
PROCESS THOUGHT, PERFECT BEING THEISM, AND BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

In both Process Thought and in Buddhism's *anicca* and *anatta*, all things flow, including in Process Thought a developing God co-creative with humans. This contrasts with an internally contradictory concept of Perfect Being God said to be both omniscient and immutable. In Buddhism the four *brahmaviharas* ("divine abidings") namely loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and even-mindedness are processes of happiness allowing application to daily life. Applied to daily life, Process Thought means opportunity for transcending dualistic opposites of true and false. Transcending binary opposites such as true or false, one experiences life as Process, considering rebirth in a causal nexus, one experiences things as flowing and changing in *kamma* Process. The process of perception includes mind as one of the six senses with corresponding six fields, and in *Process Relational Philosophy* changing interconnectedness is a key element of all life.

Keywords: Whitehead; Process Relational Philosophy;

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Buddhism; God

Introduction

Whitehead (1861-1947) and other process philosophers have brought objections (such as the problem of evil) to the concept of God when understood as a maximally great Perfect Being, and have chosen Process Thought as an alternative to Perfect Being Theism. In Germany, Paul Dahlke with translator Bhikkhu Silacara made many references to Process Thought in his book, *Buddhism and Science* (1913). Whitehead published the first edition of *Process and Reality* later in (1929). It was evident that Process Thought was already in the intellectual milieu in Germany, England, and the USA during this period.

For 20th century analytical philosophy in Britain and the USA, a basic summary of the philosophical argument about divine foreknowledge, omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection may be made as follows:

“The problem of divine foreknowledge can also be seen as denying that omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection constitute a coherent set. Roughly put, the problem of divine foreknowledge is as follows. If God is omniscient, then God knows what every person will do at every moment. To say that a person *p* has free will is to say that there is at least one moment *t* at which *p* does *A* but could have done other than *A*. But if a person *p* who does *A* at *t* has the ability to do other than *A* at *t*, then it follows that *p* has the ability to bring it about that an omniscient God has a false belief – and this is clearly impossible”².

The Process Concept of God in Process Theology states that God is developing and co-creative with humans and is able to withstand challenges successfully applied against Perfect Being Theism, such as the incompatibility of omniscience and immutability in Perfect Being Theism.

In the 21st century C. Robert Mesle (known as Bob Mesle in China) has increased the awareness of Western scholars of how Process Philosophy developed and is developing. Mesle increases awareness

² Emmet Einar Himmet, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy “Anselm”*, <https://iep.utm.edu/anselm-ontological-argument/#SH2> (accessed December 2023).

by doing his book review of Zhihe Wang, *Process Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity*.³ There Bob Mesle's review says that Wang opens his presentation of "Chinese harmonism" by affirming that Process thinking is in a deep sense much older than the modern Process movement, and is essential to Chinese traditions. Clearly, the work of Whitehead and more recently Mesle has wide appeal and resonates in American, European, and Chinese traditions.

A few of the many difficulties in Perfect Being Theology one may notice are: how can a spiritual entity make changes in the physical entities when these have logically opposite attributes? Are there "gaps" in physical causation that God can fill, such that a "God of the gaps" is required? Wouldn't believing in such a "God of the gaps" fall right into the age-old predicament of Descartes' mind/body "interactionism"? That is, if mind has no parts and does not occupy space, how can it possibly interact with body which has parts and is spatially locatable? Other difficulties include, in the light of modern science, how can one accept the ideas in the Bible about Creation as stated in the Book of Genesis? How is God's foreknowledge of what will happen in the future consistent with free will?

The Process vision is that God is not out of this world as a transcendent deity and judge, but instead God and humans co-exist in a world created by their cooperative endeavor. On this Process view, God could be influenced by humans (so God is not "impassible"). Also God could be immanent in the world instead of transcendent to the world. Indeed, this is part of the "adventure in ideas" that Alfred North Whitehead advocated. It is a basic idea of Process Thought that humans and God cooperate rather than God rules humans.

An important question is whether, and if so how, in Perfect Being Theology it makes good logical sense to say that the concept of God includes both the attributes of omniscience and immutability. Norman

³ C. Robert Mesle, book review of Zhihe Wang, "Process Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (January 2014): pp. 186-190.

Kretzmann (1928-1998) for one, has argued in a famous article that this combination of attributes is logically contradictory.⁴

When considered transcendent to the world, the concept of God as a Perfect Being seems flawed in light of the problem of evil. By contrast, according to the Process conception of God, God is not transcendent but is immanent in the world and consequently, the problem of evil does not arise.

