

“Buddhism and Philosophy: Redefining Philosophy within the Framework of Buddhism”

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Philosophy is a discipline that covers a wide range of fundamental questions about reality and the meaning of existence. Buddhist teachings describing the nature of the self, originating from Gautama, reflect characteristics of modern philosophical modes of thinking. There is an ongoing scholarly conversation concerning whether Buddhism should be classified as a philosophy or a religion. I will focus on Buddhism as philosophy in this paper, which will analyze four interpretations that establish connections between Buddhism and western philosophy. Thinking of philosophy within the framework of Buddhism will be a good transition into analyzing and critiquing an established scholarly definition of philosophy from college professor Philip Pecorino. I will evaluate the extent to which his definition is inclusive to Buddhist thought in philosophy. I will argue that the definition as written is restrictive to Buddhist philosophical thought, and that his current phrasing can lead to possible delegitimization of the ideas of Buddhism. Finally, I will propose modifications to Pecorino's definition which allow the possibility for philosophy to be more inclusive to Buddhist ideas.

Mark Siderits in his introductory chapter of *Buddhism as Philosophy* evaluates how Buddhism applies philosophical modes of thought within the context of religion.¹ Siderits explains a common belief when defining religion as a faith, which is that "reason and logical investigation are of little or no use in seeking salvation."² Siderits suggests that reason and logical investigation are important skills in philosophy. This dismissal implies that people who hold this position are neglecting the possibility of a connection between philosophy and religious thought. Siderits notes that the faith-based view of religion has not been the sole belief of all cultures throughout history, but it is predominant in today's culture. Ancient cultures, such as India, emphasized the importance of rational thought in debating the validity of religious

¹ Mark Siderits. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007.

² Siderits 6

principles. Siderits cites the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Buddhist text that postulates four different paths towards liberation, or nirvana. The path a person takes depends on what they value in life. According to Siderits, the Buddhist tradition suggests that there is one path towards nirvana, which is “attained through rational investigation of the nature of the world.”³ This freedom for rational investigation implies that Buddhism does not promote blindly accepting the Buddha’s teachings. Followers are encouraged to analyze the evidence for the Buddha’s ideas and then determine if the arguments make them valid. The embrace of logical thought and critique distinguishes Buddhism from other religions. Siderits further argues that “even an enlightened being like a Buddha... cannot bestow nirvana on others. That is something that one can only attain for oneself.”⁴ The relationship between the Buddha and others suggests that Buddhist gods are finite beings like human beings and are not omnipotent. The gods cannot force people to pursue an enlightened state. Buddhists must explore the meaning of the Buddha’s teachings, and then decide through their personal philosophical inquiries whether they accept the path that he describes.

Mark Siderits in his entry for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* discusses the relationship between the teachings of The Buddha and philosophy, describing both how Gautama’s beliefs have differed from other scholars and controversies in classifying him as a philosopher.⁵ According to Siderits, The Buddha analyzed various Sramanas, or wandering ascetics, in his attempt to understand suffering. One of the most well-known Sramana doctrines concerns the relationship between rebirth and karma, describing how continual rebirth is unsatisfactory, and how humans must find the path to liberation from rebirth. Rebirth is

³ Siderits 7

⁴ Siderits 8

⁵ Mark Siderits. “Buddha.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, February 2011.

controlled by the laws of karma that concern human actions.⁶ Liberation requires overcoming ignorance about one's identity. According to Siderits, the Vedic text "The *Bhagavad Gita*... lists four such methods, and discusses at least two separate views concerning one's true identity."⁷ The ideas concern a plurality of selves and a single self. The Buddha himself advances the teaching of non-self, which is a series of philosophical arguments.⁸ Siderits references the impermanence argument, and his citation alone implies the importance of the teaching to Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha's "middle path" strategy describes that "the ultimate truth about sentient beings is just that there is a causal series of impermanent, impersonal psychophysical elements."⁹ The Buddha denies the existence of a permanent self and believes that the word "I" is meaningless.¹⁰ The teaching of non-self has led to debate among scholars about whether the Buddha should be classified as a philosopher. People have noted that the Buddha "never categorically denies existence of a self that transcends from what is empirically given."¹¹ Scholars have proposed that the Buddha is not a philosopher because he does not believe in musing over issues that do not have a practical application, and he denies the extension of philosophical rationality to his teachings. Siderits critiques these assumptions, citing the language barrier as a source of confusion among scholars. The Buddha's texts were transcribed after he died, so there was a possibility of insertion and deletion in his works due to sectarian conflicts. Siderits suggests that future studies analyzing the Buddha's teachings in terms of later philosophical discourse that

