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Reply to Robert Morrison

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Notes

- 1 – See *Dīgha Nikāya* I.54.
- 2 – *Āṅguttara Nikāya* I.286.
- 3 – *Majjhima Nikāya* III.140, incorrectly entered as III.126 in Mistry.
- 4 – For an example of the later, see Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, chap. 5.
- 5 – Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (London: Rider, 1962), p. 46.
- 6 – *Āṅguttara Nikāya* II.146: “*taṇham nissāya taṇham pajahati.*”
- 7 – Actually, I.5.
- 8 – Rahula makes no mention of “joy.”
- 9 – Aḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta?
- 10 – See Morrison, pp. 187–196.
- 11 – Actually, *Samyutta Nikāya* II.238.
- 12 – See David Loy's review in *Asian Philosophy* 8 (2) (1998): 129–131.
- 13 – *Daybreak* 560. For my account of this, see Morrison, pp. 163–171.
- 14 – For example, see Wayne Alt, “There Is No Paradox of Desire in Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 30 (4) (October 1980): 521–530, and A. L. Herman, “A Solution to the Paradox of Desire in Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 29 (1) (January 1979): pp. 91–94.
- 15 – *Twilight of the Idols* IX.49–51.
- 16 – *Dhammapada* I.1–2.
- 17 – *Majjhima Nikāya* I.
- 18 – John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of His Metaethics and Epistemology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), pp. 172–179.
- 19 – See *Āṅguttara Nikāya* IV.69.
- 20 – Nāṇananda, *Concept and Reality* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 4.

Reply to Robert Morrison

Graham Parkes

I am delighted that my criticisms of your *Nietzsche and Buddhism* should have stimulated you to offer some criticisms of Freny Mistry's *Nietzsche and Buddhism*. I

am most grateful (as I trust other readers of the journal will be) for your having finally undertaken a critical engagement with Mistry's work and showing that it's not as reliable an interpretation of early Buddhism as I had thought. I should have been more critical of her book, and could have been less critical of yours, if you had included a discussion of Mistry's work from the beginning. But I'm afraid that I'm still in the dark concerning your rationale for eschewing such a discussion, and have apparently failed to make sufficiently clear my point concerning canons of scholarship in this area. I think it's worthwhile trying to clarify this issue before going any further.

You explain that you faced two choices: either dedicate the first fifty or so pages of your work to "the tedious task of showing the deficiencies in Mistry's work," or "simply put it to one side" and start afresh with your own work in the area. In consultation with your supervisor, you opted for the latter. That's the source of the problem right there: ill advised, you opted for a course that flouts the principles of scholarship currently prevailing in the Anglophone academic world. You say you aren't interested in "playing academic games"—I didn't for a moment suppose you would be. But by writing a dissertation on the topic of Nietzsche and Buddhism, and going on to have it published by OUP, you are choosing to participate in the practice of scholarship, where certain canons operate.

Look: either you don't read the original *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, in which case you really do "start afresh with your own research in the area"—but fail to meet the expectations of scholarship in the field, and do your readers an obvious disservice in the bargain. Or else you do read it, in which case you are obliged to acknowledge the contribution it has made. To mention the earlier work in only five cursory footnotes misleads the reader into thinking that all the other points and comparisons you make are original. Optimally you will offer a discussion that articulates the good and bad points of the previous scholarship. That you have now accomplished the critical phase of this task in just a few pages of this journal suggests that it needn't have taken anywhere near fifty pages of your dissertation or book.

If you had acknowledged Mistry's prior treatment of most of the topics in your first ten chapters, you could have made that part of your book much shorter, and left yourself more time and space to develop the themes that are original. It's an insult to the informed reader's intelligence to discuss topic after topic that has been addressed by previous scholarship and not acknowledge that fact. And if you insult your reader's intelligence in this way, you can expect rougher than kid-glove treatment of your writing in return.

On the issue of your prose style: usually if an author doesn't take the trouble to make his or her writing clear, I don't take the trouble to read it. Life is too short to spend time disentangling prose that wasn't well formed by the person writing it. But, as I explained, several factors necessitated my persevering. Yes, it's humbling for us all to see our own prose next to Nietzsche's—but let's have that experience stimulate us to write better. Please do not believe those who praise your prose style. In spite of the prevalence of postmodern discourse, coherent grammar remains a necessary condition of what your kinder commentators call clear and admirable style. I

won't embarrass by quoting further examples of sentences that are syntactically challenged, but would recommend instead that you inspect your writing with a critical eye and see how often you have to ask something like: "Is the lack of a main verb here a brilliant literary flourish, or a liability and obstruction to the communication of my ideas?"

Your ill humor at my criticisms is quite understandable, but I'm disappointed that you declined to take your response beyond the level of *tu quoque* finger-pointing. You are often too busy admonishing me to "read more carefully" to bother reading carefully what I wrote—but a detailed rebuttal would be as tiresome for you and other readers to read as for me to make. Instead let me confine myself to making a few points that might help us all better appreciate the potential benefits from comparing Nietzsche and Buddhism.

