Roman Buddha

by William Ferraiolo

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> 'Those who teach a Dhamma for the abandoning of passion, for the abandoning of aversion, for the abandoning of delusion – their Dhamma is well-taught.'
>
> (Ājīvaka Sutta, AN 3: 72)

Rudyard Kipling tells us that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet' (Kipling, 1889). To some this may seem an apt summation of the intellectual and spiritual chasm yawning between the dominant wisdom traditions originating respectively in certain areas of Asia and in the early Mediterranean city-states that spawned western culture. The multifarious strands of Buddhism (and other Asian wisdom traditions) are often regarded as too esoteric and culturally alien for the earthy pragmatism of the industrial West and its predominantly materialistic worldview. The admonitions of the Noble Eightfold Path are all well and good for tonsured monks swaddled in flowing robes, or cave-dwelling hermits perched in the lotus position on some Himalayan mountaintop, contemplatively indifferent to 'worldly' concerns, but what has all that got to do with life in the 'real world' of career, family, financial obligations, and material need? In this paper, I argue that the Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55–135 CE) offered practical counsel through which the West may begin to more comfortably approach Buddhism as a system of self-governance and a path to awakening. Epictetus' collected *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* offer glimpses of a spirit which Buddhist practitioners will, I think, find strikingly kindred.

The West has produced intellectuals of the order of Newton and Einstein, statesmen like Churchill, and captains of industry like the Rockefellers and Bill Gates – but what are we to do with Bodhisattvas, lamas, rinpoches, and the rest? It all seems so… 'Oriental'. Those westerners on the religious quest

are likely to be drawn to familiar Abrahamic traditions and have no need of exotic spirituality wafting in from the East. Furthermore, the eastern sages seem, until recently perhaps, to have been in no particular hurry to illumine the barbarian West. There are few reports of Bodhisattvas reincarnating in this part of the world – and if one did, no one would pay much attention (with the possible exception of a few aging hippies and maybe Richard Gere). What inspires 'them' is just not going to fly for 'us' – and vice versa. There is a fundamental incommensurability in these competing conceptions of the human condition separating eastern and western approaches to the 'good life'. We should not expect to find large tracts of common ground on which 'the twain' may meet to share the wisdom of their respective sages. So goes an all-too-common misconception on both sides of the putative divide.

SLAVE AND SAGE

This kind of parochialism is misleading, oversimplified, and paints the relevant cultural traditions in overly stark contrast. The West has, I would argue, produced its fair share of (arguably) enlightened beings and, in at least a few instances, they have significantly influenced the evolution and development of western culture. Socrates, Jesus, and Mohammed have obviously left their marks and exhorted billions to reconsider the human condition, our relationship to the transcendent, our values, and our way of life. I would like to suggest, however, that a much lesser-known and insufficiently appreciated figure may be our best hope for finding a worldview within which East and West might encounter each other in a light more felicitous to mutual understanding and appreciation. Just as it is instructive and valuable for westerners to develop an understanding and appreciation of Buddhism and other strands of Asian philosophy and/or religion, so too is it worthwhile for Buddhists and practitioners of allied eastern wisdom traditions to become better acquainted with like-minded intellects that contributed to the philosophical, cultural, and religious foundations of the western world. In addition to the aforementioned figures of indisputable historic and cultural interest, one sage of the Roman Empire stands out for special (and long overdue) attention. The Roman Stoic Epictetus may serve as a valuable nexus through which the Buddha's wisdom could be rendered more accessible to those reared outside of an Asian cultural context. Also, a clearer understanding of practical therapeutic philosophy as developed in the ancient West may be brought to the attention of eastern practitioners through an exploration of the methods and application of Epictetan counsel. Certainly, in my own case, it was an appreciation of Stoicism, and the wisdom of Epictetus in particular, that opened the door to Buddhism and eased those first tentative steps toward concepts such as impermanence,

renunciation, and a synoptic ethic of mental discipline. Perhaps, given a bit of luck and intrepidity, fellow seekers from East and West may encounter each other and develop a richer understanding of commonalities intersecting their respective traditions and spiritual heritage.

