

Did Buddhism Anticipate Pragmatism?

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1 Prāmāṇika and Pragmaticist: prima facie resemblances

Writers presenting Buddhism to European and North American audiences have often availed themselves of philosophical terminology from modern traditions to convey presumably less familiar ideas coming from various classical and medieval Asian settings. Since the Buddha and many philosophers who developed his ideas seem to have stressed the importance of practice over theory, Buddhism is frequently described as practical or even pragmatic in its orientation. Since there have been few unpleasant clashes between traditional Buddhist beliefs and the findings of modern science, and nothing that would compare in importance to the confrontations between Darwinians and Creationists, many Buddhist apologists have been able to get away with characterizing theirs as a religion that is scientific in spirit; many Buddhists, especially Theravādins from Sri Lanka and Thailand, prefer not to designate Buddhism as a religion at all, since they seem to fear that calling anything a religion is tantamount to saying that it is not scientific.

Describing Buddhism as practical or pragmatic in orientation is of course hardly equivalent to saying that it is an anticipation of Pragmatism, but there may be several other aspects of Buddhism and Pragmatism that makes comparing them a useful exercise. Some resemblances and differences between some forms of Buddhism and some forms of Pragmatism have been pointed out by Kamala Kumari (1987), John Powers (1992) and others. Some examples of the resemblances that one can easily find are 1) a tendency in both systems to be suspicious of authoritarianism, 2) a tendency to eschew doctrines that are not demonstrably relevant to the concerns of people who have not yet taken up permanent residence in a graveyard, and 3) a belief that virtue (or good character) is not innate but can be acquired—a belief that results in an emphasis on the development of good character through the influence of education.

These similarities between Buddhism and Pragmatism are enough to warrant closer examination, and the authors named above have al-

ready made contributions to pointing out both the similarities and the limits of similarity. The purpose of the present paper is simply to add a few minor details to what has been said by others. In particular, I shall examine some aspects of a theory of signs that was founded by Dignāga (early fifth century) and elaborated by his successor Dharmakīrti (late sixth or early seventh century). These two Buddhist philosophers are credited with founding a school of thought in which a special emphasis was placed on studying the limits of knowledge, the Sanskrit word for which is *pramāṇa*. They are therefore known as *Prāmāṇikas* (epistemologists). The scope of this essay is modest; two *Prāmāṇikas* will be compared with one Pragmaticist, namely, Charles Sanders Peirce.

Dignāga observed that signs never indicate the positive features of what they signify but only preclude certain general descriptions from being made about the signified object. From this it follows that words and other signs are more significant the more they exclude. Similarly, the more one knows what an object is not, the better one understands what it may be. In the spirit of that observation, I shall focus most of my attention on the ways in which the two *Prāmāṇikas* differed from Peirce the Pragmaticist, and I shall try to point out the differences that strike me as most fundamental.

2 Experience, signs and signification

2.1 *Prāmāṇika*

Over one thousand years passed between the time of the Buddha's death and the time when Dignāga was active. During that intervening millennium, the Buddhist community accumulated a vast collection of texts that claimed to represent the words of the Buddha. Given the vast number of such texts, it is not surprising that there are doctrinal inconsistencies within the collection as a whole, some of which are serious enough to make a difference in the way one would practise Buddhism. Dignāga's predecessor Vasubandhu, who had been a prolific writer of texts in Buddhist systematics, had ended one of his most famous works, the *Abhidharmakośa*, with a statement to the effect that so many years had passed since the Buddha's death that no one could be reasonably expected to know for sure what the Buddha's words had been, much less to understand clearly what his words had meant. Dignāga, writing at least a generation later than Vasubandhu, was evidently interested in reducing the dangers of internal conflict among Buddhists. He carefully avoided nearly all the topics over which there was sectarian dispute and tried to return to the most basic elements of Buddhist doctrine, the matters on which everyone could agree. By returning to these basic issues themselves, and avoiding the secondary issue of textual authority, Dignāga apparently hoped to present a form of Buddhism that would

not only unite various factions of Buddhists but could also be defended against criticisms by outsiders.