The work of Alfred North Whitehead, a mathematician, logician, and philosopher, became an intellectually respectable starting point for the tradition of Process Thought, and thus initiator of both Process Philosophy and Process Theology. Charles Hartshorne was a teaching assistant of Whitehead's at Harvard University, found his own voice, and became another significant Process thinker in this tradition. Charles Hartshorne, author of numerous books, focused on theological development following on from Alfred North Whitehead's philosophical thought. Instead of focusing on Hartshorne's past connection with Whitehead, however, this researcher will focus on the present and future of process thought as connected with C. Robert Mesle and Zhihe Wang. Notably too the future was heralded when in September of 2024 the Center for Process Studies hosted "A Century of Process Thought: Commemorating Whitehead's Legacy at Harvard and Beyond" that included speaker John B. Cobb and many other leading Process thinkers at www.ctr4process.org

In thinking with Whitehead and more recent Process thinkers, such as John B. Cobb (1925 - present), C. Robert Mesle (1950 - present), and Zhihe Wang (1965 - present), one finds new ways of thinking about deity which resonate with Buddhist, Chinese, and modern Christian views of the world. As a part of this new development, it is one main focus of this research investigation to discover whether and to what extent there are similarities, differences, and convergences between Process Thought and Buddhism.

In the viewpoint of Process Thought explained by Whitehead,

⁴ Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 63 (1966): 409-421.graj

God interacts with humans in “concrecence”, i.e., a process of becoming, evolving, and self-actualization in co-creating the world. As a critical side point, this researcher thinks that that if God and humans co-created the world, that “world” would not include the world prior to the one in which humans existed, where dinosaurs existed. Since dinosaurs arose millions of years before humans existed, God and humans could not have co-created dinosaurs because humans would not have existed at that time. Thus, whether it is logically possible that God and humans could co-create the world depends on what the referent of “the world” is.

Process Thought asserts that God co-creates the world with humans by “persuasive influence” instead of coercion. That is, by “luring people to goodness, “in achieving actualization of noble values, knowing “one’s subjective aim” wherein each entity has a purpose and God inspires them to attain God’s image of goodness and creativity. God’s interaction with humans operates also by “relational aspect” in which one’s place in the network of interrelationships constituting the world is taken into account.⁵

Whitehead’s vision, as expressed in his greatest work, *Process and Reality*, illuminates the possibility of seeing the world as a network of interrelated processes. (One criterion of the greatness of a work is its capacity to inspire the research of future generations, as this researcher observed occurred when *Process and Reality* was introduced to undergraduate classrooms in the USA.) A parallel between Buddhism and Whitehead emerges wherein all of our choices and actions have consequences. Intentional human action is referred to in the Pali Buddhist four great *Nikāyas* (i.e., *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Digha Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, and *Anguttara Nikāya*) as *kamma* (action, deed, or event; Skt. *karma*). The concept of process is evident in my *Introduction to Early Buddhism*; the pages stated in the bibliography herein. The theme of causally interrelated Processes was developed by John B. Cobb (1925 - present), who studied, taught, and published in an interdisciplinary way on ecology, sustainable environmental ethics, and interreligious dialogue. Process thinkers understand well how processes of the world flow together,

⁵ Mesle, 2008, *ibid.*, pp. 103-105.

and so the interdisciplinary work of Process thinkers like John Cobb across the boundaries of disciplines is a fitting legacy to Whitehead and also coheres with modernity. As a stipulative definition, one may say that *intradisciplinary* teamwork is work performed by multiple members who work in the same field, whereas *interdisciplinary* teamwork, on the other hand, involves work performed by team members from multiple specialties or disciplines on one activity.

Focusing on Perfect Being Theism, Norman Kretzmann (1966) finds that when omniscience and immutability are two of God's attributes in the same concept of Perfect Being, then the concept is self-contradictory. Accordingly, a main idea of this research is that the concept of God in Perfect Being Theology is arguably self-contradictory.

Process Thought is an overall term that includes both Process Theology and Process Philosophy. Process Theology includes many religious ideas including those of Process Theism. Overall, Process Theology holds that God is not all-powerful in the classical sense of a being who is a judge and controller and who commands creatures to do God's will. Instead, the world is characterized by change, and change happens in part because beings have free will.

