Opening Post On Distinguishing Epicurean Philosophy from Buddhism

Post by “Cassius” of December 17, 2018 at 5:55 PM

I am no expert on Buddhism, but it is my understanding from my own reading, as bolstered from statements of people I respect, that (borrowing from a friend) throughout all the schools [of Buddhism] runs a thread that teaches that our existence is characterized by suffering, and that self-denial and intense meditation is required to reach a state of equanimity that is beyond suffering. As such, I have always seen Buddhism, like Stoicism, as at root all about the suppression of desire (which surely includes pleasure) and therefore totally incompatible with Epicurean philosophy.

However when in the face of generalizations like that I get:

"You don't know what XXX said in the year YYYY!" And of course there are hundreds of XXXs and dozens of YYYY's so the implication is we can't get a fair assessment of Buddhism til we have studied all of them.

Further, I get:

"Well that may be the position of the 100 million Buddhists in India, by there is Guru XXX in YYYY who had a couple of dozen followers but he was exactly like Epicurus - so don't judge Buddhism by those 100 million!"

And last but not least for this into post, I get: "But Epicurus is all about "freedom from pain" as the goal of life! That's exactly what Buddhism teaches! "

And I have to just sigh and start over with them on what Epicurus really wrote about pleasure.

That's just a sample. The purpose of this thread and subforum is to collect material that will help us all better distinguish Epicurean philosophy from Buddism.

I do ask this: Please try to avoid the above dismissals and let's attempt to **fairly** generalize, so that people can read this thread and subforum and be educated about the high-level situation, and not the details which are clearly exceptions to the general rule.

Also: The Facebook thread that originated this topic.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 18, 2018 at 2:02 PM

The best place to start this discussion objectively is with the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. These are among the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The truth of suffering

The truth of the cause of suffering

The truth of the end of suffering

The truth of the path to the end of suffering (the eightfold path)

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

Right understanding (of the four noble truths, for one)

Right intention

Right speech

Right action

Right livelihood

Right effort

Right mindfulness

Right concentration

My understanding is that desire/clinging/attachment is one of the causes of suffering in Buddhism. Possibly you could compare this to unnatural and unnecessary desires, but I don’t think that would be completely accurate. Desire/clinging/attachment is more about clinging to things which are impermanent. It is also about clinging to the self, which is considered an illusion. This aligns to some degree with “don’t fear death” in EP. So there are overlapping or related concepts common to both philosophies, but how the concepts fit into the big pictures seems to be quite different.

Post by “Hiram” of December 18, 2018 at 3:08 PM

the end in B. is nirvana, which means "extinction" (of the fires of desire)

this is confused / and not the same as with sukkha (bliss, delight, pleasure), which is the opposite of dukkha (suffering, dissatisfaction, existential angst), which is the problem that Buddha was attempting to solve. Because sukkha is the opposite of dukkha, it's often thought of as "the end" (and in Nichiren Buddhism it is).

I also think it's fair for someone who wants to delve in the differences in doctrine to consider to what extent the upayas (= efficient means) of the Buddhists can serve Epicurean ends--because many of them do, and a blind dismissal of them comes off as insincere, impractical, fanatical and uninformed. Do we want pleasure or not, and do we consider it worthy of cultivation? If we do, we will study the means to it diligently and not dismiss the means because they are not the end.

It is clear that both in Epicurean philosophy, as well as in scientific studies, and in many other (secular or religious) wisdom traditions (like Buddhism, and also hygge, sumac kawsay, etc.), there are many upayas / efficient means that lead to a life of pleasure. The clear designation of these as "means" helps to not confuse the issue.

Post by “Cassius” of December 18, 2018 at 3:46 PM

Godfrey -- When you list those "Four Noble Truths" and "The Noble Eightfold Path" who is the authority that says those "are the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism?" I'm not sure I've been able to establish anything that people generally take as given - were these endorsed or issued by someone in "authority."

Of course also that list really isn't a list of "doctrines" so much as a list of "topics." Is there a list in complete understandable sentences as to what each of the four plus eight mean?

Thanks very much for this so far.

Post by “Hiram” of December 18, 2018 at 4:58 PM

The Four Noble Truths and eightfold path are universally known as the core of Buddhist teaching. You can quickly search them online or on youtube and learn more.

Post by “Cassius” of December 18, 2018 at 6:18 PM

Yes but Hiram this is kind of like with the Epicurean texts, there is a lot of controversy. Was there a single person who originated them and against whom they can be pinned down in a single form?

Post by “Godfrey” of December 18, 2018 at 7:05 PM

My understanding is that they are considered to have been part of one of Buddha's first teachings and transmitted orally after that, until they were eventually written down. However this wikipedia article provides much more detail than I was aware of, both as to their origin and to their centrality in various branches of Buddhism:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2018 at 8:18 AM

Godfrey I don't want to bog you down back in Buddhism, because you came here to talk about Epicurus, but as we begin to put this thread aside for future reference I want to be sure I have a basic grasp of the key differences. No doubt there are many similarities in "tools" as there are between many philosophies, psychology approaches, religions, etc. Getting involved too deeply in tools has always struck me as a recipe for confusion and spinning one's wheels.

Core differences usually come down to goals, and I gather that one very high level conclusion is that while the goal of Epicurean philosophy is the feeling of pleasure (or living pleasurably, which ought to be understood to be the same), Buddhism is ultimately "against" feeling of any kind, and thus the goal of Buddhism is to suppress / terminate feeling.

Is that a fair summary of that aspect? To repeat i don't want to bog you down in Buddhism, but identifying the goal of Epicurus precisely is probably advanced by making clear what it is "not" and distinguishing it from other goals.

Post by “Hiram” of December 19, 2018 at 9:45 AM

Yes, after Siddhartha Buddha attained nirvana under the Bodhi tree, he touched the ground (a symbol of his vow to benefit innumerable sentient beings on Earth, rather than keep his insights to himself).

He then went to the Benares deer park, and there he started preaching his first enlightened sermon, which was on the four noble truths to his first disciples.

As for feeling / desires, yes the doctrine is more ascetic than EP and there's no hierarchy of desires (natural and necessary), instead it seems that all desire is dissatisfaction / dukkha.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2018 at 3:56 PM

Buddhism isn't against feeling by any means and the goal isn't to suppress or terminate feeling. The goal is enlightenment/nirvana, which involves a sense of connectedness/oneness with all beings and a sense of joy.

Desire, however, is to be understood and ended. A nuance of eliminating desire is that if you understand yourself as being one with all things, then there is nothing to desire. So the Buddhist approach to desire is quite different from that of EP, where it is (to my current understanding) worked with as a means to focus the pursuit of pleasure on the life-enhancing varieties.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2018 at 6:11 PM

Godfrey so what role, if any, does "pleasure" have in Buddhism to your understanding?

(I'm doing what I said I would not do, to drag you further into this discussion, so I will give it a rest after this.)

Post by “Godfrey” of December 19, 2018 at 7:02 PM

It would only be an incidental byproduct of other activities and not something to be sought after or desired (since one should be getting rid of desire). For example meditation, enlightenment, or helping an old lady across the street may bring pleasure. But they are to be done because they are what needs to be done. If they bring pleasure, there's no reason not to enjoy that pleasure but it shouldn't be dwelled upon and the activities aren't done for the reward of the pleasure.

That sounds pretty dry. There's plenty of pleasure in B, but theoretically it's achieved under these conditions.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2018 at 7:51 PM

End of inquisition. (For the moment) Anyone else who wants to continue is welcome but I will stand aside .....