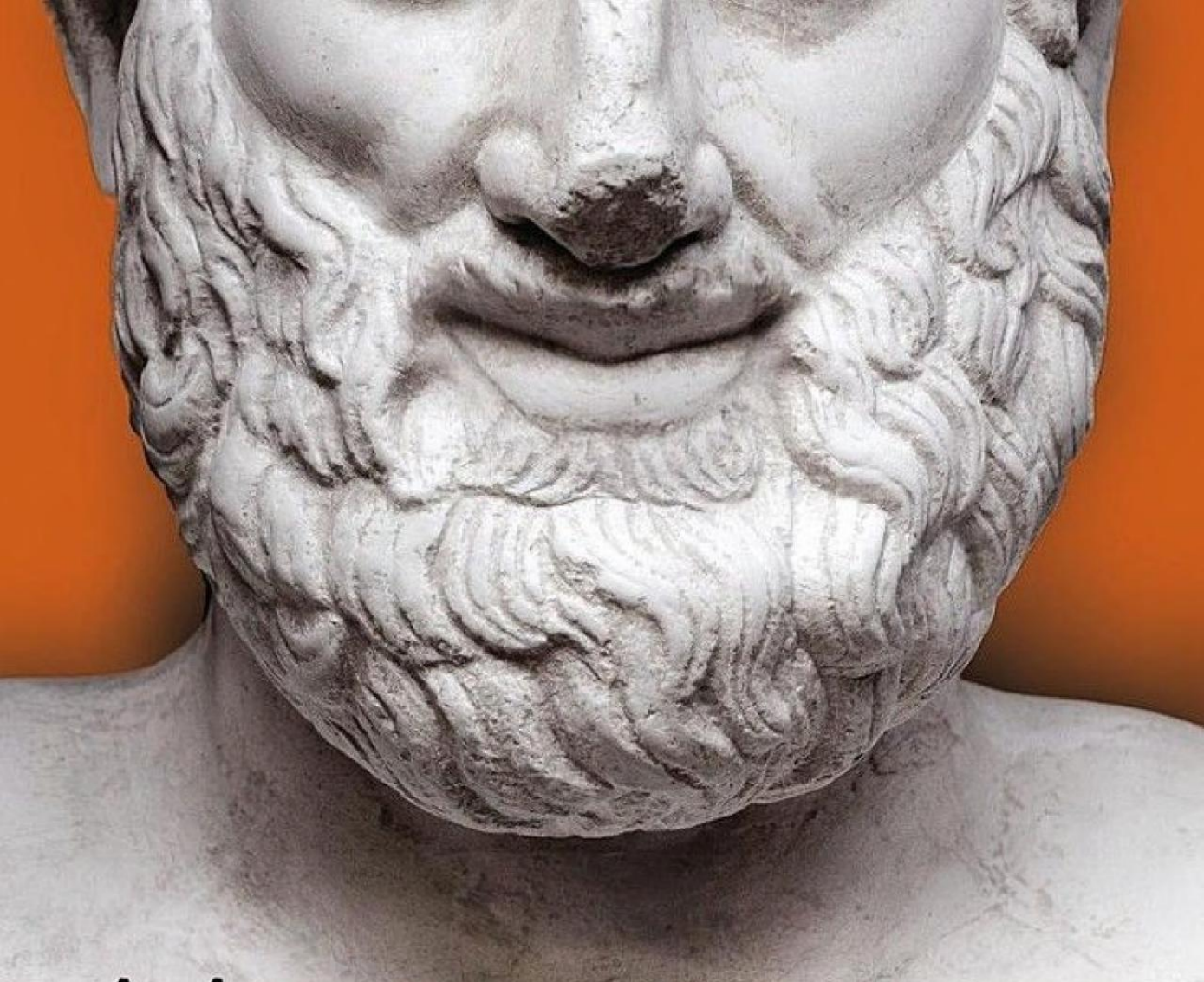

More Than Happiness

Buddhist & Stoic Wisdom for a Sceptical Age

Antonia Macaro

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

As I was about to finish writing this book, I found myself driving along hedge-lined Devon lanes towards a Buddhist retreat centre, Gaia House. I have been coming here on and off for thirty years or so, attracted by the insights the Buddhist tradition seemed to offer but always questioning, trying to work out whether I could accept the whole belief system or, if not, what I should leave out and why. That journey of discovery had as many twists and turns as my drive, before I felt I could come up with any answers. My relationship with Stoicism followed a similar development.

I am neither a Buddhist nor a Stoic by inclination. The ancient philosopher I feel most in tune with is the more down-to-earth fourth-century Greek thinker Aristotle. But I have come back to Buddhism and Stoicism again and again over the years, despite my difficulties and reservations. Maybe it's because their insights seem to get to the heart of our experience of life in a way that other philosophies don't. I believe both traditions contain much daily wisdom that can help all of us to live better lives.

I know I am not the only one to feel like this. These traditions have proved to be durable sources of inspiration for generation after generation. Buddhist schools that originated anywhere between India and Japan have been thriving and growing in the West since the mid-twentieth century. And Stoicism, which flourished first in ancient Greece and then in Rome, has experienced a surprising rise in popularity in recent years. After centuries of attracting small numbers of aficionados, there are now numerous books, blogs, online forums and an annual Stoic Week devoted to it. A Stoic approach to business has been advocated in websites and publications like *Business Insider* and *Forbes*. Philosopher Nancy Sherman has explored the relationship of Stoicism to the military in her book *Stoic Warriors*.

Both traditions have helped to give birth, directly or indirectly and with much shedding of detail, to a number of therapeutic techniques that in recent years have swept through the US and the UK, rapidly spreading to other countries. In particular, Stoicism is one of the inspirations behind Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), while Buddhist meditation is the source of a range of mindfulness-based interventions that aim to help with various conditions such as chronic pain, stress and depression.

Both Buddhism and Stoicism promise no less than unlocking the door to peace of mind and the end of suffering. Yet this comes at a price. Both are radical systems that ask much of their followers: ultimately, to challenge and curb their attachment to the things of the world. Perhaps their appeal lies precisely in this radical nature. More moderate thinkers like Aristotle and Epicurus, a contemporary of the early Stoics, are not

enjoying such a resurgence.

I have struggled with aspects of both traditions. It's not only that they are demanding. They are also inevitably interlaced with antiquated ideas, so it is a challenge to extract a message that is at ease in the modern world. We tend nowadays to adopt a naturalistic outlook, one that seeks to explain the universe without reference to anything supernatural. This seems right: our beliefs should be compatible with our best science, which is thoroughly naturalistic. When we are tempted to tolerate aspects of the Buddhist or Stoic traditions that clash with this naturalistic worldview, we risk taking too much from them. On the other hand, we might take too little if we end up borrowing only a few tips in the service of a conventional notion of happiness, so that the radical content is all but lost. In this book I try to walk a tightrope between too much and too little.

My main aim is to explore what we may extricate that fits in with a naturalistic, questioning point of view, but that is more than just tips on how to be happy, as happiness is not everything. This is why I've chosen to concentrate on the parts of both traditions that have the potential to make an impact on how we live, but that also stand up to scrutiny and preserve something of their original radical nature – challenging rather than indulging received notions of who we are and what our aims in life should be.

Both traditions placed great value on seeing things clearly, so rejecting their more outmoded ideas is actually more faithful to their spirit. As Seneca put it, 'Our predecessors achieved a great deal, but their work is still unfinished.'[1] We should feel comfortable putting aside the doctrines that don't quite square up: freezing them in time is no way to pay homage to the creative thinkers who shaped them.

There are many 'Buddhisms' and 'Stoicisms'; therefore the versions I present in this book are composites. I have focused on early Buddhism partly because I find its relative simplicity most congenial, and partly because it seems more readily comparable with Stoicism. And I have quoted mainly from the Roman Stoics partly because of their emphasis on ethical issues, and partly because only fragments remain of the earlier works. I have made liberal use of quotations from ancient sources of both traditions to let the authors' voices speak for themselves.