When God changes, then creative possibilities are opened up for humans who co-create with God, but God does not determine their particular choices. God of course is powerful but leaves it open for human beings to choose as they wish. Otherwise, God would not be good enough to qualify as God. God would be a tyrant. As Rush Rhees says in the "Natural Theology" chapter of his book *Without Answers*: "The power of God is a *different* power than the power of the Devil. But if you said that God is *more* powerful than the Devil – then I should not understand you because I would not know what sort of measure you used."⁶

In Process Thought, God is a force for goodness. It is not that God is more powerful than the Devil. It is that God co-creates goodness in the world by cooperating with human beings for the development of goodness.

⁶ Rush Rhees, *Without Answers*, (London: Routledge, 1969, Taylor & Francis, 2014), p. 113.

Unlike in pantheism, in Process Thought God contains the world but is not identical with the world, *contra pantheism*, and Process Philosophy endorses *panentheism*. **Panentheism** is the view that God is immanent in the universe but is more than the universe and is the consciousness of the universe.

Process Theology as seen by this researcher as providing an “arguably true” alternative to Perfect Being Theology. In a well-considered assessment, the convergence between Buddhism and Process Thought is close enough to justify using concepts of each to discuss the psychological and ontological elements of the other, for example, non-substantiality (*anattā*) and change in relationships; personal development over time and *anicca*; and suffering in life crises and *dukkha*. As Forrest Wood, Jr. has argued, “Destruction cannot disappear from any conceivable world in which creativity is fundamental. A world without destruction would be a static world without change, without decision making, without life.”⁷ So “the three characteristics” (viz, *anicca*, *anattā*, and *dukkha*) in Buddhism may provide a bridge on which to cross over in dialogue from Buddhism to Process Thought.

In sum, the concept of Process God is that of one which suffers with people in the way nature flows rather than as a fixed substance, and so partakes of *anicca*, *anatta*, and *dukkha* (the “three characteristics” of existence or *tilakkhaṇa*). Meditation is essential to Buddhism and meditating on the way nature flows facilitates understanding of Process Thought. On the Process view, the Process God has some power and some responsibility and shares these with people in co-creating the world. The “three characteristics” of Buddhism – impermanence, non-substantiality and suffering -- that people experience is a reality that is shared with the Process God. The concept and reality of the Process God has enough power to co-create the world with humans and shares with humans the responsibility of having done so. Evil and suffering exists in the world

⁷ Forrest Wood, Jr., “Whiteheadian Thought as a Basis for Philosophy of Religion” Chapter 7, www.religion-online.org accessed October 29, 2024 at 5:30 a.m. Thailand time.

because humans have free will and make mistakes; because there are good and evil forces in the world causing it by fighting each other; because God does not restrain humans from doing harm or force them to do the good; because the degree of evil and suffering in the world is enormous; because evil results from collective responsibility of humans and God wherein God shares power and responsibility; because the degree of evil and suffering obscures the clear emergence of a creative and loving God. Although developing fully a process philosophy of religion is not the objective of this paper, if it was then David Ray Griffin's book, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, would be a wonderful starting point for further discussion of evil.

On the positive side, the above problems do not invalidate the Process Thought view. Instead, the convergence of Buddhism and Process Thought makes a comparative philosophy bridge between them, and Process Thought views of developing persons and change are compatible with Buddhism.

To what extent Process Thought converges with ideas in Buddhism can be discovered by considering the concepts of process in Process Thought and application by C. Robert Mesle, the concepts of process and deity in Process Thought by A.N. Whitehead, and the concepts of diversity and ecological harmony in Process Thought in the work of John B. Cobb. His transdisciplinary approach and unifying theme of ecological interdependence have made him a Process Philosopher with an enormous reputation as author of at least fifty books.

Process in Buddhism means, for example, that changing perceptions resulting from conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) arise. The 12 links or *nidānas* in the wheel of becoming arise in co-dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) as rebirth (*punabbhava*) occurs.⁸ Rebirth may be understood as happening across lives as in traditional Theravada or as Buddhadasa understands it as the rising and falling in everyday life.

⁸ Frank J. Hoffman, *Introduction to Early Buddhism: Philosophical Texts, Concepts, and Questions* (Ayutthaya: MCU Press, 2020), p. 8.

Understood in the latter way, it is congruent with the Process Philosophy vision.

