

BACHELOR'S THESIS EXAMINER REPORT
PPE – Bachelor's in Politics, Philosophy and Economics
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Thesis title:	Buddhism in Nietzsche's Critique: A Reassessment of Nihilism
Student's name:	Neha Dahal
Referee's name:	Jakub Franěk

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Contribution and argument (quality of research and analysis, originality)	50	30
	Research question (definition of objectives, plausibility of hypotheses)	15	10
	Theoretical framework (methods relevant to the research question)	15	10
Total		80	50
Minor Criteria			
	Sources, literature	10	7
	Presentation (language, style, cohesion)	5	4
	Manuscript form (structure, logical coherence, layout, tables, figures)	5	4
Total		20	15
TOTAL		100	65

Plagiarism-check (URKUND) match score:

[NB:] If the plagiarism-check (URKUND) match score is above 15%, the reviewer has to include his/her assessment of the originality of the reviewed thesis in his/her review.

Reviewer's commentary according to the above criteria (min. 1800 characters including spaces when recommending a passing grade, min. 2500 characters including spaces when recommending a failing grade):

The author of the reviewed thesis has chosen an unusual and relevant topic – namely a critical assessment of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Buddhism as a nihilistic religion. The author must also be commended for processing a vast amount of literature while writing her thesis; the biography is quite long and impressive. The thesis also contains many interesting insights. Nonetheless, at the same time it suffers from various shortcomings and its overall argument fails to be fully convincing.

The thesis is, at least formally speaking, logically structured. Its main argument comprises of the three principal theses introduced on pp. 13-14 and further developed in the three chapters that form the body of the thesis: (1) Nietzsche had only limited knowledge of the Buddhist tradition with which he had become acquainted through Schopenhauer; most

importantly, his awareness of Buddhism was limited to the Hinayana tradition. His understanding of Buddhism was hence incomplete and distorted. (2) Buddhism is in fact a rather diverse tradition and, more importantly, two of its branches that are thoroughly ignored by Nietzsche – Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism and Zen Buddhism – contain teachings and practices that undermine Nietzsche's understanding of Buddhism as nihilistic. (3) Specifically Zen Buddhism may be even portrayed as a teaching / practice aimed at overcoming nihilism in parallel to Nietzsche's own philosophy.

While the structure of the thesis appears to be well thought out, the author unfortunately did not manage to develop it in a persuasive way. Chapter 1: Testimonial Knowledge... appears to be rather superfluous. In the judgement of the present reviewer, it would thoroughly suffice to merely state the first thesis in its condensed form. Apart from that, dwelling too much on the inadequacy of arguments drawn from secondary sources appears rather counterproductive, given the fact that the author of the reviewed thesis herself draws mostly, if not exclusively, from such sources.

While the passages exploring the history and various teachings and practices of the Tibetan Buddhism in Chapter 2 are very informative and interesting in their own right, their relevance for the main topic of the thesis is not apparent. It is not until the very end of the chapter (pp. 36-37) that the author finally attempts to demonstrate how some of the practices and teachings of Vajrayana's Buddhism demonstrate – contra Nietzsche – that Buddhism (at least in this version) should not be nihilistic. Specifically, she mentions two arguments:

(a) Vajrayana is selfless and kind – acts of kindness are not usually viewed (sic!) as life-denying – therefore “if Nietzsche had known about Tibetan Buddhism, he might have had a different view of Buddhism” (p. 38).

(b) Nietzsche apparently misunderstood the Buddhist concept of sunyata (or emptiness), which he misconstrued as “nothingness”. This misunderstanding then contributed to his assessment of Buddhism as nihilistic. Nonetheless, one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism explains that sunyata does not in fact indicate “nothingness” but rather “lack of independent existence” (p. 38).

It is of course questionable, whether Nietzsche himself would be persuaded by our author's arguments. Nonetheless, the present reviewer finds even more disturbing the fact that the author herself does not even consider this question. In fact, the passages devoted to Nietzsche's thought are extremely brief (as well as superficial) and consist of ‘encyclopaedic’ overviews of some of Nietzsche's key concepts or ideas, such as Will to Power, the Übermensch, the idea of the Eternal Return, or, for that matter nihilism. Unfortunately, these passages not only fail to do justice to Nietzsche's thought but in some instances also appear to reveal our author's lack of understanding of some of his basic and most notorious theses. E.g. while she mentions (in one of many indirect citations from secondary literature) the argument, according to which “the origins of nihilism can be traced back to the foundations of Western metaphysics and the Judeo-Christian moral tradition” (p. 8), she apparently does not comprehend its implications, for otherwise she could hardly equate nihilism (as Nietzsche understands it) simply with the “deterioration of absolute, transcendent ideas” (p. 9).

The most thought-provoking and interesting part of the thesis is Chapter 3, in which the author develops her claim about certain parallels between Nietzsche's thought and Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, even in this chapter, she refrains from engaging in a real dialogue with Nietzsche and her arguments hence fail to be fully convincing. See e.g. subchapter “Übermensch and Zen Enlightenment” on p. 52. While it may be true that Zen

Buddhism, just like Nietzsche, aims to “overcome nihilism”, it does so in a very different way. The question, what would Nietzsche think of such approach, unfortunately remains not just un-answered but also un-asked.

Apart from that, the arguments in Chapter 3 appear to be largely drawn from the existing secondary literature. That, however, is true also about other chapters. The present reviewer in fact finds it hard to distinguish, what the author’s original contribution in this thesis is. No one really expects the authors of bachelor’s theses to come up with some truly original breakthrough ideas. Nevertheless, we do engage the BA theses (especially on philosophical topics) authors to demonstrate some originality in their thinking by e.g. engaging in a real dialogue with the authors of the texts they write about, instead of only compiling what they have learned from secondary sources. The reviewed thesis unfortunately consists largely of such compilation.

Proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F): D

Suggested questions for the defence are:

- In the light of his critique of Christianity (e.g. in *Genealogy of Morality*, part 1) do you think Nietzsche would consider your claim that Vajrayana Buddhism cannot be considered nihilistic because it is compassionate and selfless?
- Explain Nietzsche’s claim, according to which the origins of nihilism can be traced back to the foundations of Western metaphysics and the Judeo-Christian moral tradition.

I (do not) recommend the thesis for final defence.

Referee Signature

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL POINTS	GRADE	Quality standard
91 – 100	A	= outstanding (high honor)
81 – 90	B	= superior (honor)
71 – 80	C	= good
61 – 70	D	= satisfactory
51 – 60	E	= low pass at a margin of failure
0 – 50	F	= failing. The thesis is not recommended for defence.