

Buddhist Philosophy – Mahayana and Zen Approaches (HPPH7019)

Assignment 2

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Essay

Conduct a comparative analysis of the concept of nirvana in Theravada Buddhism and
Buddhahood in Mahayana Buddhism

In the long history of human inquiry, few questions have gripped the imagination as persistently as that of liberation — specifically when it comes to liberation from suffering, ignorance as well as, say, from the endlessly recurring wheel of becoming. In the Asian philosophical traditions, this quest has found a particularly unique expression in the Buddhist concept of nirvana — a term so often translated, yet so rarely understood in its full depth. The problematic point, as I perceive it, lies precisely in the fact that this concept resists definition by negating everything that can be even potentially positively asserted. In this paper, I aim to explore and compare two central interpretations of nirvana as conceived in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. While both emerge from a common doctrinal root the two traditions diverge sharply not only, let's say, in metaphysical postulates, but in their entire vision of the spiritual path and the ideal of human self-realization. Theravada, with its emphasis on individual liberation and the analytical deconstruction of the '*self*', tends to depict nirvana as a final cessation of craving, and hence, of suffering. Unlike Mahayana frequently speaks less of disappearance and more of transformation — an awakening to the Buddha-nature inherent that entails a profound realization of emptiness (*sunyata*) and boundless compassion. The major significance of the comparison I propose lies, for me at least, not in historical curiosity but in the philosophical challenge it presents. For instance, it is logically reasonable to ask whether two

traditions — each claiming fidelity to the same enlightened teacher — can arrive at such different interpretations of the ultimate goal of human life. Is one of them, perhaps, more internally consistent or ethically reliable than the other? Or is it rather the case that the difference lies more in form than in content, and thus amounts to a matter of existential vision rather than doctrinal contradiction? One further point I would like to make at the outset is that the method for addressing these questions — as it might have already been seen — will be philosophical rather than theological or historical. I propose to examine the logical structure of each doctrine, the empirical claims on which they rest, and their implications for ethics and metaphysics. Moving forward, I will attempt — in a spirit of philosophical clarity rather than sectarian allegiance — to assess the relative, say, strengths and limitations of each vision of nirvana. Eventually, if any conclusions emerge, they will be drawn not from personal sympathy toward one worldview or another, but from the standpoint of reason or at least I hope I will do my best not to abandon this way of reasoning.

Given that my style of exposition is deductive in the Aristotelian sense of the word, I would like to begin by taking a closer look at the historical or, if one prefers, doctrinal background of the teachings we are about to distinguish. As mentioned earlier, I will approach these phenomena from the standpoint of philosophical-analytical inquiry, rather than historical materialism or sterile historicism. First and foremost, it must be stated that the division of Buddhism into the Theravada and Mahayana traditions is not, as some might primitively imagine, the result of some radical schism born of sectarian hostility. Quite the contrary. It is rather the consequence of differing approaches to the interpretative possibilities latent within the Buddha's own often mysterious teachings.

From the very outset, the Buddhist Dharma presented itself — as I would argue — as an invitation to inquiry, not a compendium of rigid and dogmatic decrees. In this sense, it is almost inevitable that such a tradition marked by its flexibility and openness would, over the course of centuries, give rise to varying understandings of its fundamental principles in different geographical regions. Consider, for instance, Theravada, often referred to as ‘*the Teaching of the Elders*.’ Its adherents and heirs regard it as the oldest, most conservative, and in a certain sense, the most orthodox form of Buddhism. For this tradition, it is of no small importance to emphasize the figure of the Buddha as a historical person (Gautama Buddha), who serves as a model in the pursuit of the path to liberation. Characteristically, the theoretical development of this teaching rests upon the Pali Canon, particularly the monastic code (Vinaya Pitaka), discourses (Sutta Pitaka), and philosophical and psychological analysis (Abhidhamma Pitaka). If we turn more closely to the doctrinal foundation of Theravada, we notice that it is centered around the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the analysis of human experience into impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self elements. In this context, nirvana is the cessation of the three poisons (greed, hatred, and delusion) and the final liberation from the cycle of rebirth (samsara)¹. Touching upon Mahayana, it arises as a specific reform movement challenging what its proponents perceived as the narrow, monastic emphasis of earlier schools. Its major sacred texts, including the Prajnaparamita sutras, the Lotus Sutra, and the Avatamsaka Sutra, were composed in Sanskrit and were often attributed to the Buddha as something higher and esoteric. The most striking idea conveyed by these texts, in my view, lies in their articulation of a grand cosmic vision in which all beings possess this potential for enlightenment, and where the ideal is not the arahant, who seeks personal liberation, but the bodhisattva, who postpones final nirvana

