

Spinoza and Buddhism: Philosophical Paths to Liberation Across East and West

Parallel insights between Spinoza and Buddhism reveals shared understanding of reality, selfhood, and liberation despite vastly different cultural origins

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Baruch Spinoza, the 17th-century Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish heritage, and Buddhism, an ancient Eastern philosophical tradition founded by Siddhartha Gautama, are from vastly different historical and cultural contexts. Yet, despite separation by centuries and continents, these philosophical systems reveal striking parallels in their understanding of reality, the self, and the path to human liberation. By examining these convergences and divergences, we gain deeper insight into universal philosophical concerns that transcend cultural boundaries.

Reality

Spinoza's metaphysics centers on a revolutionary conception of substance rejecting Jewish, Calvinist and Catholic doctrines. "Being is one" is the core of Spinoza's worldview. Nothing is separable from anything else. For Spinoza, only one substance exists—which he identifies as "God or nature"—and that's the entire universe. Everything else, including humans, animals, and inanimate objects, are merely "modes" or expressions of the singular, all-containing, substance of being. This perspective challenges the traditional Western separation between God and creation. It has more in common with the animism or pantheism found in the pre-Abrahamic West and in many non-Abrahamic societies. In Spinoza's view, the anthropomorphic, monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions was dead, or at least depersonalized and absorbed into material reality.

Buddhism similarly challenges conventional dualistic thinking through its doctrine of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*). This principle posits that all phenomena arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions—nothing exists independently. Both Spinoza and Buddha rejected the notion of independent existence. Buddhism's concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) further complements this view by demonstrating that nothing possesses inherent existence separate from its causal networks.

"Everything is connected" captures a metaphysical insight shared by other traditions as well. In India, Adi Shankara, a prominent philosopher of the 8th century CE, is renowned for establishing Advaita Vedanta, a school of Hindu philosophy emphasizing the non-dual nature of reality, where the individual soul (*Atman*) is ultimately one with the universal consciousness (*Brahman*). In China, *Dao De Jing* (attributed to Laozi, 6th century BCE) and the writings of Zhuangzi (4th century BCE) describe the *Dao* as the unnameable source and substance of all things. Everything flows from and returns to the *Dao* in an endless cycle of transformation. Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE) famously stated "everything flows" (*panta rhei*), and his river metaphor suggests that reality is a unified, ever-changing process rather than a collection of separate objects. Parmenides (c. 515-450 BCE) also argued that reality is a single, unchanging, eternal whole. Shinto and other animistic religions are based on recognizing our spiritual connections; we are "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, With rocks, and stones, and trees."⁽¹⁾

So Spinoza's view that the universe "unfolds" through cause and effect relationships is hardly unique. Nor, for that matter, is the Buddhist worldview that emphasizes the interconnected nature of all phenomena. All such philosophical systems reject the notion that entities possess essential, independent properties, instead understanding reality as a complex web of inter-penetrative relationships.

The Self

Perhaps the most profound parallel between Spinoza and Buddhism lies in their radical reconceptualization of the self. Spinoza challenges the Western notion of autonomous selfhood by demonstrating that humans, like all modes of substance, are determined by external causes: "In the mind, there is no absolute or free will, but the mind is

determined to will this or that by a cause, which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity."

This view finds a striking parallel in Buddhism's doctrine of anatta (no-self), which denies the existence of a permanent, independent self. Instead, what we experience as "self" is understood as a constantly changing process arising from interdependent causes and conditions. The article correctly identifies this parallel when noting that both Spinoza and Buddha "challenge the concept of an enduring, independent self."

Both perspectives view the conventional sense of selfhood as a kind of illusion. Spinoza suggests "Consciousness is only a dream with one's eyes open," that our sense of autonomy comes merely from observing our own mental processes without recognizing their pre-determined nature. Similarly, Buddhism considers the belief in an independent self to be a fundamental delusion that causes suffering.

Ethics and Liberation

With their metaphysical foundations established, both Spinoza and Buddhism offer ethical frameworks aimed at human liberation. For Spinoza, freedom doesn't mean uncaused action—which he considers impossible—but rather shifting from "passive" to "active" engagement with the world through understanding. Understanding is the key to freedom, and "freedom" is the ability to make conscious choices without being unthinkingly driven by impulse or emotion.