Among the most basic ideas in Buddhist doctrine is that all dissatisfaction arises from some failure to understand the world as it really is. Failure to see reality accurately is generally said to arise from habitual carelessness in thinking. The term that is used in Buddhist texts for this carelessness is *ayoniśo manaskāra*, which literally means thinking that fails to be based upon first causes. The prime example of this sort of thinking is that in which the principal objects about which one thinks are complex objects, rather than the elements of which those complex objects are composed. Thinking about oneself as a whole person, for example, and being concerned with this person is a habit of thought that fails to take into consideration the fact that the so-called person is really a complex of simple parts. Being a complex of simple parts, it is bound to undergo constant changes of constitution; ultimately, of course, it is bound to disintegrate altogether. Despite the inescapable fact of change and death, however, people often tend to wish that they could remain young, remain healthy and remain alive forever, or at least for much longer than is normally possible. The amount of dissatisfaction that a person experiences with old age, then, is directly proportionate to the strength of one's will to remain youthful. Moreover, the strength of unrealistic desires is said to be a function of the depth of the delusions that one has allowed to develop through careless habits of thought.

Dignāga took the idea of careful thinking (*yoniśo manaskāra*) to include not only thinking about the right sorts of things, such as the simple objects that serve as the most basic components of experience, but also thinking correctly about anything. Towards the end of avoiding errors in thinking, Dignāga made improvements in the system of logic he had inherited from his forerunners. He placed his system of logic in an elegant framework, much of which he had borrowed from previous thinkers of both the Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical traditions. According to Dignāga, every cognition falls into exactly one of two possible categories. The deciding characteristic that separates these two categories is the presence or absence of some kind of judgement (*kalpanā*), by which Dignāga means the mental activity of associating a sensation with past or future sensations or with language. The word *kalpanā* is a verbal noun that literally means the act of producing or creating or regulating. In everyday language, the word could be used to refer to the act of building something mechanical or composing a piece of music or a poem. To capture this sense of the word, let me refer to it not merely as judgement but as creative judgement.

A cognition in which there is a complete absence of creative judgement is called a pure sensation (*pratyakṣa*). An example of pure sensation for Dignāga is the act of seeing a patch of colour without associating it in any way with previously seen colours, or with simultaneous sensations of sound, odour, taste, texture or temperature; this pure sensation

is also free of any associations with words. In a pure sensation, a sensible property is being experienced just as it is in itself and for itself. In contrast to this pure sensation, Dignāga recognizes another kind of cognition in which creative judgement is present; in this kind of cognition, sensed objects are no longer experienced simply as they are; rather, they serve as signs that indicate other experiences. They may indicate experiences from the past by triggering memory, or they may indicate possible future experiences by triggering anticipation.

Dignāga is evidently committed to the idea that thinking about what one is experiencing involves more than simply manipulating sensible data; it also creates a subjective world of experience. Vasubandhu had already observed that two people who are objectively in the same physical situation can nevertheless have radically different worlds of experience. Although both people might be in the same physical world, one might be experiencing the tortures of hell, while the other is experiencing the joys of paradise. In fact, each is experiencing the cumulative effects of mental habits that have been formed through thousands of individual instances of creative judgement that have been carried out previously. For Dignāga, the implicit principle upon which he seems to be working is this: to the extent that one can learn to form careful habits of thinking, one can be liberated from the hellish experiences that result from being a habitually sloppy thinker.

One could read most of Dignāga's works without being aware that he was a Buddhist thinker. The same cannot be said for his successor Dharmakīrti, whose agenda as a defender of Buddhism is overt. Whereas Dignāga seems to have been dedicated to offering a system of logic that would enable his readers to think more clearly and therefore avoid unpleasant disappointments, Dharmakīrti was explicitly engaged in the task of showing that no set of doctrines other than those of Buddhism are in keeping with reality. Becoming free from the displeasures of disappointment may be a result of thinking clearly, but for Dharmakīrti the test of whether one is thinking clearly is the extent to which one's experiences of the world are in harmony with the basic teachings of Buddhism. The blunt polemicism of Dharmakīrti makes him quite a different philosopher from Dignāga—at least as different from Dignāga as James was from Peirce; this fact will make the following presentation not a two-way comparison of Buddhist Prāmāṇikas with Pragmaticists, but a three-way comparison.

