
OVERCOMING THE PASSIONS IN SPINOZA: A BUDDHIST READING

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ABSTRACT

Spinoza's philosophy and Buddhism have often been compared based upon their tendencies towards seeing the world as a single order and moving beyond our passions and desires. But the comparison of these philosophies also creates interesting problems. One problem is the way we relate to this order itself. In Spinoza we achieve enlightenment when we recognize that we are a part of a single substance which has its own order and necessity. This leads us to transcend the bondage of our passions through reason. And when we reach the highest level of the intellectual love of God, we show kindness on all beings still trapped in this bondage. Buddhist enlightenment is the recognition of the dependent origination of all things. It is a larger order of causality which we are a part. We suffer within this order through our attachments so our goal is to eliminate our attachments. When we see the world in this way, we do not judge through the categories of good and evil and we show compassion to all living creatures still in the state of ignorance. So there are obvious similarities. But a major difference in these two approaches is differing ways they regard the order itself. Spinoza focuses on the *love* of this order – intellectual love of God – which leads

him affirm non-judgment and kindness. And Buddhism focuses on the *non-attachment* to this order which leads to compassion. Comparing and contrasting these two philosophies is valuable because it allows a deeper understanding of the Buddhist role of compassion as a special kind of (non-passive) passion which breaks the suffering of others. It also clarifies elements of Spinoza's philosophy which are not easily understood, for instance, his claim that pity as a useless emotion.

Keywords: Spinoza, Buddhism, Dependent Origination, Compassion, Pity

Substance and God

Spinoza's idea of a single substance is the heart of his philosophy. This is in contrast to Descartes' philosophy which posits two substances: thought and extension. This single substance is also equated with God or nature. God according to Spinoza is a substance which exists by itself and is the cause of itself. Spinoza describes the notion of substance that "By Substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed".¹

Thought and extension are merely attributes of this single substance. In a way this is reminiscent of the tradition of divine names in philosophical theology. Spinoza writes that substance consists of infinite attributes, "each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence."² And that it "necessarily exists."³ That is why, Spinoza can claim in the famous proposition 15, ethics 1 that "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God".⁴

This also means that God is a necessary order. For instance Spinoza writes that "God is the immanent and the transient cause of all things".⁵ "God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one".⁶ "In Nature there is nothing contingent, but all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and act in a certain manner."⁷

And finally: “Things could have been produced by God in no other manner and in no other order than that in which they have been produced.”⁸

Dependent origination

This order is also present in Buddhism. The teaching of dependent origination is one of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. It is known as *paticcasamupada* in the Pali canon or the teaching of cause and effect. In its general understanding, it is used in the context of *kamma* and rebirth. According to Sahdra, this principle is even compatible with empirical psychology which holds that “any given psychological phenomenon exists in the context of a complex nexus of causes and conditions. For empirical psychologists, tightly controlled experiments can help to identify some of the causes of a psychological phenomenon, although they do so by controlling or ignoring many other possible influences.”⁹

Spinoza is aware of this psychological dimension when he writes of the idea of freewill as a kind of ignorance. He writes that we believe we have freewill because we are ignorant of the causes which lead us to do what we do and think what we think, while at the same time we are conscious of doing and thinking. We are a part of a causality but in our ignorance we believe in our own agency. As long as we follow our desires and passions we are moved by this nexus of causation. We are in bondage and we experience suffering because we desire things outside of our control.

Just as Spinoza believes in God as a necessary order, dependent origination is itself an order. It is a kind of law. The teaching of the *niyamas* or natural laws are a fundamental doctrine in Buddhism. They are divided into five types such as caloric order (*utu-niyāma*), germinal order (*bīja-niyāma*), psychical order (*citta-niyāma*), moral order (*kamma-niyāma*), and finally the order of natural phenomena (*dhamma-niyāma*).¹⁰

Utuniyāma: physical inorganic order; physical law; the natural law dealing with the events in the natural world or physical environment. Bījaniyāma: physical organic order;

biological law; the natural law dealing with animals and plants, in particular, heredity. Cittaniyāma: psychic law; the natural law dealing with the workings of the mind and thinking. Kammaniyāma: order of deed and result; the law of kamma; moral law; the natural law dealing with human behaviour, specifically intention and the actions resulting from it. Dhammaniyāma; order of the norm; the general law of cause and effect; causality and conditionality; the natural law dealing with the relationship and interdependence of all things, phenomena.¹¹

Some Buddhist approaches consider that when one achieves enlightenment, the world as dependent origination shows itself as illusion. But the idea of *dhamma-nyama* suggests that the world exists by itself as a natural order. Yet this also depends upon the individual ignorance. The more we develop a concentrated mind, the more we can stop our ignorance and stop the chain of causes. The more we merely possess imagination, the more the imagined world leads us to be bound within this causality. It is interesting that Spinoza has a similarly negative view of imagination.

