**SOCRATES AND SIDDHARTHA**

**ON FREEDOM AND SATORI**

Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha, in providing a revolutionary alternative to the Hindu theology and practices of his day, changed the meaning of a number of terms, perhaps most importantly the word Dharma. About a century later, Socrates inaugurated a similar interpretive change for the Delphic inscription “know thyself.”

Dharma has a number of meanings, including: truth, law, pattern, order, teaching, culture, virtue, being, and duty. Most of these meanings remain implicit in Buddhist use of the term, but with a significant twist. The Hindu society of sixth century BCE India was rigidly hierarchical; and “do your dharma” – as in the later *Bhagavad Gita* – meant “do your duty” as socially prescribed.

Buddha’s counter-cultural founding of the Sangha – the monastic order – provided an opportunity for individuals to opt out of their particular caste and class; an opportunity to engage in the most important dharma: self-realization, understood as the enlightenment adventure (here roughly equivalent to the Japanese term “satori”).

Self-discovery leads to self-understanding; self-understanding leads to self-mastery; self-mastery leads to wisdom; and wisdom is the Dharma-gate to freedom. In Buddhism, Dharma, once realized, holds a person in freedom *from* suffering, and freedom *for* wisdom, bliss, equanimity, and creative service.

Now, the Delphic Oracle in archaic Greece had inscribed above its entrance: *gnothi seauton* – “know thyself.” This Apollonian stricture had as its essential meaning: “know your place.” In other words: “You are not a god; you are merely human; act accordingly.” The Delphic inscription was a warning to act within appropriate limits. Its message was essentially limiting. In this sense, it paralleled the Hindu interpretation of dharma. “Do your duty; don’t rise above your station. Take your place; be thankful for what you’ve got; don’t aim for more.”

About a century later, in classical Athens, Socrates put a new meaning on the Delphic inscription. For Socrates, *gnothi seauton* means above all: “know yourself as an embodied soul, endowed with the opportunity for self-discovery, wisdom, and freedom.”

Instead of primarily limiting, Socrates reinterprets the Delphic inscription as an invitation to liberation. Freedom, not constriction, is Apollo’s *Socratic* message.

Thus Socrates does for *gnothi seauton* what Siddhartha did for Dharma. An initially limiting notion becomes an invitation to the most liberating adventure of all: the journey to self-realization. The epistemological voyage to self-knowledge becomes the ontological voyage to self-transformation – the birth and becoming of a new being, a new way of being, a new mode of being-in-the-world, in which one’s own inherent divinity becomes actualized in wisdom, virtue, bliss, and beauty.

The Siddhartha-Socrates parallel becomes even more pronounced when we recall the other message inscribed above the Delphic Oracle: *meden agan* – “nothing in excess.” Socrates took this to heart. He made it crucial to his teaching that “knowledge is virtue” – mirrored in the two wings of Buddhism: *prajna* and *karuna* (wisdom and compassion).

The enlightened life, the Socratic life, the virtuous life, is a life of The Middle Way. And this is precisely what Siddhartha also taught, which is why *Madhyamaka* – the “middle way” – is another name for Buddhism.

Let us also note that “Buddha” means “awake.” Socrates too was awake. He was Apollo’s messenger to Athens, encouraging his fellow citizens to awaken from their ethical slumber. Athens as a whole failed to heed Apollo’s humble prophet. Athenian grandeur imploded in collective suffering and defeat. In revenge, the Athenian court killed the messenger who tried to save them. (The parallels to contemporary America – think JFK, MLK, RFK, and John Lennon – are tragic and astonishing, proving once again that history repeats itself.)

In conclusion, we are obliged to observe that Socrates did not ignore, nor did he simply negate, the original meaning of *gnothi seauton*. As far back as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the message was clear: “pride goeth before the fall.” Hubris – the Greek word for pride and overweening ambition – was long understood (though insufficiently) as the greatest sin. Hubris is the common theme in the greatest plays of the Greek tragedians.

Although Socratic philosophy liberates, it also maintains, like Buddhism, an emphasis on humility: a pragmatic appreciation for the importance of limits.

Thus, in the hands of Socrates, the Delphic inscription is not so much negated as modified. Socratic virtue is limiting and liberating at the same time.

This is mirrored in Buddhism: operating within the humble limits of selfless service, one is freed for the bliss-wisdom-grace of nirvanic satori without measure.

As in all great art, limit is the key to creativity. To make one’s life a work of art: this is the opportunity and the challenge at the heart of the human condition.

Buddhist literature tells a tale. Let us end with this illuminating story.

Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha was meditating in a forest. Not far away, a group of young nobles and merchants – thirty friends – had gone into the forest for a picnic. Twenty-nine had brought their wives. The other, unmarried, had brought along a harlot.

After much food, laughter, and drink, the party fell asleep. The harlot, awakening, observed her sleeping companions. She stole some jewelry and fled.

When the party awoke, they observed the missing jewels and the absent woman. Rightly concluding theft and flight, the thirty nobles and merchants pursued the harlot through the forest.

As they did so, they came upon the Buddha, comfortably ensconced at the root of a tree. The men explained their situation: their anger, hurry and pursuit. Siddhartha then asked: “Which is more important: that you seek a woman, or that you should seek yourself?” They replied: “It is more important to seek ourselves.” Said the Buddha: “Sit, then; and I shall teach you the Dharma.”

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