THE SCHOPENHAUER CURE AND THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SCHOPENHAUER & BUDDHA PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN LIBERATION

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Throughout history, human freedom or liberation has been a poignant philosophical discourse. There have been many religious leaders, psychologists, and philosophical thinkers who expounded theories and taught about it. Buddha and Schopenhauer are two such people.

According to Schopenhauer and Buddha, all human beings, whatever their race or country, are subject to suffering (dukkha), i.e., they suffer from disease, decay, death and anguish in various forms. Because this is such a universal malady common to all humanity, both the Buddha and Schopenhauer advocated a remedy that can be obtained by all mankind without any distinction.

Some scholars have taken Schopenhauer for his word when he claimed that his philosophy was fundamentally the same as Buddhism. In this research study, comparison will be drawn between the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and some of the Key Themes in Schopenhauer’s Centre of Philosophy.

The Vinaya Piṭaka (Vinaya, Vol. I. 10 ff) Sutta Piṭaka (Saṅyutta Nikāya, Vol. V. 420 ff; Saṅyukta Āgama. 379 ff, Taishō Tripitaka, Vol. 2, No. 99) will be utilized as a primary source for the Buddhist aspect of the concept. Other sources will also be thoroughly examined. With regard to the Schopenhauer aspect the following of his six books will be used as primary sources: “On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason; The World as Will and Representation; Parerga and Paralipomena; The Two Fundamental
Problems of Ethics and Early Manuscripts. Books written by other authors on Schopenhauer’s philosophy will also be discussed.

Definition of Liberation

Before discussing early Buddhist and Schopenhauer’s ideas on liberation or freedom, let us determine precisely what is meant by these terms. The definition of liberation varies in different societies and in different times. And it has changed from time to time according to their needs and goals. However, it has common factors that are beyond space and time. *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006) meanings of the term “liberation” state that liberation (noun) means “to be freed or change from not having freedom to having freedom.” A major use of the word is the act of the (forcible) removal of unwanted control of an area, person or people by an outside (sometimes military) force. Some have used the term to refer to the removal of sexual inhibitions.

These criteria can now be applied to conditions described in our Buddhist materials to determine the extent to which they conform to the criteria above. According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of liberation (*Pāli*: mutti, vimutti, mokkha). One is mundane liberation (*lokiya-vimutti*), that refers to the worldly aspect of liberation, which is freedom from unwanted things. The second, supra-mundane liberation (*lokuttara-vimutti*) is used to describe the complete removal of the kilesas or āsavas.

In other words, the practice of the Buddhist path evolves in two distinct stages, a mundane (*lokiya*) or preparatory stage and a supramundane (*lokuttara*) or consummate stage. The mundane path is developed when the disciple undertakes the gradual training in virtue, concentration, and wisdom. This reaches its peak in the practice of

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1 Paṭisambhidāmagga. II. 143. Majjhima Nikāya (Samantap1s1dik1). IV. 168.
3 Aṅguttara Nikāya. I. 152; Dhammasaṅgaṇī. 193.
4 Ibid.
5 Āsava: literally meaning influxes, but common translations are cankers, taints, corruptions, intoxicants and biases. There are four kinds of Āsava, Kāmasava (sense-desire), bhavāsava (desiring of existence), diṭṭhāsava (wrong-views) and avijjāsava (ignorance). Vibhaṅga. 373.
insight meditation, which deepens direct experience of the three characteristics of existence. When the practitioner’s faculties have arrived at an adequate degree of maturity, the mundane path gives birth to the supramundane path, so called because it leads directly and infallibly out of (lokuttara) the world (loka) comprising the three realms of existence to the attainment of “the deathless element,” Nibbāna.

Regarding mundane liberation, mention has been made in numerous Buddhist sources, such as Ambaṭṭha Sutta, Soṇadanḍa Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya; Madhurā Sutta, Kaṇṇakattha Sutta, Assalāyana Sutta, Esukāri Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, and Vāseṭṭha, Vasala Sutta of Sutta-nipāta. These suttas mention discussions of traditional Indian society on the well-known four castes priest (brāhmaṇa), warrior (khattiya), merchant (vessa), and slave (sudda). The claim of the Brāhmanic caste as being the highest among them was challenged by the Khattiyas, as their power increased as rulers of society, taking the vanguard in the fight against this Brāhmanic attitude.

The Buddha’s main argument against caste was that no man could be superior or inferior in society merely by reason of his birth. He clearly pointed out that the position of man in society depended on his conduct. This meant that it was a person’s attitude and behaviour (kamma) which made a man superior or inferior. The Buddha’s approach was thus based on knowledge and ethics. The outward behaviour of a person who is morally superior, is a result of his inward knowledge and it is that kind of person that the Buddha described as being endowed with true knowledge and practice (vijjācaraṇa) and it is he who is the best both among men and gods.

It is, moreover, pointed out by Buddha that any prejudice of caste is an obstacle in the way of salvation. It is clearly regarded as a bondage. Buddha addressing Ambattha says: “Whatsoever, Ambattha, is bound by caste-prejudice… is far removed from the way of the highest salvation. By casting aside the bound of caste-prejudice,

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Ambattha, the highest salvation is realised.” This theory is directly related to mundane liberation.

