Nietzsche and Early Buddhism

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Western scholarship in the field of comparing Nietzsche and Buddhism got off to a shrill and not very promising start with the publication in 1933 of Nietzsche und der Buddhismus by Max Ladner.1 (I say “Western” because essays on this topic began to appear in Japan in the 1890s, even before Nietzsche’s death.2) An adulator of Wagner, Ladner admits from the start that he has no interest in attaining a comprehensive understanding of Nietzsche’s thought, since it would be a joyless undertaking even to try. Nor does the author make any attempt to conceal his animosity toward the Nietzsche half of his subject, so that his utter contempt is evident on almost every page. His method—though that term may overly dignify the procedure—is to plod chronologically through almost every utterance Nietzsche made concerning Buddhism and show how hopelessly wrongheaded his understanding was. Since it is especially misleading in the case of Nietzsche’s writings to take isolated remarks out of context, Ladner’s conclusions are less than illuminating. And because the author at no point displays any appreciation for the nature of Nietzsche’s philosophical project, this first book on Nietzsche and Buddhism is of use mainly for its references to the relevant textual passages.

1

In 1981 Freny Mistry, a Nietzsche scholar from India who studied in Germany, published a book in English titled Nietzsche and Buddhism (the book under review here). She brought to the work a rare combination of qualifications: an excellent grasp of Nietzsche’s thought and a comprehensive understanding of early (Theravāda) Buddhism. Although there is the occasional stylistic infelicity and missed diacritical mark, as well as some incoherence in the book’s organization, it is a carefully and broadly researched study presented in clear and direct prose. It opens with the citation of an unpublished note that Nietzsche wrote in the early 1880s, in which he says: “I could be the Buddha of Europe: though admittedly an antipode to the Indian Buddha.” Mistry announces her intention to show that the putative an-
tipodes are in fact surprisingly close, “despite marked differences in expression and perspective,” and that Nietzsche and the Buddha (as portrayed in the early Buddhist scriptures) “showed complementary ways to self-redemption” (pp. 1, 4).

In the introduction Mistry carefully documents the main sources from which Nietzsche drew his conception of Buddhism, and points up “the marked ambivalence” that characterizes Nietzsche’s explicit references to the Buddha and his doctrines. The main texts are (in the probable order of his encountering them): Carl Koeppen’s Die Religion des Buddha (Berlin, 1859), M. Coomaraswamy’s Dialogues and Discourses of Gotama Buddha (London, 1874), Max Müller’s Essays II: Beiträge zur vergleichende Mythologie und Ethnologie (Leipzig, 1869), Hermann Oldenberg’s Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde (Berlin, 1881), and H. Kern’s Der Buddhismus und seine Geschichte in Indien (Leipzig, 1884). Throughout the course of her study the author speculates intelligently on the sources for Nietzsche’s understanding of particular Buddhist ideas, citing the relevant passages in English translation, and then evaluates the reliability of these secondary texts by comparing them with the corresponding Buddhist scriptures.

The first chapter, “The Overcoming of Metaphysics and Nihilism,” takes its orientation from Nietzsche’s frequent remarks on the parallels between the intellectual and spiritual revolutions that took place during the time of the Buddha and the changing situation in nineteenth-century Europe. Mistry draws parallels between the Vedânta philosophy prevalent in India and Schopenhauer’s thought (which was influenced by it), and then between the respective “overcomings of metaphysics” effected by Nietzsche and the Buddha. They both aim at overcoming nihilism, she suggests, through a reliance on human capacities rather than a faith in some salvific power beyond the natural world.

In “The Analysis of Personality and Universe,” she compares the Buddha’s breaking down of the “I,” or self, into the five “aggregates” with Nietzsche’s analysis of the “I,” or subject, into a multiplicity of drives, noting the emphasis from both sides on the living human body. Correspondingly, they both understand things and substances as merely conventional unities rather than entities “in themselves,” and as being posited by human beings in an attempt to avoid facing up to the basic fact of impermanence. Mistry then delineates the parallels between the Buddhist conception of elements of existence continually arising and perishing in “dependent co-origination” and Nietzsche’s conception of the world as a complex play of “will to power.” In both cases redemption is to be found in the here-and-now rather than in a world beyond, though in theory (early) “Buddhism advocates the overcoming of the will altogether” whereas Nietzsche aims at a continual self-overcoming of the energies that make up will to power (pp. 69–70).

The third chapter deals with “the experiment with truth and reason.” Rather than relying on any kind of revealed Truth emanating from God or the beyond, the Buddha and Nietzsche both advocate the employment of human powers of insight and wisdom (as opposed to merely theoretical reflection) toward the goal of attaining, in a “scientific” manner, various truths (in the plural) about the world. Mistry shows how Nietzsche misunderstood the Buddhist teaching on emptiness (śūnyatā) as passively

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nihilistic, through being unaware of the Buddha’s warnings against attachment to śūnyatā as a theory: “Śūnyatā seeks to ‘empty’ reality of thought-constructs and opinions, not of meaning altogether, as Nietzsche believes it to do” (p. 99). The chapter closes with an illuminating demonstration of the affinities between the Buddha’s and Nietzsche’s psychological strategies for effective teaching.

Chapter 4 is an insightful treatment of the problem of “suffering.” Nietzsche reproached Buddhism as a form of “passive nihilism” on the grounds that its aim is the elimination of suffering and is thereby a denial of life. Mistry argues convincingly that much of Nietzsche’s antipathy toward Buddhism on this topic stemmed from his associating it with Schopenhauer and Wagner, whose ideas he had come to repudiate. She shows that Nietzsche misunderstood what Buddhism is saying about suffering because of “a lack of adequate information available to him on what the term dukkha implies in Buddhism” (p. 120), a term which — because it also connotes joy and even bliss — is inadequately rendered as “suffering.” The Buddha’s focus is on eliminating such “causes” of dukkha as “selfish craving and lack of self-control, hatred, enmity, dejection, sloth, inertia, lust, anxiety, doubt, and . . . the presumption of a metaphysical-individual ego-substance” (p. 122). Nietzsche similarly mistook the Buddhist project of eradicating tanhā (craving) as being life-denying, and Mistry points out that tanhā is not desire per se, but “ego-ridden craving” founded on ignorance and consisting of “the desire for immortality or for annihilation, for metaphysical beliefs and soul theories” (p. 131). By showing that “non-attachment” is important in Nietzsche, and that the Buddhists advocate active endeavor and compassion in the sense of “creative friendship” as means of self-overcoming, she reveals significant harmonies between the two apparently disparate projects.

Nietzsche writes that he arrived at his idea of eternal recurrence, which he regarded as the most life-affirming idea possible, through a confrontation with the “opposite ideal,” a “world-renouncing” mode of thought that he thought was advocated by the Buddha and Schopenhauer. Mistry’s fifth chapter shows that Nietzsche again misunderstood Buddhism on this point, and that the thought of eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche called a “European form of Buddhism,” is actually opposed to the Indian form in only minor respects. She cites Nietzsche’s unpublished notes — from when he was working to finish Thus Spoke Zarathustra and to achieve a satisfactory formulation of the thought of recurrence — that show he was reading passages in Oldenberg’s Buddha dealing with Buddhist ideas of recurrence. It seems very likely that some of the imagery he found in Oldenberg found its way into his thinking about eternal recurrence. Mistry tends in this chapter to take both the Nietzschean and Buddhist ideas too literally for my taste: eternal recurrence as a statement about the way the world really is rather than an existential imperative, and death and rebirth as occurring between successive reincarnations rather than at every moment within this life. Nevertheless her conclusion that both sides are aiming at “perfect” activity in this present existence is well drawn.

In the book’s final chapter, “The Transfiguration of Suffering and Nirvana,” she consolidates her argument that, in spite of Nietzsche’s understanding (and consequent rejection) of nirvāṇa as a nihilistic condition, his existential project is, ironi-
cally, remarkably close to the Buddha’s. She demonstrates that Walter Kaufmann’s characterization of the ideal of nirvāṇa as “the very antithesis of Nietzsche’s apotheosis of creativity” is wrongheaded, being based on an unquestioning acceptance of Nietzsche’s (mis)conception of the goal of Buddhist practice (pp. 186–188). In spite of a few divergences, which Mistry is careful to delineate, she concludes that both Nietzsche and Buddhism in some sense aim at “redemption in this world through the creative transformation of suffering.”

As mentioned above, I think that *Nietzsche and Buddhism* could have been more coherently organized. My only other reservation concerns two methodological features. The author tends to cite passages from the entirety of Nietzsche’s writings indiscriminately, treating notes from the *Nachlass* on a par with passages from the published works. She also quotes a great deal from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but without distinguishing what is said through the persona of Zarathustra from Nietzsche’s voices as quoted from his other, nonnarrative works. The combination makes for a reading of Nietzsche that is less subtle than it might have been. But all in all this is a definitive and comprehensive treatment of an important, and generally neglected, aspect of Nietzsche’s thought. Mistry’s contention that the affinities between the Buddhist and Nietzschean paths to self-overcoming are surprisingly numerous and by no means merely superficial is convincingly argued, and her book therefore constitutes—as its subtitle suggests it is intended to—a powerful stimulus for further comparative studies.

