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# Andersonian Realism and Buddhist Empiricism

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‘The arising of form and the ceasing of form – everything that has been heard, sensed, and known, sought after and reached by the mind – all this is the embodied world, to be penetrated and realized.’ Buddha, from the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

‘Wisdom is one thing: it is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things.’ Heraclitus, Frag. 20.

‘Heraclitus... was unremitting in his attack on subjectivist illusions, on the operation of desire or the imagining of things as we should like them to be, as opposed to the operation of understanding or the finding of things (including our own activities) as they positively are, with no granting of a privileged position in reality to gods, men or molecules, with conflict everywhere and nothing above the battle.’ John Anderson (Classicism).

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to interpret some of the key ideas and teachings of Buddhism – in particular, so-called ‘early Buddhism’ – in light of John Anderson’s philosophy of situational realism. First, there is a brief description of the key components of John Anderson’s philosophy. Secondly, the ideas of early Buddhism are interpreted in terms of Anderson’s philosophy. Finally the two theories are compared and contrasted,

Scottish-born Australian philosopher John Anderson (1893-1962) was Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney from 1927 to 1958. He variously described himself as a realist, a determinist, a materialist, and (in a ‘practical’ sense) an empiricist. Anderson’s philosophy gave rise to that school of thought known as Australian Realism and his students included some of the most notable philosophers of the late twentieth century such as J. L. Mackie, John Passmore, and D. M. Armstrong.

Gautama Buddha (‘the [historical] Buddha’) is considered the founder of Buddhism. The dates of the Buddha’s birth and death are uncertain. Most early-20th-century historians dated his lifetime as c563 BCE to 483 BCE, but more recent opinion dates his death to between 486 and 483 BCE or, according to some, between 411 and 400 BCE. The Buddha is said to have been born in Lumbini, in what is now modern day Nepal, into a royal Hindu family and was raised as a Hindu – in luxury. Married at the age of 16, he had a son. Shortly after the son’s birth Buddha either took four journeys by chariot or had four dreams (or visions). He then decided to leave his wife and son – and his former life of luxury – in order to seek ‘insight’ into what he saw as the problem of human suffering. He died around 80 years of age. He did not claim to be God or a god, nor a ‘son’ or ‘agent’ of any such god, nor even a prophet. When asked about himself, he simply said, ‘I am awake.’

At the risk of oversimplification, there are two main streams, branches or ‘schools’ of Buddhism, namely, Theravāda (literally, ‘the Way [or Teaching] of the Elders’ or ‘the Ancient Teaching’), being the oldest surviving Buddhist school, and Mahāyāna (literally, the ‘Great Vehicle’, or ‘Big Wheel’), of which there are many kinds. In addition, there are a number of esoteric schools of Buddhism (notably Tibetan and Japanese), some or all of which are regarded, at least by some commentators, as

being part of the Mahāyāna school, and by others as forming a separate third stream or branch. That is sufficient for present purposes. There is little, if any, supernaturalism or superstition in Theravada Buddhism which, for the most part, is a system of mental cultivation as opposed to a religion per se. However, the same cannot be said for most of the Mahāyāna school or schools. That is not to say that one stream is more authentic than the other. Each is regarded by experts as being a legitimate and authentic response to the inspiration of the Buddha.

This article focuses on some of the key ideas and teachings of ‘early Buddhism’. The expression ‘early Buddhism’ is shorthand for the Buddhism of the earliest preserved strata of Buddhist literature, the five *Nikāyas* (collections) in the *Sutta Pitaka*, being one of the ‘three baskets’ that compose the *Pāli Tripitaka* (or ‘Pāli Canon’). The Pāli Canon is, on the whole, the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings and the only collection of sacred texts formally recognised as ‘canonical’ by Theravāda Buddhists. The Pāli *Nikāyas* are universally recognised as the oldest literary source of Buddhism, even though the literary form of the Pāli Canon is not such that it can be said to record the actual words of the Buddha.