Another example of mundane liberation, can be seen in Dīgha Nikāya. It is the rejection of rituals of animal sacrifices as practised during the time of the Buddha, in Indian society. Rituals are a societal convention and can be perceived as chains to liberation.

Yet another Sutta, dealing with mundane liberation known to Buddhism is the doctrine of Vinaya. The Buddha set the rule for anyone joining his Order, to obtain prior permission from those concerned, whether it be parents, masters, creditors, or from the King’s service, thus setting them free from their worldly responsibilities.

Women were another group of people who suffered under the male dominated by Brāhmaṇ society. It was believed that women are both morally and intellectually low and they cannot reach high intellectual or moral standards attained by men. Therefore they were confined very much to domestic activity. According to a Brahman saying women never deserve to be independent; as children they must be kept under parents, as young-women must be kept under husband, and old-women they must be kept under their sons. Brahman’s very specifically say that in order for women to be born in heaven, they do not need any specific religious rite or ritual other than treating their husband well. Due to the influence of this belief, women under Brahman society were very much kept away from the moral and intellectual domain.

The Buddha again does not think that there is a difference between men and women in so far as their intellectual ability is concerned. Indian society believes that a woman’s wisdom is only two inches long (davangula- paññāya).

When someone asked a nun (bhikkhunī) “How can women attain high spiritual states usually attained by men?” The nun replied:

9 Dīgha Nikāya. I. 99-100.
10 Na kho ahaṃ brāhmaṇa sabbā yaññāṃ vānāṃ na pañāhaṃ brāhmaṇa sabbāṃ yaññāṃ na vānāṃ. Aṅguttara Nikāya. II. 42.
11 Kuṭadanta Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya. 5.
12 Mahāvagga, I. 41-61.
“Itthībhāvo no kiṁ kayira cittamhi susamāhite ūnamhi vattamanamhi samma dhammam vipasato.”¹⁴

What harm can our womanhood do when our minds are well concentrated and when we have wisdom to see things as they really are.”

This statement exemplifies the Buddhist attitude towards women. Therīgāthā is a good example for the kind of spiritual attainment women realize within Buddhism.

In India, there is no ritual or ceremonial need for a son and the birth of a daughter need not be a cause for grief. It is well known that the Buddha consoled king Pasenadi who came to him grieving that his queen, Mallikā, had given birth to a daughter. “A female offspring, O king, may prove even nobler than a male…” a revolutionary statement for his time.¹⁵

In the examples above, the Buddha had proposed two means of liberation: mundane liberation (lokiya-vimutti) and supra-mundane liberation (lokuttara-vimutti) with an emphasis on the latter.

Now if we are to look at Schopenhauer’s definition of liberation, he rightly pointed out, “liberation or freedom can be understood as (1) physical freedom, (2) intellectual freedom, and (3) moral freedom. Schopenhauer sets intellectual freedom aside, to be dealt with subsequently. He only concentrates on physical freedom and moral freedom.

Physical freedom is described by Schopenhauer as the absence of material obstacles. In Schopenhauer’s words: “[...] in this physical meaning of the concept of freedom, animals and men are called free when their actions are not hindered by any physical or material obstacles- such as fetters, or prison, or paralysis- but proceed in accordance with their will”¹⁶ This concept, physical freedom, is well-understood and philosophically unproblematic.

¹⁴ Saṃyutta Nikāya. I. 129. See also Therīgāthā.
It is important to note, for the purpose of our discussion on this subject that Schopenhauer, although he has often spoken of intellectual freedom, yet does not clearly describe what it means. As far as we understand, it is quite similar to moral freedom. So for our presentation we will be unable to aptly account for his description of intellectual freedom.

Schopenhauer however, does offer an account of Moral freedom. With regard to moral freedom, “restraint” is not a physical obstacle, but is being caused by “mere motives such as threats, promises, dangers, and the like”\(^{17}\)

Schopenhauer’s conception of moral freedom is hard to grasp. So in order to figure out what he is getting at we have adapted, from a variety of his discussions, an illustrative example to demonstrate his conception of what moral freedom is.

Let us take, for example, a Jewellery store clerk who is a good law-abiding citizen who becomes the victim of a threat by a violent crook. Let us suppose that this crook were to threaten to harm the Jewellery store clerk and her family if she did not arrange to bring him a large amount of valuable jewels from the store’s vault. The Jewellery store clerk, because of her fear of harm to herself and her family under the crook’s threat, “steals” the jewels from the vault.

This example not only illustrates what Schopenhauer means by moral freedom, but it also points directly at one of the core issues of free will.

Schopenhauer would suggest that our Jewellery store clerk was not having her freedom to act as she was being hindered by an obstacle. He suggests that “a motive [such as a threat] can never act in the same way as a physical obstacle”\(^{18}\) and that “while a motive can never be irresistible in itself and has no absolute power [it] can always be offset by a stronger counter motive, provided that such a counter

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 5.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 5.
motive is present and that the particular man can be determined by it.”

There was no immediate physical obstacle hindering her and the Jewellery store clerk was free to do as she willed. If she willed to steal, then she could steal. If she was more strongly motivated to uphold the law she could have willed to call the police and done so. There is no question of the clerk’s freedom to act because she was not being physically opposed. The clerk was free to follow whichever motive she willed more. Moral freedom addresses whether or not the clerk was free to evaluate the personal motives that constitute her will in determining her action. Was she free to will what she willed? In this case we have to ask if she was free to determine for herself which motivation to follow. The question is about whether or not we are free to will which motivation to act upon.