2.2 Peirce

2.2.1 Phaneroscopy

In his writings on phaneroscopy, by which he meant the study of appearances independently of their correspondence to external realities, Peirce articulated a set of ideas that bears some likeness to the Buddhist

Prāmāṇika doctrine of sensation and judgement as the two modes of cognition. In these writings Peirce described what he called the three modes of being, which he simply called Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. This doctrine was not the clearest or the most scientific of Peirce's contributions to philosophy, and Peirce described these three categories differently in different writings. Nevertheless, the doctrine does offer a point of comparison with the doctrine of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. What Peirce called a Secondness comes close to what Dignāga called a pure sensation; it is an actuality, that is, a sensation in the immediate present in which one being learns directly how another being is (Peirce 1905, 75–76). Peirce's Firstness was a category that comprised universals and potentials. Redness, for example, existing as a potential to make another see red colour, is a First; the sensation of the actually seen red colour, on the other hand, is a Second. Thirdness was the category in which Peirce placed laws and probabilities, or in other words, the tendencies for events of the future to follow patterns similar to those of the past. It is the category of Thirdness that makes it possible for one to make reasonable predictions of how future events will unfold, and to make reasonable inferences about a large phenomenon based on a study of a randomly chosen example. It is in this mode that sensible properties serve as signs for potential sensations.

Peirce regarded his three modes of being as theoretically distinct, but he noted that in practice the modes are constantly interacting. A pure sensation of an immediately present quality is a pure fiction (Peirce 1905, 91), since we are constantly associating sensations with the past and making predictions about the future rather than seeing things purely as they are here and now. Dharmakīrti also acknowledged that it *seems* as though judgement is always present with sensation, but this is because judgement occurs so quickly after a sensation that sensation and the reflection upon it feel simultaneous—looked at phaneroscopically, Peirce would say, they are simultaneous. According to Dharmakīrti, however, one can stare at a colour or listen to a sound intently, until one is no longer aware either of the name of what is being sensed or of any memories or anticipations; trancelike states provide instances of such experience. Moreover, one can see one thing and be thinking of something entirely different; being absentminded is an instance of this kind of experience. Both trancelike concentration and absentmindedness, says Dharmakīrti, suggest that sensation and judgement are distinct processes and that consciousness is usually switching rapidly from one process to the other.

There may be a vague similarity between the Buddhist Prāmāṇikas' doctrine of two types of consciousness and Peirce's doctrine of three modes of being. The similarity, however, provides little promise for finding much of importance that the two systems have in common. As we shall see in subsequent sections, this promise, slight as it is, is quashed by significant differences.

2.2.2 Pragmatism

As is well known to historians of Pragmatism, Peirce coined the word “pragmaticism” to refer to the doctrine of meaning that he had originally called pragmatism; when the original term fell into common usage, it acquired meanings alien to Peirce’s original intentions, so he gave his original doctrine a new name “which is ugly enough to be safe from kid-nappers” (Peirce 1903, 255). Pragmaticism was the doctrine saying that “the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life” (Peirce 1903, 252); Peirce stated the same idea in his statement that “what a thing means is simply what habits it involves” (Peirce 1878, 30). According to this doctrine, arriving at the complete meaning of an expression or a conception entails enumerating all the conceivable differences in action that the confirmation or denial of the expression would imply. Doctrines whose affirmation or denial would make no possible difference to one’s behaviour are, therefore, meaningless.