In light of our profound ignorance of what the Buddha actually said, whenever I write 'the Buddha says' it should be read as 'the Buddha is reported as saying'. I use the Pāli rather than Sanskrit form of words, apart from 'karma' and 'nirvana', which are now terms in common usage.[2]

With huge literatures to deal with, and a short space in which to deal with them, my choice of what to cover has had to be ruthlessly lean, and therefore my presentation is highly selective.[3] I have tried to keep it simple and capture the spirit rather than follow the letter. I am certainly not trying to say anything about what authentic Buddhism or Stoicism should be.

What follows is a personal perspective – which has emerged both from my lifelong search and from engaging with the material – on how to approach these traditions so as to take what we need from them and not more. Along the way, I highlight many of the strategies advocated in both traditions, and in the concluding chapter I describe the ideas and practices that I think we could all benefit from adopting. I hope to show that with the right approach a wealth of inspiration can be ours.

Notes

1. Seneca 2015, 64.9
2. *Kamma* and *nibbāna* in Pāli. Pāli is the language of much of the earliest Buddhist literature.
3. There are many lists in Buddhism – three refuges, five hindrances, five precepts, seven factors of awakening, ten perfections and so on, not to mention of course the four noble truths and the eightfold path. Only a few of these have made it into my discussion, but for a 'list of Buddhist lists' see Leigh Brasington's website: leighb.com/listlist.htm. As for the scholarly debates currently ruffling feathers on many of the topics I touch on, clearly it would not have been possible to delve into them.

Chapter 1

SETTING THE SCENE

What do we really know?

Bodh Gaya, in the Indian state of Bihar, is nowadays a busy part of the world, full of crowded, noisy temples. Buddhist pilgrims from the four corners come to pay homage to the place where the Buddha is said to have attained his awakening, under a *Ficus religiosa* – subsequently also known as a Bodhi tree. The current tree is just over a century old, although its lineage is supposed to go back to the original tree. We don't really know. The truth is that we don't really know much about the story of the Buddha at all.

The kernel from which the legend of the Buddha grew might go something like this: Gotama, the future Buddha, lived at some point in the fifth century BCE and died sometime around 400 BCE, give or take twenty years. He probably lived at least part of his life in north-eastern India. At that time in India there was an established culture of wanderers and renouncers – people who had given up a conventional social role and become mendicants, dedicating themselves to the spiritual life. What this meant exactly was understood differently by different groups, but it generally revolved around ascetic practices and meditative techniques. Gotama left a comfortable background to pursue this lifestyle, sought instruction from teachers and experimented with but ultimately rejected extreme asceticism. Eventually he had an awakening, a powerful transformative experience that led him to establish a small group of followers at first, and then teach all over northern India for many years, dying in old age.

The texts embellish this story with many details, some more fantastical than others. The future Buddha, for instance, descends from Tusita heaven into his mother's womb. His birth is accompanied by many portents, such as being welcomed by gods and the appearance of a splendid light. The priests declare to his father, a king, that his son has the marks of a Great Man, predicting he will become either a great king or a Buddha. He is brought up in luxury but becomes disillusioned with his life through a series of encounters: with an old man, a sick man, a dead man and an ascetic. This prompts his departure and subsequent spiritual search, enlightenment and teaching.

While its bare bones may well have some historical basis, the story of

the Buddha is to be taken as legend rather than biography. A similar story was also told of a disciple of the Buddha, Vasa: 'The son of a wealthy gildmaster in Vārānasi, he wakes up one night with feelings of disgust for the life of licentious luxury that surrounds him. He escapes from the house and the city gates open miraculously for him. However, instead of having to search for a religious teacher, he goes straight to Śākyamuni who is teaching in the Deer Park.'[1] Was this a common story of the time, maybe some kind of ideal life trajectory?

More than that, the story of the Buddha's life as it is usually told also applies to all the other Buddhas that are said to have preceded Gotama, of which there are a few. In one discourse the Buddha tells the story of his manifold previous lives, starting with Buddha Vipassī 91 aeons ago (an aeon being basically a very long period of time), through to the Buddhas Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Konāgamana and Kassapa, and ending with the current Buddha. Similarities and differences are listed: which clan they belonged to, under what tree they were awakened and so on. Lifespan, through these countless aeons, reduced from 80,000 years in the time of Vipassī, to scarcely a hundred in the time of Gotama.[2]

Differences in timescale and detail notwithstanding, the essentials are the same. Vipassī's biography has exactly the same turning points as Gotama's: the descent from Tusita heaven; the encounters with an old man, a sick man and a dead man; the decision to leave his comfortable surroundings to embrace the homeless spiritual life; the awakening; the teaching. This generic Buddha-story may well have preceded the full telling of Gotama's life in the Buddhist texts, which seems to suggest that the life course described is more like a typical Buddha's CV than a historical record.

The appeal of the idea that there is history and biography lurking in the early Buddhist texts if only we can discover it is irresistible, but it has been discarded as wishful thinking by more than one scholar. The story of the Buddha was never intended as pure history. These texts are the stuff of myth and legend and so they will remain. There may well have been a real person at the root of the Buddha's legend, but history and myth cannot be disentangled.[3]

As for the Buddha's teachings, despite modern books having titles like *What the Buddha Taught*, we don't really know what that was either. The main body of work that has been handed down over the centuries as containing the teachings of the Buddha is known as the Pāli Canon. This is divided into three areas: discourses (*suttas*), monastic rules and commentaries.

The texts that make up the Pāli Canon had been transmitted orally for centuries before being committed to writing. It seems that individual followers would specialise in reciting particular kinds of texts, and there would be scope for adjusting length, or detail, according to context. The Canon manifests all the features of oral literature: mnemonic formulae, overlapping lists, repetitions, stock descriptions (sometimes ending up in

the wrong places). The doctrinal discrepancies and contradictions that show up in the texts could be due to several reasons, for instance that teachings varied according to context and purpose, that competing schools left their mark in different places, or that doctrines from non-Buddhist schools were gradually incorporated.

Contemporary scholarship is split between those who believe it is possible somehow to isolate the original teachings from later interpretations and those who are more sceptical. But even if we believe that at least some of those teachings have been preserved in the Canon, it would be naive to think that this records the words of the Buddha exactly as he spoke them. Even the early discourses would have undergone potentially major changes in the few generations after the Buddha, and probably reflect later developments. Late additions are likely to be found cheek by jowl with earlier material. The layers are likely to be so interwoven as to make it extremely challenging, maybe impossible, to separate the Buddha's own thought from that of those who followed him.

We know a little more about Stoicism. The school was founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BCE. Its name came from the location of Stoics' meetings: the *Stoa Poikile*, or painted porch, in Athens' city centre. This is now an unkempt, fenced-off area where cats roam and adjacent buildings are adorned with graffiti. But at the time it was part of a busy public area, where many other philosophical schools were peddling their wares: Cynics and Epicureans were active, and older centres of learning like Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum were still open. Zeno was followed by Cleanthes and then Chrysippus as head of the Stoics, the latter often considered the most significant early Stoic figure. Teaching continued until sometime in the first century BCE, when the centre of gravity of the tradition shifted to Rome, by then the main cultural centre of the Western world.

But a lot is unknown. The writings of the early, Greek Stoic philosophers are mostly lost, their ideas known mainly through other writers' accounts. This is why reconstructing their views is an uncertain task, especially since those later authors were often hostile towards Stoicism. The work of the Roman Stoics – Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius – on the other hand, has survived through the centuries, either as writings by the philosophers themselves or as notes taken by their students. By the beginning of the third century CE the Stoic school was declining, but the Roman Stoics continued to influence philosophers and psychologists with almost unbroken popularity until today.