⁶ Siderits 2

⁷ Siderits 2

⁸ Siderits 5

⁹ Siderits 4

¹⁰ Siderits 5

¹¹ Siderits 2

resulted from his work will be fruitful for the effort of scholars to better understand his original unedited beliefs.¹²

The idea of unconscious beliefs has been important in philosophy since the ancient days, when Plato coined the concept of an unconscious mind within his theory of knowledge.¹³ David Burton evaluates unconscious beliefs in Buddhist philosophy through a comparative perspective, in which he references philosophical ideas from western thinkers Nicholas Everitt and Alec Fisher. He uses their theories to expand the understanding of Buddhist principles.¹⁴ According to Burton, “Everitt and Fisher claim that one has some beliefs of which one is not conscious, and never has been conscious.”¹⁵ As evidence for their proposal, Everitt and Fisher wrote about the postulate that there are more than ninety-nine ants in the world. Burton explains that he had not consciously thought of this proposition, but it is obviously true. The lack of conscious thinking about something that is right suggests the presence of unconscious beliefs. Everitt and Fisher’s theory about unconscious beliefs can apply to Buddhism. Burton cites Padmasiri De Silva, who explained how Theravada Buddhism discusses wrong beliefs that exist in the minds of unenlightened people that they are not consciously aware of having. The beliefs account for “unconscious roots of prejudices and strong biases which color our emotional life.”¹⁶ The most prominent prejudice is the “personality view,” which conceptualizes a permanent and unchanging self. According to Burton, the disposition of the permanence of the self is common in modern philosophical thought.¹⁷ Buddhists claim that the tendencies to value a permanence of the self is a wrong worldview that results from complications in previous lives. The Buddhists

¹² Siderits 3

¹³ David Burton. “Unconscious Beliefs in Buddhist Philosophy: A Comparative Perspective.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, no. 2 (November 2005): 117–30.

¹⁴ Burton 118

¹⁵ Burton 119

¹⁶ Burton 120

¹⁷ Burton 121

believe that “the inability to observe the eternal self establishes its non-existence.”¹⁸ Burton asserts that the Buddhists are relying on a principle that is known as Ockham’s razor in modern western philosophy. Ockham’s razor is the theory that explanations of a concept should be as concise as possible, and the fewer the ambiguous assumptions about something, the better. The Buddhists theorize that dispositions to ignorance, such as the permanence of self, are unconscious, impermanent events. Although ideas of the unconscious in Buddhist philosophy were theorized long before Everitt and Fisher, Burton explains that their modern ideas of the unconscious help to elucidate and expand the understanding of Buddhist principles.¹⁹

He Jianming discusses how Buddhism can be applied to understand and critique western philosophical principles and transcend the systems they stem from. His analysis of Buddhism as philosophy centers on the concepts of idealism and materialism.²⁰ The evaluation of philosophy within Buddhism focuses on three perspectives: ontology, worldview, and epistemology.²¹ Master Taixu, a Buddhist scholar, concentrated on comparing Chinese, Western, and Indian philosophies to Buddhism, and explaining how Buddhism transcends the three philosophical systems. According to Taixu’s analysis, Buddhism embodies the strengths of Western, Chinese and Indian philosophies while rejecting their weaknesses. Jianming cites a few examples of Buddhism applying strengths of each discipline in the following excerpt:

He [Taixu] stated that, in terms of behavioral science, Buddhism held that all living creatures could attain Buddhahood and could enjoy the advantage of Western advancement to “spirit to matter” without the disadvantage of persisting in wrongdoing.