Epictetus was born a slave but ultimately became an influential teacher and philosopher whose advocacy of Stoicism had a tremendous impact on Roman culture and subsequent developments – Christianity among them. Prince Siddhartha Gautama enjoyed the material benefits of aristocratic birth but opted for a wandering homeless life, the pursuit of wisdom, and mental discipline, and became, of course, one of the most influential spiritual figures in world history. The two could hardly have begun their lives in more disparate circumstances, yet Epictetus and the man who would become known to posterity as the Buddha arrived at very much the same understanding of the human condition and its fundamental challenges. Both keenly understood the dangers of psychological and emotional attachment to the uncontrollable vicissitudes of human experience. Both counselled renunciation of the usual worldly desires for fortune, fame, and self-aggrandizing power. Both maintained that true liberty is won through thoughtful discipline, proper conduct, and a deep, penetrating understanding of the nature of reality and one's place within it. Though advancing somewhat different metaphysical accounts of persons and the ultimate nature of their relationship to surrounding reality, the eastern sage and his western counterpart both offered very similar practical programs of therapeutic guidance for the attainment of liberation from the common ills and dissatisfactions endemic to humanity.

EPICTETAN DHARMA

Most people live as slaves – not in the sense in which Epictetus was literally another man's property, but in the sense that they allow their emotional well-being to depend upon conditions over which they themselves have no ultimate control. They enslave themselves through irrationality, ignorance, and indiscipline. Their desires are often unhealthy, unwise, and all too often lead to self-destruction (to say nothing of their unfortunate impact upon others). The common result of unfulfilled desire is anger, frustration, anxiety, dissatisfaction, or what the Buddha might have called a pervasive *dukkha.* In the *Discourses*, we find Epictetus instructing his students to pay careful attention to craving, its causes, and, perhaps most importantly, its likely consequences:

> There are three fields of study, in which he who would be wise and good must be exercised: that of the *desires* and *aversions*, that he may not be disappointed of the one, nor incur the other; that of the *pursuits* and *avoidances*, and, in general, the duties of life, that he may act with order

and consideration, and not carelessly; the third includes integrity of mind and prudence, and, in general, whatever belongs to the judgment.

Of these points the principal and most urgent is that which reaches the passions; for passion is only produced by a disappointment of one's desires and an incurring of one's aversions. It is this which introduces perturbations, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; this is the spring of sorrow, lamentation, and envy; this renders us envious and emulous, and incapable of hearing reason. (*Discourses*, Book III, Ch. Two)

Epictetus also advises careful and consistent observation of the crucial distinction between that which conforms directly to the exertion of the will and that which depends upon factors external to the agent's unmediated direction. Wise persons rationally control that which is within their power and remain placidly indifferent to conditions over which they have no direct influence. In so doing, the wise remain untroubled by the uncontrollable unfolding of reality, and never experience frustrated desire. They want only that which they have the power to produce and are averse only to that which they have the power to avoid. All else is accepted and embraced simply as it is:

There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs.

Now, the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted, unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, and take what belongs to others for your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own, and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm. (*Enchiridion*, 1)

The wise suffer no real harm because they understand that the only real harm is that to which one subjects oneself through irrational attachment. All other states of affairs are embraced, welcomed, and rendered impotent to disrupt the deep, abiding serenity born of careful attention and wise discernment. In another passage from the *Discourses*, we notice Epictetus describing the condi-

tion of the 'good man' in terms that call to mind the Buddhist account of the *arahant* or the awakened practitioner:

> A good man is invincible; for he does not contend where he is not superior. If you would have his land, take it; take his servants, take his office, take his body. But you will never frustrate his desire, nor make him incur his aversion. He engages in no combat but what concerns objectives within his own control. How then can he fail to be invincible? (Book III, Ch. Six)

Consider how closely this resembles the Buddha's remarks concerning the equanimity of those who have conquered desire and illusion. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's recent anthology, *In the Buddha's Words*, we find these thoughts from the Dhātuvibhanga Sutta regarding the aspiring *arahant*:

