

## WHY IDEAS ON IDEAS MATTER: EARLY BUDDHISM AND PROCESS PHILOSOPHY ON IDEATION

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*Abstract: The formation of ideas is a universal characteristic of humankind. However, the nature of ideation and the ensuing convictions is fraught with ontological and ethical implications. This article seeks to explore the issues of ideation and establish the implicit substance-based ontology that accompanies it from a Buddhist and Whiteheadian perspective. The early Buddhist sutras identify extreme positions as resulting in unbeneficial practices and conceptions. These findings are correlated with Alfred North Whitehead's criticism directed towards substance orientated epistemology. Both Buddhism and Whitehead share the conviction that absolute or essentialist claims are suspicious, and they both attempt to create a scheme of presuppositions and language that better appropriate lived human experiences. The Buddha, as with Whitehead, explored new modes of terminology to sidestep such reified understandings of nature. The article concludes with some advantages of event-based ontology that envisions the actuality of the universe as consisting of events and experience as opposed to substance.*

Humanity's current rapport with knowledge is precarious. Bombarded with sectarian news outlets, social media campaigns, and postmodern critiques, discerning authentic information seems nearly impossible in a cultural context where lies slip into veracity and truths smack of deceit. The issue, to an extent, is not misinformation, but the fidelity ascribed to it. As Frederick Nietzsche noted long ago, "convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" (Nietzsche 1996: 179). His observation is apt, that is, falsities in themselves are relatively harmless if firm convictions do not accompany them. One of the underlying assumptions that demands an unequivocal differentiation between true and false, and the resultant conviction, is the pervasive substantialist view of reality, a perspective that refuses to acknowledge the indeterminate quality inherent within the nature of reality and knowledge. In this regard, the alternative paradigms of Buddhist Thought and Process Philosophy show a different appropriation.

The affinity between Alfred North Whitehead's Process philosophy and Buddhism concerning their anti-substantialism have long been noted, and Whitehead even admitted that "the philosophy of organism [Process Philosophy] seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought" (Whitehead 1979: 7). The most critical work exploring their resonating features is Steve Odin's work on Hua-Yen Buddhism (*Huáyán* 華嚴) and Process Philosophy's examination on penetration and interpenetration.

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Buddhism and Process Thought's mutually illuminating connections is grounded on their rejection of substance thinking and its correlative ramifications in favor of a circumstantial approach to truth. There is, however, another tier of Buddhist-Process discourse that has not yet been fruitfully explored, that is, juxtaposing Early Buddhism and Process Thought. Before the advent of the sectarian trends of Abhidharma (*āpīdāmó* 阿毗達磨), among others, and the later umbrella terms of Theravada and Mahayana, the Early Buddhist approach systematically engendered a mode of thought that truly revolutionized the Indian intellectual tradition. Instead of entering into the standard multifaceted South Asian discourse upon ontology and epistemology, the Buddha developed a system of thought based upon the most fundamental constituents of human existence—psychophysical experience, which may loosely equate to William James' Radical Empiricism. Alfred North Whitehead, similarly, pursued a new mode of philosophical investigation based on an experiential, event-based ontology, that better aligns is more intuitive to human experience. This article seeks to further elucidate some of their affinities concerning their epistemological and ontological characterizations of the importance of conditionality.

In order to achieve these objectives, the paper is divided into several sections. First, I explore Early Buddhism's critique of its intellectual milieu. The early sutras identify extreme positions as resulting in unbeneficial practices and ideations. I correlate these findings with Whitehead's criticism directed towards substance thinking. Here, it becomes clear that both Early Buddhism and Whitehead were suspicious of absolute truth claims that derive from closed metaphysical systems, and they both attempted to create a scheme of presuppositions and language that better appropriated lived human experiences. The Buddha, as with Whitehead, explored new modes of terminology to sidestep such reified understandings of nature. The Buddha employed "becoming/not becoming" as an alternative way of discourse to avoid essentialist statements that operate within strict binaries whereas Whitehead gave precedence to process over substance. Lastly, I conclude with the importance of maintaining intellectual humility in a continuously evolving universe.

