

IN SEARCH OF GODOT: BUDDHISM RE-VISITED

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a journey of two men amidst drab reality to find wisdom through experience. Godot, for which Estragon and Vladimir are waiting, never turns up and therefore their waiting goes on. Throughout the play, Beckett uses Existentialism as a tool to express human suffering. While dealing with the process of unveiling the meaninglessness of life, the futility of existence and the repetitiveness of human follies, Beckett has highlighted the four noble truths of Buddha.

My paper will seek the presence of the four noble truths of Buddha in a text which is written in the period of postmodernism. The universal fact of suffering, or the unsatisfactoriness of life, its pain, its malaise, its 'ill'-ness, is the starting point of the first noble truth of Buddha and it is the starting point of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as well. The second noble truth which identifies with the motive power which keeps this universal suffering going, the fuel which prevents the fire from going out, and this is the craving or desire. This same factor has occurred with Estragon and Vladimir with their occasional intrusion of existential crisis. The third noble truth which concerns cessation (*nirodha*), and it is that the cessation of suffering is a consequence of the cessation of craving. In *Waiting for Godot*, frequent mentioning of Godot's arrival by Estragon and Vladimir is a kind of craving to meet the unknown as they think Godot to be that healer who will help them to attain salvation. The fourth noble truth which deals with the declaration that a way existed through which the cure might be achieved; this was the way delineated by the Buddha, which consisted of morality, meditation and the attainment of wisdom. Through my paper, I will interpret Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the light of Buddhism. Though written after the Second World War, this text strongly values Buddhism, therefore, establishing the ever presence of Buddhism even in the minds of intellectuals despite their origins and cultural backgrounds.

KEYWORDS: Beckett, Buddhism, Five Noble Truths, Godot

INTRODUCTION

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act I Sc I

At certain times, writers become what fans of nonlinear systems like to call strange attractors. Lines of critical thought and attention start to swirl and eddy around them. Thoughts and arguments and idioms from different areas and with different points of application seem bent in their careers by brooding mass. But an attractor is not a black hole, a principle of limit with respect to discourse, or, to hire out Michel Foucault's wonderful word "rarefaction". "Authors" and their oeuvres used to be constraining forces, which both harassed and harnessed interpretation; authors were what interpretation came up short against, were swallowed up by. Now, certain authors, in fact, the very authors whose classic status meant that they acted as a brake or constraint – Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dickens, Joyce and Beckett - function as principles of expansion, or accelerators of discourse.

One important reason for Beckett's international breakthrough was his ability to perfect the realistic form so as to enable the theatre to present serious subjects in a popular and readily understood mode. The play which made Beckett a genre by himself is *Waiting for Godot*. This play has not only given him immense success, but also acted as one of the pioneers of the 'theatre of the absurd'.

Waiting for Godot was written between October 1948 and January 1949. The dramatic situation is a simple one: two men Estragon and Vladimir wait on two separate occasions by a skeletal tree for someone called Godot who, they hope, will come to save them. Two other men, Pozzo and his servant Lucky call and stay for a while. But the one for whom they are waiting does not arrive.

Written after the Second World War in the year 1948, *Waiting for Godot* unveils the conditions of man and his fear for the unknown. The universal fact of suffering, the unsatisfactoriness of life, its pain, its malaise, its inherent 'ill'-ness, which is the starting point of Buddha's First Noble Truth also marks as beginning of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The Pali word, *dukkha* which means incapable of bearing or withstand anything, Estragon and Vladimir are enacting on the stage at the very start.

Estragon: [Feebly.] Help me!

Vladimir: It hurts?

Estragon: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

Vladimir: [Angrily.] No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.

Estragon: It hurts?

Vladimir: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

The play begins with these two men on a barren road by a leafless tree. These men, Vladimir and Estragon, are often characterized as "tramps," and the world of this play is operating on its own set of rules, its own system where nothing happens, nothing is certain, and there's never anything to do. The tramps are soon interrupted by the arrival of Lucky, a man/servant/pet with a rope tied around his neck, and Pozzo, his master, holding the other end of the long rope. The four men proceed to do together what Vladimir and Estragon did earlier by themselves: namely, nothing.