> He does not construct or generate any volition tending toward either existence or non-existence. Since he does not construct or generate any volition tending toward either existence or non-existence, he does not cling to anything in this world. Not clinging, he is not agitated. Not being agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna. (2005, p.410; from MN 140, III 244–247)

The fruits of this mental discipline are release and equanimity:

> He indeed is the all-vanquishing sage,
> The one released from all the knots
> Who has reached the supreme state of peace,
> Nibbāna, without fear from any side. (p.422; from AN 4: 23; II 23–24)

We see that both wise men hold out the prospect of imperturbability for those who renounce transient worldly attainments and devote themselves instead to mental discipline and the extirpation of unhealthy desire, aversion, and attachment. Only through turning inward and learning to govern the unruly mind and its passions may one hope to attain true wisdom and the spiritual 'invincibility' of the 'all-vanquishing sage'.

Similarly, we need only compare a passage from the *Dhammapada* with a nugget of Epictetan counsel from the *Enchiridion*, or *Handbook*, to perceive a deep confluence of the flowing streams of Buddhist and Stoic wisdom regarding the renunciation of ill-will and hatred as crucial to the attainment of peace within a well-disciplined mind:

> 'He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me': the hatred of those who harbour such thoughts is not appeased. (*Dhammapada*, 3)

Were it not for the citations, one would be hard pressed to discern which remark had been uttered by the Roman Stoic and which originated with the Buddha:

> Remember that it is not he who gives abuse or blows who insults; but the view we take of these things as insulting. When, therefore, anyone provokes you, be assured that it is your own opinion which provokes you. Try, therefore, in the first place, not to be bewildered by appearances. For if you once gain time and respite, you will more easily command yourself. (*Enchiridion*, 20)

Is not essentially the same truth offered in both these passages? For all practical purposes, the Epictetan attitude to insult, offence, and the like is indistinguishable from the Buddhist admonition to renounce unskilful thoughts such as hatred and anger.

DIVERGENCE AND CONFLUENCE

For those who would focus on differences between Stoic and Buddhist metaphysics insofar as the two apparently diverge concerning issues such as the ontological fundamentality of impermanence, it may be instructive to note that remarks very reminiscent of the Buddha's appear throughout Epictetus' advice to his students regarding the insignificance of ephemeral states of affairs. Both men clearly understand the pitfalls of devotion to impermanent conditions and the liberation available to those who are able to renounce them. In a section offering advice for the attainment of tranquility, the *Discourses* remind us to:

> Remember that it is not only the desire of riches and power that debases us and subjects us to others, but even the desire of quiet, leisure, learning, or travelling. For, in general, reverence for any external thing whatever makes us subject to others… Nothing is so essential to prosperity as that it should be permanent and unhindered. (Book IV, Ch. Four)

Epictetus also denigrates the common obsession with the body and its accoutrements as well as the usual assumption that the body constitutes 'the self' or is, at least, indispensable to one's wellbeing:

> When you would have your body perfect, is it in your own power, or is it not? 'It is not.' When you would be healthy? 'It is not.' When you would be handsome? 'It is not.' When you would live or die? 'It is not.' Body then is not our own; but is subject to everything that proves stronger than itself… Is despising death, then, an action in our power,

> or is it not? 'It is.'… You ought to consider your whole body as a useful ass, with a pack-saddle on, so long as possible, so long as it is allowed. But if there should come a military conscription, and a soldier should lay hold on it, let it go. Do not resist, or murmur; otherwise you will be first beaten and lose the ass after all. And since you are thus to regard even the body itself, think what remains to do concerning things to be provided for the sake of the body. If that be an ass, the rest are but bridles, pack-saddles, shoes, oats, hay for him. Let these go too. Quit them yet more easily and expeditiously. (Book IV, Ch. One)

Do these passages not ring harmonious with the Buddha's admonition to relinquish the emotional stranglehold on conditioned phenomena and self-centered desire? Bhikkhu Bodhi presents this passage from the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*:

