Paradox of a Purposeful Life: Oedipus' Tragedy from the Buddhist Perspective

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A year ago, when I attended the admission interview of the Medicine Faculty, the first question of why I would want to become a doctor came as no surprise. Of course, I passionately described my grand aspirations of saving lives and safeguarding public health. It is somehow ironic, because I question myself at times whether I truly understand what exactly saving lives is. However, according to the social norms, when purpose and meaning are the fundamentals of good life, it makes no sense to say otherwise.

Interestingly, this essay aims to suggest otherwise. By engaging Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* with Thich Nhat Hanh's translation of the Mahayana Buddhism's *The Heart Sutra* and his commentary *The Heart of Understanding*, I argue that the purposeless and meaningless aspects of life should not remain a taboo to be feared and avoided. They could have their significance in leading the good life.

Analysis

The Heart Sutra embodies the Buddha's core teachings that the practice of the perfection of transcendent wisdom, or prajna-paramita, is

known to be “the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore” and “to put an end to all kinds of suffering” (“New Heart Sutra”). This advocacy is based on the prerequisite that this is a world dominated by sufferings, and we as living beings could never escape experiencing hardships.

It is especially true for Oedipus. The tragedy unfolded as he, the King of Thebes, promised his people to save them from the devastating plague by avenging the murderer of his predecessor, Laius. Oedipus had always been a hero. Despite tireless attempts to rewrite his destiny, the search step by step unveiled the realization of the Oracle’s prophecies that he killed his biological father, revealed to be Laius, and slept with his biological mother, who turned out to be his queen Jocasta.

Oedipus’ line “I live in fear. . . . I have no choice” (lines 1244–1245) contrasts sharply with his earlier line “[f]ear is no excuse” (line 302). “What man ever suffered grief like this?” (line 1777) echoes to the Buddhism’s prerequisite. Oedipus has two well-defined purposes of life. One is to responsibly and righteously protect his people, for example, from the epidemic. Another is to be the master of his fate, altering the predetermined sinful misfortunes, including his effort to flee Corinth where he believed to be his birthplace.

Yet, sufferings haunt around as Jocasta pleaded, “Oedipus – // you were born to suffer, born // to misery and grief” (lines 1354–1356). The seemingly meaningful pursuits in life leads Oedipus to his self-destruction, ultimately blinding his eyes. Bodhisattva may have commented: if only Oedipus could have read The Heart Sutra. Considering the Four Noble Truths, Oedipus could only comprehend the first phase, Dukkha, interpreted as the truth of suffering.

Oedipus fails to proceed to the second stage to recognize Tanha, or

the cause of suffering. The immediate cause is his egocentric attachments, rooted in the Three Poisons, namely greed, hatred and delusion. Oedipus claimed the throne by solving Sphinx's riddle, and in the eyes of the people of Thebes "[i]t was a sign. A god was in it." (line 73). Arguably, his motivation for the relentless search to remove the curse from the city could originate from his desires to be admired, worshipped as a godlike figure and trusted in times of adversity.

Oedipus' accusation of Creon, brother of Jocasta, and Tiresias, the blind prophet of their conspiracy to overthrow him when Tiresias pointed out that he was the killer further supports this inference. His theory on "Money, power, one great skill surpassing another, // . . . , other men's envy grows and grows" (lines 519–520) shows how hostility is gradually developed when truth becomes unexpected and unbearable. With overwhelming bitterness, he concocted the allegations to convince himself with the illusion that he was guilt-free.

The underlying cause is his distorted concept of "self". Upon first appearance in the play, Oedipus reaffirmed his identity, "Everybody everywhere knows who I am: Oedipus. King." (line 11). "My power is absolute in Thebes" (line 313) demonstrates Oedipus' faith in his authority to be enduring and mighty. His unexplainable belief in the truthfulness of the prognostications proves his innocence of the network of causes. He failed to perceive the impermanent and interdependent nature of existence of beings and development of circumstances.

The Five Aggregates conclude "self" comprising of both physical and psychological elements, including feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. They all "bear the mark of Emptiness" ("New Heart Sutra"). The same rationale applies to the Eighteen Realms of Phenomena

that describe the world view. Therefore, the tendency in human nature to believe the actuality of an exclusive "self" and a fated life is flawed. This is due to the impression of different contrasting qualities, for example, we care about survival because we fear death.

Oedipus' status of being powerful only becomes promising when witnessing the struggles of the powerless, for instance, the civilians plagued by the Sphinx. His attachment to the transitory possessions of knowledge and fame drives him to follow the traces of the so-called destiny. Similarly, he suffered because he regarded himself corrupt and immoral. These criticisms are justifiable when there is the entrenched prototype of virtues in the community. These invisible tags, therefore in reality, are "empty".

Thich Nhat Hanh's illustration of the sufferings of the prostitutes provides further insight (*The Heart of Understanding* 155–157). The conception of being defiled makes their lives hell. By taking a step backwards, they may realize that others' sense of purity is built on their despair. This differentiation then becomes indefensible, because they do not bear the sole responsibility of their way of life. In most cases, the heavy burdens of poverty lure them into prostitution. This logic eventually relieves their sufferings.

The self-created labels, "sinful" and "impure" respectively, reflect the commonalities between Oedipus and the prostitutes. Both wind themselves in the false ideology of "self". They develop a strong attachment to the ideal qualities: to be virtuous and pure, also echoing to our primary discussion: to be purposeful; when all could only be accentuated by the undesirable qualities (157). Oedipus was clueless about this line of reasoning, consequently suffered endlessly with his pursuit to escape committing "sins".

