

Interfacing Communitarianism and Buddhist Approach: A Comparative Paradigm

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Abstract:

The fundamental principle of communitarianism is its focus on the community and not just the individuals but on shared values, traditions and good life. A strong community shapes an individual's identity, talents and life pursuits which can only develop within the context of a community. Human life should begin with a concern for the community, rather than the individual. The study presents its objective of demonstrating a comparative analysis between communitarianism and buddhism. The major finding is that both traditions, despite different origins, converge on the central importance of community, shared values and interdependence in defining human identity and moral guidance. The study then uses this theoretical background to draw parallels with the principles of Buddhist philosophy. Both frameworks advocate for a society where fairness and mutual care govern relationships, preventing any single factor from undermining justice and equality.

Keywords: Communitarianism, Buddhism, Interdependence, Shared Values

Introduction: Communitarianism Theory

Communitarianism is a political and social philosophy that prioritizes the community in understanding human identity, well-being and political life. The term communitarian was coined in 1841 by John Goodwyn Barmby, an official of the communist church, who founded the Universal Communitarianism Association. Key contemporary exponents associated with this school of thought include Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel and Amitai Etzioni. In its modern form, the philosophy gained prominence in the 1980s. The term communitarian was first elicited by Micheal Sandel in his work *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) in what has been labelled as communitarianism.

Communitarians are first and foremost concerned with community. They insist that each of us, as an individual, develops an identity, talents and pursuits in life only in the context of a community. Political life, then, must start with a concern for the community (not the individual).

Jean Hampton (*Political Philosophy An Introduction*; 1998)

Buddhist Response to Communitarian Theory

Virtue Central to Good Life

Alasdair MacIntyre, the British-Scottish moral philosopher identified that practicing virtue is essential for living a truly good human life. In his essay *After Virtue* (1981), he observed:

For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtue is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to achieve such a life. We, thus cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made references to the virtues.

This understanding aligns with buddhist approach. In Buddhism, “virtue” mainly refers to sila (ethical conduct) and kusala (wholesome qualities). Sila is intentional, non-harmful conduct guided by non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion, expressed through the (Pañcasīla) Five Precepts which are undertaken with mindfulness and goodwill. It creates a blameless life and forms the foundation for joy, tranquility and concentration. Kusala means wholesome, skillful or conducive to the good. It refers to intentions and actions that reduce greed (lobha), hate (dosa) and delusion (moha) which lead to happiness and liberation. In both perspectives, virtue is not only a means to reach that life but it is a part of what makes life good in the first place. In simple terms, it treats virtue as the heart of human flourishing in action and not something secondary.

The 'Embedded Self' vs. Individualism

Michael Sandel, a leading communitarian thinker, criticizes John Rawls’s liberalism in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982). He argues that Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” treats people as if they have no real ties, roles or commitments, reducing the person to an empty and abstract self. Sandel insists that we are always “embedded” in particular communities, cultures and belongings. He maintains that justice arises from a common life built on mutual understanding, not from isolated individuals pursuing personal gains. Rejecting the liberal idea that the self exists before its goals, Sandel argues instead that our purposes and identities come from the social world we belong to. In *Democracy and Discontent* (1996), he reiterates that modern liberalism’s overemphasis on the individual has caused many social and moral problems. Michael Sandel’s critique of liberal individualism closely resonates with buddhist ideas of interdependence. Sandel argues that human beings cannot be understood as isolated individuals who choose principles or life-goals independently because we are always shaped by the communities, cultures and relationships into which we are born. This “embedded self” mirrors the buddhist understanding of *paticca-samuppāda* (dependent origination) and *anattā* (non-self), which teaches that a person has no fixed, independent essence separate from causes, conditions and social relations. Just as Sandel rejects Rawls’s “unencumbered self” as an empty and unrealistic abstraction, buddhism chooses not to take up the idea of a permanent and self-sufficient individual. Instead, both perspectives hold that identity emerges through interconnected experiences, moral relationships and shared life practices. Therefore, a just society whether viewed through the lens of communitarianism or buddhism, cannot be built on isolated individuals pursuing private interests but must grow from communities rooted in mutual care, ethical responsibility and a shared moral guidance.

Justice and Social Harmony

Michael Walzer in his work, *Spheres of Justice* (1983) enunciated a communitarian theory of justice. A given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a certain way—that is in a way faithful to the shared understandings of its members. (When people disagree about the meaning of social goods, when understandings are controversial, then Justice requires that the society be faithful to the disagreements, providing institutional channels for their expressions, adjudicative mechanisms, and alternative distributions).

