



How Did the Buddha Foster Critical Thinking and Thereby Contribute to Human Development?

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Abstract

This research paper is focuses on the Buddha as philosopher comparing and contrasting him with Socrates. These two important figures could be studied by many points of view. Buddha and Socrates developed their ideas of critical thinking and practiced them, thereby contributing to human development. The way in which Buddha spoke of his teaching is pragmatic, in saying that he teaches only suffering and its elimination. However, a more expansive view is afforded when one views Buddhism as one of the schools of Indian Philosophy. Viewing the panorama of Materialists, Skeptics, Ajivikas, Jains, Fatalists, Takki, and Traditional Brahmins, it becomes evident why in the *Sutta Pitaka* so much of the Buddha's effort is directed at stating, clarifying, and refuting these alternative philosophical views.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Human Development, Buddhism, Socratics.

Introduction

Buddhism is fundamentally the practice of meditation, and those who study Buddhism without meditating will not get the benefit that Buddhism was designed to provide. Buddhism is often described by my monastic friends and serious lay practitioners as a way of life rather than as a philosophy or a religion. This is true, and yet it is an incomplete picture of a complex world-wide and multi-disciplinary phenomenon. It is helpful to remind ourselves that Buddhism is studied in universities from many disciplinary perspectives, and is represented in departments of religion, philosophy, art history, social sciences (especially psychology and anthropology), social work, medicine, and increasingly in the natural sciences such as cognitive neuroscience where brain states and meditation practices are studied. Buddhism cannot be completely understood by any one of these kinds of approaches in isolation from the others, nor can Buddhism be rightly reduced to mindfulness without cultural content. Buddhism is truly an interdisciplinary phenomenon.

In this paper I will focus on Buddha as philosopher comparing and contrasting him with Socrates. These two important figures could be studied by many points of view. In my view, Buddha and Socrates developed their ideas of critical thinking and practiced them, thereby contributing to human development. The way in which Buddha spoke of his teaching is pragmatic, in saying that he teaches only suffering and its elimination. However, a more expansive view is afforded when one views Buddhism as one of the schools of Indian Philosophy. Viewing the panorama of Materialists, Skeptics, Ajivikas, Jains, Fatalists, Takki, and Traditional Brahmins, it becomes evident why in the *Sutta Pitaka* so much of the Buddha's effort is directed at stating, clarifying, and refuting these alternative philosophical views.

Socrates thought that the unreflective life was not worth living. Buddha thought that blind faith was not enough and that one must inquire. In the paper to be presented I will argue toward the conclusion below (identical with my thesis). That is, the Buddha fostered critical thinking and thereby contributed to human development; specifically, I will argue that Buddha and Socrates were philosophers who used critical thinking toward human development; their ideas on critical thinking toward human development were similar but not identical; and they both had ways of thinking and acting that included logical consistency, saying what they knew and saw themselves, and seeking eternal truth rather than examples. [by (3), (6), and (10)]

Terminology

Contributions made by Buddhism to critical thinking and thereby to human development are numerous. To begin, consider definitions of “critical thinking” and “human development”.

Critical Thinking, the Oxford English Dictionaries online report, “The objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement.” And an example is used “*Central to teaching children critical thinking is getting them to ask questions.*”

Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/criticalthinking?ref=drivervlayer.com> accessed May 16, 2018 at 8:25 p.m. Thailand time.

The United Nations Development Program understands human development as “advancing human flourishing”. Immediately one can see that there are a variety of ways in which flourishing can happen. “Dimensions of Human Development” are divisible into “directly enhancing human abilities” which includes long and healthy life, **knowledge**, and decent standard of living; and “creating conditions for human development” which includes **participation in political and community life**, environmental sustainability, human security and rights, and gender equality.

In this paper I am interested in human development in the development of knowledge and wisdom as well as participation in community life.

Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/what-human-development>

Putting these two concepts together one can see that knowledge and wisdom and also participation in community life are aspects of human development that Buddha and Socrates facilitated.

Main Argument

The argument below consists of the numbered premises of my argument and the conclusion that logically follows from the premises. The argument provides the outline of my paper presentation as it will be presented at the conference in the Power Point presentation.