This brings us to another concept outlined by Thich Nhat Hanh: interbeing. One prominent example is that through a piece of paper, we acknowledge the existence of the trees, the rain, the clouds, the Sun, the timbermen, their parents, the wheat and even abstractly the time, the space and our minds (141–142). Thus, the acceptance that one contains everything in the universe corresponds to the visualization that one is "empty" because it does not have a permanent independent "self" (144).

Oedipus was extremely disturbed by his unethical acts, even though all were unintended. But when we explicate the interbeing of the blood flowing in his flesh, we are well aware of the subsistence of his parents then his grandparents, the water then the ocean, the minerals then the stones, the air then the atmosphere. It is subsequently reasonable to suggest that his last life could once be a cloud, a plant, a fish or simply anything. Deductively, his biological parents are not wholly accountable for his birth (148–150).

However, it must be highlighted that this is not meant to absolve those who deliberately commit sinful deeds. To determine that the sufferings Oedipus placed himself in are unnecessarily torturing, it must be made clear that his circumstances are involuntary, but how? According to the pratitya samutpada (Dzogchen Ponlop 8–9), occurrence of each experience in life is due to the happening of a previous incident and in preparation for a future encounter, such that everything is changeable and interdependent.

Tracing back, the origin of the curse was Laius' transgression to abduct and rape the son of Pelops, Chrysippus. Mythologists suggest that the social mores back then allowed Laius to court Chrysippus, hence Laius' craving was potentially to humiliate Chrysippus (Rosenman 119–132). In the meantime, Oedipus would be nowhere to be found. He would have no way to intervene in the dispute, even though he would very much have

wanted to. He might have intercepted the drunken Laius from having sex with Jocasta, but this is ultimately imagined.

Burdened with the curse, Laius and Jocasta could have made the choice to guarantee the death of their son Oedipus. Yet, Jocasta handed over the baby to the shepherd and ordered to "abandon" him "on a mountain" (line 1480). Her decision thus becomes incomprehensible, especially when she was also overwhelmed by fear of the potential realization of the prophetic words.

By considering the pregnancy and birth of Oedipus as the sixth link "contact" between his mother and himself, the seventh link "sensation" was developed in Jocasta from the experiences of, for example, seeing his tiny curling fingers, hearing his first loud cry or even feeling the foetal movement. It gave rise to the eighth link "craving" when Jocasta's motherly nature was prompted. The desire not to directly inflict harm on her own flesh and blood, and to avoid suffering from immense guilt and pain beyond words, naturally established.

The shepherd was expected to obey the queen's command. He had no reason not to, or else he would be subject to severe punishment within the hierarchy if exposed. Even so, when pity stirred his heart, the one moment he felt deeply moved was already influential enough to change his mind. The "contact" of seeing and touching the baby stimulates the shepherd's "sensation" of compassion, following with the "craving" to spare his life.

The significance of the unpredictable nature of every character's decision made at each crossroads weaving into the network of causes and conditions challenges the pursuit of purpose in life. If in order to lead a good life, then Jocasta's purpose was to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy, and the shepherd's purpose was to be dutiful and obedient. However, the

illustrations above prove that the ever-changing circumstances in life could pull them away from attaining the purpose, ironically end up pursuing purposeless.

The same applies to Oedipus when he aimed at regaining control over his destiny. If fate does exist, then Oedipus' tragedy would be inevitable as it was the punishment for his father's sin. All his efforts would be in vain, because he could only change the present but not the past. So, his purpose could not stand. If fate does not exist, then his phobia of the Oracle would be the cause of suffering, guiding him to experience the self-fulfilling prophecies. Without overcoming the fear, his purpose could still never be accomplished.

Conclusion

Back to the primary question of whether purpose is a must to a good life, I argue that purpose is equally empty as all other phenomena, when it has neither an intrinsic value nor independent nature. Oedipus' heroic aspiration to serve the people is always appreciated, but his persistence in rewriting his "fate" creates the tragedy, showing that developing a strong attachment to some purposes may bring sufferings and become self-defeating.

Similarly, in clinical settings, my purpose to save lives contradicts to withdrawing life-sustaining treatments from patients suffering incurable or terminal illnesses. However, forcefully inserting feeding tubes or performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation may only increase patients' sufferings or even go against their will to die with dignity. I have to be purposeless in some situations.

Undeniably, being purposeful may help us grow and prosper. Yet, sometimes being purposeless may encourage a lesser attachment to different pursuits, especially when circumstances are out of our control. I still believe in getting the best out of ourselves, just that purposeless could serve to fine-tune our status, so that we suffer less.

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Teacher's comment:

LEUNG's article is a very good example of intertextual "close-readings." In her in-depth reading of Sophocles' masterpiece *Oedipus the King* with Buddhist concepts (such the Four Noble Truths, Three Poisons, Five Aggregates, emptiness, interbeing and etc.), LEUNG demonstrates her ability to analyse the existential predicament of Oedipus and human

at large. Surprisingly, Oedipus looks like a psycho through the lens of the grand master Buddha. Through this imagined therapy session, LEUNG also helps us to rethink about the relationship between purpose and well-being of life critically. (CHENG Wai Pang Damian)