Schopenhauer describes how one’s will to live could be outweighted by other motives such as “sacrificing one’s life for another” and dying for ones “convictions.” So our clerk here had her motive not to be a thief offset by the stronger counter motive to preserve her life and the life of her family.

Here is where free will is a problematic issue. Did the Jewellery store clerk really have any moral freedom? Given her character, past experiences, and the situation in which she found herself, would it be possible for her to be more strongly motivated to call the police than to give in to the crook? Perhaps she is not morally free. To act differently than she did might require her to have been a different person, or have required some aspect of the situation to be different.

So, now we have seen how Schopenhauer described two different kinds of freedom. In this discussion of the two freedoms he has indicated that the conception of freedom shifts from being in respect to ability of action, as is the case regarding physical freedom,
to the conception of freedom in relation to willing as in the case of moral freedom. He asks if the will itself is free.

Schopenhauer suggests that in order to talk about the freedom of willing one needs to modify the concept of freedom from its original empirical meaning to a more abstract interpretation of the concept. An abstract conception of freedom would then not refer to being free of hindrance but rather being free of necessity.

Understanding this distinction between being free of obstacles and being free of necessity is important in the context of what he goes on to present. When talking about freedom of willing he suggests that the will cannot be dependant on any ground, that is, “it is in no respect necessary.”

He then considers: – Free will is not determined by any grounds. Everything that determines another (e.g. will) must be a ground. Therefore, free will is a groundless ground, and the act of willing “proceed [s] absolutely and quite originally from the will itself;” that is, it is free of necessity.

This discussion leads Schopenhauer to use the term “liberum arbitrium in differentiae” which means quite crudely the inexplicable ability to generate an act of will without grounds for the action. He says that the action of generating action out of nothing is the “only clearly defined, firm, and positive concept of that which is called freedom of the will.” He goes on to say that there is a “peculiar feature” of free will, it is that human beings, who have the ability to generate action out of nothing, make it possible “under given external conditions which are thoroughly determined in every particular” for “two diametrically opposed actions [to be] equally possible.”

It is with that idea that Schopenhauer leads us to his discussion of consciousness. Before he can clearly define consciousness he has to illustrate that there are two types. There is the consciousness of one’s own self that is in contrast to the consciousness of other things.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}} \text{Ibid., p. 7.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{22}} \text{Ibid., p. 8.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}} \text{Ibid., p. 9.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}} \text{Ibid., p. 9.}\]
Simply, Schopenhauer is indicating self-consciousness is whatever is left over after we have removed the consciousness of other things, things known through cognition, things that are understood and/or known by reason.

We realize our self-consciousness when we subtract cognition because all that remains is an awareness of our own “emotions and passions.” Emotions and passions such as “desiring, striving, wishing, demanding, longing, hoping, rejoicing […]”\(^{25}\) etc. are all aspects of the will. He suggests (in the following quotation) that these aspects of the will, our emotions and passions, which are part of our self-consciousness, are always closely connected to objects in the external world. These emotions and passions either refer to our desire for objects in the world, or to our wish to steer clear of them.

“Consequently, we have arrived at the borderline of self-consciousness as soon as we touched the external world, where the self-consciousness touches the realm of the consciousness of other things. But the objects apprehended in the world are the material and the occasion for all those moments and acts of will […] it revolves around them, and is at least motivated by them.”\(^{26}\) Schopenhauer goes on to suggest that to deny this would mean cutting one’s self off from the external world and falling into the deep dark recesses of self-consciousness.\(^{27}\)

So now Schopenhauer invites us to consider the NECESSITY of things in the world in determining volition through self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is occupied with willing. The passions and emotions that constitute self-consciousness necessarily involve objects in the external world. Could willing be free if necessity is involved? Thus, can we say that self-consciousness is enough to prove freedom of the will (as he so clearly defines it)? Schopenhauer says NO.

Summarizing what we have stated, we have looked at the lives of these two philosophers, the Buddha, and Schopenhauer; and examined their concepts of liberation. The theory of liberation remains a subject of interest for discussion in the East and the West and across ages, as proved by the Buddha’s teachings and the philosophical works of Schopenhauer. In this case, we can see that the conception of mundane liberation or physical freedom given by the Buddha and Schopenhauer are similar in nature, though there are differences between the definitions of supra-mundane liberation and moral freedom.

**Schopenhauer and Buddhist Studies**

An examination of the influence of Buddhism on Schopenhauer’s philosophy is simple: it appears that there was none. Schopenhauer completed the writing of his most important work, *The World as Will and Representation* in 1819. This book essentially represented the whole of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and his later writings only serve to elaborate on the ideas he introduced in the original work. As we have seen, the first European translations of Buddhist sutras had not yet appeared when Schopenhauer wrote *The World as Will and Representation* and he had no knowledge of Pāli or Sanskrit. Schopenhauer simply did not have access to any materials on Buddhism at the time he was formulating his metaphysical system.28

However, other Indian texts were available to Schopenhauer, and, along with the writings of Plato and Kant, these did have a significant influence upon him. In 1813 Friedrich Maier introduced Schopenhauer to Indian philosophy. Maier instructed Schopenhauer to read Antquetil du Perron’s Latin translation of *fifteen Hindu Upanishads*. Maier himself translated the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Gītagovinda* into German from the English translations by Jones and Wilkins29. According to some scholar, Schopenhauer first becomes

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29 Guy Richard Welbon., *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa & Its Western Interpreters*, pp. 159-60. He also wrote that the New Testament had probable Indian origins and that Jesus had been taught Egyptian wisdom that had been learned from India (as in Philostratus). Batchelor,
acquainted with Buddhist texts (Forty-two Sections Sutra), not Hindu literatures.