There might be some superficial resemblance between Peirce’s attitude as expressed in the doctrine of pragmaticism and the Buddhist eschewal of questions that have no bearing on the search for nirvāṇa. The Buddha did reportedly dismiss a set of questions as ones that need not be answered, and his explicit reason for not answering these questions was that the answers did not lead to the goal of nirvāṇa. There is, however, an important difference between dismissing a question as irrelevant for a *specific* purpose (as the Buddha did) and dismissing a concept as implying no conceivable difference in action for *any* purpose. Many—and probably most—of the questions that modern scientists seek to answer would be dismissed by the Buddha as irrelevant to the pursuit of nirvāṇa. Determining the half-life of a particular isotope of uranium is extremely unlikely to have any bearing on a Buddhist’s practices that are directed towards eliminating self-centred desires and aversions. Since nirvāṇa is the only truly worthwhile goal (*artha*), the vast majority of the questions of science would be distractions from the goal; being off-the-goal, the questions would be called *anartha* in Sanskrit, a word that can also be translated as “meaningless”. No matter how “meaningless” certain scientific questions may be from a Buddhist perspective, however, they are paradigmatically meaningful by Peirce’s doctrine of pragmaticism. Any question to which a scientist can conceive an experiment—even an experiment that cannot be physically performed—the results of which would decide a theoretical matter by eliminating a false hypothesis, is for Peirce a pragmatically meaningful question. That scientists can formulate a clear picture of what evidence they would have to find to eliminate a particular theory of cosmogony from further consideration makes the question of cosmogony pragmatically meaningful, even if it is not yet, and might never be, practically possible to discover that evidence. From a Buddhist perspective, on the

other hand, the question of whether the universe began or was always here is always listed as typical of those questions that tend not to edification. The difference between Peirce and the Buddhists on what it means for a matter to be pragmatically significant is great enough to make it clear that the Buddhist Prāmāṇikas were not even close to anticipating Peirce's pragmatism. Another telling distinction will be discussed in sections 3 and 4.

3 Path or method? Nirvāṇa or science?

No matter how many similarities one may find between the Buddhist Prāmāṇikas and Peirce the Pragmaticist, there is a difference that is so fundamental as to render most similarities insignificant. This difference has to do with purpose, with the ultimate goal towards which clarity of thinking is seen as an end. Peirce is primarily interested in the mentality of the scientist. Scientists, says Peirce, are people who find the cosmos "so admirable, that to penetrate to its ways seems to them the only thing that makes life worth living" (Peirce 1896, 42). Inquiry into the principles of the cosmos is done for the sole purpose of discovering "truth for truth's sake". Therefore, it is an inquiry conducted without any interest whatsoever in any ulterior purpose, such as commercial gain, the improvement of one's character, or the improvement of society as a whole. A person who seeks knowledge in order to become a better person or a more informed citizen, or in order to make the world a better or more comfortable place, may be a very good person, concedes Peirce; such a one is, however, no scientist.

True science, insists Peirce, is necessarily amoral. A concern for morality is usually a positive obstacle to scientific progress, according to Peirce, because morality is essentially a conservative enterprise in which traditions are preserved intact and unchallenged in order to insure the smooth running of society (Peirce 1896, 44). Society as a whole is normally not concerned with truth; rather, it is concerned with sustaining a body of "pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth" (Peirce 1877, 8), because the ability to be unrealistic enables human beings to have hopes and aspirations that make it possible for them to face unpleasant situations that might otherwise be overwhelming. The ability to be unrealistically hopeful, in other words, may be a survival mechanism that has been bred into human beings through Darwinian natural selection. The scientist, in contrast to the moralist, is necessarily a radical, whose job is not to preserve traditional folklore and mythology, but to challenge it and question it at every turn. Peirce goes even further and argues that not only is a concern for morality an impediment to scientific progress, but so is academic life as a whole, since the academy is generally an institution for the preservation and transmission of received

norms instead of an institution for the discovery of new ones.

Wherever there is a large class of academic professors who are provided with good incomes and looked up to as gentlemen, scientific inquiry must languish. Wherever the bureaucrats are the more learned class, the case will be still worse (Peirce 1896, 45).

