

East-meets-West: How *the Dhammapada* Influenced the New Thought Movement

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ABSTRACT: New Thought teachings are based on a variety of pre-existing traditions as well as on information new to the human consciousness. While the exact source of specific New Thought concepts is unclear, evidence suggests that the movement benefited from eastern religious traditions including Buddhism. New Thought metaphysical principles including the Law of Attraction, the practice of meditation, and the Law of Cause and Effect can be found in the Buddhist text, *the Dhammapada*. These principles are described in detail throughout *the Dhammapada*, providing strong evidence that early New Thought thinkers were influenced by the contents of *the Dhammapada* and Buddhist practices.

BACKGROUND

New Thought metaphysical teachings benefit from millennia of religious, spiritual, and cultural traditions.ⁱ The teachings also benefit from information that was new to the human consciousness when received by early thinkers and practitioners. To determine the degree of influence on New Thought metaphysics of any contributing perspective would be an impossible undertaking. Fortunately, such precision is unnecessary for us to benefit from its transformative teachings. However, it is useful to explore New Thought's roots so that we may better understand the context from which it came and the modern spiritual reference point in which it fits.

Among the traditions from which New Thought draws are those of the eastern religions.ⁱⁱ While rarely discussed, Buddhism and New Thought share a common philosophical framework aligning some of New Thought's messages more closely with the spiritual thoughts of the East than those in the West.ⁱⁱⁱ This is interesting, considering modern New Thought teachings are frequently presented in biblical context.

Among the eastern spiritual perspectives, Buddhism was selected for this analysis because of the philosophies, principles, and practices that it shares with New Thought metaphysics. *The Dhammapada*, or the "Sayings of Buddha," is a popular Buddhist text that records

the heart of Buddha's teachings. *The Dhammapada* contains Buddha's words on the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path, among other philosophies. Because it is still used by all modern Buddhist denominations,^{iv} it is appropriate for exploring broad concepts within Buddhism. Thus, this analysis does not explore the variations within and among Buddhist practices and modern dogma.

Following a brief introduction to metaphysical philosophy, this paper will explore the specific and profound influence of the *Dhammapada* on New Thought teachings. This influence will be considered in three key themes: the law of cause and effect, the practice of meditation, and the practice of manifestation.

Early Greek Metaphysicians. Aristotle and Plato were the first to record early metaphysical concepts in detail on the Earthly plane.^v Both philosophers referenced earlier thinkers that informed their philosophies, making it difficult to pinpoint the initial descent of metaphysical concepts into Earth's consciousness. Likely, several people received these concepts from Divine Consciousness before they became ingrained into mass human consciousness. In any case, Aristotle defined metaphysics more than 300 years before the birth of Christ. His work has influenced 2,000 years of Abrahamic religious traditions,^{vi} which are often referenced by the New Thought movement.

Furthermore, some of Aristotle's assertions, notably in *Metaphysics*,^{vii} seem to mirror certain new thought principles particularly with regard to his comments on the power of thought and his discourse on what would seem to be an early description of the Law of Attraction. Understanding possible sources of influence for Aristotle and other early Greek philosophers is thus important for understanding the early evolution of the New Thought Movement.

Evidence suggests that during their lifetimes Aristotle and his contemporaries were influenced by eastern religions including Buddhism. We have documentation indicating Aristotle's travels to Asia Minor and evidence suggesting more extensive travel in Asia. Buddha also traveled extensively, primarily in India, Tibet, and Nepal.^{viii} While travel outside this region is not well documented, it is clear that the contemporary sphere of the Buddha's influence reached far beyond Asia.^{ix}

Before Aristotle's birth, the philosophies of Buddhism had reached Greece. Thinkers from both cultures exchanged ideas in these early pre-Christian centuries, resulting in the proliferation syncretic ideas in Greece, Asia Minor, and the Asian subcontinent. Based on what we know, it holds that Greek philosophy – including Aristotle's – benefited in some ways from Buddhist influences.^{ix} The emerging possibility is that Buddhist thought implicitly influenced many modern religious and spiritual perspectives through Greek philosophy. Further evaluation of Greco-Buddhism exceeds the scope of this project, though it remains an important area for future study.

Metaphysical Philosophy. Most Earthly spiritual perspectives are based on one of the two philosophical views of metaphysics: process or substance. Process metaphysics focuses on “becoming” and thus views the human experience as evolutionary.ⁱⁱⁱ The “process metaphysics” soul is fluid and is changing through a series of continuous processes at different scales of existence. In contrast, substance metaphysics emphasizes “being.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thus a

“substance metaphysics” soul is first and foremost a “thing.” A “thing” can be measured in finite terms and can be broken down and described by its fundamental components. This difference is important to note because most spiritual perspectives hold one perspective or the other.

