

Good General Reference Post Contrasting Buddhism with Epicurus

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2022 at 9:16 AM

I want to commend Nate and recommend his post as probably the most concise, direct, and clear that I have seen. Of course I don't have the personal knowledge to validate or correct any errors, so those who read this thread in the future please feel free to elaborate. But for future reference and to avoid interminable rabbit trails, I will pin this post to the top of this subforum where it will be easily visible. Thanks [Eikadistes](#) ! The original post in its original context is [here](#).

[Quote from Nate](#)

Of the ancient Indian philosophies of Ājīvika, Ajñāna, Buddhism, Chārvāka, Jainism, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Samkhya, Vaisheshika, Vedānta, and Yoga, we'll find the closest companion to Epicureanism in Chārvāka. Early Buddhism is most closely related to the Indian school of Ajñāna, from which Pyrrhonism developed, so, in general, I don't think that comparisons between Buddhism and Epicurean philosophy are helpful. They are dissimilar and historically unrelated.

In terms of physics, Epicureanism shares the atomism of Ājīvika and Vaisheshika (though, both traditions propose a deterministic physics) as well as the materialism of Chārvāka.

It uniquely shares the ethics of Chārvāka, whereas every other tradition devalues hedonism.

We find the most similarity between Epicurean epistemology and Chārvāka, which justifies the criterion of direct physical and mental perceptions, without inference, comparison, or speculation. It is most dissimilar from Ajñāna, which rejects all criteria of knowledge, followed closely thereafter by Buddhism, which avoids making any certain claims.

Epicurean theology is comparatively unique. Epicurus would have been opposed to the atheism of Ājīvika, Chārvāka, Nyāya, and Vaisheshika, as well as the agnosticism of Ajñāna and Buddhism, as well as the immanent dualism and mysticism of Samkhya and

Yoga, and also the divine idealism of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. The Jain universe of multiple, physical deities (the Tirthankaras), is the closest ancient Indian theology that in any way resembles Epicureanism. There is not, to my knowledge, any significant historical link between the two at any point in time.

As far as ancient Indian philosophies go, early Buddhism overwhelmingly contradicts Epicurean philosophy. They are at the opposite ends of the epistemological spectrum, propose completely different goals in life, and are only barely physically compatible if, for no other reason than early Buddhism's refusal to provide any hard answers on physics.

Whereas Epicureanism is most similar to Chārvāka and, to an extent Ājīvika and Vaiśeṣika, Buddhism shares intellectual similarities with Ajñāna and Prryhonian Skepticism, and the meditative practices with Vedānta and Yoga. Buddhism's propositions are much closer to Epicurus' opponents than to Epicurus in any meaningful way.

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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.

Post by "Cassius" of January 29, 2022 at 5:26 AM

Thanks Scott! Since we are devoted to studying Epicurus here rather than competing viewpoints, I doubt it would make much sense to pursue any systematic study of any "minor" religion or viewpoint unless a significant number of us here have confronted it and need "ammunition" against it.

The reason "Buddhism" in general is so relevant is of course so many people come into contact with it (maybe superficially) and need points of reference to decide whether to go further. If someone is deeply into a specific branch that would most likely be beyond the scope of our project here. I would probably refer such a person to Hiram, as he is more into those details than I would think would be appropriate here.

But I do appreciate all the good information that is coming out in these threads.

As was commented to me recently, one thing about our project is that we can expect, as people rotate in and out of this study, that the same questions are going to be asked over and over again. Covering them thoroughly as we are doing gives us a database of experiences to which we can point people going through these questions for the first time.

So we can continue and expand these discussions as our participants here find helpful. But I think I am already pleased to see that I think we are covering the situation well enough for the satisfaction of most generalists who ask "As an Epicurean should I be concerned about studying Buddhism?" And as for me I am satisfied that I would tell most people to give that a very low priority.

Most people who will come into contact with us probably will need to spend more time understanding how and why Stoicism is so incompatible with Epicurus rather than Buddhism, but for those who for whatever reason (geography or whatever) have come more into contact with Buddhism, this discussion ought to be helpful and is something I could never provide myself.