¹ ‘*After a being has, as it were, ‘nirvana-ed’, the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion no longer arise in his or her mind, since they have been thoroughly rooted out (to switch to another metaphor also current in the tradition).*’ (p. 75) Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundation of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.

out of compassion for others. In contrast to *'the Teaching of the Elders'*, the philosophical underpinnings of this tradition rest upon two key concepts: the doctrine of emptiness (sunyata) and the concept of Buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha) — the idea that all sentient beings contain a latent seed of Buddhahood². As we can see, the followers of Mahayana make a remarkable move. Through these two innovations, they effectively restructure the entire metaphysical landscape of Buddhism. Rather than treating nirvana and saṃsara as two separate realms, they posit their ultimate non-duality. Another important point that must be addressed at this stage is that these philosophical developments are difficult to classify, in the classical sense, as either a doctrinal evolution or a deviation. This divergence cannot be likened to the kind of irreconcilable doctrinal schisms witnessed in the European Christian tradition, particularly during the era of religious wars. In my view, the Theravada and Mahayana traditions reflect different existential sensibilities. Theravada, with its emphasis on precision, asceticism, and disciplined analysis, appeals to a philosophical mind seeking clarity through reduction. Mahayana, by contrast with its poetic expansiveness and metaphysical boldness speaks to the far-reaching imagination, to the very possibility that ultimate truth may lie not in negation, but in radical reaffirmation. Again, this is not a fundamental theoretical contradiction of the kind seen in European history during the Reformation. Not at all. I would rather liken this divergence to that which emerged in Europe at the turn of the Enlightenment and industrialization, represented by two schools: classicism and romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century. Romanticism, as represented by Novalis and the Schlegel brothers, with its free form, emotional expressiveness, and symbolism, arose as a kind of response to the strict rules, symmetry, and harmony of early Goethe and Pierre Corneille. Yet, despite their differences, both movements recognized a shared ideological foundation in the aspiration to create high art directed toward awakening moral significance. Accordingly, when

² Hookham, H.S. *The Buddha Within. Tathagatagarbha Doctrine* (p. 99)

comparing the traditions of Mahayana and Theravada, it is essential to keep in mind that neither is a monolith. Theravada, though more uniform in doctrine, contains a broad range of interpretations concerning the path and its culmination. Mahayana, for its part, encompasses a diversity of schools — from the analytical rigor of Madhyamaka, to the mystical idealism of Yogacara, and the iconoclastic spontaneity of Zen. Thus, in this work, I claim a certain sensitivity to nuance in the course of my comparative analysis, with the awareness that doctrinal generalizations are only approximations, offered here as a framing perspective.

As of now, I want to move on to examine more closely how each tradition conceives of nirvana — not as an abstract term, but as the very goal of the human journey — and I propose to do this in light of both metaphysical propositions and ethical consequentialism.

To comprehend nirvana in the Theravada tradition is to turn toward a concept that, like a tongue trying to taste itself, recedes whenever one attempts to grasp it as an object. After all, the Buddha himself was known for his reticence when asked to define nirvana in positive terms, choosing instead a language of negation³. Clearly, this linguistic caution is not a matter of rhetorical modesty but reflects a much deeper epistemological commitment — namely, that nirvana lies beyond the conditioned realm, beyond language⁴, and thus beyond the grasp of conceptual thought. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that despite this apophatic tendency,