### **John Anderson and situational realism**

John Anderson’s central thesis or doctrine is that there is a single way of being, namely, that which is conveyed when we say that a proposition is true. This one way of being consists of objects or facts, that is, ordinary things, ‘occurrences in space and time.’ Every question is a simple issue of truth or falsity, there being no different degrees or kinds of truth. Anderson developed a theory of philosophy which has been variously called, among other things, ‘Australian realism’, ‘Sydney realism’, and ‘Andersonian realism’. Anderson himself described his theory as ‘propositional or situational realism’ (Anderson, 1962[1962]: 169). The key elements of Anderson’s theory of philosophy are propositionality, situationality, plurality, causality, and empiricism.

#### *Propositionality*

According to Anderson it is only in propositions that we know – and *can* know – things at all. Things are *not* prior to propositions. Things themselves *are* propositional, and they are ‘real’, as are the categories, being the fundamental ‘solid’ features of reality. The proposition – so central to traditional Aristotelian logic – *is* the way in which things actually occur. All objects of experience – indeed, all things – take the propositional form (that is, they have ‘propositional structure’). In other words, there is, says Anderson, a direct, logical, coterminous relationship between the proposition and the way things *actually* are. As Hibberd (2009: 72) explains, ‘[p]ropositions are not items that correspond or agree with situations, because they are not “about” anything’. In the words of Anderson himself:

When we assert the proposition ‘All men are mortal’, what we assert is the actual mortality of men, and to call the assertion of the proposition merely a *means* to the asserting of the fact is to say that we have *no* way of asserting the fact . . . the proposition which is commonly said to ‘assert a fact’ just is that fact. (1962[1962b]: 169)

A proposition is ‘capable of being unconditionally true’, notwithstanding that ‘a consistent adherence to the treatment of them as merely verbal forms would not allow of any enunciation of belief, that is, of any “judgment”’ (Anderson, 1962[1926]: 26). However, Anderson denied that any proposition is

*transparently* or ‘necessarily’ true (see Anderson, 1962[1962]: 72). That means that a statement that something is the case can be justified only by a statement that *something else* is the case. So, *every* proposition is *contingently* true or false. Logic is a description of reality. Logic concerns things and how they are related to other things. Logic is *not* about words or the meaning of words. Logical thinking means relating – that is, putting together or distinguishing – different pieces of information about facts or alleged facts. Logic helps us to find facts and see the connections between one set of facts and another.

### *Situationality*

According to Anderson there is a ‘single way of being’ (Anderson, 1962[1930]: 48), indeed, ‘only one way of being’ (Anderson, 1962[1927a]: 3). Whatever exists are ‘occurrences’ – or ‘situations’ – in *one* space-time. Things exist ‘in situations’, and, as Hibberd (2009: 68) explains, ‘There is nothing less than the situation and nothing but situations exist.’ Further, any talk of there being different levels or orders of reality – for example, ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ levels – is ‘contrary to the very nature and possibility of discourse’ (Anderson, (1962[1927a]: 4), that is, ‘unspeakable’ (Anderson, 1962[1927a]: 4). Situations are ‘in continuous process – processes continuing into one another *is* causation’ (Hibberd, 2010: 38). Thus, ‘whatever we call the cause and whatever we call the effect are alike situations, and any situation can have “efficacy” in that it can be the sufficient (as well as necessary) condition of another situation’ (Anderson 1962[1938]: 133). A fact can be explained *only* as following logically from other facts occurring on the same level of observability.

Anderson drew an all-important distinction between *qualities* and *relations*, thereby rejecting all forms of ‘relativism’ including the doctrine of constitutive relations. This means that *nothing* is constituted by, nor can it be defined or explained by reference to, the relations it has to other things. As Hibberd (2010: 38) explains, ‘Situations are not constituted, wholly or partly, by the relations they enter into or stand in.’ Thus, there is no ‘consciousness’ whose nature it is to know. There are *no* ‘ideas’ whose nature it is to be known – and also *no* so-called ‘ultimates’. And there is no such thing as a ‘universe’ or a ‘totality’ of all things.