Overcoming

In a work which considers Spinoza from an Eastern perspective, van Reijen defines Spinoza's concept of eternity in term of God's essence. He focuses upon seeing one's bodily existence from the perspective of eternity. He writes that "Spinoza's idea that the essence of the special private body is to understand from the perspective of eternity and that only then other things can be understood and God can be seen as the cause".¹² This would be the goal for the human being which is akin to Buddhist enlightenment which involves seeing oneself within the order of dependent origination.

But as long as we are attached to our finite bodies and our belief in freewill we remain ignorant and see the world in a distorted way based upon its utility for us. According Spinoza, this ignorance is a form of human bondage since being influenced by our passions makes us passive in face of the causes external to us. Sometimes, Spinoza also

describes it as confused knowledge. The French philosopher Deleuze observes concerning confused knowledge that it “expresses the natural condition of our experience in so far as we do not have adequate ideas. It is constituted by the linking together of inadequate ideas and of the affects-passions that result from them.”¹³ This confused knowledge does not understand the body as it is a part of the larger order of the existence of things or substance.

In order to move beyond this bondage, more abstract reason should be the foundation of knowledge. As in geometry, adequate knowledge represents the order of things beyond the limits of mere bodily sense perception. He explains in the ethics that “The idea or knowledge of the mind follows God and is related to God in the same way as the idea or knowledge of the body”.¹⁴

Spinoza’s uses the idea of reason’s power to control the passions as a kind of liberation. In the *Ethics* he states that “I shall treat the power of reason, showing how much reason itself can control the emotions, and then what is freedom of mind or blessedness”.¹⁵ Passion is seen in relation to its passivity in the face external objects. This leads to suffering. But the use of reason allows us to cease to be passively affected by external objects. In this way, he writes, “In proportion, then, as we know an emotion better is it more within our control, and the less does the mind suffer from it.”¹⁶ Reason is able to control and cease suffering.

Buddhism believes that many passions or desires are caused by ignorance which leads to an unwholesome mind and unwholesome actions.¹⁷ Actions can be distinguish as good and bad actions. According to the principle of dependent origination they are called *sankhara*. The condition of *sankhara* produces consciousness.

Human Freedom as God’s Freedom

The concept of freedom in Spinoza is often misunderstood. In Book 2, proposition 7, he writes that “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.”¹⁸ This passage further explains that “the relation between the mind and the body is the same

as that between an idea and its object, since the mind is nothing but that idea of the body which exists in the infinite intellect of God”.¹⁹ This means that to the extent that I can achieve adequate knowledge, my mind can expand beyond the limits of my body and its restricted desires. My knowledge can embrace the order of God. I can become this order and share in its eternal power and freedom. So human freedom is actually the ability to use reason to move beyond the limitations of the body to enjoy God’s freedom.

But in the context of the human body, Ioan writes that we can understand freedom as “diminishing the determinations from outside and enhancing determination from within.”²⁰ This again is based upon reason. According to Kashap, “when one is conscious of one’s freedom to choose whether or not to do a certain thing, one will not do anything other than what follows from adequate ideas in one’s mind.”²¹

This whole idea can be seen in Book 1, definition 7 where Spinoza writes:

That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its own nature alone and is determined to action by itself alone. That thing, on the other hand, is called necessary or rather compelled which by another is determined to existence and action in a fixed and prescribed manner.