II

The first thing that struck me on seeing Robert G. Morrison’s *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, which is a shorter book than Mistry’s (the pages being much smaller), was the strangeness of his choosing the same title. Why not *Nietzsche and Early Buddhism* for instance? Nor does the “ironic affinities” of his subtitle distinguish it much, if it means that some salient features of Nietzsche’s thinking have significant counterparts in the Buddhism that he for the most part rejected—since this is, as we have seen, precisely Mistry’s argument. So it is only natural to raise the question: what does the new *Nietzsche and Buddhism* offer that the old one didn’t? In order to be in a position to answer this question, I reread Mistry’s book in its entirety before reading Morrison’s.

In view of Mistry’s subtitle, *Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study*, one might expect the later book to begin where the earlier left off, perhaps by undertaking a comparison with Mahāyāna Buddhism rather than the Theravāda tradition. But such an expectation is unfulfilled, since Morrison’s study turns out to cover pretty much the same ground as Mistry’s, with only a very few references to the Mahāyāna. Time and again the same passages and sources are cited and exposted, which is natural if one is making the same comparison—but redundant unless one is drawing different conclusions. Is it possible that Morrison didn’t know of Mistry’s book? No: it appears in his bibliography, although, as one of the shortest entries among thirteen pages of secondary sources, it is easy to overlook. So the *raison d’être* for the new *Nietzsche*
and Buddhism must be that Mistry’s position is discussed and criticized, or her major theses qualified or refuted. No: all one finds is five rather cursory footnotes (from a total of over seven hundred) referring to the earlier book, with no engagement with any of its arguments.

Can it be, then, that the author is an amateur scholar, innocent of the rules of the game? No: the jacket blurb informs us that he is a lecturer in Buddhist studies, and he explains in his preface that he wrote “a Ph.D. thesis on Nietzsche and Buddhism.” But if his advisor(s) explained to him how to deal with previously published scholarship on one’s topic, the candidate appears to have ignored that advice. Surely, if someone has already done the research, presented the material, and made the arguments, you say so in your dissertation—and then take it from there and do something new, or different, with that material. Or, if the earlier work is unsatisfactory, you say so and explain why. What you don’t do is just say the same things over again in your own words, as if they hadn’t already been said—even if you then go on, as Morrison does, to develop a few ideas of your own.

For anyone familiar with Mistry’s study, the large amount of repetition in Morrison’s book makes reading it a very frustrating experience—and a distressing confirmation of the Buddha’s first Noble Truth. I was tempted to forgo reviewing it altogether, on the Nietzschean grounds that it is better simply to “pass by” rather than expend time and energy saying negative things. But Nietzsche also emphasizes responsibility, and we seem to be forgetting these days that to publish a book makes one responsible for a considerable expenditure of other people’s time and money (not to mention natural resources). I should mention, too, that Freny Mistry met a tragically early death in a traffic accident several years ago, so that I feel called upon in some sense to speak up on her behalf.

Two further considerations weighed against opting out. The first is that the topic is one of the most interesting in comparative philosophy, and deserves more discussion than it has received so far. The more important reason has to do with the prestige of the publisher, which tends to confer credibility upon the book’s contents. It’s a sad thing to have to criticize an institution one has long admired—enough to make one long for the old days, when the sight of one of Oxford’s books standing in the library shelves, quietly resplendent in its gold lettering and noble crest on a background of deep navy blue, provided assurance that it contained scholarship of the highest standard, usually couched in prose as elegant as it was erudite. But the new Nietzsche and Buddhism falls into a different class altogether, reading more like a run-of-the-mill doctoral dissertation than a work of real scholarship. The text suffers from gratuitous repetitiveness, factual errors, misprints, and a style that is awkward to the point of syntactical blunders. Its publication in such an ill-fashioned state may actually be a disservice to the field of comparative philosophy.

The book’s opening sentence, which it is prudent to make special efforts to get right, hardly inspires confidence. “On an autumn day in Leipzig in the year 1864, the young Nietzsche—a directionless and despairing 21-year-old—was browsing in a second-hand bookshop owned by his landlord…” (p. 3). Most people who know anything about Nietzsche’s life know that he was born in 1844, so that,
depending on whether this autumn day was before or after October 15, he would have been a despairing nineteen- or twenty-year-old at the time. And in the autumn of 1864 he was beginning his university studies at Bonn, not moving to Leipzig until October of 1865. Minor points, perhaps, but, appearing as they do in the first sentence of the book, they become emblematic of the work as a whole. Morrison keeps getting Nietzsche’s age wrong (p. 64), even when the sources he cites have it right. He then has Nietzsche being “forced into an early retirement at the age of 31 by his recurring illnesses” (p. 108), when in fact he persevered with his professorship until he was almost 35. Further down the page the author remarks that many of Nietzsche’s symptoms may have been “no more than the effects of congenital syphilis.” Although Nietzsche’s eventual breakdown very probably was a consequence of syphilis, there is no evidence whatsoever that it was congenital. Again these points are not central to Morrison’s primary concerns; but in view of the amount of responsible literature on Nietzsche, it is superfluous to make them without taking care to get them right.

The misprints dismay especially since they, too, start early. A few examples: “EC” for “EH” (p. 4), “afterall” (p. 5), “übungeninnerer” for “Übungen innerer” (p. 27), “I will not deal directly with the Fourth Noble Truths here” (p. 31), and “Begier” for “Begierde” (p. 66). Italics are sometimes withheld from book titles in the footnotes, and then, as if in compensation, they take over entire lines of text (pp. 157 and 159).

The repetitiveness also sets in early. In his second chapter, speaking for Nietzsche, Morrison writes:

> Buddhism no longer speaks of “the struggle against sin;” but, quite in accordance with actuality, the “struggle against suffering” which is simply a physiological fact. It therefore has “the . . . self-deception of moral concepts behind it. . . .” (p. 25)

Four pages later, he cites the well-known passage in *The Antichrist*, which says that Buddhism, unlike Christianity,

> no longer speaks of “the struggle against sin;” but, quite in accordance with actuality, the “struggle against suffering.” It already has . . . the self-deception of moral concepts behind it. (p. 29)

And then, just two pages after that, he reminds us yet again that Nietzsche says that Buddhism

> no longer speaks of “the struggle against sin;” but, quite in accordance with actuality, the “struggle against suffering.” (p. 31)

—and appends, for the third time in six pages, a footnote referring the reader to aphorism 20 of *The Antichrist*. In the context, these repetitions accomplish nothing save to insult the reader’s intelligence and arouse grim expectations of what is to come. Even more astonishing than the author’s obliviousness to such redundancies is the fact that no editor saw fit to recommend excisions.

Plodding prose is especially hard to put up with when the topic is as consummate a stylist as Nietzsche, but in Morrison’s case it often comes down to syntactic
and semantic incoherence. Dangling participles abound, verbs fail to agree in number with their subjects, and relative pronouns hover confusingly over ranges of possible antecedents. The following two sentences give an idea of the problems:

It is by working on and with the affects that comprises [Nietzsche’s] notion of self-overcoming, that constitutes the accumulative process of qualitatively higher expressions of the will to power, a process that he considers will eventually bring forth his new kind of being, the Übermenschen. Therefore, although we may know little of the workings of our unconscious “under-wills,” the fact that he considers that whatever goes on in the body terminates as our affects, and that such affects are symptoms of the sickness or health of the body, the fact that self-overcoming is a matter of our working with the affects means that knowledge of the unknown workings of the body is not of immediate or prime importance. (p. 109)

Even if one can reconstruct from this something that makes sense, it still doesn’t constitute a coherent interpretation of what Nietzsche is saying.

III

The first, shorter part of Morrison’s book is titled “Nietzsche’s Buddhism” and is an account of how Nietzsche misunderstood Buddhism and the sources of that misunderstanding. The second part, “Ironic Affinities,” delineates the parallels between Nietzsche’s and Theravāda Buddhist ideas, his misunderstanding of them notwithstanding.

A question that is basic to any comparison of this kind concerns the sources of Nietzsche’s conception of Buddhism, but for some reason Morrison delays discussion of these until the end of his part 1, where he has nothing to add to what is given in Mistry’s account. He follows her in saying that Koeppen’s book is the first work on Buddhism that Nietzsche read, in 1870, and suggests this as a source “for Nietzsche’s view that nirvana is the ‘desire for nothingness’ and implies total annihilation of the individual at death” (p. 53).