Similarities between Hellenistic philosophical schools (dating from the fourth century BCE, the time of Alexander the Great) and early Indian philosophy are often remarked on. There are intriguing, if wispy, glimpses of cultural transmission between India and the Greek world, but few hard facts. The geographical link between the two cultural spheres was the vast area covered first by the Persian Empire and then by the empire of Alexander the Great, through which trade and diplomatic routes

developed. The Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor remarks that there was no 'East' and 'West' at that time, and that the 'world of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE that extended from Athens to Pāṭaliputta was in many respects a single, interactive cultural sphere.'[4]

A central character in this story is the Greek sceptical philosopher Pyrrho of Elis, who around 334 BCE travelled to north-east India with Alexander the Great. He wrote nothing himself, but we know something of his thought through other authors' texts. Diogenes Laertius, who documented the lives of Greek philosophers, tells us that meeting Indian sages led Pyrrho 'to adopt a most noble philosophy … taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgement', and that this was held to bring with it 'tranquillity like its shadow'.[5] One recent, controversial, theory holds that Pyrrho's ideas advocating letting go of all views actually derive from Buddhism.[6]

Diogenes also tells us that Pyrrho 'led a life consistent with this doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not'.[7] On the other hand we are also told that Pyrrho lived to be nearly 90, so perhaps we should take these reports of carelessness with a pinch of salt.

Another noteworthy character is the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, who travelled in India around 305 BCE. Again, his writings have not survived, although some of what he wrote was preserved by other authors. Apparently Megasthenes mentioned two kinds of sects: the '*Brachmanes*' and the '*Sarmanes*' – the latter divided into forest-dwellers, living on fruits and leaves, and 'physicians', who lived in towns. These terms seem to correspond to the more common distinction between *brāhmaṇa and samaṇa. Brāhmaṇa*, or brahmins, were members of a priestly class dedicated to maintaining the religious tradition rooted in the ancient Indian texts called the Vedas. *Samaṇa* were wandering ascetics, whose movement the Buddha is said to have initially joined.

We can't be sure whether there was any direct philosophical influence of India on Greece or Greece on India, and if so what exactly it was, but this remains a fascinating issue that underscores the striking parallels between Buddhism and Stoicism.

Are Buddhism and Stoicism religions?

Some belief systems form complete wholes and require followers to sign up to every tenet, making it harder to borrow ideas from them. This is especially true of religions. Buddhism is usually classified as a religion, although this is often disputed. Stoicism on the other hand is normally considered a philosophy, although it has some features in common with religions. Neither fits neatly into our current template of what a religion is. But then it all depends on what we mean by 'religion'.

Defining religion is hard: there is probably no one definition that captures everything that at one time or other has been considered

religious, and if we're not careful we can end up with one so broad that it catches all sorts of non-religious stuff into its net. For example, according to the psychologist William James:

> 'the life of religion … consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.'[8]

James' definition errs on the side of inclusivity. If we were to adopt it, then both Buddhism and Stoicism would qualify as religions. Whether we conceive of religion so liberally or not, this kind of definition draws attention to the fact that the traditions may not best be seen as simple self-help methods, because they rest on complex ideas about the nature and structure of ultimate reality (what is known as *metaphysics*). This might not be obvious from popular books, in which what is more unpalatable is often quietly edited out, as if it were never there.

It's a well-known fact that the Buddha made pronouncements against metaphysics, as his concern was mainly practical. In one discourse the monk Māluṅkyāputta starts brooding on the fact that the Buddha has left certain things unaddressed – things like whether the world is eternal, whether it is infinite, the relationship between body and soul, what happens after death. So he decides to go to the Buddha to sort it out. If the Buddha were to refuse to answer, he would return to ordinary life. The Buddha rebukes the monk, producing the famous simile of the arrow:

> 'It is as if, Māluṅkyāputta, there were a man struck by an arrow that was smeared thickly with poison; his friends and companions, his family and relatives would summon a doctor to see to the arrow. And the man might say, "I will not draw out this arrow so long as I do not know whether the man by whom I was struck was of the Brahman, Ruler, Trader, or Servant class" … or … "so long as I do not know his name and his family … whether he was tall, short or of medium height … whether he was black, brown or light-skinned … whether he comes from this or that village, town or city …"'[9]

He continues in the same tone about what kind of bow or bow-string it was, what the arrowhead was like and so on. The Buddha explains that the spiritual life does not involve settling all questions regarding the ultimate nature of reality, because this 'is not relevant to the goal', which is nothing less than ending suffering:

> 'Whether one holds the view that the world is eternal or the view that it is not eternal, there is still birth, ageing, death, grief, despair, pain, and unhappiness – and it is the destruction of these here and now that I declare.'

In another discourse, the Buddha tells the story of a monk who is curious about where the four elements that make up the world 'cease without remainder', and who, being able to access the god-realms in meditation,

asks the same question to ever-ascending hierarchies of gods. They don't know. He finally appeals to the all-seeing, all-powerful god Brahmā for an answer, but in a strangely humorous twist the great god takes the monk aside and confesses that even he doesn't know the answer.

The Buddha's lack of interest in metaphysics sits alongside a reluctance to foreground supernatural powers or causes. In the same discourse, for instance, the Buddha has to deal with the householder Kevaddha, who is urging him to get 'some monks to perform superhuman feats and miracles' to impress the locals. The Buddha replies that's not his style. When Kevaddha insists, the Buddha goes on to say that while he allows the miracles of psychic power and telepathy, he knows they would be misattributed to charms if displayed, and therefore 'I dislike, reject and despise them.'[10]

But despite the Buddha's reservations, the supernatural pervades the texts. The Buddhist cosmos is thick with gods. The Buddha and his followers lived among and interacted with 'fairies, demons, goblins, ghosts, nymphs, dragons, angels, as well as various gods'.[11]

And while the Buddha clearly disliked showy displays, a number of discourses set out the supernatural abilities that can be achieved through meditative states. In addition to powers like mind reading and recollection of past lives, the ascetic life yields the following fruits:

> 'being one, [the monk] becomes many, being many he becomes one; he appears then vanishes; he passes unhindered through house walls, through city walls, and through mountains as if through air; he rises up out of the earth and sinks down into it as if it were water; he walks on water as if it were solid like earth; he travels through the sky cross-legged as if he were a bird with wings; he touches and strokes with his hand things of such power and energy as the sun and moon; he has mastery with his body as far as the world of Brahmā.'[12]

Many people protest that all this supernatural stuff is a late addition to the more minimalist and purer original message. Perhaps because of some of the Buddha's pronouncements, a scholarly tradition developed according to which Buddhism is really a down to earth philosophy onto which supernatural beings and metaphysical flourishes were stuck.[13]

But this may be wishful thinking. A wandering ascetic of the time of the Buddha is likely to have believed many things we find improbable. The supernatural is inextricably woven into the fabric of Buddhism. It is possible to create a 'bespoke' Buddhism by selecting the texts that suit us and leaving contradictory ones out, but that would be moulding Buddhism in our own image. Supernatural and naturalistic aspects of Buddhist doctrine are deeply intertwined. If Buddhism is practical or non-metaphysical, it is so only relatively.

Even away from supernatural beings and extrasensory powers, some key Buddhist ideas are uneasily squared with a naturalistic worldview. Much of the Buddhist edifice is built on the twin foundations of karma

and rebirth. It is not entirely clear where these concepts originally came from, but they became common and widespread in ancient India. The basic idea of karma is that our intentional actions (which in Buddhism include purely mental states like intentions and volitions) accumulate and continue to produce consequences well beyond the end of this life, directing us towards a good or bad rebirth.

The idea that Buddhism is a purely secular philosophy devoid of religious or supernatural elements, therefore, is not entirely in tune with its teachings as they have been handed down. The question for the secular-minded is how many Buddhist ideas can survive being uprooted from the religious soil in which they grew.