If Peirce's description of science and the scientific mentality is accepted as normative, then it is difficult to imagine anyone more unscientific than the Prāmāṇikas, and especially Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti (much more so than Dignāga) would be a good example of the kind of thinker whom Peirce called, in the most disparaging tones, a metaphysician. Whereas the scientist is someone who uses reason to learn what is not already known and to accept new discoveries without any predispositions to reject what conflicts with fixed beliefs, the metaphysician is one who uses reason only to find arguments in support of a set of doctrines that have come to be regarded as orthodox. In the sense that Peirce uses the term, Dharmakīrti is a metaphysician par excellence. While it is true that Dharmakīrti is a doctrinal minimalist, in that he has pared Buddhist doctrine down to a few basic principles that all Buddhists would accept as true, there is virtually nothing in his writings that would suggest that Dharmakīrti is prepared to reject any of those basic Buddhist principles. For example, argumentation is produced, not in the spirit of weighing evidence that might help decide whether or not some kind of consciousness survives the death of the physical body, but to convince the reader that mental events are independent of physical events and that therefore consciousness can continue even when the processes of the physical body stop; the doctrine of an independent continuity of mental processes is crucial for a doctrine of rebirth, which is in turn a keystone in providing a rational justification of Buddhist ethical guidelines. Dharmakīrti's agenda, in other words, is obviously to encourage his readers to strengthen their beliefs in a set of doctrines, belief in which will enable them to be moral; being moral, in its turn, is a necessary aspect of the path whose purpose is to lead one to nirvāṇa (?). So, while the highest use of reason is for Peirce to conduct a dispassionate inquiry that is independent of goals and morality, the highest use of reason for Dharmakīrti is to confirm a set of beliefs that have the goal of becoming dispassionate. For the Pragmaticist, dispassion is a means towards the end of discovering truth; if it should turn out that truth could be discovered without dispassion, then dispassion would have no utility for Peirce. For the Prāmāṇika, on the other hand, truth is a means towards the goal of being dispassionate, and if one could achieve dispassion without ever knowing the truth, then truth would be dispensable for the Buddhist.

4 Experiment or experience? Fallibilism or yogic insight?

Nowhere are the differences between Prāmāṇika Buddhism and Peircean Pragmatism more apparent than in their differing attitudes towards certainty. In looking at their attitudes towards certainty, we shall see that each of the three philosophers being examined had a different position. Let me begin with a brief discussion of Peirce's views, because they are probably the most familiar to most modern readers (even those who have never heard Peirce's name).

4.1 Peirce on fallibilism

Of all the characteristics of the scientific mentality as described by Peirce, none was more important than the ability to tolerate uncertainty and the willingness to reexamine one's beliefs. The sole rule of reason, said Peirce, is this: "...in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not to be satisfied with what you are already inclined to think..." Because science is not a body of knowledge but rather a process of inquiry to which there can never be an end, anything that impedes further investigation impedes science; and nothing more impedes further investigation than the conviction that the whole truth is already known on a matter. The enterprise of science can never be finished, because it is never possible to investigate more than parts of the whole, and one can only hope or assume that the parts selected for study are representative samples.

All positive reasoning is of the nature of judging the proportion of something in a whole collection by the proportion found in a sample. Accordingly, there are three things to which we can never hope to attain by reasoning, namely, absolute certainty, absolute exactitude, absolute universality (Peirce 1896, 56).

Many thinkers have acknowledged that there can be no certainty through the senses or even through reason. Religious thinkers, for example, often emphasize the shortcomings of reason in order to show the superiority of revelation or mystical experience. What characterizes the scientist, however, is the view that there is no certainty at all.

Now if exactitude, certitude, and universality are not to be attained by reasoning, there is certainly no other means by which they can be reached (Peirce 1896, 56).

Anyone who has not led an insular life eventually notices that there are irreconcilable differences of opinion among people and that even those

who claim to be delivering divine messages that are supposedly free of the limitations on human knowledge cannot agree on precisely what the divine message is. What distinguishes the religious thinker from the scientist is that the former is inclined to adhere to a particular message and dismiss whatever directly contradicts it, while the latter is inclined to be equally suspicious of all claims to divine inspiration and to reject divine revelation as a reliable method of arriving at truth (however excellent it may be at arriving at fixed beliefs).

