
BUDDHIST AND KANTIAN ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECTS¹

Rainier A. Ibane

Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The Buddha taught in the *Kalama Sutta* that one must abide by religious teachings only “when you yourselves know” the consequences of these doctrines in everyday life. This principle is reinforced and corroborated by stories that surround the life of the Buddha. Not unlike Kant’s essay, “What is Enlightenment?,” the *Kalama Sutta* also aims to liberate humans from distorted perceptions filtered by aristocratic social contexts and naïve world views. Kant’s revolutionary project, however, makes a distinction between the public and private uses of reason and applies the enlightenment doctrine to the former while allowing for temporary compromises in the latter. The Buddha, on the other hand, is not known to make such a distinction and emphasizes personal emancipation from the illusions of the transitory world. The Buddha’s awakening to the experience of suffering, however, goes further than Kant’s Enlightenment project to include non-human beings within the ambit of its objects of compassion and can therefore more adequately address ecological concerns.

Introduction

When the Kalamas asked the Buddha about preachers that praise their own teachings while reviling the doctrines of others, the Buddha replied:

“Kalamas, when you yourselves know: ‘These things are bad; these things are blameable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,’ abandon them “Kalamas, when you yourselves know: ‘These things are good; these things are not blameable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,’ enter on and abide in them.”²

For the Buddha, the criterion for both good and bad is not a transcendental principle from above nor a fundamental notion from below nor admonitions made by others from the left or the right; but a reflexive insight from within: “when you yourselves know”. Opinions, beliefs and other knowledge claims must be verified or falsified, by the knower himself or herself. It is not enough to hear about or merely restate knowledge claims. One must be able to confirm the truth of such claims.

The Buddha then asked the Kalamas, in a dialogical fashion, whether the absence or presence of greed, hate and delusions appear to benefit or harm humans. His listeners then realized, after being provided with examples, that the former leads to benefit while the latter leads to harm. The Buddha’s method of teaching was aimed at the enlightenment of his students by demonstrating the veracity or fallibility of knowledge claims in terms of their practical consequences to everyday life.

Buddha Stories

When a woman asked the Buddha to resurrect her dead child, the Buddha simply asked her to provide him a mustard seed from a household that has never experienced death. The woman then tried in vain to find a house where no one has ever died and realized that she is not the only one

who has lost a loved one. She then buried her son immediately, returned to the Buddha, and attentively listened to his teachings.

On another occasion, his followers praised him for being the greatest of all teachers. The Buddha merely responded by asking if they have actually met all the great teachers in the world. Since they have not done so, the Buddha concluded that their flattery has no basis. He then advised them that if they find the teachings of other teachers to be helpful, then they must practice them. He compared his teachings to what appears to be precious gold that must be tested before being bought. His final reminders to his disciples shortly before his death were that “Craving and desire are the cause of all unhappiness. Everything sooner or later must change, so do not become attached to anything. Instead devote yourself to clearing your mind and finding true, lasting happiness.”³

These testimonials summarize the Buddhist vision of life. For the Buddha, life is imbued with suffering; suffering is due to attachments, the cessation of suffering is attainable, and happiness can be achieved by practicing the right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Awakening and enlightenment

The importance of right mindfulness and right concentration are affirmed in the opening lines of the *Dhammapada*:

“All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.... If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.”⁴

The task of thinking, as described in the *Kalama Sutta*, is to be mindful and not to be easily swayed by:

“what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, ‘The monk is our teacher.’”⁵

One Must Think for Oneself

On this point, the Kalama Sutta is echoed across four thousand years later in Königsburg, Prussia, when Kant lamented in his essay about Enlightenment that,

“It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me.”⁶

Kant, like the Buddha, dares us to think on our own: “Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!” (WE 1)⁷

Such audacity is necessary within social contexts wherein independent and critical thinking threatens the “guardians” of the status quo. Kant warned about “the shackles of permanent immaturity” that forbid the public to argue and to merely obey. These shackles are not mere external social sanctions but also internalized individual and social habits, rules and formulas that turn thinking into mechanical forms of reasoning. Buddha did encounter such limitations while he lived a sheltered life in his father’s kingdom and when the other monks who were expecting him to live an ascetic life abandoned him when he followed the middle path of moderation between pleasure and pain.⁸

Kant did recognize, like the Buddha, that emancipation from non-thinking can be achieved by exceptional individuals who manage to cultivate their own minds. He was more interested, however, in the

enlightenment of the general public which can be achieved when freedom of thought is allowed to flourish in the public sphere where the best argument can emerge and provide direction for social development. Kant himself demonstrated the public character of his philosophical thinking by publishing his essay about the Enlightenment as part of a public debate in a monthly magazine in Berlin in 1783.