What of Stoicism's relationship to metaphysics? Like Buddhism, it is far from being a mere collection of wise maxims about how to live and is very much an integrated system in which the practical advice relies on views about the cosmos and our place in it.

According to Diogenes Laertius, for the Stoics God is:

> 'a living being, immortal, rational, perfect or intelligent in happiness, admitting nothing evil, taking providential care of the world and all that therein is, but he is not of human shape. He is, however, the artificer of the universe and, as it were, the father of all'.[14]

The Stoic God can be difficult to pin down. Without going into too much detail at this stage, according to the Stoics the cosmos is providentially ordered by a divine rational principle that suffuses everything. This is what they call God, or Zeus, and sometimes even refer to, in the plural, as 'gods'. Our minds are fragments of this principle, 'literally "offshoots" of God, parts of God that God has assigned to the mind or self of each person'.[15] If this is our essential nature, where does evil come from? The Stoics believed it originates in humanity, but this doesn't seem to get to its ultimate source. It seems that Chrysippus wrote works on fate, providence, divination and oracles, in which he had a go at various answers: cosmically, good and evil are necessarily interdependent; or evil is only a by-product of good; or some apparent evils are actually goods.

Marcus Aurelius was concerned with this problem too. He writes:

> 'Everything derives from it – that universal mind – either as effect or consequence. The lion's jaws, the poisonous substances, and every harmful thing – from thorns to mud … are by-products of the good and the beautiful.'[16]

It is unclear to what extent the Stoics believed in a traditional person-like God. The Stoic Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* appears to indicate that they did:

> 'Zeus, giver of all, you of the dark clouds, of the blazing thunderbolt,
> save men from their baneful inexperience
> and disperse it, father, far from their souls; grant that they may achieve
> the wisdom with which you confidently guide all with justice
> so that we may requite you with honour for the honour you give us

praising your works continually, as is fitting for mortals'.[17]

On the other hand, this and other similar verses could be read not as straightforward prayers but as direct addresses to a more rational part of ourselves, like in these lines by Seneca:

> 'You need not raise your hands to heaven; you need not beg the temple keeper for privileged access, as if a near approach to the cult image would give us a better hearing. The god is near you – with you – inside you.'[18]

There is a tension between a religious reading of the Stoic God, in which God is the providential architect of the world, and a more naturalistic reading, in which all this God talk is just a traditional way of referring to natural processes. Either way, nature is an expression of a divine rational principle and God is part of nature rather than a supernatural deity standing outside it. Perhaps because this was not religion in the most traditional sense, already in ancient times the sincerity of the Stoics' religious intentions was doubted, and they were accused of bringing in God to give an appearance of piety.[19] Although the Stoics' religious beliefs were relatively pared down, however, they did deeply affect their views on how we should conduct our lives.

The question we need to address is this: to what extent are supernatural and metaphysical elements essential to provide a foundation for ethical and practical advice? Does it really make sense to take only parts of these traditions to help ourselves to live flourishing lives, as is our aim in this book? As philosopher Owen Flanagan asks:

> 'Imagine Buddhism without rebirth and without a karmic system that guarantees justice ultimately will be served, without nirvana, without bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves, without Buddha worlds, without nonphysical states of mind, without any deities, without heaven and hell realms, without oracles, and without lamas who are reincarnations of lamas. What would be left?'[20]

What indeed. This is what we'll try to grapple with in this book, about both traditions. In the next two chapters I will look at how they view the *causes* of the human predicament, and in the following two chapters at the *solutions* they offer. Then in the second part of the book I will move on to some reflections and perspectives on what gems may be left if we discard the more metaphysical aspects.

Notes

1. Snellgrove 2002, p. 7
2. '*Mahāpadāna Sutta*'. Walshe 1987, 14
3. E.g. Penner 2009; Gethin 1998, p.16. But Stephen Batchelor points out that the little vignettes in the Pāli Canon describing daily life may well be truthful, since any later editors of the texts would have had no doctrinal reason to alter them.

4. Batchelor 2016
5. Diogenes Laertius, 9.61, 9.107
6. Beckwith 2015; Batchelor 2016
7. Diogenes Laertius, 9.62
8. James 1960, p. 69
9. '*Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta*'. Gethin 2008, p. 171
10. '*Kevaddha Sutta*'. Walshe 1987, 11
11. Gethin 1998, p. 128. Anālayo (2016) also comments that as far as we can tell, the Buddha and his disciples believed in a variety of celestial beings (p. 59).
12. '*Sāmaññaphala Sutta*'. Gethin 2008, p. 31
13. Gethin 1998, p. 130
14. Diogenes Laertius, 7.147
15. Long 2002, pp. 145–6
16. Marcus Aurelius 2003, 6.36a
17. In Sellars 2006, pp. 91–2
18. Seneca 2015, 41.1
19. Sellars 2006, p. 93
20. Flanagan 2011, p. 3

Chapter 2

DUKKHA HAPPENS: WE SUFFER

The human condition

Life is not for the fainthearted. Just listen to the news. There are natural disasters: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, tsunamis, epidemics. There are human-caused afflictions: robbery and murder, war, terrorism, discrimination, child abuse, domestic violence, racism, slavery, genocide, environmental destruction and people being generally nasty to each other. Turning to look inside, even the sunniest person is unlikely to dodge forever some version of grief, fear, regret, anger, loneliness.

It's the human condition. Of course, we don't suffer all the time. If we're very lucky, plenty of joy and thrills will come our way alongside the angst and the distress, and suffering will be minimal. If we're very unlucky – our lives blighted by war, poverty, disease – the stream of suffering can outweigh the good. But whether we're lucky or unlucky, death will be waiting. The pain of losing loved ones and the knowledge that at some point we will cease to run around on this earth are things that the fortunate and the unfortunate have to share.

That a lifetime of busyness and striving to improve our life – make it perfect even – should end in death seems absurd, sometimes to the point of draining all meaning out of life. Who could blame us for wanting to forget all about it? And yet the awareness is there, poking us, not letting us avert our gaze for too long.

Many artists and poets have expressed this despair. I remember one of them well from my school days. For Giacomo Leopardi, the deeply pessimistic nineteenth-century Italian poet, human life is like a white-haired, frail, barefoot old man who, carrying a heavy load, traverses mountains and valleys, through sharp rocks and deep sand and thickets, through winds and storms, through heat and frost, through rivers and ponds. He runs, stumbles, gets up, hurries more and more with no rest or sustenance, bleeding and with his clothes torn. He finally gets where all this effort has taken him: a huge frightful ravine, in which he falls, forgetting everything.[1] As a life vision, it doesn't get much bleaker than that.

For a more minimalist version of a similar sentiment, we probably couldn't improve on Nabokov: 'The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light

between two eternities of darkness.'[2]

Like other animals, we have a strong inbuilt desire for our life to continue and a fear of it ending. Unlike other animals, who experience fear only when death seems imminent, we can brood on it and stoke the terror well away from any actual threat. Also unlike other animals, we are aware of the ultimate futility of our endeavours.

We deal with this in a number of ways. According to existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom:

> 'Death … itches all the time; it is always with us, scratching at some inner door, whirring softly, barely audibly, just under the membrane of consciousness. Hidden and disguised, leaking out in a variety of symptoms, it is the wellspring of many of our worries, stresses, and conflicts'.[3]

But we can't live in constant fear, so we find ways to chase the terror away: we project ourselves into the future through our children, we try to become rich and famous, we develop 'compulsive protective rituals' or an unshakeable belief in an 'ultimate rescuer'.

Death anxiety pushes us in one of two directions. In the normal course of events we assume that satisfying our desires will fill the void, and we don't let the abyss put us off embracing worldly things with enthusiasm. Sometimes we get what we want. This approach – distracting ourselves by pursuing worldly satisfaction – can keep existential discomfort at bay for some people at least some of the time. But ultimately it is bound to fail. Our inbuilt dissatisfaction system will make sure of that, as we get used to and stop noticing the things we believed would make us happy ever after, then imagine that satisfaction will come from something else. This is called the 'hedonic treadmill'.

