

# 2022 Epicurus vs Buddhism Compare and Contrast Thread

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 29, 2024 at 11:58 AM

Incidentally, I am re-reading parts of the *Dhammapada*, and I am reminded how antithetical many of the propositions in ancient Buddhist scriptures are to Epicurean Philosophy. We **do** find similarities in the evaluation of *mindfulness*, the importance of *community*, and a commitment to a *behavioral code*, but I think we will find these features in most wisdom traditions. The rest is ... well, I believe that Nietzsche shares a useful conclusion in referring to it as "life-negating":

- **Just as a storm throws down a weak tree, so does Mara overpower the man who lives for the pursuit of pleasures..." (7)**
- **"Just as rain does not break through a well-thatched house, so passion never penetrates a well-developed mind." (14)**
- **"Do not give way to heedlessness. Do not indulge in sensual pleasures. Only the heedful and meditative attain great happiness." (27)**
- **"But those who act according to the perfectly taught Dhamma will cross the realm of Death, so difficult to cross." (86)**
- **"Giving up sensual pleasures, with no attachment, let the wise man cleanse himself of defilements of the mind." (88)**
- **"Inspiring are the forests in which worldlings find no pleasure. There the passionless will rejoice, for they seek no sensual pleasures." (99)**
- **"... upon dissolution of the body that ignorant man is born in hell." (140)**
- **"Easy to do are things that are bad and harmful to oneself. But exceedingly difficult to do are things that are good and beneficial." (163)**
- **"... The righteous live happily both in this world and the next." (169)**
- **"Swans fly on the path of the sun; men pass through the air by psychic powers; the wise are led away from the world after vanquishing Mara and his host." (175)**
- **"Happy indeed we live, we who possess nothing. Feeders on joy we shall be, like the Radiant Gods." (200)**
- **"Seek no intimacy with the beloved and also not with the unloved, for not to see the beloved and to see the unloved, both are painful. Therefore hold nothing dear, for separation from the dear is painful. There are no bonds for those who have nothing beloved or unloved. From endearment springs grief, from endearment springs fear. From him who is wholly free from endearment there is no grief, whence then fear? From affection springs grief, from affection springs fear. From him who is wholly free from affection there is no grief, whence then fear? From attachment springs grief, from attachment springs**

**fear. From him who is wholly free from attachment there is no grief, whence then fear?" (210-214)**

- **"Your life has come to an end now; You are setting forth into the presence of Yama, the king of death. No resting place is there for you on the way, yet you have made no provision for the journey!" (237)**
- **"Unchastity is the taint in a woman..." (242)**
- **"Of all the paths the Eightfold Path is the best; of all the truths the Four Noble Truths are the best; of all things passionlessness is the best: of men the Seeing One (the Buddha) is the best. This is the only path; there is none other for the purification of insight. Tread this path, and you will bewilder Mara." (273-274)**
- **"Cut off your affection in the manner of a man plucks with his hand an autumn lotus..." (285)**

Like Epicurus' opponents, early Buddhists (as recorded in the texts) do not distinguish between *stable* pleasure versus *excessive* pleasures. They describe pleasures to be necessarily *excessive*, intrinsically insatiable, fundamentally destructive, and ultimately evil. In this regard, as far as general ethical positions go, this attitude is categorically Platonic or Stoic.

Likewise, the treatment of *identity* and *death* seems to be irreconcilable with Epicurean Philosophy. Most ancient Indian philosophies (Buddhism included, among dozens of others) propose that our identity can be reduced to an indestructible *Self*, distinct from bodily phenomena, carrying a trans-dimensional record of a *Self's* ethical history, and that record dictates into which new, animal body the indestructible *Self* will manifest, and from which bodies it will be restricted.

Granted, while the physics are off, there is some ethical coherence. The descriptions of the *Awakened One* by Buddhists and the *Wise Man* by Epicureans share similar descriptions: *an admirable person, godlike in behavior, fearless, patient, mindful, kind, peaceable, a preventer of violence, never impulsive, who acts in accordance with their beliefs.* (Then again, as I propose, the reason for this coherence is because ethics is grounded in nature, and that nature affects everyone, regardless of the beliefs that arose from their niche, cultural context:)

- **"One is not wise because one speaks much. He who is peaceable, friendly and fearless is called wise." (258)**

However, even as such, the specific ethical rules dictated by early Buddhists are extensive, uncompromising, and, from my perspective, perilously conservative. Most of these rules (as I understand them) were not intended for people outside of the early monastic community. Siddhartha prescribes a monastic life for his followers, so ethical guidelines are contextualized within the life of a monk or nun. As far as that goes, Sex seems to be Enemy #1.

The very first book of the Pāli Canon (the ancient Buddhist scriptures) is a code of conduct for bhikkhus ("monks") and bhikkhunis ("nuns"). To note a few of those rules:

- Sexual intercourse leads to complete expulsion from the monastic community. (Pārājika 1)
- Masturbating warrants correction. (Saṅghādisesa 1)
- Holding hands with another person warrants correction. (Saṅghādisesa 2)
- Marriage proposals warrant correction. (Saṅghādisesa 5)
- Huts not built to the Buddha's design specifications warrant correction. (Saṅghādisesa 6)

This is followed by hundreds (and hundreds) of other restrictions that seem to govern every aspect of an early Buddhist mendicant's day, from the way they dress, to the way they shave, walk, eat, speak and, most importantly, which thoughts are acceptable thoughts to entertain.

If there is a foil to *Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll*, I think it might be *Buddhism*.

Now, having levied that critique, let me also add that I don't know of many Buddhists who hold themselves accountable to a 2,500-year-old monastic code, so I don't want to skewer Buddhism and Buddhists on the basis on texts, and a historical figure, who are no longer as revered as are more recent texts, mantras, and historical figures who have cultivated the tradition. My friends who have invited me to Buddhist gatherings primarily use East Asian literature that has been written in the last few hundred years, as opposed to Indian literature that goes back thousands of years. I find similarities with my own, Protestant upbringing, in which the hymns and liturgy we recite are only as old as the King James Bible, and Bible Study *rarely* included a study of ancient Greek.

Still, I hold other traditions to the same standard that I hold my own: "*Why would I follow X/Y Tradition if I genuinely reject X/Y Founder's teachings?*" For me, as a kid, the teachings of Jesus seemed antiquated, and did not provide me with solutions to apply to my troubles. *However*, Epicurus nailed evolution and quantum indeterminism, and I award him bonus points for his insight in the form of representing myself as a member of his tradition. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Siddhartha said that sex is as questionable as murder. I have to reject this.