Michael Walzer argues that society should follow “complex equality,” meaning that advantages in one area (like wealth) should not give someone power in other areas (like health care, education or politics). Each sphere should have its own rules for distributing goods, so that money, family ties or social prestige do not dominate everything. This creates a society in which no one permanently outranks others. Walzer’s concept of complex equality, where advantages in one sphere should not dominate others, resonates with the buddhist principle of Sanghavatthu or the Four Bases of Social Harmony. These four bases holds generosity (dāna), kind speech (peyyavajja), meaningful service (atthacariyā) and impartiality (samānattā) ensuring that social interactions are governed by mutual care, fairness and respect rather than by domination or self-interest. Just as Walzer argues that wealth should not control health, education or political power, Sanghavatthu emphasizes that relationships and communal life must be guided by moral principles that protect the balance and dignity of all its members. Both perspectives support a society in which no individual’s advantage in one area can undermine equality or justice in other spheres, thereby promoting fairness, shared responsibility and ethical governance across social domains.

Primacy of the 'Good' and Community

Charles Taylor, a Canadian communitarian philosopher, criticized the liberal idea of humans as isolated, autonomous choosers in *Philosophical Papers* (1985). He argued that human agency, rights and freedom exist only within social contexts, as people develop meaning through constant interaction and reflection with other people. In *Sources of the Self* (1989), Taylor emphasized that humans are “embodied individuals” guided by moral sources that are secular, religious, literary and philosophical and that the good (intrinsic values) takes priority over the right (instrumental values). As regards the question of priority between 'right' and 'good', Taylor, like all communitarians, accords primacy to the 'good'. As he argues:

"Where 'good' means the primary goal of a consequentialist theory, where right is decided simply by its instrumentalist significance for this end, then we ought indeed to insist that the right can be primary to the good. But where...good... means whatever is marked out as higher by a qualitative distinction, then we could say that the reverse is the case, that in a sense, the good is always primary to the right... the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules which define the right"

Similarly, Buddhism emphasizes Dhamma (cosmic law/truth) as foundational which has rules, actions and community norms which goes parallel to the Taylor’s ideas that shared values give purpose to the rules that govern society welfare of the community reflecting moral purpose and communal welfare.

Community as a Cooperative Pursuit

Amitai Etzioni stated that, proponents of communitarianism emphasis the centrality of community in shaping political life, viewing politics not as a site of conflict as in liberal thought but as a cooperative pursuit of the common good. According to Etzioni (2013), communitarianism is a social and political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of community in the functioning of political life, in the analysis and evaluation of political institutions, and in understanding human identity and well-being. It arose in the 1980s as a critique of two prominent philosophical schools: contemporary liberalism, which seeks to protect and enhance personal autonomy and individual rights in part through the activity of government and libertarianism, a form of liberalism (sometimes called "classical liberalism") that aims to protect individual rights especially the rights to liberty and property, through strict limits on

governmental power. The idea of the common good is inherently normative and linked to justice, making precision definition difficult. Broadly, it refers to goals that promote the welfare of the entire community rather than privileging the interests of any specific group. It reflects what the community collectively recognizes as beneficial, transcending individual or factional interests. Communitarianism emphasizes that community shapes identity, values, morality and political life. Similarly, this is placed in buddhism on the Sangha where harmony, fellowship, and unity are fostered through acts of goodwill and shared living, as detailed in the *Dutiyasāraṇīyasutta*.

“Monks these six are conditions that are conducive to amiability, that engender feelings of endearment, engender feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity. Which six?

“There is the case where a monk is set on bodily acts of goodwill with regard to his companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

“And further, the monk is set on verbal acts of goodwill with regard to his companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This, too, is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

“And further, the monk is set on mental acts of goodwill with regard to his companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This, too, is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

“And further, whatever righteous gains the monk may obtain in a righteous way—even if only the alms in his bowl—he does not consume them alone. He consumes them after sharing them in common with his virtuous companions in the holy life. This, too, is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.”

“And further—with reference to the virtues that are untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration—the monk dwells with his virtue in tune with that of his companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This, too, is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

“And further—with reference to the view that is noble, leading outward, that leads those who act in accordance with it to the right ending of suffering & stress—the monk dwells with his view in tune with that of his companions in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This, too, is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity”.

A.N 6.12. *Dutiyasāraṇīyasutta* (Conducive to Amiability)

This mirrors communitarian ideas that moral development occurs within community and institutions should reinforce shared value and the welfare of the community determines individual flourishing. Thus, both reject extreme individualism as a concept.

Conclusion

Communitarian concept of the common good insists on cooperation, and not competition between individuals, and thereby promotes social solidarity. It inspires the isolated individuals to establish cordial relations between each other, and shows them the way to obtain emotional security. In a nutshell, communitarianism embodies a strong moral philosophy in shaping identity, values and belongings whereas Buddhism deepens this lens through principles of Sīla, Karuṇā, and Paṭiccasamuppāda which gives a contemporary society with holistic ideas built on empathy rather than competition.

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