### I. Early Buddhism and Absolutism

Before addressing the topic at hand, a few words on my usage of Early Buddhism is necessary. Early Buddhism denotes a historical investigating into the doctrinal developments of Buddhist thought, and it seeks to expose discrepancies between earlier and later forms of Buddhism as they pertain to both practice and theory. Although some scholars may have expected the utilization of the Japanese movement of Critical Buddhism, spearheaded by Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō, to

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<sup>1</sup> For more, visit [www.openhorizons.org](http://www.openhorizons.org).

critique the presuppositions of East Asian Buddhism, I find they do not go far enough in the reappraisal of early Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

This lapse can be attributed to the nature of Buddhist Studies in Japanese academia, along with Critical Buddhist's predilection for the deconstructive approach of Madhyamaka thought. This hermeneutical disposition, however, taints their readings of early Buddhist scriptures e.g., that of the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas*. Buddhist scholars through critical historical and philological research have reconstructed several developments within Buddhist thought that already transpired by the time of the ancient hero of Critical Buddhism, the great dialectician Nāgārjuna. In both cases, that of Critical Buddhism and Early Buddhism, the East Asian traditions are contrasted with its Indian counterparts with the latter being the criteria of orthodoxy. Although Early Buddhist scholars agree with Critical Buddhism's overall critique of East Asian strands of Buddhism, their analyses are derived from different hermeneutical perspectives. For this comparative investigation, I utilize Early Buddhism instead of Critical Buddhism.

The *Dhammapada*, generally translated as "The Sayings of the Buddha," is one of the most authentic sources in the Pali canon that is directly attributed to the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> Within the text, the Buddha's psychological investigation is expounded through a simple yet powerful analogy. The Buddha correlates suffering and its causes with a tree and its roots (D 24.338). The Buddha states that an individual may chop down a tree countless times, but as long as the root of the tree is intact, the tree will naturally regrow. The Awakened One, instead of erecting another tree among other trees, sought to uproot the source of the tree completely. Whereas the growing trees signify closed systems of thought, the "root of the problem" is the implicit craving for unwavering certainty. The issue, then, is not necessarily the ontological or epistemological pronouncements representative of the trees, but the essential psychological convictions that engender them.

Within the scope of this discussion, the problem is not ontological, but rather the modes of thought imputed on reality. This discernment is crucial because it safeguards Buddhism from the superficial and unwarranted charge of idealism. The Buddha's objective, then, was to create a more coherent theory of truth by reassessing our suppositions and justifications in terms of psychological analysis, not metaphysical claims. This argument becomes explicitly evident as the paper develops.

In the *Dīgha Nikāya* or the Long Discourses, we find one of the most decisive articulations of the Buddha's philosophical views that differentiates it from his contemporary counterparts.<sup>4</sup> From the socialite Brahmins to the forest ascetics, the Buddha identifies 62 views that were propagated on the Indian subcontinent during his time. These 62 views are classified further between those who maintain views upon the past, which makes up 16 views, and those who support beliefs concerning

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent source in English that address the Critical Buddhism movement, see the edited work by Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, 1997. *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>3</sup> For simplicity, *The Dhammapada* will be reference as "D".

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, the *Dīgha Nikāya* will be reference as "DN".

the future, which make up the remaining 44 views (DN, 1.13; 1.31). The various critiques put forth are comprehensive, pitted against those who uphold eternalism (concerning the world, soul, or both) to those who maintain a radical skepticism (nothing can be known). Despite the drastically differing views analyzed through these 62 views, the Buddha refuted them under a single categorical mistake: All the views maintained are deemed as “overstatements” or “speculative views” (*adhivuttipada*), and as such, cannot be entertained definitively.

For every view refuted, the Buddha disclaims they are “merely the feelings of those who do not know and see, the worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving” (DN. 3.32). Again, the Awakened One identifies the root problem to cravings, and these metaphysical overstatements arise from personal dispositions or feelings as conditioned by contact with the external world. Given this presupposition, Buddha writes, “when those ascetics and Brahmins who are speculators about the past, the future, or both, having fixed views, put forward views in 62 different ways, that is conditioned by contact” (D 3.57). The term “contact” acquires additional layers in Buddhist discourse. Unlike the Western physiological theory of the Five Senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body), Buddhism upholds a psychologically infused theory of the Six Bases (*liùchǔ* 六處) that includes the mind in addition to the Five Senses. The mind, like the other senses, is a conditioned faculty and not an objective synthesizer of information as in Cartesian dualism.

The psychophysical paradigm systematizing the relation between the base senses and the speculative views always occurs within a specific cultural context which furthers another layer of the Awakened one’s critique. Whereas the exploration above sought to dismiss “overstatements” by on the grounds of psychological/phenomenological justifications, the Buddha also accounted for another component of cultural reasonings that lead to exaggerated claims. This critique is especially powerful in our current global situation where nationalism, racism, classism, and other ingrained attitudes become foundations for convictions.