### *Plurality*

Thus, at any ‘point’ in space-time there is a *plurality* of space-time interacting situations or occurrences (‘complexes’), governed by the categories. Indeed, there are literally countless such pluralities – ‘embedded or nested in other situations, [with] these, in turn, [being] constituents of other situations’ (Hibberd, 2009: 69) – and all these situations ‘exhaust the whole of reality’ (Hibberd, 2009: 68). Things are distinct but also connected in space-time, and the connections are ‘real’. Anderson wrote of the ‘facts of complexity and interaction’, and the ‘influence of the other things with which [things] come in contact’ (1962[1935a]: 96), stating, ‘we always deal with complex states of affairs and never with “simple entities”’ (1962[1927a]: 12). All things are ‘irreducibly complex’; that is, there is no *a priori* limit to the number of true things that one might – and can – say about any given state of affairs, and the relationships between that state of affairs and any one or more other states of affairs.

### *Causality*

Anderson’s philosophy is a ‘philosophy of process’ (Hibberd, 2009: 83) in which everything is

‘continuously changing and infinitely complex’ (Hibberd, 2009: 67) and where causation is ‘interaction at all points’ (Hibberd, 2009: 84). Causality is not a matter of there being any ‘necessary connection’ between things:

In fact, we have no right to say anything is ‘the occasion’ of anything else.  
(Anderson, 1962[1938]: 126.)

Nevertheless, ‘all events are caused and are themselves causes of further events’ (Hibberd, 2009: 79), and different kinds of conditions can be expected to have different effects (see Anderson, 1962[1936]: 127). In Anderson’s words, ‘a certain set of physical antecedents gives place to a certain set of physical consequents’ (Anderson, 1962[1936]: 124). Further, both cause and effect are logically *independent*. In addition, the causal process is not uni-linear, for there is ‘interaction at all points’ (Baker, 1986: 110). Hibberd (2009: 82) refers to ‘Anderson’s Heraclitean views of *all things in process, active and maintained through exchanges*’. This ‘interaction at all points’ constitutes a ‘causal field’, being ‘that which the efficient cause acts upon and from where the effect is produced ... that which is subjected to influences of a causal kind and that which persists while a change occurs’ (Hibberd, 2009: 82).

Nothing is ‘simple’, everything is ‘complex’. Each thing is a cause of at least one other thing *as well as being* the effect of some other thing. That means that a thing is explainable only by reference to one or more other things. Further, ‘whenever a change takes place, it does so under sufficient and necessary conditions’ (Passmore, 1962: xxiii), although one should be very careful to avoid postulating any notion of a cause being ‘always necessary’ (Anderson, 1962[1938]: 126). It is, at all times, necessary to distinguish ‘conditions under which something occurs from conditions under which it does not’ (Anderson, 1962[1938]: 128-129).

### *Empiricism*

Anderson’s empirical view of reality is one which ‘admit[s] a direct knowledge of actual things’ (Anderson, 1962[1935b]: 300). Anything that exists is a ‘fact’, that is, ‘a spatial and temporal situation or occurrence that is on *the same level of reality* as anything else that exists’ (Baker, 1986: 1) – and on the *same* level of observability as the observer. Anderson wrote:

... whatever we know we learn – in other words, that to know something is to come into active relations, to enter into ‘transactions’, with it . . . (Anderson, 1962[1962]: 162.)

Truth is what *is*. There are no degrees, kinds or levels of truth: ‘the nature of belief requires the rejection of any theory of distinct *sorts* or different *degrees* of truth; truth being simply what is represented by the copula ‘is’ in the proposition’ (Anderson, 1962[1926]: 26). Every question – other than reality itself (which is neither true nor false, but just *is*) – is an issue of truth or falsity. To find out whether something is the case, you ‘look and see’. A thing is not true if it can be verified. It can be verified because it is true, and may be true even if, for whatever reason, it cannot be verified. The Andersonian test of *meaning* is *not* that a particular proposition should be verifiable or falsifiable, but that its term-words (constituent expressions) must refer to some ‘thing’, that is, something with which we are familiar. When all of the above mentioned key elements of Anderson’s theory of philosophy are brought together, we have a system of thought that is both ontological and epistemological:

We cannot, then, make any such distinction as between “things as we know them”

and “things themselves”. Unless the former *are* things themselves, we are not entitled to speak of things (and hence to speak) at all. ... (Anderson, 1962[1927a]: 12-13.)