Morrison apparently reads Pali, but was clearly hampered in his research for this book by a lack of German. An examination of Nietzsche’s juvenilia (published in the 1930s and available in a current reprint) shows that he was wondering about the Sanskrit words aham (I) and ahāmkara (I-ness) as early as 1861, when he presumably came across them in one of his classes at school.3 Had Morrison consulted the work (published after Mistry’s book) of scholars like Johann Figl, he would have learned that Nietzsche’s acquaintance with Indian thought dates back to his schooldays at Schulpforta (1858–1864), and that he was introduced to Buddhism by a lecture course he attended during his second semester as a student at Bonn (1865).4 In fact, if Morrison had looked at an obviously relevant work, Nietzsche and Asian Thought, he would have found an English translation of an essay of Figl’s which cites the following passage from Nietzsche’s lecture notes from 1865:

In Buddhism there is an even deeper submersion into pantheistic nihilism. Nirvana is the goal[: “annihilation.”]}5
This is surely a more significant source for Nietzsche’s understanding of nirvāṇa as “desire for nothingness.” A couple of years later, however, he is using the term “nirvana” in a positive sense, to refer to blissful states occasioned by listening to music (by Liszt) and contemplating the beauties of nature (rivers and valleys near Leipzig and Bonn).6

Morrison’s surmise that Nietzsche’s views could have been influenced by “the Sanskrit and Pali scholars he talked to at the university of Basle” (p. 55) sounds as if it concerns potentially interesting new material—at least until one realizes that there were no Sanskrit or Pāli scholars there in Nietzsche’s day.

The new Nietzsche and Buddhism begins with a discussion of “the historical parallel between India at the time of the Buddha and the Europe of [Nietzsche’s] own milieu” (p. 8), which was treated, as we saw, by Mistry in her first chapter. Morrison then proceeds to an account of Nietzsche’s criticisms of Buddhism for being nihilistic in a negative sense, for promoting “passive” rather than “active nihilism”—another topic discussed at length by Mistry (introduction and chapters 1, 4, and 6). Although he provides a more detailed analysis of the notion of dukkha, Morrison has nothing to add to her conclusion that “Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Buddhist view of suffering is essentially a misconstruction” (Mistry, p. 116), even though an understandable one in view of the state of scholarship at the time.

The second part of the book begins with a chapter titled “Nietzsche’s View of Man.” One could perhaps appreciate as quaint the use of the term “man” throughout the text, if feminist criticism hadn’t made it important to understand that Nietzsche is almost always writing about der Mensch, human beings, and by no means excluding “woman.” Much of the chapter consists of a labored, and not very relevant, account of Darwin and Nietzsche’s response to him. But there is no sense whatsoever of the evolution of Nietzsche’s thinking—quotes from early works are juxtaposed indiscriminately with citations from late works—nor of the specific differences between texts that Nietzsche spent enormous energy on seeing into publication and notes which he chose not to publish (as in much of the non-Nietzsche book The Will to Power).

Chapter 7 is remarkable for its structure: it is divided into two more or less equal sections, the second of which is marked “7.1.” It seems that word-processing tools are beginning to prevail over human editors. The conclusion from these first two chapters is that there are affinities between Nietzsche’s idea of the human being as a particular pattern of will to power within the larger relational matrix of the natural world and the Buddhist understanding of the human being—and of the human body especially, as conditioned by patīcca-samuppāda (“dependent co-arising”). A valid conclusion—but again one that is already argued for in considerable detail by Mistry (in her second chapter).

Chapter 8 bears the first promising title of Morrison’s book: “Nietzsche’s ‘Little Things,’ the ‘Body,’ and the Buddhist Khandas”—though why the “body” should be in quote marks is unclear. By drawing our attention to what Nietzsche has to say about “the little things” such as “the food we eat, our metabolism, where we live, our climatic environment” (p. 102), the author is surely on the right track for affin-
ities with Buddhism. Indeed Nietzsche’s enthusiasm over “the small, inconspicuous truths” dates farther back than the late work from which Morrison quotes, to the time of Human, All Too Human. But then he spoils it by trivializing the concern with the little things as “just Nietzsche grumbling” and as “no more than aids to self-overcoming,” and then negating them completely by saying: “much, if not all, can be achieved without them” (pp. 108–109). The “if not all” totally nullifies the insistence of both Nietzsche and the Buddhists on the benefits of full awareness of the specific, here-and-now details of our actual lives.

In a section on the “body” and the “aggregates” Morrison begins with Nietzsche’s idea of “subject multiplicity” and the human body as a corresponding multiplicity of “under-wills.” This is again on the right track for an illuminating comparison with the Buddhist idea of the khandas (better known in Sanskrit as skandhas). But the incoherence of the prose—as exemplified in the passage on page 109 that was quoted above—soon gives way to a misunderstanding of Nietzsche’s conception of the drives, or affects, which is of central importance here. With reference to aphorism 119 of Dawn of Morning, Morrison writes:

Man is, therefore, nothing other than “the totality of [his] drives,” which ebb and flow in a continual flux of becoming, formed, to a greater or lesser degree, by the stimulus afforded by the environment. (p. 110)

Nietzsche does, indeed, understand the individual as a configuration of drives (Trieben), but in doing so he points up the predominance of inner forces over external in the constitution of the individual. The drives are by no means “formed . . . by the stimulus afforded by the environment”; rather, they constitute that environment by interpreting what Nietzsche calls “nerve stimuli.” What is significant about the drives is that even though each individual configuration of them is unique, the drives themselves are transpersonal, and animate the living body with energies that flow from archaic sources.7

Morrison does acknowledge the role of the “evolutionary past” for Nietzsche, but he goes wrong in saying that “to truly affirm life” consists of the higher type’s “adding distance between himself and his animal past.” Of course Nietzsche regards someone who is dominated by animal drives as no better than a beast; but in living affirmatively the point is to engage one’s “animal past” in the right way—by training the animal drives without taming them.8 If Morrison had a better understanding of Nietzsche’s ideas on the archaic character of the drives, he could have developed his remarks on the Buddhist notion of “past karmic action” into an interesting theme. As it is, Mistry’s “analysis of personality and universe” in terms of the multiplicity of the body and the Buddhist “aggregates” remains the more informative treatment of these rich topics.

The next chapter, “‘God’s Shadow’ and the Buddhist ‘No-Self’ Doctrine,” pretty much recapitulates Mistry’s discussion (in her first three chapters) of the denial of God, substance, a metaphysical realm, and the self in Buddhism and Nietzsche. At the beginning of his tenth chapter, “‘The Will to Power’ and ‘Thirst,’” Morrison writes:
As Nietzsche’s notion of will to power has its paradigm in Hesiod’s notion of Eris or Strife, I will use the notion of Erôs as found in Plato’s Symposium as a paradigm for tanhā (“thirst”). (p. 133)

(The reader may be excused some puzzlement over the author’s methodology at this point.) There are indeed affinities between will to power and Platonic and cosmogonic erôs, even though the ideas concerning “force-center” physics that Nietzsche learned from Boscovich and Lange were more important for the development of his understanding of “the world will to power” (as Morrison documents in an earlier chapter). The discussion of tanhā is much more extensive than in Mistry’s book, but the roundabout comparisons of “paradigms” are strained and ultimately not very illuminating.

IV

Finally, in his last two chapters, Morrison begins to hit his stride as far as marking the “ironic affinities” is concerned. Chapter 11 compares the process of self-overcoming in Nietzsche with the Buddhist practice of citta-bhāvanā, which he translates as “mind-development.” This is potentially an enlightening comparison, and the discussion of the Buddhist ideas is informative, but the author’s poor understanding of what Nietzsche is saying prevents him from doing anything very interesting with it.

The main problem here derives from Morrison’s condescending attitude toward his subject. Nietzsche’s theme of self-overcoming is “not sufficiently worked out” (p. 158); he is portrayed as “trying to achieve” something in the area of communicating ideas, but as failing (p. 160); his idea of sublimation is “a little simplistic” (p. 162); there are “no clear answers in Nietzsche’s writing” to the questions the author poses for him (p. 163); and, moreover, “what little advice Nietzsche has given above raises more questions than it answers” (p. 167). It apparently never occurs to Dr. Morrison that the shortcoming may not lie with Herr Nietzsche but rather with himself as an insufficiently careful reader of his works.

At least Morrison sees that the first step on the way to self-overcoming is the attainment of self-mastery. He cites the passage in Twilight of the Idols where Nietzsche says that the first phase is a “preschooling in spirituality [Geistigkeit]” which consists of “gaining control over the restraining instincts.”9 Having decided that Nietzsche is incapable of elaborating his ideas adequately, Morrison proposes to do it for him with “an attempted model”: “To picture what Nietzsche is trying to express from the various glimpses of his often uncompleted thoughts, a Hegelian-like dialectical model may help” (p. 168). I think not. What does help is to read with care and attention what Nietzsche actually wrote. If, instead of devoting his energies to complaining about uncompleted thoughts, Morrison had bothered to look for an account of the next stage in self-overcoming by reading the next section of Twilight of the Idols, he would have found what he was looking for. There Nietzsche writes that one “loses spirit”—and Geist is for him “the great self-mastery”—“when one no longer needs it” (Twilight of the Idols, 9.14). And since Morrison is confident that
Nietzsche “has left no guiding examples of his method” (p. 159), he fails to see that the consummate exemplification of one who goes beyond “great self-mastery” to successful self-overcoming is given a few pages further on, in the person of Goethe.

