



Shantideva



David Hume



Arthur Schopenhauer



Professor Nancy Snow

A111: Buddhism and Schopenhauer



AA111 – Buddhism and Schopenhauer

- My aims for this session:
 - To help with your reading of both Chapters 6: Buddhism in practice and 7: Philosophy and compassion;
 - To give support and help for you to understand the meaning of Option 3 for TMA06;
 - To make some links between these chapters and some others in A111.
 - To provide you with some simplified resources.

Images from a Buddhist temple in Saigon, Vietnam

AA111 – Buddhism and Schopenhauer

Here is Option 3:

To what extent and in what ways are Buddhist teachings about liberation from suffering echoed in the work of Schopenhauer?

In your answer, you should draw on your study of both Unit 6 and Unit 7 of Block 3. Your answer should be no more than 2000 words

Guidance for Option 3

To answer the question, you will need to draw upon material from both Chapters 6 and 7 in Book 3, *Crossing boundaries*, combining perspectives from both Religious Studies and Philosophy.

Note that the question refers to Buddhist teachings. It might help to consider what you've already learnt about how this works in what you've learnt about Christianity. What is the relationship between beliefs, material objects and rituals and ceremonies? Don't put this directly into your answer, (don't drift into a discussion of Christianity) but think about it and how it might help here. Importantly, listen to the talk for Week 29, *6 Working across disciplines*.

Clearly, you must read both Chapters 6 and 7, but very important for this question are the online exercises for Week 28, associated with Chapter 6. Work your way especially through Sections 5,6,7 and 8. You might also look at the Optional further study which suggests some readings that might help, particularly from the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. For Schopenhauer, look specifically at Sections 5 and 6 of Chapter 7.

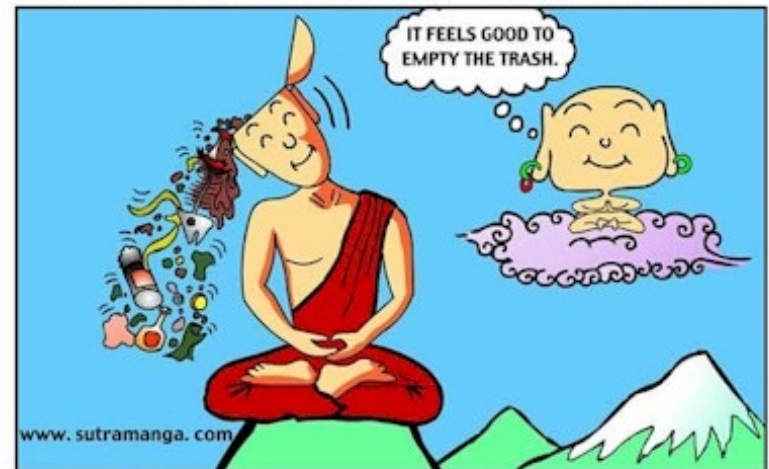
The focus of Chapter 7 is Schopenhauer's view of Buddhism as pessimistic and a consideration of compassion. The Chapter also considers other Western philosophers, David Hume, who wrote before Buddhism was really very well known in the West, and the contemporary Nancy Snow. To what extent do they show an understanding of what Buddhism teaches?

You should not try to cover all the relevant material but focus on a small number of examples and discuss these in depth.

You might choose to say to a great or a small extent, or something inbetween. Any of these positions can produce a good essay if argued with reference to evidence.



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Here is Option 3:

To what extent and in what ways are Buddhist teachings about liberation from suffering echoed in the work of Schopenhauer? In your answer, you should draw on your study of both Unit 6 and Unit 7 of Block 3. Your answer should be no more than 2000 words

Do reading the **Guidance for Option 3** and note the following points from it:

