The Buddha’s Temperance: A Comparison of Epicureanism and the Dhamma

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Introduction:
This present article argues against three comparisons of Epicurean thought and Buddhism: that Epicurean Atomism and the Buddha’s teachings of physical reality are similar, that Epicurus’ insistence that one should not fear consequence after death and the absence of god in the Buddha’s teachings are similar, and that Epicurean minimalism and the minimalism taught by the Buddha are similar.

Epicurean Thought and the Dhamma
Epicurus was a Greek philosopher born around 340 BCE, which is approximately 40 years after Aristotle was born. The scope of influence Epicurus has had on history, and today’s modern world, cannot be overstated. While Epicurus did not say gods don’t exist, he did tell his students to not be afraid, and to live life to its fullest without worry of the divine, for, after death there will be no punishment. Keeping this in mind, Epicurus was one of the first hedonistic philosophers declaring that one should enjoy the pleasures of life while they can. However, simply saying that he advocated the fulfillment of pleasure in the present moment does not adequately convey his teachings; he was actually a strong proponent of a simple life and attaining pleasure through an uncomplicated lifestyle while minimizing pain, causing many people to refer to him as an ascetic.

Epicurus also developed an elaborate physical theory based on the atomist philosophy of Democritus, where the physical world is made up of small pieces of matter that cannot be broken down any further known as “atoms”. This physical theory is remarkably ahead of its time, accounting for such natural phenomena as gravity and the notion that something cannot be created from nothing. Another interesting aspect of his philosophy is his “films” explanation of perception. He suggested that our perception of the outside world is due to thin “films” of the objects coming “into” our senses. He then concluded that this is how we get thoughts and ideas - a concept would be a thin “film” of an object entering our mind. He also constructed the first social theory argument, as far as I know, wherein a society was formed through an agreement to neither harm nor be harmed.

Epicurean theory, though it talks of simplistic living and simple atoms, is not a simple philosophy; the physical aspects along with his description of the empirical senses alone is quite sophisticated, and would require a person to devote one’s life to it in order to master. That being said, I have some issues with a tendency amongst some modern Buddhists that compares Epicurean thought to Buddhism.

The three main arguments I will address that support a similarity between Epicurean thought and Buddhism are these: first, that the materialistic perception of

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4 Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, contained in Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book X.
Epicurus and his insistence that something cannot come from nothing is related to the physical world as taught by the Buddha. Second, that his suggestion to not fear the gods or punishment after death is similar to the Buddhist idea of a reality existing without a creator god, and third, that the minimalist teachings of Epicurus are comparable to those of the Buddha. I will address these three points and give explanations as to why I think the comparisons are hasty, at best.

**Atomism**

First, the extraordinarily elaborate physical theory of Epicurus being similar to the Buddha’s teaching of the *Dhamma* in regards to physical reality may be misguided. John C. Plott and James Michael Dolin explain in “Global History of Philosophy” why they think Epicurean Atomism has similar qualities with Buddhism:

> Early Buddhism should, therefore, be regarded not as a system of metaphysics but as a verifiable hypotheses discovered by the Buddha in the course of his ‘trial and error’ experimentation with different ways of life. We agree therefore with Dr. Warder when he says that ‘the Buddha legend synthesizes the quest for truth on scientific principles regardless of past traditions: observation of life, experiments in asceticism (under various teachers and independently), final deduction of a way to end suffering’. We also agree with him when comparing Buddhist with Epicureanism, he says 'both attacked old superstitions and sought knowledge of nature, knowledge which we may characterize as scientific on account of its bases of perception.'

The point Epicurus was making is that the world is conditioned by material “atoms,” and while he believed that the physical world was not completely determined - owing to the fact that atoms can “swerve” from a determined course - the whole of physical reality can be understood by these physical conditions. Physical conditions which are empirically observable and completely in the realm of the material world.

The Buddha’s explanation of conditions within physical reality, particularly Dependent Origination, really has very little to do with the Epicurean explanation - the two main firing points within the round of conditions of the Dependent Origination are ignorance and desire. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains these two firing points, the two roots of continuation being ignorance and desire (craving), of Dependent Origination in “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”:

> Ignorance and craving should be understood as the two roots. Ignorance (avijjā) is called “the root (mūla) from the past extending into the present,” which reaches its culmination in feeling (vedanā). Craving (taṇhā) is called “the root from the present extending into the future,” which reaches its culmination in decay-and-death (jarāmaraṇa).

Neither of these are empirically apparent in the material world.

Buddhism, though it has a surprising amount of emphasis on empiricism and reason for a religion, is structured around a framework of absolute truth that any believer must hold in order for many teachings to make sense. For brevity, I will use only one example of these absolute truths: rebirth, to explain my position.