More generally, we adapt to both good and bad changes in our lives. At one end of the spectrum, grief about bad news generally subsides with time. Some changes have longer-lasting effects than others, however, and things like severe disability are hard to fully bounce back from. Unemployment and widowhood also tend to leave lasting scars.[4] At the other end, the thrill of a new relationship or new house also tends to fade. But even if adaptation does not happen and satisfaction lasts for a while, it won't last forever because nothing does. In the long term we are all going to be thwarted, and the search for worldly satisfaction will remain a wild goose chase.

An alternative response to death anxiety advocates overcoming our entrancement with the world of the senses and seeking a different way out, perhaps in an afterlife in which all suffering will cease. All over the world human cultures have come up with paths offering just such a promise. 'Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which, in one way or another attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude', writes Yalom.[5]

Grappling with our predicament

Buddhism and Stoicism zoom in on the human condition and offer another approach to salvation. Their way of dealing with suffering rests not on the promise of a blissful afterlife but on a deep suspicion of the urge to find fulfilment in worldly goods and activities. It's not by *pursuing* but by *abandoning* our desires that real satisfaction can be found.

There couldn't be a clearer illustration of how the Buddhist path evolved in response to the inescapable realities of life than the legend of the Buddha. After leading a sheltered existence, on a series of outings he has a number of encounters – with an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic – that prompt his decision to embark on a spiritual journey.

Other passages seem to confirm the idea that Buddhism is at heart a response to suffering. Once, in his old age, the Buddha is warming his back in the last of the sun. His attendant Ānanda massages his limbs, commenting on how the Buddha's skin is now wrinkled, his back bent forward, his faculties not so sharp anymore. The Buddha agrees: 'When young, one is subject to aging; when healthy, subject to illness; when alive, subject to death.' He then goes on to say, in what seems like a heartfelt outpouring:

> 'I spit on you, old age –
> old age that makes for ugliness.
> The bodily image, so charming, is trampled by old age.
> Even those who live to a hundred
> are headed – all – to an end in death,
> which spares no one,
> which tramples all.'[6]

These existential themes find echoes in other texts, for instance in these verses from the *Dhammapāda*:

> 'Look at this beautified body:
> A mass of sores propped up,
> Full of illness, [the object] of many plans,
> With nothing stable or lasting.'[7]

One word captures the bleak reality of the human condition: *dukkha*. Usually translated as 'suffering', or 'unsatisfactoriness', *dukkha* is the first of the four noble truths, surely the best-known exposition of Buddhist ideas. (The other three are the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to the cessation of suffering.) The first translation sometimes evokes misunderstanding: if the first noble truth is understood as 'life is suffering', then it can be reasonably objected that life is not only suffering; it also gives us joy and excitement and delight. But that is not the point. The latter and broader translation, more in favour in recent times, has the advantage of pointing to a universal feature of life: whether we are actively suffering or not, no worldly thing or pleasure can give us lasting satisfaction. This is true however we may

happen to feel at any given time. Because both translations are partial, *dukkha* is often left untranslated. However it is glossed in English, according to Buddhist studies scholar Richard Gombrich, the first noble truth 'looks more like an exclamation than a proposition': *dukkha*![8] A kind of proclamation of suffering.

The first noble truth is introduced in what is traditionally held to be the Buddha's first discourse after his awakening, in which a number of key doctrines are presented. Early on in the text the Buddha introduces *dukkha* with these words:

> 'Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering'.[9]

This is a brilliantly succinct, yet comprehensive, description of the human condition. We get old, become ill and die. What we love is snatched away from us, and what we don't wish for turns up in our life. Everything else, surely, is detail. Things break, blooms fade, teeth decay, relationships end.

Fundamentally, how life is *dukkha* is described by three closely interconnected qualities, known as the 'hallmarks' of existence. These are:

- *dukkha* itself
- impermanence (*anicca*)
- not-self (*anattā*)

Briefly, impermanence means that all phenomena are constantly arising and passing, while not-self refers primarily to the fact that we lack a permanent, unchanging core.

Understanding impermanence, which is so close to the roots of suffering, is at the very core of Buddhist teaching. At the end of the Buddha's first discourse, one of the monks has an insight that is expressed succinctly as: 'Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation', at which the Buddha proclaims that the monk has understood.[10]

We can train ourselves to become more aware of this by simply paying more attention to the changing nature of all things. When walking along a street, remind yourself that there was a time when none of these buildings stood, and that none will last forever. When you admire a beautiful flower, remember that you are seeing only one moment in the life course of the plant. More awesome still is the experience of looking at a mountainous landscape, knowing that every contour was carved by millennia of ice, rain and wind.

Our faulty views about the self are just as close to the roots of suffering. The Buddha breaks down our experience of self into a comprehensive list of five 'aggregates', or five kinds of physical and

mental processes:

- bodily phenomena
- feelings (this refers not to complex emotions but to a basic quality of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral)
- cognitions (labelling or recognising)
- volitional activities (such as tendencies, desires and complex emotions)
- consciousness.

Of each of these the Buddha asks whether it is permanent or transitory. The answer is that all five are outside our control, lack permanence and are subject to suffering; therefore none of them can be a self.[11] It is assumed that a self must be permanent and beyond suffering. But why should that be?

The Buddha may have been responding to a particular religious view, common at the time, in which the self (*ātman*) was considered unchanging and essentially identical to *brahman*, the ultimate reality (not to be confused with the *brāhmaṇa*, the priestly caste), 'the spirit immanent both in the universe and in individual human beings'.[12] In that view the *ātman* was seen as underlying appearances and could be discovered through spiritual practice. Instead, the Buddha instructs us to remain at the level of our perceived experience of the world and avoid speculating about hidden entities.

The Buddha's main point is easily substantiated by reflecting on our own experience, which is indeed that things are impermanent, ever-shifting and *dukkha*. Nothing is solid, everything is changeable and dependent on everything else; therefore lasting satisfaction is beyond our reach. But does that mean we have no self?

There is definitely something we could call the everyday functioning self: the Buddha was not denying that. He merely denied something that may well be better described as 'soul'. Some scholars have remarked that the denial of self in Buddhism occurs only in specific contexts. The philosophy of not-self is expressed in certain kinds of meditative practices, such as mentally breaking down the body into its constituents in order to facilitate the insight that what we are is really a collection of shifting parts. But while the self is deconstructed in meditation, the monastic rules refer to monks as persons with agency.[13]

In a later text the self was likened to a chariot: there is no essence of chariot, but we find it convenient to use this word to refer to a particular collection of parts – pole, axle, wheels, yoke and so on.[14] This view of the self should not come as a shock to anyone who does not believe in an immortal soul. If we are made up of biological parts, it makes sense that our 'self' is impermanent, conditioned and bound for dispersal when we die. Of course, even if we understand this intellectually, it does not necessarily follow that we experience ourselves that way: we experience ourselves as wholes, not as collections of parts. In the same way, knowing that the table is made up of atoms does not stop us experiencing it as

solid.

This is why Buddhism developed particular forms of meditation to focus our attention on the lack of an enduring self. But even without training, we can all try something similar. If you sit somewhere quiet and pay attention to your experience, you will probably notice sensations in parts of your body, thoughts arising in your mind, perhaps images or tunes. What you will not observe is a self separate from these. This opens the door to the realisation that what you call 'you' is no more than the collection of interrelated experiences.

Stoicism also reflects an acute sensitivity to the human condition. Life is short, we have no control over much that happens to us, and death looms for everyone. When death happens, the temporary arrangement of matter that we once were will dissolve and be lost. Far from being unduly pessimistic, this perspective simply recognises certain basic facts about our existence.[15] People need help to grapple with this fleeting, unsatisfactory world, and that is just what Stoic philosophy seeks to provide.