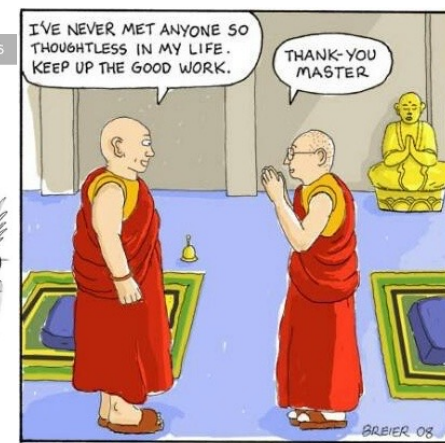
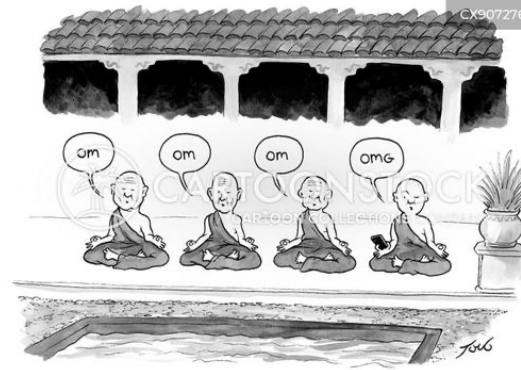
- The question is comparative
- Don't just list all you know about Buddhism and Schopenhauer
- Don't expect to cover everything. Concentrate on three specific similarities and differences
- Distinguish between different forms of Buddhism

And importantly, quoting from the guidance notes:

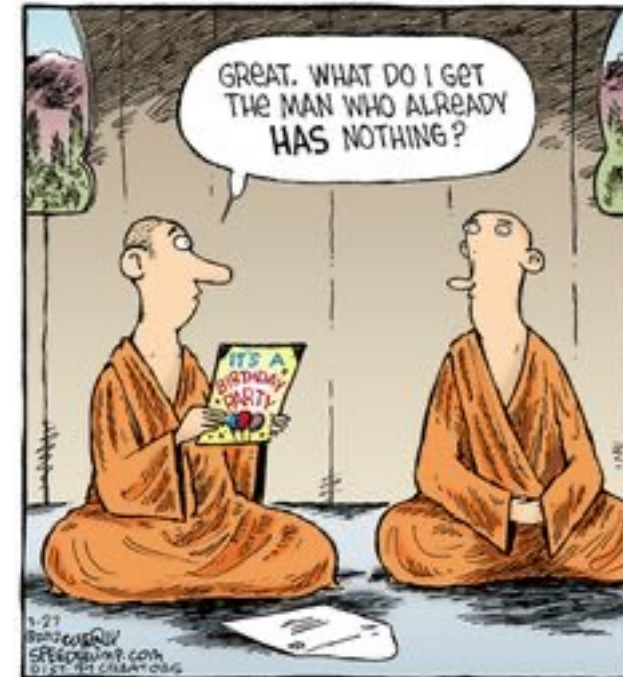
*Begin your essay with a brief but informative introductory paragraph. In it, state your answer to the question (a **thesis statement**) and quickly summarise how you will support that answer in the main body of your essay. This will help your reader because they will know what to expect, but it will also help you to check you have addressed the question.*

Some meaningful words to think about and help you:

- Think about the Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Where might they fit in, in an argument answering the set question?
- The role of self and striving in suffering and altruism in ending it?
- The role of practice for the relief of suffering in either sets of thinking?
- Optimism and pessimism?

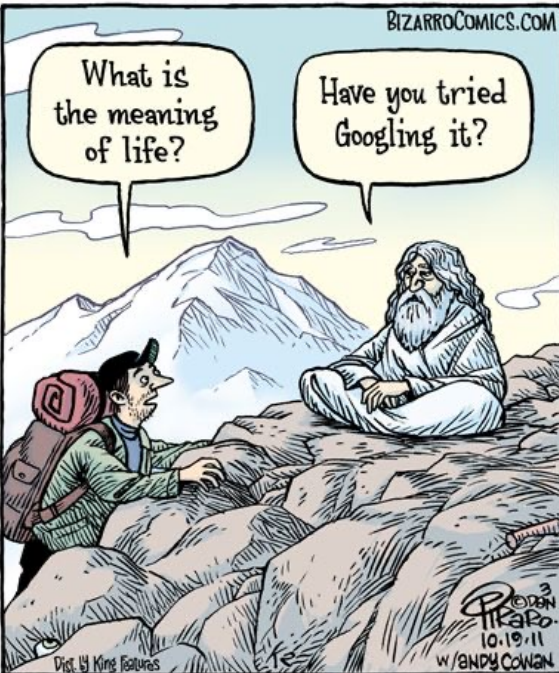


Buddhist Compliment



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What is Buddhism? A starting point 1. (Using Asian and Buddhist Sources)



Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to Insight into the true nature of reality. Buddhist practices like meditation are means of changing yourself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The experience developed within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years has created an incomparable resource for all those who wish to follow a path — a path which ultimately culminates in Enlightenment or Buddhahood. An enlightened being sees the nature of reality absolutely clearly, just as it is, and lives fully and naturally in accordance with that vision. This is the goal of the Buddhist spiritual life, representing the end of suffering for anyone who attains it.