Since Buddhist philosophers were almost invariably atheists who rejected revelation as a means of attaining certainty, some authors have been led to believe that Buddhism has more of an affinity with science than with most religions. As I shall try to show in the following paragraphs, however, there are features of Buddhist philosophy that warrant dismissing the belief that Buddhism is scientific in spirit.

4.2 The Buddhists on yogic experience

A doctrine that is universal in classical Indian Buddhism is that there are three degrees of wisdom. The lowest is that which comes from being told the truth. Becoming familiar with the truths that others have discovered is seen as a first stage in a process of becoming certain about them and thereby becoming free of doubt, hesitation and resistance. Advancing beyond this first stage requires reflection. It is at this second stage that most Buddhist philosophical literature operates; reasoning is applied to the end of showing the falsity of views that rival Buddhism and the truth of doctrines within Buddhism. In the writings of Dharmakīrti, for example, one finds elaborate arguments against divine revelation and even the existence of a supreme god, against several causal theories that rivalled those most often found in Buddhist doctrine, against the doctrine of a permanent self, and against the materialistic reduction of all mental events to physical processes; one also finds arguments for Buddhist causal theories, the doctrine of karma and the doctrine of rebirth. Reflecting on all this argumentation is supposed to confirm the truth of Buddhist doctrine and to increase one's confidence that nirvāṇa is the ultimate goal and Buddhist practice the sole path to that goal. But this reflection is still only a propaedeutic to the final stage of wisdom, which is achieved through contemplative cultivation (*bhāvanā*). At this stage of wisdom, confidence in Buddhist doctrine gives way to certainty (*niścaya*) about it; at this stage of the contemplation of wisdom, one is supposed to learn through direct experience that the doctrines that one has studied and reflected upon are indeed true. What was once a working hypothesis is now a confirmed truth; what was once faith is now knowledge.

In the system of the Prāmāṇika Buddhists, this final stage of confirmation is known as yogic sensation (*yogipratyakṣa*), and it occupies

a unique place within the epistemological framework described by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. As we saw above, Dignāga outlined two distinct ways of acquiring knowledge. Direct sensation provides knowledge of particular sensible properties that are immediately present, whereas judgement arranges these sensations in categories by comparing present sensations with memories of past sensations; judgement may also make predictions of future experiences based on patterns that have been recognized in past experiences. It is apparent that within this schema, all knowledge of laws, rules, patterns and universals takes place within the realm of judgement, since in this realm alone is there any cognition of times and places other than the immediate present, and there could never be universality without a cognition of something more than the here and now. Therefore, all the doctrines of Buddhism, which are taken as universal truths about causal principles and so forth, occur at the level of judgement rather than at the level of sensation. What makes this awkward for the Prāmāṇika Buddhists is that they have a strong commitment to nominalism; in other words, all the universal judgements in which the mind deals are said to be superimposed upon particulars. Universals, resemblances and laws, according to Dignāga, are not part of the objects of the world outside the mind; they are not discovered by a passive mind engaged in recording data from the external world; rather, they are the creations of the mind that feel as if they are part of our sensory experience only because we fail to separate objective reality from subjective interpretations of reality. Given this way of looking at things, it would appear that for the Prāmāṇika Buddhists there would be no means of claiming that the teachings of the Buddha are any more than a set of subjective interpretations to which Buddhists alone have become particularly attached.

