

Good General Reference Post Contrasting Buddhism with Epicurus

Post by "Scott" of January 29, 2022 at 1:11 AM

"Of the ancient Indian philosophies of..."

I know a bit about the ancient Indian traditions prior to Buddhism, but I'm no expert in those. I'm about at the Wikipedia level on that stuff 🤪 But I can say a few things about Buddhism at any rate.

HOWEVER... I just completed a quick romp through the forum and it seems to me most every significant topic surrounding a comparison of Buddhism and EP has been kicked around in this forum multiple times. There are discussions on this stuff starting several years ago. The dead horse is hardly recognizable now. And it seemed to me a lot of the threads didn't really lead to any definitive answers or useful information. I think Nate was right when he said "I don't think that comparisons between Buddhism and Epicurean philosophy are helpful. They are dissimilar and historically unrelated." I would add to that that Buddhism became so variegated through time that today we would need to specify very particular Buddhist lineages/schools in order to attempt a sensible comparison. Even the most commonly shared teachings like the "Four Noble Truths" and so forth have RADICALLY different meanings between schools.

So let's take just one example here - the GOAL of the Buddhist life. The stated goal(s) of the different traditions do NOT match! There are fundamental differences. Even though many Buddhists would refer to the ultimate goal as "Nirvana", in modern "Secular Buddhism", we have the currently popular Stephen Batchelor who says based on the earliest Pali writings of Buddhism that the goal of life (aka Nirvana) may be identified as "human flourishing". Batchelor presents a modern, engaged-with-the-world idea. It is certainly not about suppressing desire, but involves working with desires so they don't become problems. But the Theravada tradition (one of the largest and oldest branches of Buddhism - also steeped in the early Pali scriptures) goes in a different direction and says the ultimate goal is "cessation of all suffering", which they also call Nirvana but this is understood as being obtained by training the mind in silent meditation (basically for years and years) with minimal contact with the outside "world". This is to produce the (frequently criticized) result of someone who is totally "unfettered" by desires (desires being the cause of suffering, in this view). Mahayana Buddhists OTOH (like Tibetan, Zen, etc.) consider the Theravada tradition of spending all your time in self-absorption trying to liberate yourself as being involved in a kind of selfishness (which is a big no-no), and so they go in yet a different direction. They hold forth the ideal of the "Bodhisattva" which is a kind of infinitely compassionate person everyone tries to become in order to go around saving everyone else from suffering. Then we have the goal for Pure Land Buddhists - to chant and pray to Amida Buddha (an incarnation of the Buddha) hoping to be delivered to the Pure Land

(a kind of heaven) after death. Resembles Christianity. This rambling of mine (sorry for the length) is only a tiny fraction of understanding only 4 schools regarding just one idea - the "goal" of the Buddhist life, and believe me I have only scratched the surface!

Now Epicurus had to defend his philosophy against competitors. And if I understand it correctly (and I might not - I'm not a scholar in Classical/Hellenistic Greece!) this competition was not just for recognition - money and resources were also on the line. A successful philosophical school won patrons and students and thrived. But here today in EF we don't have that situation of course. Still sometimes it feels like a battle is going on. EP against X, EP against Y, EP against Buddhism, etc. For me I just find studying various philosophies fun and interesting and - more importantly - helpful in living a good life. Differences between philosophical perspectives help clarify ideas, through contrast and comparison. This seems worthwhile. But if we're going to do comparisons of EP to Buddhism, I think it would be more productive to narrow down to particular branches of Buddhism or I think even better, just specific concepts. This approach may not help so much with the project of making EP "triumph" over other perspectives, but I think it works better to help gain useful insights.