> Suppose, monks, a dog tied up on a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar: it would just keep on running and revolving around that same post or pillar. So too, the uninstructed worldling regards form as self… feeling as self… perception as self… volitional formations as self… consciousness as self… He just keeps running and revolving around form, around feeling, around perception, around volitional formations, around consciousness. As he keeps on running and revolving around them, he is not freed from form, not freed from feeling, not freed from perception, not freed from volitional formations, not freed from consciousness. He is not freed from birth, aging, and death; not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say. (2005, pp.39–40; SN 22: 99)

Such comparisons could assuredly continue and would address numerous points of intersection common to the practical counsel offered by these two sages of the ancient world. Let us, however, explore a further crucial confluence that may be overlooked due to a common misinterpretation of the Buddha's attitude toward desire. While some may claim that the Buddha advised the complete renunciation of *all* desire, whereas Epictetus did not, it turns out, upon closer inspection, that Epictetan and Buddhist analyses of the propriety and value of desire and its many possible objects are far more similar than one might initially suppose.

GOVERNING DESIRE

Students in introductory courses on western philosophy and philosophy of religion often respond incredulously to the suggestion that enlightenment, according to the Buddha, requires the renunciation of desire. They tend to be, in the first place, very skeptical that mere mortals could possibly extirpate all

desire but, more importantly, many question the wisdom and, indeed, the desirability of attaining this condition of desirelessness. What kind of life, they wonder indignantly, would that be? Wouldn't an 'enlightened' life be sedentary, boring, vapid, and without purpose? Buddhist practice may be valuable for dealing with life's difficulties and reducing our suffering, but surely we should not completely extinguish *all* desire. Many of our desires, they insist, are healthy, invigorating, and imbue our endeavors with meaning and purpose. Does the Buddha really counsel the renunciation of all forms of desire, they wonder? If so, he advocates an anemic lifelessness and retreat into emotional isolation, rather than a real, full-blooded engagement with reality and our fellow human beings. Far from being a path to *awakening*, Buddhism, it seems to many western students, offers to put us to sleep. This, however, is a misunderstanding of the Buddha's analysis of desire – one that may be clarified with a bit of help from Epictetus' counsel regarding the proper management of desire and aversion from the Stoic perspective.

THE DESIRE TO EXTIRPATE DESIRE

In 'Three cheers for Tanha', Robert Morrison (Dharmacārī Sagaramati) seeks to dispel some common misconceptions about the Buddha's analysis of *taṇhā* and the skilful response to this condition of unenlightened existence. According to Morrison, *taṇhā* should be understood as:

> … a metaphor that evokes the general condition that all unenlightened beings find themselves in in the world: a state of being characterized by 'thirst' that compels a pursuit for appeasement, the urge to seek out some form of gratification. (1997)

The general condition of unenlightened existence is *dukkha* or dissatisfaction because impermanent states of affairs do not allow for a permanent slaking of the common 'thirst' for sensual gratification and pleasurable experience. New 'thirsts' arise and old ones reassert themselves after relatively brief periods of abatement. *Taṇhā* itself, however, does not lead irretrievably to *dukkha*. *Taṇhā* can inspire skilful (*kusala*) effort as well as unskilful (*akusala*) floundering.

So we see that the real culprits are grasping, clinging, and aversion regarding impermanent states that cause various forms of pleasure and/or displeasure. The extirpation of *dukkha*, or dissatisfaction, is not quite the same thing as, and does not necessarily require, the extirpation of *all* desire. We eliminate *dukkha* by learning to deal skilfully with our mental states and habits of cognition. We pay attention to the nature of mental states, the conditions of their arising, and their relation to subsequent unsatisfactory states of being. Aversion and desire regarding uncontrollable elements of one's environment, other people, socio-political conditions, etc. – these invite *dukkha* because such

conditions need not satisfy our desires and may incur our aversions. Aversion to conducting oneself in unwise or unskilful fashion, or the desire to improve one's understanding and mental discipline, or to assist others in their attempts to improve – these are neither unhealthy nor inappropriate because one's *efforts* in these areas *do* conform to one's properly disciplined will.