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If one does not hold that reincarnation is true, then the teachings of kamma and rebirth don’t make sense and are at best a myth; however, the teachings are very clear that this relation of conditions between action and rebirth is not only essential to the understanding of existence, but an actuality. If one does not hold that reincarnation is true, then the idea of Nibbana is nonsense. There can be no state of non-rebirth if there is no state of rebirth. If one does not hold that rebirth is true then the idea of past lives is ridiculous. The results of kamma from past lives being experienced in this present life are dependent upon there being past lives. There are many more examples of these absolute truths the Buddha builds upon in his teachings, but I will leave those for future discussion.

This is where people may say that rebirth can be tested by science, if not now, then in the future, therein allowing reincarnation to be empirically evident, as evidence: “which we may characterize as scientific.” My response to this possible misinterpretation follows.

Modern science is a field of study that uses hypothesis and testing, a study that leads to a belief in how the world functions and exists based on induction. One critical element of science is that it must always assume that it may be wrong, no matter how insignificant the chances are; science must be prepared to be proven false. That means two things: what is tested by science must be falsifiable and the result of the test must never be absolute.\(^\text{12}\)

Karl Popper in “Conjecture and Refutations” discusses why modern science must deal with theories that are falsifiable:

> The refutability or falsifiability of a theoretical system should be taken as the criterion of its demarcation. According to this view, which I till uphold, a system is to be considered as scientific only if it makes assertions which may clash with observations; and a system is, in fact, tested by attempts to produce such clashes, that is to say by attempts to refute it, Thus testability is the same as refutability, and can therefore likewise be taken as a criterion of demarcation.\(^\text{13}\)

Continuing with reincarnation as the example: rebirth is not presented as a phenomenon that is falsifiable in the teachings of the Buddha. In the Payasi Sutta, Prince Payasi tries to prove the existence of rebirth through hypothesis and testing:

> ‘Reverend Kassapa, I have friends, colleagues and blood-relations who take life, take what is not given, commit sexual offences, tell lies, use abusive, harsh and frivolous speech, who are greedy, full of hatred and hold wrong views. Eventually they become ill, suffering, and diseased. And when I am sure they will not recover, I go to them and say: “There are certain ascetics and Brahmins who declare and believe that those who take life, ...hold wrong views will, after death at the breakingup of the body, be born in a state of woe, an evil place, a place of punishment, in hell. Now you have done these things, and if what these ascetics and Brahmins say is true, that is where you will go. Now if, after death, you go to a state of woe, ... come to me and declare that there is another world, there are spontaneously born beings, there is fruit and result of good and evil deeds. You, gentlemen, are trustworthy and dependable, and what you have seen shall be as if I had seen it myself, so it will be.” But although they agreed, they neither came to tell me, nor did they send a messenger. That, Reverend Kassapa, is my reason for maintaining: “There is no other world, there are no spontaneously born beings, there is no fruit or result of good or evil deeds.”’\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, (Routlage, 1963) p. 345.

\(^{13}\) Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, (Routlage, 1963) p. 345.

Kassapa’s answer:

As to that, Prince, I will question you about it, and you shall reply as you think fit. What do you think, Prince? Suppose they were to bring a thief before you caught in the act, and say: “This man, Lord, is a thief caught in the act. Sentence him to any punishment you wish.” And you might say: “Bind this man’s arms tightly behind him with a strong rope, shave his head closely, and lead him to the rough sound of a drum through the streets and squares and out through the southern gate, and there cut off his head.” And they, saying: “Very good” in assent, might ... lead him out through the southern gate, and there cut off his head.” Now if that thief were to say to the executioners: “Good executioners, in this town or village I have friends, colleagues and blood-relations, please wait till I have visited them”, would he get his wish? Or would they just cut off that talkative thief’s head? ‘He would not get his wish, Reverend Kassapa. They would just cut off his head. So, Prince, this thief could not get even his human executioners to wait while he visited his friends and relations. So how can your friends, colleagues and blood-relations who have committed all these misdeeds, having died and gone to a place of woe, prevail upon the warders of hell, saying: “Good warders of hell, please wait while we report to Prince Payasi that there is another world, there are spontaneously born beings, and there is fruit and result of good and evil deeds”? Therefore, Prince, admit that there is another world.”

Kassapa explains that the belief in another world, and rebirth itself, is unfalsifiable, that there exists another world whether or not you test it. These worlds are, in fact, absolute, considering that even if a test disagrees with the actuality of another world, this has no bearing on whether the other world exists or not. This belief is unfalsifiable, and therefore, not a theory that can be tested by science, it does not meet Popper’s criteria to be considered scientific.

