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Comparison of Buddhist Emptiness and the Socratic Knowledge of Ignorance

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Over two-thousand years ago great thinkers like Siddhartha Guatama and Socrates began to explore a new facet of human existence and truth. Although these brilliant minds were separated by thousands of miles, they developed similar philosophies. By observing the world around them they both came to the realization that people, in much the same way as they are today, are doing things the wrong way.

In an attempt to make sense of the calamity of the surrounding world they both explored the idea that the mainstream leadership of the day, as well as the paradigm by which they led society, had serious flaws. Carelessly allocated power and corruption of that power became apparent to philosophers like Siddhartha and Socrates as being one of the roots of discontent of society. In response, both began to formulate ideas that included freeing the mind of the turmoil and difficulty of society.

Siddhartha's ideas, which evolved into Buddhism, were based on the idea that people tend to lead lives that dwell on the acquisition of money, material things, and power. His philosophy pointed out that the suffering of life is brought on by selfish craving, which can be eliminated by living a less materialistic life in which one eliminates the various uncertainties of life which create suffering.

The Buddhist philosophy goes on to outline eight key disciplines which must be acquired to relate to the world harmoniously. The first three principles – right seeing, right thinking, and right speech – bring into light the necessity for people to see, think about, and conduct themselves in a manner which is not predisposed to hate or ill will. If a person uses prejudice when looking at the people around them, then negative impressions begin to form before the truth can be realized. The same prejudice holds true for thinking and speech. If a person harbors ill will toward another person or group of people, then that negativity will be apparent in his or her verbal and nonverbal communication, even if the person does not intend to portray hostility.

The next three fundamentals of Buddhism outline a lifestyle and ethical system which allow a person to steer clear of many negative patterns of living. Right action, right effort, and right way of life all inspire people to be careful with regard to how they prioritize the aspects of their lives. It is easy for people to become obsessed with material things, power, and other vices which complicate life. In Buddhism, these illusions of happiness are exposed, and people can learn to live free from their allure.

The final two principles of Buddhism – right mindfulness, and right meditation – are perhaps the most important. These ideas contain the key to a harmonious life and peaceful co-existence with one's surroundings. With these ideas comes the concept of emptiness. Only by seeing the big picture for what it is, can people achieve true peace. A full mind concerns itself with all of the petty conflicts of life. A full mind agonizes constantly about issues of which a person usually has very little control, and of which the outcome is not terribly important in the overall scheme of things.

Only an empty mind has the ability to come to terms with the harsh reality, unfairness, and suffering of the world in a way that allows for an acceptance of the bad, while at the same time inspiring good. A similar point of view was shared by Socrates, who pointed out the necessity for people to develop a sense of humility with respect to their knowledge and intelligence. Just as Buddhism inspires people to come to terms with how little they know, or are able to control; the Socratic notion of the knowledge of one's ignorance allows for a person to clear his or her mind of the illusion that one is capable of a superior level of knowledge. Most people today, as well as over two millennia ago, cling tightly to a social pecking order that requires constant concern over who is smarter, who is richer, or who is more powerful.

When Socrates looked at the world around him he saw very much the same thing that Siddhartha saw – a superficial system that emphasizes relatively unimportant things and that enslaves people in the pursuit of imaginary goals. Emptiness and knowledge of ignorance are both key elements to dealing with such a world and at the same time maintaining one's sanity. A humble person can approach such a world without becoming entangled in all of its superficialities.

It is easy for an intelligent person to take a step back and overcome the simplicity of the machine that makes the world operate, but it is a much harder, if not impossible, for a person to repair the machine. The fools of the world, those who are not empty and are not aware of their own ignorance, will rush in to try to repair what they do not truly understand. The result is suffering. Suffering for those with power because they shortly realize that they are powerless, and suffering for the common person because they are now a pawn in a foolish scheme to fix the world.

People also inherently follow a competitive and exclusionary method of life. Today this principle can be seen in just about every aspect of life. If a person is not the best at work, they are fired. If a person is not better than others in school, they don't make it to the end. People innately seem to discard the lesser part of society in a rush to move forward. To a selfish person who is engrossed in the rat race of life in the machine, this may seem acceptable. To a humble person, however, a person with an empty mind and with knowledge of one's own imperfection, this solution does not seem as fair.

The unfairness of the world also inspires thinkers, like Siddhartha and Socrates, to contemplate a solution to the problem. Eventually, however, it usually becomes clear that no solution to the problem is possible. To illustrate this point Socrates' student Plato developed the allegory of the cave. In his allegory, all of the people of the world are in confined to a cave, able to see in only one direction. The only things that people are able to see are shadows on the wall. After a while everyone becomes convinced that the shadows are reality, without realizing that a small group of people behind them are holding up various aspects of the real world in order to create the false shadows on the wall.

Plato goes on to tell of one individual who frees himself from his chains, escapes from the cave, and becomes aware of the real world above. Buddhism also encourages people to rise above the images on the wall and become aware of the real world. In Buddhist thought a person who achieves a complete understanding to the real world is said to be enlightened. A select few of the enlightened take on the cause of attempting to free the minds of others. Called the Bodhisattva, these people sacrifice a bit of their harmony in an attempt to bring others to a more peaceful level of understanding.

Returning to the analogy of Plato's cave, however, such a person finds it difficult to see in the dark. Those holding the shadows make a mockery of the enlightened, pointing out how absurd their ideas are in relation to what the people know – shadows on the wall. Such a person usually stumbles around in the dark; unable to figure out how to help the others, until eventually they give up and return to the surface.

From this analogy, it is easy to see how true harmony can come from not only a realization of the harshness of the world, but also from the realization that pursuit of a cure is possibly just as unsettling as the problems themselves.

Socrates and Siddhartha both seemed to be trying to answer the same question, but there were a few differences in their methods. Socrates kept most of his ideas to himself. He, in fact did not even write down many of his ideas. Most of what is known of his philosophy was recorded by Plato. What he did express openly was eventually the cause of his demise. It is not known for sure whether he was executed for his ideas, or he gave up the fight easily, but it does seem that he welcomed the end.

Siddhartha, on the other hand, was a true Bodhisattva. He communicated his ideas actively, and was consequently respected as a great thinker. His culture accepted his teachings more readily, and his accomplishments may have even been fulfillment of prophecy.

Socrates' ideals seem to have been overcome in the centuries to follow by monotheistic religions, which continue to dominate the western world today. Buddhism, on the other hand, spread into much of Asia and is still practiced by millions of people today. Perhaps this is why it seems, at least potentially, that eastern philosophy offers a

much more workable, peaceful, and harmonious answer to the questions that still
continue to dwell on our minds twenty-five hundred years later.