¹⁸ Burton 123

¹⁹ Burton 118

²⁰ He Jianming. “An Outline of Modern Chinese Buddhism’s ‘Response’ to Eastern and Western Philosophy.” *Chinese Studies in History* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 44–58.

²¹ Jianming 45

The Buddha sympathized with sorrow and joy: thus all could enjoy the advantage of China's loving harmony of "people to people" without the disadvantage of vulgarity. The Buddha has a great desire to succor all living things: thus all could enjoy the advantage of India's resolution in "matter to spirit," without the disadvantage of destructiveness.²²

Buddhism can synthesize the strengths of the three philosophies through the idea of "inferential observation with equal parts knowledge and practice," which allows people to think rationally and meticulously about all global phenomena.²³ Scholars go as far as to argue that Buddhism is epistemologically superior to other philosophies. As evidence for this idea, scholar Xiong Shili noted that Buddhism has the ability to weave together schools of rational and irrational thought, which are immiscible in western philosophy.²⁴ Additionally, Jianming discusses how Buddhism is applied to understand and criticize the western philosophical ideas of idealism and materialism.²⁵ The scholar Zhang Taiyan explained the relationship between idealism and materialism by applying the Buddhist teaching of the "three forms of existence." He disagreed with earlier work that defined the two concepts in opposition to one another. Zhang explained that "Idealism does not necessarily destroy materialism but rather can contain materialism. This is because materialists believe in what they perceive: this sensory input is precisely the idealist concept of direct sensual perception."²⁶ Zhang applies Buddhist ideas to postulate that idealism and materialism are incorrectly separated as opposites by western thinkers. Scholar Wang Enyang made use of the Buddhist concept that all is emptiness and non-abidingness to theorize and denounce the solipsistic tendencies of idealists.²⁷ Enyang criticizes the western conception

²² Jianming 46

²³ Jianming 46

²⁴ Jianming 47

²⁵ Jianming 48

²⁶ Jianming 48

²⁷ Jianming 51

that the self is all that is known to exist (solipsism) through evaluating Buddhist principles. Jianming suggests that the scholars are applying Buddhist teachings and doctrines to criticize the weaknesses and inadequacies of western philosophy. Their work implies that Buddhist philosophy occurs through the doubts scholars have about the validity of established western philosophical concepts.

Having described four perspectives of Buddhism as philosophy, now I will concentrate on evaluating the extent to which a scholarly definition of philosophy fits within the framework of Buddhism. College professor Philip Pecorino provides an example of a definition of philosophy that as written is not inclusive to Buddhism. I will focus on three sections of his definition that demonstrate this idea. He defines philosophy broadly as “an activity: a quest after wisdom.”²⁸ Pecorino neglects defining wisdom and giving examples of who is wise. Without this context, there is a possibility for western cultural bias, or the idea that there is a focus on western philosophers as the sole authorities for wisdom. Buddhism, being an eastern tradition, may not fit the label as wise through a western lens. Pecorino frames philosophy as “an activity of thought, a type of thinking... the most critical and comprehensive manner of thinking which the human species has yet devised.”²⁹ There are two problems with Pecorino’s characterization of philosophy here. One issue that is explicit is his elitism. He does not cite other examples of human thinking in history that philosophy has transcended and does not elaborate on what constitutes a “comprehensive manner of thinking.” The second more implicit issue with his ideas concerns human thinking that does not fall under the category of philosophy. Are those contributions invalid or inadequate because they do not meet the standard for philosophy? Mark Siderits describes in his entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* how some scholars

²⁸ Philip A. Pecorino. “Chapter 12: Conclusion.” *Introduction to Philosophy*. Queensborough Community College, CUNY.