Nietzsche leads up to this guiding example by emphasizing something that is significantly consistent with Buddhist practice: that the true locus of culture is not the soul or spirit, but the body (Leib). He then says that “progress” in his sense is “coming back up to a lofty, free, and terrible nature and naturalness.” The exemplar is Goethe, who managed to “come back up to the naturalness of the Renaissance” (*Twilight of the Idols*, 9.47, 48, 49):

What Goethe wanted was totality ... he disciplined himself into wholeness, he created himself.... He conceived of a strong, highly cultured human being, adept in a range of physical skills [Leiblichkeiten], self-controlled and with reverence for himself, who can dare to grant himself the full range and richness of naturalness, and who is strong enough for this freedom.

The final stage of self-overcoming, then, consists of daring, after prolonged practice of self-mastery, to relax the discipline and trust to natural spontaneity. Morrison does mention later on “a movement from consciousness to instinct” in Nietzsche (p. 214), but he doesn’t elaborate or make clear that this is instinct refined through protracted discipline. (This pattern of extended practice succeeded by natural spontaneity is typical of many of the arts, martial as well as fine, that were developed in Japan under the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism.)

The eventual relaxation takes daring because the ego, which would otherwise control the process, has been overcome—dissolved into a plurality of drives—in the course of the protracted self-discipline. What is responsible for the disciplining are various (groups of) drives, and there comes a point where the discipline is no longer necessary because these various groups have learned to live in harmony with each other. Morrison fails to see the inconsistency of his supposing that it is the “I” that is doing the self-overcoming, since he never asks the (very Buddhist) question Nietzsche so often poses: Who, or which drive, or what group of affects is the agent of willing, disciplining, or whatever, in this particular situation? More generally, he detracts from the richness of Nietzsche’s account of self-overcoming by discussing only one of the metaphorical levels, that of cultivation, through which it is presented—ignoring the several parallel discourses that draw imagery from the natural elements, artistic workings of these, animal breeding and training, libidinal economics, internal politics of the psyche, and so forth.11 These discursive fields would surely provide fruitful grounds for further comparisons with Buddhism.

The title of Morrison’s final chapter is meant to set up a contrast between Nietzsche’s undertaking of “learning to see” and the Buddhist aim of “seeing and knowing things as they really are.” The author spends a lot of time worrying about a contradiction he posits between Nietzsche’s well-known deprecation of consciousness (Bewusstsein) and the necessary role he (Morrison) thinks it would have to play in the process of self-overcoming (pp. 204, 206). By overlooking the obvious point that what is conscious (in the sense of bewusst) for Nietzsche is always conditioned

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by language, Morrison misses another close affinity between the Nietzschean and Buddhist projects. It is precisely Nietzsche’s insistence on the deep wisdom of the body, and on the fact that almost all of our “drive-life” goes on beneath the level of consciousness, that brings him close to the Buddhists’ insistence on the somatic aspects of mindfulness and their efforts to circumvent or undercut conceptual thinking—which takes place consciously, in language.

Morrison rightly emphasizes Nietzsche’s conception of objectivity as a matter of bringing as many perspectives to bear on the situation as possible. But if he had reflected upon Nietzsche’s characterization of “learning to see” as “learning to comprehend and deal with each individual case from all sides,” he would have realized that there is in fact something in Nietzsche that corresponds to the Buddhist aim of “seeing and knowing things as they really are.”12 It is accessible by following the important thrust in Nietzsche’s thinking away from the anthropocentric standpoint: “As a researcher into nature,” he writes in The Joyous Science (aphorism 349), “one should come out of one’s human corner.”

One way to get out of one’s human corner is to “die” to the normal perspectives in which we look at the world, undergoing a “death with waking eyes”—but with eyes open to the “net of light” in which all things are spun as if buried in it. In a later, corresponding account, Zarathustra sees things as they are: “baptized in the well of eternity.” Nietzsche also characterizes the necessary kind of dying as a “festival” in which we cross over to the dead world of the inorganic, realizing our fundamental identity with rock and stone. Another way to get beneath the level of consciousness is to “realize egoism as an error,” and “Feel cosmically!”13 There is a mystical evocation of the condition of having come out of one’s human corner in the chapter “Before Sunrise” in Zarathustra (3.4), where the protagonist, after an all-night vigil, greets the heavens before the sun rises over the sea and while the light illumines all things evenly, without bias or slant. Under these conditions, Zarathustra is surely able to “see and know things as they are”: free from “their bondage under purpose” and enjoying what Nietzsche elsewhere calls “the innocence of becoming.”14

Mistry’s work, as an illuminating prolegomenon to a comparative study of Nietzsche and Buddhism, accomplishes a thorough preparation of the ground. In the last quarter of his book Morrison begins to cultivate some of that ground and extends it to a couple of new topoi, but his work is insufficiently thorough. Had he condensed the first three quarters of the book into a preliminary chapter recapitulating Mistry’s accomplishments, and then devoted his energies to a thorough elaboration of the themes he introduces in his final two chapters, he could perhaps have come up with a study that furthers our understanding of the field. As it is, readers interested in the current state of scholarship won’t miss anything by ignoring the first ten chapters of Morrison’s book, reading Mistry’s study first, and then turning to the final two chapters of the new Nietzsche and Buddhism.

Both books would in fact be more accurately titled Nietzsche and Early Buddhism. When one goes beyond the question of influence to comparative studies per se, later Buddhism provides in my view even more fertile ground. The extension of
the comparison to Mahāyāna schools of Buddhist philosophy, which has already
been well begun by Japanese scholars, promises even greater increases in our
understanding of Nietzsche, Buddhism, and—more important—ourselves and the
world.15

Notes

1 – Max Ladner, Nietzsche und der Buddhismus: Kritische Betrachtungen eines
Buddhisten (Zürich: Juchli-Beck, 1933).

2 – For more details, see my essay, “The Early Reception of Nietzsche’s Philosophy
in Japan,” in Graham Parkes, ed., Nietzsche and Asian Thought (Chicago: University

3 – See H. J. Mette, ed., Friedrich Nietzsche Jugendschriften (Munich: Deutscher

4 – Johann Figl, “Nietzsche’s frühe Begegnung mit dem Denken Indiens,”
jungen Nietzsche,” in Elisabeth Gössmann and Günter Zobel, eds., Das Gold
im Wachs: Festschrift für Thomas Immoos zum 70. Geburtstag (Munich: Ludi-

5 – Johann Figl, “Nietzsche’s Early Encounters with Asian Thought,” in Parkes,
Nietzsche and Asian Thought, pp. 51–63, 59.

6 – See letters to von Gersdorff of 24 November and 1 December 1867, and to
Rohde of 3 November 1867 and 3 February 1868; also cited in Mistry, Nietzsche
and Buddhism, p. 182.

7 – For a discussion of this generally neglected theme in Nietzsche, see the sec-
tions “Drives Archaically Imagining” and “Dreams and Archaic Inheritance”
in chaps. 8 and 9, respectively, of Graham Parkes, Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche’s Psychology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

8 – See “Accommodating Animals” in chap. 6 of Parkes, Composing the Soul.

9 – Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, 8.6.

10 – For a detailed exposition of this point, see chap. 9 of Parkes, Composing the
Soul.

11 – These various levels are diagrammed on p. 120 of Parkes, Composing the Soul,
and discussed in chaps. 4, 6, and 9.

12 – Morrison, p. 201, with reference to On the Genealogy of Morals, 3.12, and
Twilight of the Idols, 8.6 (italics added).

13 – Nietzsche, The Wanderer and His Shadow, aphorism 308, and “At Noon,”
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 4.10. For a detailed account of going over to the dead


Response to Graham Parkes’ Review

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If one is to treat the work of another with such disdain as Professor Parkes displays, then one needs to be very sure of one's own ground. But, upon examination, this particular patch of high ground is not as secure as may at first appear. Unfortunately, in making this clear, I have little choice but to address shortcomings in the late Freny Mistry’s work that I had preferred in my book to pass over.

Parkes claims that Mistry brings to her work, “a comprehensive understanding of early (Theravāda) Buddhism.” Leaving aside the naïveté of equating Theravāda Buddhism with early Buddhism, it has to be said that Mistry’s understanding of Theravāda Buddhism leaves much to be desired. I will cite a few examples.