SKILFUL AND UNSKILFUL COGNITION

Morrison again points to the distinction between *taṇhā* as a general condition of unenlightened existence and skilful or unskilful methods of dealing with this condition:

> For example, if a heterosexual man encounters a very attractive woman, this will probably give rise to a pleasurable 'feeling-sensation', which in turn can form the condition for the arising of affects such as 'lust' (*rāga*), 'infatuation' (*pema*), etc. Whereas, if we encounter someone who tells us that we are stupid, then the 'feeling-sensation' is more likely to be unpleasant, which in turn can form the condition for the arising of affects such as 'aversion' (*paṭigha*) or 'hatred' (*dosa*), etc. The response to 'feeling-sensation' is going to be a particular affect, and *taṇhā* here, as I suggest, is not so much a particular affect, but is best understood metaphorically, as a general condition from which there can arise all manner of affects, including, as we shall see, what Buddhism regards as 'skilful' (*kusala*) affects, the kind of affects cultivated in an active spiritual life. (1997)

Gautama's skilful understanding of, and encounters with, *taṇhā* precipitated a spiritual search for liberation from the ills of unenlightened existence – a search culminating in his emergence as the man historically revered as the Buddha. Unskilful understanding of, or encounter with, *taṇhā* takes as its object some impermanent condition over which one has no direct control and, therefore, leads to further *dukkha*. Skilfulness with respect to *taṇhā*, however, takes as its object conditions that one *can* control, such as the renunciation of unwholesome attachments, and the directing of one's mental energies so as to realize peace and equanimity.

The Buddha carefully distinguished skilful from unskilful cognition, habit, and behavior. He did not simply condemn all experience of *taṇhā* irrespective of context or consequences. If an encounter with *taṇhā* does not generate *dukkha* or, moreover, actually facilitates the diminution of *dukkha*, then that experience, and a skilful understanding of it, can be part of a noble search for liberation. In 'Desire & Imagination in the Buddhist Path', Thanissaro Bhikkhu makes the point that the Buddha did not regard all desire as necessarily unskilful:

> The notion of a skilful desire may sound strange, but a mature mind intuitively pursues the desires it sees as skilful and drops those it perceives as not. Basic in everyone is the desire for happiness. Every other desire is a strategy for attaining that happiness. You want an iPod, a sexual partner, or an experience of inner peace because you think it will make you happy. Because these secondary desires are strategies, they follow a pattern. They spring from an inchoate feeling of lack and limitation; they employ your powers of perception to identify the cause of the limitation; and they use your powers of creative imagination to conceive a solution to it.
>
> *But despite their common pattern, desires are not monolithic*. Each offers a different perception of what's lacking in life, together with a different picture of what the solution should be. A desire for a sandwich comes from a perception of physical hunger and proposes to solve it with a Swiss-on-rye. A desire to climb a mountain focuses on a different set of hungers – for accomplishment, exhilaration, self-mastery – and appeals to a different image of satisfaction. *Whatever the desire, if the solution actually leads to happiness, the desire is skilful. If it doesn't, it's not*. However, what seems to be a skilful desire may lead only to a false or transitory happiness not worth the effort entailed. So wisdom starts as a meta-desire: to learn how to recognize skilful and unskilful desires for what they actually are. (2006; emphasis added)

The wise skilfully investigate, monitor, and govern their desires, and the objects of those desires, in pursuit of liberation from the ills endemic to unenlightened existence. They do not reflexively repudiate *all* desire as unhealthy or inappropriate.

