Similarities and Dissimilarities of Buddhist and Taoist Ethics

Religious ethics in the comparative mode represents cross-traditional and cross-cultural ethical inquiry with critical, constructive, and theoretical dimensions. The critical dimension involves analysing the social, political, economic, and institutional influences on these systems, thinkers, practices, and patterns. The constructive dimension requires identifying and developing intercultural moral resources for articulating new self and social understandings as well as practical strategies for advancing human well-being. And the theoretical dimension involves reflecting on systemic issues raised by the preceding dimensions; for example, justification and truth, the role of imagination, and relations among understanding, interpretation, and explanation. As presently understood and practiced, comparative religious ethics embraces methodological pluralism and accepts the role of the comparative ethicist as a transformative public intellectual.¹

Two of the most influential beliefs that have shaped Asian history are Buddhism and Taoism. They have been around through thousands of years and have dominated majority of Asian regions, particularly China and India. While they differ in many things, each religion has a unique approach to such belief in the same way that each highlights a distinct way of life.

Comparative methods and theory critically examine the major scholarly approaches to comparative religious ethics of Buddhism and

Taoism as well as interpretive and theoretical issues raised by these approaches. The aims of this methods and theory include careful examination of alternative methods in comparative religious ethics including attention to presuppositions, sources, cross-cultural categories of analysis, conceptions of moral rationality, methodological practices, and clarification of the moral teachings of Buddhist and Taoist traditions. From the historical point of view, comparison aims to affect a historically and culturally contextualized empathetic understanding and appreciation of the diversity of religious ethical traditions of Buddhism and Taoism, and to that end they are informed by work in comparative religious ethics and the history of religions. This comparison attempts to characterize the nature of whole traditions while at the same time using socio-moral problems as points of contact between, and modes of access to, the fundamental beliefs and modes of thought of Buddhism and Taoism.

As presently practiced, comparative religious ethics encompasses a number of aims, ranging across enriched cultural moral self-understanding, appreciation of other traditions, enhancement of cross-cultural communication, addressing shared social problems, and systematic theorizing about religion and ethics. This vision combines the methods and theory of comparative ethical inquiry with a practical moral rationale and project. It is self-consciously open to methodological diversity, while at the same time introducing a constructive moral purpose and sustaining motivation for its practitioners. These practitioners, in turn, take on the role of “transformative intellectuals” who self-consciously and critically relate their inquiries to the important tasks of constructive moral practice, making common cause with the aims and tasks of inter-religious moral dialogue.²

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Comparing the two great traditions to two pyramids rising from a common base has been often cited by historians of religion. The top of each pyramid represents the elite and sophisticated realm of religious “professionals,” while the foundations of the pyramids belong to the devotional activities of “simple believers.” Whereas the summits are clearly separate and distinct from one another, the bases merge into a differentiated lay religion and a mass of popular beliefs and practices.

From the historical point of view, the comparison shows that Buddhism and Taoism emerged from the different background. The situations of India and China at the time of the Buddha and Lǎo Zǐ indicate a wide and varied environment of two countries. Chronicles of the Buddha and Lǎo Zǐ reveal their different way of life as well as their different contribution to the society they lived in. From the early history till now the two traditions developed in different ways along with the great works of literature and partition of various schools and sects.

Buddhism and Taoism have its own foundation of ethics. The Noble Truth (Ariyasacca) and Perfection (Pāramita) are regarded as the origin of Buddhist ethics. Virtue (Te, 德) and the three Treasures (Sān Bǎo, 三寶) are regarded as the origin of Taoist ethics. Two traditions are based on the different foundations. On the other hand, the similarity of Buddhism and Taoism is to emphasize the realization of the Noble Truth and Virtue, and the fulfilment of moral obligation until it reaches the highest level. In the case of cause and condition of the nature, Buddhism and Taoism have different approaches. Buddhism holds Buddhist Law of Conditionality (Paṭiccasamupāda) and Taoism embraces the Tao (道) and Yīn Yáng (陰陽) as its Nature Law. However, the similar concept is that two traditions lay emphasis only on the nature of cause and condition. Major striking difference between Buddhism and Taoism is that the
Buddha emphasizes the theory of Kamma while Lǎo Zǐ focuses on the concept Wú Wéi (無為). Though, there is contrast between action and non-action, Buddhism stresses wholesome (Kusala) and unwholesome (Akusala) Nature and Taoism keeps its focus on Good (Shàn, 善) and Evil (Bù Shàn, 不善) as their own foundation of ethics.