The doctrine of yogic sensation, however, provides a way out of this unhappy cul-de-sac. According to Dignāga, the practitioner of yoga ceases to be influenced by prior teachings and sees things directly as they really are without prejudice; this is all he has to say on the subject, and it would be incautious to try to read more into this laconic statement. According to Dharmakīrti and his interpreters, on the other hand, yogic sensation enables one to know directly the truths of Buddhism and to attain full certainty of them. It is not entirely clear in Dharmakīrti's writings whether one becomes certain of the truths of Buddhism by being a yogin or whether one becomes a genuine yogin by being certain that the Buddhist path is uniquely effective in arriving at the only goal truly worth pursuing. What is more clear is that for Dharmakīrti the doctrines of Buddhism are objective truths that have the form of universal propositions. As objective truths, they must be the subject matter of sensation rather than judgement; as universal propositions, they would normally be expected to be judgements rather than sensations. Yogic sensation is therefore not quite like either of the two modes of cognition recognized in Dignāga's system. Indeed, it is difficult to see exactly how it

is supposed to differ from such extraordinary methods of attaining certainty as divine revelation—aside from the obvious fact that yogic insight is something one can do without the assistance of a god. Whatever else it may be, yogic sensation is definitely not akin to Peirce’s scientific method; it is supposed to provide precisely the kind of certainty that Peirce says is impossible to achieve.

5 So what?

In the sections above I have argued that the Prāmāṇika form of Buddhism is not scientific in the sense in which Peirce talked of science. “True science,” wrote Peirce, “is distinctively the study of useless things” (Peirce 1896, 48) Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, states that discerning useful from useless things (*artha-anartha-vivecana*) is the central task of his philosophical project; reason, he says, is to be used to enable one to get what is beneficial and to avoid what ought to be avoided. One can hardly imagine anything that would be more pointless to Dharmakīrti than study for the sole sake of satisfying one’s curiosity. Moreover, Peirce’s aversion to metaphysics is nowhere evident in Prāmāṇika Buddhism, nor is his insistence on the unavailability of certainty. The genuine scientist is for Peirce a person who is willing in principle to discard any hypothesis that is overturned by the discovery of countervailing evidence. There is nothing in the writing of Dharmakīrti that suggests that he was prepared to discard any of the principal doctrines of Buddhism; on the contrary, his task was clearly to use reason to find arguments to show that the doctrines of Buddhism are uniquely true, and this use of reason marks him as a “philosopher” in the pejorative sense in which Peirce uses the term, to refer to “a man with a system which he thinks embodies all that is best and worth knowing” (Peirce 1896, 43).

Even if it may be granted that Buddhism did not anticipate the key features of Peirce’s Pragmaticism, the question might still remain as to how these two systems of philosophy compare. Is one more successful than the other? Does either have anything of importance to learn from the other? Is there any point in comparing them? The first of these questions, I would argue, has the same answer as the question “Is a shoe more successful than an umbrella?” Shoes and umbrellas have different functions, and neither is very good at doing what the other was designed to do. Similarly, Buddhism and Pragmaticism involve very different mentalities; the Buddhist mentality would be a poor choice for someone interested in learning for the sheer joy of discovery, and the scientific mentality would be a poor choice for a person determined to achieve nirvāṇa. Having said that, however, it is not at all obvious whether it is more noble to pursue learning or to achieve nirvāṇa. Given this difference in functions, it seems unlikely that, a few minor points aside, Bud-

dhism has much to gain from Pragmatism or vice versa. And this leads to the question of whether there is any point in comparing these two systems of thought. The answer to this, I suppose, depends on whether one is a Pragmaticist or a Buddhist. For a Peircean Pragmaticist, there is always some point in undertaking a study: the acquisition of learning as an end in itself. While the comparative study of these two philosophical systems might be utterly useless from any practical point of view, it may still be a worthy—indeed, a paradigmatic—subject for scientific inquiry. For a Buddhist, and especially a North American Buddhist, on the other hand, the study of Pragmatism might serve a very practical purpose. Understanding the causes of one's ways of thinking is always considered to be a fruitful exercise for a Buddhist to undertake. Most North American Buddhists have been exposed for most of their lives to educational policies informed to a large extent by Pragmatists and to at least some extent by Pragmaticists. Coming to an understanding of Pragmatism, therefore, would be for most North Americans a valuable component of their self-understanding. Internal conflicts in their own thinking might turn out to be traceable to the fundamental incompatibilities between Pragmatist and Buddhist ways of thinking.

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