On page 160 she makes one of the most egregious errors I have found in modern Buddhist literature. She says:

[If] ethical action is performed with a view to reward, i.e. the desire to put an end to suffering or escape it altogether, the Buddha's ruthless injunction is: ‘There are eighty-four hundred thousand great periods, wherein both fools and wise, when they have run, have fared on, will make an end of suffering. Herein it is useless for one to say: ‘By this
virtue, by this practice, by this penance, or holy living I shall bring to ripeness the karma that is yet unripe...’ (S iii.210)."

But this is not a “ruthless injunction” of the Buddha, and Mistry has in fact put into his mouth a teaching attributed to Makkhali Gosāla,1 of whom the Buddha says: “of all the theories put forward by recluses, that of Makkhali [Gosāla] is the most vile.”2 It is the “most vile” because it denies the law of karma, that ethical actions have consequences, and to deny this is to deny the very foundation of the Buddhist spiritual life. Three pages later, she makes a similar mistake:

That self-redemption is a creative act... itself entirely unrelated to extraneous purposes or ends... is as much the Buddhist credo as it is the Nietzschean.

She then quotes the Buddha to give credence to this view:

If Bhūmija, those recluses or brahmans who are of wrong view, wrong aspiration [etc.], fare the Brahma-faring with an expectation, they are incapable of obtaining the fruit.3

As the Buddha goes on to say, this would be like trying to obtain oil from sand, which is equated with following the wrong spiritual path. Thus the text is quite unambiguous: the paths that the other samanās and brahmans follow will not bring them the results they seek, not because they want certain ends but because they are on the wrong path. The only way they will achieve their ends, as the text goes on to tell us (not mentioned in Mistry) is to follow the right path: “Whatever recluses and brahmans have right view, right aspiration [etc.], if they make an aspiration and lead the Brahma-faring, they are able to procure fruit”—that is, achieve the spiritual ends they seek. Again Mistry has failed to understand the text, using the Buddha’s criticism of the paths the other religieux follow as if the Buddha was commenting on his own Noble Eightfold Path. Mistry does say “extraneous purposes,” but on the previous page she states what these are: “If the practising Buddhist were to act with the thought of nirvana or of a better future life the thought itself would render the decisive act unaccomplishable.” For the practising Buddhist, these are not “extraneous purposes.”

Apart from misreading the text, Mistry conflates doctrines found in the Mahāyāna sūtras with those attributed to the historical Buddha as found in the Pāli suttas. She proceeds as if it were the same “Buddha” who taught both traditions. This ignores the different contexts and purposes and even historical misunderstandings that are the foundation of these “later” Mahāyāna traditions. It is clear that she is trying to emphasize the importance of being experientially rooted in the present, that is, following the basic Buddhist practice of smṛti or “mindfulness” and sampṛajñaya or “clear-comprehension,” which is common to both the Pāli and Mahāyāna traditions.4 However, an aspect of this practice contradicts what she says above, since “clear-comprehension” includes the clear-comprehension of purpose: “one should always question oneself whether the intended activity is really in accordance with one’s purpose, aims or ideals.”5 Here, one clearly acts with a purpose or aim in mind. When we switch to the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom tradition, we do have
teachings that say, for example, that one should practice dāna or “generosity” without any thought of a giver, gift, or recipient: but this is to engage in a practice that, according to the Bodhisattva ideal, one has been practicing for kalpas to perfection, that is, transform it into a pāramitā through prajñā or “transformative insight.” But the “perfection of generosity” (dāna-pāramitā) will only arise on the basis of the previous practice of generosity, which can include a hierarchy of aims and purposes from happy future states to that of attaining nirvāṇa in order to help all sentient beings.

According to the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, all these aims eventually have to be transcended in order for one to attain Buddhahood. Mistry may have something like this in mind, but unfortunately she displays no understanding of the various contexts of these teachings. To claim as Mistry does (she gives no source) that “If the practising Buddhist were to act with the thought of nirvana or of a better future life the thought itself would render the decisive act unaccomplishable” (p. 162), without any qualification, miscomprehends the very foundation of Buddhist practice, through a misunderstanding of teachings aimed at advanced Bodhisattvas, as if they were aimed at the ordinary practitioner, whose needs are quite different. As the Parable of the Burning House in the Lotus Sūtra shows, individuals are given different “play things” according to their capacities in order to entice them out of sārīśāra and onto the Buddhist path. The aim of a happy future state or of a nirvāṇa for oneself are such “play things,” even though they are eventually to be given up. This principle is also aptly illustrated in the Pali suttas in the encounter between the brahmin Unṇābha and Ānanda, which I use (pp. 142–144) to make sense of the statement “he abandons tanhā by means of tanhā.”

On pages 89–90, Mistry once again fails to understand the text. In order to show that “the Buddha upholds reason as the foundation of his discipline,” she quotes the Majjhima Nikāya (l.68), where Sunakkhata, who had recently left the Buddhist Order, accuses the Buddha of preaching “a doctrine acquired through logical thinking, constructed upon critical investigation, scrutinised by himself … proclaiming that whoever thinks logically will arrive at the total destruction of suffering.” Mistry goes on:

The Buddha on having obtained this information replies: “Sunakkhata has spoken these words in anger. The foolish man wants to censure the perfected one when he says ‘And the object of expounding his doctrine is simply this that whoever thinks logically will arrive at the total destruction of suffering.’”

But this is not what the text actually says. Mistry relies on Grimm’s The Doctrine of the Buddha for this quote from the Majjhima Nikāya, and not the Pali Text Society translation listed in her Bibliography under “Translations Used.” Grimm mistranslates the term takkāra (tat-kāra) as “thinks logically,” when in actual fact it means “practicing.” What the text actually says is that he who practices the Dhamma will eventually put an end to suffering, not he who thinks logically. Thus Mistry completely misses the point.

Mistry then compounds her error. She adds:
Even if the Buddha had said what he did not, there is no meaningful connection between this supposed supporting statement and what that statement is supposed to support. The “cultivated mind” (bhāvitam cittam) has nothing whatsoever to do with upholding “reason as the foundation of [the Buddha’s] discipline.” “Mental cultivation,” as I show in my section on Citta-Bhāvanā (pp. 171 ff.), has little to do with reason, but is a matter of developing the affects, of exercising the Four Right Efforts, of purifying the mind of the kleśas or “afflictions” and cultivating skillful states of mind, of training the unruly and fickle mind, of developing mindfulness and clear comprehension, and so forth. Reason has a small part to play in the cultivation of citta, but by itself it is completely ineffective. Further, if Mistry had consulted the Pali Text Society’s translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, she would have noticed that the Buddha goes on to claim psychic powers (iddhi) such as the ability to multiply his bodily forms, sitting cross-legged, fly through the air like a bird, become invisible, pass through stone walls and mountains, walk on water, read the minds of others, and so forth. This is hardly the concern of reason. One does not cultivate such iddhīs on a foundation of reason!

Mistry argues that “If original Buddhism is characterized as the ‘religion of reason’ par excellence it is because its interpretation of reality, crystallised in the Four Noble Truths, is not based upon a suprarational knowledge but upon the exploitation of human intelligence [which] carries with it . . . the profound consciousness of rational limits” (p. 90). But if this were the case, Buddhism would be based not on reason, but on this “profound consciousness,” which is aware of the limits of reason, and therefore must itself stand above reason, that is, be a form of suprarational knowledge. However, all schools of Buddhism have regarded the Dharma as atakkāvacara or “beyond the bounds of reason”—in other words, suprarational. Mistry’s whole treatment of Buddhism as the “religion of reason,” of Buddhism being supposedly “scientific,” is without any supporting sources, is misinformed, and lacks any clear line of rational argument.

Commenting on the inadequacy of translating the term dukkha as “suffering, misery, pain, etc.,” Mistry (p. 121) goes on to say that it “signifies a composite of ‘imperfection’, ‘impermanence’, ‘insubstantiality’ and ‘joy’,” giving Rahula’s What the Buddha Taught (p. 17) as her source. Parkes, commenting on this passage, says that the term dukkha “connotes joy and even bliss,” which is plainly absurd. The term dukkha connotes nothing of the kind. Here we are not talking about the term “dukkha,” or even the fact of dukkha, but about the “Ariyan Truth of dukkha.” It is only as an Ariyan Truth that states of bliss experienced, for example, by devas and brahmās, are understood to be dukkha. Dukkha, as an Ariyan Truth, is a perspective on unawakened existence, including its joys, available only to an Ariyan. It is how an Ariyan sees unawakened existence. Again Mistry makes a promising start, but fails to get to the real nub of the issue.
Mistry also makes some basic errors. For the sake of simplicity and space, I will list only some of them.

Pages 54 and 66: Mistry locates the mind (manas) within the vedanākkhanda, the “aggregate of feeling/sensation,” which is simply wrong.

Page 41: She has the Buddha denying “the non-dualistic (advaita Vedanta) position of Sankara,” when the Buddha had never heard of such—by the time Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta appeared the Buddha had been dead for some 1,200 years.

