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Level 3 Extended Project.

Laughing in Pain and Laughing at Pain: A Comparative Study of Stoicism and Madhyamaka Buddhist Philosophy

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Gautama Buddha, symbol of Greco-Buddhist aesthetics, 1st–2nd century AD, Gandhara.

Candidate Declaration

This project is my own original work, and no element of the work included in this project has been submitted for any other qualification.

Signed:

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Introduction

Imagine you have just received a nasty tackle in a football match. A Stoic standing on the sidelines shouts at you, “Let yourself feel the pain, then get over it! It is not in your control, but you do not have to suffer if you take away your negative judgments!” A Madhyamika cries: “Your suffering is just an illusion; even you, ‘self’, are just an illusion! So let it go!” In reality, the fans would accuse you of diving using much less civilised and encouraging language.

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium (circa 300 BCE) and prospered in the Hellenistic period.¹ Madhyamaka, or the ‘middle way’, is a sub-branch of Mahayana Buddhism based on the teachings of the Indian monk and philosopher Nāgārjuna (circa 150-250 BCE).² From the Agora³ of Athens and Rome to the monasteries of India and Tibet, Stoicism and Madhyamaka Buddhism aimed to solve one universal problem – suffering. This is a striking convergence. Without direct contact, these two schools on opposite ends of the world independently developed arguments asserting that total liberation from suffering is possible. However, their approaches are different – the Stoics teach that one should live in accordance with nature, using rationality as a guide; Madhyamaka, in contrast, dismantles the very conception of an independent self, championing that everything is empty of essence and the realisation of this truth helps one secure peace of mind.

¹ The period during which Ancient Greece and Rome prospered; in this essay, I will mainly be citing Roman Stoics, whose activities and writings were temporally adjacent (or in Aurelius’ case, overlapping) with Mādhyamikas (people of the school Madhyamaka).

Dirk Baltzly, “Stoicism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy),” Stanford.edu, January 20, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>.

² Jan Christoph Westerhoff, “Nāgārjuna,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, May 21, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/>. Richard Hayes, “Madhyamaka,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/madhyamaka/>.

³ Central public space in city-states where philosophers, including the Stoics, used to teach and debate.

Ethical philosophy ought to be comparative. A ‘cosmopolitan’ proposition makes philosophy more inclusive, nuanced, and responsive to the complexity of human experience.⁴ In this essay, I argue that the divergence in Stoicism and Madhyamaka’s teachings regarding the cessation of suffering is fundamentally due to their different metaphysical worldviews; historical backgrounds also shape their modes of thinking, but have a less significant impact. Further, both schools identify ‘judgment’ as the root cause of suffering. Ultimately, I believe they are striving towards the same end goal, but the Madhyamaka path of intellectual realisation is more radical than Stoicism’s rational self-control.

‘There is Suffering’

Suffering is the fundamental driving force behind both Stoicism and Madhyamaka. The Buddhist concept of *duḥkha* is worth scrutinising.⁵ All sentient beings experience *duḥkha*. It means the ‘bad functioning of a chariot’s wheel’ and refers to everything from the slightest annoyance to extreme torture, encompassing restlessness, anxiousness, ontological transience, physical pain, and more.⁶ The Four Noble Truths, Buddha’s core teaching, acknowledges that ‘there is suffering; there is the origin of suffering; there is the cessation of suffering; and there is a path to the cessation of suffering’.⁷ Similarly, suffering is a special focus for the Stoics, who realise that although inevitable, it is an obstacle one can, and should, overcome. Why were both these ancient schools so concerned with suffering and how

⁴ Joel J. Kupperman, “Why Ethical Philosophy Needs to Be Comparative,” *Philosophy* 85, no. 2 (April 2010): 185–200, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819110000033>.

⁵ The more common day-to-day use is the Pali spelling, “dukkha”. Throughout this essay I will use Sanskrit spellings for Buddhist concepts to be consistent with mainstream Buddhist scholarship.

⁶ Marianna Benetatos, “Early Stoic and Buddhist Philosophies of Life,” December 8, 2016. The usual Schopenhauerian translation of “suffering” doesn’t capture the vastness of the Pāli word’s meaning. (However, for clarity, the translation of “suffering” will be adopted throughout this essay.)

⁷ Mark Siderits, “Buddha (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy),” Stanford.edu, March 6, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buddha/>.

to defeat it? The causes are distinct – for Madhyamaka, it was mainly due to the broader Buddhist soteriological aim. Meanwhile, the Stoic philosophers were more influenced by their historical period.

Buddhism is the philosophy of Siddhartha Gautama (fl. circa 450 BCE).⁸ He was born into a wealthy family; his father was the leader of the Sakyas.⁹ A famous parabolic account named ‘The Four Sights’ documented an inspiring moment which drove the twenty-nine-year-old to be a *śramana*, who is austere for a higher purpose. The story goes that Gautama left his palace and entered the city, where he encountered the sights of an old person, a sick person, a dead person, and a holy person. The former three people symbolise the physical decline, illness, and eventual death of mortals, and the latter stands for the pursuit of truth. Gautama was determined to be the latter – he abandoned a life of comfort to seek a remedy for universal existential suffering.¹⁰ Gautama would eventually become the Buddha, ‘the awakened’. Madhyamaka, which deeply respected and followed the Buddha’s teachings, naturally aimed to become soteriological,¹¹ focusing on self-liberation and the cessation of suffering above all else.

