



STOIC AND BUDDHIST WISDOM

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Stripped of cultural and metaphysical differences and boiled down to bare essentials, Stoicism and Buddhism can seem strikingly similar. While those important differences should not be denied, it can be useful to focus on the common perspectives, which we can borrow whether or not we agree with the wider philosophies. In this article I will highlight the main points that both schools want us to truly get and put into action.

The starting point

For both, the starting point is the reality of the human condition. The Buddha is clear on this. Human life inevitably entails experiencing dukkha (suffering, or unsatisfactoriness): birth is dukkha; ageing is dukkha; illness is dukkha; death is dukkha; getting what we don't want is dukkha; not getting, or losing, what we want is dukkha.

While the Stoics did not have a specific word to capture this pervasive feature of life, their writings are full of references to the impermanence and instability of worldly things, as well as the madness of spending our life chasing them. They advocated regarding external goods - which is anything other than virtue - as neither good nor bad, but indifferent.

But human beings are deluded and fail to grasp this: we lust after and blindly follow our urges to get certain things that we see as desirable and important - wealth, popularity, power. At the same time we are desperate to get away

from what we don't want — illness, poverty, isolation. We are constantly chasing pleasure and running away from pain.

The fundamental mistake

The fundamental mistake is to think of those things as good or bad. In Buddhism these are referred to as the eight worldly conditions: gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Compare this with Diogenes Laertius' list of Stoic indifferents: 'life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, fair fame, and noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, ignominy, low birth, and the like.' (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, book VII)

Freeing ourselves

Both Buddhism and Stoicism encourage us to free ourselves and rebel against these unreflective values. The spiritual/philosophical task is to cut through the fog of our delusions and stop being pulled around by impulses based on mistaken beliefs. Both schools sometimes described this process in terms of a medical metaphor. What is the disease? The false views leading us to become attached to things that are not truly of value.

In practice, this primarily requires us to develop a greater sensitivity to the way things seem to us. In Stoicism it is a matter of withdrawing assent from our impressions - initial involuntary

judgments about how things are. In Buddhism it's about developing mindfulness of 'feelings' — the immediate reactions suggesting to us that something is good or bad (or neutral), and we should avoid or pursue it. We are normally unaware of these until they are already guiding our actions and leading us astray. Learning to catch and question these will help us to have more reasoned responses to things.

We don't do this to feel good, but because it reflects a deeper understanding of reality. In the process, however, we are likely to develop more tranquillity and equanimity, which most of us could do with.

Going against our inclinations

All this is difficult. We have to go against deeply engrained human inclinations and impulses, therefore effort is required. Buddhism relies on a whole complex system of meditation. The Stoics focus more on reasoning, memorising texts, repetition. For both, however, it is crucial to establish some kind of daily practice that can remind us to constantly challenge our faulty understanding of ourselves and the world. This is how we start moving towards wisdom.

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