In Whitehead there is the belief in “philosophy of organism” which he considered more like Indian or Chinese thought than Western.⁹ As Mesle says for Whitehead:

The world of things is only a mask that conceals the unity of the whole... Consciousness is only a tiny tip of the iceberg of human experience, and, I am arguing, human feeling is only a tiny tip of the feeling that is present in the larger world.¹⁰

Process Theology inclines one to believe that feeling goes all the way down. It’s up to our own imagination, says Mesle explaining Whitehead. Because we can only feel as humans feel, it is easy to imagine that only we feel, and that animals, plants, and inorganic matter do not feel. What if the way other things feel is just so different from the way we feel, can it be declared impossible for that reason? To fathom Whitehead’s thought on metaphysics, one needs to understand that *experience*, *feeling*, and *emotion* are among the words he stretched in his philosophy of organism.

Process Thought means to include an experiential, event-based ontology, based on psychological analysis instead of grand metaphysical claims. Accordingly, Process Thought includes Buddhist ideas such as “no self” or non-substantiality (*anatta*), impermanence (*anicca*), middle way (*majjhimā patipadā*) between extremes, and nature as consisting of processes or flows and not permanent substance or *sva-bhāva* (own-being).

From a Process Philosophy perspective, things are really just events -- flows over time -- rather than substantial things. For example, mountains may look solid, but over time they walk just as plate tectonics

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherborne, (New York: Free Press, Macmillan, 1978), p. 7.

¹⁰ Robert C. Mesle, *Process Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, (West Conshohocken PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 1988), p. 34.

measures shifts in the earth's crust. Furthermore, as Alexander McKinley wrote in *Mountain at a Center of the World*, the mountain itself can be a changing actor, accommodating the many interventions people make into it. That is, on Adam's Peak, the environment changes as people of many cultures' re-name it, and re-think its religious and cultural significance. The rock's natural agency thus became a pluralistic human tool.¹¹

Whitehead stated: "The chief error of philosophy is overstatement."¹² In this, he is thinking like the Buddha who considered holding "speculative views" (in one sense of *ditthi*) to be out of touch with reality.

The Concept of Happiness in Buddhism, Process Philosophy, and Process Theology

Basically, in Process Thought, anything that is compounded can come apart, and anything that flows can stop flowing. As in Buddhism, the three marks of everything that exists are: impermanence (*anicca*), non-substantiality (*anatta*), and suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). So, from a Buddhist view, if one tries to cling on to things, then the result will always be unhappiness. Because of *anicca* and *anatta*, there will be *dukkha* in the untamed mind. It is in the tamed mind dwelling in the four *brahmaviharas* that true happiness occurs. The Great Renunciation of "Siddhartha" (meaning "one whose aims are well-accomplished") shows the process of realizing that becoming a recluse is preferable to being a householder, even a rich householder like Prince Siddhartha.¹³

The main idea here is that by contrast, Perfect Being Theism lacks the four *brahmaviharas* because its focus is on God as understood as out of this world, transcendent. By contrast, the immanent understanding of God as Process is instead applicable to daily life. The four *brahmaviharas*

¹¹ Alexander McKinley, *Mountain at a Center of the World: Pilgrimage and Pluralism in Sri Lanka*

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), pp. 92-93.

¹² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ Frank J. Hoffman, *Introduction to Early Buddhism: Philosophical Texts, Concepts, and Questions* (Ayutthaya: MCU Press, 2020), 10 and 45.

focus on God being developing and co-creative with humans in this life and happiness through mental cultivation, rather than on a transcendent God, heaven, and prayer to attain oneness with a transcendent God in an afterlife.

According to the Pali discourses, Siddhartha became the Buddha and eventually found the peace of *nibbana*. Prior to that he practiced the four *brahmaviharas*: *metta* (loving kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), *karuna* (compassion), and *upekkha* (equanimity). As the most venerable Prof. Dr. Phra Brahmmapundit says: compassion “...arises from awareness of the nature of suffering (*dukkha*) and the interconnectedness of all living beings.”¹⁴ Working from *metta* to oneself first, that loving kindness can be extended to all beings.

Practicing the “holy abidings” or *brahmaviharas* the normal procedure of beginning with oneself first leads to happiness. Practicing sympathetic joy or *mudita*, one can be joyful at one’s own skillful *kamma* and then extend that feeling out into the universe for all beings.

Karuna (compassion), for example, needs to be extended to oneself when a mistake is made, so that one learns from the mistake, contemplates other virtues one has, and then extends compassion to all beings who have made mistakes instead of merely blaming them.