### The philosophy of early Buddhism

The Buddha did not attempt to set forth a consistent philosophical system. That was *not* his aim. The Buddha had but one concern – to alleviate suffering. All of his teachings – even the more philosophical ones – were promulgated solely for the purpose or objective of addressing and redressing the problem of human suffering. All that was ‘philosophical’ in his teachings was directed to that purpose, and that purpose alone. Buddhism is certainly not a ‘philosophy’ as we generally understand the term, so any talk of Buddhism supposedly being a form of empiricism – the well-known ‘Buddhist empiricism thesis’ – is, at least in one sense, misguided.

Nevertheless, Buddhist teachings do contain much which is philosophical, as well as ethical and moral, in nature, but that which is philosophical in Buddhism is very much ‘practical philosophy’ – with the emphasis on ‘practical’ or, rather, *practice*. The empiricism in Buddhism is to be found, not as some highly organized, systematic philosophical exposition, but as a *praxis*, a way of seeing the world, and a method of problem-solving. For the most part, the Buddha was a radical empiricist in his approach to reality. He taught people that the way to find out about life and themselves was by direct perceptive experience, and by trial and error. When one reads the Pāli texts there is much emphasis on the need to distinguish between ‘true’ (*sacca*) and ‘false’ (*micchā*).

#### *Buddhist propositionality*

There is much which is ‘propositional’, in an Andersonian sense, in Buddhist teachings and scriptures. Even when utterances are recorded, they usually take the propositional form – or can at least be treated propositionally – and are presented as universal or universalisable ‘truth-claims’ of one sort or another. Jackson (1989: 114) writes:

... Buddhists [sic] descriptions of the way things are do conform to some meaningful sense of the term ‘proposition,’ if not necessarily to the most restrictive one.

Having said that, *no* form of Buddhism – not even early Buddhism – is simply reducible to propositions that can easily be verified or falsified by empirical means.

It is recorded in Buddhist scriptures that there were some 14 philosophical questions that the Buddha refused to answer: ‘Is the world eternal [*or not, or both, or neither*]?’; ‘Is the world finite [*or not, or both, or neither*]?’; ‘Is the self identical with [*or different from*] the body?’; ‘Does the Tathāgata [Buddha] exist after death [*or not, or both, or neither*]?’ Many have debated why the Buddha refused to answer these questions. The ‘better’ view – from a Buddhist perspective and understanding of truth – is that the propositions do not *correspond* to the way things really are. That is why the Buddha apparently deemed the questions unanswerable. For example, the ‘Sutra on Totality’ (*Sabbasutta*) makes it clear that there are certain statements that are meaningless in the sense that they assert things that are *avisaya*, that is, not within the realm of the senses (or within the limits of experience) and therefore not a fit subject or topic for discourse. Such matters include the existence or non-existence of the world, In other words, Buddhism asserts that some propositions are simply ‘false’ or ‘meaningless’.

The fact that there is much which is ‘propositional’ in Buddhist teachings and scriptures, and that recorded utterances of the Buddha usually take the propositional form – or can at least be treated propositionally – does not support a conclusion that the Buddha saw life as inherently propositional in nature in the way John Anderson did. Once again, it is more than likely that the ever-practical Buddha sought to avoid any pronouncements on such matters. However, the fact that early Buddhism adhered to a correspondence theory of truth, asserting that a proposition is true (*sacca*) if it is one which *corresponds* to the facts (that is, ‘things as they are’ [*yathābhūtam*]), strongly militates against the view that Buddhism sees life as being propositional in the Andersonian sense.

### *Buddhist situationality and plurality*

The Buddha reportedly said:

Monks, we who look at the whole and not just the part, know that we too are systems of interdependence, of feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness all interconnected. Investigating in this way, we come to realize that there is no me or mine in any one part, just as a sound does not belong to any one part of the lute.

Similarly, the third Zen patriarch Seng-Tsan described situationality and plurality in this way:

One thing, all things:  
Move along and intermingle,  
Without distinction.