But first a quick response to one of your more tendentious contentions, since it points up the major difference between our understandings of Buddhism. You say that I "turn general Buddhist doctrine on its head" by suggesting that Nietzsche's emphasis on the body is consistent with Buddhist practice, and then proceed to deliver a lesson in what you call "elementary Buddhism." I obviously should have specified that I was thinking of Mahāyāna rather than elementary Buddhism (though the mention of Mahāyāna in the parenthesis at the end of the paragraph surely suggests that). If the elementary Buddhism you are advocating understands the locus of practice to be *citta*, or "mind," and only incidentally the body, then its position is indeed far from Nietzsche's. But then that isn't really "general" Buddhist doctrine anyway, but rather a teaching of early Buddhism in particular. What brings Mahāyāna Buddhism closer to Nietzsche is its this-worldly concern with "attaining enlightenment in this very body." (This is why I remarked that *Nietzsche and Early Buddhism* would have been a more appropriate title for your book.)

When you say that for Buddhism "conceptual thinking [in itself] is not a problem," we are actually in agreement. When the Zen master balances his checkbook, or the abbot goes over the temple's accounts, he naturally employs the appropriate mode of calculative thinking. When I referred to "the Buddhists' ... efforts to circumvent or undercut conceptual thinking," I meant that they regard the ubiquitous employment of conceptual thinking as a barrier to "seeing and knowing things as they really are"—just as Nietzsche does. I am glad for the opportunity to clarify this point. But now to the prime source of my disappointment.

You mention the possibility of "a dialogue" with me, but you don't seem very interested in fulfilling a necessary condition of dialogue, which is to try to understand what the other person is saying and then respond to it. Suppose the situation were reversed: I have written a book on Buddhism and Nietzsche, you as a Buddhist scholar criticize my interpretation of Buddhism and refer to writings of yours that purport to offer a better reading, and I have three months within which to prepare a response. One of the first things I'd do would be to take a look at those writings in order to evaluate that supposedly better interpretation. In this way I could acquaint myself with the grounds for your criticism and perhaps thereby enhance my understanding of the topic. But you decline to do anything of the sort.

Although you claim to be “interested to see” what I have to say on the subject of Nietzsche’s understanding of the drives, sublimation, and so forth, the interest isn’t strong enough to motivate you to actually do any reading. You simply wonder whether you would find that you’d missed something important, or confirm your suspicion that I am merely one of those authors that “read much into Nietzsche that is simply not there.” But why, I wonder, didn’t you take the trouble to resolve this question by consulting the sources I cite (none of them hard to find in university libraries), rather than cavalierly dismissing my arguments as ridiculous without even looking at them? There’s no hope of dialogue if all one does is reiterate “I’m right and he’s wrong.”

We seem to agree that a key issue in any comparison of Nietzsche and Buddhism is the former’s understanding of the drives and their possible configurations. It would have been of more benefit to readers of the journal if, instead of lecturing me on this topic, you had first read at least some of the hundred-and-fifty pages I devote to it in my book. I wonder in this context where you get the idea that, for Nietzsche, “one can bring into being *new drives*” and that the higher type is distinguished by this ability. In all the discussions I’ve seen Nietzsche devote to the topic of the drives, I’ve never come across the idea that new ones can be brought into being. It’s not clear what that could even mean, for the drives are “given” with the body. You cite *Dawn of Morning* 110 in support of your contention, but you’ve been misled by the translation. Nietzsche is talking not of a new drive, or instinct, or affect—but of a new “demand” (*Verlangen*—which does also connote desire). He gives as examples of what might oppose this demand not other drives, but “things and considerations of a baser kind, as well as people that are low in our estimation.” One can always, of course, become *newly aware* of a drive, since most of their workings go on unconsciously, and the higher types are indeed praised by Nietzsche for being conduits for, and for cultivating, a broader range of drives than most of us are ever aware of.

A related point that is failing to get across concerns Nietzsche’s account of self-overcoming. We agree that the first step is a “preschooling in spirituality [*Geistigkeit*],” which consists of “gaining control over the restraining instincts” (*Twilight of the Idols* 8.6). I complain that instead of paying attention to what Nietzsche goes on to say about *Geist* in the next section of *Twilight of the Idols*, you offer “an attempted model” in Hegelian terms, which is unhelpful. I point out that in the ninth section Nietzsche writes that one “loses spirit”—and *Geist* is “the great self-mastery”—“when one no longer needs it” (*Twilight* 9.14). You claim to have read the whole section again, but to be “still looking.” But that’s it right there: the second step is to “lose *Geist*,” to give up the task of self-mastery, at the point where you no longer need it—to “give back to the drives their freedom” so that they will now “go where our best inclines” (KSA 12 : 1[122]—WP 384). There’s no point in quibbling over the niceties of Goethe as an exemplar: when Nietzsche writes of him that “he disciplined himself into wholeness” and exemplified “a strong, highly cultured human being . . . self-controlled . . . who dares to grant himself the full range and richness of naturalness,” that exemplifies what is involved in taking the second step.

