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# Critical Thinking and Buddhism

Ruihan Zhang

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [rzhang1@iwu.edu](mailto:rzhang1@iwu.edu)

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## **Critical Thinking and Buddhism**

**by Ruihan (Suzanne) Zhang**

Many people believe that religions and science cannot coexist logically because science is evidence-based, whereas religion belief is supported by spiritual, personal, or subjective experiences. When a scientific theory is presented, many immediately ask for proof or hard evidence. When people speak of religious revelations, many ask what it was and how it was experienced. Hence, people make connections between science and critical thinking much more readily than they make such connections between religion and critical thinking. Critical thinking is conventionally related more to the scientific method, logic, deductive/inductive reasoning, etc. However, a sincere Buddhist, born into a Buddhist family, and who attended middle school and high school in a Buddhist monastery, would readily recognize many similarities between Buddhism and critical thinking. Many Buddhist ideas are applicable and helpful to critical thinking and vice versa. Due to the many parallels between them, a distinct relationship between Buddhism and critical thinking exists, and contrary to conventional belief, using them in combination can take one's thinking to a much higher level.

### **Ethics Shared by Critical Thinking and Buddhism**

One foundational parallel between critical thinking and Buddhism is ethical reasoning. Critical thinking is important because it leads people to be fair-minded and take right actions. Paul and Elder (2006) write that one of the preliminary stages of critical thinking development is to put oneself in the shoes of others and nurture empathy. This implies that the ability to think critically requires one to be ethical and maintain moral integrity. The simple definition of moral is: do no

harm to others. However, as Paul and Elder (2006) note, “good-heartedness is not enough” (p. 340); one must act morally as well.

In Buddhism, there are five basic precepts that serve as a guide for life: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no taking intoxicants, and no lying (Epstein, 2012). These precepts guide Buddhists toward moral behavior, and they run parallel with critical thinking and ethical decision-making. The five precepts may sound simple, but there are many underlying morals and implications tied to them. This idea can be better understood by analyzing one of the five-precepts.

For example, no killing is the first precept of the five because Buddhists respect all sentient beings in the world. “Respect for life includes the recognition that all sentient beings have intrinsic value apart from any instrumental value they may have. That means we should not see other beings, or ourselves, as objects, as mere tools for the gratification of desires” (Epstein, 2012, p. 55). Similarly, Paul and Elder (2006) put the first ethical injunction as: “Strive to act so as to reduce or end the unnecessary pain and suffering of innocent persons and creatures” (p. 342). Of course, most people wish for a good life, yet people are often too egocentric to recognize that the wish applies concurrently to other people and creatures as well. Hence, the fundamental ethical principle is to recognize the importance of life, and thus not cause suffering.

On the other hand, people must recognize the fact that religions, in our example, Buddhism, are not inherently ethical. Some religious practices are not in accordance with ethics because when religious adherents make a commitment to religious beliefs it, “may prevent them from recognizing that ethical concepts take priority over religious beliefs when they conflict” (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 347). Recognizing this problem, many Buddhist schools sets their mottos as the eight traditional Chinese virtues: kindness, filial piety, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, citizenship, integrity, and humility (“Instilling Goodness and Developing Virtue School Core

Virtues”, n.d.). These ethical principles aid those in difficult situations to choose the right actions to take. Of course, critical thinking is essential to this process because having the principles alone is not enough; people must be able to judge how to apply them morally.

### **Compassion and Critical Thinking**

A true Buddhist mind employs critical thinking at all times. Compassion and selflessness are important aspects of Buddhism. Critical thinking is crucial to the process of achieving compassion. As has been established, Buddhism asks Buddhists to be compassionate to all living beings. Many Buddhists are vegetarians because they do not want to hurt animals, and they think that they do not have the right to kill others for food. However, to many people, eating meat is normal; they take animals for granted. To these people, animals are not living beings with souls; rather, they are non-living objects, or at least objects not worthy of compassion or respect. Research suggests that many humans are egocentric beings who are innately selfish (Paul & Elder, 2006). Humans are too often committed to things that serve their own good, which can sometimes be harmless, but other times, self-benefitting may come alongside the suffering of others, regardless of whether it be the suffering of animals, or other human beings.