Stephen Ruppenthal makes a similar observation in his introduction to Chapter 24 of Eknath Easwaran's translation of the *Dhammapada*:

> All the Buddha's teachings come round to this one practical point: to find permanent joy, we have to learn how not to yield to selfish desire.
>
> This conclusion is so contrary to human nature that it is not surprising to hear even experts maintain that in preaching the extinction of desire, the Buddha was denying everything that makes life worth living. But *trishna* [*taṇhā*] does not mean all desire; it means selfish desire, the conditioned craving for self-aggrandizement… *He distinguishes raw, unregulated, self-directed* trishna *from the unselfish and uplifting desire to dissolve one's egotism in selfless service of all*. The person who makes no effort to go against the base craving for personal satisfaction is headed for more sorrow. (1985, p.179; emphasis added)

So the effort to renounce 'base craving' and *selfish* desire is skilful and should not be disparaged simply because such effort is linked with desire. Ruppenthal pointedly inquires how such intense effort could possibly be made without the inspiration of desire for liberation from the common dissatisfactions of the all-too-human condition. He then cites the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* in support of his contention that the Buddha's analysis identifies *selfish* desires as antecedents of *dukkha*, and actually extols the virtues of skilful usages of unselfish desire in generating and sustaining wholesome mental states. Here is one example of a passage Ruppenthal cites in support of his contention:

> If, while holding on to concentration and one-pointedness of mind, one emphasizes desire, that is concentration of desire. One generates desire for the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen; he puts forth effort and mobilizes energy… He generates desire for the arising of wholesome states that have not yet arisen; he puts forth effort and mobilizes energy. (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, V 268)

So the desire for wholesome states, and behavior in accordance with that desire is skilful, whereas selfish desire for sense pleasure and gratification is unskilful and this '*kama-trishna*' (*kāma-taṇhā)* is a causal antecedent of *dukkha*.

Skilful habits of mind and conduct tend toward satisfaction and equanimity whereas unskilfulness tends toward dissatisfaction, discontent, distress – *dukkha*. Buddhism's central focus is the understanding of *dukkha*, its nature, origin, and prescribed methods designed to bring about its cessation. If *dukkha* ensues from selfish desire, enlightenment requires an understanding of criteria by which one may identify and relinquish selfish desire, as well as an understanding of the means by which one may understand and engage in skilful cultivation of appropriate desires. What exactly, though, differentiates wise encounters with desire from the thoughtless selfishness that increases and exacerbates needless suffering?

BUDDHIST SKILFULNESS AND EPICTETAN 'INTERNALS'

When it comes to desire and its objects, we tend to put the cart before the horse, so to speak. A self-centered desire forms, and we set about trying to bend conditions to the satisfaction of this desire. We try, in short, to make the world as we wish it to be. In doing so, we behave unskilfully. A recalcitrant world is apt to leave us unsatisfied. There is, I claim, a way to incorporate Epictetus' distinction between 'internals' (or that which is 'up to us') and 'externals' (or that which is *not* 'up to us') to clarify the Buddha's analysis of selfish desire (*taṇhā*) as distinct from a skilful understanding of, and encounter with, desire, aversion, and *taṇhā* as the pervasive condition in which the unenlightened find themselves. Selfish desire insists that the world conform to its

dictates, whereas a skilful understanding of desire involves the mental effort to produce harmony between one's mental states and unalterable conditions of reality by deft alteration of the 'internal' realm of cognition. In other words, selfish desire involves an insistence upon changing the world to suit one's whims, but skilfulness involves the effort to alter one's consciousness and attitudes so as to embrace conditions that simply lie beyond one's control. The Buddha and Epictetus both counselled mental discipline designed to reduce the needless suffering that inevitably results from ill-considered attitudes and desires. To insist that conditions of the 'external' world *must* be thus or so, especially when one lacks the power to produce the desired conditions, virtually assures discontent. Epictetus instructs his students about how to approach circumstances in which they encounter the pull of desire, and reveals a method for dealing wisely with this ubiquitous challenge:

> Why, what else but to distinguish between what is mine, and what not mine – what I can and what I cannot do? I must die; must I die groaning too? I must be exiled; does anyone keep me from going smiling and cheerful, and serene? 'Betray a secret?' I will not betray it, for this is in my own power. 'Then I will fetter you.' What do you say, man? Fetter me? You will fetter my leg, but not even Zeus himself can get the better of my free will… These are the things that philosophers ought to study; these they ought daily to write, and in these exercise themselves. (*Discourses*, Book I, Ch. One)

For it makes no sense to 'exercise' oneself concerning matters regarding which the strength of one's will has no purchase. It is wise to skilfully focus one's efforts upon that which lies within one's control, and to refrain from making demands upon, or hanging one's contentment upon, that which one cannot control by effort of will.

