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**From Buddhism to Cynicism:
Applications and Methodology of Asceticism**

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In many religions and philosophies, the practice of asceticism, or rather, the severe self-discipline of non indulgence, is fundamental. Two of the most recognized religions and philosophies grounded in asceticism were Buddhism and Cynicism. The ascetic religion of Buddhism taught that the path to eternal freedom is through religious salvation. It began to develop in the mid 400s BCE and preached that one must reach Unbinding since existence is suffering.¹ 3,596 miles away, the Cynic school of philosophy was beginning to rise (450 BCE).² It preached living an ascetic life through virtuous action and rejected much of what the world had to offer. Both philosophies promoted the idea that realizing one's self desires was the first step. Although Cynicism and Buddhism share a common foundation in asceticism, their rationale for a modest lifestyle greatly differs, with Cynics viewing asceticism as living a very simple life with the intention of living life by virtue, while Buddhists, contrarily, understand asceticism as living with the purpose of obtaining religious freedom. This composition highlights the different applications of asceticism between the religion Buddhism and the philosophy Cynicism. It provides background context and compares the ascetic lifestyle for Buddhism and Cynicism on the basis of their end goal and the methods to attain that goal, emphasizing the difference between the cessation of desires and following desires.

The term "asceticism" has evolved throughout many years to encompass a broad range of definitions and interpretations, yet it is primarily categorized between its association with ethics and its association with religion.³ With regard to religion, asceticism aims for personal growth within one's religion, usually meaning drawing nearer to a god. Religious practitioners abstain from drinking, eating, and sensual love; however, this abstinence takes on a very severe form such as fasting, chastity, and isolation. On the other hand, asceticism, as it relates to ethics,

¹ *The Four Noble truths. A Collection of the Buddha's sayings* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Tim Watts, "Cynics," *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy* (ABC-CLIO, 2020).

³ Arbesmann, R, *Asceticism* (Gale Ebooks: New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003).

focuses on a less harsh or drastic form of abstinence. Ancient practitioners, normally athletes, would practice self-discipline and arduous training in order to prepare for a contest or warfare. This training would consist of abstinence from drinking, eating, and sensual love in order to strengthen one's will.⁴ The most notable cynic that practiced asceticism in relation to ethics was a Greek man named Diogenes of Sinope, whose life was captured by another named Diogenes Laërtius.

Diogenes Laërtius was a biographer who captured the lives of many notable, Greek philosophers. Evidently, his biography *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*⁵ is emblematic of his work. In this biography, he recorded many anecdotes about Diogenes of Sinope who, at that time, was the living embodiment of cynicism. One tale describes an experience he had while eating dinner. As Diogenes finished his dinner in the market-place, multiple bystanders repeatedly called out "Dog!" as they passed by. However, Diogenes explained "It is you who are the dogs, who stand around me while I am at dinner."⁶ Diogenes believed that true happiness could only come from virtuous action through self-realization. A person has to live in a way that is natural to themselves and base their actions on the measure of happiness. In this story, it can be interpreted that Diogenes was mocking the bystanders since he understood them as not discovering their own happiness. In other words, this ridicule of Diogenes only brought temporary happiness for them; thus, it was a poor shortcut to happiness that was not ever-lasting. Another anecdote begins: on one occasion, Alexander the Great came upon Diogenes when he was basking in the sun, saying "Ask any favour you choose of me." Diogenes replied, "Cease to shade me from the sun." The response of Diogenes exemplifies

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, VI* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895).

⁶ Ibid.

cynicism's view on superfluosity. Even though Alexander was an extremely popular and respected figure at that time, Diogenes treated him as if he was a beggar, conveying the lack of respect that Diogenes had for the rich. This anecdote also pays homage to Diogenes's dislike of sybaritism, which is the opposite of what Diogenes is trying to express. A final anecdote illustrates Diogenes sitting in a tub with only his clothes, a spoon, and a cup to drink with. He then witnessed a child drinking from the fountain, cupping the water in his bare hands. After seeing the boy, Diogenes discarded his spoon and cup, exclaiming "That child has beaten me in simplicity."⁷ This anecdote demonstrates the extent to which Diogenes would go to in order to communicate his simplistic views of lifestyle, in which a person has to recognize their standards of happiness and live accordingly. Oftentimes, he would have to use flamboyant methods of showcase. While Diogenes recognizes that he only needs the bare necessities in order to live a happy life by his morals, he is essentially teaching that one does not need luxury in order to achieve happiness.