³ *'The Deathless is another name for Nibbāna. So being one who overcomes death would be one who realizes Nibbāna. The means for overcoming death, realizing Nibbāna, are seeing the world as empty and being ever mindful. This can provide enough insights into the nature of reality that the view of self is uprooted. These insights are along the lines of seeing that not only is there nothing worth craving or clinging to, there is nothing that can really be obtained or clung to. If my self is understood in the same way, then the view of self is uprooted. There never has been anyone there, there is no one to die – the Deathless has been achieved.'* Brasington, Leigh. On The Way To The Far Shore. Parayanavagga. Q&A with The Buddha on the Way to Awakening.. URL: <https://www.leighb.com/wtfs/On%20The%20Way%20To%20The%20Far%20Shore%20-%20A5.pdf> (p. 98)

⁴ *'Language and the fact that experiences are somehow connected fools us into thinking that there is an 'I' apart from and behind changing experiences-apart from the fact of experiences being connected. In reality, as we shall presently see, for Buddhist thought there is only their 'connectedness'-nothing besides that. The fact that experiences are causally connected is not to be explained by reference to an unchanging self that underlies experience, but by examining the nature of causality.'* (p. 139) Gethin, Rupert. The Foundation of Buddhism. Oxford University Press.

Theravada does offer a relatively coherent and well-structured account of what nirvana entails, both empirically and doctrinally — and it is this account I will now attempt to elucidate. At its most fundamental level, nirvana in Theravada is defined as the cessation (nirodha) of suffering or dissatisfaction (dukkha). This cessation is not a mere annihilation, as critics fond of fatalistic readings of complex philosophical ideas sometimes claim, but is first and foremost the extinguishing of the fires (āsava) of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). Using a metaphor, it is a, say, going out of the flame — not since something has been destroyed, but because the conditions that sustained it have been removed⁵. What remains, ultimately, is not a ‘thing,’ but an absolute state of unconditionedness, of deathlessness, that lies beyond the mutability of space and time.

To condense its meaning, I would describe it thus: it is not the ‘*absence of Self in non-being*,’ but rather a ‘*non-sensory in nothingness*.’ Simultaneously, the path to this state is found in the Noble Eightfold Path, under which nirvana is not a sudden gift from above but the natural culmination of right view, intention, effort, speech etc.⁶. Summarized, it is a process of purification by which the mind gradually becomes disentangled from craving and attachment. From a philosophical perspective, Theravada develops its understanding of nirvana through the Abhidhamma, which seeks to analyze mental phenomena with surgical precision⁷. Here, nirvana is classified as a dhamma, more precisely, as an ultimate reality (paramattha dhamma) unique in

⁵ Aggisutta—Bhikkhu Sujato. So It Was Said 93. The Book of the Threes. Chapter Five. FIRE. URL: <https://suttacentral.net/iti93/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none¬es=asterisk&highlight=falae&script=latin>

⁶ ‘The Buddha explains right intention as threefold: the intention of renunciation, the intention of good will, and the intention of harmlessness. The three are opposed to three parallel kinds of wrong intention: intention governed by desire, intention governed by ill will, and intention governed by harmfulness.’ (p. 26) Bodhi, Bhikkhu. The Noble Eightfold Path. The Way to the End of Suffering

⁷ Bodhi, Bhikkhu. A comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma. URL: https://www.saranaya.com/books/meditation/Bhikkhu_Bodhi-Comprehensive_Manual_of_Abhidhamma.pdf (pp. 348-349)

its unconditioned nature (asankhata). All other phenomena are subject to the law of dependent origination, and thus arise and cease within causal chains. Crucially, nirvana, by contrast, is neither caused nor causative. It resembles nothing else in the empirical world; it is, I would say, a phenomenon that is suprarational and suprasensory.

At this point, it is logical to ask: what, then, is the nature of this unconditioned reality? The Itivuttaka proclaims: *'There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, you could not know an escape here from the born, become, made, and conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore you do know an escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned'*⁸. This indicates a certain radical dualism between the conditioned realm of existence (saṃsāra) and the unconditioned, a dualism with profound implications for human self-identification within the material world. It thus becomes clear why, in Theravada, the 'self' (atta) is not a fixed essence but is instead treated as a useful fiction. While the doctrine of anattā (non-self) posits that what we ordinarily perceive as the 'self' is in fact a collection of five aggregates (pancakkhandha): form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. None of these is permanent, none satisfactory, and none can rightly be called 'self.' Therefore, the only logical conclusion is that nirvana is not the liberation of the self, but liberation from the illusion of self. The enlightened arahant, accordingly, no longer continues to exist as a metaphysical entity, but abides in peace, free from the re-arising of aggregates. Another important and, I would say, unique distinction within the Theravada understanding of nirvana relevant to this work lies in the differentiation between *'nibbana with remainder'*