- (1) Critical thinking in Buddha and Socrates means asking questions to clarify of concepts and critically analyzing arguments with a view to discover what is true.

- (2) Human development in Buddha and Socrates means discovering knowledge and participating in community life.
- (3) As a corollary, Buddha and Socrates used critical thinking toward human development. [by (1) and (2)]
- (4) Buddha's ideas on human development were different in some ways to Socrates' ideas on human development.
- (5) Buddha's ideas on critical thinking were similar in some ways to Socrates' ideas on critical thinking.
- (6) As a corollary, Buddha's ideas on both human development and critical thinking can be compared and contrasted since they are similar but not identical. [by (4) and (5)]
- (7) Buddha and Socrates both showed ways of thought and action that included logical consistency in speech and adherence to a rule for debate excluding self-contradiction.
- (8) Buddha showed a way of thought and action that included causal reasoning, saying only what he knew and saw himself, with the outcome of fostering critical thinking.
- (9) Socrates showed ways of thought and action that included requiring causal reasoning, saying what he knew and saw himself, and seeking eternally true definitions rather than just focusing on examples, with the outcome of fostering critical thinking.
- (10) As a corollary, Buddha and Socrates both showed ways of thought and action that included logical consistency, causal reasoning, saying what they knew and saw themselves, and seeking eternal truth rather than just focusing on examples.
[By (7), (8), and (9)]

Therefore, Buddha and Socrates were philosophers who used critical thinking toward human development; their ideas on critical thinking toward human development were similar but not identical; and they both showed ways of thinking and acting that included logical consistency, causal reasoning, saying what they knew and saw themselves, and seeking eternal truth rather than just focusing on examples. [by (3), (6), and (10)]

Postscript

It is evident that both Buddha and Socrates were important philosophers in their respective cultures. However, there is an important difference which should be noticed in closing.

As a result of fostering critical thinking, Buddha contributed to the human development of his disciples and the laypeople who followed his message in Asia and the West. Buddha said “yes” to life, and taught nonviolence to self and others. Socrates, on the other hand, chose to do violence to himself and end his life by drinking the hemlock rather than be banished from Athens. Since Socrates’ death was so very tragic, one may surmise that something is lacking in his method in comparison with Buddha’s achievement of final enlightenment or *parinibbana* at death.

I submit that what is lacking in Socrates is meditation that, together with reasoning, would have made him more tranquil and insightful in front of the judges who accused him. Perhaps he would have been able to find a middle way by admitting he could be a better man and so paying a token fine he was encouraged to decide upon himself, instead of making fun of this request and speaking of how brave he was in battle and how patriotic he was as an Athenian democrat. Instead of speaking truth to power without a theory of his own, Socrates could have lived longer constructed his own best theory of universals (like justice, courage, piety, and friendship), a task that had to be taken up by his student Plato. His student, Plato, covers for Socrates in the Plato’s book, *The Apology*, by emphasizing Socrates’ high minded pursuit of his vocation to philosophy and his adherence to practical ethics until the bitter end. Socrates however leaves us with no published work and on his deathbed he simply asks friends to pay his debt to Asclepius and to punish his sons if they do not care for virtue. These are things the importance of which ordinary people without the benefit of Socrates’ penetrating intellect could discover for themselves.

Critical thinking in human development for Socrates meant getting things defined by their essential properties; for Buddha, asking questions to arrive at truth or *dhamma* in the process of arriving at enlightenment or *nibbana*. Some of their goals were different. Socrates aimed at self knowledge which he thought resulted from intellectual inquiry into the meanings of common abstract nouns of ethical import, such as piety to the gods, justice, and friendship. Buddha aimed at the self transformation that tranquility and insight brings. His eureka experience of enlightenment in this very life came through understanding causality. Buddha advocated mental cultivation (*bhavana*) and a path summarized by morality, concentration

and wisdom (*sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*). In the final analysis (as reported by his student Plato in his *Dialogues* or *Collected Works*), the philosophical conversations between Socrates and his famous interlocutors leave only a series of embarrassed people and unanswered questions. The philosophy of the Buddha, by contrast, leaves an enduring legacy to humankind which contributes to human development.

References

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