The Buddha is also reported to have said that ‘things are different according to the forms which they assume under different impressions’. One could substitute the word ‘situations’ for ‘impressions’ without distorting meaning. Although Buddhist texts are a little confusing on the point, it would appear that the Buddha held the view that the categories apply to ‘things as they really are’ (*yathābhūtam*). However, different schools of Buddhism recognise varying numbers of so-called ‘conditioned’ and ‘unconditioned’ constituents (*dharmas*) of existence. Here is a typical saying attributed to the Buddha:

The thing and its quality are different in our thought, but not in reality. Heat is different from fire in our thought, but you cannot remove heat from fire in reality. You say that you can remove the qualities and leave the thing, but if you think your theory to the end, you will find that this is not so.

Early Buddhism does, however, recognize the existence, at any ‘point’ in space-time, of a plurality or multiplicity of interacting factors that can, at any time, produce a certain effect (Kalupahana, 1975). We are talking about a complex system whose ‘parts’ are mutually dependent (Kalupahana, 1975: 59). This is quite Andersonian in its description of space-time existence and interacting plurality. In the ‘Fire Sermon’ (*Aditta Sutta*), the Buddha is recorded as having said:

The eye, O monks, is burning; visible things are burning; the mental impressions based on the eye are burning; the contact of the eye with visible things is burning; the sensation produced by the contact of the eye with visible things, be it pleasant, be it painful, be it neither pleasant nor painful, that also is burning. With what fire is it burning? I declare unto you that it is burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of anger, with the fire of ignorance; it is burning with the anxieties of birth, decay,

death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair.

The ear is burning, sounds are burning, ... The nose is burning, odors are burning, ... The tongue is burning, tastes are burning, ... The body is burning, objects of contact are burning, ... The mind is burning, thoughts are burning, all are burning with the fire of greed, of anger, and of ignorance.

The Fire Sermon presents, albeit in a highly lyrical way, a plurality of multiple situations that are ‘in continuous process – processes continuing into one another *is* causation’ (Hibberd, 2010: 38).

### *Buddhist causality*

A cardinal, perhaps the core, teaching of Buddhism – arguably the *only* thing that holds *every* Buddhist teaching together – is this: *all* phenomena are arising together in a mutually interdependent web of cause and effect. Perhaps even more importantly, this teaching more accurately states that *things arise dependent on conditions and cease when those same conditions cease*. Jayatilleke (1963: 453) writes that the ‘Buddhist theory is ... empirical since it spoke only of observable causes without any metaphysical pre-suppositions of any substrata behind them’. Further, early Buddhism saw causation as a complex phenomenon going far beyond mere constant conjunction in the nature of some ‘regularity’ theory. The emphasis was on causal connections, or the relationship, between ‘two events that are separated in time and space’ (Kalupahana, 1975: 104). Early Buddhism saw that multiple factors are invariably necessary (that is, reasonably required) to produce any given effect. In light of this complexity and plurality, it is never as simple as selecting one such factor from a set of jointly and severally sufficient conditions and taking that factor to be the cause of the particular effect, for we are dealing with a complex system whose parts, as previously mentioned, are mutually dependent (Kalupahana, 1975: 59). Again, this is quite Andersonian in its depiction of complex space-time interacting plurality.

However, Buddhism goes further and seeks to distinguish causes and conditions (Kalupahana, 1975: 59). In that regard, the English word ‘conditionality’ encapsulates essence of the Buddha’s teaching of (in Pāli) *paṭicca-samuppāda* (in Sanskrit, *pratītya-samutpāda*), or ‘dependent arising’. Conditionality is a much broader concept of causality. When we speak of the ‘cause’ of some event we are referring to something that is directly and immediately responsible for the occurrence of the event, whereas the word ‘condition’ is wide enough to embrace supporting and contributing factors as well. The Buddha is reported to have said on many occasions, ‘This being, that becomes.’ In other words, the most general quality or a thing is that it is the *condition* for another. More fully, the Buddha would say:

This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises;  
This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.

This conditionality – that is, all things are ‘conditioned things’ – was said by the Buddha to be universal, underlying all of reality, irrespective and quite independently of anyone noticing it. Buddha reportedly said:

What, monks, is dependent-arising? With birth as condition, monks, there is age and death. Whether or not Tathāgatas [Buddhas] arise, this natural condition persists, this stability of nature, this fixed course of nature, specific conditionality.