⁸ Udana 8.3. Tatiyanibbanasuttaṃ 73. The Third Discourse about Nibbana. URL: <https://suttacentral.net/ud8.3/en/anandajoti?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false>

(saupādisesa-nibbāna) and ‘*nibbana without remainder*’ (anupadisesa-nibbana). The former is attained during life, when defilements have ceased but the body still persists, while the latter occurs after death, when even the physical basis of existence has come to an end. This duality again reflects the nuanced conception of dualism at play here, insofar as liberation can be realized in life, but is consummated only when all conditions have ceased. At the same time, the ethical consequences of nirvana are equally crucial. The goal is not mere cessation for its own sake, but freedom from the compulsions that bind beings to suffering. In this sense, nirvana is not an escape from the world, but a transformation of one’s relation to it. Again, the arahant does not become indifferent or nihilistic. Quite the contrary, he acts without attachment, without distortion by ego or craving, and his conduct is marked by compassion, tranquility, and clarity — not because he clings to moral ideals, but because he has ceased clinging altogether. Interestingly how this actually has become the major reason why critics of Theravada so frequently accuse it of promoting a bleak, non-anthropocentric, or even life-denying view in which the highest goal is the extinguishing of all desire. But in my view, such an interpretation misreads the essence of this tradition. The desire that is extinguished is ‘*taṇha*’ — craving rooted in ignorance — not healthy aspiration or love. In fact, the cessation of craving makes true compassion possible, for one can care for others without needing them to fill one’s own psychological voids. In other words, the relinquishment of illusory desires allows one to recognize their true (and healthy) priorities in the very teleology of one’s existence — priorities which, as already noted, are compassion, empathy, and love.

To summarize this section, the Theravadin conception of nirvana is not merely marked by restraint, precision, and psychological depth — it postulates a goal that is both metaphysically radical and empirically attainable. And it becomes achievable not through mysticism, but

through sustained ethical practice, which ultimately reaches its aim not in various complex metaphysical postulates, but in the profound cessation of suffering in its broadest sense.

If Theravada as we have already found out presents nirvana as a strict cessation, Mahayana reimagines the very contours of the path, reinterpreting liberation as a dynamic realization not only of emptiness but of universal potential. It would be a serious mistake to suggest that the transition from Theravada to Mahayana was marked by a rejection of the Buddha's core ideas. I would rather say it represents an expansion of their horizon, where the individual path takes on cosmic proportions, and the ultimate goal grows from the idea of a merely personal liberation to the collective awakening of all sentient beings. Here the Mahayana vision of nirvana cannot be separated from its doctrine of Buddhahood (to attain nirvana = to become a Buddha).

If we were to identify the defining features of Mahayana as an autonomous tradition, surely one of its boldest departures from earlier, more cautious formulations is the idea that all beings possess the potential for Buddhahood. While Theravada emphasizes the absence of a permanent self, Mahayana introduces the notion of Buddha-nature not as a reification of '*self*,' but as a metaphor for an inner awareness, freed from ignorance. This concept does not contradict the doctrine of '*anattā*', as it does not posit a metaphysical '*self*.' Rather, it points to an immanent potential that has not yet awakened from delusive illusion. To realize nirvana in this view is not to extinguish, but to disclose what has always already been there. I would argue that this shift in emphasis brings with it a new model of spiritual practice. The Mahayana practitioner can no longer find solace in personal salvation alone. The ideal is now the '*bodhisattva*', the one