Noticing cultivation of equilibrium (*upekkha*) in oneself, one can be happy with the feeling stopping short of self-pride. Then by encouraging others to practice mindful mental equilibrium, one may extend appreciation to all beings who practice *upekkha*. However, from a Buddhist point of view, *nibbana* is the highest bliss and the true happiness. *Nibbana* is “the un compounded, the ultimate, free from defilements, the truth.”¹⁵ As such it is the goal of the Buddhist life.

¹⁴ Most Venerable Brahmmapundit, “*Karuna for Healing a Wounded Humanity and the Earth*”, (Keynote Address In 7th Buddhist Christian Colloquium: Karuna and Agape in Dialogue for Healing a Wounded Earth, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, November 2023): 10.

¹⁵ Cited in K.N. Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Press, 1971), p. 341.

Comparing Buddhism to Process Thought, happiness in the latter is understood as a continuous process of becoming. Happiness arises from ongoing experiences and interactions with persons, places, and things in the world. Happiness is not an isolated event. Instead, the happiness in Process Philosophy and Theology (i.e., Process Thought) arises through our interconnectedness and empathy with other persons and beings in the world. In this process way of thinking, happiness is understood as making creative responses to life's challenges and opportunities. Embracing new possibilities and arriving at new knowledge is to experience novelty in life as a process. So, the process of experiencing novelty can be a fulfilling life of living in the flow of becoming. From a Process Theology perspective, the world is Becoming rather than Being. Accordingly, happiness occurs with the five aggregates (*panca-khandha*) intact and is parallel to what Buddhists call *sa-upadisesa nibbana*, that is, *nibbana* with substrate, in this very body, in this very life of creative novelty.

Whitehead speaks of the metaphysics of *Process and Reality* as the philosophy of organism. The cosmology elaborated in *Process and Reality* (1979) posits an ontology based on the two kinds of existence, that of actual entity and that of abstract entity or abstraction. The ultimate abstract actual principle of existence for Whitehead is creativity. Actual existence is a process of becoming, and is a creative advance into novelty.

Ethical action is not considered to be separate from happiness in *Process and Reality*. Instead, ethical thinking is woven together in the fabric of the pursuit of happiness. By performing ethical actions and making positive contributions to the interdependent world, human beings can find more to life than just simple hedonistic pleasures of the world. Whereas humanism prioritizes the value of human beings, Process Thought regards all beings as valuable and inter-connected.

Although Buddhism and Process Thought both achieve happiness and well-being, they approach this goal from different angles. Buddhism's focus is on liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) and entry into *nibbana* in this life. In the ideal case of one who is "thus gone", i.e., the *Tathāgata*, then *nibbana* without psycho-physical substrate occurs. However, Process

Philosophy emphasizes creativity, interconnectedness, and ethics in a dynamically evolving world. In Process Theology, the other form that Process Thought takes, God is seen as immanent in the world and as co-creative with humans in this process of evolution rather than transcendent to the world as in Perfect Being Theology.

Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, co-authored with Charles Hartshorne, is Whitehead's *magnum opus*. In it, he explains his theory of reality (i.e., his metaphysical system). God is not understood as a transcendent Divine Judge, but as the "Primordial Nature of the Universe". Neither a judge nor a controller, God in Whitehead's system of thought is the underlying principle of creativity in the universe who draws creatures to the good by persuasion to see the divine light in the co-created universe with both human and divine agency. God provides possibilities for creatures to actualize in following the path of goodness.

A.N. Whitehead has a "dipolar ontology", a theory of being inside his metaphysics. It holds that there are *two types of existence*: "actual entities" (actual occasions) and "eternal objects" (possibilities). The former are *individual occasions of experience*, and the latter are *abstract possibilities humans can choose to actualize*. Whitehead's concept of "prehensions" is a very important process in his thinking. Actual entities can perceive (technically, theyprehend) past events and use them in their own process of becoming. In this way, thinking about past events can help one become a better human being and avoid obstacles to actualizing goodness. This researcher tends to see this process as similar to the awareness of the process of *kamma* in Buddhism.

C. Robert Mesle, in interpreting Whitehead, emphasizes *creativity* as a basic aspect of reality. Reality is understood as dynamic rather than static, and the same is true of his concept of deity. Happiness in this view is not seen as a static accomplishment but as "interbeing", the interconnected flow of causally related events. Thich Nhat Hanh's translation of *patticasammuppada* as "interbeing" is seen in his approach that shows the dynamic flow of events in which we are all intertwined. As Mesle observes, explaining Whitehead: "We are part of the same

causal web of interconnections as everything else that exists.”¹⁶ We are not supernatural exceptions to the causal web of the universe, we are part of it, and we experience with our body-mind, not as disembodied consciousnesses.