Process metaphysics best describes the perspectives of the New Thought movement and Buddhism. Because the two stem from the same branch of metaphysics, understanding and exchange of concepts between the movements is enhanced. It is philosophically sound for process-based New Thought to find common ground with process-based Buddhism's concept of what happens to the soul after death. If not perfect agreement, Buddhism and New Thought would find mutual understanding in a supposition such as “the soul rejoins the collective universal consciousness after death.”

However, it is difficult if not impossible for process-based New Thought and Buddhism to find common ground with substance-based Judeo-Christian concepts of what happens to the soul after physical death. The typical Judeo-Christian perspective would view the soul as a fixed “block” of matter that would be transferred to another plane of existence rather than experience further evolution. Even though New Thought teachings use and adapt many Judeo-Christian teachings, their underlying philosophical perspectives are incompatible. The limited but profoundly central example of the soul's destiny illustrates this key difference and suggests other sources for New Thought's philosophical basis. The remainder of this paper will focus on specific themes from Buddhism's *Dhammapada* that likely influenced New Thought thinkers.

ANALYSIS

(2) ...If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.

Chapter I. The Twin-Verses, The Dhammapada

Theme 1. The Law of Cause and Effect.

The law of cause and effect is a universal law of metaphysics^x and is illustrated throughout the *Dhammapada*. The Law states that every action has a consequence and is related to the Law of Karma. Everything we do has a measured effect, even if we do not see it immediately or even in this lifetime. The metaphysician would call this Divine Perfection. In Buddhist understanding, the Law of Karma is one mechanism by which Divine Perfection manifests.

The consequences of an “untended mind” are discussed using the analogy of rain and its effects on a home with a poor roof. Like the roof, the untended mind is ill prepared to handle anything that comes to it and, as Melody Beattie would say, is “blown about by every wind.”^{xi} New Thought Metaphysics emphasizes “right thinking” and emphasizes the importance of keeping one’s thoughts in check.^x The Bible passage frequently cited by Metaphysicians in illustrating this law is:

(7) Don't be deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. (8) For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption. But he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

- *Galatians Chapter 6, Holy Bible*

As illustrated by Buddha’s *Dhammapada*, the *Holy Bible*, and New Thought Metaphysical writings, messy thoughts mean messy manifestations and ultimate lack in fulfillment of one’s desires. *The Dhammapada* states:

(13) As rain breaks through an ill-thatched house, passion will break through an unreflecting mind.

(14) As rain does not break through a well-thatched house, passion will not break through a well-reflecting mind.

Chapter I. The Twin-Verses, The Dhammapada

The actions of man are discussed in the same chapter of *the Dhammapada*, hinting at the future results for one who does evil versus one who does good deeds. The law of cause and effect is completed in “two worlds,” one being the spiritual and one being the current consciousness experience. Death means continued joy for one who does right and continued torment for one who does wrong.

This passage should not be interpreted to mean a linear path to “heaven” or “hell,” but rather in context that one creates his own future consequences with his actions today. While Buddhist texts describe a “heaven” and a “hell,” along with other planes of existence,^{xii} these are not “permanent” states of being as modern Christian dogma asserts. In keeping with the Buddhist belief of reincarnation, “the next (world)” mentioned the following passage would be interpreted to mean one’s soul’s destiny in the next level of reincarnation rather than one’s permanent after-life home. In Buddhism, nothing is permanent.^{xiii} *The Dhammapada* says:

(15) The evil-doer mourns in this world, and he mourns in the next; he mourns in both. He mourns and suffers when he sees the evil of his own work.

(16) The virtuous man delights in this world, and he delights in the next; he delights in both. He delights and rejoices, when he sees the purity of his own work.

Chapter I. The Twin-Verses, The Dhammapada

Theme 2. Meditation. Meditation is a central practice of the New Thought metaphysician, being the first skill taught to a new practitioner.^x Buddha teaches the practice of meditation in the *Dhammapada*, asserting its importance for clearing and focusing the mind and in cultivating certain positive traits. Meditation originated in Hindu cultures of the east,^{xiv} before being adopted by Buddhism and ultimately

by New Thought metaphysics. The purpose for metaphysical meditation, which is also referred to as “the Silence,”^x does not match the purposes of Buddhist and Hindu meditation. However, the practice as it is taught became incorporated into New Thought metaphysics by its early thinkers who were influenced by eastern religious thought.