who, having seen the truth, chooses to remain in the world of suffering to assist others⁹. This reinterpretation of the path transforms nirvana from something vaguely escapist into something deeply reengaged. The fires of greed, hatred, and delusion are not simply extinguished, as in Theravada — they are transmuted into wisdom and compassion. So, I would put it this way as where the arahant withdraws from the world, the bodhisattva plunges deeper into it not out of attachment, but in solidarity with all those who are still bound by suffering. This reinterpretation also leads to a drastically different metaphysical contemplation of the relationship between ‘*samsāra*’ and ‘*nirvāṇa*’. Within Mahayana all phenomena are regarded as empty, primarily lacking intrinsic and independent existence (‘*śūnyata*’). This principle is applied universally not only to the ‘*self*’ or material objects but even to concepts such as nirvana itself. Consequently, if all things are empty, then the supposed opposition between ‘*samsāra*’ and ‘*nirvāṇa*’ is also illusory. From the perspective of ultimate truth, these are not two separate realms, but two aspects of the same reality. Thus, unlike the dualistic conception in Theravada, where nirvana stands in opposition to samsāra, Mahayana asserts their non-duality. So, the world we inhabit with all its cruelty, impermanence, and transience becomes something not to flee, but to be rightly perceived. Therefore, nirvana is not explicated as some distant metaphysical state. On the contrary, it is an awakening to the true nature of things, a nature that has never been absent but unfortunately merely misunderstood. This exact perspective transforms spiritual practice from a linear path of escape into a some sort of cyclical return, in which one awakens not to depart the world, but to exist within it differently — since now in truth only.

⁹ ‘*The bodhisattva thus at once turns away from sansara as a place of suffering and at the same time turns back towards it out of compassion for the suffering of the world.*’ Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundation of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.

Further developments of this vision appear in the Mahayana doctrine of the Three Bodies (Trikaya) of the Buddha. In addition to the historical figure of Gautama, the Buddha is understood in this tradition as a being with a transcendent nature. In this case, nirvana comes to be inseparable from the Dharmakaya as it is not a place or state, but the very suchness (*tathata*) of reality, when fully realized and embodied. This metaphysical elevation of the Buddha turns nirvana into something far broader than just cessation. It becomes, I would say, an active presence — a presence characterized by openness and interpenetration that penetrates all things. That said, it must be emphasized that the openness and inclusivity characteristic of this tradition do not imply a renunciation of the ethical or meditative rigor found in Theravada. On the contrary, Mahayana incorporates and extends it, albeit with a different orientation toward final goals. Practices such as calm abiding (*samatha*) and insight (*vipasyana*), the cultivation of discipline and concentration — all remain vital. But the key difference lies in their orientation as they are now directed not merely at the destruction of ignorance but at the realization of emptiness and the arising of spontaneous, uncontrived compassion. At last, the bodhisattva acts not from moral obligation, but from some sort of natural awareness of interdependence.

Since I could not examine Theravada without acknowledging its criticisms, it would only be fair to do the same with respect to Mahayana. Critics of this tradition, including some within Theravada, have occasionally regarded its doctrinal innovations as extravagant or revisionist, particularly given their metaphysical reach and inclusivity. Broadly speaking, Mahāyāna's theoretical turn seemed to them so idealistic as to border on the self-contradictory. And indeed, there is a boldness in Mahayana's willingness to embrace paradox — from claims that nirvana is not separate from saṃsāra, to the notion that the Buddha is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, to the view that emptiness is not nothingness but fullness free from fixation. Yet

from a philosophical standpoint, I would argue that this very flexibility reflects a deeper awareness of the limitations of language. It recognizes that ultimate truths cannot be captured by rigid categories and that genuine understanding may at times require the transgression of conventional analytic logic. This is, I would add, an additional reason why metaphysics and dialectics may be justified from an epistemological point of view.

Finally, If I were to offer an interim summary of the Mahayana conception of nirvana, I would phrase it as follows: first, nirvana here is not about dissolution into non-being but about integration. Put simply, whereas in Theravada we speak of the extinguishing of the flame, in Mahayana we are redirected toward its transformation. The overarching aim is not the exaltation of the enlightened self above worldly problems, but rather a return to the world — to see through illusion to truth. Here, nirvana is no longer the goal at the end of a long path, but a constantly available presence — one that merely awaits the seeker's recognition and courage to open their eyes.