Dipolar Metaphysics but Without Either/Or Dualistic Thinking

In *Process and Reality* Whitehead wrote: “every instance of experience is dipolar, whether that instance be God or an actual occasion of the world.”¹⁷ Mesle shows how this means that experience has both mental and physical poles. There is no ultimate dualism between mental experiences and physical experiences *contra* Descartes.¹⁸

Whitehead’s perception was that all events are relational processes. The whole universe, all that is actual, is composed of the becoming and perishing of moments of experience, experience of spatial-temporal relations and experiences of causal connections.”¹⁹ In Buddhist terms, this is *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā* (non-substantiality), and if we cling to impermanence and non-substantiality, then *dukkha* (suffering) will occur.

The middle way (*majjhima patipada*) does not affirm or deny but embraces the emptiness of *sunyata*, which is not mere negation but transcendence of opposites. *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent co-arising or inter-being, may be analyzed as *sunyata*, emptiness of own-being, or emptiness of *svabhava*. Doing so would be to perceive the continuing unity of Buddhism from Theravada to the Mahayana school of Nagarjuna.

¹⁶ Robert C. Mesle, *Process Relational Philosophy*, (West Conshohocken PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 1988), 24. In my view, it is more important to show the present and gesture toward the future of Whitehead’s work by emphasizing the work of Robert C. Mesle and that of Wang Zhihe rather than the significant contributions of the past made by Charles Hartshorne.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

It can be seen that there is a new way within Process Thought to view Buddhism and creatively facilitate reflection on why the Buddha's 10 metaphysical questions were deemed useless by him. That is, these binary questions ("either/or" ways of thinking) are just the sort questions a skillful *dhamma* master would not fall into the trap of discussing. Such binary questions may be viewed as opportunities for reflection and new understanding instead of engaging in automatic and unreflective yes or no answers. Zhihe Wang saw this too.

Zhihe Wang in his book *Process and Pluralism* emphasized a Chinese way to religious diversity: peaceful co-existence, mutual transformation, openness to change, harmonism beyond dualistic either/or thinking (7). In holding these ideas, he was inspired by Alfred North Whitehead and connected with his contemporary C. Robert Mesle.

Process Philosophy, Buddhism, and Reflections on the End of Metaphysics

One can describe the ideas of Process Philosophy in its own terms, as creativity, and yet make direct comparisons to Buddhist ideas. Process Philosophy is a way of thinking that emphasizes change rather than permanence, becoming rather than being, and interconnection of all things. *Anicca, anatta.* and both the *dukkha* and *sukka* are implicit in "interbeing" as Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh translated *paṭiccasamuppāda*. It is noteworthy that the concepts of diversity and ecological harmony in Process Thought are described in the work of John B. Cobb. Some features of Buddhism such as *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent co-arising or interbeing) are congruent with Cobb's vision of Process Thought.

Through the effects of their teachings and effects of their actions, skillful practitioners of Buddhism make continuing ripples on the ocean of life. But the meanings of being "enlightened" may vary depending on tradition and how religious traditions are interpreted.²⁰ The enlightened

²⁰ Hongladarom, S., Joaquin, Jeramiah Joven, and Hoffman, Frank (eds.), *Philosophies of Appropriated Religions: Perspectives from Southeast Asia*, (New York: Springer and Barnes & Noble, 2023), 62.

one on this researcher's reading of Process Philosophy is not thought of as a "ghostly something" that exists somewhere as an entity, but as a continuing force for the good in a dynamic, changing universe consisting of events. This is similar to the idea in Buddhism of the *Tathagata* (one who is "thus gone" but not to a place) having karmic effects in the world. These effects may be thought of as rippling through the continuing events of life.

There are both conditioned *dhamma* and unconditioned *dhamma*. In other words, one can be seen existing in traces (*sankhāras*) of their actions rippling through the ocean of living beings that are affected by them. Whether described as all-knowing and all-seeing in a reverential moment of chanting, such enlightened or worthy ones remain only in their wisdom and teaching in the lives of others and not as a ghostly something.

