

Nietzsche, Buddhism, and the Usefulness of Suffering in the Martial Arts

by Zachary Anderson, Cosumnes River College

Mentor: Richard Schubert

The purpose of this paper is to present and defend the argument that the extrinsic value of suffering forms a common basic element in traditional Buddhist philosophy and in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Furthermore, in this paper I will attempt a practical application of this idea to martial arts practices, which I will argue uniquely demonstrate the value of suffering and ascetic ideals.

Suffering, in the context of Nietzschean philosophy, can easily be characterized as simply the antithesis to happiness; it is, at bottom, all experience which is intuitively undesirable (Leiter). Suffering, in the context of traditional Buddhist philosophy, can be characterized as “occasions of unhappiness” that result from the inevitable “harassing ills,” of life, particularly those associated with our awareness of the impermanence of life, such as illness, old age, and the deaths of others (Burt 27-28). In the context of both Nietzschean philosophy and traditional Buddhist philosophy, suffering is not only inevitable, but an endemic, inseparable component of ordinary human existence. That is, that while the broad purpose of Buddhist philosophy is the cessation of suffering, this cessation cannot or generally does not occur by the ordinary means that would be incidental to the lives of unenlightened human beings. Furthermore, while suffering itself is escapable according to Buddhist philosophy, the “harassing ills” that cause suffering in the lives of ordinary people are not.

Hereafter, suffering will be broadly defined as an experience of intuitive disvalue. Suffering, in the context of this paper, universally accompanies the awareness of incongruity between reality and our perception of reality. Several things about this definition are noteworthy. First, that there exists or may exist incongruity between reality and our perception of reality, that is, doubt or misunderstanding as to the nature of our existence, but that this incongruity itself is not suffering in the context of this paper. Suffering, in this context, refers to the experience of suffering, which is in part dependent on our own awareness of that incongruity.

In determining any value suffering may have, it is important to distinguish the difference between intrinsic value and extrinsic value. A thing is thought to have intrinsic value if and only if it is valuable for its own sake, with no other necessary conditions. That is, if we say that happiness has value, we must say that it has value under absolutely any conditions under which it may occur, without regard to any relationship that may exist between it and other things which may have value or disvalue. Conversely, a thing is thought to have extrinsic value if and only if it is instrumental in the attainment of other valuable goods. Extrinsicly valuable goods are useful as means to ends, but have no value at all without taking their ends into account.

Nietzsche tells us that, as an intuitively negative element of human experience, suffering is extrinsicly valuable, that is, it can be inherently useful (Leiter); “Only great pain is the liberator of the spirit, as the teacher of the great suspicion... I doubt that such pain makes us ‘better’ – but I know that it makes us deeper,” (The Gay Science, preface: 3) Suffering is useful because it is the only thing that raises doubt for philosophers and for people in general; it is the only thing that causes us to question what we intuitively accept as true. Suffering is the only experience that provides the motivation to seek perceptions of reality beyond those provided to us by our intuition and cultural conditioning. Without suffering, we would not have the means to imagine a “truth” that is not always immediately within our grasp.

Nietzsche’s account of suffering also gives it a secondary usefulness: suffering potentially immunizes a person from further suffering of the same kind: “The more a person tends to reinterpret and justify, the less will he confront the causes of the misfortune and eliminate them.” (Nietzsche, Human Section 3). Such suffering, after having been experienced, would not similarly be conducive to doubt again. “Humans can bear suffering; what they cannot bear is seemingly senseless suffering.” (Nietzsche, Genealogy XXV). In this way we see that Nietzsche does not treat suffering as intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable in itself without satisfying any further necessary criteria. Instead, suffering is treated as extrinsicly valuable, that is, valuable only in so far as it presents us with an opportunity to change and grow as human beings. In other words, we may intuitively perceive experiences of suffering as obstacles, but surpassing obstacles is the only means by which we may develop.

Thus, to summarize, the usefulness of suffering is twofold. First, suffering allows (or perhaps forces) us to examine, question, and reconfigure our current perception of reality. Second, suffering immunizes us from further suffering of the same kind, what Nietzsche deems “senseless suffering,” which is no longer useful because it does not cause us to reevaluate ourselves; it is no longer conducive to doubt. Ultimately, Nietzsche’s account holds that human

suffering is a vital component to the development of “human excellence”, a depth of character Nietzsche calls “the highest power and splendor possible to the type man.” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy Preface*: 6).

In Buddhism, while the cessation of suffering is an end valuable in itself, this cannot be Buddhism’s only end, as suffering has a source: the profound ignorance at the heart of human nature (Siderits). Thus, while the presence of suffering would not seem to be ideal, suffering can be useful in so far as it can be a means to recognizing the ignorance that is its source.