As it has already become apparent in my examination of each tradition, the comparative analysis of the concept of nirvana gives us not only different metaphysical visions, but with two separate visions of spiritual liberation. Yes, albeit both traditions derive from the same foundational teachings, they interpret the meaning of ultimate freedom in radically different ways, shaped by their doctrines and ethical ideals. Yet I would not describe this divergence as a contradiction... To me, it reflects a plasticity that is characteristic of the Buddhist teaching as a whole. See, Theravada with its roots in the earliest canonical texts, regards nirvana as the absolute cessation of suffering through the eradication of craving and delusion. It is a state which is by far beyond the conditioned realm of language and thought that can be described predominantly through negation as what it is not. As repeatedly emphasized, this state is not

born, does not arise, is not constructed, and does not cease. Liberation in this tradition is marked by negation - by the extinguishing of the fires that sustain existence, by the dissolution of the aggregates that generate the illusion of a 'self,' and by the quiet cessation of becoming. It's worth noting that this cessation is not nihilistic. On the contrary, it is precisely because nirvana lies beyond the domain of change and suffering that it is considered the highest good. The ethical path, grounded in moral discipline on the one hand and insight on the other, guides the practitioner from 'saṃsara' to the peace of the unconditioned. Conversely, Mahayana does not treat nirvana as a separate metaphysical substance but rather as a deeper conception of reality itself. Drawing on the doctrine of 'sunyata', its adherents claim that all phenomena are devoid of intrinsic existence. This applies equally to the concept of nirvana as to anything else. From the standpoint of ultimate truth, the dichotomy between 'saṃsara' and 'nirvaṇa' collapses as both are empty, both interdependent, and both arise within the same underlying reality. Thus, the aim is no longer to escape the world, as in Theravada, but to perceive it correctly without clinging or dualistic fixation. In the end, it is not the world that changes, but the subject's perception of it.

Once again, this difference implies both an ethical and epistemic reorientation. Whereas the arahant of the Theravadin tradition seeks personal liberation through detachment, the bodhisattva of Mahayana elects to remain in 'saṃsara' to assist all beings to attain awakening. The motivation here is no longer merely the pursuit of supersensible transcendence, but also compassion. The bodhisattva literally refuses to rest in peace so long as others remain imprisoned in illusion. I would put it this way: nirvana in Mahayana is imbued with and nearly inseparable from the notion of altruism. Attaining absolute liberation becomes impossible if that liberation does not include and embrace others¹⁰. The point is not the primacy of the collective

¹⁰ 'Compassion is the basis and motivating force of the Bodhisattva. From it, therefore, springs the entire edifice of the Mahayana. Kamalazla states that '[t]he Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, attained to their omniscience by

over the individual, but rather that true wisdom for the bodhisattva must manifest itself in compassionate action.

One might be tempted to read these two visions as opposites — one individualistic and analytical and the other collective and visionary. But such crude conclusions would do injustice to the subtleties of both traditions. In truth, each highlights a different aspect of human existence. Theravada, for instance, offers clarity through a sober and structured account of how the mind entangles itself in suffering and how discipline and restraint can disentangle it. Mahayana, by contrast, offers greater existential depth and realism by focusing on how reality itself is misperceived through the lens of dualistic thinking and how freedom arises not through escape but through transformed perception.

The distinction I am attempting to articulate between these traditions may best be contemplated along two dimensions. The first I would call, provisionally, philosophical. The difference between nirvana in Theravada and Mahayana, for me, is first and foremost a matter of ontology and epistemology. Theravada postulates a clear ontological divide between the conditioned and the unconditioned; nirvana is that which remains when all conditioning, in the broadest sense, has ceased. Its uniqueness lies in its complete freedom from causality. Mahayana, by contrast, undermines such distinctions through critique. The very act of defining something as conditioned or unconditioned is, from this perspective, a conceptual construct. Hence, since all our cognitive categories are empty, nirvana cannot reside ontologically ‘elsewhere.’ This difference in ontology and epistemology leads to a divergence in a second dimension, which I would call, provisionally, ethical. Where Theravada aims toward detachment and restraint,

embracing compassion; and they so rejoice in the welfare of the world that they remain therein, nor do the Blessed Ones abide in nirvana, because of their compassion’ (Beyer 1974: 100).’ (p. 195) Williams, Paul. Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundation (2nd edition). Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices.

Mahayana leans toward engagement, dialectic, and compassion. I am not suggesting, of course, that the arahant lacks compassion or the bodhisattva lacks wisdom. Not at all. Rather, each tradition chooses a different point of departure since Theravada begins with suffering and seeks its final cessation, whereas Mahāyāna commences with emptiness and seeks its revelation.