Spinoza's path to liberation involves developing "adequate ideas" about the causes of our experiences, particularly our emotions or what he calls "affects." By understanding the true causes of our passions, we can transform our relationship to them. This approach parallels Buddhist mindfulness practices, which involve clearly seeing the arising and passing of mental phenomena without being controlled by them.

Both traditions reject simplistic moral dualism in favor of a more nuanced understanding of beneficial and harmful states. For Spinoza, "good" refers to what increases our power of acting or "conatus,"⁽²⁾ while "evil" refers to what diminishes it. Similarly, Buddhism distinguishes between wholesome (kusala) and unwholesome (akusala) states based on whether they lead toward or away from liberation. Neither system imposes morality from outside but derives ethical guidelines from an understanding of how reality functions.

The text highlights how Spinoza's emphasis on reason resembles aspects of Buddhist practice: Instead of relying on capricious and unpredictable joys, like sensual pleasure, and fears or anger, ultimate freedom is grounded in reason. This rational approach aims at a "joyful serenity" reminiscent of the equanimity cultivated through Buddhist meditation.

Eternity

One of the most profound similarities between Spinoza and Buddhism is their shared emphasis on transcending limited perspectives. Spinoza encourages viewing reality "from the perspective of eternity," seeing particular events as part of a larger causal network. This broader viewpoint diminishes reactive emotions by distributing "cause" across the entire web of conditions rather than focusing blame narrowly.

This approach closely resembles the Buddhist practice of developing wisdom through seeing phenomena in their true nature—as impermanent, lacking inherent existence, and arising from causes and conditions. In both cases, liberation comes from transcending narrow self-interest and reactive emotions through a more comprehensive understanding of reality.

When Spinoza's perspective allows one to regard the passage of events with calm and composure, it echoes Buddhist equanimity (upekkhā), which arises from clearly seeing the impersonal, causal nature of phenomena. Both traditions cultivate detachment—not indifference, but as freedom from reactive patterns through understanding.

Community and Compassion

Despite their emphasis on individual liberation through understanding, neither Spinoza nor Buddhism promotes isolated self-improvement. Spinoza argues that rational individuals naturally seek community with others, as "there is nothing more useful to a man than a man." His ethics culminates in a vision of rational cooperation where "all together should seek for themselves the common advantage of all."

Similarly, Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*) alongside wisdom. The Buddha taught that liberation involves not only seeing things as they are but also developing skillful relations with others. Both traditions recognize that our interconnected nature makes community essential to human flourishing.

Divergences

Despite these remarkable parallels, important differences remain between Spinoza's philosophy and Buddhism. Spinoza's system is deterministic and rationalistic, emphasizing the power of intellectual understanding. While Buddhism acknowledges the importance of intellectual understanding, it places even greater emphasis on contemplative practices that directly transform consciousness through techniques like meditation.

Additionally, Spinoza's concept of God—while radically different from Abrahamic theism—maintains some continuity with Western philosophical discourse about divinity. Buddhism, in contrast, generally avoids metaphysical speculation about ultimate entities, focusing instead on the practical path to ending suffering.

The traditions use different methodologies: Spinoza uses logic to represent his views in a geometrical, mathematical pattern, reflecting his Western philosophical heritage. Buddhism, meanwhile, developed a rich psychological analysis of mind and detailed contemplative technologies for transforming consciousness, without giving primacy to logic.

Similar Truths?

The striking parallels between Spinoza's philosophy and Buddhism transcend vastly different historical and cultural contexts, suggesting these two systems uncovered similar truths about reality and human experience. Both challenge conventional views of self and world, replacing them with visions of interconnection, determination, and the possibility of liberation through understanding.

Spinoza wrote, "The road to these things that I have pointed out now seems very hard, but it can be found." Similarly, the Buddha described his teachings as going against the stream of common thinking but offered a systematic path to freedom. In both cases, liberation comes not from escaping the world but from seeing it clearly—from the perspective of eternity or with the eye of wisdom.

These philosophical traditions remind us that despite cultural and historical differences, human beings across time and space have encountered similar existential questions and sometimes arrived at remarkably similar insights. The dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy enriches both traditions and continues to offer valuable perspectives for contemporary philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality, consciousness, and human flourishing.

- (1) "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

- (2) Conatus, from the Latin verb "conari" (to attempt), is also translated as "endeavor," "striving," or "natural tendency". In Spinoza's philosophy, conatus is a fundamental principle: every entity, whether mind or matter, has an innate drive to continue existing and to increase its power or perfection