Contrastingly, Stoicism’s dedication to the topic of suffering was due to historical factors, not an active choice. Following the death of Socrates,¹² the Stoic canons also demonstrated that being a philosopher in classical antiquity was an occupational hazard. Epictetus served as a slave for three decades, and later in life was banished from Rome by Emperor Domitian for being a philosopher. Seneca, the mentor to Emperor Nero, was exiled and twice condemned to death by his mad mentee. Even Marcus Aurelius, an Emperor himself, was tormented

⁸ Although popularised through Hesse’s novel, Contemporary scholarship is not completely certain whether the Buddha’s given first name was “Siddhartha”. Scholars are certain, however, that his last name was Gautama.

⁹ A clan located in the foothills of the Himalayas.

¹⁰ Steve Clarke, “The Life of the Buddha - the Buddha and His Teachings in Buddhism - GCSE Religious Studies Revision - Eduqas,” BBC Bitesize, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zr3sv9q/revision/1>.

¹¹ Concerned with salvation.

¹² Alas...

throughout his life – his health was deteriorating; his wife committed adultery; his son, Commodus, was a failed leader; the Parthians attacked Rome, then the Germans, then the Antonine Plague; in 175 BCE, one of Aurelius’ generals claimed the throne for himself, and the rebellion gained considerable traction.¹³ With these taken into consideration, it is not surprising then that thinkers like Aurelius, who suffered extensively themselves, embraced ‘the invitation to turn away from the external world toward the inner citadel of reason [because it] may provide great comfort’.¹⁴

This evaluation reveals that historical context influenced Stoicism more than Buddhism. Put in the bigger picture, however, the impact of history in directing the ancient thinkers’ contemplations is dwarfed when compared to one aspect of their philosophical discourse – metaphysics.¹⁵ Before examining what they advocate as paths to overcome suffering, it is imperative to understand the schools’ worldviews and perceptions of reality, for reflecting the self and one’s conduct in the world stems from the ontological¹⁶ frameworks they have constructed.

The World We Live in – Rationality and Emptiness

The Stoic understanding of the world is well-defined – the universe is a rationally governed body that undergoes constant change. This statement can be divided into three parts: that the universe is ordered, that it is a single body, and that it is a flux.

¹³ Lewis Waller, “Stoicism’s Major Flaw,” YouTube, March 21, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MULZYg2UfK8>.

¹⁴ James A. Mollison, “Nietzsche Contra Stoicism: Naturalism and Value, Suffering and Amor Fati,” *Inquiry* 62, no. 1 (September 27, 2018): 93–115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2019.1527547>.

¹⁵ The earliest branch of philosophy; it aims to investigate the nature all things.

¹⁶ A branch of metaphysics concerned with the essence of ‘being’.

First, the Stoics adopted the Aristotelian terminology *Logos* to describe the cosmic law. The view that ‘all things obey and serve the Universe’ extends into the belief in cosmic determinism, where every event, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is part of the larger, rational plan of the universe.¹⁷ Secondly, the Stoics argue that the force of *Logos* interconnects everything. Their ontological construct is fundamentally materialistic. They rejected dualism, believing that even the ‘mind’ and ‘virtues’ are material, grounded in the same substance as the physical world. They resonate with Parmenides’ monism: ‘Constantly regard the Universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul’.¹⁸ Lastly, ‘change’ is at the heart of Stoicism as it directly confronts the impermanence of existence. ‘Flux’, a concept attributed to the pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus, is embraced by Stoicism.¹⁹ Materials change: ‘Things must needs move in a cycle, one thing giving way to another, and some things must pass away, and others come into being’.²⁰ Furthermore, ‘it is not evil for things to undergo change’ because ‘nothing is evil which is according to nature’.²¹ This profound understanding links back to the idea that change is natural and without chaos because it is governed and determined by *Logos*, the universal rationale.

On the other hand, Madhyamaka develops a more complex world model. The first step to solving this puzzle is to know that Madhyamaka is based on negation. The ‘middle way’ is a path between extremes. To follow it is to reject both eternalism (*Śāśvata-vāda*), the dogma that essence is fixed, and a permanent, independent self exists, and nihilism (*Uccheda-vāda*), the belief that nothing exists after death, and actions have no karmic consequences. This

¹⁷ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion (Royal Collector’s Edition) (Case Laminated Hardcover with Jacket)* (1535; repr., Royal Classics, 2020), 316. This is a fragment from Arrian, the pupil of Epictetus.

¹⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. George Long (1559; repr., SDE Classics, 2019), 33.

¹⁹ Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. Brooks Haxton (500BC; repr., Penguin, 2003). (In the past, I have investigated the metaphysics of Heraclitus and Parmenides. I am fascinated by how Stoicism synthesised seemingly contradictory theories to create a novel system.)

²⁰ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 234.

²¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 33, 15.

negation is encapsulated by the concept of **interdependent origination** (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the notion that nothing exists permanently, and every appearance arises from complex causes through a continual transformative process. Nāgārjuna uses a fourfold logical tool called ‘tetralemma’ to challenge the common understanding of causality and the notion that things have a distinct intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).²² He posits four possibilities for how things might be caused:

1. From itself
2. From others
3. From both itself and other things
4. From neither itself nor other things²³

Nāgārjuna rejects (1) because the same object cannot precede itself in time; he rejects (2) and (3) as they imply cause and effect are dependent on each other, undermining the very argument of independent origination; finally, he rejects (4) on the basis that it denies causality altogether, and this is inconsistent with how causality is in the real world. Through the Tetralemma, Nāgārjuna concludes that all phenomena lack intrinsic nature and that everything arises interdependently. Due to the absence of *svabhāva*, Nāgārjuna describes existence as consistent with ‘**emptiness**’ (*śūnyatā*) – this is the philosophical focus of the whole of Buddhist philosophy. A point of paramount importance is that interdependent origination and emptiness are two ways of describing the same thing – nothing is independent, and nothing has an intrinsic nature.

²² In addition to his challenge of causality, Nāgārjuna also uses Tetralemma to challenge *svabhāva* through change, personal identity, and knowledge. Other Mādhyamikas, such as Buddhapālita and Jñānagarbha, also developed their own tetralemmas, which reasons against independent origination.

²³ Nāgārjuna and Jan Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The ‘Doctrine of Two Truths’ is a reductionist perspective to understand *śūnyatā*. The first of the two truths is the ‘conventional’: It is based on unreliable appearances and is accepted by our sensory organs without much critical deliberation. The ‘ultimate’ truth lies deeper and requires further investigation: ‘An ultimately true statement is one that correctly describes how certain ultimately real entities are arranged’.²⁴ Nāgārjuna unveiled the ultimate truth of *śūnyatā* through logical reasoning of the tetralemma, in which interdependency is identified as the ultimately real arrangement.

There is another evaluation regarding *śūnyatā* – that is, despite the realisation of *śūnyatā* is considered the ultimate truth, *śūnyatā* itself is not the ultimate truth. In other words, emptiness itself is empty. ‘The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.’²⁵ This assertion is logically valid because there cannot be a true nature independent of false natures; granted that is the case, it would still be an image based on our perceptions and so deprived of being an ultimate truth. Mādhyamikas, therefore, conclude that:

The true nature of reality cannot be described by any conceptual fabrication, by any conventional term or expression. Thus, it is not existent, not non-existent, not something, not nothing, not permanent, not extinct.²⁶

Despite the Madhyamaka worldview being devoid of an absolute materialistic foundation, it strongly resonates with Stoicism’s emphasis on the interconnectedness of being. Like the Stoics, Nāgārjuna also recognises impermanence (*anicca*) as a universal pattern. However, I believe there are nuanced differences between the schools’ understanding of impermanence and change. The Stoic holds that everything is in change under the governance of *Logos*, but what that implies is that *Logos*, the objective cosmic law, remains constant; Madhyamaka’s

²⁴ Siderits, “Buddha (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).”

²⁵ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 182.

²⁶ Gyamtso, Khenpo Tsültrim and Nagarjuna, *The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Boston, Ma: Shambhala Publications, 2003), XI.

concept of *anicca*, once viewed through the lens of interdependent origination, clearly appears as part of the reasoning to justify emptiness, and is much more radical in stating that nothing is constant, not even the phenomena of change itself.

So far, I have stated Stoicism and Madhyamaka's perception of the world around them. A famous syllogism says, "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal." While this seems like a mere demonstration of logic, it contains the deepest emotional experience that man can have – from observing "people die" to realising "I die".²⁷ Stoicism and Madhyamaka's ingenuity are fitting the insignificant and transient 'I' into all-encompassing metaphysical structures. In the following sections, I will analyse what the Stoics and Mādhyamikas determine as the cause of suffering, then evaluate how they apply their ontological understandings to liberate man from suffering.

'There is the Origin of Suffering'

The second of the Four Noble Truths asks, 'What is the origin of suffering?' In search of an answer, philosophers start looking within themselves, into their suffering selfhood. I believe the central commonality in the Stoic and Madhyamika worldviews, namely the shared appreciation of the interconnectedness of existence, shaped the way both schools think, and they arrive at an agreement.

The Stoics state that the rational cosmic rule, *Logos*, governs the universe. Humans are inseparable parts of the universe. Therefore, following a naturalistic view, 'the law of living is to **act in conformity with nature**'.²⁸ The ancient Stoics believed in God, and by extension,

²⁷ Hazel Barnes, "Self-Encounter: A Study in Existentialism," *National Public Educational Television*, 1961, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsUDzTsytMY>.

²⁸ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 72.

they advocated that ‘He put in our power that which is noblest and highest’, the faculty of reason.²⁹ Individual rationality is a share of *Logos*, the rationale of nature, so ‘to the rational animal the same act is according to nature and according to reason’.³⁰ Stoicism assigns rationality to the soul (*psychê*). Specifically, it asserts that the ruling part of the soul, *hêgemonikon*, is responsible for decision-making.³¹ When the *hêgemonikon* functions properly, it brings health as ‘individual reason understands the workings of cosmic reason and adapts its will to the command of nature’.³² However, Stoicism recognises that this is often not the case. They state suffering as when the person is troubled by impressions and not behaving rationally.