Spinoza states the relation of metaphysical notion of “free” and psychological notion of “free” that “God is free from the passions, nor is He affected with any emotion of joy or sorrow”.²³ This statement is very similar to Buddhist teaching *nivana* which is known as enlightenment. The word *nivana* is interesting. The prefix *Ni* means a negation, and the root *vana* refers to the passions. The idea of enlightenment then is *ni-vana*, or the overcoming of the passions. In this sense the experience of freedom by the individual is following the principle of God’s freedom as being determined from within and not being influenced by what is external. This is similar to the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

The Intellectual Love of God versus Non-attachment

We saw that the lowest form of knowledge is called confused ideas which is related to human bondage. The second level is called adequate ideas and is related to human freedom. The third and highest stage is called intuitive ideas. It is related to what Spinoza calls the intellectual love of God. In proposition 25, Spinoza writes: “The highest effort of the mind and it’s the highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge”²⁴ In Book 4 preposition 28 Spinoza claims that “Knowledge of God is the mind’s greatest good; its greatest virtue to know God”.²⁵ Knowledge of God refers to the eternal and infinite essence of God. Spinoza States the idea of love of God as follows:

The intellectual love of the mind toward God is the very love with which He loves Himself, not in so far as He is infinite, but in so far as He can be manifested through the essence of the human mind, considered under the form of eternity; that is to say, the intellectual love of the mind toward God is part of the infinite love with which God loves Himself.²⁶

Kisner claims that “the means for achieving this ‘intellectual love of God’ is a gradual process of individual and sometimes collective self-improvement, which is guided by an ideal.”²⁷ Intuitive knowledge is considered that “The highest effort of the mind and it’s the highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge”.²⁸ In other words, it is to see things from an eternal perspective, or from the perspective of the whole.

But how can we compare this with Buddhism. When the Buddhist reaches enlightenment, when they see this order of dependent origination, they are to detach themselves from its causality in order to avoid suffering. But Spinoza wants us to identify with and love this order? The answer seems to lie in the way Buddhism and Spinoza regard compassion. The two approaches are not as dissimilar as they first appear.

Passion and Compassion

As we discussed earlier Spinoza distinguishes between active and passive. In book 3, proposition 3, he writes. “The actions of the mind arise from adequate ideas alone, but the passive states depend upon those alone which are inadequate”.²⁹ Then, Spinoza offers evidence on the passion which is confused idea when he writes: “The force and increase of any passion and its perseverance in existence are not limited by the power by which we endeavor to persevere in existence, but by the power of an external cause compared with our own power”.³⁰ This is the way inadequate knowledge or the passive passions are connected to human bondage. Buddhism relates this passivity to suffering.

Spinoza’s doctrines in *Ethics* Book 4, which focus on of human bondage or of the strength of emotions are related human ignorance. Spinoza tries to show that pity, good and evil, joy and sorrow are based in ignorance. He describes pity as useless emotion and writes: “Pity, in a man who lives according to the guidance of reason, is evil of itself and useless”.³¹ This idea of pity as useless is not very understood. But if we compare it to Buddhist ideas of compassion it makes more sense.

Compassion has been taught and practiced for millennia in three main Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. For many Western researchers, these approaches to the alleviation of suffering are more akin to psychology and philosophy than religion insofar as they do not require belief in a higher power to reap their benefits. Makransky and Germer observe that “as clinical scientists and psychotherapists begin to systematically explore the concept of compassion, it may be helpful to consider the nuances in understanding that have emerged within these traditions in different parts of the world.”³² This makes the comparison of Spinoza’s ideas of overcoming the passions and the Buddhist idea of compassion particularly important.

The Buddhist concept of compassion is found in four sublime attitudes which are the heart of teaching of the Buddha. They are *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*. Sarkar clarifies these terms as follows:

Metta is the Pali word and in Sanskrit it is *Maitri* (love or loving-kindness). It is the first one of the Brahma-Viharas or the sublime states. The term “*Karuna*” is found in Buddhist texts like *Visuddhimagga*, *Shilakkhandhavagga* etc. If anybody is perceived to have suffered and other one shakes or moves with compassion at once, then it is called *karuna* or or compassion or pity. It is the second Brahma-Vihara. *Mudita* is the third one of the Brahma-Viharas which is translated as sympathetic joy or sympathy or gladness. When someone feels happy seeing other person’s happiness, then it is called *mudita* or sympathetic joy. When a person remains mentally in a neutral position between the two extremes of sorrow and happiness then it called *upekkha* which is translated as equanimity.³³

Spinoza’s understanding of the passions is rooted in the distinction between passivity and activity. Buddhism also sees this idea as mental state in the context of attachment (*kilesa*) upon which our actions happen. Both of schools see this issue as the order of causality. Passions are related to our desire in relation to our ignorance. In its original meanings the passions represent a *passivity*. We are manipulated by things outside of our control and hence we are in a state of bondage. The original meaning of passions is also related to suffering.

