

# Welcome Cleveland Oakie!

Post by “Joshua” of November 9, 2021 at 6:48 PM

Quote

As I've been invited to submit questions, I did have one: Has anyone seen any evidence that Epicurus might have been influenced by Buddhism?

Good question! This is rather complicated, but the short answer is "probably not". This could be a long post...

Alexander the Great

Epicurus was living and working in the late fourth century and early 3rd century BCE. Gautama Buddha lived somewhere between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE.

There *was* a very gradual inter-fluence of Greek and Indian thought starting *possibly* with the Presocratics (more on that in a bit), but not coming to a head until Alexander the Great's Indian Campaign in 327 BCE, 14 years after Epicurus' birth. Epicurus *did* muster for the mandatory two-year Athenian military training at his coming of age, but he never campaigned as a soldier.

Bactria

When I say that the Greco-Indian exchange of ideas was gradual, I do mean that in every sense. Bactria in Central Asia (Afghanistan and other parts of the present-day Middle East) was on the far-flung limits of the frontier of Greek civilization. Even to get that far, you had to cover the whole breadth of Persia.

Having gotten that far, there was even more trouble ahead; between Bactria and India there still lay the formidable barrier of the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains. There was no direct sea-route to India from the Mediterranean until the construction of the Suez Canal in the 1860s. There was, in Antiquity, an overland route over this same land-bridge, and one of Alexander's dreams in founding Alexandria was to fully exploit it. This did happen eventually, for a few hundred years, but not in a systematic way until well after Epicurus' death. Egypt before the Ptolemies was a civilization in what appeared to be terminal decline—a mere vassal of the Persians.

King Ashoka

Nor did Buddhism even spread throughout India until quite late in Antiquity; the key figure in its spread was King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire, who didn't come to power until 2 years before Epicurus died. Ashoka, in a spirit of innovation prefiguring Constantine, took the unusual step of

establishing Buddhism as the Imperial State Religion.

The earliest surviving artefacts of Greco-Buddhist art date from the 1st to 3rd centuries CE. Now, to be fair, very little Greek art in general survives from the time of Epicurus. Most of what we know about it comes from the Roman copies that were made starting sometime around the late 2nd/1st centuries BCE, and on through the Imperial Period.

## The Ionian School

I mentioned the Presocratics earlier. I will lay the groundwork here by talking a little bit about the philosophical tradition that Epicureanism stems from. Epicurus himself was an Athenian citizen by birth, but not a resident; he was born on Samos at the Eastern extent of the Aegean. This cluster of islands off the Greek mainland (known collectively as Ionia) experienced a cultural flourishing in the centuries preceding Epicurus' birth, a flourishing that predated the flowering of Athens, and that had its center in the city of Miletus on the Greek coast of Asia Minor.

The 'Ionian School', as it is sometimes called, was quite unusual in its approach to philosophy—particularly when compared with the later Platonic style. Where logic and dialectic would come to rule in Athens, the Ionians *tended* (though not universally) to prefer the direct experience of nature, and to make inferences about the physical laws that governed it. If Socrates and Plato are the fathers of Dialectic Philosophy, it was the Ionians who took the first faltering steps toward physical science.

There was Anaximander, who drew the first map of the world and concluded that it was spherical; Xenophanes, an early agnostic; Heraclitus, who intuited that all things in nature are in motion; Anaxagoras, who supposed that the sun was not divine at all, but simply a huge, burning stone; Empedocles, who thought that the Cosmos was uncreated and eternal; and, most importantly for us, Democritus and Leucippus, who posited that all bodies are made of indivisible atoms suspended in void.

## Democritus

### Quote

By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour; in reality atoms and void.

Of these last, Democritus is better attested. He was said to have been born into a wealthy family. Rather than building on that legacy, he chose instead to use his inheritance to fund his particular avocation—the pursuit of philosophy, wherever on Earth that might lead him.

He traveled far and wide; Assyria, Babylon, Egypt—even, it is rumored, as far away as Ethiopia on the east coast of Africa, and, yes, to India.

Since Democritus was Epicurus' most important source (despite the latter's protestations), it would do well to dwell on this Indian connection.

Unfortunately, we cannot! There is but a hint that Democritus ever made it that far. Even if he had, the topic on which Epicurus most seriously diverges from Democritus is precisely Ethics, the subject we are reviewing now. Had Epicurus stuck with Democritean atomic-determinism, it might be interesting to address Indian concepts like *Karma* in light of that. But Epicurus forged his own path; a radical embrace of free-will.

That's a lot for now. I will try to return to this thread in a day or two and outline what I think are key differences between Epicurean and Buddhist thought.

(I have no qualifications to do so, by the way, except that I was once a Secular Buddhist and am now an Epicurean.)

-josh