Post by "Scott" of January 29, 2022 at 10:59 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Since we are devoted to studying Epicurus here rather than competing viewpoints, I doubt it would make much sense to pursue any systematic study of any "minor" religion or viewpoint unless a significant number of us here have confronted it and need "ammunition" against it.

I totally understand what you are saying, [Cassius](#) . I was thinking also that another value to discussing other philosophies and viewpoints would not just to have "ammunition" to defeat them, but to learn from how they might interface with EP and how people might benefit. For instance, a common discussion in the EF is how to IMPLEMENT Epicurean philosophy. EP per se doesn't offer much specifics on how to do this. I have found great nuggets from Stoicism and Buddhism and many other perspectives that do. These expand and augment my EP experience. And "implementation" is not the only area where discussing other viewpoints can provide benefits.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 29, 2022 at 11:37 AM

Learning about ancient Indian philosophy helped me understand the context of Christian politics better. It also helped me, ultimately, understand and accept Epicurus' theism without getting stuck on contemporary vocabulary.

It fascinated me that the vocabulary of Sanskrit recognizes two general classes of religious expression: the insiders, those who use the national historical texts as the basis of intellectual engagement, and the outsiders, those who do not. The first category includes atheists, non-theists, agnostics, polytheists, and theists as well as monists, dualists, and pluralists, as well as deontologists, logicians, ethicists, mystics, physicians ... you name it, "Hinduism" hosts it.

Of the second category, or the *cultural outsiders*, we find an equal range of diversity, atheists, non-theists, agnostics, polytheists, and theists as well as monists, dualists, and pluralists. Categorical divisions are determined according to a sense of national unity versus decentralization, not doctrines or positions along the philosophical spectrum.

Imagine, conversely, living in ancient India, and only having vocabulary at-hand to express "the amalgamation of Academics, Sceptics, Peripatetics, Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics members of the 'Hellenic' religion" (versus how we put "the amalgamation of Vaisheshika, Vedanta, Yoga, (etc.) as members of the 'Hindu' religion").

Anyway, breaking down these individual propositions made it easier to see how Epicurus could be a critic of common religious beliefs, bemoan the popular superstition, reject all forms of supernaturalism, ground all phenomena in a scientific framework, *and yet still* work with the concepts of *God* and *the Soul*.

It is a useful historical point of study to supplement Epicureanism, particularly (in the same way we use Democritean atomism as a point of comparison) as a contrast to the deterministic forms of atheistic Indian atomism, as well as the non-atomistic form of Indian hedonism, as well as the religious form of theistic atomism.

It also helps illuminate the thought-patterns of Gassendi and other neo-Epicureans of the Renaissance.

It also further shows how the basic propositions to which Siddhartha Gautama was responding were the same propositions that were being considered in ancient Greece: Is the nature of reality a unity, a duality, or something else? Is the experience of the world more real than the world itself? The propositions the Buddha taught are very much so the same propositions that Epicurus rejected, as represented by ancient Greek Skepticism.

Surely, there are multiple points of agreement between Siddhartha and Epicurus. They agreed on withdrawing from popular society. They agreed that suffering is undesirable and we should strive to overcome it. They agreed that conventional superstitions are insubstantial and intellectually bankrupt. They were suspicious of social means by which to acquire wealth. They saw empty speculation as a source of suffering. They entertained a *form* of atomism. At the same time, these attitudes were also shared by Siddhartha's non-"Hindu", Indian contemporaries, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Ajita Kesakambalī, Makkhali Gośāla, Pūraṇa Kassapa.

The important comparison to draw here is not necessarily Epicurus and Buddhism as much as it is Epicurus versus Heterodox Indian Traditions (Buddhism being one of several). They share a common suspicion of the predominant philosophical context in which they arise, and offer reforms to what they see as formal misunderstandings. I think most comparisons that can be found between Epicureanism and Buddhism are largely superficial, and can, to some degree or another, be found in nearly every ancient Hellenistic and Indian school of thought.

