destruction of the self or the denial of one's existence, Dōgen, as well as the Stoics, wished for the transformation

of one's self and the overcoming of the denaturalized vision of reality. By this, he rejoined the medical paradigm mentioned above. Dōgen himself considered Buddha Shākyamuni as a great physician who, by compassion, came into the world and taught a medicine-like method in order to deliver every living being from suffering (KIMURA 1991, 331). Of course the medical paradigm cannot by itself consume the entire philosophical or metaphysical charge of the Buddhist and Stoic doctrines, but it can serve as a means to be transported inside their conceptual structure.

I would like to conclude by stating that both Buddhism (here the Zen of Dōgen) and Stoicism share one common feature. This is the accent put on personal action and personal responsibility concerning the matter of self liberation, understood not as an egocentric act but as an act of rejoining the natural flow of reality or of reintegrating the cosmic dimension of nature. This means that, in order to compare them, one necessarily has to pass through the questioning concerning the notion of self in its diverse aspects. Indeed, Stoic and Buddhist masters would have certainly agreed that their teachings were what we can characterise as *manières de vivre* (HADOT 1995) – ways of living based on the idea that every man should turn his gaze inward, seek his true self and take refuge in it, in order to be liberated from suffering.

Notes

- 1 This does not at all mean that Buddhism and Stoicism should be reduced to the ethical aspects of their doctrine. Yet, as the cosmological and metaphysical aspects are so obviously different, the realm of ethics (including not only human habits and comportment, but also psychological aspects) is understood here as the ground which seems to be the most appropriate (because of the presence of a certain number of similar questionings) for a comparison of two doctrines as heterogeneous as Buddhists and Stoics. Such a comparison, starting from common inquiries, should reveal not only similarities but also differences between these doctrines and, by these means, eventually, unexpected philosophical questioning. Nevertheless, other points of view could be adopted to proceed to a comparison; for instance, a logical approach.
- 2 The idea of the philosophy as a therapeutic method was not new in ancient Greece but rather well established. Therapeutics can even be regarded as one of the main functions of all ancient Greek philosophy (VOELKE 1993, 73). Of course,

each philosophical school developed specific methods of dealing with suffering, and sometimes these methods opposed one another thereby breeding very complex debates between the different schools.

- 3 The Eightfold Path can be regrouped as following: the sapience's path (*prajñā*) which consists in the right view (*samyag dr̥ṣṭi*) and the right thought (*samyak samkalpa*); the virtue's path (*śīla*) which is the right speech (*samyag vācā*), the right action (*samyak karmānta*) and the right living (*samyag ājīva*); the mental discipline's path (*samādhi*) which concerns the right effort (*samyag vyāyāma*), the right mindfulness (*samyak smṛti*) and the right concentration (*samyak samādhi*).
- 4 P. Hadot showed that the Stoics distinguished between philosophical discourse and philosophy. While discourse is a theoretical stance on physics, ethics and logic, philosophy is the very act of living physics, ethics and logic. Therefore Stoic philosophy can be considered as a practice destined to operate a radical changing of the one who adheres to it.
- 5 One major difference between the Stoic and Buddhist doctrines is the refusal of inquiries concerning the physical world in the Buddhist doctrines. But of course, Buddhists didn't completely ignore the physical reality. Nevertheless, they have chosen to emphasize the salvation problem and the personal involving of each individual in the Buddhist way, more than the physical or metaphysical problems.
- 6 Cf. GOLDSCHMIDT 1998, 63 and note 8.
- 7 The awakening (*bodhi*, *satori* 悟) reveals the truth of interdependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*, *engi* 緣起) and the lack of substantiality (stable essence) of everything in the universe. The one who realises the *bodhi*, realizes at the same time the profound significance of the vacuity (*śūnyatā*, *kū* 空) which isn't an absolute void where nothing exists, but the fundamental undiscriminating nothingness from where everything arises in interdependence.
- 8 "To learn the Buddha's truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas. To be experienced by the myriad dharmas is to let our own body-and- mind, and the body-and-mind of the external world, fall away. There is a state where the traces of realization are forgotten; and it manifests the traces of forgotten realisation for a long, long time." (*Genjō-kōan* - NISHIJIMA & CROSS 1994)
- 9 Dōgen, *Kōmyō* (光明).
- 10 Cf. note 8.
- 11 Though, the concepts of " nature" and " law" should be necessarily questioned and compared in both cases.

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