The Awakened One exposes five different grounds that an individual may justify an overstatement. They are <sup>1</sup> through faith, <sup>2</sup> approval (or preference), <sup>3</sup> oral tradition, <sup>4</sup> reasoned cogitation, and <sup>5</sup> delight in the contemplation of views. The *Majjhima Nikāya* relays the following problem arising from these five grounds, the first of which is faith:<sup>5</sup>

Now something may be entirely accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistaken... [under these conditions] it is not proper for a wise person who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.” (MN 2.170-171)

For each ground a similar argument is put forth. To maintain authenticity and intellectual honesty, he argues that we must not absolutize notions of reality because, under critical investigation, one realizes these differing grounds for ideas of truth do

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, the *Majjhima Nikāya* will be reference as “MN”.

not yield certainty. The thrust of this critique may be summarized as such: To uphold any position absolutely, whether being justified through faith, preference, oral tradition, rationalism, or contemplative enjoyment, is at the detriment of evidence falling outside of the scope of the particularized perspective. Knowing this limitation, the Buddha argues that a wise person must maintain beliefs tentatively, allowing for new experiences to alter the opinions and attitudes. The early discourse's doctrine on *Pratīyasamutpāda* (*yuánqǐ* 緣起) or co-dependent origination and the *12 Nidanas* (*shíèr yīnyuán* 十二因緣) facilitates in demonstrating this task. Ideation rises through the ceaseless cycle of causation, starting with: Ignorance→ volition formations→ consciousness→ name-and-form→ six bases→ contact→ feeling→ craving → clinging→ existence→ birth→ aging and death (SN 2.1-2).<sup>6</sup> This psychophysical principle systematically accounts for mental formations and the convictions that follow. The *12 Nidanas* is a demonstrative tool, evincing how the 62 speculative views leads to the perpetuation of convictions and, ultimately, suffering.

Between the psychophysical aspect and cultural/personal predilections that give rise to thoughts and subsequent truth claims, one acquires a working understanding of Early Buddhism's understanding of ideation, that is, ideas rise and fall away, never to be reified in an honest quest for truth. David Kalupahana captures this dialectic perfectly when alludes to the axiom: "What one feels, one perceives." As he explains:

It is a clear admission that our interests, whether simple interests or more extended emotions, such as likes and dislikes, play an important role in our perceptions. Indeed, no perception can be totally free from perspectives—perspectives determined minimally by interest and maximally by likes and dislikes, that is, by prejudices. (Kalupahana 1997: 34)

Brahmins and ascetics engender, then reify, metaphysical views upon predilections and extended emotions. Rather than propounding another metaphysical perspective among others, the Buddha understood that the experiences that ground such attitudes are "the arising and passing away of the six bases of contact" that need not be absolutized. The statements or views must fall within the limits of our continually shifting sense experiences; anything beyond is an "overstatement" that leads individuals into a "thicket of views," an intellectual labyrinth.

## II. Whitehead's Process Thought and the Problem of Overstatements

The Buddha's exploration of the role of ideations and the psychological desire to constantly reify them into absolutes provides a perfect transition to Alfred North Whitehead's critiques directed towards scientific inquiry and philosophical essentialism. Active in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Whitehead intellectual acumen is a *tour de force*, being both a renowned mathematician and philosopher. His turn to metaphysics and philosophical inquiry was grounded in an existential crisis, instigated by the death of his son, Eric, in World War I. Upon this unfortunate event,

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<sup>6</sup> "SN" refers to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*.

Whitehead turned his attention to the importance of philosophy, especially the philosophy of science.

As with the Awakened One, Whitehead became suspicious of philosophical classifications and scientific certitude in a similar vein. Interestingly, He even shares the Buddha's terminology to critique intellectual absolutism when he states in *Process and Reality*, "the chief error of philosophy is overstatement." Our aim in the quest for knowledge is the search for applicable generalizations, "but the estimate of success is exaggerated" (Whitehead 1979: 7). Recognizing the limits of scientific inquiry, he sought to expose questionable scientific presuppositions. In doing so, he soon realized that the scientific disciplines were replete with "overstatements."

Whitehead argues that overstatements occur under two primary forms. The first is the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In the nature of thought, mental constructs of spatialization are the "expression of more concrete facts under the guise of very abstract logical constructions." This activity is a constant movement in conceptualizing the world for very pragmatic reasons, but these ontic constructs are habitually in danger of acquiring timeless quality whereby becoming a threat to critical investigations, whether in scientific or philosophical inquiry. This confusion in cognition, as Whitehead describes it, "is merely the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete" (Whitehead 1985: 50-51). Such pronouncements align him the Buddha's observations of the mind being a contingent faculty characterized by conditionality. Furthermore, two parts to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness may be identified. The first problem that arises is the isolatedness of abstractions. Once abstracted into a mental construct, the causal conditions that gave rise to the particular occasion are neglected, as if the event manifest independently. Whitehead states, "this fallacy consists in neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought. There are aspects of actualities which are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought to these categories" (Whitehead 1979: 7-8).

