

The Stoic Zeitgeist and Buddhism

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ABSTRACT: Growth of every religion is influenced by the surrounding cultural background. No doubt, cultural legacy gets mixed with many potent elements resulting into a sort of new or modern civilization. Nothing can totally be erased or replaced and therefore, some notable fibres of the past grandeur remain. In case of Buddhism, the influencing civilization had been from the East. Therefore, in general, it would be wise to understand the prevailing traditions which could intimately come close to the 'ism', during its birth and also gestation period. People's civilization has a clear impact of the geographical conditions and many times the extant political regime. A country like India wherein Buddhism could find a colossal support and base, had been stuffed disproportionately with various cultures and languages. No doubt, theoretically one may emotionally proclaim unity in diversity, it had been ever subject to polarization. Most of the countries are, impartially speaking, divided into various ethnic groups, each having own territorial spirit. It is only a soothing idea to camouflage the reality and declare that all are united. In India, we have traditional divisions based on the conventionally and conveniently allotted duties. The danger has been the growing habit of imposing own ideas with an undue insistence, owing to which the very social paradigm is getting totally damaged. The dominating traditional ritualistic practices which had been in excess have weakened the true philosophical spirit, It is in this context that Stoicism and Buddhism have stood as corrective factors in a genuine format.

There have been many similarities in Stoicism and Buddhism particularly with regard to the guidance for ethical living. There is a clear indication that both have an astounding intention of dispelling the human ignorance so as to lead a life with a sense of fulfilment. This paper attempts to bring forth the similarities between the two and provide a pathway or technique to live life meaningfully.

Keywords: Stoicism, Buddhism, Cultural background and Influence of Civilization

INTRODUCTION

It is indeed an open fact that, the appeal for ethical living or maintaining a moral platform for the deeds being performed, has been in decline. There can be various reasons right from the sociological point of view to the personal culture voluntarily nurtured. It is but natural that our response to the societal norms depends a lot on the social approval and the returns in a gainful manner. This evidently makes us overly-practical as need of the hour. With the burning flames of personal and social unrest, it is agreeably difficult to maintain a stoic stance. The continual influence of the social media, News and Political scene does make us nervous and introvert. The popular perceptions of the masses definitely disappoint and bring us close to depression. Nevertheless a common man hangs on to the religious promises from the scriptures with great hope. There is openly a sort of discouragement but yet the grip is so strong that with a meagre percentage of the existing population one finds comfort with the religions followed. The real danger is because man is losing the analytical sense and permitting emotions to take over the scientific facts. Under given circumstances it is exceedingly difficult to be a follower of the principles of hedonism because there is oppression and repression at every stage in the walk of life. People do take great pride in feigning righteousness and pretending as devout practitioners of asceticism. This, in fact, is done more to impress the society in general or fellow beings. There are many acts performed serving the implanted illusions and putting on the mask of so called spirituality. It is indescribably a horrible situation created by the self-proclaimed spiritual Masters. Naturally, for the sensitive and honest people, usually onlookers, this automatically brings in loneliness. Further it may give an easy path to quirkiness. Ultimately the sensitive souls may hunt for a sort of consolation which they might get in reading and or writing. The philosophical bent of mind definitely helps under such a situation but then there are limitations. This is chiefly because as human beings we do need a support system, theoretically speaking, to stand firmly in a composed manner. Living up to others' expectations would drain all energy. There are indeed compulsions from academic or professional life and many times from the upbringing too. Everything generates out of the clash of feelings, contradictions and conflicting ideas. Therefore despite having so much of easily available literature we do need rather an abridged form of living philosophy for all. It is in this context that both Stoicism and Buddhism, instruct us to embrace the reality and then march without confusion. This means there is no sense in clinging on to the principles which are historically revered but failing in practice nor continuing with those which are imposed by the majority. People do voluntarily use masks to hide truth. This is well described as **Hawthorne effect** where it is made clear that our behaviour gets transformed when we become conscious of our image in front of others. This works out only on a temporary basis as we come to know there are observers around. This should not lead us to any conclusion about someone's personality. That is why it is safe to conclude that with rare exceptions everyone has a split personality or different personal nature contradicting the disposition in the professional life. In order to eliminate the confusion/conflict of ideas, it is necessary to have a guidance from religion, philosophy, literature, sociology, psychology etc. It is in this light that the need of a compact set of living or livable principles arises. Both Stoicism and Buddhism deviate from the conventional lengthy approaches that are partially permitting escapism when it comes to the efficacy in practical life.