Page 37, footnote 36, and page 45: She has the Buddha, when entering his ascetic phase before his Awakening, receive “his initial spiritual instruction” from “Sankhya samanas,” and says that “the Buddha’s teachers” were Sankhya philosophers.” But this is undoubtedly wrong, and shows no awareness of post-1934 scholarship in this area.

Page 183, footnote 28: Ignoring the diverse schools that comprise the Mahāyāna, she thinks that nirvāṇa in the Mahāyāna “connotes absolute communion with Being,” which no school does.

Ibid.: She thinks that the Sthaviravāda and the Mahāsāṅghikas are Mahāyāna schools, which they are not, and that the former “attributes absolute omniscience to the Buddha,” which they do not.

Page 77: Unaware of the important formulations of paticcasaṃuppāda or “dependent origination” as the path from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa, Mistry understands the doctrine of paticcasaṃuppāda to be “subject to circular motion.” If that were the case, there would be no escape from saṃsāra.

Page 185, footnote 31: She says that the Buddha “upheld the idea of the wife as one’s best friend,” giving Rahula as source, but Rahula does not actually say this; he does say that “love between husband and wife is considered almost religious or sacred” (What the Buddha Taught, p. 79), which is certainly not “What the Buddha Taught”!

Page 191: Mistry thinks that “The preservation of the state of nirvana ... entails consistent training,” which contradicts all that is said about nirvāṇa in the Pāli suttas. The source of this view seems to be the only reference in the entire Pāli canon where doubts are expressed about the complete emancipation of the Arahat: “‘gains, favours, and flattery might be for [the Arahat] a danger’ (S ii.236).”

How this is possible when the text clearly states that the Arahat has destroyed the asāvās (khiṇāsavo), which is always understood to entail complete Awakening and therefore freedom from any such influences, is a mystery. As the translator notes (ignored by Mistry), “The syntax of this sentence seems to me corrupt” because the sentence does not make sense. That the Arahat can be adversely affected by such worldly concerns is not a view found anywhere else in the Pāli suttas, nor in the Theravāda tradition as a whole, and one cannot use a single questionable source as the basis for such a controversial view while completely ignoring the generally accepted view.

Thinking that because Nietzsche mentions in a letter to Gersdorff (dated 13 December 1875) that he had read an English translation of the Sutta Nipāta, Mistry concludes that he must have been aware of certain verses from that text, which she
cites (p. 86). However, Mistry did not bother to trace this text—a very simple matter as there was at that time only one English translation. If she had she would have realized that Coomaraswamy’s translation is an abridgment, and the verses she cites are omitted from that work. Mistry commits the same error on page 129, but by luck cites some verses included in the abridged translation. In his review, Parkes lists Coomaraswamy’s translation, Dialogues and Discourses of Gotama Buddha (London, 1874), as being included in Mistry’s “Introduction,” but it is not. I assume he has taken this source from my work and attributed it to Mistry.

According to Parkes, Mistry was a Nietzsche scholar, and her work certainly has many intelligent and interesting aspects. But it was my main concern to see Nietzsche’s opinions on Buddhism from the standpoint of Buddhist scholarship. From this perspective, I find Mistry’s Buddhist scholarship too superficial, that it contains too many basic errors, that it relies on out-of-date secondary sources, and that her approach to the subject is too uncritical. Therefore I had two choices: either dedicate the first fifty or so pages of my work to the tedious task of showing the deficiencies in Mistry’s work, or simply put it to one side and start afresh with my own research in this area. In consultation with my supervisor, I chose the latter. Parkes may think this is not playing by “the rules of the game,” but I’m not really interested in playing academic games.

After Parkes’ kid-glove treatment of Mistry’s book, he turns his attention to mine and reveals his fangs, sinking them first into the issue of the title. He is struck by the “strangeness” of choosing the same title as Mistry. The only thing I find strange here is that Parkes should find this “strange.” The title of my doctorate was Nihilism and Nietzsche’s Buddha, which Oxford University Press thought not commercial enough, and they suggested Nietzsche and Buddhism. When I mentioned that there was already a book with that main title in print, they replied that as it was published in 1981 this was irrelevant. So I agreed. As for my covering “pretty much the same ground as Mistry’s,” it is my view that there are so many deficiencies in Mistry’s understanding of Buddhism that this was necessary. And to say as Parkes does that this amounts to saying “the same things over again in [my] own words” or that I have “nothing to add to what is given in Mistry’s account” I find quite absurd. However, I am relieved to see that he does affirm that I “develop a few ideas of [my] own.”

Parkes laments what he sees as the diminishing standards and credibility of OUP for letting into print a work that reads “more like a run-of-the-mill doctoral dissertation than a work of real scholarship” that is marred by “plodding prose” and “a style that is awkward to the point of syntactical blunders.” It is certainly a humbling experience to read through one’s own prose after a quote from Nietzsche. However, other readers and reviewers disagree with Parkes’ judgment. OUP’s first reader comments: “The style is, on the whole, admirable. The book is clearly written, with a minimum of the jargon that infects so many recent writings on Nietzsche.” Professor David Loy in his review comments: “The clear prose style may itself be an example of the Selbstuberwindung of its own dissertation genealogy.”

I am grateful to Parkes for pointing out real errors in the book, misprints, and a source I had missed. For example, it was 1865 and not 1864 when Nietzsche
browsed in that secondhand bookshop, and he was thirty-four when he retired from Basle, certainly not thirty-one as I say. Here I was rather careless. But with regard to the causes of Nietzsche’s eventual breakdown, I say this may have been a consequence of congenital syphilis. I did not say it was. My impression is that the matter remains unsolved. Fortunately, some of the misprints listed by Parkes, and many more, have been corrected in the paperback edition, published in the U.K., though a couple remain. However, to say as Parkes does that because an error (1864 instead of 1865) appears “in the first sentence of the book,” it becomes “emblematic of the work as a whole” reveals a very odd form of logic, a rather prejudiced form. But what puzzles me about Parkes’ keen copyediting eye is why he fails to mention the equal number of similar errors in Mistry’s work.

My account of the importance of Darwinism to Nietzsche, which Parkes thinks “not very relevant” was considered by OUP’s first reader to bring to light “important aspects of Nietzsche’s thought … which have been overlooked in recent writing on Nietzsche.” Obviously, opinions vary.

My comment about “Nietzsche grumbling” is not simply “trivializing the concern with the little things,” but is rather lighthearted aside on Nietzsche’s “comments on the relation between the German diet and the German spirit” (p. 108). And I cannot agree, when saying that Nietzsche’s “little things,” like the Buddhist’s, are “no more than aids to self-overcoming” and “much, if not all, can be achieved without them” (p. 109), that this “totally nullifies the insistence of both … on the benefits of full awareness of the specific, here-and-now details of our actual lives.” What I am saying is that many of the minute details given in Buddhaghosa’s account (pp. 105–107) and the examples from Nietzsche concerning “the food we eat, our metabolism, where we live, our climatic environment” (p. 102) contain many elements that are not essential to the pursuit of self-overcoming. The reason for this is “that the important forces are our affects” (p. 109), or, in the Buddhist case, the sāṅkhāras (see pp. 110–111), not the physical body and the environment. These are certainly aids, but it is the affects and sāṅkhāras that are the essential elements in the practice of self-overcoming.

Parkes then moves on to my “misunderstanding of Nietzsche’s conception of the drives, or affects.” He thinks I miss Nietzsche’s view of “the predominance of inner forces over external in the constitution of the individual,” because I say that what we are is “formed … by the stimulus afforded by the environment.” However, Parkes’ ellipsis leaves out the important conditional “to a greater or lesser degree.” This qualifies what I had previously said in the footnote on page 103:

Whether it is the subject themselves [i.e., the drives] or the environment (which includes parents, society, culture, etc.) that has the larger say in forming the individual depends, for Nietzsche, upon the kind and ‘power’ of the individual. What he calls the ‘herd-types’ are seen as hardly more than the product of their environment, and have no real independence of action or thought apart from what has been formed by the environment. The ‘higher-types,’ having some independence from the mores and attitudes of the ‘herd type,’ in other words, more power, are able to attain some degree of independence of mind and action. This, as we saw, is the main reason Nietzsche dislikes Darwinism: it
favours the herd-type by over-emphasising the part that the environment plays in determining the ‘fittest.’ The problem being that in Nietzsche’s scheme, his fittest are all too easily swamped by the lowly herd-types.

And on the following page:

Although both [Nietzsche and Buddhism] consider the environment as initially important, both agree that its influence can and must eventually be overcome.

The whole discussion in chapter 8 makes it unambiguously clear that I do not think that the drives are solely “formed … by the stimulus afforded by the environment,” which would entail that any talk of self-overcoming would be mere empty words. Nor do I neglect “the predominance of inner forces over external in the constitution of the individual,” but simply draw attention to Nietzsche’s view that in the case of the “herd-types” their environment plays the major role in determining what they are, and with the “high-types” it is the “struggle or … Hellenic agon between the various affects within the individual” (p. 104) that determine what they become.