As the sensual world is like that of a vibration in nature. It would, in fact, be terrible to find satisfaction in the sensory world because then we wouldn't search beyond it; we would just be bound to it. However, as we awaken to this *dukkha*, we begin to find the way out so that we are no longer constantly trapped in sensory consciousness. The First Noble Truth of Buddha, the universal fact of suffering, or the unsatisfactoriness of life, its pain, its malaise, its inherent 'ill'-ness echo the state of Estragon and Vladimir who are trapped amidst the meaninglessness of life.

This play of Samuel Beckett springs out of his Irish background, not simply that the English translation contains actual Irish phrases or sentence structures. Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky have cosmopolitan names. But the world they inhabit – sleeping in ditches, waiting by the roadside, eating scraps from the left over – the lineage of the tramps and the less defined 'feel' of the characters (even in French) is undoubtedly Irish. It is very interesting to note that a text created by an author of Irish origin which is written in French and later in English, reflects Buddha's Four Noble Truths chronologically.

The Second Noble Truth which states that there is an origin of suffering and that the origin of suffering is attachment to the three kinds of desire: desire for sense pleasure (*kama tanha*), desire to become (*bhava tanha*) and desire to get rid of becoming (*vibhava tanha*). This is what one can contemplate as the origin of suffering which is attachment to desire.

As the title suggests, the two tramps were waiting for Godot. To them, Godot stands for betterment or to be precise a ray of hope.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says?

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot.

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

Vladimir: I am curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?

Vladimir: Were you not there?

Estragon: I can't have been listening.

Vladimir: Oh...nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Throughout the play, the tramps cannot be sure if they have met Godot, if they are waiting in the right place, if this is the right day, or even whether Godot is going to show up at all. While they wait, Vladimir and Estragon fill their time with a series of mundane activities and trivial conversations interspersed with more serious reflection. The desire to meet Godot was so intense among them, they would not mind if they have to wait for an entire lifetime.

The Second Noble Truth which identifies what is, so to speak, the motive power which keeps this universal suffering going, the fuel which prevents the fire from going out, and that is craving or desire. The basic situation of the play also owes a lot to Beckett's understanding of theatre and perhaps to his own life. Waiting for someone to arrive or something to happen that might change events has frequently been a key feature of drama: Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, W.B. Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well*, and Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* are examples of three such plays that were known to Beckett. Usually in the end, someone does come or something does happen to change the situation, although often it is not what the characters think or hope it will be. But Beckett used the fundamental fact that, in his own words to his biographer James Knowlson, 'all theatre is waiting' to create a central situation in which boredom and the avoidance of boredom are key elements in preserving dramatic tension of an unusual kind.

The originality of *Waiting for Godot* lies in the concrete reality of the silence that has somehow to be filled. So the tramp-clowns must talk, swap hats, eat carrots, play games so as to whiling away the silence at bay. The inspiration for such a use of silence could have come from an instinctive response to Strindberg's or Chekov's theatre or from philosophical meditation.

The nature of the change which took place when Gautama sat meditating under the Bodhi tree on the bank of the Neranjana river is traditionally described by saying that he became the Buddha, that is, Awakened One. In later Buddhist literature, the transition is described in terms which make it literally a memorable event, but the earlier literature gives a more prosaic and analytical account, and one which makes the event described extremely difficult to fit into the categories of 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience. The opening of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* "A country road. A tree. Evening", is also an awakening which the text unfolds in its due course. The tree which is the only stage-direction in both the Acts, plays a pivotal role in shaping the consciousness of the readers and spectators. The lifeless tree which finds some leaves in the second Act takes us and the characters on stage to wisdom through experience and therefore making us aware of Buddha's Third Noble Truth.

According to the Third Noble Truth, cessation of suffering can be attained through *nirodha*, which means the unmaking of sensual craving and conceptual attachment. The Third Noble Truth, which expresses the idea that suffering can be ended by attaining dispassion, *nirodha* extinguishes all forms of clinging and attachment. This means that suffering can be overcome through human activity, simply by removing the cause of suffering. Therefore, attaining and perfecting dispassion is a process of many levels that ultimately results in the state of *Nirvana*, which means freedom from all worries, troubles, complexes, fabrications and ideas.

In the second Act of the play when Estragon and Vladimir were contemplating to hang themselves, they were ceasing the desire to meet Godot and were trying to cease suffering for ever by committing suicide. Both the tramps, attained *nirodha* with their thoughts but with their actions, they rolled on to survive.

Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves?

Vladimir: With what?