In Buddhism, there are numerous instances where suffering is presented as suitable to a useful purpose, although these experiences of suffering are not necessarily presented as independently valuable themselves. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Buddha encounters a woman who is in a state of profound suffering as a result of the death of her son. Sending her on an errand that mirrored the futility of her longing, to find a mustard seed from a household in which no one had ever died, Buddha “used the occasion of her overwhelming sorrow” to show her the universality of suffering (Burt 44). By understanding this, the woman was able to recognize her suffering as the result of her selfish, unrealistic desire to have her son continue to live despite the impermanent, limited nature of human life. She thus reexamined her suffering and immunized herself from further suffering of that kind. While the cessation of suffering was Buddha’s true end for the grieving mother, suffering itself was the means to that cessation.

Thus, while these two disparate philosophies rarely agree in terms of their other ethical premises, a striking parallel can be found in the usefulness of suffering. Suffering is useful in so far as it raises the doubt that is necessary for change. Change, in this regard, can constitute a change in state of being or state of mind. Ultimately, this change is ideal, and can only be brought about through contemplation, in which suffering plays a vital role.

While the usefulness of suffering can be observed under extraordinary circumstances of revelatory insight, it can also be understood to have practical applications under more frequent conditions. Both Buddhist and Nietzschean philosophy are frequently used to endorse ascetic practices in the cultivation of their respective ideal qualities. A particularly useful illustration of this can be found in martial arts practices.

What we are primarily concerned with regard to martial arts practices and Nietzsche’s account of suffering is the practitioner’s drive for change, which is essential to the cultivation of human excellence. This process of cultivation does not have a final, ideal state of human excellence after which change is no longer valuable, but occurs consistently until death. By contrast, while

suffering can be similarly conducive to change in Buddhist philosophy, such change is no longer required (or perhaps even possible) after the attainment of enlightenment, and thus neither is suffering. It is the position of this paper that martial arts practices are useful means to both of these characterizations of change, as the martial arts demand it of their students.

How then, is this demand particular to the martial arts? Do all arts demand change, i.e. growth, of their students? Could it not just as easily be argued that such an insistence on change in the artist is just as relevant in painting, music, knitting, etc.? The question raised is thus as follows: "What, with regards to the cultivation of human excellence, is unique to martial arts practices?"

What make the martial arts unique in this regard, as opposed to other arts, are two qualities fundamental to martial arts practice that make them uniquely conducive to the cultivation of human excellence through suffering, as per Nietzsche's philosophy, as well as the cessation of suffering, as per Buddhist philosophy.

First, the martial arts provide a uniquely comprehensive set of demands on students. That is, the martial arts require of practitioners the development of a variety of faculties, both physical and mental. Furthermore, martial arts demand, not only a change in physical ability and martial prowess in the practicing student, but a broader reconfiguration of students' understanding of the limits of their bodies and minds. Such a reconfiguration, in my view, can only be brought about via a great deal of suffering, perhaps spread over a significant period of time. It is my view that this process is both empirical and rational, in that it requires both an experience and recognition of suffering, and the rational rejection of that experience as having any intrinsic meaning beyond that to which we attribute it. That is, the practitioner must fully comprehend the kind and degree of suffering involved, which is only possible through direct experience, and recognize the lack of intrinsic disvalue of that suffering relative to the benefits of martial arts practice. In short, martial arts present qualitatively superior opportunities to recognize suffering's lack of intrinsic importance to the quality of our existence.

Second, given that the martial arts involve a highly diverse, comprehensive set of demands for practitioners, martial arts are highly conducive to a diverse, comprehensive, and thus persistently useful assortment of suffering. That is, while experiences of suffering are useful, multiple experiences of suffering of the same kind yield diminishing value. The martial arts are relatively resistant to this tendency, as the kinds of suffering they require are numerous, and thus less exhaustible. The suffering experienced in the practice of martial arts, that is, the suffering that accompanies the constant reevaluation and expansion of what we understand to be true of ourselves, creates a fluid relationship between the martial artist and their perception

of suffering. In short, the martial arts offer a greater quantity of opportunities to acknowledge suffering's relative lack of importance to the quality of our existence.

The martial artist is constantly and consistently forced to reevaluate and reinvent herself as a practitioner and as a person. Thus, what the martial arts are uniquely capable of is demanding a comprehensive contribution of effort from the practitioner. More so than other endeavors, martial arts require not only that the practitioner give themselves to their practice, but that they give *all* of themselves. In this way, their perception of suffering shifts as they become subservient to their art, rather than their own intuition. The martial artist learns to abandon their basic intuitional boundaries of suffering, and develop more freely as human beings.

Over the course of this paper, I have presented suffering as an extrinsically valuable aspect of human experience in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and have demonstrated how this view corresponds to the treatment of suffering in traditional Buddhist philosophy. I have presented my view of suffering as an essential, beneficial element in the practice of martial arts practices, and of martial arts practices as uniquely demonstrative of suffering's extrinsic value. Within the limited scope of this paper, questions which may not have been addressed include those regarding aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy and traditional Buddhist philosophy not strictly to do with suffering, as well as how they interact with these philosophies' respective treatments of suffering and any relevance to martial arts practices they may have. These issues require further study.

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