Because Buddhism does not include the idea of worshipping a creator god, some people do not see it as a religion in the normal, Western sense.

The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical:

- *nothing is fixed or permanent;*
- *actions have consequences;*
- *change is possible.*

So Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, caste, sexuality, or gender. It teaches practical methods which enable people to realise and use its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives.

A relatively simple definition from the Buddhist Centre online



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What is Buddhism? A starting point 2. (Using Asian and Buddhist Sources)

Buddhism, founded in the late 6th century B.C.E. by Siddhartha Gautama (the "Buddha"), is an important religion in most of the countries of Asia. Buddhism has assumed many different forms, but in each case there has been an attempt to draw from the life experiences of the Buddha, his teachings, and the "spirit" or "essence" of his teachings (called dhamma or dharma) as models for the religious life.

*However, not until the writing of the *Buddha Charita* (life of the Buddha) by Ashvaghosa in the 1st or 2nd century C.E. do we have a comprehensive account of his life. The Buddha was born (ca. 563 B.C.E.) in a place called Lumbini near the Himalayan foothills, and he began teaching around Benares (at Sarnath). His time in general was one of spiritual, intellectual, and social ferment. This was the age when the Hindu ideal of renunciation of family and social life by holy persons seeking Truth first became widespread, and when the Upanishads were written.*

On the origins of Buddhism from the Asia Society's Center for Global Education (My edits) There are disputes about his dates of birth. The Chapter gives (410 to 370 BCE)



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What is Buddhism? A starting point 3.

Despite the bewildering variety of religious communities, many shared the same vocabulary—nirvana (transcendent freedom), atman (“self” or “soul”), yoga (“union”), karma (“causality”), Tathagata (“one who has come” or “one who has thus gone”), buddha (“enlightened one”), samsara (“eternal recurrence” or “becoming”), and dhamma (“rule” or “law”)—and most involved the practice of yoga. According to tradition, the Buddha himself was a yogi—that is, a miracle-working ascetic.

From the *Encyclopedia Britannica*

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Note that there are many varieties of Buddhism:

Basic concerns are:

- *How to live.*
- *How to understand and describe reality.*

Some key Buddhist beliefs:

- *The basic aim is **Nirvana**, which isn't the same as bliss, but the cessation of suffering and the liberation from the cycle of **reincarnation**.*
- *There is a central challenge to the idea of self which is seen as causing suffering.*
- *In this world there is nothing unchanging or permanent.*
- *All things are interconnected and can change into other things.*
- *Compassion is of central importance and is associated with helping people achieve liberation as soon as possible.*
- ***Mediation** is central.*
- *Emphasis on **asceticism** – its origins in Northern India lie in communities practicing asceticism – pursuing spiritual goals without worldly distractions.*

Thinking of your study of A111 so far, what does Buddhism have in common with Western ways of thinking, and in what ways is it different? Think of both Philosophy and Religious Studies. How has your study of Christianity helped? Has it any similarities with Buddhism?

Write some views in the Chatbox.



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Some similarities and differences

Similarities

- *Both Buddhism and the Western philosophical tradition are concerned with what is known as **Metaphysics**, which is the examination of the fundamental nature of reality and the relationship between the mind and that reality. Both have a concern for meaning.*
- *Both are concerned with **moral philosophy**, the nature of right and wrong and what is good.*
- *Christianity preaches a concern for others and Christian Charity. Buddhism is concerned with compassion for others.*
- *Certain forms of Christianity preach a simple life of self-denial, although these can concentrate on individual salvation and thus, the self.*

Differences

- *There is no God for Buddhists. It is not a **monotheist** set of beliefs and this has meant that at certain times Westerners have regarded as a philosophy rather than a religion.*
- *Buddhism denies individualism – that the individual is of primary importance.*
- *Buddhists believe in reincarnation rather than an afterlife.*
- *You might want to argue that Western culture is very materialistic, and this is why for some Westerners, Buddhism has been and is so appealing.*
- *For Buddhists there is no central, inner self, just changing, experiences and thoughts.*