The Dhammapada holds, as does New Thought metaphysics, that meditation is a freeing activity that permits one to open the mind and to live a better life. Both emphasize and require regular practice of meditation to achieve greater understanding and freedom. In the second passage below, Buddha goes as far as to state that destruction arises from the absence of meditation. Here he clearly positions meditation as the key practice for furthering one’s progress on path. *The Dhammapada* states:

(23) *These wise people, meditative, steady, always possessed of strong powers, attain to Nirvana, the highest happiness.*

Chapter II. On Earnestness, The Dhammapada

and

(282) *Through zeal knowledge is gotten, through lack of zeal knowledge is lost; let a man who knows this double path of gain and loss thus place himself that knowledge may grow.*

Chapter XX. The Way, The Dhammapada

Theme 3. Manifestation. Perhaps one of the most popular metaphysical laws of our time is the Law of Attraction, popularized by *The Secret*,^{xv} but first clarified by early New Thought thinkers.^{xvi} The Law of Attraction focuses on the power of our thoughts and beliefs in intentionally manifesting what we want. Used with other metaphysical tools such as the previously discussed Law of Cause and Effect and the practice of meditation, we can use the Law of Attraction to consciously create the life we

desire. The Law of Attraction is pervasive in New Thought literature as well as in the *Bible*. Example verses include:

(7) *Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened for you. (8) For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. To him who knocks it will be opened.*

- *Matthew Chapter 7, Holy Bible*

and

(24) *Therefore I tell you, all things whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you have received them, and you shall have them.*

- *Mark Chapter 11, Holy Bible*

The Law of Attraction is implicitly described throughout *the Dhammapada*, beginning with the first verse. However, the *Dhammapada* describes Law of Attraction more in terms of the effects of thoughts and beliefs than prayer. *The Dhammapada* describes “mental states” from which perceptions are born. The perception of suffering comes from a poor mental state and the result is suffering. In other words, suffering is attracted to one operating with a mindset of suffering. The first verse describes the negative consequences of manifesting with a poor mindset. The second verse is perhaps the most profound verse in *the Dhammapada* relating to Law of Attraction and describes, cookbook-like, how to manifest desired experiences. *The Dhammapada* states:

(1) *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.*

(2) *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 a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.

- Chapter I. *The Twin-Verses*, The Dhammapada

Other verses in *the Dhammapada* also describe the benefits of manifesting with the right mindset. The following verse describes the power of the tamed mind, citing ease in life. The mind is trained to do what the person wants it to do. *The Dhammapada* says:

(35) It is good to tame the mind, which is difficult to hold in and flighty, rushing wherever it listeth; a tamed mind brings happiness.

- Chapter III. *The Mind*, The Dhammapada

CONCLUSION

(50) Not the perversities of others, not their sins of commission or omission, but his own misdeeds and negligences should a sage take notice of.

(51) Like a beautiful flower, full of colour, but without scent, are the fine but fruitless words of him who does not act accordingly.

(52) But, like a beautiful flower, full of colour and full of scent, are the fine and fruitful words of him who acts accordingly.

- Chapter IV. *Flowers*, The Dhammapada

New Thought metaphysics benefits from a vast array of spiritual, cultural, and religious traditions. Among these, the eastern traditions and Buddhism specifically and profoundly influenced the laws and practices of modern New Thought metaphysics. Cross-cutting themes between the two traditions can be examined by comparing modern with historical practices and spiritual texts. Examining historical Buddhist spiritual texts, such as the *Dhammapada*, in context with New Thought teachings suggests

that teachings from Buddhism were formational for New Thought's early thinkers.

The Dhammapada contains early statements about New Thought metaphysical principles, including the law of cause and effect, the practice of meditation, and the practice of manifestation also known as the Law of Attraction. *The Dhammapada* can be used to help us understand the sources these and other New Thought Principles. For the practicing metaphysician, it holds that Universal Mind is present in both traditions.

Author's Note: All citations from The Dhammapada contained in this paper come from a public domain English translation copy provided courtesy of Project Gutenberg. All citations from the Holy Bible are from the World English Bible, which has been released into the public domain.

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Chris Anama-Green is a graduate of the College of Divine Metaphysics and an ordained minister in the Church of Divine Metaphysics. This paper was written as part of his metaphysical studies. Chris is an EdD candidate at the University of the Cumberland, has an MAT from Morehead State University, an MPH from East Carolina University, and a BA from Emory & Henry College.

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