Once again, it would be intellectually lazy in my humble opinion to claim that one of these conceptions is superior to the other. Each has its internal coherence and its metaphysical quintessence. In a sense, both speak to different dimensions of the human search for meaning. Theravada offers refuge, I would say, for the weary in the broadest possible sense. For here, the notion of peace is not contingent upon the world at all. Mahayana's nirvana, by contrast, dares to affirm the world not as it appears to the deluded mind, but as it could be when seen without illusion. In essence, they are complementary expressions of the same longing: to be free, to be awake, to be at peace. That one tradition emphasizes detachment and the other engagement does not reflect doctrinal incompatibility, but rather the richness of the Buddhist tradition itself. The question is not what is more '*true*,' but what more fully responds to the condition of the seeker. And perhaps what is needed is an instrumental synthesis of both where the clarity of Theravada helps dismantle illusion, and the vision of Mahayana reimagines the meaning of the real.

In my personal conviction, the emergence of these two schools is, in fact, a historical inevitability. The problem lies in the fact that clarity (structure) and depth (paradox) do not always coexist comfortably. In the narratives of nirvana offered by Theravada and Mahayana, we find a rare case in which the traditions might more profitably cooperate than conflict, seeking not merely to coexist but to help interpret one another. Both are driven not simply by a desire for doctrinal precision but by a shared aspiration to be free from illusion. That is the essential point and this commonality binds them more closely than all the differences I have previously

discussed. Personally I, as a philosopher with a rather distinctly empirical temperament, must admit a natural affinity with Theravada. Its insistence on the impermanence of all phenomena as well as refusal to hypostatize the '*self*' and its methodical path toward liberation through clear observation resonate deeply with my own imagination of the look of the scientific spirit. Indeed, the doctrine of '*anatta*' anticipates, in its own idiom, much of what psychology and neuroscience are only now beginning to disclose, say, that the '*self*' is not a unity but a process, a stream without a fixed point. What I value especially in Theravada is a kind of stoic integrity in the face of suffering's many faces. Its nirvana is not to be romanticized. I would even say that, in some sense, it may appear austere and demanding to some. But therein lies its greatest qualitative distinction as it demands not blind faith but direct perception. And in an age saturated with mysticism and populism, such restraint is especially refreshing. In the case of Mahayana, however, I must also note the psychological insight of its myths. Not because I share all of its metaphysical commitments, but since I do recognize the importance of its emphasis on inclusivity and openness. The ideal of the bodhisattva, with his boundless compassion and refusal to claim final peace until all are free, correlates with me on a deeply emotional level. Likewise, the concept of '*sunyata*' - though frequently misunderstood - is a two-edged philosophical challenge. On the one hand, there is an alluring epistemic humility that says if all things are empty, so too are our concepts, our beliefs, even our very selves. On the other hand, one must be cautious, for where there is emptiness, there is always the temptation to fill it with anything at all even if it's evidently harmful. By the way, I have to mention that this difference between Theravada and Mahayana I have been talking about strongly reminds me of the dialectic in Western philosophy that once took form between Plato's '*forms*' and Democritus' flow. Analogically, in Theravada, we find a Platonic philosophical minimalism as it comes to a refusal

to affirm more than is necessary for liberation, whereas in Mahayana, we encounter the metaphysical generosity of Democritus, who suspected that reason could not contain everything.

So, If I had to state a personal preference, I would put it this way: let the path of Theravada guide our understanding of the self, and let the trail of Mahayana guide our relations with others. These are not mutually exclusive virtues. Indeed, their union may offer the most complete vision of what it means to live wisely and well.

To conclude, touching upon the visions of nirvana in both traditions, we are not merely contrasting doctrines but we are confronted with two profound solutions or answers to the same existential question: how can one be free? One tradition offers silence and cessation; the other, paradox and compassion. Yet both direct us beyond the self, to a place where wisdom and peace are meant to collide. Whether the path is solitary or shared, analytical or visionary, it invites not mere belief, but a transformation of mind. And that, ultimately, is the task of philosophy — one I can only underscore in this work, but certainly not resolve.

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