If science were to somehow test rebirth in the future, from a Buddhist perspective, then the premise of the test would be something that exists absolutely and could not be falsified. Another important point is that things that may or may not be tested by science in the future cannot be used in an argument as if those things are scientific.

Secondly, let’s say reincarnation happened to be tested by unbiased scientists and the results were favorable that rebirth is an actuality of existence. These findings would be unusable by Buddhists for proof of their faith in rebirth as that faith would treat these findings as absolute truth. Remember, any findings made by science must allow for the chance to be disproven. Another correlation some see is that the atomism that constructs the matrix of the physical world contains no transcendental force in neither the Epicurean system nor that of the Buddha’s. Paul Muljadi suggests a similarity with Buddhism and Epicureanism in that there is no divine intervention in “Epicureanism: The Complete Guide”:

Parallels may be drawn to Buddhism [with Epicureanism], which similarly emphasizes a lack of divine interference as aspects of its atomism.15

The Buddha explained that the cycle of experience continues to exist through kammatic formations from one life to the next. Our experience of the physical world is

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thus dependent on the past kamma we have acquired, this past kamma being a force that is not of the material world. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains this process in his translation of the Ahidhammattha Sangaha:

- Ignorance (avijjā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna) belong to the round of defilements (kilesa);
- One part of existence (bhava) known as “karmic existence” and “karmic formations” (saṁkhārā) belong to the round of kamma;
- One part of existence known as “rebirth existence” (upapattibhava) and the rest belong to the round of results (vipāka).

The three rounds exhibit the cyclic pattern of existence in saṁsāra. The most fundamental round is the round of defilements. Blinded by ignorance and driven by craving, a person engages in various unwholesome and mundane wholesome activities. Thus, the round of defilements gives rise to the round of kamma. When this kamma matures, it ripens in the resultants, and, thus, the round of kamma gives rise to the round of resultants. In response to these resultants — the pleasant and painful fruits (phala) of his own actions... the person still immersed in ignorance is overcome by craving to enjoy more pleasant experiences, clings to those he already has, and tries to avoid the painful ones. Thus, the round of resultants generates another round of defilements. In this way, the threefold round turns incessantly until the ignorance at its base is removed by the wisdom of insight (vipassanā) and the supramundane paths. These kammatic functions are certainly transcendental, if not divine, and add a force of nature that conditions physical reality that is neither apparent nor included in the material world.

**Fear**

There is some belief that Epicurus’ insistence to not fear the gods nor worry about punishment after death17 is similar to the notion that there is no creator god within the belief structure of Buddhism. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, in “The Spread of Buddhism”:

> With Epicureanism, for example, Buddhism has in common its stress on spreading to all mankind a salutary message based on rational insight, which must lead to “absence of fear”, in particular of the supernatural.18

*Ottapa*, Pāli for fear, is a fundamental quality in the teachings of the Buddha. It is, in actuality, a wholesome factor in one’s own decision making to fear the results of one’s actions. *Ottapa* is the fear of being unwholesome and it stems from a fear of doing wrong in the present moment because of the results one would face from one’s own kamma in this life and, to be sure, the next life, after death. The Buddha explains fear in the *MahaAssapura Sutta*:

> And what, bhikkhus, are the things that make one a recluse, that make one a brahmin? Bhikkhus, you should train thus: We will be possessed of shame and fear of wrongdoing. Now, bhikkhus, you may think thus: We are possessed of shame and fear of wrongdoing. That much is enough, that much has been done, the goal

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17 Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, contained in Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book X.
of recluseship has been reached, there is nothing more for us to do; and you may rest content with that much. Bhikkhus, I inform you, I declare to you: You who seek the recluses status, do not fall short of the goal of recluseship while there is more to be done.\textsuperscript{19}

While Buddhism does not have a creator god, this does not imply that it is similar with Epicurus’ belief that one should not fear consequence of the supernatural or that there is no punishment after death. From the \textit{Saleyaka Sutta}:

Householders, it is by reason of conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of unrighteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. It is by reason of conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of righteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.\textsuperscript{20}

The teachings of the Buddha are hinged on repercussions of past actions after death; I don’t see how this comparison is valid.