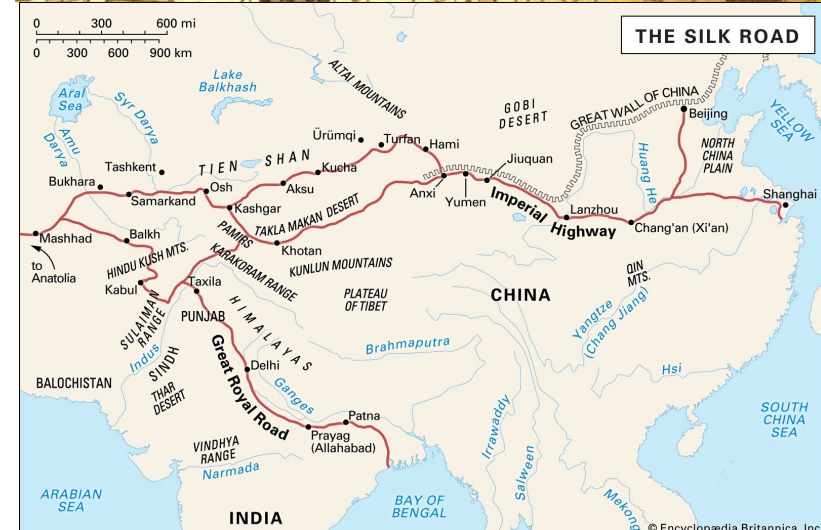
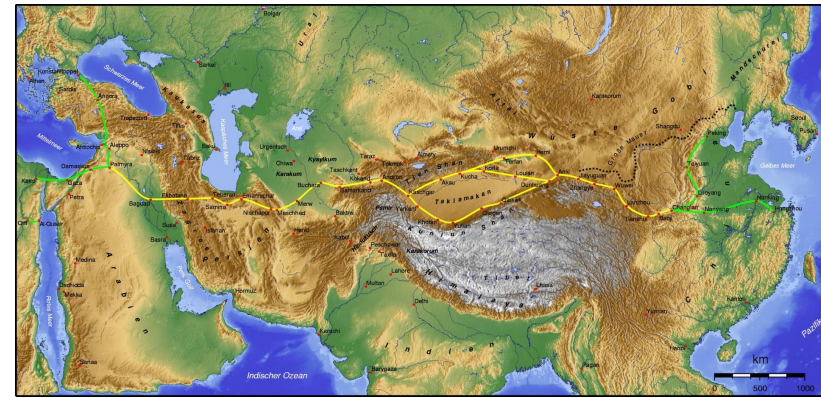


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Buddhism and the West

Just some general points here, worthy of note:

- There was/is more continuity between Buddhism and the West than is generally realised.
- It's worth noting that early contacts between Buddhism and the West did exist. Emperor Ahoka of India sent Buddhist missionaries to Syria, Egypt and they went as far as Greece as early as around 250 BC. Therefore some early Christians were aware of Buddhism. Thus there has been some continuity in the links between Buddhism and the West despite some fundamental incompatibilities.
- There are myths of Jesus travelling to India and/or Tibet, although these are no longer credited.
- Christian and Buddhist beliefs mixed along the Silk Road, a trading link between the Roman Empire and the Far East which continued into the late Middle Ages. Later Jesuit Missionaries to the Far East sent back accounts of Buddhist practices.
- Increasing European imperialism in the 19th century both made Buddhism more familiar in the West and threatened in the East, especially as a result of Christian missionaries, although some Westerners 'went native'. Some found Buddhism compatible with science, in the face of a crisis for Christianity because of evolutionary theories, as it didn't recognise any truth except that established by science and holds no belief in some kind of divine revelation.
- Buddhism in the West was becoming established before the 1960s, especially in the 1920s in France and Germany. The first English publication of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was in 1927.
- We are more familiar, perhaps, with Buddhism's growing popularity in the West in the 1960s. Undoubtedly influential in all this was the present much travelled Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who first visited the US in 1979. Also important was the 1960s counterculture, with its emphasis on altered states of consciousness, mediation, and chanting. The steady influx of refugees to the West from Tibet, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, in the wake of the Vietnam War also had an impact.



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The **Dharma** – the aim is, by following these, the release from suffering in this and future lives:

The Four Noble Truths

1. The Truth of Suffering (acknowledging that the experience of being alive involves suffering, e.g. illness, ageing, dying, losing things one loves, etc.)
2. The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (craving caused by ignorance)
3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (nirvana) – or the assertion that a permanent cessation of suffering is possible
4. The Truth of the Way to the Cessation of Suffering, also described as the 'Noble Eightfold Path'.