PARALLELS IN STOIC AND BUDDHISTIC CULTURES

Both Stoicism and Buddhism were introduced independently depending on none to get affiliated or influenced by. The reason had been their urge to place the naked truth as it is, regarding the world we live in. Many philosophies particularly the religious ones, always took great pride in finding a shelter under some popular thinking or approach. They excelled well but being religious could serve only a selective section of the mass. Obviously, they took great advantage of the sentiments of a particular caste, creed and language to cover a faction of the society. Stoicism comes from West while Buddhism from the East. Despite this, they advocated that human 'happiness' should be given, on priority basis, first position. We know Stoicism developed around 300 BC while Buddhism approximately around 500 BC. They supported the idea that 'happiness' has the dependable source within us and therefore, hunting out for the same from the available externalities is merely a waste of efforts and time. That which can be narrated briefly shows it has clarity and is free from the excesses or conflicts. Without exposing any religious philosophy which has gone in volumes giving space to confusions and escapism, let us consider the simplified tenets of both Stoicism and Buddhism

BUDDHISM

Asceticism is the doctrine with full faith in the principles and practices of an ascetic which proposes extreme self-denial combined with approved austerity. The strong belief that such an ordained life can release the soul from the strongly connected bondages of the body to unite with the divine. It is rather a theory or purposefully created system of ascetic practices. Ultimately from a bird's eye-view we find there's self-deprivation for gaining ethical or intellectual ends. In addition this went on to be claimed as a genuine necessity for religious ends too. Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism grew up very fast and therefore signalled maturity at a very early age. Obviously from a mental plane there were signs of picking up voluntarily a path to become a sage. However, with intuition, there was a sort of confidence to lead self to enlightenment. Further as everyone knows the same achievement became a searchlight for the whole humanity. Naturally all these efforts needed courage, sustenance, perseverance and undeterred hope. Shakyamuni qualified for all this and therefore, with an unflinching concentration marched in a steadfast manner. After the birth with so many soothsayers felt there are numerous auspicious signs, they named him Siddharta which may be roughly translated as, 'mastering all truths and presence or in possession of favourable omens' Due to the high level of comprehension he could thoroughly master all worldly knowledge and the wisdom thereof, surpassing many. His main concern was about human life and therefore at the outset began gathering knowledge of the worldly affairs. Concluding that everything around is subject to impermanence, he developed compassion for the humanity as a whole. It is at this juncture that his mind uncontrollably got agitated and so decided to release people from sufferings and the attachment which is blindly carried forward. With deep contemplation he decided to place before the world, a philosophy of life in an absolutely succinct form than using verbose language filled with exaggeration. 'These characteristics of worldly existence the strong eating the weak, the troubles of a multitude of sufferings, the cruelty and heartlessness all plunged Shakyamuni into even greater confusion and even deeper pain. what is human life for? Why does such a cruel world would exist? what is the ultimate meaning of life in the Universe? With this Shakyamuni sat down under a tree and his mind felt an aversion to the world. He pondered the issues of worldly life and transcending the world, and again fell into a state of deep contemplation and silent concentration for a long time.'¹ With the strong desire to disseminate the wisdom gained out of enlightenment, Buddha felt the necessity of dispelling ignorance of the mass. Naturally as an extension of the same he wanted to bring upon salvation to the seekers. Obviously a relearning process with soundness of mind was a requisition in the chosen path. Just painting the world as it is or exposing its pit falls was not the need of the hour but seeking a solution was of utmost importance.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