Impressions (*phantasiai*) are the raw data produced by the sensory organs.³³ According to Epictetus, ‘For what purpose then have we received reason from nature? That we may deal with impressions aright’.³⁴ ‘Assent’ (*synkatathesis*) is the approval of an impression which enables action. It is a judgement that immediately triggers a positive impulse (*hormê*), which attracts, or a negative impulse (*aphormê*) to avoid what is presented in the impression. Stoicism acknowledges that impulses are natural and necessary to sustain life. However, suffering arises when an impulse disrupts the alignment of personal and cosmic reason. This occurs when they become unconstrained by reason and degrade into irrational passion. ‘Passion’, or *pathos*, is an excessive urge based purely on potentially false impressions. This deprives the soul of its proper function. The result of an impaired soul is that the self will

²⁹ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 317.

This fragment’s reference is unclear; the natural meaning from its heading would be that they are sayings of Rufus, incorporated by Epictetus in his discourses on Friendship. (This is indicated in the footnote of the SDE edition, which ambiguously cites Matheson.)

³⁰ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 63.

³¹ They did not make a sharp distinction between “mind” and “soul” in the way later philosophies did (e.g. Descartes and Kant).

³² Benetatos, “Early Stoic and Buddhist Philosophies of Life.”

³³ The word “fantasy” stems from this Greek terminology, and it is a helpful illustration of how unprocessed impressions can often be illusory and false.

³⁴ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 60.

mindlessly cling to external objects and form attachments. Since the world is in flux, those things one is attached to will eventually disappear, leaving the self suffering from loss. This vicious cycle grows because an irrational agent will cling to more things in the hope of recovering the loss. When those things ineluctably fail them too, suffering is multiplied.

Madhyamaka also saw sensory experience as the precursor of mental processes, echoing the Stoic assertion that attachment to impermanent things leads to suffering. The Buddha coined the term ‘*tanhā*’, which means thirst, to describe the craving and grasping of things that bring pleasure, or the fear and aversion of what brings sorrow and pain. A close analysis reveals that the desire to repeat or maintain pleasant or avoid unpleasant feelings establishes permanent emotional patterns; these fixed emotions produce cravings.

Stoicism and Madhyamaka follow the same chain of reasoning, which suggests the internal conditions leading up to the origin of suffering:

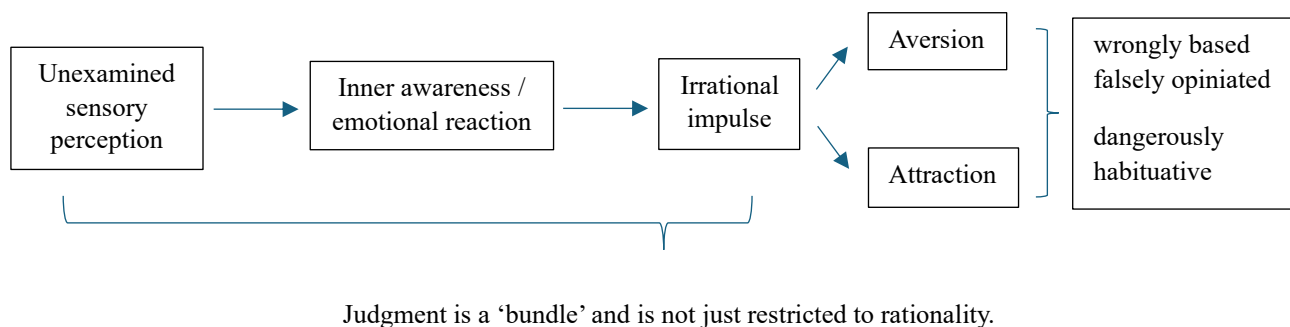


Fig. 1 The shared model of the origin of suffering identified by the author

The consequence of thirst or, from a Stoic perspective, when passion dominates reason, is that the self will be trapped in a ‘never ending circle of latent tendencies and their manifestation, our lives are controlled and our conducts blindly guided’.³⁵

³⁵ Benetatou, “Early Stoic and Buddhist Philosophies of Life.” (Here, “controlled” is Benetatou’s expression of strained or unfree, as opposed to the Stoic teachings, which I will analyse later.)

I believe that at a fundamental level, instead of attachment, both Stoicism and Madhyamaka identify that suffering originates from individuals' **key erroneous judgments**. Epictetus explicitly wrote, 'It is our judgements which straiten and crush ourselves'.³⁶ Similarly, Nāgārjuna argues that pursuing ultimate truth is changing one's view or judgment of the world; as one's judgment is corrected, they are freed from existential suffering. While both schools insightfully point out this underlying cause, their assertions on what the key erroneous judgments are differ; their interpretation of the 'magnitude' (how wrong the judgment is) also varies. According to their identifications, the Stoics and Mādhyamikas propose distinct paths to the cessation of suffering and peace of mind.

There are Paths to the Cessation of Suffering

Stoicism asserts that the key erroneous judgement concerns the self's agency. From the perspective of an individual, the world is divided into two parts – the externals and the internals. One controls the internals, while the externals are things the individual does not. The Stoics believe one does not control one's body because it is filled with passion. The mind and soul, *hegemonikon*, is rational, and 'this alone of the faculties we have received is created to comprehend all other faculties as well'. Therefore, the God-given reasoning faculty's purpose is for humans to 'deal rightly with our impressions'.³⁷ When one misjudges whether something is or is not in their control, their personal reason is no longer in line with *Logos*, and thus their equanimity is compromised.