None of his contemporaries assigned quite as much importance to Indian philosophy as Schopenhauer did, however. Schopenhauer said that, “We find the direct presentation in the Vedas, the fruit of the highest human knowledge and wisdom, the kernel of which has finally come to us in the Upanishads as the greatest gift to the nineteenth century.” Schopenhauer was the first European philosopher to integrate Indian thought into his own work, and thought that Indian wisdom would completely reshape Western thought.

Once accessible Buddhist translations and commentaries did begin to appear, Schopenhauer studied them enthusiastically. Even more than the Upanishads, Buddhism captured his attention and interest. He increasingly became a connoisseur of all things Indian, and even kept a gilded statue of the Buddha in his home. Schopenhauer also became something of an expert on Buddhism, and encouraged all of his readers to study it as well. A footnote in On the Will in Nature lists a variety of sources on Buddhism that he had read and which he thought would prove useful to his audience. Among the works on which he commented were Upham’s Doctrine of Buddhism and The Mahavasni, Raja Ratnacari et Rajavali, I. J. Schmidt’s On Mahāyāna and Prachna-Paramita and History of the Eastern Mongols, Spence’s Manual of Buddhism and Eastern Monachism, Colebrooke’s History of Indian Philosophy, Taylor’s Prabodna Chandro Daya, Turner’s Journey to the Center of Teshu Lama, Turnour’s The Mahavasna, Bouchinger’s La vie ascétique chez les Indous et les Bouddhistes,
Burnouf’s *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme*, Koeppen’s *Die Religion des Buddha*, and the unfinished Tibetan studies of Csoma de Körös. Schopenhauer even identifies works on Buddhism that he thinks are inaccurate and warns his readers away from them. Obviously Schopenhauer had read extensively on the subject of Buddhism.\(^\text{33}\)

The works that Schopenhauer had read all basically represent the earliest works of European Buddhist scholars. Schopenhauer died in 1860, too early to benefit from the Pāli renaissance of the 1870s, and he made no indication in any of his references that he was familiar with Müller’s Pāli studies of the 1860s.

### Heart of Buddhism

The *Khadira Sutta*\(^\text{34}\) is a statement on the necessity of properly understanding the four noble truths as a prerequisite for spiritual liberation. The Buddha applies two sets of simple plant similes to illustrate this vital truth. The first set of similes illustrate that it is impossible to be spiritually liberated without having fully realized the four noble truths: it is like trying to building a bag or basket from the tiny leaves of the Indian long-leaf pine, or of the emblic myrobalan, or of the acacia. The second set of plant similes makes use of large and durable leaves: those of the lotus (*paduma*), the kino (*palāsa*) and the maluva (*māluvā*) plants.\(^\text{35}\)

The Four Noble Truths are mentioned in the first sermon of the Buddha. Reference to this first sermon is found twice in the Pāli Canon, one is in *Vinaya Piṭaka*\(^\text{36}\) and one in the *Sutta Piṭaka*.\(^\text{37}\) These


\(^{34}\) *Saṁyutta Nikāya*. 5. 438 ff.  


\(^{36}\) *Vinaya*. l. 8-13.  

versions are close, but not precisely identical because the account in the Vinaya Piṭaka is more extensive than that found in the Saṁyutta Nikāya. The sermon is called “Turning the Wheel of Dhamma (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)” because the dhamma-wheel is set in motion when the Buddha first preaches the truth that he realized under the Bodhi-tree.

The stage is set in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the date is on the night of full moon day of Āsāḷha (June-July) and the audience consists of five former companions of the Buddha: Konḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma and Assaji. Briefly summarized, the Buddha tells them that there are two extremes to be avoided, devotion to sensual pleasures (kāmesukhallikānuyoga) and devotion to mortification of the body (attakilamathānuyoga). Between these two poles lies the middle way (majjhima paṭipadā), which consists of the Noble Eightfold Path: proper view, proper aim, proper speech, proper action, proper living, proper effort, proper mindfulness, and proper concentration. The Suttas explain that this middle path produces vision and knowledge, causes calm, special knowledge, enlightenment and Nibbāna. The sermon continues with the Buddha teaching the nature of suffering (dukkha), the arising of suffering (samudaya), the cessation of suffering (nirodha), and the practice leading to the cessation of

38 The Samukta Āgama version only explains the Four Noble Truths and has no mention of some of the other major doctrines found in the Pāḷi version. In Āgama version, the Four Noble Truths are mentions in three sections, of the discourse. There is also mention of the Four Noble Truths leading to Enlightenment.