A sense of mortality and time passing are strong themes in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*: 'Everything in flux. And you too will alter in the whirl and perish, and the world as well.'[16] Marcus dwells on the transience of things and the vanity of worldly concerns so poignantly that his *Meditations* have sometimes been seen as the expression of a melancholy sensibility. In fact his notes to himself were simply reminders to face the inevitable facts of life in the right spirit.

Conclusion

Dukkha is real and touches all of us. If we're lucky, ordinary kinds of goals – seeking happiness and satisfaction in worldly things – will work for periods of time, but ultimately they are bound to fail. That things are impermanent is an immutable fact of life. Buddhism and Stoicism are right to draw our attention to this situation, make it vivid, urge us to take it seriously and respond appropriately. Exactly what 'responding appropriately' means is open to discussion. For the moment it will be enough to underline the futility of trying to hang on too tightly to things that will pass. But why exactly does our human condition lead to suffering?

Notes

1. Giacomo Leopardi, 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia' (*Canti*, 23)

   Vecchierel bianco, infermo,
   Mezzo vestito e scalzo,
   Con gravissimo fascio in su le spalle,
   Per montagna e per valle,
   Per sassi acuti, ed alta rena, e fratte,

Al vento, alla tempesta, e quando avvampa
L'ora, e quando poi gela,
Corre via, corre, anela,
Varca torrenti e stagni,
Cade, risorge, e più e più s'affretta,
Senza posa o ristoro,
Lacero, sanguinoso; infin ch'arriva
Colà dove la via
E dove il tanto affaticar fu volto:
Abisso orrido, immenso,
Ov'ei precipitando, il tutto obblia.
Vergine luna, tale
E' la vita mortale.

2. Nabokov, V. (2000) *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Penguin, p. 5
3. Yalom 2008, pp. 9, 5
4. Diener and Biswas-Diener 2008, p. 157
5. Yalom 2008, p. 5
6. '*Jara Sutta*'. (SN 48.41), transl. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*, 30 November 2013, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn48/sn48.041.than.html
7. Fronsdal 2006, 11
8. Gombrich 2013, p. 10
9. '*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*' ('The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the *Dhamma*'). Bodhi, 2005, p. 76. The Indian concept of *Dharma*, Pāli *Dhamma*, means the deep truth underlying everything, including moral truth. In Buddhism it also refers to the teaching of the Buddha.
10. '*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*'. Bodhi, 2005, p. 77
11. Bodhi 2005, p. 341
12. Gombrich 2013. This view is usually associated with the brahmanical tradition, to which the Buddha was supposed to be referring. According to Bronkhorst (2007), however, it is possible that both Buddhism and Brahmanism were in fact responding to ideas current at the time.
13. Collins 1994, pp. 66–75
14. Siderits 2007, p. 55
15. Sellars, 'Stoicism and the Human Condition', modernstoicism.com 10/12/2015
16. Marcus Aurelius 2003, 9.19

Chapter 3

MALADIES OF THE SOUL: WHY WE SUFFER

Reading Stoic and Buddhist literature we might come across phrases like ‘a medical science of the mind’, ‘treating the diseased soul’, or the ‘existential illness’ that the Buddha set out to cure. Both traditions employ medical metaphors to describe the human affliction, which is that we suffer as a result of the kinds of beings we are: deluded and grasping. The false views we hold about ourselves and the world mean that we value and become attached to things that are neither permanent nor valuable. This erroneous attachment is what needs treatment, and both traditions prescribe a therapeutic path for the condition. For now, I will concentrate on the diagnosis.

We’re all familiar with medical explanations of physical health conditions. A medical model might involve a disease, a cause, a mechanism of change based on this cause, and a therapeutic procedure. For example, an infection is caused by bacteria; the mechanism of change would involve eliminating or reducing their population and the therapeutic procedure would probably be a course of antibiotics. Picking threads common to both traditions, then, we could say that:

- the *disease* is our normal experience of life, in which we feel emotions and suffer;
- the *cause* is our incessant craving for and attachment to self and worldly things, due to our ignorance of the fundamental features of the world;
- the *mechanism of change* is educating ourselves to see things as they really are and cultivating non-attachment;
- the *therapeutic procedure* is the prescribed path, which in both cases includes cognitive, ethical and experiential aspects.

The Stoic diagnosis

In the Stoic scheme of things, emotions are the main symptom of the disease. There is some disagreement as to whether ‘emotion’ or ‘passion’ is the better translation of the Greek *pathos*. On the one hand, ‘passion’ is said to better reflect the Greek meaning, while the English ‘emotion’ is broader. On the other hand, the word ‘passion’ suggests an especially forceful emotion, and it wasn’t only the very strong kinds that the Stoics

objected to: 'Stoicism as formulated by Chrysippus was opposed to nearly all emotion', writes ancient philosophy scholar Richard Sorabji.[1]

In Stoicism, emotions are problematic because they are inseparable from faulty beliefs about the world: an emotion always entails a judgement.[2] This makes sense: if I'm frightened, I'm implicitly or explicitly judging that something is dangerous. We also know that the judgements involved in emotions can be wrong, leading us to project badness onto something neutral. We may, for instance, be frightened of cockroaches, even though they cannot harm us.

For the Stoics, however, the problem is even worse, since in their framework almost all our judgements about what is good or bad in life are deluded. This is because they believed that the only thing that can be good or bad is virtue. 'Virtue' in the context of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy has a slightly idiosyncratic meaning, referring to something like the excellent performance of our distinctively human functions. For the Stoics, this meant primarily our rationality.

From a Stoic point of view, everything other than virtue is, strictly speaking, 'indifferent', which means that although we might justifiably prefer or 'disprefer' something, we should not mistake it for good or bad. Highly counterintuitively, the Stoics held that we are wrong to regard health, life, love, money, comfort, worldly success and achievement as good, and equally wrong to judge poverty, disease and death as bad. It is from this kind of erroneous judgement that emotions arise.

There are four broad kinds of emotion, which are grouped together according to whether they attribute goodness or badness to the present or the future: desire (good in the future); fear (bad in the future); pleasure or delight (good in the present); pain or distress (bad in the present).[3] For example, when we feel joyful about a job offer or a new relationship, we are making the mistake of believing that things outside ourselves can be good; when we're upset that we didn't get the job or were dumped, we're wrongly assuming that external things can be bad.

If the Stoics are right, the great majority of our hopes and plans – in fact almost everything we want and pursue, as well as everything we fear and wish to avoid – are misguided, as they are based on the faulty assumptions that things outside ourselves can be good or bad, that we should act to acquire or avoid them, and that it's appropriate to be happy or distressed depending on whether we gain or lose them. An emotion is a sign that we have allowed ourselves to think of something indifferent as good or bad.

The Stoic reasoning is that since emotions are judgements, we are capable of controlling and altering them, and are ultimately responsible for them. If we genuinely came to endorse the belief that nothing apart from virtue is good or bad, ordinary kinds of emotion (that don't relate to virtue or vice) should just vanish, and this is the outcome we should seek. (The Stoics did allow a handful of 'good emotions', although these are not emotions as we'd normally understand them. I will discuss these in

confusion, ignorant of what is truly valuable. Or we can choose the truth and tranquillity of the philosophical path. If we do, we will have to turn our back on what is shifting and vulnerable, stop trying to obtain things that we may lose or fail to get, stop trying to avoid things we can't control, and instead concentrate on seeking only moral good and avoiding only moral evil. The reward is peace of mind and a 'smooth and undisturbed' life.