Having said that, ‘[a]ll things conditioned are instable, impermanent’. All phenomena (*dhamma*



[*dharmā*]) are in a state of arising and vanishing, and all of this occurs on the same plane of observability. Again, this is all very Andersonian in its Heraclitean depiction of change and strife as the natural conditions of existence.

### *Buddhist empiricism*

The Buddha encouraged his followers to ‘come and see’ (*ehi-passiko*) [Sanskrit: *ehi-passyika* ‘which you can come and see’--from the phrase *ehi, passya* ‘come, see!’], that is, to test and investigate for themselves whether or not his teachings worked, as opposed to placing reliance on blind faith. Yes, investigate for yourself and then make up your *own* mind based upon the evidence. Buddhism is a very down-to-earth set of teachings. At the risk of over-simplification, the essence of Buddhism is: what you see is what you get. *That* is all there is, but it is more than enough!

Despite what Andersonians would see as flaws in the Buddhist correspondence theory of truth, there is still much that is ‘empirical’ in Buddhist methodology and teaching. Both the Buddha and John Anderson appear to be in agreement that there some ‘things’ (eg the conception of a ‘contrivance of a “universe”’ as a ‘totality of things’) which are nothing more than ‘a mere phrase, without any experience or serious argument to justify it’ (Anderson, 1962[1935a]: 96). *Some* things are – yes, ‘unspeakable’.

The essence of Buddhist empiricism is this – one ‘looks and sees’, one ‘perceives.’ In other words, knowing (*jānam*) must be based on ‘seeing’ (*passam*). Jayatilleke (1963: 453) writes:

The Buddhist theory is ... empirical since it spoke only of observable causes without any metaphysical pre-suppositions of any substrata behind them.

The Buddha taught that it is through the regular practice of mindfulness (*sati*) *from one moment to the next*, that we experience – note that word *experience* – life directly ...without those mental filters and psychological barriers which we tend to erect between ourselves and the objects of experience. Alan Watts, a well-known authority on Buddhism (and Zen Buddhism, in particular), has written that ‘the method of Buddhism is above all the practice of clear awareness, of seeing the world [that is, ‘things’] *yathābhūtam* – just as it is [they are]’ (Watts, 1962: 72), for it is recorded in the Pāli texts that the Buddha said, *Bhūtam bhūtatopassati* (‘See a thing as it really is’). He was talking about things (*bhūta*) that can be *directly* experienced. Now, in order to do that successfully, the Buddha made it unambiguously clear that we must not put any barriers between ourselves and external reality – barriers such as beliefs, views (especially speculative ones), thoughts, ideas, theories, opinions, and doctrines.

In the ‘Sutra on Totality’ (*Sabbasutta*) the Buddha says:

Monks, I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully to it and I will speak.

What, monks, is totality? It is just the eye with the objects of sight, the ear with the objects of hearing, the nose with the objects of smell, the tongue with the objects of taste, the body with the objects of touch and the mind with the objects of cognition. This, monks, is called totality.

Now, if anyone were to say, ‘Aside from this explanation of totality, I will preach another totality,’ that person would be speaking empty words, and being questioned would not be able to answer. Why is this? Because that person is talking about

something outside of all possible knowledge.

The above is the *locus classicus* of Buddhist empiricism. The so-called ‘twelve gateways’ (*āyatana*) or bases of cognition, which constitute the ‘totality of life’ are as follows: eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, body and tangibles, and mind and the objects of cognition (eg ideas and concepts) – that is, the six (yes, six, in Buddhism) spheres of experience and their corresponding objects. In Buddhism, what is directly perceived is ‘causality’ as it operates in all spheres – physical, psychological, and moral. There is no transcendental reality or ‘Being,’ or even ‘self,’ that is given as the object of such direct perception. The Buddha affirmed that if someone *preaches* another reality’, that person is speaking ‘empty words’. If there be ‘another reality,’ we can have no knowledge of it. Such a reality is, therefore, unspeakable. That is *very* Andersonian.