With regard to the judgment of moral and immoral actions in Buddhism and Taoism, both stand on the same ground of the voice of conscience by holding the views such as “a sense of shame and blame” (Hiri and Ottapa) in Buddhism and “a sense of selflessness” (Wú Sī, 無私) in Taoism. Both express strong disapproval on “destruction of life” (Pāṇātipātā) and “pleasure in killing (Lè Shārén, 樂殺人) in judging a case of killing. Another similarity between two can be seen in the doctrine of harmlessness as Buddhism and Taoism put emphasis on non-violence (Ahiṃsa) and compassion (Cí, 慈) respectively. Both traditions accept the consequence of action and hold the result of Kamma (Vipāka) and the benefit of Wú Wéi (Wúwéi Zhīyì, 無為之益) despite the fact that Kamma and Wú Wéi differ on the theory of cause and effect.

For the case of social ethics, the primary concern of Both Buddhism and Taoism is closely similar. Buddhism put emphasis on the human happiness and social stability while Taoism focuses on man, nature and social harmony. With regard to the personal and community ethics, Buddhism stresses on ethics of individuals and inter-relationships and Taoism emphasizes on ethics of humanity and universe. Both traditions hold similar ground on the ethical responsibility for family and society by emphasizing “the protection of six directions” (Cha Disāpaṭicchādi) in Buddhism and “the way of Filial Piety (Xiào Dào, 孝道) in Taoism. In the case of ethical views on politics, Buddhism emphasizes on “rule of kingship” (Rājadhamma) without interfering individual administrative system. On the other hand, Taoism expresses its
closer concern on politics by guiding “the way of governance” (Zhìdào, 治道).

Both traditions have similar ground on the moral training as Buddhism stresses on “course of training” (Sikkhāpada) and Taoism emphasizes on “precept and prohibition” (Jiè Jìn, 戒禁). In Buddhism there are numerous precepts of rules and regulations which are categorized into ethical precepts for Buddhist laity and ethical codes for Buddhist Samgha. Taoism also has various precepts of prohibition and rules which contain ethical precepts for lay organizations and monastic institutions. In the classification of individual, both have different categories. Buddhism has two main categories: the ordinary person (Puthujjana) and the noble person (Ariya) while Taoism put emphasis only on the person of virtue (Dé Rén, 德人). Another major difference between Buddhism and Taoism is concerned with the intellectual development and ethical attainment. In this regard, Buddhism clearly emphasizes on “the state of purification” (Visuddhi) and “the state of liberation” (Vimutti) whereas Taoism stresses on “the way of Internal Alchemy” (Nèidān Dào, 内丹道).

Summary and Observation

Taoists believe that life on earth can be happy and peaceful. Living according to the “Tao” deals with a way of learning, appreciating and working with whatever happens during a person’s life on earth. However, Buddhists believe that life on earth is a revolving wheel of pain. Man must go through a series of life and rebirth until he attains Enlightenment. The ultimate goal is to attain Nibbāna, or freedom from the birth, death cycles.
The Taoist concept of heaven (Tiān) is a part of the Great Four of the universe - Tao, Heaven, earth and man. The Tao, “way” or “process” of life itself, is a part of nature and the eternal process of change. It is the thread that holds all heaven, earth and man together, as a part of the universe. Life and death are part of this process. Everything is a part of nature, therefore the mind lives on.

According to the Buddhists philosophy, life on earth is suffering and man must always be preparing himself for liberation from this cycle of life and rebirth. The Taoist’s concept is more affirmative. If one learns to live by the Tao, being aware that everything is a part of a continuous natural process, one can enjoy life.

The fundamental beliefs of Buddhism and Taoism deal with the ultimate causes and underlying nature of life. The Taoist and Buddhists beliefs of human conduct differ in their reasoning as to “why” things happen. With Taoism, everything that happens is a part of the natural and eternal process of change. Buddhists believe suffering on earth is caused by man’s desires and attachments to earthly goods. Both Taoists and Buddhists believe there is nothing they can do about what happens on earth. However, the Taoist lives a life of humility and quietude in order to have a good life on earth; whereas, the Buddhist’s life of humble existence is to escape the miseries of life on earth.