The Buddhist diagnosis

While the Buddhist tradition doesn't use the language of a diseased soul, it does sometimes compare the Buddha to a great physician, seeing his teachings as the cure for the disease of *dukkha*. The four noble truths each have a medical parallel: the disease is *dukkha*; the cause is ignorance/craving; the desired state of health is nirvana/cessation of *dukkha*; the medicine is the path.[15] Bhikkhu Bodhi writes that: 'The Buddha does not offer us palliatives that leave the underlying maladies untouched beneath the surface; rather, he traces our existential illness down to its most fundamental causes.'[16]

Dukkha is attributed primarily to ignorance in some texts and primarily to craving in others. But in practice both are implicated, as it is ignorance of how things really are (i.e. of the three hallmarks of existence – *dukkha*, impermanence, notself) that gives our foolish cravings free rein.

There are four distortions of perception, thought or view, which explain where we go wrong:[17]

> 'Sensing no change in the changing,
> Sensing pleasure in suffering,
> Assuming "self" where there's no self,
> Sensing the unlovely as lovely'.

Instead we should:

> 'see change in what is changing,
> Suffering where there's suffering,
> "Non-self" in what is without self,
> … see the unlovely as such.'[18]

As in Stoicism, the cause of our ailment is that, out of profound ignorance about the way things are, we believe and act on the alluring appearances that present themselves to us, leading us to cling to our 'self' and worldly things. We are fundamentally mistaken in our judgement that by satisfying worldly cravings, happiness and satisfaction will come our way. In a world where all is impermanent and ever-changing, this will never happen.

The message is that by engaging with the Buddhist path we can turn this unfortunate situation around and attain the cessation of *dukkha*. This is a central Buddhist goal: in one discourse the Buddha says that what he

teaches is just 'suffering and the cessation of suffering'.[19]

We might think that 'cessation of *dukkha*' simply means the end of all suffering, a kind of state of perma-bliss. But it is a little more complicated than that. The basic fact that we feel pain is not going to change. To illustrate this, the Buddha uses another arrow simile:

> 'Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, and then strike him immediately afterward with a second dart, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling experiences a painful feeling, he feels two feelings – a bodily one and a mental one.'[20]

When an 'uninstructed worldling' experiences pain he cries and wails about it, and at that moment suffers two kinds of pain, physical and mental. Normally when we get an ache we don't just quietly feel it and let it pass. Instead, immediately all sorts of aversive reactions start piling up, increasing the intensity of our suffering: we don't deserve this; we don't need it just now; we're stuck with it forever. After training, however, the pain no longer doubles up. When an 'instructed noble disciple' feels pain, he feels only one kind of pain:

> 'Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, but they would not strike him immediately afterward with a second dart, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. So too, when the instructed noble disciple experiences a painful feeling, he feels one feeling – a bodily one, and not a mental one.'

The reason why the instructed disciple is able to do this is an altered perception of the self. Unlike the uninstructed worldling, the disciple does not cling to the flow of mental and physical processes (the five aggregates), mistaking them for the self, and therefore does not get distressed when what is pleasant changes into what is unpleasant. If experiencing pain, the disciple does not react to it with aversion, but relates to it as just a shifting sensation.

It is said that the Buddha suffered from backache.[21] No one could remove that or any other ache because human bodies are susceptible to pain and there's nothing we can do about it. Similarly, nothing could be done about impermanence, about things changing and passing, about not getting what we want and with tedious regularity getting what we don't want. However, while the Buddha had back ache, he did not *suffer* with it. The lesson is that, with training, we can learn to remove the added layer of distress that so often sneaks in unnoticed.

Compare this with Marcus' view that:

> 'Either pain affects the body (which is the body's problem) or it affects the soul. But the soul can choose not to be affected, preserving its own serenity, its own tranquillity.'[22]

To achieve this imperturbability we need mindfulness. When Anuruddha,

one of the Buddha's disciples, was gravely ill, the monks asked how it was that painful feelings didn't overwhelm his mind. He replied: 'It is, friends, because I dwell with a mind well established in the four establishments of mindfulness that the arisen bodily feelings do not persist obsessing my mind.'[23]

This is a remarkable skill, but one that we can all practice to some degree. When we experience physical or mental pain, the first thing to do is to acknowledge it and allow it to be there simply as a feeling that will pass. A popular and useful acronym to remember is RAIN: Recognise what is happening; Allow the experience to be there; Investigate with kindness; Non-identification. By doing this we can loosen the added layer of suffering and become better able to live with the pain. We will come back to mindfulness in Chapter 9.

But can this extra layer of suffering be removed completely, or can we only hope to reduce it? The same discourse says:

> 'If [the instructed noble disciple] feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it detached. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached. If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached. This, monks, is called a noble disciple who is detached from birth, aging, and death; who is detached from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; who is detached from suffering, I say.'[24]

This is the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed worldling. Aches and pains will continue, loss and unpleasantness of all kinds will continue, but with training we can come to 'feel them detached'.

Therapies of the soul?

Understanding on its own is not enough. Both traditions rightly saw that in order to overcome habitual illusions we can't avoid the difficult task of changing established perceptions and habits, and that is why both rely on more practical methods for effectively internalising the message.

The Buddha prioritised direct, intuitive knowledge attained through meditative experience over logical reasoning or tradition.[25] Understanding how things are needs to be complemented by a more experiential insight. Our delusions about self, permanence and the possibility of worldly happiness are deep and hard to uproot, therefore a large part of the path is about cultivating forms of meditation that facilitate that insight.

Similarly, the Stoics understood that, although what needs to be changed are judgements, some beliefs are so entrenched that we need more than arguments to shift them. To produce lasting changes, the arguments have to become embedded in our being through repetition and vivid practices that affect us more deeply and forcefully. (I will say more about Buddhist and Stoic methods in Chapter 9.)

The process of abandoning erroneous beliefs and attachments was

seen as therapeutic, and many today emphasise the link between these ancient ideas and contemporary psychotherapies. It is often said that among the primary inspirations behind the modern Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), currently one of the most popular therapies on the market, was Epictetus' saying: 'People are disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of things.'[26] And mindfulness-based methods, which can clearly make very positive contributions to people's lives, originate in Buddhist texts.

But Buddhist and Stoic paths to reduce human suffering shouldn't be confused with what we now call psychotherapy, which tends to be much more limited in scope and hands-off about people's values. Both CBT and the growing number of mindfulness-based methods have specific goals – to reduce the impact of depression, for instance, or chronic pain. They necessarily help themselves only to certain parts of the traditions they borrow from – those that suit their particular therapeutic purposes – and place them in a completely different context and set of values. While there are always exceptions and grey areas, asking people to completely rethink their value system is not normally part of the remit of the contemporary psychotherapist. If the ancient philosophies and the modern therapies are both 'therapeutic', it is in a very different sense of the word.

Conclusion

In both Buddhism and Stoicism, then, insight into how things really are can transform our experience. Our problems are caused mainly by wrong views about the world. In Stoicism, the disease is the faulty value judgements that give rise to emotions; in Buddhism, it is the faulty perceptions concealing the fact that everything is impermanent, empty of self and inseparable from suffering. To make progress and be saved we must challenge these views, correct our direction and take the first steps along the path.

We may disagree on matters of detail, but the broad thrust of these ideas is surely right: if we attend more carefully to how the world is, we can become more aware of what is truly valuable and less concerned with what superficially appears to be real and lasting. The source of many of our problems is indeed a mistaken view of what matters.

If 'salvation' is some kind of ideal state of being that contrasts with an erroneous worldly existence, then in one way or another both Buddhism and Stoicism can be considered paths of salvation. But of what exactly does this salvation consist? Both traditions were integrated wholes formed of interlocking, interdependent parts, and in the next two chapters I will attempt to spell out the concepts that underscore their views of salvation.