Beyond being "outsiders", the doctrines vary so greatly, the contrast is stark.

Buddhism shares enough in common with Pyrrhonism that we might not say Epicureanism is the *Black* to Buddhism's *White*, but we might say that Epicureanism is the *Black* to Buddhism's *Very Light Grey*.

Post by "Cassius" of January 29, 2022 at 12:28 PM

What I am reminded of reading these last two posts is that knowledge of all kinds is generally helpful and probably only rarely if ever unhelpful.

As we hopefully continue to grow as a forum over the years, the challenge will be to be sure we accommodate as many varying interests as we can, while always keeping the focus on Epicurus. And this "interest" issue is not only a matter of topic, but also a matter of "basic" vs.

"advanced" in the study of Epicurus.

Probably over time we will want some more introductory or guidepost material that prepares new readers for what they will find here, and acclimates everyone from the beginning that there are natural progressions and interests and that no one should expect to want to participate in every discussion, or be turned off in any way by that fact.

I think this is probably a part of the "atomistic" nature of the universe to prepare people for - maybe it's all a subset of the point that Epicurean philosophy is more of an "operating system" that equips individuals to go out and live their own lives in their own habitats more successfully.

It isn't a monotheistic religion in which we expect everyone to do the same things in the same way and all live inside the same garden / house / commune.

We can "prepare" here, and those who like the teaching and transmission will always probably find this place a central focus, but once we understand the basics some significant number will then move on to start their own "local" or "specialized" groups that apply the principles in unique ways.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 29, 2022 at 1:20 PM

Quote from Scott

discussion in the EF is how to IMPLEMENT Epicurean philosophy. EP per se doesn't offer much specifics on how to do this. I have found great nuggets from Stoicism and Buddhism and many other perspectives that do.

My perspective on this has changed over time and may not be the same as other people's. I've explored adapting techniques from various other traditions and found it ultimately unsatisfying. For me, EP needs to be understood and practiced on its own terms and in some ways it is more "freewheeling" than some other traditions. The best way that I've found to do this is by studying and by applying the insights to daily living.

"Studying" can be pretty wide ranging, as suggested by this thread. I read up on the history of physics and cosmology and on modern neuroscience as well, all in books intended for lay people. One of the joys of this philosophy is that, for me, it's a gateway to so many other subjects.

As to applying to daily living... Sometimes I find pleasure by thinking about the infinite universe or by how I got here. Yesterday I was in physical pain and thought about [PD04](#). These are methods of implementation, but for me they arise from my studies. My perspective is EP: I find

that many of the things that used to perplex me no longer do. For me, this is more useful than spiritual exercises or a daily practice. But for others these things may bring great pleasure and understanding. The Feelings are our guides.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 29, 2022 at 6:07 PM

(This is a cross-post (?) from my timeline- I havent had the time to read through all the comments, but there was a thought I had to get out. So I'm sorry if this post doesn't connect to the previous discussion 😊)

A few days ago, I went out with my friend. It was cold and generally physically unpleasant, but our talk was far more pleasurable. Buddhism would say that coldness is pain, and we should thus try and avoid it. But then I would miss out on a great talk! So, taking only pain into consideration is far too easy.

And probably thats an issue I've with all philosophies. They all view the world through a specific lens, which doesn't connect with scientific discoveries. Epicureanism is the only example where I can't find it. And I'm the first one to admit that I'm uncomfortable with the thought that pleasure is the only good, and I actively try to escape it... but again and again, I've to admit that there isn't a single religion or philosophy which has a scientifically and empirically correct worldview. Except Epicureanism 😊

Post by “Scott” of February 3, 2022 at 10:12 AM

(Pardon me but I'm backing out of this thread. I'm not meaning to ghost. I would just create more rabbit holes I think and there are probably enough already! Carry on soldiers!)