Returning to pity, we see now that it would be the identification with a particular suffering. Spinoza’s philosophy instead is an affirmation of joy, the intellectual love of God, or power. This reflects the Buddhist distinction between passion and compassion. Com-*passion* is not a mere passion as an attachment. Compassion does not attach to the individual who is suffering, it is instead a generalized break [*karuna*] of suffering in general. It is unselfish according to the meaning of *mudita*. Compassion is not passive, it is active and directed toward the order of dependent origination itself. While Spinoza and Buddhism differ on their interpretation of order, love and the status of suffering, they end up in a similar destination. That is a freedom beyond individual freedom, a love

beyond attachment, a generalized compassion and kindness that breaks the suffering of others.

Spinoza's ideas and Buddhist ideas show many similarities. But the purpose of comparing them means little in itself. What is gained from this comparison is a deeper understanding of principles which are little understood in each tradition. For instance, Buddhists often focus upon non-attachment to the extent that they fail to appreciate their connection to the world through compassion. It is a passion which is not merely passive but actively breaks the chain of suffering. Spinoza can remind Buddhism of its own principles concerning the joy of being actively engaged in the world and the importance of *metta* as a kind of love that affirms the whole. Likewise, Buddhism can clarify Spinoza philosophy to show that the rejection of such passions as pity is not the rejection of compassion and kindness. It is instead a recognition that to break the suffering of others requires something beyond the passivity of pity.

While we cannot bring Spinoza's philosophy into accord with Buddhism, we can play them off of one another to gain deeper insights into their respective doctrines and insights.

ENDNOTES

¹ Spinoza, B. *Ethics: Preceded by On the Improvement of the Understanding*. Hafner Publishing Company, (1949), 41.

² Ibid, 41.

³ Ibid, 48.

⁴ Ibid, 52.

⁵ Ibid, 59.

⁶ Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, Princeton University Press, (1994), p. 97.

⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 65.

⁸ Ibid, 68.

⁹ Sahdra, B. K., & Shaver, P. R. "Comparing attachment theory and Buddhist psychology", *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, (2013). 23(4), 282-293.

¹⁰ Sanu, M, “Buddhist Response to Environmental Degradation Under Conceptual Framework of the Five Niyāma”, International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2015, 65.

¹¹ Phaengcharoen, Phramaha Somphong Santacitto, “An Analytical Study of The Concept of Dhamma as Natural Law in Theravāda Buddhism”, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Bangkok, Thailand, 2006, 62

¹² Van Reijen, M. Might “Spinoza be Considered more as an Exponent of the Oriental Enlightenment, than as an Exponent of the Western Enlightenment? Araucaria:”, *Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política, Humanidades y Relaciones Internacionales*, (2018), 20(39), pp. 297-310.

¹³ Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. City Lights Books Press, (1988), p.82

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 101

¹⁵ Ibid, 252.

¹⁶ Ibid, 256.

¹⁷ Bhikkhu, *Buddhadāsa. Paṭiccasamuppāda: Practical Dependent Origination*. tr. by Steve Schmidt. Suan Mokkhabalaram, Suratthani, Thailand: Vuddhidhamma Fund, (1986), 35.

¹⁸ Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 119.

¹⁹ Radner, Daisie, *Spinoza's Theory of Ideas*, Duke University Press, 1971, 338.

²⁰ Ioan, R. “Spinoza and Nietzsche on Freedom Empowerment and Affirmation”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, (2017), 25(4), 1864-1883. doi:10.1111/ejop.12283, 4.

²¹ Kashap, S. P. *Spinoza and Moral Freedom*. SUNY Press, (2012), 163.

²² Spinoza, B. *Ethics*, 41.

²³ Ibid, 264.

²⁴ Ibid, 269.

²⁵ Rocca, *Spinoza*, published by Routledge, London, (2008), 178.

²⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 274.

²⁷ Kisner, Matthew J Youpa, Andrew, *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, 87.

²⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 269.

²⁹ Ibid, 237.

³⁰ Ibid, 194.

³¹ Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 226.

³² Makransky, J., Germer, C. K., & Siegel, R. D. “Compassion in Buddhist psychology. Wisdom and compassion in psychotherapy:”, *Deepening mindfulness in clinical practice*, (2012), 61-74.

³³ Sarkar, Bijay Kumar, “Buddhists Concept of Brahma-Vihar: An Analysis of Morals”, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, (2019), 1.

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