The Buddha, in a way, had a similar experience of emancipation when he took flight from his father's kingdom in his search for truth and wisdom. When another king offered him residency as an adviser, Siddhartha politely replied that he is not interested in wealth or power, only in the path to truth.⁹ Kant rejoins the Buddha on this point when he wrote that "Even Ceasar must follow the rules of grammar."¹⁰ Both of them overcame the ethics of their cultural milieu by aspiring for post-conventional principles and by sharing their ideas to the general public.

Unlike Kant's public use of reason, however, the path towards Buddhist awakening is not merely achieved by public debate and discourse but also by private meditative exercises wherein stray thoughts are reined-in by meditators on their way towards the path of emancipation. For the Buddha "the greatest of victories is the victory over oneself; and neither the gods in heaven nor the demons down below can turn into defeat the victory of such a man."¹¹

The Buddha offered this approach to salvation for all men, including his own father and family members, and all others in whatever station in life that they may find themselves to be. He offered a more democratic interpretation of the caste system in accordance with the nobility of the experience of treading the path towards Nirvana. For the Buddha, nobility is defined by the quality of life lived according to the eight-fold path mentioned above.

Kant, on the other hand, made a temporary exception from the task of Enlightenment within the contexts of the private use of reason for those who occupy social functions or offices such as soldiers, tax payers, pastors and priests, who must obey first before they question the duly constituted authorities. Such conventional duties, however, cannot

be held “for all time” because it will preclude the improvement of future generations who might discover better modes of social arrangements for themselves. As Kant puts it,

A man may put off enlightenment with regard to what he ought to know, though only for a short time and for his own person; but to renounce it for himself, or, even more, for subsequent generations, is to violate and trample man’s divine rights underfoot.¹²

For Kant, the process of enlightenment is conditioned by the freedom to think and to express oneself in an age of enlightenment. The social conditions of his time, however, were not ripe for the enlightenment of all its citizens. Enlightenment is therefore a process that must be achieved historically by creating the necessary conditions for freedom, especially the freedoms of thought and expression.

The Buddha, moreover, took a step further with regards to the project of emancipation by including all living beings and not only humans, in so far as the former also experience suffering. A tree, for example, could be experienced for itself and for others, as a living organism that serves as dwelling for birds and insects instead of merely cutting it down to build a palace. The Buddha once narrated that the spirit of a tree appeared in a dream before a king who wanted to cut it. The tree pleaded that if it must be cut down, it must be cut down piece by piece, in order to avoid harming the smaller trees and animals that are sheltered underneath its shade.¹³

Kant, on the other hand, did not think that humans have reciprocal duties to non-humans because humanity, as the kingdom of ends, is the goal of morality and lower beings are mere means or instruments towards that end. In so far as duties towards humans are concerned, however, they both believe that self-cultivation and education for all is a more lasting contribution towards the human development. As Kant puts it,

”Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass.”¹⁴

The Kantian project is both an epistemological and a political revolutionary project because it subsumed and overturned the naïve categories of empirical thinking about objects in the world as categories of the human mind. He announced the advent of modernity with his constructivist epistemology that emboldened humans to control and dominate the natural world. It also paved the way towards a progressive vision history that installs humanity as the end of development. In the field of ethical theory, it introduced the distinction between hypothetical and moral imperatives, or in the language of Habermas, the foremost contemporary Kantian philosopher, it established the difference between instrumental ways of calculating the world and communicative forms of rationality. This goal is achieved not merely by shifting attitudes towards the world but by means of a structural transformation of the public sphere in terms of human language, action and political power.¹⁵ Private forms of reasoning is subservient to hypothetical considerations while one is obliged to speak one’s real thoughts in the public sphere.

The Buddha’s project likewise attempts to achieve enlightenment by becoming aware of prejudices and biases as one tries to experience the unconditioned word of Nirvana in this world and beyond. The critical difference between Kantian enlightenment and the Buddha’s awakening, however, lies in what they claim to be the ultimate ground of reality. On the one hand, the notion of enlightenment for Kant is conditioned by freedom from external sanctions such as conventional duties to one’s community. The keystone that tests reality for the Buddha, on the other hand, requires a mindful attitude towards experiences that are achieved through meditation and right behaviour.

Nirvana in the Modern World

For Buddhists, the mind must be emancipated from biases and prejudices – that would include Kantian categories – in order to enable the knower to come to terms with that which is really real. Such an experience need not be devoid of content. Thich Nhat Hanh, a contemporary advocate of Buddhist mindfulness, offers an example of how to obtain happiness by awakening to ordinary experiences:

“When I am mindful, I enjoy more my tea,” says Thay as he pours himself a cup and slowly savours the first sip. “I am fully present in the here and now, not carried away by my sorrow, my fear, my projects, the past and the future. I am here available to life.”¹⁶

Modern human beings are unfortunately over-crowded by many objects around them and are preoccupied with a flurry of activities that do not provide the space nor make time to exercise acts of mindfulness for its own sake. Even meditation and taking a nap are being promoted today for the sake of productivity and efficiency in the work place. People live for the sake of projects without appreciating the reality of other people and the beauty of objects that are given to them here and now.