Buddha says, in effect, if people affirm the existence of such things, they are talking about ‘something outside of all possible knowledge’ (*avisaya*). John Anderson said as much when he wrote that any notion of there being different orders or levels of reality or truth was ‘contrary to the very nature and possibility of discourse’ (Anderson, (1962[1927a]: 4). Such thinking (if that be the right word for it) was, according to Anderson, ‘unspeakable’ (Anderson, (1962[1927a]: 4). The Buddha, too, had no time for any speculative ‘positions’:

“Does Master Gotama have any position at all?”

“A ‘position,’ Vaccha, is something that a Tathāgata [Buddha] has done away with. What a Tathāgata sees is this: ‘Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception... such are mental fabrications... such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.’ Because of this, I say, a Tathāgata — with the ending, fading out, cessation, renunciation, and relinquishment of all constructions, all excogitations, all I-making and mine-making and obsession with conceit — is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.”

In those two expressions – *ehi-passiko* (‘come and see’) and *visaya* (‘in the realm of the senses,’ a ‘fit and suitable object of discussion’) – one has the essence of the Buddha’s radical empiricism. However, there are three other important concepts in Buddhism which should be mentioned, and they are the three ‘marks’ or ‘characteristics’ of existence – (in Pāli) *dukkha* (‘unsatisfactoriness’ or ‘suffering’), *anicca* (‘inconstant’), and *anattā* (‘no-self’ or, more correctly, ‘not-self,’ ‘non-self’ or ‘non-soul’).

The teaching pertaining to *dukkha* is this – unsatisfactoriness is part of our lives. This can be empirically tested. We get into a comfortable position, and (try to) sit still for two hours. Within a very short time, we will become uncomfortable. Alternatively, we think of something pleasant and (try to) continue to think about that subject indefinitely. Sooner or later an unpleasant thought will come into our mind. Thus, everything is inconstant (*anicca*), that is, everything is impermanent, transient and subject to change. Now, if everything is impermanent, so must be those hundreds and hundreds of ‘I’s’ and ‘me’s’ which we mistakenly believe constitute a separate, isolated, independent ‘self’ or ‘soul’. In other words, there is *no* actual ‘self’ at the centre of our *conscious* – or even *unconscious* – awareness (*anattā*). *Dukkha*, *anicca* and *anattā* – three perfectly interconnected ideas.

### **Andersonianism and Buddhism: Some major differences**

One area of difference between Buddhism and Andersonian realism pertains to the use of the ‘verification principle’ in Buddhism. In early Buddhism, ‘valid’ knowledge is that which is verified

through direct sensory (as well as extrasensory) perception. Anderson would, of course, reject any ‘logical positivist’ suggestion that verification is, or should be, a test of meaning. A thing can be verified because it is ‘true’, and may be true even if, for whatever reason, it cannot be verified.

There is also another major difference in Buddhism from Anderson’s philosophy. In traditional Buddhism, as previously mentioned truth is ‘defined’ in terms of a correspondence theory – that is, a proposition is true (*sacca*) if it is one which *corresponds* to the facts (that is, ‘things as they are’ [*yathābhūtam*]). Consistency or coherence is also said to be a measure of truth, but correspondence is, in traditional Buddhist thought, the final determinant. This criterion of truth is very much at odds with Anderson’s ‘identity thesis’ criterion for establishing the truth of propositions. As Anderson pointed out, the correspondence theory is inherently relativist, as correspondence is a relation requiring two different terms, ‘so that no matter how *closely* a belief corresponded to the fact, the belief could never be *identical with* the fact, and hence could not be true’ (Molesworth, 1958: 98). In Andersonian realism, to say that a proposition is true ‘is to say that that state of affairs occurs – it actually is the case: to say that it is false is to say that no such state of affairs occurs’ (Molesworth, 1958: 105). This is a major difference between Buddhist epistemology and that of Anderson.

Another difference between the two schools of thought pertains to the question of whether there is more than one *sort* or *degree* of truth. Anderson’s position is unambiguously clear: there is only one sort of truth (see Anderson, 1962[1926]: 26). Such is not necessarily the case in traditional Buddhist thought, which recognises a distinction between what is known as conventional truth (*sammūṭṭisacca* or *voḥārasacca*) and ‘truth in the highest sense’ (*paramatthasacca*) to which the theory of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) belongs.