Such behaviors may make human beings sound like hopeless, horrible creatures, but people do have the ability to change themselves, and critical thinking is key to attaining compassion. An essential component of critical thinking is intellectual empathy, which is the act of “putting oneself imaginatively in the place of others on a routine basis” (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 11). Compassion is developed in the process of experiencing intellectual empathy. In the case of becoming a vegetarian, many Buddhists contemplate how they would feel if they were to be eaten by others (Mahoney, 2017), thus making the prospect seem more achievable. However, there is more to compassion than sympathy and empathy.

In Buddhism, Bodhisattvas are the true representation of compassion. The shared ultimate goal of all Buddhists is to leave the cycle of birth and death (also known as reincarnation), to become Buddhas, or enlightened beings (Oxford Dictionary, p. 29). Nonetheless, many bodhisattvas make the vow that they will only attain Buddhahood when all others are able to as well. In the *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva*, Earth Store Bodhisattva makes a vow saying that “only when the beings who are undergoing retribution for their offenses have all become Buddhas will I myself accomplish the right enlightenment” (*The Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva*). This act of selflessness seems very farfetched for non-Buddhists, but with practice, it is achievable. Paul and Elder (2006) note that to think critically, one must put down one’s ego and bring other people before themselves and their benefits. This act is a somewhat less extreme version of the vows of the Bodhisattvas.

Other than giving and sacrificing, compassion and selflessness can also be expressed as the opposite of “an eye for an eye.” The Buddha taught his disciples to treat others with kindness and compassion, even their enemies or others who mistreated them (Ghani-ur-Rahman, 2012). Relating how a more critical approach to encouraging individuals to be mindful of mistreatment, Freire (1970) discusses how critical thinking and hope are closely connected in the process of overcoming oppression. He describes circumstance where the oppressors oppress to the extent that the oppressed eventually overthrow the oppressors. However, Freire warned that after the oppressed overcome the oppression, they must not treat the former oppressors in a vengeful manner, but instead, love and forgiveness are the key to on-going comity. Otherwise, the oppressed and the oppressors would simply change their roles in a cycle, and there will always be people who are oppressed (Freire). Therefore, as both the Buddha and Freire understood and taught, true liberation is rooted in critical thinking, which enables compassion. Buddhism and critical thinking

aid each other in spreading this message to allow humans to think at a higher level and make the world a better place.

### **Happiness Found Through Critical Thinking and Buddhism**

Freire (1970) further speaks about objectivity and subjectivity. People tend to think that objectivity is the fair-minded point of view; however, Freire says that both views are necessary for the proper function of the world. In his argument relevant to the oppressors and the oppressed, the exploited must hold on to their subjective views to recognize the oppression under which they exist. An analogy that he makes is that if only objectivity exists, it would be like living in a world without people. Therefore, objectivity should not be considered alone; a subjective point of view is also important (Freire, 1970). This idea shows that the world is relative; humans are living in a world of comparisons. The relative nature of the world can be applied more generally using the important Buddhist concept of dualities.

In *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, the Sixth Buddhist Patriarch of China in the Tang Dynasty explained that people are accustomed to the dualities of the world. For example, people hold on to the existence and definition of good and evil, sweet and bitter, and happy and sad (*The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*). Hence, people make constant comparisons in the world, which guide them to make choices and take actions. This suggests that there must be oppressors for there to be the oppressed, and people must taste sugar in order to know bitterness. In the same way, critical thinking is not about having solely the objective point of view, but also the ability to see from different aspects.

When people see things from different perspectives and realize that they see the world through comparisons, they have attained the key to happiness: it is impossible to have a perfectly

easy life. Throughout one's life, people experience many ups and downs. Those bumps can sometimes be small and sometimes large. During those times, if one can change one's point of view, misfortunes might not seem so horrible. In fact, the misfortunes might even turn out to be helpful (Paul & Elder, 2006). An example for this is a bad test score. Many students would consider a bad score only as a detriment to their final grade. However, if the students take the perspective from the bad side to the good side, they may find that the bad score provides a good motivator for them to work harder in the future. In addition, if they receive a much better score next time, the bad score largely shows their improvement and presents them admirably as hardworking students.