As applied to daily life, Process Thought may say that setting aside speculative questions means opportunity for transcending dualistic opposites of true and false. Such questions posed in either/or terms often lead to conflict because of human beings' natural inclination to conceptual proliferation (*papanca*).²¹ Free association of the mind in conceptual proliferation leads to doubt, unclarity, and suffering.

Concluding this section, it is significant that remembering the Buddha's teachings as viewed through the tradition of Process Thought (i.e., Process Philosophy and Process Theology) is only one of the important ways to remember them. In fact, Buddhism and Process Thought emerged in the event universe as distinct philosophical traditions with complex and highly nuanced interpretations, beliefs, and contexts. Of course, this does not mean that there are not important contrasts, comparisons, and convergences between them.

The logical conclusion is that, in daily life, Process Theology has a concept of God that makes better logical sense than Perfect Being Theology, that the four *brahmavihāra* (*metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, *upekkha*) are more evident in Buddhism than in Perfect Being Theology, and that setting aside speculative views is beneficial to achieving *nibbana*, and yet

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the opposites are useful as creative opportunities for transcending them into middle way thinking.

The conclusion of this researcher about happiness in Buddhism is that, in daily life, setting aside speculative views is beneficial in practice to achieving the *brahmaviharas*. These four – *metta* (loving kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), *karuna* (compassion), and *upekkha* (equanimity) – facilitate happiness in this life and hopefully also facilitate achieving *nibbana*. In Buddhism, binaries or opposites are useful as creative opportunities for transcending them.

Similarities are that the connection between the four *Brahmaviharas* in Buddhism and Process Thought is a shared emphasis on interconnectedness, creativity, and the dynamic nature of reality. However, contrasting differences are that the Four *Brahmaviharas* are rooted in Buddhism's *pariyatti* (Buddha's teachings) and *patipatti* (Buddhist practice) while Process Philosophy provides a broader viewpoint of an "event universe" within which these four high mental states of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity can be applied.

As an aside, there is an updated and recent defense of Whitehead's view given in the scientific perspective of Leemon B. McHenry, *The Event Universe*. McHenry provides this abstract of his book:

"What kinds of things are events? Battles, explosions, accidents, crashes, rock concerts would be typical examples of events and these would be reinforced in the way we speak about the world. Events or actions function linguistically as verbs and adverbs. Philosophers following Aristotle have claimed that events are dependent on substances such as physical objects and persons. But with the advances of modern physics, some philosophers and physicists have argued that events are the basic entities of reality and what we perceive as physical bodies are just very long events spread out in space-time [underline is mine]. In other words, everything turns out to be events. This view, no doubt, radically revises our ordinary common-sense view of reality, but as our event theorists

argue, common sense is out of touch with advancing science.”²²

So here we have an example of revisionary metaphysics, not descriptive metaphysics. In *The Event Universe: The Revisionary Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead*, Leemon McHenry argues that Whitehead’s metaphysics provides a more adequate basis for achieving a unification of physical theory than traditional substance metaphysics. He investigates the influence of Maxwell’s electromagnetic field, Einstein’s theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics on the development of the ontology of events. and compares Whitehead’s theory to his contemporaries, C. D. Broad and Bertrand Russell, as well as another key proponent of this theory, W. V. Quine. In this manner, McHenry defends the naturalized and speculative approaches to metaphysics as opposed to analytical and linguistic methods that arose in the 20th century.

Thomas Merton, St Theresa of Avila, and the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* are prominent examples of saints in the Christian mystical tradition. A question arises about whether Perfect Being Theism could lack the “Buddhist brand name” of the four *brahma viharas* but have the same ideas expressed differently? This is true for Christian mystics like these and Christian Zen practitioner, Thomas Merton, but the parallel does not hold for Christians outside the Christian mystical tradition who seek truth and comfort by believing traditionally in a transcendent God who is not in the world. These hope for a positive judgment after death which permits them to enter heaven often described in terms of communion with God forever in the beatific vision. In Buddhism, by contrast, one has to be living in the world to achieve the benefits of *nibbana sa-upādisesa* (enlightenment with substrate) with the five aggregates intact i.e., the *pañca-kkhandhā* (specifically *rūpa* or form, *vedanā* or feeling, *saññā* or sensations, *sankhāra* or dispositions, and *viññāṇa* or consciousness. In Christianity, however, it is correct to be a Perfect Being thinker who prays to, and worships, God, understood as One who is completely transcendent to the world; whereas in Buddhism this is not the focus but instead the

²² Leemon B. McHenry, *The Event Universe: The Revisionary Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead*.

road to *nibbana* is the focus. One may say God and *nibbāna* are two different focal points or objects of aspiration in the two different religions as this researcher Hoffman argues in Kellenberger (1993).