Stoicism develops a practical framework for overcoming suffering by adopting the **dichotomy of control** to liberate oneself from the danger of misjudgments. That being said,

³⁶ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 71.

³⁷ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 12.

scholars must not interpret Stoicism's extirpation of passions as the complete elimination of emotions because 'passions' are only limited to those that are excessive by rational measure.³⁸ What it does instead is that dichotomy of control urges followers to focus solely on what is in one's control – *hegemonikon*. The mind has the power to reason; it forms judgements about things:

These mistaken judgements we must eradicate... For what is weeping and lamenting? A matter of judgement. What is misfortune? Judgement. What is faction, discord, criticism, accusation, irreligion, foolishness? All these are judgements, nothing else, and judgements passed on things beyond the will, as though they were good and evil.³⁹

As Aurelius reminds himself, 'It is in our power to have no opinion about a thing, and not to be disturbed in our soul; for things themselves have no natural power to form our judgements'.⁴⁰ External things do not inherently contain suffering, but one's judgment about them can generate real distress. Personal reason is part of the larger universal law; when followed, one will not commit unnatural actions or be injured by their irrational assents on false impressions.

What is the rational, 'correct' attitude towards external things? The Stoics argue that a virtuous person should be indifferent to them. 'Material things are indifferent, but how we handle them is not indifferent.'⁴¹ One should not actively seek or avoid anything outside their control: 'A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it may be, without wishing for what he has not'.⁴² Consider this EPQ, for example. Once I submit this dissertation, there is nothing I can do to alter the mark I will receive. Therefore, it will not be rational for me to become anxious towards the subject beyond that point. Stoicism suggests that if I receive a

³⁸ David B. Wong, "The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism," *Dao* 5, no. 2 (June 2006): 207–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02868031>.

³⁹ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 176-177.

⁴⁰ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 52.

⁴¹ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 99.

⁴² Lucius Annaeus Seneca and Robin Campbell, *Letters from a Stoic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), Epistle 2.

low grade, I should accept the result without discontent because *Logos* governs everything that happens, and so they happen for a justified reason. I should remove my negative judgment of the event, which will alleviate my suffering due to false impressions: ‘Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace’.⁴³

This chain of reasoning reveals that Stoicism is championing a sense of universal teleology and determinism. Nietzsche praised the Stoics for their accepting attitude towards life. This should not be confused with passive resignation, however. Quite the contrary, the central Stoic idea of ‘*Amor Fati*’ (love of fate) calls for people to embrace *Logos* and everything which happens to them, despite some external events bringing misfortune. The obstacle is the way: ‘It is for you to take what is given to you and make the most of it’.⁴⁴ In practicality, by visualising, and sometimes even voluntarily living out unpleasant scenarios, Stoicism dissolves attachments to things outside one’s control: ‘When you are attached to a thing... you should bear in mind what it is, that you may not be disturbed when it is broken’.⁴⁵ It should also be recognised that Stoicism does not set unrealistic standards for life without any possessions.⁴⁶ A key element of the indifferent attitude is acceptance, which treats equally the acceptance of the good and the bad. For instance, when you offer nice food, you should enjoy it and be thankful for it. You should also use your reasoning to judge when you have had enough; failing to do so will cause you to suffer from feeling too full or, in the long run, potentially bad health. The food itself is of value and will not cause suffering. The active pursuit and the desire to always have it lead to pain. The key is to let the reasoning faculty

⁴³ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 330. (Enchiridion is also known as the “Manual”)

⁴⁴ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 100.

⁴⁵ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 241.

⁴⁶ This is unlike their contemporaries, such as Diogenes of the Cynic school, who proposed that asceticism is preferable because the complete withdrawal from material things prevents any form of indulgence and subsequent suffering.

maintain control, ‘for the two principles we must have ready at command are these: that outside the will there is nothing good or evil, and that we must not lead events but follow them’.⁴⁷

Indifference shelters the self from harm elicited by the inevitable loss of external things. Nothing should be considered ‘his’ or ‘mine’. Humans’ lives are ephemeral, and the things which the soul assents to only connect for a moment, not forever nor inseparably: ‘I do only what lies in my power... for I know that what is born must needs also perish. For I am not immortal, but a man, a part of the Universe as an hour is part of the day. Like the hour I must be here and like an hour pass away’.⁴⁸ Even the most instinctive and universal fear – the fear of death – can be overcome by the dichotomy of control: ‘Is death beyond the will, or can the will control it? Death is beyond the will’s control. Put it out of the way then!’⁴⁹ The detachment from external things, including life itself, requires the recognition of impermanence and change. The ultimate end goal, *Ataraxia*, is achieved through upholding virtue. For the Stoics, ‘virtue [is] the perfection of human rational activity operating in ways consistent with nature’.⁵⁰ A Stoic sage who has obtained *Ataraxia* enjoys serene tranquillity. Because they are so masterful in controlling their assents, external incidents cannot harm them: “What say you, fellow? Chain me? My leg you will chain – yes, but my will – no, not even Zeus can conquer that”.⁵¹

When Stoicism teaches that the self should not attach to things outside its control, it implicitly asserts that a distinct rational agent can exercise will and judgment. Mādhyamikas formed a more radical argument regarding the self – beyond conventional truth, there is no

⁴⁷ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 194.