Whitehead is pointing out that some categories are maintained while others are lost in the mental abstractions derived from actual occasions. What is lost in this abstraction primarily concerns the influx of factors that gave rise to a specific event. As a student of Whitehead's noted in a lecture, "reality applies to connections, and only relatively to the things connected. (A) is real for (B), and (B) is real for (A), but [they are] not absolutely real independent of each other" (Heath). Put differently, the investigation of A must, by necessity, include B because things are constituted by their relations. Intricately tied to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is, what Whitehead terms, the fallacy of simple location. The quest for absolute knowledge is under attack insofar as Whitehead is alluding to the fact that our understanding is always based upon our immediacy of experience, without being able to be fully cognizant of past conditions that ultimately gave rise to the current conditions. As such, our immediacy, by default, becomes the criterion by which true is measured. Yet, the perceiver's location is simple in several regards, given their cultural-historical location. The complexity of these ontological matrix is amplified through psychological dispositions.

For the epistemic dynamics that further complicate our ideations, Whitehead introduces positive and negative prehensions to illustrate the point that selections must be made, and certain categories are either highlighted or ignored in the process of abstraction. Once again, this mental process is very pragmatic, but the formulated conceptions in which one interprets the universe cannot adequately be comprehensive as to capture an absolute truth. Instead, Whitehead opts-out of the quest of a timeless, absolute knowledge in favor of more realistic renderings and upholds the importance of continual revisions and reassessments of ideations.

The revisionist principle is central for Whitehead theory of knowledge. Abstractions, as problematic as conceptually they may be, are useful but contain a dark side when utilized at the expense of other experiences or categories. He states, “It is of the utmost importance, to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions” (Whitehead 1985: 59). This assessment is the second form of an overstatement, which is the sense of certitude one derives from such abstractions. The goal, as Whitehead understands it, is arriving at generalities, not unalterable specifics. The success of mathematics detracted philosophy from this proper aim (Whitehead 1979: 8). The success of mathematics has led to overstatements in all fields of inquiry by striving of unalterable truths.

### III. A Different Paradigm for Ideation

Given this brief exploration into the ideation and the process of abstraction from an Early Buddhism position and a Whiteheadian position, we find a congruent critique. Their critiques revolve around the issues of static ideations in a world characterized by flux. Again, and this is pivotal, this universal occurrence of abstractive thought is a practical, indispensable tool for humankind, but, on another level, may ultimately lead to exaggerated results and overstatements. The affinities between the two should be apparent, but one of the most striking conceptual similarities between Buddhism and Whitehead is their utilization of “becoming” to sidestep the problems addressed above. Long before Whitehead exalted “becoming” as the quintessential feature of reality employing creativity, the Buddha was aware of the advantage attached to this verb that, like Whitehead, maintained an indeterminate process of actualization.

The Discourse to Prince Abhaya found within the *Majjhima Nikāya* exposes one creative way in which the Buddha uniquely addresses the notion of truth. The chapter recounts an episode where the Jain founder instructs the young Prince Abhaya in a ploy to discredit the Buddha’s teaching by confronting him with a poignant question. Upon posing the question to the Awakened One, the Buddha changes the discourse away from a standard binary response and exposes the conditional nature of the answer, to which he responds:

In the same way, prince, when wise nobles or brahmins, householders or contemplatives, having formulated questions, come to the Tathagata and ask him, he comes up with the answer on the spot. Why is that? Because the property of the Dhamma is thoroughly penetrated by the Tathagata.

From his thorough penetration of the property of the Dhamma, he comes up with the answer on the spot. (MN, 58.11)

The Buddha, by not adhering to absolutist declarations, asserts that answers cannot be pre-established, but rather formulated after a thorough examination of contingent circumstance. Responses, then, can only be expressed “on the spot” due to the fluid nature of the circumstances accompanying the question. To escape the simple dichotomy of true or false, the Buddha in this particular discourse employs the term “become” (*bhūta*) as opposed to simply true (*sacca*). David Kalupahana astutely states, “experience, whether sensory or extraordinary, does not provide us with ‘ready-made’ truths. Bhūta or ‘become’ highlights that very idea. What is true is what has ‘come to be,’ and what is false is what ‘has not come to be’ (*abhūta*)” (Kalupahana 1997: 51). The idea of truth being associated with “becoming” allows the Buddha to overcome his inquisitor’s ploy to trap him in making an absolutist claim, a claim that would necessarily make him overreach into an overstatement.