39 There are several translations of this Sutta, include:
1) “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000);
2) “Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth” (Piyadassi Thero, 1999);
3) “Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth” (Ñānamoli Thero, 1993);
4) “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (Bhikkhu Thanissaro, 1993);
5) “Turning the Wheel of Dhamma” (Dhamma, 1997);
6) “The Buddha’s First Discourse” (David J. Kalupahana, 2008) and
7) “The Discourse on the Setting in Motion of the Wheel (of Version) of the Basic Pattern: the Four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled Ones” (Peter Harvey, 2009).
suffering (magga). In brief, the Four Noble Truths consist of the truth of morality (sīla), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā).

Once venerable Sāriputta spoke to a gathering of the monks: “Friends, just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant’s footprint is reckoned the foremost among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities are gathered under the four noble truths. Under which four? Under the noble truth of stress, under the noble truth of the origination of stress, under the noble truth of the cessation of stress, and under the noble truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.” This shows that the Four Noble Truths is the heart of Buddha’s teaching.

The Central Theme of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy
Now we are turning to Schopenhauer’s point of view on dukkha. In Schopenhauer’s preface to the first edition of his major work The World as Will and Representation (1819) Arthur Schopenhauer presented his prospective readers with three, apparently pretentious requirements:

1. The book should be read twice;
2. The introduction to this book, written five years before this work, should be read before the book itself;
3. A thorough acquaintance with Kant’s principle writing is also expected.

41 Majjhima Nikāya. I. 184-5.
Schopenhauer’s great work, *The World as Will and Representation* (German: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*), is divided into four books, with a long appendix on Kant’s philosophy in volume I. Each of the four books sets out a distinct movement of thought. The first presents the world as representation, or as it is for our experience. The second book adds that this same world (and we ourselves within it) must be viewed under another aspect, as will. We called the appearance/thing in itself distinction the backbone of Schopenhauer’s philosophy: now “the world as representation” is what falls on the “appearance” side of this line, while “the world as will” is the thing in itself. But then in book three aesthetic contemplation, cultivation of sympathy, and practice of asceticism emerges as a cessation of willing in the individual, which transforms the world of objects into a timeless reality of ideas, and finally book four intensifies Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view of the ordinary life of desire and action, and advocates an abolition of the will with oneself as the path to what is ethically good, and ultimately to a kind of resigned mystical salvation.

**The four noble truths of Buddhism and some of the key themes in Schopenhauer's philosophy**

The main teaching of Buddhism is about suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation (*nirodha*). Buddhism considers *dukkha* to be a fundamental characteristic of the world and the man living in it. It considers human desire (*taṇhā*) as a salient cause of this *dukkha*, that this *dukkha* could be ceased by human effort and that there is a path, called the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to cessation.

Schopenhauer, also, had seen life as suffering. He presents a new concept which he designates as will as the cause of this suffering. The world, according to Schopenhauer, is a representation of this will. He holds that for one who is aware of suffering in the

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44 M. I. 431; S. III. 119.
45 S. V. 421 ff.
46 S. II. 84.
47 Dhammapada. verse. 276. *Tumhehi kiccamatappam akkhataro tathagata patipanna pamokkhanti jhayino marabandhana.*
48 D. II. 311-313; M. III. 71-78.
49 WWR. Vol. I. 3.
50 WWR. Vol. I. § 18.
worldly existence there is hope of liberation. He teaches the path of liberation as consisting of these factors:\(^{51}\)

(a) aesthetic contemplation
(b) cultivation of sympathy and
(c) practice of asceticism

Though there is an apparent similarity between some of these postulates presented by the Buddha and Schopenhauer, the two stances adopted in perceiving these postulates and the manner in which they are articulated show significant differences.

In Buddhism *dukkha* is explained as a kind of intense psychological anguish resulting from the distorted vision leading to subjective perception of reality based on one’s likes and dislikes. According to this explanation it is not only suffering caused by the unfulfillment of life’s wants, for there can be intense experience of *dukkha* even for one whose all needs as well as wants are fulfilled. As Schopenhauer understands suffering is due to the unfulfillment of life’s wants even after striving to achieve them.\(^{52}\) He, then, holds that the basis of all suffering is mainly physical pleasure as well as pain.

Schopenhauer’s conception of will is unique to his philosophy. For him will is not merely a psychological impulse, a conscious and an active response in the human individual, but more or less force, an energy which reside in the individual. He considered it as a thing-in-itself, beyond time and hence, a concept verging more on the metaphysical side. It is this will that works to present itself against all others, thus causing conflict, evil and suffering. It shows some similarity to *taṇhā* (desire) in Buddhism. *Taṇhā*, however, is a psychological force, analyzable, controllable, refutable and also eradicable. *Taṇhā* is in man, generated by man and hence, quenchable by man himself.\(^{53}\) Schopenhauer seems to consider will as an

\(^{51}\) Naw Kham La Dhammasami, Another Way of Looking At Things (A Comparative Study of Schopenhauer & Buddha Perspectives on Human Libration) [Maharagama, Sri Lanka: Ruhuwan Paharuwa, 2011], pp. 115-128.


\(^{53}\) A. I. 168-9.
inexorable power or a drive which is blind, ungovernable and destructive.

The Buddha clearly asserts man’s ability to successfully strive to overcome the cause of suffering of which he himself is the creator. Strangely, Schopenhauer does neither assert this ability nor clearly articulate about man’s such ability.