The role the environment plays in forming us is clearly summed up by Nietzsche in Daybreak:

However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of drives which constitute his being… [A]bove all the laws of their nutriment remain wholly unknown to him. This nutriment is therefore the work of chance: our daily experiences throw some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly; but the coming and going of these events as a whole stands in no rational relationship to the nutritional requirements of the totality of the drives: so that the outcome will always be twofold—the starvation and stunting of some and the overfeeding of others. (p. 119)

The result of this is that we are mere accidents; what we have become is the result of mere chance encounters with the environment, which, in the case of Nietzsche’s herd-type, plays the determining role. The way out of this is to realize “What we are at liberty to do,” that “One can dispose of one’s drives like a gardener.”13

According to Parkes my next error is “in saying that ‘to truly affirm life’ consists of the higher type’s ‘adding distance between himself and his animal past,’” as I miss the point that “in living affirmatively the point is to engage one’s ‘animal past’ in the right way—by training the animal drives without taming them.” But what I say is:

However, the ‘higher type,’ through self-overcoming, can bring about affects not shared by the common man, can influence the way his being unfolds and add distance between himself and his animal past, and his fellow men. This, for Nietzsche, is how to truly affirm life. (p. 110, emphasis added)

It is not simply a matter of either training or taming the animal drives: one can “make [a drive] wither away” (Daybreak 109), and one can also bring into being new drives, as when “There arises in us the scent of a kind of pleasure we have not known before, and as a consequence there arises a new desire” (Daybreak 110) that
can do battle with whatever drives oppose it. The higher type is not distinguished from the lower merely through his having trained his animal drives, but by the fact that he has brought into being drives that are beyond the scope of the lower types, which correspondingly open other “higher” perspectives on life not available to the lower types.

Parkes then turns to the chapter on “‘The Will to Power’ and ‘Thirst,’” where he expresses “puzzlement over [my] methodology” of using the notion of Erôs as found in Plato’s Symposium as a paradigm for tanhâ to parallel my earlier use of Hesiod’s Eris as a paradigm for the will to power. He then goes on to say that my discussion of tanhâ is “strained and ultimately not very illuminating.” The “problem of desire” has been raised on a few occasions in Buddhist scholarship, and this chapter is a serious attempt to deal with this “problem.” But Parkes offers no informed criticism for me to respond to. I must say that I do find such comments quite petty and dismissive of a very important topic.

Thus it is a relief to find that Parkes thinks that, in my last two chapters, “Morrison begins to hit his stride as far as marking the ‘ironic affinities’ is concerned.” Unfortunately, relief turns to further disappointment: “the author’s poor understanding of what Nietzsche is saying prevents him from doing anything very interesting with it,” my main problem being a “condescending attitude toward [my] subject.” This apparent condescension on my part is in daring to offer some criticisms of Nietzsche’s account of self-overcoming and sublimation. Parkes thinks that I consider Nietzsche “incapable of elaborating his ideas adequately.” But I say nothing of the kind, only that Nietzsche’s ideas are on the whole “rather sketchy and bereft of any clear and definite goal—a matter of experiment and trial and error” (p. 171). This is not because Nietzsche was incapable of elaborating his ideas, but because his “experiment” was in its infancy and therefore incomplete. But: “If, instead of devoting his energies to complaining about uncompleted thoughts, Morrison had bothered to look for an account of the next stage in self-overcoming by reading the next section of Twilight of the Idols, he would have found what he was looking for,” which amounts to “one loses spirit [Geist] when one no longer needs it” (Twilight IX.14). Reading the whole section again, I’m afraid I’m still looking. I also complain that Nietzsche “left no guiding examples of his method” (p. 159). I also fail “to see that the consummate exemplification of one who goes beyond ‘great self-mastery’ to successful self-overcoming is given a few pages further on, in the person of Goethe.” But Parkes should read more carefully. I am referring to examples of Nietzsche’s “method or methods,” not his exemplars. Goethe is indeed an exemplar, but he is not an example of a method. Nietzsche’s paean to Goethe is certainly inspiring, but it is rather sparse on the methodology of becoming an Übermensch.

Parkes then turns general Buddhist doctrine on its head. Presumably referring to Nietzsche’s aphorism “Beauty no accident” (Twilight IX.47), where, as Parkes sees it, Nietzsche emphasizes “that the true locus of culture is not the soul or spirit, but the body (Leib),” he thinks such “is significantly consistent with Buddhist practice.” But what Nietzsche says here has little or no connection with Buddhist doctrine or practice. Although in Buddhism there is no “soul,” the locus of Buddhist practice is
citta, or “mind,” which, as I point out (p. 172) is as much the locus of our affects as it is of our thoughts. It is citta that is “cultivated” (bhāvanā), not one’s kāya or sarīra. What is cultivated is mindful awareness, mental clarity, right views, skillful affects, and so forth. These may find objective expression in words and deeds, and even physical demeanor. But these are the objectifications of the locus of Buddhist practice, citta. To say that the body is such a locus is simply wrong. Sure, certain physical activities such as Tai Chi, Hatha Yoga, and so forth can have a beneficial but limited psychological effect on the mind, and one of the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness” is the body and its movements. But as the Dhammapada informs us, it is “mind” (manas) that precedes all skillful and unskillful states, as well as their objectification through speech and bodily activity.16 In the Upāli Sutta,17 the Jaina view of the importance of bodily activity over “mind” activity is criticized by the Buddha as a gross misunderstanding. It is karmic activity that is the locus of creative activity in Buddhism. Karmic activity is cetanā, a matter of “intending” or “willing.” The body is here the mere instrument of the “mind.” It is a “result” (phala or vipāka) of previous karmic activity. This is elementary Buddhism.

To respond in detail to the rest of Parkes’ review is simply beyond the scope of this response. It would require a dialogue with Parkes in order to try and establish a common ground to limit misunderstanding. But I shall address a few points.

Although I do “mention … ‘a movement from consciousness to instinct’ in Nietzsche (p. 214),” I do not “elaborate or make clear that this is instinct refined through protracted discipline.” There are two points here. First, from what I do say in my account of Nietzsche’s self-overcoming (pp. 155–171), I think it obvious that what is initially crude and instinctual can, in Nietzsche’s view, be transformed into something “refined.” Second, in that account I give my reasons for concluding that Nietzsche’s notions are not fully worked out; therefore it would be dishonest of me to “elaborate or make clear” what I do not think is clear. Compared with the practice of the “cultivation of friendliness” (mettā-bhāvanā), which is the Buddhist model of “sublimation” that I use as a comparison (pp. 178–182), Nietzsche’s is very sketchy indeed. Nevertheless, I am interested to see what Parkes has to say on this subject in his Composing the Soul: will I find I missed something important? Or will I find, as is unfortunately all too often the case, that authors read much into Nietzsche that is simply not there. Perhaps Professor Parkes could send me a review copy.

According to Parkes, the “final stage of self-overcoming” is learning “to relax the discipline and trust to natural spontaneity.” This is possible as “the discipline is no longer necessary because these various groups [of drives] have learned to live in harmony with each other.” I cannot agree with this. This way of looking at what Nietzsche is aiming at is far too essentialist, as if all one had to do was create harmony among the various drives. But I mentioned earlier that in Nietzsche’s gardener analogy it is not a matter of rearranging the relations of what is there, but of weeding out certain traits, cultivating those worthy of cultivation, and bringing new drives into being. It is this model that has affinities with Buddhism, that reflects the non-essentialist doctrine of paṭiccasamuppāda. Thus, to say, as Parkes goes on to say,
that “Morrison fails to see the inconsistency of his supposing that it is the ‘I’ that is doing the self-overcoming, since he never asks the (very Buddhist) question Nietzsche so often poses: Who, or which drive, or what group of affects is the agent of willing, disciplining, or whatever, in this particular situation” is so ridiculous as to be unworthy of comment.

It seems that for Parkes I just cannot get anything right: “The author spends a lot of time worrying about a contradiction he posits between Nietzsche’s well-known deprecation of consciousness (Bewusstsein) and the necessary role he (Morrison) thinks it would have to play in the process of self-overcoming (pp. 204, 206).” Rather than worrying, what I actually do is list and contrast the various comments Nietzsche makes about consciousness—most of which, if taken at face value, would undermine his project of self-overcoming—and, from a broader perspective, try and determine just what the role of consciousness is in Nietzsche’s project. As footnote 17 on page 201 shows, I am not a lone “worrier”: for example, John Wilcox remarks that the “theme of the utility of consciousness is important in Nietzsche’s notes; and it is inconsistent with his claim that consciousness has no effects. Nothing that is impotent can have utility.”18 This is not the product of “worrying,” but of reading what Nietzsche actually says about consciousness, and trying to make overall sense of it.