Estragon: You haven't got a bit of rope?

Vladimir: No.

Estragon: Then we can't. [Silence]

Vladimir: Let's go.

Estragon: Wait, there's my belt.

Vladimir: It's too short.

Estragon: You could hang on to my legs.

However, the tramps postponed their suicide and decide to wait for Godot the next day. The entire play, therefore, acts as an experience and they attain *Nirvana* with their understanding to value life amidst drab reality. Victim of existential crisis, they represent humanity at large. Existentialism which is chiefly a twentieth century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrine, centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual, who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad, was the prime concern of the postmodern literary activists. The Second World War which took away harmony and paved the way for a postmodern society which was marked by 'absence of the centre', existentialism was the only weapon to be pondered upon.

The Fourth Noble Truth of Buddha which can be manifested by practising the Eightfold Path, yet to be achieved by Estragon and Vladimir. *Waiting for Godot* ends where both the tramps decide to leave the place but they did not move. As the play does not give any conclusion, the momentum of their actions still finds a place in the distorted world. They have travelled from the First Noble Truth to the Third and give us ample of scope that they would submit themselves in the Fourth Noble Truth someday.

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the way to the end of suffering, as it was laid out by Gautama. It is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things. Great emphasis is put on the practical aspect, because it is only through practice that one can attain a higher level of existence and finally reach *Nirvana*. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Godot as according to them, Godot can take them out of their present situation. They have faith on Godot. To attain *Nirvana* they just need to have the Fourth Noble Truth done, which is possible if they find a preacher. It is not possible for them to attain it, as they have done enough to accumulate their broken souls despite every odd.

The eight aspects of the path are not to be understood as a sequence of single steps, instead they are highly interdependent principles that have to be seen in relationship with each other. They can be stated as follows:

Right view (*samyag-dṛṣṭi / sammā-dīṭṭhī*), which is the beginning and the end of the path, simply means to see and to understand things as they really are and to realise the Four Noble Truth. As such, right view is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. It means to see things through, to grasp the impermanent and imperfect nature of worldly objects and ideas, and to understand the law of karma and karmic conditioning. Right view is not necessarily an intellectual capacity, just as wisdom is not just a matter of intelligence. Instead, right view is attained, sustained, and enhanced through all capacities of mind. It begins with the intuitive insight that all beings are subject to suffering and it ends with complete understanding of the true nature of all things. Since our view of the world forms our thoughts and our actions, right view yields right thoughts and right actions.

While right view refers to the cognitive aspect of wisdom, right intention (*samyak-saṃkalpa/sammā sankappa*) refers to the volitional aspect, i.e. the kind of mental energy that controls our actions. Right intention can be described best as commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement. Buddha distinguishes three types of right intentions: 1. the intention of renunciation, which means resistance to the pull of desire, 2. the intention of good will, meaning resistance to feelings of anger and aversion, and 3. the intention of harmlessness, meaning not to think or act cruelly, violently, or aggressively, and to develop compassion.

Right speech (*samyag-vāc / sammā-vācā*), is the first principle of ethical conduct in the eightfold path. Ethical conduct is viewed as a guideline to *moral discipline*, which supports the other principles of the path. This aspect is not self-sufficient, however, essential, because mental purification can only be achieved through the cultivation of ethical conduct. The importance of speech in the context of Buddhist ethics is obvious: words can break or save lives, make enemies or friends, start war or create peace. Buddha explained right speech as follows: 1. to abstain from false speech, especially not to tell deliberate lies and not to speak deceitfully, 2. to abstain from slanderous speech and not to use words maliciously against others, 3. to abstain from harsh words that offend or hurt others, and 4. to abstain from idle chatter that lacks purpose or depth. Positively phrased, this means to tell the truth, to speak friendly, warm, and gently and to talk only when necessary.

The second ethical principle, right action (*samyak-karmānta / sammā-kammanta*), involves the body as natural means of expression, as it refers to deeds that involve bodily actions. Unwholesome actions lead to unsound states of mind, while wholesome actions lead to sound states of mind. Again, the principle is explained in terms of abstinence: right action means 1. To abstain from harming sentient beings, especially to abstain from taking life (including suicide) and doing harm intentionally or delinquently, 2. to abstain from taking what is not given, which includes stealing, robbery, fraud, deceitfulness, and dishonesty, and 3. to abstain from sexual misconduct. Positively formulated, right action means to act kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the belongings of others, and to keep sexual relationships harmless to others. Further details regarding the concrete meaning of right action can be found in the Precepts.