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 3, 2022 at 10:29 AM

From the [2022 Epicurus vs Buddhism Compare and Contrast Thread](#), a chart I created:

**EPICUREAN
PHILOSOPHY**

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

	EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY	THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM	MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM
Founder	Epicurus	Siddhārtha Gautama	Siddhārtha Gautama, Nāgārjuna
History	<p><i>Epicurus</i> (341–270 BCE) founded this anti-Platonic ethical philosophy of non-deterministic atomism with the support of his disciples <i>Metrodorus</i>, <i>Hermarchus</i>, and <i>Polyaenus</i>. The 1st-century BCE Roman poet <i>Lucretius</i> (author of <i>De Rerum Natura</i>, "On the Nature of Things") and <i>Philodemus</i> made notable contributions to spread the philosophy. The 2nd-century CE <i>Diogenes of Oinoanda</i> is known for funding a large, Epicurean stonework project.</p>	<p><i>Siddhārtha Gautama</i> (c. 563-483 BCE), the "Awakened One" proposed a "Middle Way" between the "Eternalism" of the Brahmin religion (that proposes the existence of an eternal <i>atman</i> or "soul"), versus the "Annihilationism" of <i>Ajita Kesakambalī</i>'s hedonistic school of <i>Chārvāka</i>. Buddha rejected all metaphysical propositions and described the true nature of one's being as <i>anattā</i>, the "non-self", lacking permanency.</p>	<p><i>Nāgārjuna</i> (c. 150-250 CE) developed the highly influential <i>Madhyamaka</i> school of Buddhism (possibly influenced by Pyrrhonism through the works of Sextus Empiricus; Pyrrhonism, <i>itself</i>, was inspired by Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, the founder of Ajñāna, a competitor of early Buddhism). Many other influential Buddhists helped spread the religion, such as <i>Bodhidharma</i> to China and <i>Padmasambhāva</i> to the Tibetan Plateau.</p>
Epistemology	<p>All knowledge begins with [1] <i>sensation</i> (aisthesis) caused by the interaction of external particles with our sensory organs. We detect pleasurable or painful [2] <i>feelings</i> (pathē) associated with the various sensations. Through repeated stimulation, we form [3] <i>anticipations</i> (prolepsis) about the patterns of nature.</p>	<p>All knowledge is validated by two <i>paramana</i> or "proofs", [1] <i>pratyakṣa</i> or "perception" and [2] <i>anumāna</i> or "inference". <i>Perception</i> and <i>inference</i> are due to the six <i>āyatana</i> or "sense objects" of <i>sight</i>, <i>sound</i>, <i>odor</i>, <i>taste</i>, <i>touch</i>, and <i>thought</i>. The <i>āyatana</i> are not organs, but rather, appearances.</p>	<p>The only meaningful thing to <i>know</i> is that all objects lack independent existences. Things only meaningfully exist within the continuum of the mind. Physical phenomena is dismissed as <i>māyā</i> meaning "magic" or "illusions", and the appearance of the natural world is dismissed as a dream.</p>

EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Metaphysics	<p>Reality exists independent of the mind. The universe is made of bodies and void. Bodies are either particles that can neither be created nor destroyed, or compounds that are composed of particles. All compound objects are subject to the forces of dissolution. Both empty space and the particles that move through it are infinite in number and eternal in time. The mind is a compound structure associated with a living animal, and can be located within the body.</p>	<p>Reality is a changing, experiential aggregate, composed of [1] the elemental forms (<i>rūpa</i>) - solid earth, cohesive water, mobile gas, warm fire, and empty space, [2] sensuous feeling (<i>vedanā</i>), [3] mental cognition (<i>saṃjñā</i>), [4] willful determination (<i>saṅkhāra</i>), and [5] consciousness (<i>vijñāna</i>). Natural patterns are observed, but propositions about them are dismissed as meaningless speculations.</p>	<p>Reality is <i>sūnyatā</i> or "emptiness". All things lack a <i>svabhava</i> or "independent nature" (as was used by the atheistic <i>Chārvāka</i> to refer to the physical nature of reality). The only "real" existence is consciousness. The energetic activities of nature are simply objects that exist within the mind, including the "body" and the "self", which are also just temporary illusions within the continuous <i>citta-santāna</i> or "mindstream".</p>
Cosmology	<p>The Earth, Sun, Moon, planets, and other linked celestial objects comprise a <i>kosmos</i> in a spatially-infinite universe with infinite <i>kosmoi</i>. All <i>kosmoi</i> are made of atoms. The seeds of life are everywhere.</p>	<p>Beings migrate through numerous planes of existence (<i>ascending</i> to heavens and <i>descending</i> to hells). One's directionality at death reflects their <i>kamma</i> or "moral causality".</p>	<p>A variety of mythic beings inhabit the various realms, from gods to hungry ghosts. Heavens are idealized as Pure Lands, each of which is inhabited and ruled by its respective Bodhisattva.</p>

EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Theology	<p>The gods are perfect, material beings, unconcerned with humanity, imagined as either as [1] indestructible, extra-terrestrial animals, or [2] thought-forms we dream due to our natural preconception of "blessedness". Epicurus is romanticized as having been god-like.</p>	<p>Divine entities are called <i>Devas</i>, blissful beings who inhabit emotional "planes of existence". As they refine their <i>kamma</i> or "moral causality", they get closer to the goal of <i>Nibbāna</i>. Each realm is defined by the disposition of its inhabitant.</p>	<p><i>Buddha</i> is treated as a deity, and other Buddhas are acknowledged to exist besides Shakyamuni (Gautama Buddha). Buddhahood is available to everyone and the achievements of <i>Siddhārtha</i> are not as emphasized as is the <i>Buddha-nature</i>, itself.</p>
Ethics:	<p>Calculate the advantages of every situation based on their possibility to provide stable, long-term pleasure. Actions are judged according to their consequences. There are no eternal ethical rules. There are, however, "Masterful Opinions" attributed to Epicurus that should be studied in order to minimize pain and maximize the pleasure of the good life.</p>	<p>Follow the <i>Noble Eightfold Path</i> according to the <i>dhamma</i> or "law" taught by Buddha to achieve <i>Nibbāna</i>, the "extinguishment" of suffering: [1] Right Resolve, [2] Right Speech, [3] Right Conduct, [4] Right Livelihood, [5] Right Effort [6] Right Mindfulness, [7] Right Meditation, and [8] Right view that death is not the end.</p>	<p>The path of the Mahāyāna <i>bodhisattva</i> involves going beyond the <i>Eightfold Path</i> of the <i>arhat</i> to devote themselves toward practicing Buddhism for the benefit of all beings before finally achieving a state of <i>Nirvāṇa</i>. This continuous mission is thought to extend beyond an individual's life into their future lives.</p>
Goal of Life:	<p>A godlike state of pure pleasure, a disposition of imperturbable joy, free from physical pain and mental anguish. The practice of prudence will lead the wise person to the good life.</p>	<p><i>Nibbāna</i>, the end of <i>dukkha</i> or "suffering" and release from <i>saṃsāra</i>, the cycle of rebirths caused due to one's <i>avidyā</i> or "ignorance" of <i>anicca</i> or "impermanence".</p>	<p>To achieve <i>Nirvāṇa</i>, one must pursue the altruistic path of the <i>bodhisattva</i>, who works for the benefit of all beings by helping others achieve <i>bodhi</i> or "enlightenment".</p>

Post by “Cassius” of February 4, 2022 at 9:44 AM

Thank you again, but as far as "conclusion" goes I expect this topic to remain as active over time as the eternal questions like "Aren't stoicism and Epicureanism pretty much exactly the same?" And as a result this will be an "evergreen" topic that will be revisited enough times to make anyone believe in Nietzsche's "eternal return!"

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 4, 2022 at 9:57 AM

I think we can adequately demonstrate that Epicurean philosophy contrasts sharply with the ancient Indian philosophy of Ajñāna, and, by extension, with the metaphysically reserved philosophy of Buddhism.