In a sense, this is also what Kant meant by his enlightenment project – to dare to think in one’s own terms and not be shackled by social and authoritarian figures who think they know better and believe that they should decide for others. For Kant the individual person, and no one else, who must know and eventually decide on what must be done. In this sense, both the Buddha and Kant defended the irreducible dignity of the individual human person as responsible agent whose decisions are made on the basis of their own insights.

One of the main differences between them, as mentioned earlier, is that Kant confined himself to the duties that humans must have towards fellow humans while the Buddha extended human duties to sub-humans, especially those who are suffering. Kant was aware of the structural differentiation of the modern world that demands different forms of

discourses whereas the Buddha believes that self-awareness is a necessary precondition to other forms of discourses and that authentic discourses must not be confused with reality's appearances such as the pleasure or pain that experiences may happen to contain. When Mara, the legendary temptress, challenged the Buddha to provide a witness to the possible success of his project, the latter pointed to and touched the ground, the earth, as the ultimate testament to his claims.¹⁷

The earth as ground of philosophical claims is significant for the modern world not only because of today's ecological concerns but also because it awakens humans to the broader context of other beings that share their existence. Even the seemingly inert rock has been found out to be the source of minerals that feed plants that eventually support life. (LS 1) One of the first inspirations of Siddhartha for his search of the path towards emancipation was when he realized the misery of insects, birds and farm animals beneath the beauty and grandeur of nature.¹⁸

Conclusion

Both the Buddha and Kant dare human beings to think not only on their own but also to become aware and critical of the obstructions that block the processes of thinking. For the Buddha, the ultimate criterion of awakened thinking is a life lived according to the eight fold path while for Kant enlightenment is conditioned by the unshackled freedom to think and to act on one's own thoughts. Both of them require that thinking and acting be emancipated from worldly biases and prejudices. With constant practice, profound thoughts are then carried on in the affairs of everyday life. Mindfulness views the end of meditation sessions as mere change of postures from the special moments of contemplation. Although this is an arduous project, Buddhists believe that it can be achieved. The Buddha testified: "The earth is my witness."

Kant's critiques, on the other hand, were made in order to eventually make room for faith. The process may be slow and tedious; but it can be reached, gradually if one just keeps on striving towards enlightenment in the practices of everyday life.

ENDNOTES

¹ The author was inspired to write this paper from his *Facebook* conversations with Chanreoun Pa, Noel Valencia, Susan Tamondong, Francisco Castro and Zosimo Lee. The paper was eventually read during the Asian Association of Christian Philosophers held at Ateneo de Manila University in April 2013.

² *Kalama Sutta: The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry* Translated from the Pali by Ven. Soma Thera <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/kalama1.htm> (accessed on May 28, 2019)

³ *The Life of the Buddha* (New Delhi: Hemkunt Press, 1978), 115.

⁴ "The Dhammapada," trans. F. Max Mueller, *The World's Greatest Classics: Sacred Books of the East* (New York: The Colonial Press, 1990) 115-127. Reprinted in *Primary Texts in Moral Philosophy: The Philippine Collection*, Ed by Rainier A. Ibane and Angelli F. Tugado (Pasig: Philippine Commission on Higher Education, 1998), 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html> (Accessed on May 28, 2019)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The Story of the Buddha*, 73-76

⁹ *The Story of the Buddha*, Ibid., 70.

¹⁰ Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*

¹¹ Dhammapada 8.103-105, *Ibid*, 10-11

¹² Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"

¹³ Ibid., 110-112.

¹⁴ "What is Enlightenment," Ibid.

¹⁵ Juergen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, (Boston: The Beacon Press), 313.

¹⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, "Beyond Environment: Falling Back in Love with Mother Earth" in *Philosophy Manual: A South-South Perspective* (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), 168.

¹⁷ *The Story of Buddha*, 81-82

¹⁸ Ibid., 56-61.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Habermas, Juergen, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: The Beacon Press).

Kant, Immanuel, “What is Enlightenment?” <http://english.ncu.edu.tw/stewart/Teaching/Library/ReadingSec/What%20is%20Enlightenment.pdf> (Accessed on March 28, 2013)

The Story of the Buddha (New Delhi: Hemkunt Press, 1978).

Thich Nhat Hanh, “Beyond Environment: Falling Back in Love with Mother Earth” in *Philosophy Manual: A South-South Perspective* (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), 168.