The conditions of the world might be unchangeable, but the perception of those conditions is under each person's own control. The following quote is the first verse of a Buddhist evening chant: "Wishing now to understand, all the Buddhas of the three times, contemplate the Dharma realm, all things are created from mind" (*The Flower Adornment Sutra*). With sutras like this, Buddhists regularly call to mind their control of their perspective on the world, and this regular recognition and practice allows them to have a better grasp of the control. Similarly, with regular practice, critical thinking provides people the ability to gain the full control of their own mind instead of being influenced and manipulated by the exterior world. Since many Buddhists understand this concept as well, critical thinking becomes a more useful and powerful tool for them to manipulate and control their perception of the world, which brings about a more positive life style.

### **Detachment in Buddhism and Open-Mindedness in Critical Thinking**

Another important component of critical thinking is to be open-minded and fair-minded. A good practicing critical thinker is one who can consider opposing viewpoints (Paul and Elder, 2006). By listening to the other side's point, one might find the new ideas that are more plausible

than their own. This process requires scrutiny of the words that we use to communicate. Dewey (1910), notes that people are very much attached to the meaning of words. However, he stated that “the ideal of a system of scientific conceptions is to attain continuity, freedom, and flexibility of transition in passing from any fact and to any other” (p. 134). In other words, people must become aware that the meanings of words and everything in the world are not set in stone. Like words, the world is always changing; the only permanence is impermanence. True thinkers are the ones who can adapt well to the changes, whether in language or activity, for as the world evolves, their mindsets follow along.

Similarly, this non-attachment to words and their ideas is also asked of all Buddhists. In fact, one of the most important practices to Buddhists is detachment. In *On the Nature of Attention*, a Buddhist essay discussing the human mind, David R. Loy writes, “for Buddhism any linguistic identification is attachment, and clinging is not the spiritual solution but part of the problem” (2009, p. 18). People must not be attached to any things or their titles. When they look at things, they should see beyond their labels and into their nature. The Buddha teaches that suffering in the world comes from attachments. This is because when people are attached to things or the desire for things, it is painful if they are unattainable; it can be worrisome to own them because people are afraid of losing them; and it can be even more troublesome when the things are lost. This applies to both materialistic items *and* ideas. Most people are unwilling to give up their world views. A noted example of this was Galileo and his proposition about Heliocentrism. Both critical thinking and Buddhist philosophy promote the idea of being open to new ideas and new things. People who practice true critical thinking are willing to give up their own old ideas, and by adopting the idea of detachment that Buddhists follow, they can be detached from sufferings.

### **The Unfinishedness in Human Beings and Karma**



The world is an ever-changing place and humans are ever changing creatures, and thus comes the notion of the unfinishedness in human beings. Unfinishedness emphasizes the choice that people have in their lives, as all people are still forming their identities every time they make a decision. This idea is brought up by Paul Freire. In his book, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, his argument is that people have the “capacity to intervene, to compare, to judge, to decide, to choose, to desist makes them capable of acts of greatness, of dignity, and, at the same time, of the unthinkable in terms of indignity” (Freire, 2001, p. 53). People are the executors and decision-makers of society; they can obtain their desired result. For this reason, conditions can be made better, and the world can become a more suitable environment for everyone. Buddhism also advances the notion that humans do have complete control over their lives; instead there is the cause and effect of karma.

Karma is the law of Buddhism, which means the law of cause and effect; good deeds bring blessings and plant positive roots, whereas evil deeds bring negative retribution and corresponding punishments. One’s actions in the past determine what will happen today (Oxford Dictionary, p. 91). Although people cannot change what they have done in the past and the retributions which they must bear, people do have total control over their actions in the present, which decides their future. Recognizing unfinishedness emphasizes the importance of choice in a person’s life, and recognizing karma emphasizes the importance of making moral decisions to create the best possible future.

### **Chan Meditation and Critical Thinking**

Chan meditation is common among Buddhists. During meditation, cultivators seek a calm mind and try to focus single-mindedly. They observe the movements of their mind and watch their thoughts float by, yet do not dwell on them. Paul J. Griffiths described it in his book:

“It centers upon the practice of ecstatic technique, withdrawal from contact with the outside world, suppression of emotional and intellectual activity and is to be identified with what, in Buddhist terms, is called ‘the cultivation of tranquility’” (Griffiths, 1986, p. 16).