With regard to recognition, acknowledgement of worldly possessions and desires is one of the first steps towards Unbinding or Nirvana. The well-known Buddha was born Siddhartha Guatama and lived from 560 to 480 BCE.⁸ Upon reaching enlightenment, his first sermon preached about the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are a basis for all Buddhist doctrine and explain that the path towards Buddhism begins with the realization that all life is suffering - life is the origination of stress.⁹ This is the First Noble Truth. In order to stop suffering, a practitioner must undergo cessation of craving as understood from the Second and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Baumann, Martin, "Buddhism," *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy* (ABC-CLIO, 2020).

⁹ *The Four Noble truths. A Collection of the Buddha's sayings, 5* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Third Noble Truths.¹⁰ A practitioner must discern their desires and restrain themselves. These desires are sensual pleasures that root practitioners to the material world. Once a practitioner has stopped craving, they will cease to stress; thus, cease to suffer. A method of ceasing suffering is through fasting. The Second and Third Noble Truths emphasize that where there is passion, delight, and craving for the nutriment of physical food, comes sorrow, despair, and affliction.¹¹ It is even said that the Buddha went to the extremes, eating only one sesame seed, one grain of rice, and one juniper berry a day.¹² The Fourth Noble Truth explains that the last step to the ultimate goal of Unbinding is the Eightfold Path.¹³ In this way, a practitioner must understand right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Buddhist practitioners may also practice celibacy as noted in the Eightfold Path, specifically right action. The Four Noble Truths stress the importance of purity within Buddhism.¹⁴ In order to maintain their pureness, practitioners must live in isolation as highlighted in right view. Right view is the basis of the Eightfold Path; therefore, one must live in seclusion in order to reach Nirvana.¹⁵ Once practitioners have understood the Eightfold Path, they will be able to escape Samsara - the continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Once a practitioner has escaped Samsara, they have reached Unbinding or Nirvana. As is evident from the texts, the motivation of Buddhist practitioners for asceticism is to escape the material, human world so as to transcend without worldly ties and desires. Asceticism in Buddhism is more interpreted as a developed system of dualism with the objective being the

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Young, Serinity, "Enlightenment and Religion" *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy* (ABC-CLIO, 2020).

¹³ *The Four Noble truths. A Collection of the Buddha's sayings*, 29 (Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Ibid., 30 and 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

endeavor to free the spiritual part of man from the corruption of the body.¹⁶ On the contrary, the motivation for Cynics, especially Diogenes, is to live life with the goal of finding happiness through one's own methods. Thus, life is based on one's specific measures of happiness. While Diogenes would agree that one must undergo their own self realization of their wants and desires, he would disagree with Buddhism in the use of this knowledge. Diogenes mentions that one must live in accordance with nature and their own self-nature and desires. He is even quoted as asking someone, "Are you not ashamed to have worse plans for yourself than nature had for you?"¹⁷ Cynicism focuses on enduring the hardships presented by nature, such as a life of poverty, in contrast to the Buddhists' decision to not partake in these hardships, which is represented by their isolation from the world. While Buddhism promotes the cessation of desires, it can be interpreted that cynicism teaches that one must follow their desires so as to reach self-happiness. The Four Noble Truths teach that all life is suffering, yet Diogenes understands that one must enjoy life through virtuous acts that result from self-realization.

This research paper observed the difference in the use of asceticism between the religion of Buddhism and the philosophy of Cynicism. It examined key differences, such as the methodology and purpose of asceticism within each ideology. As the creator of Cynicism, Diogenes of Sinope was the manifestation and lived his life in perfect accordance with its principles. He preached that one only has to follow their desires in accordance with nature and live life through virtuous action. In contrast to the methods and goals of Cynicism, Buddhist practitioners viewed asceticism as a path towards religious freedom with a defining end goal of Nirvana. Also known as Unbinding, Nirvana is achieved through the Eightfold path which emphasizes the severity and importance of practices such as fasting, celibacy, and isolation. A

¹⁶ Arbesmann, R, *Asceticism* (Gale Ebooks: New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003).

¹⁷ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, VI* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895).

minimalistic lifestyle is a shared foundation for Cynicism and Buddhism, but the expression of asceticism differs in each.