My problem is not with your “daring to offer some criticisms of Nietzsche’s

account of self-overcoming”: Nietzsche himself encourages the reader to adopt an ironic and critical distance—but only after the reader has read carefully. My problem is that you continue to dismiss Nietzsche’s ideas as an “experiment [that was] in its infancy and therefore incomplete,” when in fact he worked on the issue of self-overcoming for many years and said a great deal about how it works. That’s another reason why I referred you to the treatment in my book, which cites dozens of passages on the topic from almost all the major works—in the light of which you would no longer want to say that “practically all” the relevant material can be found “in a few extended dicta in *Daybreak* and one in *Twilight of the Idols*” (p. 163).

Near the end of my review article I suggest that where you assert a contrast between Nietzsche’s undertaking of “learning to see” and the Buddhist aim of “seeing and knowing things as they really are,” there is in fact an interesting area of affinity. You say you aren’t so sure, and explain that the source is “a state wherein the mind . . . is calm, alert, profoundly concentrated, and ‘empowered.’” But this is a fair characterization of Zarathustra in the “Before Sunrise” and “At Noon” chapters in *Zarathustra*. If you read these passages differently, then you should tell us how.

You “do not think the Buddhist ‘seeing and knowing’ is ‘accessible by following the important thrust in Nietzsche’s thinking away from the anthropocentric standpoint.’ . . . Nietzsche makes it unambiguously clear that there is no such [non-anthropocentric] standpoint.” Having claimed that not only is there such a standpoint for Nietzsche but he also advocates our adopting it, and having cited the places where I argue this at greater length, I am at a loss as to how to respond to your blunt denials. You begin your response by saying that I display disdain for your work; but the fact that I read your book with care, and spent a great deal of time writing about what I perceive to be its shortcomings, suggests that disdain is not the issue here. And when you don’t deign to read some of the relevant things that I’ve written, in order to engage the arguments, the disdain would seem to be on the other side.

You confine yourself, in support of your refusal of my reading, to citing four passages from Nietzsche’s works, beginning with an excerpt from an unpublished text from 1873 saying that the human being represents the world to himself anthropomorphically. The beginning of another unpublished text from 1873, “On Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense,” similarly derides the human tendency (common to all beings) to believe ourselves the center of the world. Of course these passages show that Nietzsche thinks anthropocentrism is rampant—but that doesn’t mean he thinks it’s a good thing and that we shouldn’t strive to overcome it. This is the thrust of Zarathustra’s very first words on the *Übermensch*: “The human being is something that is to be overcome.” Part of what this means is that the anthropocentric perspective is something that is to be overcome—as evidenced by his association of the overman with three of the elements: the overman is “the sense of the earth”; “Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this ocean”; and “He is this lightning” (Prologue, § 3).

You say you can’t agree with my interpretation of *The Joyous Science* 349, and suggest that Nietzsche is chastising only Darwin for his anthropocentrism. Darwin is

indeed the example, but Nietzsche's subsequent exhortation for the researcher into nature to come out of his human corner is intended quite generally—as evidenced by the end of the aphorism, which invokes the idea of the whole of nature as “will to power” (significantly the only mention of will to power in the book). This connects it with *Beyond Good and Evil* 36, which I'll talk about in just a moment. This anti-anthropocentric attitude persists to the end: in aphorism 15 of *The Antichrist(ian)* Nietzsche still deplures our “imaginary science of nature” as “anthropocentric.” And the aphorism just before denies that we humans are in any sense “the crown of creation” by claiming that, alongside us, “every being is at a similar stage of perfection.”

You take *Beyond Good and Evil* 36 to be saying that “we can never step out of our conditioned phenomenality so as to gain a non-anthropomorphic perspective.” A hint that this is *not* how to take it comes from the aphorism immediately preceding, where Nietzsche warns: “if the human being pursues [the search for truth] in too human a way [*zu menschlich*] . . . I bet the result will be nothing!” What follows is precisely a suggestion that our attempts to understand the world will meet with more success if we make our approach less anthropomorphic. Aphorism 36 is the *locus classicus* for one of Nietzsche's most radical ideas: that the whole world (not just humans, or even life) is to be understood as will to power. This idea, together with the supposition that “all existence is essentially interpreting existence” (*The Joyous Science* 374), gives us a picture of the cosmos as a force-field of interpretive drives. This understanding, which is consonant with a number of Daoist and (Mahāyāna) Buddhist ideas, is eminently conducive to reducing anthropocentrism.

I realize that this goes beyond the standard reading of Nietzsche, which sees him as staying firmly rooted in a perspectivism. But this is precisely where the comparison with Buddhism illuminates themes in his writings that most commentators overlook. If you think this interpretation of mine invalid, you owe it to the reader to do more than “just say no.”

I'm sorry that our relationship has got off to such an inauspicious start, which seems to be impeding a genuine dialogue. If at some point such a dialogue should get underway, I believe that we both stand to learn from it.