In a nutshell if we want to understand, Buddhism we should know these Truths and the path suggested. In fact these truths are centred around sufferings, the chief reality of human existence. Just as every phenomenon has a cause it has an end too. The insistence on portraying the world we live in as it is, at any rate, has no intention to encourage a pessimistic lacing. Ultimately knowing the factual existing reality and then overcoming the same with faultless knowledge is the aim From the Four Noble Truths we learn to combat the inevitable part of our life, i.e. Suffering. Acknowledging the visible reality is the first sign of maturity. Therefore, the first Truth identifies the presence of suffering. The second one engages itself to discover the basic cause which generates suffering. The next one provides a relief by declaring that like other things suffering too has an end at some point. Lastly Buddha suggests or points out at the path which can surely relieve us from the suffering. When analyzed we realize that Buddha has clearly stated about the suffering which has the whole humanity in its grip but much of it is owing to our own ignorance and attachment giving birth to suffering. Similarly getting out of the vicious circle all that would need is the clarity, viz; impermanence as the basic characteristic of all living beings and their qualities. But then it would not be an automatic release. We need to have a righteous path to come out of the bondage, in short suffering, its cause, its cessation and the right path are the universal Truths suggested. The ultimate aim, therefore, has to be Nirvana. For this state to attain the chosen path has Noble Eightfold scheme, which is comprised of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This is an indication that ultimately it is all based on a moral platform with ethical thinking, getting reflected in the behaviour. In fact, it is not anything new for a spiritual path. The beauty of Buddhism lies in the fact that it hides nothing, portrays the world as it is and leads us to a path which demands right disposition to end the very cycle of suffering 'The Eightfold Path is the holistic education or training of body, speech and mind that culminates in awakening. Right view refers to beliefs, ideals, values that are in harmony with the way things are. Initially its most important elements are confidence in i) the human capacity for enlightenment, and ii) the law of Kamma (Karma in Sanskrit). Right thought refers to thoughts consistent with Right view. These are Characterized by a freedom from all kinds of toxic thinking, in particular that which is i) sensual ii) hostile or iii) cruel. Right thought includes the aspiration to be free from all inner affliction, and thoughts of Kindness and compassion."²

THE ART OF STOIC JOY

Apart from the common cravings, there are definitely certain desires every human being nurtures in mind. That is mainly because everyone has ideals to be achieved. As we advance in life we realize our expectations are not exactly unreasonable but to a large extent unrealistic. This is because we do wrestle with our emotions, desires and are not ready to accept the reality. There are scores of unfulfilled desires which remain with us continually draining our energy. There is always a clash between the existing reality and our own nourished illusions. Goals for life are bound to be present in everyone's life but if they heavily weigh on us and efforts levelled fail miserably then a sort of agony sets in totally in a rigid form. Stoicism, therefore, trains our mind to look evenly at the life and its events/ phases. It also reminds us about our own limitations at all levels. Getting trained to adopt stoic principles we equip ourselves with a greater measure of perseverance, understanding and patience. There are endless streams of distractions and discouraging happenings for one and all, but more so for the sensitive souls. Therefore, we all do require a coherent philosophy in life which is not just based on impractical religious sentiments. There is no sense in any given philosophy if it fails to generate enough strength to eliminate our sufferings from life. What is the use of verbose language that impresses our minds with its composition and syntax but fails to touch the realities of life? At their best such philosophies might provide merely