\textbf{Minimalism}

The idea that Epicurean minimalism is similar to the minimalism taught by the Buddha is explained by Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricoeur in “What Makes Us Think?: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics”:

Epicurus establishes a hierarchy of desires: desires that are natural and necessary - the drink that quenches thirst, the feeling of pain and so on: and desires that are neither natural nor necessary - honors, glory, riches, women (or men), which must be eliminated. Pleasure is characterized by the absence of bodily suffering and troubles of the soul. To the extent that survival has been assured, the individual will tend to lessen his pain and suffering. Here one meets the four noble truths of Buddha’s teachings, which amount to an authentic physiology concerning the universality of pain, its origin, its suppression, and the eightfold path that leads to this suppression.\textsuperscript{21}

While these two teachings look similar on the surface, they are quite different from the perception of intention (a quality the Buddha held as foundational). Epicurus was interested in the comfort of the senses. He did not advocate indulgence because that would eventually lead to discomfort. Epicurus thought of desire in three ways: natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and empty. It was through minimizing the unnecessary and completely eradicating the empty that one found comfort in the senses. This is important as he wanted a life of pleasure via the senses, one of joy and ease.\textsuperscript{22} This is a drastic difference from the asceticism taught in the \textit{Nikāyas}. The minimalist path proclaimed by the Buddha was a means to detach oneself from the senses, not to find a

comfortable state within them. In “A Comparative History of World Philosophy: From the Upanishads to Kant”, Ben-Ami Scharfstein explains another position that sees similarities with the minimalism of Epicurus and that of the Buddha:

Although Buddhism theoretically rejects pleasure and Epicureanism seeks it, both define the desired state as one of calm, safety, and absence of pain.23

This comparison of a desired state that both Buddhism and Epicureanism teach may be another misinterpretation. The Buddha did not seem to advocate the desire, or craving, of a calm, safe and pain-free state in this existence, as Epicurus did. Instead, the Buddha advocated a want to be released from a state of rebirth and what we would call life, while Epicurus wanted comfort within that life. The Buddha explains that suffering comes from desire (craving) in the Majjhima Nikāya:

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to rebirth, bound up with pleasure and lust, finding fresh delight now here, now there: that is to say sensual craving, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. And where does this craving arise and establish itself? Wherever in the world there is anything agreeable and pleasurable, there this craving arises and establishes itself.24

The Buddha goes on to say that the extinction of suffering comes with the extinction of desire (craving):

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering? It is the complete fading-away and extinction of this craving, its forsaking and abandonment, liberation from it, detachment from it. And how does this craving come to be abandoned, how does its cessation come about? Wherever in the world there is anything agreeable and pleasurable, there its cessation comes about.25

According to the Buddha, desire itself leads to suffering. One’s desire to find this state of comfort that Epicurus advocated would only lead to the continuation of suffering in the eyes of the Buddha. While both lived, and taught a minimalist life, the intention behind this life was much different. The Buddha explains to Upali the difference between an act with intention and one without:

What do you think, householder? Here some Nigantha might be restrained with four checks - curbed by all curbs, clamped by all curbs, cleansed by all curbs, and claimed by all curbs - and yet when going forward and returning he brings about the destruction of many small living beings. What result does the Nigantha Nataputta describe for him?26

Consider when one is walking with the intention to cross a path and steps on a beetle unaware, compared to when one steps on a beetle with the intention to step on that beetle. While both acts seem similar, they are quite different according to the Buddha. This

was one quality of action and livelihood the Buddha was very clear about: intention. So, while Epicurus leads a minimalist life with the intention to attain a state of comfort within the senses, the Buddha leads a minimalist life with the intention to detach himself from the senses. While on the surface these two may seem to share certain qualities, the teachings are rather far apart, and these similarities may not be so similar after all.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that some aspects of Epicurean thought are not compatible with the Buddha’s teachings and have presented comparisons that I disagree with, namely: that Epicurean Atomism is similar to the Buddha’s explanations of physical reality, that Epicurus’ position to not fear consequence after death is in agreement with the Buddha’s teachings, and finally, that Epicurean minimalism is related to that of the Buddha’s.

These arguments being: Epicurean Atomism is founded upon no transcendent forces, while the physical reality of the Buddha is founded upon forces that transcend material reality. Epicurean thought posits the absence of punishment after death and that fear of such punishment is not necessary, while the Buddha’s teachings hinge on the consequence of action and rebirth, and that the fear of such consequence, ottopa, is a wholesome and necessary state. Epicurean minimalism is founded upon the search for the most comfort in life, having a simple lifestyle is how one experiences the most overall pleasure, while the minimalism that the Buddha taught is founded upon the extinction of desire and the extinction of one’s dependency on pleasure and comfort.

This paper does not argue that comparisons may not be drawn from Epicureanism and the teachings of the Buddha, however, such comparisons should be done with care and respect for the traditions of the teachings; respect for not only the teachings of the Buddha, but also those of Epicurus. Possible misinterpretations that may lead to faulty comparison hurt not only the tradition of Buddhism, but also Epicureanism.
References