But being engrossed in self-created irrelevancies, I overlook the “obvious point that what is conscious (in the sense of bewusst) for Nietzsche is always conditioned by language.” Thus I “[miss] another close affinity between the Nietzschean and Buddhist projects”: that, in Nietzsche’s case, “almost all of our ‘drive life’ goes on beneath the level of consciousness,” and the “Buddhists’ insistence on the somatic aspects of mindfulness and their efforts to circumvent or undercut conceptual thinking—which takes place consciously, in language.” Personally, I think that to focus on language and conceptual thinking, besides being circular, misses the real issue here. In Buddhism, conceptual thinking is not the problem. The problem is our misunderstanding the conventionality of words and concepts, of being beguiled by them, of creating “views” (diṭṭhi) out of them. The problem is not that “consciousness is conditioned by language” (which is disputable), but is rather an “issue of grasping” (upādānagata),19 that is, our attachment to concepts and ideas, our clinging to them, our emotional need for security, identity, belonging, and so forth. One has to distinguish between vicāra or “intellectual investigation,” which is deemed necessary for the development of paññā, and papañca or “the tendency of the worldling’s imagination to break loose and run riot.”20 In itself, conceptual thinking is not a problem. The necessary transformation of our affective composition that gives rise to the state of nippapañca, the ceasing of conceptual proliferation, will require a little more than mere attention to “the somatic aspects of mindfulness.”

However, I do get something right: “Morrison rightly emphasizes Nietzsche’s conception of objectivity as a matter of bringing as many perspectives to bear on the situation as possible.” But of course, I don’t make much use of this as I miss what Parkes sees as a correspondence between Nietzsche’s “learning to see,” which is “learning to comprehend and deal with each individual case from all sides,” and the

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“Buddhist aim of ‘seeing and knowing things as they really are.’” But the reason I
did not make much of this comparison is that I am not sure that there is one. “Seeing
and knowing things as they are” arises in dependence upon samādhi, which is a
state wherein the mind is temporally purified of all unskillful affects, is calm, alert,
profoundly concentrated, and “empowered.” Although, in my account of Nietz-
sche’s notion, perspectivism could certainly be an aid along the way to samādhi,
traditionally “seeing and knowing” is of an altogether different order. It is what
makes one an Ariyan. Its consequences are profound as it is what permanently lib-
erates one from ever again becoming embroiled in saṁsāra. I think one has to be-
ware the premature synthesis. I do not think that the Buddhist “seeing and knowing”
is “accessible by following the important thrust in Nietzsche’s thinking away from
the anthropocentric standpoint.” Indeed, I cannot agree with Parkes’ interpretation
here of The Joyous Science 349. Nietzsche considers that Darwin’s “doctrine of the
‘struggle for existence’” is “one-sided,” and “is probably due to the origins of most
natural scientists”: “their ancestors were poor . . . people who knew the difficulties of
survival only too well at firsthand.”

In other words, Darwin’s doctrine is conditioned by his social inheritance,
which gives it a narrow and one-sided perspective. It is an illegitimate generalization
from “an exception, a temporary restriction of the will to life.” Thus to counteract
this one-sided perspective, Nietzsche thinks that the “‘natural scientist should come
out of his human nook’ and look around at the conditions prevailing in the broader
world of nature. But I cannot agree with Parkes that this entails “thinking away from
the anthropocentric standpoint.” Nietzsche makes it unambiguously clear that there
is no such standpoint:

Man imagines the existence of other things by analogy with his own existence, in other
words anthropomorphically. (Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks 11)

How should explanations be at all possible when we first turn everything into an image,
our image! (Gay Science 112)

There is nothing for it: one is obliged to understand all motion, all “appearances,” all
“laws,” only as symptoms of an inner event and to employ man as an analogy to this
end. (Will to Power 619)

At Beyond Good and Evil 36, he makes exactly the same point. We can never
step outside our conditioned phenomenality so as to gain a non-anthropomorphic
perspective.

Parkes concludes by saying that Mistry’s work is “an illuminating prolegomenon
to a comparative study of Nietzsche and Buddhism.” However, I think I have shown
that this is simply not the case. And I also think that Parkes misleads when he says
that “readers interested in the current state of scholarship won’t miss anything by
ignoring the first ten chapters of Morrison’s book, reading Mistry’s study first, and
then turning to the final two chapters of the new Nietzsche and Buddhism.” How-
ever, I am relieved to find that he considers that at least two chapters of my work are
worth reading.
Notes

1 – See Dīgha Nikāya 1.54.
2 – Aṅguttara Nikāya I.286.
3 – Majjhima Nikāya III.140, incorrectly entered as III.126 in Mistry.
4 – For an example of the later, see Śāntideva’s Bodhicaryāvatāra, chap. 5.
6 – Aṅguttara Nikāya II.146: “tanhaṁ nissāya tanhaṁ pajahati.”
7 – Actually, 1.5.
8 – Rahula makes no mention of “joy.”
9 – Aḷāra Kālama and Uddaka Rāmaputta?
11 – Actually, Samyutta Nikāya II.238.
13 – Daybreak 560. For my account of this, see Morrison, pp. 163–171.
15 – Twilight of the Idols IX.49–51.
16 – Dhammapada I.1–2.
17 – Majjhima Nikāya I.
19 – See Aṅguttara Nikāya IV.69.

Reply to Robert Morrison

Graham Parkes

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

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

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

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

On the issue of your prose style: usually if an author doesn’t take the trouble to make his or her writing clear, I don’t take the trouble to read it. Life is too short to spend time disentangling prose that wasn’t well formed by the person writing it. But, as I explained, several factors necessitated my persevering. Yes, it’s humbling for us all to see our own prose next to Nietzsche’s—but let’s have that experience stimulate us to write better. Please do not believe those who praise your prose style. In spite of the prevalence of postmodern discourse, coherent grammar remains a necessary condition of what your kinder commentators call clear and admirable style. I
won't embarrass by quoting further examples of sentences that are syntactically challenged, but would recommend instead that you inspect your writing with a critical eye and see how often you have to ask something like: “Is the lack of a main verb here a brilliant literary flourish, or a liability and obstruction to the communication of my ideas?”

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

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

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

You mention the possibility of “a dialogue” with me, but you don’t seem very interested in fulfilling a necessary condition of dialogue, which is to try to understand what the other person is saying and then respond to it. Suppose the situation were reversed: I have written a book on Buddhism and Nietzsche, you as a Buddhist scholar criticize my interpretation of Buddhism and refer to writings of yours that purport to offer a better reading, and I have three months within which to prepare a response. One of the first things I’d do would be to take a look at those writings in order to evaluate that supposedly better interpretation. In this way I could acquaint myself with the grounds for your criticism and perhaps thereby enhance my understanding of the topic. But you decline to do anything of the sort.
Although you claim to be “interested to see” what I have to say on the subject of Nietzsche’s understanding of the drives, sublimation, and so forth, the interest isn’t strong enough to motivate you to actually do any reading. You simply wonder whether you would find that you’d missed something important, or confirm your suspicion that I am merely one of those authors that “read much into Nietzsche that is simply not there.” But why, I wonder, didn’t you take the trouble to resolve this question by consulting the sources I cite (none of them hard to find in university libraries), rather than cavalierly dismissing my arguments as ridiculous without even looking at them? There’s no hope of dialogue if all one does is reiterate “I’m right and he’s wrong.”

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

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

My problem is not with your “daring to offer some criticisms of Nietzsche’s
account of self-overcoming’: Nietzsche himself encourages the reader to adopt an ironic and critical distance—but only after the reader has read carefully. My problem is that you continue to dismiss Nietzsche’s ideas as an “experiment [that was] in its infancy and therefore incomplete,” when in fact he worked on the issue of self-overcoming for many years and said a great deal about how it works. That’s another reason why I referred you to the treatment in my book, which cites dozens of passages on the topic from almost all the major works—in the light of which you would no longer want to say that “practically all” the relevant material can be found “in a few extended dicta in Daybreak and one in Twilight of the Idols” (p. 163).

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

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

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

You say you can’t agree with my interpretation of The Joyous Science 349, and suggest that Nietzsche is chastising only Darwin for his anthropocentrism. Darwin is
indeed the example, but Nietzsche’s subsequent exhortation for the researcher into nature to come out of his human corner is intended quite generally—as evidenced by the end of the aphorism, which invokes the idea of the whole of nature as “will to power” (significantly the only mention of will to power in the book). This connects it with Beyond Good and Evil 36, which I’ll talk about in just a moment. This anti-anthropocentric attitude persists to the end: in aphorism 15 of The Antichrist(ian) Nietzsche still depletes our “imaginary science of nature” as “anthropocentric.” And the aphorism just before denies that we humans are in any sense “the crown of creation” by claiming that, alongside us, “every being is at a similar stage of perfection.”

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

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

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