Chan meditation provides a mechanism to cope with Kasser’s view of the world – a system which “distracts us from what’s really good about life” (Hari, 2018). In *All the Stuff in the World*, Johann Hari (2018) writes about how the “junk values” in the world make people sick in the mind. There are many distractions in the world that hinder people from having a clear mind and the ability to think critically. At these times, meditation could also aid critical thinking because meditation allows people to separate themselves from the world. Meditation is now a part of popular culture, and many schools and work places practice as part their daily routine. Students who meditate perform better in exams, and meditation has been proven to improve concentration depth and concentration span (Sessa, 2007), which are also essential to critical thinking and difficult to master and practice routinely.

Moreover, not only does meditation help with critical thinking, critical thinking aids meditation as well, thus creating a positive feedback loop. In higher-level Chan, cultivators contemplate philosophical questions such as “Who am I?”, “Where am I from?”, “Where is my mind?”, and “If I am observing my mind, are the observer and the observed one person or two?” (Loy, 2009, p. 16). Although one may never come to answer these questions, intense critical thinking is required during the process. The cultivators must know from what inferences they draw and what implications they make in order to make the unconscious conscious (Paul and Elder, 2006). Buddhism and critical thinking complement each other in many ways that make each more approachable for their practitioners.

### **How Buddhism Goes Beyond Critical Thinking**

After discovering the parallels between Buddhist philosophy and critical thinking, some may come to value Buddhism *because of* critical thinking, and some may come to value critical thinking *because of* Buddhism. Nonetheless, Buddhism does not stop at the level of critical thinking, it takes people beyond. Critical thinking allows the world to become more manageable by humans and help people make it a better place. Suffering continues as long as attachments exist, whereas Buddhism transcends people to another level; critical thinking provides meaning to people's daily life, making one's life worthwhile to live, but souls are still confined by the worldly matters, whereas Buddhism provides meaning to the grand scheme – the end of suffering.

In Buddhism, there are as many worlds as there are of grains of sand, and this one that humans are currently in is called the Saha World, which is also known as the world of suffering (Oxford Dictionary, p. 154). The final goal of all Buddhists is to leave the cycle of birth and death, end suffering, and attain enlightenment. Although critical thinking allows people to become more rational and less driven by their emotions, it only alleviates some suffering instead of exterminating it. Buddhism can extinguish suffering because in Buddhism, the three poisons – greed, anger, delusion – and attachments are the source of suffering, and they can be overcome; whereas in terms of critical thinking, people are still innately selfish. The discrepancy takes place at the word “innately.” The three poisons are not innate; good and evil are not innate. In Buddhism, nothing is inherent, but everyone has a common Buddha nature, which means that everyone has the capability to become enlightened.

Buddhism implies that one can end personal suffering, and the method to achieve enlightenment is comprised of part two and three of this essay – the realization of world being an illusion created by comparison and getting rid of all labels and discrimination of all matter of the

world. Though critical thinking alone may allow one to reach the conclusion that the world is of dualities, it cannot allow one to become detached. For example, Freire emphasizes the importance that the oppressed see themselves as the oppressed in order to gain liberation (Freire, 1970). Since the attachment notion is there, suffering continues even if the oppressed could break free from oppression, more problems would surface later even if they have gained freedom for that moment. Buddhism asks for more. Although the Sixth Patriarch did say that the world is made of dualities, his message was that Dharma is non-dwelling and non-clinging (*The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*). In *The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra*, the Buddha says: "to practice the way is to have no remark of self, no remark of others, no remark of age, and no remark of living beings" (*The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra*). When the discrepancy of self and others no longer exists, one attains true selflessness; when the distinction of time and life ceases, one attains true enlightenment. Therefore, although better living conditions might be attained through critical thinking, authentic liberation can only be achieved with detachment and non-discrimination from Buddhism.

In conclusion, Buddhism and critical thinking have many complimentary similarities. Due to those similarities, knowing one allows a better understanding of another. Although Buddhism transcends critical thinking, it does not mean that people should immediately try to learn and practice Buddhism rather than critical thinking. The reason for this is various subjects are meant for different people. Even though Buddhism is seemingly "better" because it is of a higher level, when Buddhism is provided to people who are not able to apprehend it, it is like a kindergartener being given a college textbook. At these times, knowing how to think critically is the most effective tool of improvement. Especially for those who are younger, it may be easier to teach them to think

critically before they try to understand some of the more complex reasons for Buddhism. In the long run, any progress in learning to think more critically or adopt some of the teachings of Buddhism will help the world. As people find what kind of thinking resonates more strongly within them, they will be able to grow in their thinking capabilities and lead more purposeful and fulfilling lives.

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