The goal in Taoism is to achieve Tao, to find the way. Tao is the ultimate reality, a presence that existed before the universe was formed and which continues to guide the world and everything in it. Tao is sometimes identified as the Mother, or the source of all things. That source is not a god or a supreme being, as Taoism is not monotheistic. The focus is not to worship one god, but instead on coming into harmony with Tao. According to those who believe in the Tao is the essence of everything that is right and complications exist only because people
choose to complicate their own lives. Desire, ambition, fame, and selfishness are seen as hindrances to a harmonious life. It is only when a person rids himself of all desires can Tao be achieved. By shunning every earthly distraction, the Taoist is able to concentrate on life itself. The longer the person’s life, the more saintly the person is presumed to have become. Eventually the hope is to become immortal, to achieve Tao, to have reached the deeper life. The desire for immortality sharply contrasts Buddhist values; the Buddhist appreciates impermanence above all else. The after-life for a Taoist is to be in harmony with the universe, to have achieved Tao.

To understand the relationship between life, and the Taoism concept of life and death, the origin of the word Tao must be understood. The Chinese character for Tao is a combination of two characters that represent the words head and foot. The character for foot represents the idea of a person’s direction or path. The character for head represents the idea of conscious choice. The character for head also suggests a beginning, and foot, an ending. Thus the character for Tao also conveys the continuing course of the universe, the circle of heaven and earth. This is similar in Buddhism, where wheels and circle symbols are prevalent, representing continuity, and the cyclic nature of the world. Finally, the character for Tao represents the Taoist idea that the eternal Tao is both moving and unmoving.

The head in the character means the beginning, the source of all things, or Tao itself, which never moves or changes; the foot is the movement on the path. Taoism upholds the belief in the survival of the spirit after death. This is something most Buddhist practitioners either disagree with entirely, or simply refuse to discuss at all. To have attained the human form must be always a source of joy. And then to undergo countless transitions, with only the infinite to look forward to, what
comparable bliss is that! Therefore it is that the truly wise rejoice in, that which can never be lost, but endures always.\(^3\)

Both believe there is an inner light which guides a person in the right direction to the ultimate goal. Personal desires must be forsaken to enable the inner light to guide a person to achieve eternal bliss. The inner light concept is similar, but the actual path is the difference between Taoism and Buddhism. The path toward enlightenment for the Buddhist was defined by Buddha in his Eightfold Path. Only through following this path does the Buddhist reach Nibbāna. The path to Tao is individual, it comes from within. No one can define a path for the Taoist; it must come from the inner light. Tao means way, but in the original and succeeding manuscripts no direct path is explored or expounded. Desire, ambition, fame, and selfishness are seen as complications. That idea is consistent with Buddhist teachings and it is the personal life of each individual that gives Taoism its special form. Taoist believes the soul is not reborn and it migrates to another life.\(^4\) Buddhist also believes the soul is not reborn, but instead a consciousness containing the seeds of good and evil deeds is the object of rebirth.\(^5\) This implies that there is still an underlying awareness that is reborn, that is separate from individual personality traits, otherwise no one would experience the fruits of kamma. Kamma would then be irrelevant beyond this life.

One major difference between Taoism and Buddhism is the concept of Kamma to the Buddhist. This idea that all actions are the display of thought, the will of man, is known as Kamma. Kamma determines the Buddhist actions and position in life. A person’s Kamma limits the goals which can be achieved. Kamma determines where in the

cycle of birth, death and rebirth the consciousness returns. This return can be in the form of an animal or human, and the Buddhist must progress through a hierarchy to achieve Nibbāna. The Taoist has no concept similar to Kamma, and no the determining factor to one’s life is contained in the individual behavior for the Taoist. By forsaking personal desires in life, by concentrating of the self, a longer life is prolonged. Eventually, by following the inner light, immortality can be achieved. The similarities between Taoism and Buddhism in the belief of some kind of life after death far outweigh the differences. Both religions believe the individual must focus on the self to achieve the ultimate goal.