Rather than allowing selfless desire to ensue from our careful investigations of reality, we typically form prescriptive desires that tacitly demand conformity of a world that is almost entirely beyond our control. Epictetus perceived the perils of frustrated desire and taught that one should only desire that which one has the power directly to produce without mediation or complicity from the external world. The rest of reality's unfolding, the 'external' world, is to be embraced as it stands. The great Stoic, and onetime slave, counsels his students to:

> Demand not that events should happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen, and your life will be serene. (*Enchiridion*, 8)

Note that this is not the expression of a simple, fatalistic attitude, but rather a counsel to develop the mental discipline necessary to maintaining serenity no matter how surrounding events may unfold. Epictetus counselled others, but

did not allow his contentment to depend upon anyone adhering to his counsel. *His* efforts were his to control, but he could not produce the student's understanding or improvement by sheer force of his will. He regarded such states of affairs as 'externals' and did not rely upon them to secure his happiness or contentment. There must be rational limitations on desire and/or attachment to the satisfaction thereof. This is essential to attaining tranquility irrespective of changing external circumstances.

Truth is, arguably, the *sine qua non* of skilfulness in matters of belief. Though much else may be said for a belief – that it is, for example, interesting, useful, comforting, or pervasive – it is an epistemic failure insofar as it is untrue. The adoption of, or acquiescence in, false belief is not generally conducive to skilful interaction with the world because false beliefs do not, as it were, 'fit' the world with which one is engaged.

Startlingly enough, the otherwise obvious implications of reality's independence from our mental states seems to elude many of us when it comes to propriety or skilfulness in matters of desire. We inveterately fall into the habit of attempting to force the world to satisfy our desires and suffer frustration, anger, and anxiety as a result of our inability to do so. It is as if we believe that we can force a 'fit' between reality and our desires, even though we recognize the hopelessness of most attempts to force a similar 'fit' with our beliefs. There is, I suspect, at least a flash of irony in John Searle's characterization of the difference between our general attitudes regarding the world's relationship to our beliefs as opposed to our desires:

> It is the aim of belief to be true, and to the extent that belief is true, it succeeds. To the extent that it is false, it fails. Desires, on the other hand, are not supposed to represent how the world is, but how we would like it to be… In the case of desire it is, so to speak, the responsibility of the world to fit the content of the desire. (2004, pp.167–168)

Though Searle indicates that desire takes the world to be 'responsible' for conformity to its dictates, we all know that the world is, of course, *responsible* for no such thing. It is difficult to imagine what it would mean for the world itself to have responsibilities – and one wonders what could constitute a case of the world either meeting or shirking putative responsibilities. Facts need not conform to one's stubbornly fixed beliefs or desires.

THE INWARD TURN

Epictetus advised that our efforts should be directed only at 'objects', or conditions, lying within our sphere of direct influence. Only those parts of the world (the 'inner' world) that conform directly and without mediation to one's will are likely to conduce to the alleviation of distress and dissatisfaction – or

what the Buddha regarded as *dukkha*. Again, Epictetus made this distinction between 'internals' and 'externals' a centrepiece of his counsel regarding the conduct of a well-regulated, rational lifestyle:

> Remember that desire demands the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion demands the avoidance of that to which you are averse; that he who fails of the object of his desires is disappointed; and he who incurs the object of his aversion is wretched. (*Enchiridion*, 2)

This is a central purpose of the Stoic's practice of self-discipline:

> So, in our own case, we take it to be the work of one who studies philosophy to bring his will into harmony with events; so that none of the things which happen may happen against our inclination, nor those which do not happen be desired by us. Hence they who have settled this point have it in their power never to be disappointed in what they seek, nor to incur what they shun; but to lead their own lives without sorrow, fear, or perturbation, and in society to preserve all the natural or acquired relations of son, father, brother, citizen, husband, wife, neighbour, fellow traveller, ruler, or subject. Something like this is what we take to be the work of a philosopher. (*Discourses*, Book II, Ch. Fourteen)