The Buddha presents a will structured path consisting of perfection of virtue, concentration and wisdom, that leads to cessation of suffering. This cessation of suffering is effected by bringing about total inner revolution in one’s morality and spirituality. With the dawn of wisdom (paññā) vision gets straightened. Then he begins to see not through his likes, but in a detached manner, without subjectively adding value to one’s objects of perception.

Schopenhauer’s way to liberation is neither so well structured nor systematically articulated. He presents three ways of escaping from suffering. One is through leading a life of aesthetic contemplation which, he says, will appease the violence-field, disturbed consciousness and bring about tranquility. He explains that this is possible through aesthetic contemplation that helps to dissolve oneself in the aesthetic object itself, then eradicating one’s individuality that leads to self striving. Music, art, and other form of fine arts could be utilized for this purpose. Buddhism though it encourages righteous enjoyment of aesthetic beauty in a detached manner, does not prescribe the use of such enjoyment as a means to liberation.

The other method proposed to be adopted as an aid to liberation from suffering is the cultivation of sympathy. This has some parallel with the cultivation of the Four Sublime Abodes (brahma-vihāra) in Buddhism. But this practice is not an essential factor of the path, though cultivation of sympathy and compassion are highly lauded practices in Buddhism.

54 Cūlavedalla Sutta, M. I. 299 f.
55 Naw Kham La Dhammasami, Another Way of Looking At Things (A Comparative Study of Schopenhauer & Buddha Perspectives on Human Liberation), pp. 137-147.
56 Ibid., pp. 126-9.
The third and perhaps, the most effective way of escape from suffering is the practice of asceticism.\textsuperscript{57} As proposed by Schopenhauer his practice amounts to almost the practice of self-mortification, which the Buddha avoided as one of the extremes. As prescribed by Schopenhauer the practice of asceticism is a sort of gradual withdrawal from the world and all worldly things. As explained by Schopenhauer this could even mean to turn desire against desire itself. This means to get rid of desire including even desire to live.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Table 1.} Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and Some of the Key Themes in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy
  \begin{table}[h]
  \centering
  \begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
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  The Four Noble Truths & Schopenhauer Adds \\
  \hline
  1. Life is full with dissatisfaction & The World is mere Representation \\
  \hline
  2. Dissatisfaction is rooted in desire & (I) The cause of dissatisfaction is willing \\
  & (II) The world as Will \\
  \hline
  3. There is hope & There is miniscule hope \\
  \hline
  4. Hope is in the Noble Eightfold Path & Hope lies in: \\
  & (I) Aesthetic contemplation \\
  & (II) Cultivation of sympathy \\
  & (III) The practice of asceticism \\
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\end{itemize}

\textbf{Differences and Misconceptions}

Despite such close correspondence between the thought of Schopenhauer and the Buddha, there are some distinct differences. The first difference between them is simply a matter of style. The Buddha was a practical teacher\textsuperscript{58} and he consistently avoided any sort of metaphysical discussion.\textsuperscript{59} His main goal was to end the suffering of sentient beings, and not to split philosophical hairs.\textsuperscript{60} He was always reluctant to describe concretely absolute truth or Nibbāna, except to affirm that those concepts were equivalent. Schopenhauer, on the other hand was a metaphysician of the highest order. Stephen Batchelor

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., pp. 129-133.
\textsuperscript{58} Aṅguttara Nikāya. II. 24; litvuttaka. 122. Yathāvādī tathākārī, yathākārī tathāvādī.
\textsuperscript{59} Majjhima Nikāya. I. 426-432.
\textsuperscript{60} Majjhima Nikāya. I. 140. Dukkha0 c'eva pa001pemi, dukkhassa ca nirodha7.
deplores that “although some of his contemporaries thought of him as a Buddhist, he preferred listening to music than sitting in meditation”.

As a philosopher, Schopenhauer averred, his job was to describe and analyze compassion—there was no compunction to actually practice it. Yet for all of his bombast, there is much that makes Schopenhauer a sympathetic character. There is, for instance, his concern for the suffering of animals. “The greatest benefit conferred by the railways,” he writes, “is that they spare millions of draught-horses their miserable existences.”

Friedrich Nietzsche mentioned in his essay (Schopenhauer as Educator-1874), “He (Schopenhauer) often chose falsely in his desire to find real trust and compassion in men, only to return with a heavy heart to his faithful dog again. He was absolutely alone, with no single friend of his own kind to comfort him…” A notorious misogynist, Schopenhauer once pushed a woman down a flight of stairs. Grudgingly, he paid her regular restitution for her injuries until her death, when he recorded in his journal, “The old woman dies, the burden is lifted (Obit anus, abit onus)”. This story shows that Schopenhauer does not practice what he preaches. That is why, in his Ueber den Willen in der Nature, he expressed, “To preach morality is easy, to found it difficult.—” Schopenhauer was a pure philosopher whose aim was not salvation, but rather a description of the world as he thought it to be. He often made normative statements about the nature of objective reality, and The World as Will and Representation was essentially an attempt to describe the metaphysical world.