The above points supply seeds of knowledge as to how, having noted its similarities and differences with Buddhism, Process Thought can at some points be convergent with Buddhism.

Overview of Similarities

The Process Concept of God in Process Theology states that God is developing and co-creative with humans and is able to withstand challenges successfully applied against Perfect Being Theism, such as the incompatibility of omniscience and immutability in Perfect Being Theism. Perfect Being Theism lacks a unified statement of the four *brahmaviharas*, i.e., *metta*, (loving kindness), *karuna*, (compassion), *mudita*, (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity) that are processes of happiness in Buddhism, and that allow Process Thought to be applicable to daily life.

Applied to daily life, Process Thought by eliminating dualistic thinking provides opportunities for transcending dualistic opposites of true and false.

In Buddhism and in Process Theism, life as experienced is a life of processes, and in Buddhism, continuities in the rebirth process show that rebecoming or *punabhava* is an outcome of the *sankhāras* in *kamma* Process.

In Buddhism's ontology there are the six interconnected senses and the corresponding six fields of each in the flowing Processes of perception, including mind and its field of perception, and so therefore in Process Relational Philosophy interconnectedness is a key element in all life.

In conclusion with shared themes of Process Thought and Buddhism viz., *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (non-substantiality), all things flow, including in Process Thought a developing God that is co-creative with humans. This is in contrast to the concept of Perfect Being God that is arguably self-contradictory. In Buddhism, the four

brahmaviharas that are processes of happiness allow application to daily life. Applied to daily life, Process Thought may say on its view, there are opportunities for transcending dualistic opposites of true and false. Transcending binary opposites such as true or false, one experiences life as Process; considering rebirth in a causal nexus, one experiences things as flowing and changing in *kamma* Process. The process of perception includes mind as one of the six senses with corresponding six fields. Thus, in *Process Relational Philosophy* changing interconnectedness is a key element of all life. Even *dhamma* flows, as nothing stays the same forever.

Overview of Differences and Convergences

Another difference is that Buddha leads people to enlightenment in a gentle way and Process Thought lures people to goodness by showing the benefits of doing good. On the other hand, Perfect Being God not only does not lure them to do good as in Process Thought, but forces them and threatens them with hell if they do not do the good.

Convergences between Buddhism and Process Thought are close enough to justify using concepts from each to discuss the psychological and ontological elements of the other, for example, non-substantiality (*anattā*) and change in relationships, personal development over time and *anicca*, and suffering in life crises and *dukkha*. So “the three characteristics” of *anicca*, *anatta*, and *dukkha* in Buddhism may provide a bridge on which to cross over in dialogue from Buddhism to Process Thought.

When one thinks comparatively between Process Thought and Buddhist Thought, it is as if two rivers that, although previously separate, now begin flowing together and form a confluence.

As far as Perfect Being Thought is concerned, it shows marked difference to Process Thought in that Perfect Being Thought affirms Being rather than Becoming as the ultimate spiritual reality. Consequently, Perfect Being Thought is not convergent with Process Thought.

Transcending binary opposites such as true or false, one experiences life as Process; considering rebirth in a causal nexus, one experiences things as flowing and changing in the process of *kamma* (*karma*).

Conclusion

The Process Concept of God in Process Theology holds that God is developing and co-creative with humans toward the process of goodness, is able to withstand challenges successfully applied against Perfect Being Theism, and that these challenges include the incompatibility of omniscience and immutability in Perfect Being Theism.

Perfect Being Theism lacks a unified statement of the four *brahmaviharas*, i.e. *mettā* (loving kindness), *karuṇa* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), *upekkhā* (equanimity) that are processes of happiness in Buddhism, and that allow Process Thought to be applicable to daily life.

Applied to daily life, Process Thought may provide opportunities for transcending dualistic opposites of true and false.

Transcending dualistic opposites of true and false in Buddhism and in Process Theism, life as experienced is a life of processes, and life in the rebirth process shows that rebecoming or *punabbhava* is an outcome of the *kamma* Process.

Punabbhava and *sankhāras* connect to Buddhism's ontology where perception involves six interconnected senses and the corresponding six fields of each in the flowing processes of perception, including mind and its field of perception.

Therefore, in Process Relational Philosophy interconnectedness is a key element in all life.

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