It should be noted that bringing one's 'will into harmony with events' does not imply a reflexive fatalism or simple-minded acquiescence irrespective of circumstances, but rather a recognition that many states of affairs are not, as Epictetus would put it, 'up to us'. One should not, for example, simply shrug at the criminal or refrain from attempting to reform him (if this appears possible). It may well be advisable, in fact, to imprison him (if he seems incorrigible). One should, however, recognize that criminality might (and probably will) persist irrespective of one's best efforts to dissuade criminals or counsel their rehabilitation. It is folly to peg one's contentment to another person's behavior or to defer equanimity until such time as all persons and conditions conform to one's stubbornly held conceptions of how things 'ought to be'. The wise (or the skilful) understand the distinction between those conditions that lie within their control and those conditions that do not. It is *selfish* (or self-centered) desire that attempts to impose its dictates upon those phenomena over which it ultimately has no control. The self – or what one conceives of as the self – makes demands upon the 'external' world, or upon 'things which are beyond our power', as Epictetus puts it. This is the hallmark of selfish, or irrational and unskilful, desire. The 'I' insists upon having its way – 'The world must obey me!' Healthy (or skilful) desire, on the other hand, seeks to alter 'internal' states that are 'within our power', such as aversion, craving, attitude, etc. Skilful desire impels one to set about producing 'inner'

conformity with unalterable 'external' conditions. This type of desire is adaptive to changing and uncontrollable conditions of reality.

Selfish desire seeks to impose itself upon other persons and states of affairs in the world 'out there'. When combined with the urge to eradicate those who disagree with one's worldview, this tends to generate needless conflict and suffering ensues. One may, of course, attempt to enlighten other persons, teaching them methods whereby they may attain serenity or equanimity, thereby attempting to 'make the world a better place', but whether others heed that counsel is beyond the teacher's control. It is worth noting that wise men such as the Buddha and Epictetus were, after all, sometimes ignored and even ridiculed. Instead, we must embrace the world, its people, and its conditions by skilfully relinquishing the insistence that they *must* change in one way or another, and by employing rationally directed desire as a means of generating equanimity irrespective of the vicissitudes of our experience.

One need not renounce the desire to accept, embrace, or desist in one's opposition to conditions that lie beyond one's control. One need not renounce the desire for 'self'-improvement and 'self'-control, or even the desire to *attempt* to teach others how to improve themselves. Such desires, properly managed, may be very useful tools in the effort to reduce needless suffering. Epictetus and the Buddha do not proffer identical conceptions of the nature of the 'self', but this does not preclude a deep confluence of practical counsel regarding the proper governance of desire and its relationship to living a wise and tranquil life.

Conclusion

Ancient Rome produced a sagacious counselor steeped in the western milieu, and Epictetus' wisdom survives and inspires even up to the present day, though the source of that wisdom is woefully under-appreciated and infrequently acknowledged. Epictetus' analysis of the distinction between 'internals' and 'externals' provides one useful way for westerners to conceive Buddhist skilfulness with respect to desire and its possible concomitants. Epictetan counsel undoubtedly departs from the Buddha's worldview in certain respects (e.g. Stoic pantheism), but we should not, therefore, dismiss it as entirely alien to, or incompatible with, the Dharma. Indeed, differences in manifestation are to be expected when the same truths are approached from disparate socio-cultural and historical starting points. Let us be prepared to explore, investigate, and respect wise counsel wherever we may find it – irrespective of cultural, geographical, or historical origin. Let us embrace all that is to be valued within our own heritage, but also reach out to find points of contact upon which further and richer understanding may develop between

spiritual pilgrims from all points of the compass, thereby providing for mutual enrichment of their respective traditions and practices. We may find connections uniting us at greater depths than we had previously fathomed.

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