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65 As quoted in Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Schopenhauer and Hartmann (1877) by Francis Bowen, p. 392.
The means of ending suffering are also different in the two schools of thought. The Buddha described the path to Nibbāna in an extremely straightforward manner. The Fourth Noble Truth says that the way to attain Nibbāna is to follow the Eightfold Path, which includes the studious practice of the moral prescriptions (sīla), concentration (samādhi) and meditation (paññā). Salvation in Buddhism is a matter of enlightenment, and knowledge is the key to the end of desire. While such enlightenment is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, and can even conceivably take multiple human lifetimes, the Buddha and many of his predecessors and successors stand as testimonies to the possibility of its attainment.68

Schopenhauer had an understanding of the Will, which had two separate parts. The Will to Life and Human Will. The Will to Life, was the over all striving that every animal did on a daily basis, the striving for the will to live. Schopenhauer believed that the nature of life was suffering and that this suffering was manifested in the will to live. However, this will, in humans, was also manifested by Human Will, or striving for that life, such as studying, reading, etc. This human will also leads to suffering and strife, for as soon as humans would reach one goal, another set of problems or suffering would appear. In fact, Schopenhauer believed that if humans recognized how much suffering there is in life and in the world they would want to kill themselves. However, if you look at all that suffering and decide to live anyway then you have conquered the will and you will no longer truly suffer. In quite a Buddhist theme, you have become liberated and redeemed from life.

There is no such well-defined path in the philosophy of Schopenhauer. He was quite willing to describe the self-denial of the will, but he was at the same time vague about the mechanism for its achievement. While he certainly advocated such worthy aims as compassion and the acquisition of knowledge, Schopenhauer never said that they necessarily led to denial of the will. Similarly, he recommended the mortification of the will and the suppression of desires by individual humans, but he did not claim that these measures alone could extinguish the will. Despite this difference, however, the

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theories of salvation in Buddhism and Schopenhauer’s writings are still relatively close.

In order to destroy all suffering, Buddha and Schopenhauer do not asked help from God or Gods. A Buddhist who is fully convinced of the doctrine of *kamma* does not pray to another to be saved but confidently relies on himself for his purification because it teaches individual responsibility. Schopenhauer follows the same line:

“Whoever regards himself as having become out of nothing must also think that he will again become nothing; for an eternity has passed before he was, and then a second eternity had begun, through which he will never cease to be, is a monstrous thought. If birth is the absolute beginning, then death must be his absolute end; and the assumption that man is made out of nothing leads necessarily to the assumption that death is his absolute end.”

Schopenhauer also disagrees with Buddhism most notably on the condition of the human self. He does agree that what humans commonly recognize as their self is impermanent. He also asserts that the will is a common bond between everyone and abolishes duality between self and object. Still, Schopenhauer does continually refer to the intellect as the antipode to the will. The intellect ultimately perishes when the body dies, while the will continues on. While the body lives, however, this intellect represents a unified entity with positive existence which can oppose the will. This conception of the intellect is at odds with the Buddhist self, which has no existence at all except as a continuously changing collection of fragments. In Schopenhauer’s philosophy the self is fleeting, but in Buddhism, it is completely illusory.

With regard to poem or music, one time the Buddha had praise to the *Pañcasikha* who sang a song in good rhythm. When *Vaṅgīsa* recited the verses he had composed, the Buddha asked him to compose and recite some more. Music is common to all cultures of the world, in ancient and modern times. Music therapy has a long history, dating

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69 Quoted from Nārada Thera., *Buddhism in a Nutshell* (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2009), p. 46.
72 *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. I. 193.
back to ancient Greece. Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, all talk about the prophylactic and cathartic powers of music. Even the Bible mentions the use of music in treating illness, where David plays to Saul. The Buddha also did not deny the enjoying of music but when one come to observing precepts; it becomes an enemy to enlightenment.  

Aesthetic is not universal, but at least some people in every culture seem to be motivated by the need for beauty and aesthetically pleasing experiences. The aesthetic experiences of nature, according to the Pāli Canon, contain frequent descriptions of natural environments as sources of tranquility and enlightenment. The Buddha himself attained enlightenment sitting under a Bodhi-tree and passed into extinction lying down between twin Sāla-trees.

The Buddha once remarked: “Whatever is beautiful in the world does not represent your will. Such beautiful things remain. But a wise one restrains his willing in that context.” The Buddha’s advice is to get detached from the apparent beauty of the external world that pleases the physical eyes, and to cultivate non-attachment to them which would result in man himself realizing the beauty supreme within his own mind. This is the moral or spiritual and inward beauty. That is why, the Buddha said: “If some is jealous, selfish, they are unattractive despite their good features. But the person who is purged of such things and is free from hatred, it is he how is really beautiful.

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73 *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. 4. 306-308. Regarding art, once Tālapuṭa asks the Buddha if it is true that performers who delight large audiences are reborn among the laughing gods. The Buddha tells Tālapuṭa that those who arouse sensuality in others will be reborn in hell. It is important to note here that the guilty party consists of those whose motivation is rooted in greed, hatred or delusion, the performers themselves, and those who subscribe to such an idea. Implicitly, it means that this excludes those laity (it should be stressed here, only the laity, not the monastic) who perform shows or on stage with a mind of charity, loving-kindness and wisdom. Novices and monastics are bound by the rules that prohibit giving such performances, and even watching them.