Right livelihood (*samyag-ājīva / sammā-ājīva*) means that one should earn one's living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully. The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that one should avoid for this reason: 1. dealing in weapons, 2. dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), 3. working in meat production and butchery, and 4. selling intoxicants and poisons, such as alcohol and drugs. Furthermore any other occupation that would violate the principles of right speech and right action should be avoided.

Right effort (*samyag-vyāyāma / sammā-vāyāma*) can be seen as a prerequisite for the other principles of the path. Without effort, which is in itself an act of will, nothing can be achieved, whereas misguided effort distracts the mind from its task, and confusion will be the consequence. Mental energy is the force behind right effort; it can occur in either wholesome or unwholesome states. The same type of energy that fuels desire, envy, aggression, and violence can on the other side fuel self-discipline, honesty, benevolence, and kindness. Right effort is detailed in four types of endeavours that rank in ascending order of perfection: 1. to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states, 2. to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen, 3. to arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and 4. to maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen.

Right mindfulness (*samyak-smṛti / sammā-sati*), is the controlled and perfected faculty of cognition. It is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Usually, the cognitive process begins with an impression induced by perception, or by a thought, but then it does not stay with the mere impression. Instead, we almost always conceptualise sense impressions and thoughts immediately. We interpret them and set them in relation to other thoughts and experiences, which naturally go beyond the facticity of the original impression.

The mind then posits concepts, joins concepts into constructs, and weaves those constructs into complex interpretative schemes. All this happens only half consciously, and as a result we often see things obscured. Right mindfulness is anchored in clear perception and it penetrates impressions without getting carried away. Right mindfulness enables us to be aware of the process of conceptualisation in a way that we actively observe and control the way our thoughts go. Buddha accounted for this as the *four foundations of mindfulness*: 1. contemplation of the body, 2. contemplation of feeling (repulsive, attractive, or neutral), 3. contemplation of the state of mind, and 4. contemplation of the phenomena.

The eighth principle of the path, right concentration (*samyak-samādhi / sammā-samādhi*), refers to the development of a mental force that occurs in natural consciousness, although at a relatively low level of intensity, namely concentration. Concentration in this context is described as one-pointedness of mind, meaning a state where all mental faculties are unified and directed onto one particular object. Right concentration for the purpose of the eightfold path means *wholesome concentration*, i.e. concentration on wholesome thoughts and actions.

The Buddhist method of choice to develop right concentration is through the practice of meditation. The meditating mind focuses on a selected object. It first directs itself onto it, then sustains concentration, and finally intensifies concentration step by step. Through this practice it becomes natural to apply elevated levels concentration also in everyday situations.

The Eightfold Path, therefore, would be the final step to be attained by Estragon and Vladimir and they are waiting for Godot to be bestowed with this prayer. Beckett was said to be influenced by some philosophy of meditation and it was highlighted by his biographer James Knowlson in his book *Damned to Fame*.

According to Rabindranath Tagore, the way of the Buddha is ‘the elimination of all limits of love’; it is ‘the sublimation of self in a truth which is love itself’. Tagore has, in these words, identified the essence of what has come to be called Buddhism. Man and his understanding of existence are very vague to be explained within as to be experienced without. Buddhism preaches an essential part of human life, the reality.

The reality of human existence is an inevitable suffering and Buddhism conveys the right path to overcome it. Though our present Century is blessed with globalization but one cannot get rid of suffering. More we achieve, our desire will sting us and give us the feeling of unsatisfactoriness. In *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton has written “Calm of mind, all passions spent.” Buddhism, therefore, is that healer where mind finds solace. The other name of Buddhism is human psyche. A religion can be at stake due its various inhibitions, but a religion which finds a place in the mind is beyond any questions or debates. William Shakespeare in *Macbeth* has written “...life is a tale told by an idiot; full of sound and fury signifying nothing”. Therefore, whether it is Samuel Beckett or William Shakespeare, human suffering has compelled the writers to give their own characters the trait of existentialism. Buddhism is that doctrine which will lead the humanity to survive beyond the prescribed. As long as suffering exists among us, Buddhism will exist as it has become an integral part of human existence.

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