Notes

1. Sorabji 2000, p. 7. Sellars, ‘Stoicism and Emotion’, modernstoicism.com 1/2/2015
2. Depending on the thinker and the interpretation, emotions are seen as caused by or identical with beliefs. Inwood 1985, p. 131
3. ‘Pleasure’ and ‘pain’ might give the impression they are more physical than they are meant to be. Nussbaum 1994, p. 386
4. As reported by Cicero. Graver 2002, p. 43
5. Aristotle 2000, 2.6
6. Epictetus, 2.22
7. Long and Sedley 1987, p. 414
8. Graver 2002, pp. 59, 12, 60
9. In Nussbaum 1994, pp. 13–14
10. Musonius Rufus 2011, lecture 3
11. Graver 2002, p. 5
12. Seneca 2015, 8.2
13. Nussbaum 1994, p. 317
14. Nussbaum 1994, p. 15
15. Gethin 1998, p. 63
16. Bodhi 2005, p. 19
17. These distortions are known as *vipallāsas*.
18. ‘*Vipallāsa Sutta*’. (AN 4.49), transl. Andrew Olendzki. *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*, 2 November 2013. http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.049.olen.html
19. ‘*Alagaddūpama Sutta*’. Gethin 2008, p. 166
20. ‘*Salla Sutta*’. Bodhi 2005, p. 31. Anālayo 2013, p. 120
21. E.g. ‘*Sangīti Sutta*’. Walshe 1987, 33
22. Marcus Aurelius 2003, 8.28
23. Bodhi 2000, p. 1757
24. Bodhi 2005, p. 32
25. Although he was also aware of the limitations and dangers of relying solely on meditative experiences to gain knowledge (Anālayo 2003, p. 45).
26. Epictetus, ‘Handbook 5’

temporarily cease.[8] This state is unrippled by thoughts or feelings, and external stimuli don't impinge on the consciousness of the meditator. It is a bit like being dead, in that all physical and mental activity has stopped. The texts explain, however, that unlike in death the monk's 'vitality is not exhausted'.[9]

Sometimes this state is identified with nirvana.[10] But while states of absorption may be close to and mistaken for nirvana, they are not the real thing. One difficulty is that nirvana is frequently characterised as necessitating deep insight into the nature of things, and this seems incompatible with such a contentless consciousness. It has been suggested therefore that insight and tranquillity meditations may once have been alternative paths with different goals, the former for overcoming ignorance and the latter for overcoming craving.[11]

Some scholars have seen at least the higher *jhānas*, which involve supernatural powers, as remnants of a separate spiritual strand, characteristic of previous, non-Buddhist forms of meditation. Certain views and methods may have been imported into more specifically Buddhist material from other systems, like early forms of Jainism. These methods include ascetic techniques, such as abstaining from food, and meditative practices that aim at bringing the mind to a complete standstill. Ultimately, the ascetic would achieve complete motionlessness of body and mind and cessation of breathing, whereupon death would follow. This would be a positive outcome in Jainism, according to which karma was the cause of suffering, therefore the aim was to avoid accumulating new karma and destroy old karma through non-activity.[12]

Whatever the historical development actually was, both insight and concentration became part of the Buddhist path, although they coexist uncomfortably, amid discordant notes. There is still a lot of debate about how the two fit in with each other and whether or how much *jhāna* achievement is necessary on the way to nirvana. Some texts seem to suggest that the absorptions are conducive to awakening, even essential for it.[13] On the other hand *jhāna* states are as impermanent and *dukkha* as everything else, therefore they do not ultimately lead to salvation.[14] Elsewhere the possibility is raised that they may be dispensable.[15] Some texts flexibly suggest that it is possible to approach the two in any order, or pursue both at the same time.[16]

The *jhānas* are something of a double-edged sword. Apart from developing concentration, they perform the useful function of aiding detachment from worldly delights, as the pleasure they generate makes those fade by comparison. But for the same reason an excessive focus on the *jhānas* could create attachment – almost an addiction – to those states, so meditators should be on their guard.

While a number of modern teachers have taken the view that only insight is necessary for awakening, and that this can be attained with only a modicum of concentration, the traditional position is that the way of insight and the way of concentration are complementary, and the two

should be developed together. You can't develop insight if your mind is scattered; therefore some concentration is the basis for insight training.[17]

The relationship between the calm absorption of meditation and insight is captured with a simile: just like we would not be able to see our reflection in a bowl of water that had been mixed with a dye, or was bubbling over a fire, or was muddy or had algae growing in it, in the same way we need a calm mind to see things clearly.[18]

The basic structure of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation is to pay attention to the arising and passing of what we experience in our field of consciousness – sensations, sounds, thoughts, feelings. In *samatha* (tranquillity) meditation, the starting point is to focus on an object of attention, which is often the breath. In both meditations, almost all of us will find ourselves distracted. When this happens, we simply notice and return to the practice.

Mystical experiences

Insight, perceiving the world as it really is, is the key characteristic of nirvana. But what does that actually mean? Is nirvana a mystical experience? And if so, what kind? There are different ways of characterising a mystical or religious experience. One of the best known is William James', which sets out the following criteria.[19] They must be:

- ineffable (they can't be properly captured in words);
- noetic (they appear to convey some knowledge or insight about the world);
- passive (they arise unbidden);
- transient.

In this understanding, nirvana in this life may or may not qualify as a mystical experience. It is passive in the sense that it cannot be summoned at will. On the other hand, much groundwork is necessary for it to find fertile soil: the insight characteristic of nirvana typically arises after a lot of meditative practice.[20] It is transient, in that the *arahant* subsequently returns to a more ordinary perception of the world. In the standard understanding of nirvana as involving direct insight into how things really are it seems to be noetic: in James' terms, such experiences appear as 'states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect'.[21] It is not clear whether it is ineffable, since the perception it embodies may be expressed but not properly captured through language.

The idea of experiencing things as they really are in themselves is certainly alluring. But how deeply can our understanding penetrate? A mystical experience can be so powerful as to create an unshakeable conviction that we have pierced through the surface of things. But, central though such an experience may be in someone's life, could it ever justify drawing conclusions about what things are like in themselves?

The eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant had a thing or two

to say about this subject. He convincingly argued that our experience of the world is mediated by categories such as physical identity, space, time and causal connection, imposed by our particular sense organs and cognitive abilities. Because of the kind of beings we are, we can access the world only through these lenses, and whatever may exist outside our mental and perceptual capacities is forever unknowable to us. 'We can never, even by the strictest examination, get completely behind the secret springs of action.'[22] We should not mistake experience, which is all we can have, for ultimate reality. We simply don't know how accurate our representations of whatever is 'out there' are likely to be.

Like a motorcycle helmet we can't take off, we're forever hampered by human senses and brain: reality is 'veiled'.[23] Although in a mystical experience those Kantian categories are typically altered, it is still a human brain that is doing the experiencing, and as such all it can have is an experience, not a direct apprehension of things in themselves. Much as we might wish otherwise, we have no reason to think that mystical experiences reveal reality as it is.

That does not necessarily mean, however, that such experiences can't help to increase our understanding. Imagine for instance coming to perceive yourself and the world as a web of constantly changing relationships, with no sharp distinctions between self and others. Even if such an experience cannot make absolute reality transparent to us, couldn't it still give us a *more objective* understanding than our ordinary perception of separateness and solidity? After all, we know that behind the apparent solidity of objects atoms are in flux. The question then is what we mean by 'objective'.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel writes about the uneasy interplay between our own particular subjective perspective and a more objective view of the world. As Nagel sees it, there is no binary division between objective or subjective; it is more like a spectrum on which a viewpoint may be seen as more or less objective. 'A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is', he writes.[24]

We can shuffle a bit in the direction of more objectivity if we move from a narrow understanding of the relationship between the world and ourselves to a wider, more detached one. 'Thus objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully.'

Moving away from egocentric concerns and developing an awareness of the interrelation of all things might move us along the objectivity spectrum. But we mustn't forget, says Nagel, that we belong to the world, and complete objectivity – the 'view from nowhere' – is beyond us: 'Whatever we do, we remain subparts of the world with limited access to the real nature of the rest of it and of ourselves. There is no way of telling how much of reality lies beyond [our] reach'.

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