⁴⁸ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 100.

⁴⁹ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 176.

⁵⁰ Lawrence C Becker, “Stoic Virtue,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E Snow (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2018), 132.

⁵¹ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 13.

such material existence as a ‘self’. Madhyamaka offers a perspective that challenges the very foundation of Stoic agency. If the self is absent, what is there to control?

In *The Questions of King Milinda*, a story illustrates the idea of emptiness. One day, the monk Nāgasena visited King Milinda for a conversation. When asked to introduce himself, Nāgasena replied, ‘Though parents give such names as Nāgasena... this ‘Nāgasena’ is only a designation, a label, a concept, an expression, a mere name because there is no person as such that is found.’ Displeased by this response, Milinda cleverly countered, ‘If, most reverend Nāgasena, there is no person as such... Who guards morality, who meditates, who realises the paths and fruits and attains Nirvana?’ Nāgasena calmly questioned the King, ‘Is the pole the chariot?... Is the axle... the wheels... the body, the yoke... are any of them the chariot?’ After the King had denied the various parts, Nāgasena continued, ‘Is the chariot apart from [these things]?’ When the King said nothing external completes the chariot, Nāgasena replied, ‘I do not see a chariot. Chariot is only a sound.’ After hearing this, the King bowed to the monk in front of the crowd.⁵²

Nāgasena establishes that the chariot is in every part, yet none of the parts defines the chariot. This underscores that the ‘chariot’ is not a single, independent being but a collection of pieces. It does not possess an intrinsic nature. Thus, its existence is empty, depending on its components and arrangements, not on some inherent essence. The same can be said about the ‘self’ and this is the doctrine of *anātman* – the teaching of no-self, or rather, the no-teaching of the self. The Buddha became fully enlightened because he realised that ‘Gautama’ contains no meaning. ‘Self’ is merely a convenient designation. It is empty in the same way as everything else in the world. Like the chariot, it is a construct, an illusion, which only

⁵² N K G Mendis, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Isaline Blew Horner, *The Questions of King Milinda: An Abridgement of the Milindapañha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993), 28–31.

The Questions of King Milinda is an imaginative record of a series of discussions between the Bactrian Greek King Milinda, who reigned in the Punjab, and the Buddhist sage Bhante Nagasena. This work is one of the earliest signs of philosophical exchange between Hellenistic and Buddhist philosophy.

exists because of illusory sensory conceptions. At the core of Madhyamaka is the urging for followers to refrain from ‘hypostatisation’ (*prapañca*), the erroneous judgment of treating mental conceptualisation as independently real. Hypostatisation leads to thirst, which in turn makes one suffer from *duḥkha*.⁵³

Knowing ‘who you are’ and ‘what you are not’ is critical to ceasing suffering from *duḥkha*. Nāgārjuna teaches, ‘liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualisations; those arise from hypostatisation; but hypostatisation is extinguished in emptiness’.⁵⁴ This especially concerns self-grasping. As the Dalai Lama explains, the conceptualisation of ‘I’ is the key factor in developing destructive emotions.⁵⁵ Buddhism asserts that every person has the potential to become awakened, and for Mādhyamikas, self-grasping, or *ātmagrāha*⁵⁶, is a veil which blinds one from finding their inner Buddhahood. One powerful argument made by the Mādhyamikas is ‘non-self based on impermanence (*anitya*)’:

P1 – If there were a self, it would be permanent,

P2 – None of the five kinds of aggregates (*skandhas*) is permanent;⁵⁷

C – There is no self.

The five *skandhas*, which translate to aggregates or psychological elements, are what Madhyamaka identifies as the basis for self-grasping. They are forms, feeling (sensation),

⁵³ Paul B. Donnelly, “Madhyamaka,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, January 25, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.191>.

⁵⁴ Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, *Nagarjuna’s Middle Way: Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2014), 197.

⁵⁵ Dalai Lama, “Intro to Buddhism (Dependent Origination, Madhyamaka View of Emptiness) Part 2/2,” YouTube, June 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2Usw4P13U>.

⁵⁶ Literally “grasping” (*grāha*) to *atman*, where *atman* is a permanently existing self.

⁵⁷ This argument makes the underlying assumption that the five aggregates are all there is to a perceived self.

perception, formations, and consciousness.⁵⁸ These five aggregates sum up the whole of one's mental and physical existence. They are only present due to the lack of true knowledge of *śūnyatā*. The Buddha taught that 'ignorance concerning the three characteristics of sentient existence – suffering, impermanence, and non-self – will lead, in the course of normal interactions with the environment, to appropriation'.⁵⁹ Appropriation is comparable to the concept of 'ego'. It is the belief that there is a self; further, things belong to the self. This is the key erroneous judgment for Madhyamaka. The 'consciousness' aggregate, which refers to the awareness of the physical five senses and mental objects such as thoughts, ideas and emotions, is significantly involved in self-grasping. Attachments are formed as desire or aversion when one believes there is such a thing as 'mine'. This would strengthen the erroneous judgment because any clinging will be based on an egotistic assumption. The real danger of *ātma-grāha* is that if the sensory conceptions fool one, consciousness cannot distinguish between conventional and ultimate truth, between the appearance of an independent self and the reality of interdependent origination and emptiness.⁶⁰ Therefore, one would be trapped in an unending cycle of future instances of old age, sickness, and death.⁶¹ In Indian thought, the phenomenon of *samsāra* was known as the karmic cycle. It describes a state of mundane existence and aimless wandering.⁶²

The last of the Four Noble Truths states that 'there is a path to the cessation of suffering'. In his enlightenment, the Buddha constructed a systematic roadmap to fulfil this goal. It is the

⁵⁸ Rigpa, "Five Skandhas - Rigpa Wiki," September 14, 2023, https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Five_skandhas#Feelings/Sensations.

