

2022 Epicurus vs Buddhism Compare and Contrast Thread

Post by “Don” of January 28, 2022 at 12:31 PM

This is a fascinating thread. Thanks for initiating a "fresh" one, [Cassius](#) !

I'll admit I'm a little intimidated by the depth of knowledge displayed by @Nate. His grasp of early Indian philosophies is far deeper than I even realized was available! Thanks for sharing that! I find it fascinating that there was such a wide divergent spectrum of beliefs and philosophies.

I also appreciate [Kalosyni](#) 's post. One of the things that had attracted me to Buddhism in the first place was its lists and outlines and the sense that all that gave of "We have this all figured out. Here's the charts and diagrams and outlines to prove it!" Maybe that's what attracted me initially to Epicurus, too? The [Principal Doctrines](#), the Three Legs of the Canon, the 3-part Physics/Canon/Ethics have that flavor of "Here's the basics" when first encountered. Yes, I realize there's SO much more to wrap one's head around but being able to say "Here's an outline" is somehow gratifying and inviting and sparks curiosity to dig deeper.

[Kalosyni](#) gave the Four Noble Truths in her post. From another source, these are:

- (1) dukkha exists (i.e., There is dukkha)
- (2) dukkha arises from causes
- (3) we can end dukkha
- (4) by following the Buddha's path to awakening (The 8-fold Path).

(See <https://tricycle.org/magazine/dukkha-meaning/>)

My penchant for going back to the original texts was strong even back when exploring Buddhism, so I found many translations of *dukkha* somewhat misleading and pale reflections of the connotations of the original. That Tricycle article I linked to had an interesting point:

Quote

This central term [dukkha] is best understood alongside the related word sukha. The prefix su- generally means “good, easy, and conducive to well-being,” and the prefix du- correspondingly means “bad, difficult, and inclining toward illness or harm.” On the most basic level, then, sukha means pleasant while dukkha means unpleasant. The

noble truth of suffering, however, does not simply refer to bodily pain; its meaning is far more subtle and rich.

One can also feel mental pleasure and pain. Here, the twin prefixes are employed again. A "good mind" (su-manas) is contrasted with a "bad mind" (du-manas) to yield the Pali words most often used to describe happiness (somanassa) and sorrow (domanassa), also known as mental pleasure and mental pain.

The traditional way of translating the First Noble Truth is: Life is suffering. But that's not exactly the meaning of that "Truth" (yes, I'm going to start putting it in quotes). [Kalosyni](#)'s link does a great job of displaying the original texts (Thanks!) and it seems to me that even Epicurus would agree that the things that Sariputta lists can be described as "terrible things" (as the 4th line of the Tetracharmakos calls "pain").

I also find it interesting in the Tricycle article's discussion of the prefixes su- "good" and du- "bad" which, it seems to me have parallels in Epicurus's focus on pleasure and pain. So, it also seems to me that, ultimately, Buddhism and Epicureanism are both concerned with "pain" and "pleasure" and maximizing "pleasure" in one's life...

*****BUT!***** (before anyone's head explodes! 😊)

It seems to me they both started from different locations on *how* pain exists and what "pleasure/good things" means. From the start, Epicurus posited 2 feelings - pleasure and pain - which Epicureans use as the "yardstick" by which to measure which actions would be most advantageous to move us to a more pleasurable life.

Buddha, on the other hand, said that our very existence - the very components of our physical and mental makeup, "the five clinging-aggregates" - are themselves dukkha/pain/unsatisfactory. The only release from this dukkha is found in dousing the fires of our desires, our clinging, that which connects us round after round on the wheel of rebirth. I think Buddha said that nirvana/moksha could be experienced while alive (or was this expanded on in later sutras and traditions like the bodhisattva foregoing his/her own "release" until all sentient beings are freed) but the ultimate "prize" is NOT being reborn, not having to go through all the dukkha all over again and again and again.

Epicurus had something to say about that attitude:

Quote

We are born once. We cannot be born twice: for eternity we must be non-existent. But you people, who are not master of the future, put things off for "the right time". Procrastination ruins the life of all. And so, each of us is hurried and unprepared at death.

So, everything we experience, we experience in this life. There is no rebirth. There is no karma determining our future existence although understood more broadly, we DO experience the

consequences of our actions and decisions - which is one understanding of "karma" - and that does determine our life in the future in this life. Which, to me, is a reason for defining terms. I could see a Buddhist saying that Buddhism is designed to allow a person to lead "the most pleasurable life" or better "the most blissful life." But right there, how do you define "pleasure" or "bliss" and even "life."

There is a modern strain of Western Buddhism - [secular Buddhism](#) (that even has [its own podcast!](#)) but to me (and one of the things that finally led me away from Buddhism as a path) that attempts - from my perspective - to do something similar to some modern Stoics and try to separate a "modern version" of the philosophy from its underpinnings and its historical context. Which is why I think [Cassius](#) 's focus, for example, on the underlying Epicurean physics on this forum is important. We have to look at the totality of the philosophy and where it grew from if we're to understand the rest of it. A cafeteria-style Buddhism or Stoicism is just a watered down version of the original. And if you want watered-down philosophy, I suppose that's one way to go.