Both Taoism and Buddhism teach only through proper living, by following the correct path guided by the inner light, one can achieve the ultimate goal of Tao or Nibbāna. They teach to trust oneself, to find one’s own inner guidance, and to know there is much more to the universe than just our own little observable reality. Above all, they teach to think for oneself, and find out what works for oneself, because no one is the same. To become aware of oneself, and to completely know everything about oneself, and to realize what is in our own head is often nothing more than delusions of the ego. One must focus on the proper way of life to reach immortality. The cycle of life continues indefinitely until the Thread of Life is broken. For the Taoists, the ego is not such a focus of suffering as it is in Buddhism. They believe it has its place in human life, as long as it’s not in control of life, and does not create chaos and disharmony for oneself. Buddhists often talk about abolishing the ego-self entirely, and that it is one’s ego that is the root of all problems.

According to Buddhist doctrine, all actions are simply the display of thought, the will of man. This will is caused by character, and character is manufactured from Kamma. Kamma means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal or physical is
regarded as Kamma. All good and bad actions constitute Kamma. As is the Kamma, so is the will of the man. A person’s Kamma determines what he deserves and what goals can be achieved. The Buddhists past life actions determine present standing in life and current actions determine the next life, all is determined by the Buddhist’s Kamma. Buddha developed a doctrine known as the Four Noble Truths based on his experience and inspiration about the nature of life. These truths are the basis for all schools of Buddhism. The fourth truth describes the way to overcome personal desire through the Eightfold Path. Buddha called his path the Middle Way, because it lies between a life of luxury and a life of poverty. Not everyone can reach the goal of Nibbāna, but every Buddhist is at least on the path toward enlightenment. To achieve Nibbāna the Buddhist must follow the steps of the Eightfold Path. Compliance to the path does not guarantee reaching Nibbāna, but it is the only path that leads to Nibbāna. Only through following this path established by Buddha does a Buddhist have a chance to reach enlightenment, to free oneself from the continuous rounds of birth, death and rebirth, to have reached the ultimate goal - to be absorbed into a state of Nibbāna.

The goal in both Taoism and Buddhism is to reach the ultimate goal, to transcend life on earth as a physical being, to achieve harmony with nature and the universe. The ultimate goal for both religions is to achieve a higher state of consciousness, and that although everyone possesses this consciousness, it takes discipline, and commitment to a spiritual practice. The Taoist called this ultimate goal Tao, while the Buddhist seeks Nibbāna. Whatever the name, the followers of these religions believe there is an existence beyond life which can be achieved provided the right path or behavior is followed.

The remarkable interaction of the Indian religion and Chinese religion setting has long been a subject of fascination for scholars of
Buddhism and Taoism, who have explored its various aspects: philosophy and doctrines, textual material, social and institutional organization, art, economy, and so on. The encounter of these two great religions is particularly fruitful in modern time, when they contributed to shaping one another in many ways.

Asian spirituality has been expressed through a sense of unity with the cosmos and the world of nature. Buddhist and Taoist influence on the way of living has been immense and through this they have entered the mainstream of Asian tradition. It is a tradition that is profoundly ethical, but sees human beings in relationship to each other and to the cosmos. It is organic and dynamic. It understands the importance of people within the family and society.

It is true that Buddhist and Taoist religious and ethical traditions often offer very different bases of what is helpful and what is unhelpful for men and women, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. It is not appropriate to ignore the serious differences among the individual religions. However, they should not hinder the world from proclaiming publicly those things which people already hold in common and which people jointly affirm, each on the basis of their own religious or ethical grounds.6

By contrast, Taoism and Buddhism remain separated by language, local customs and rituals of praise and practice. Taoism is largely an independent journey in large regard focusing on individual cultivation and living in harmony with nature or one’s environment and, in certain specific lineages, even exorcism. Buddhism on the other hand, in addition to personal cultivation, places great importance on the development of Saṅgha and promotes sharing resources among members. This communal

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focus and directive is conspicuously absent from Taoism, allowing a lack of definition to surround the name.

Buddhism has been actively organized for much longer than Taoism and counts on extensive documentation, elaborate altars and a vast selection of scripture and literature. Taoism, remaining more private and exclusive and perhaps even oppressed, is only now discovering the freedom of expression. Despite the differences in organization, language, geography and local customs, both share a profound respect for virtues and honor and both types of ethics are relevant to the present world for a harmonious society. Buddhism and Taoism will remain moral and spiritual images for centuries to come.