⁵⁹ Siderits, "Buddha (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)."

⁶⁰ Benetaton, "Early Stoic and Buddhist Philosophies of Life."

⁶¹ Siderits, "Buddha (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)."

⁶² Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof, *Encyclopedia of Global Religion* (Thousand Oaks, Calif Sage Reference, 2011), 271–72, quoted in Wikipedia, "Samsāra," (Wikimedia Foundation, February 17, 2025), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%83%C4%81ra#CITEREFMark_JuergensmeyerWade_Clark_Roof2011.

‘Noble Eightfold Path’ (*Astangika-marga*)⁶³.

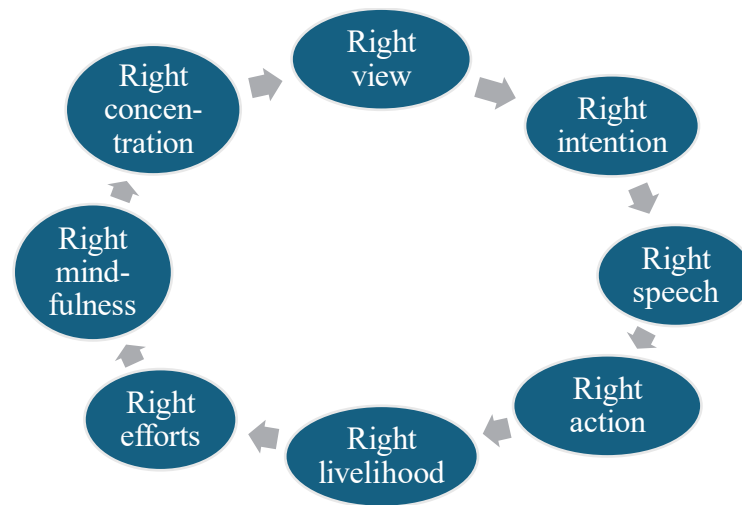


Fig.2 The Noble Eightfold Path

When one completes this cycle, they will reach the pinnacle of their personal life, *Nirvana*. Typically, Mādhyamikas hold the teachings of Buddha as dogmas to be followed. On this topic, however, Madhyamaka’s emphasis on the importance of the first of the eightfold path is unusually strong. “Right view” is the clear distinction between appearance and reality, conventional and ultimate truth, and the coming to know of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*. My interpretation of the Mādhyamikas’ attitude on this matter is that they think the Buddha perhaps overlooked the nuanced difference between the causal link of the eight folds and the identity of importance of each stage. Madhyamaka argues that the realisation of *śūnyatā* and *anātman* is necessary and sufficient to break free from *samsāra* and eliminate *duhkha*.⁶⁴ This implies that one does not necessarily have to follow all the steps before getting to *Nirvana* if they thoroughly examine things using the right view. Conversely, it is also possible that one might not reach *Nirvana* despite following all the steps, for their understanding of the

⁶³ Like the “Four Noble Truths” (*Chatvari-arya-satyani*), it is not the path or the truth itself that is noble. Rather, noble are they whom have come to understand and follow the truths and the path.

⁶⁴ These refer to logical conditions: where p and q are statements, p is a necessary condition for q if q cannot be true unless p is true; where p and q are statements, p is a sufficient condition for q if p’s truth guarantees the truth of q (Christopher Bobonich, “Basic Terms and Concepts,” web.stanford.edu, n.d., <https://web.stanford.edu/~bobonich/terms.concepts/conditions.html>).

universe's nature (or non-nature) is not definitive. Holding the right view means a fundamental change in how a person perceives the world. The epiphany's immediate impact is the apprehension that the concept 'I' is just an illusion created by the semblance of the five skandhas; 'I' is caused by many things and thus does not have a concrete root. It is only for convenience that people use the term 'I'; it is not the truth because it has no meaning.⁶⁵ The realisation follows: 'If there is no 'me' in the first place, how could there be anything that belongs to me?' When one's intellectual faculty negates belonging, 'clinging to 'me' and 'mine' ceases.'⁶⁶ This is the profound realisation of *śūnyatā*. As the false conception of an independent self has been eliminated, 'all wrong views disappear'. Finally, since the blinding veil has been removed, one sees the truth and follows it by stopping thinking about 'me' or 'mine' altogether. When this state of selflessness is achieved, 'birth in the cycle of existence stops. When karmic actions and mental afflictions cease, that is liberation'.⁶⁷ The end of *samsāra* defines *Nirvana* – 'between them not even a subtle something is evident'.⁶⁸

The cessation of suffering from *duḥkha* through understanding *śūnyatā* is beautifully explained in the Heart Sūtra:

Form is only emptiness, emptiness only form... So, in emptiness, no form, no feeling, thought, or choice, nor is there consciousness... Nor is there pain, or cause of pain... So know that the Bodhisattva... is freed of delusive hindrance... and reaches clearest Nirvana.⁶⁹

A mistake some scholars make (for example, in Shcherbatskoy and Williams' early works)

⁶⁵ By 'no meaning', it is meant that 'I' does not have an intrinsic nature and thus is empty.