a **PLACEBO EFFECT** and that too on a very temporary basis. Stoicism, like Buddhism, begins with the harsh realities of life and having stated them provides solutions. These solutions given in the form of postulates to combat with the problems, using no high sounding statements. To put it in brief, Stoicism emphasizes on the following points. a) We must gain rightful knowledge to discern between what falls under our control and what does not. b) The present time with us is most precious. c) Running after the external resources to gain happiness on a permanent basis is futile d) Controlling the mood swings and the wavering mind, would be of immense help to stay focused. e) There is no sense in nurturing our ego and vanity. f) As a discipline maintaining a diary for the events that are completed or attended to and the thoughts is necessary. g) In all walks of life never losing the sight of our aims and remaining steadfast is a prior condition. h) Stretching our imagination, particularly on the negative axis to visualize the worst that could happen, would train our mind to be ready for the possible eventualities. In turn it can make us remain prepared. i) The truth as Universal, supported by scientific thinking also, suggests that Nothing Remains For Ever. Everything has an end.

RESEMBLANCE BUT NOT IDENTICAL

Both Buddhism and Stoicism were developed under different circumstances. They were centuries apart and so their geographical conditions were matchless. Buddhism was erected out of a personal thinking, experiences and analysis of Gautama Buddha. On the other hand there had been at least half a dozen personalities contributing to the Stoic thinking. The contributors were from different countries, provinces and circumstances. The very first aim for both had been to relieve the humanity from the clutches of suffering. In fact this is dealt with the same approach. The outlook presumes much of the problem can be tackled by conditioning our mind. The limitations of the materialistic approach is exposed by both for a happy or content life. It is our response that matters. There is no denying in the fact that the world is full of misery, tragedy, discontent and newer challenges. But then, the potential of our mind can easily weigh upon it once we correct our viewpoint. Unsatiated desire and strong attachment cause all the rut. Coming out of this malady Buddha expects a pathway to enlightenment. **PRAGMATISM** is the next step strongly recommended by both.

The approach, as advocated by many old and established religions, has been placing an impetus on the next life with great hope. Both Buddhism and Stoicism believe in the practical aspect of living right now. Gaining happiness through our imagination of the future life does not seem to be as any feasible proposition for both. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the outcome, both these 'isms' lay emphasis on the right conduct for living in the present. In the same manner much importance has been given more in Buddhism over silencing the flighty nature of mind, through meditation technique. However, Buddhism thinks of relating our deeds and reincarnation thereof, to which Stoics do not signal any approval. The Buddhists believe strongly in life and death as cause and consequence. Although both do differ over certain issues, yet there are more agreements than any spiritual rivalry. Both definitely thought alike but maintained over certain points own identity. "But no matter how hard we try to prevent bad things from happening to us, some will happen anyway. Seneca therefore points to a second reason for contemplating the bad things that can happen to us. If we think about these things, we will lessen their impact on us when, despite our efforts at prevention, they happen: "He robs present ills of their power who has perceived their coming beforehand." Misfortune weighs most heavily, he says, on those who "expect nothing but good fortune." Epictetus echoes this advice: We should keep in mind that "all things everywhere are perishable." If we fail to recognize this and instead go around assuming that we will always be able to enjoy the things we value, we will likely find ourselves subject to considerable distress when the things we value are taken from us."³

CONCLUSION

Not all great thinkers think alike. Any response is based on own perception, comprehension level and upbringing. Similarly thinking for everyone changes with age, experience and circumstances. It is only after attaining a certain level of maturity that one feels settled in thinking. At the same time, it is personal psychological and societal security that causes multiple changes in our personality. You need courage or security to speak out the truth. It is in this light that both Buddhism and Stoicism, could spell out reality as it is without reservation. Further, they did not stop with the delineation but vehemently suggested a way out or release from the misery faced by all. It is not everyone's cup to approach philosophical thinking and adopt as it is. But then, any philosophy stuffed with jargons and scholastic accomplishment might fail in practical life. Therefore Buddhism and Stoicism in a unique manner took into consideration common man's problems, inquisitive nature, limitations etc. before suggesting workable principles of their philosophical grandeur.

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