The Noble Eightfold Path

Insight

1. Right view
2. Right resolve

Morality

1. Right speech
2. Right action
3. Right livelihood

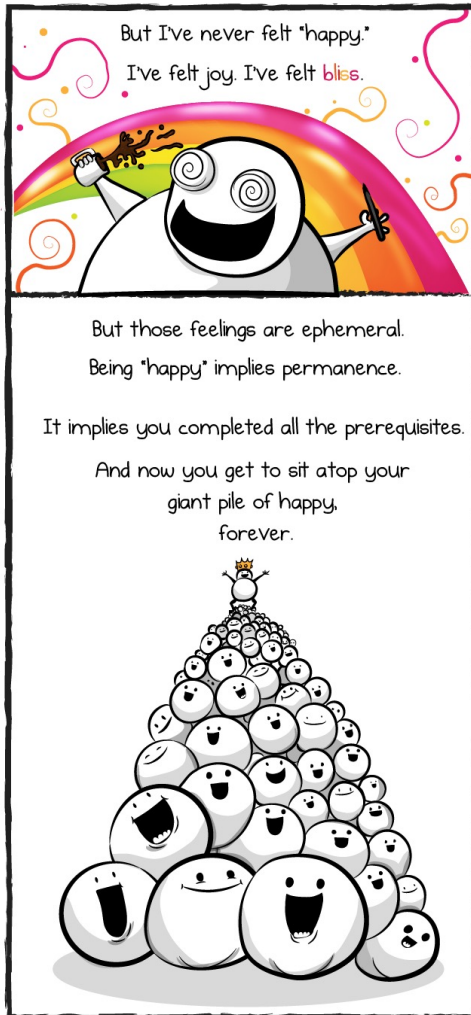
Meditation

1. Right effort
2. Right mindfulness
3. Right meditation

(You can find these on pp. 322-324 of Chapter 6)



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Here are three quotations used in Chapter 7. All three are on p. 395.

How might these quotations be used for answering the Option 3 question? In what ways might Schopenhauer's views of Buddhism differ from more recent Western views of Buddhism? Do write something in the chatbox.

A man is never happy, but spends his whole life in striving after something that he thinks will make him so; he seldom attains his goal, and when he does, it is only to be disappointed; he is mostly shipwrecked in the end, and comes into harbour with mast and rigging gone. And then, it is all one whether he is happy or miserable; for his life was never anything more than a present moment always vanishing; and now it is over."

Arthur Schopenhauer, Studies in Pessimism: The Essays

Optimism is not only a false but also a pernicious doctrine, for it presents life as a desirable state and man's happiness as its aim and object [...] whereas it is far more correct to regard work, privation, misery, and suffering, crowned by death, as the aim and object of our life (as is done by Brahmanism and Buddhism, and also by genuine Christianity)

Schopenhauer (1966b [1819], p. 584)

The idea of Buddhism being a pessimistic religion is commonly heard, but it's really a misunderstanding of Buddhism. It's maybe because the word 'suffering' is used a lot. [...] But [Buddhism] is about how [...] we free ourselves from suffering. It is not in any way pessimistic. It is about recognising the reality of life in that there is impermanence, there is loss [...]. And if we ignore that, then we won't find freedom from suffering. (Lama Zangmo, 2019)

I've also included three more quotations on the next slide, one of which is from Schopenhauer.