⁶⁶ Gyamtso and Nagarjuna, *The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 188-189. (This is in Appendix 1, which records the root verses from *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*.)

⁶⁷ Gyamtso and Nagarjuna, *The Sun of Wisdom: Teachings on the Noble Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 189.

⁶⁸ Nāgārjuna, *The Philosophy of the Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. David J Kalupahana (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986), 367.

The identity theories of both Sarva-stivāda and Sāṅkhya school posited such subtle entities to explain continuity. Nagarjuna's present statement should be understood in the background of the ideas expressed by these school.

⁶⁹ In Buddhism, sutra is a form of canonical scriptures. Some of them are recorded versions of Gautama's teachings. They are often chanted by monks, and thus, many include repetition of lines.

is treating Madhyamaka as a nihilistic school. Even Nietzsche got this wrong. In the *Genealogy of Morality*, he commented, ‘... yearning for nothingness, *Nirvana*’.⁷⁰ The interpretation of *Nirvana* as ‘nothingness’ instead of ‘emptiness’ commits a fallacy. Those who arrive at this judgement do not fully comprehend the emptiness of *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is very much like the mathematical concept of zero. Zero is not nothing; emptiness is a description of a state – the abandonment of all views.⁷¹ Despite the ultimate truth stating that ‘there is no ultimate truth’, one should not be content with living by conventional truths. Madhyamaka avoids the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Both stances contain the conventional presupposition that there is an ontologically distinct ‘I’, no matter whether it is to exist forever or if it is to be destroyed at death. The ingenuity of adopting the ‘middle way’ is that all experiences in life are described as a chain of temporary causal relations of the five aggregates. Such a basis recognises that emptiness, impermanence, and non-self are universal patterns. Therefore, it is not that the things that make up ‘I’ do not exist. Instead, collectively considering them as ‘I’ is essentially drawing non-existent connections. Just like King Milinda tried to define his chariot, self-grasping is a meaningless cause. Since clinging onto the idea of an ‘I’ is not justified, the question of the ultimate fate of this ‘I’, the supposed owner of these aggregates, simply does not arise.⁷²

Conclusion

The fascinating gain from conducting this comparative study is that while both Stoicism and Madhyamaka saw the cessation of suffering as their end goal, their paths diverge. I

⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: “on the Genealogy of Morality” and Other Writings Student Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷¹ Peter Della Santina, “THE MADHYAMAKA PHILOSOPHY on JSTOR,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* Vol.15, no. 2 (June 1987): 173–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/23445443>.

⁷² Siderits, “Buddha (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).”

believe the division is predominantly caused by the different ontological understandings of the world and humans' place in it. The Stoics and Mādhyamikas echo each other in stating that the attachment to things elicits suffering when those transient things inevitably disappear in the Universe. At a more fundamental level, however, it is all about **judgement**. Stoicism argues that people suffer due to erroneous judgements of what belongs to the external and what to the internal (what one can control and what cannot be controlled). Madhyamaka puts forward a more radical argument, asserting that the self is empty, and the perception of the existence of an independent 'I' is false. From these two bases, the schools strive towards a homogenous end goal – the cessation of suffering. Stoicism proposes that the way to *Ataraxia* is to let rationality govern our actions. This way, assents to impressions are well-considered so they will not produce vice, and as personal reason aligns with cosmic *Logos*, one obtains equanimity. Madhyamaka modified the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Paths and argues that the key to *Nirvana* lies in intellectual comprehension and ethical practice in accordance with universal emptiness and emptiness of the self. Once the elusive veil of conventional truth is removed, there is liberation from *samsāra* and peace of mind.

Both the Stoics and Mādhyamikas have triumphed against suffering. Stoicism overcomes pain through self-mastery, while Madhyamaka eliminates suffering by dissolving the self. Madhyamaka's approach is based on intellectual realisation and hence is more radical. Ultimately, they are lived philosophies, and one can decide for themselves which is more applicable after truly practising Stoicism and Madhyamaka. Just remember that 'the door is open', open for them are the doors to the Natural and the Deathless.⁷³ Every individual can

⁷³ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus and the Enchiridion*, 68.

Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha : A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (New York: Wisdom Publications, 2005),

<https://suttacentral.net/mn26/en/bodhi?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false>. The second half of this line is an adaptation from Majjhima Nikaya 26.

"Deathless" is part of the original sutra, signifying *Nirvana*. "Natural" is my own addition which aims to signifying the Stoic doctrine of living in accordance with nature and its ways.

reach *Ataraxia* or *Nirvana* and find their very own peace of mind – do so.

‘The Universe is change: life is judgment.’⁷⁴



⁷⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Martin Hammond (London: Penguin Classics, an Imprint of Penguin Books, 2014), 35. As well as being an expert in Classics and an excellent translator of ancient texts, Martin Hammond served as Headmaster of Tonbridge School.

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