In addition, Hoffman (1987) has pointed out that there clearly is in Buddhism – even in early Buddhism – a place for *a priori* ‘faith’ in the form of a ‘confidence’ not always ‘subsequent to checking’. Indeed, it appears that the Buddha himself held the view that ‘one’s checking may not “verify” doctrines if one does not possess that *a priori* faith’ (Jackson, 1989: 118). There is no place in Andersonian realism for any such *a priori* faith. To the extent that the Buddha attempted to explain the observable in terms of some supposed basic unobservable entity, such an approach cannot be seen to be empirical. As Anderson pointed out, logic compels us to reject the unobservable as the cause of the observable. Further, we are concerned solely with enquiry, and with established facts. If we take anything to be superior to facts, or believe that there are ‘truths’, which are to be accepted on the basis of faith or authority, which we are not permitted to discredit, we cease to be empiricists.

Be that as it may, Andersonian realism and Buddhism are at one in their assertion that there is no such thing as the ‘universe’. The word ‘universe’ is just that – a word. It simply means the sum ‘total’ – for want of a better word – of all there is. Hence, all theological talk of the supposed need for some ‘first cause’ is nonsense. As Anderson pointed out, ‘there can be no contrivance of a “universe” or totality of things, because the contriver would have to be included in the totality of things’ (Anderson, 1962[1935a]: 96). In any event, the entire notion of a supposed ‘Being’ – the ‘contriver’ – whose essential attributes (e.g. omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience) are *non-empirical* is unintelligible.

## Conclusion

My primary aim in this article has been to interpret *some* of the key ideas and teachings of Buddhism – in particular, so-called ‘early Buddhism’ – in light of John Anderson’s philosophy of situational realism. This has not been as easy thing to do, in large part because early Buddhism does not purport

to be a theory or ‘brand’ of philosophy, nor even philosophical in a Western sense. Hence, any comparisons or differences noted are tangential and almost anecdotal in nature.

For the foregoing reason, it would be wrong to conclude that the Buddha’s philosophical approach to life was Andersonian in all or even most respects. Yes, there are some fairly remarkable similarities – for example, both men saw all things as being irreducibly complex, ever-changing and deterministically pluralistic, and the Buddha’s teaching of ‘conditionality’ is very close to Anderson’s notion of ‘causality’. Both teachers espoused a propositional view of reality. Both rejected concepts such as there being a ‘universe’ or a ‘totality’ of things. Both presented their respective teachings on the basis of seeing things ‘as they really are’. What Passmore (1962) wrote about Anderson’s empiricism in particular can be seen to be equally applicable to that of the Buddha:

[a] determinism ... [which] is not Laplacean; there can be no question for [either] of “giving a complete description”, whether of the present or of the future. It amounts only to this: that whenever a change takes place, it does so under sufficient and necessary conditions. (Passmore, 1962: xxiii.)

Finally, the strong anti-metaphysical and non-theistic stance of the Buddha would meet with the approval of Anderson, as would the overall ‘naturalistic’ orientation of early Buddhism.

However, there are also some important differences, such as the Buddha’s acceptance of a correspondence theory of truth, different ‘kinds’ of truth (including so-called ‘higher knowledges’), the need for some sort of *a priori* faith, and the use of the verification principle---*none* of which would meet with the approval of Anderson.

One important area for future study is a thorough-going interpretation of the Buddha’s concept of mind as consisting of the ‘five aggregates’ (*skandhas* [Sanskrit] or *khandhas* [Pāli]) in light of John Anderson’s theory of ‘mind as feeling’. Early Buddhism was more a system of psychology and mental cultivation than a philosophy or religion as such (see Hall, 1957), and it may well be that the strongest points of similarity between the Buddha and John Anderson pertain to their joint rejection of the unitary nature of the human mind and of the notion of there being any separate, distinct, independent ‘self’.

If there is one singularly important similarity between the approach of the Buddha and that of John Anderson it is in the nature of a certain *praxis*, a certain *approach* – that is, a way of seeing the world, and in addition a method of problem-solving, that was ‘direct’ and ‘experiential’. Such a *praxis* is in objective contradistinction to a ‘religious’ view of things, with both men finding no place for theism or any conception of a total system. Therein lies the everlasting legacy of the two men.

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