²⁹ Pecorino 1

attempted to articulate why the Buddha should not be analyzed as a philosopher. If a person does not see the Buddha as a philosopher, then his teachings could be classified as a lesser form of human thinking. Pecorino's problematic wording ignores the idea that people may begin to classify beliefs they disagree with as "lesser forms of human thought" and thus not philosophy. Another section of Pecorino's definition evaluates forms of thought related to philosophy. He classifies religion as offering "a view which is uncritically formulated and does not itself encourage or tolerate criticism of the fundamental tenets of faith or the principle applications of those basic beliefs to the affairs of everyday life."³⁰ Mark Siderits in his introductory textbook chapter describes how Buddhism allows for its followers to analyze the Buddha's teachings, and through personal philosophical inquiry, they can ponder different phenomena and apply to their lives what makes sense for them. Pecorino describes all of religion as not allowing for criticism or dissent. While this idea is true for many monotheistic religions, the tradition of Buddhism is not that restrictive, as Siderits has demonstrated. By classifying all of religion as not allowing for dissent, Buddhism's role as an eastern religion tradition could be questioned or delegitimized. Buddhism could be considered extreme or an outlier religion due to its openness to criticism. After analyzing excerpts of Pecorino's definition, my concern now centers on the ways his definition could be modified to be more inclusive to Buddhist principles.

Before shifting to discuss possible changes, it is important to evaluate the rationality behind Pecorino's definition. Despite my contemporary view that Pecorino's belief of the superiority of philosophy is elitist, his idea concerning the discipline's prestige does reflect how scholars explained philosophy's position throughout history. The argument can be made that the way Pecorino framed his definition is logical. For example, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, a popular and influential 18th century French encyclopedia, places philosophy at the top of the hierarchy of

³⁰ Pecorino 3

reason in the Map of the System of Human Knowledge.³¹ Pecorino's classification of philosophy's superiority aligns almost exactly with Diderot's outline on the map. However, despite the rationality of Pecorino's definition in historical terms, his modern characterization of philosophy can and should be modified to be more inclusive to Buddhism as philosophy.

One way to recharacterize Pecorino's definition involves rephrasing and providing further explanations for his claims. Defining what wisdom is and providing examples of the work of wise individuals will remove the possibility of a problematic western bias. Describing other forms of human thought that are supposedly inferior and not as comprehensive as philosophical thinking could help readers to understand why Pecorino holds philosophy to a high standard. Providing a graphic or illustration of why philosophy is superior could ease my concerns that people who characterize the Buddha as opposed to philosophy could deny the legitimacy of Buddhist practices and teachings. With further elaboration, readers trying to understand how philosophy fits within the framework of Buddhism could apply teachings to characteristics of western philosophical discourse. Finally, with respect to religion, explaining that the ideas of restriction and intolerance to criticism may not apply to all faiths would grant Buddhism a more complete voice in philosophy. All my proposed modifications can create a definition that is more inclusive to Buddhism as philosophy as contextualized by Mark Siderits, David Burton, and He Jianming in their respective journal articles and encyclopedia entries.

This paper analyzed four scholarly interpretations of Buddhism as philosophy, and from those perspectives, I evaluated a definition of philosophy through the lens of Buddhism. Philosophy is generally analyzed through a western lens, which is logical considering that many of history's most famous philosophers resided in Europe. The elitist western bias has the

³¹ Benjamin Heller. "Map of the System of Human Knowledge." *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*. Ann Arbor: Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library, 2009. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/schwab.html>

tendency to neglect emphasizing the contributions of eastern traditions to philosophy. By evaluating a definition of philosophy through the lens of Buddhism, an eastern tradition, the idea of western thinking as being the sole authority of philosophical thought can be dismissed. An approach to defining philosophy through the combination of eastern and western perspectives leads to the creation of a stronger definition that is applicable to synthesizing vastly different worldviews. With my proposed modifications to Pecorino's conception of philosophy, the scholarly conversation of Buddhism as philosophy and the perspectives of western philosophy can connect to the same definition.

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