One place that highlights this exact insight, among others, is found Whitehead’s monograph *Modes of Thought*. He sets the stage by proposing two antithetical propositions, which he names p and q, and concludes that their inconsistency “must mean that in the modes of togetherness illustrated in some presupposed environment the meanings of the proposition p and q cannot both occur.” Thus far, we have a standard proposition based on the law of non-contradiction. However, Whitehead continues:

Now process is the way by which the universe escapes from the exclusion of inconsistency. Such exclusions belong to the finitude of circumstance. By means of process, the universe escapes from the limitation of the finite. Process is the immanence of the infinite in the finite; whereby all bounds are burst, and all inconsistency dissolved. (Whitehead 1968: 54)

Whitehead’s entire philosophical system is strikingly similar in this regard, insofar as he changes the discourse from objects—that may easily fall into binaries of is/is-not—to a conversation based on process and becoming. Knowledge is obtained by the recognizing the togetherness of the universe.

By emphasizing the role of circumstance and becoming as components central to notion of knowledge, Whitehead taps into the Buddha’s pragmatic approach to truth that keeps an open-ended understanding of truth; always ready for reassessment without falling into absolute claims. Truth is always a matter of indeterminacy that is grounded in the contingency and togetherness of the universe. Truth, then, is what becomes true under certain conditions, and falsity is what does not become due to the lack of favorable conditions. True and False are not set categories but conditional, to be acknowledged “on the spot,” as the Buddha exclaims.



### Conclusion

I have developed both the Early Buddhist and Whiteheadian problematizations with absolute adherence to ideations. In doing so, another tier of insight between Whiteheadian thought with Buddhism has been demonstrated through their revisionist approach to knowledge. Their most particular affinity is not upon ontology, as highlighted in later Buddhist traditions, but rather their epistemological framework and recognition of the limitations of mental formations as universal guiding principles. The revisionist intellectual framework may be a natural move for Whitehead's ontology of organism, but for Early Buddhism, it was the crux. While Whitehead sought to expand process to everything within the universe, including mental processes and even notions of divinity, the Buddha, primarily through the early discourses, did not utilize *Pratītyasamutpāda* as an ontological principle, but more appropriately as an analysis of mental processes. Perhaps, the Buddha would have cautioned Whitehead on his ontological over-statements about his processual remarks about the universe. It is a pity that Whitehead did not engage the metaphysical and epistemological insights of the Buddhist tradition directly while formulating his novel philosophical system.

The importance of being attentive to humanity's cognitive habits is paramount for a thriving world. Working with notions of universals and absolutism creates a stagnate intellectual paradigm in a continuously evolving world. By upholding the fluid nature of human constructs, humanity is better able to respond better to the inevitable fallibility inherent within humanly derived mental constructs. What makes for a powerful, successful concept is its ability to adapt to new circumstances.

The intellectual predilection for variableness over fixity is the conceptual difference typically emphasized between East-West cognitive patterns. Whereas the West would underline the "strong and firm," Eastern traditions took notice of a different notion of the polarity. Again, these are superficial remarks, but they speak to a general motif. For these reasons, South and East Asian intellectual traditions have proved to be beneficial dialogue partners for Whitehead's process philosophy. In a world becoming more defined by ideological identities and the volatile associative conflicts, assessing our ideations with greater flexibility will open a different discourse of understanding, appreciation, and mutual flourishing. In this regard, I am reminded of the *Dao De Jing's* perceptive recognition of the awesome nature of water (*shuǐ* 水). Water is a rich philosophical concept and motif in Chinese history. One of the best characterizations is captured in chapter 78 of Laozi's terse text:

Under Heaven, there is nothing gentler than water.  
 Yet when it attacks the strong and firm,  
 there is nothing more efficient [than water]  
 due to its lack [of form] and malleability.  
 天下莫柔弱于水，而攻堅強者，莫之能勝，以其無以易之。

The unique weakness of water is paradoxically its strength. Liquid's ability to naturally conform to new circumstances is due to its "soft" temperament, whereas the

"strong and firm" will ultimately meet its demise in different situations due to its course, unalterable form. This pertinent insight ties directly to the nature of ideations, which are accompanied by a "soft" or "firm" disposition.

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