75 *Dhammapada*. gāthās. 262-3.
Also the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, both parts of the Pāli Canon, consist of poems describing the path to enlightenment taken by various *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs* of the Buddha’s original Saṅgha. The poems frequently describe the Buddha’s disciples finding tranquility and enlightenment in the forest. Verse (*gāthā*) 13, for instance, is attributed to the *Bhikkhu Vanavaccha*, whose name literally means “woodland monk”:

The color of blue-dark clouds,
Glistening,
Cooled with the waters
Of clear-flowing stream
Covered with ladybugs:
Those rocky crags
Refresh me.\(^{76}\)

As we have noted above, even the Buddha himself enjoyed the aesthetic beauty of nature. These aesthetic experiences of nature do not help one to end suffering as Schopenhauer mentioned earlier.

Loving-kindness (*mettā*) is one of the main teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha said that *mettā* is a medicine for fear, poison and also leads one to the *Brāhma* world (*Brāhma loka*) after death.\(^{77}\) It cannot help one directly to enlightenment as Schopenhauer’s philosophy of sympathy, both spoke on similar condition.

Concerning the concept of asceticism, the Buddha, also, was well conversant with the contemporary ideals of asceticism. Having himself gone further with austerity than the most fanatical of ascetics, he had found penances and self mortification quite unsatisfactory. He declared himself as an enemy of asceticism and pronounced bodily austerities and self-tortures to be not only futile but positively harmful.

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The self-mortification was an actual hindrance. It turned men’s mind away from more essential matters. The Buddha, therefore, condemned asceticism, morbid ascetic practices, fanatical excesses and its exaggerations of most ugly types. In lieu of asceticism he preached the simple life of studied and purposeful temperance in all bodily matters, with the body as the mind’s obedient servant. He rejected both the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification and preached the middle path by which the wayfarer avoids the two extremes.

The Buddha preached a moral path which avoided the two extremes of the pursuit of sensual pleasures on the one hand and severe ascetic discipline culminating in the annihilation of the body on the other. He announced the discovery of this new path in the following words in his First Sermon, which is the basis of all subsequent teachings: “There are two extremes, Oh Bhikkhus, which he who has given up the world ought to avoid. What are these two extremes? A life given to pleasure, devoted to pleasures and lusts; this is degrading, sensual, vulgar, ignoble and profitless. And a life given to mortification; this is painful, ignoble and profitless. By avoiding these two extremes, Oh Bhikkhus, the Tathāgata has gained the knowledge of the Middle Path which leads to insight, which leads to wisdom which conduces to calm, to knowledge, to Sambodhi (enlightenment), to Nibbāna.” The Buddha guaranteed that we could stop suffering by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path in the correct way. The Buddha’s method of ending suffering is beyond the limits of the philosophy of Schopenhauer.

Although Schopenhauer knew a great deal about Buddhism, there are a few instances where he appears to misunderstand its most crucial doctrine: Nibbāna. In The World as Will and Representation, Schopenhauer comments on the denial of the will:

“We must not even evade [nothingness] as the Indians do, by myths and meaningless words, such as reabsorption into the Brāhman, or the Nibbāna of the Buddhists. On the contrary, we

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78 Majjhima Nikāya. I. 78, 80, 246.
79 Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā. I. 6-17.
freely acknowledge that what remains after the complete abolition of will is, for all who are still full of will, assuredly nothing. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is – nothing.”

Schopenhauer follows his criticism of Buddhism with a description of the denial of the will that sounds as though it could have come directly from a Buddhist Sutta. Even though he did not realize it, Schopenhauer was essentially speaking of Buddhist Nibbāna in the above passage, even as he dismissed it as “evasion”. Yet in other parts of The World as Will and Representation, Schopenhauer seems to have a better understanding of Nibbāna. In one footnote, he even provides a detailed discussion of the etymology of the word “Nibbāna,” and correctly identifies it as the extinction of desires and the cessation of suffering and conditionality. So, it remains unclear to what extent Schopenhauer truly understood at least one major Buddhist concept.

Conclusion
From the above study regarding the philosophies of Buddha and Schopenhauer it is seen that there are marked similarities between them. Theses similarities generally lead me to conclude that Schopenhauer, has been influenced by Buddhism. However, a close examination of the context in which Schopenhauer worked shows that there has been no such direct influence when he compiled his magnum opus, The World as Will and Representation. This was compiled in 1819 by which time influence of Buddhist thought was neither directly nor seriously felt in the Western World.

Schopenhauer’s philosophy in its formative stage has been undoubtedly influenced by the Indian philosophical, not particularly Buddhist teachings pertaining to these areas and his most important work, The World as Will and Representation clearly shows this.

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Subsequently, when Buddhist studies developed and found its way to Europe, Schopenhauer also found access to it. He was especially enamored with Buddhist thought as clearly seen from his later writing in which he praises Buddhism as a religion of pre-eminence. Though he held Buddhist thought in very high esteem, his perception and understanding of it was through the general Indian, specially *Upanishadic*, philosophical perspective. This explains the reason for both certain similarities and differences between Buddhism and Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

Our studies find that a practicing method given by Schopenhauer is can be found in Buddhism. But those methods are not leading one directly to final libration, which is Nibbāna.

The possible conclusion based on the facts uncovered through this research is that these similarities that are found in the two philosophies i.e. the *Buddha* and *Schopenhauer* are mostly apparent ones, whereas the differences are far more real.

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