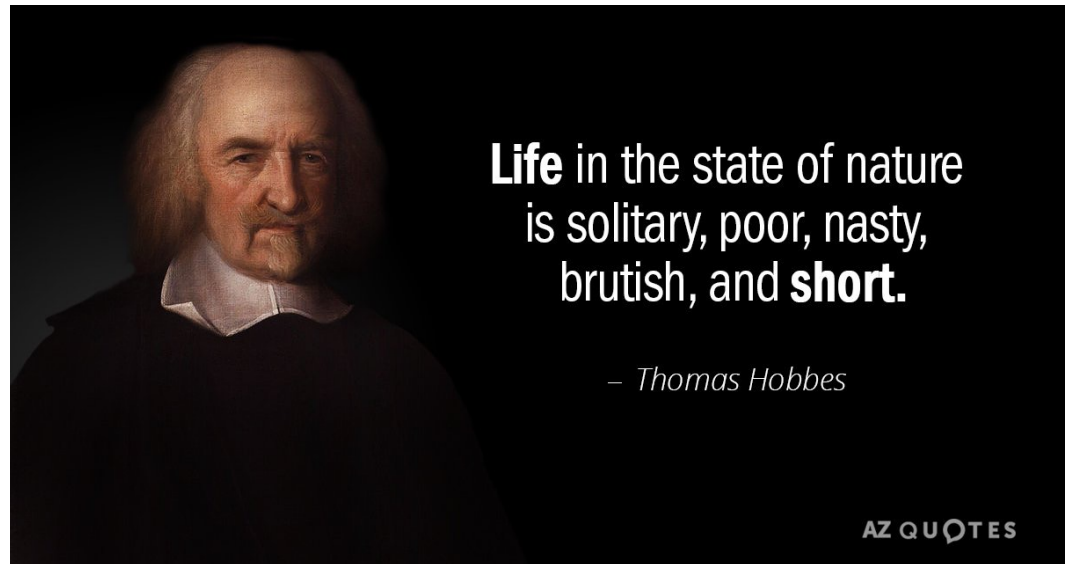
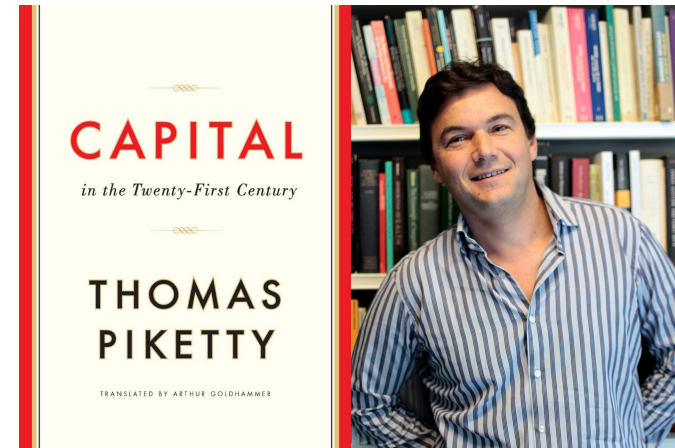
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*Life swings like a
pendulum backward
and forward
between pain and
boredom.*

Schopenhauer

**Why do you think that these
views were/are held? Write
something in the chatbox.**

What was the good of industrial development, what was the good of all the technological innovations, toil, and population movements if, after half a century of industrial growth, the condition of the masses was still just as miserable as before, and all lawmakers could do was prohibit factory labour by children under the age of eight? **Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2014**



From Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1650

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42. WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO
LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND
EVERYTHING?

(HINT: IT'S 42)

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Some concluding remarks from me:

- Ideas are produced in a context and both Buddhism and Schopenhauer's ideas appeared in largely subsistence economies where life was miserable and short for most people. You could argue that this was largely true before the coming of the industrial revolution, finally bringing benefits to the first world and some others in the twentieth century. Even now we have gulfs of inequality and plenty of poverty in the world.
- You might see the influence of Buddhism in the West, and of mindfulness, as a response to the materialism of the West in the last half of the twentieth century, really a response to what you would call first world problems, and what the psychologist, Oliver James, has called *Affluenza*.
- As the quotes on the previous slide show, Schopenhauer was not alone in his pessimism.
- Schopenhauer's pessimism comes from his view of the world, that there is no God or purpose to life. We are continually striving in a futile effort to meet our needs – the so-called 'will to live'. We suffer boredom and recognizing this is facing up to reality. He thought that Hinduism and Buddhism, of all religions, came close to recognizing this.
- Schopenhauer thought that the idea of the self (or what we might call individualism) was dangerous because it leads us to pursue our own self-interest at the expense of others.
- In fact, Schopenhauer does offer us escapes, via the contemplation of beautiful objects, by moral awareness, altruism, and by self-denial, asceticism, the latter involving the showing of compassion.
- Schopenhauer considers Buddhism to be pessimistic because of its view of the world, while I think that Buddhists would see themselves as hopeful because they don't suggest despair in the face of the world but offer a way to cease suffering.
- Consider Shantideva's teaching that the rewards of compassion, when we are all liberated from the suffering in the world, is joy. Schopenhauer's pessimism concentrates on the world, whereas Buddhist celebrate the liberation from suffering.