

# Will the marriage between Pragmatism and Buddhism last?

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## 1. Introduction

In 1993 there was a panel of the Pragmatism and Empiricism in American Religious thought group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religions. The theme of the panel was Buddhism and Pragmatism. At that panel I presented a paper entitled “Did Buddhism anticipate Pragmatism,”<sup>1</sup> in which I looked at some of the writings of Charles S. Peirce, who coined the word “pragmatism” and later abandoned it in protest against William James’s use of the term. In discussing Peirce’s writings on the nature of science and scientific method, I cited, among other passages his observation that “True science is distinctively the study of useless things.”<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist philosopher with whom I compared Peirce was the seventh century Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti, I observed, had a very different project from Peirce’s. In that paper I wrote

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

<sup>1</sup> Richard P. Hayes, “Did Buddhism Anticipate Pragmatism?,” *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University* 23, (1995): 75–88.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 55.

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....<sup>3</sup>

In the concluding remarks to that paper I wrote this:

Even if it may be granted that Buddhism did not anticipate the key features of Peirce's Pragmatism, 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? ... 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 Pragmatism 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, Buddhism has much to gain from Pragmatism or vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

That conclusion was rightly criticized for being rather too narrow, and others suggested a more favorable outcome might come of looking at Dharmakīrti and William James, rather than Peirce.<sup>5</sup> Taking Dharmakīrti as a representative of Buddhism as a whole is still much too narrow.

What I should like to do in this paper, then, is to begin with the observation that most North Americans have been exposed for most of their lives to educational policies informed to a large extent by Pragmatists. Even those who have never formally studied Pragmatism have acquired, perhaps unknowingly, a largely Pragmatist frame of reference. This is true of those who have become Buddhists no less than it is true of the general population. What I plan to explore here is whether a Pragmatist perspective on Buddhism is coherent, or whether it might lead to internal conflicts for the person trying to see the world as a Buddhist and as a Pragmatist at the same time.

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<sup>3</sup> Hayes, "Did Buddhism Anticipate Pragmatism?"

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, John Powers, "Empiricism and Pragmatism in the Thought of Dharmakīrti and William James," *American Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (1994):.

## 2. Features of Pragmatism

### 2.1. Charles Sanders Peirce

Some of the most important features of what Charles S. Peirce first called “pragmatism” were articulated in his article entitled “The fixation of belief”<sup>6</sup> and discussed further in an article entitled “How to make our ideas clear.”<sup>7</sup> In the first two articles, Peirce begins with a stark observation:

Few persons care to study logic, because everybody conceives himself to be proficient enough in the art of reasoning already. But I observe that this satisfaction is limited to one's own ratiocination, and does not extend to that of other men.

We come to the full possession of our power of drawing inferences the last of all our faculties, for it is not so much a natural gift as a long and difficult art. The history of its practice would make a grand subject for a book. The medieval schoolmen, following the Romans, made logic the earliest of a boy's studies after grammar, as being very easy. So it was, as they understood it. Its fundamental principle, according to them, was, that all knowledge rests on either authority or reason; but that whatever is deduced by reason depends ultimately on a premise derived from authority.

Accordingly, as soon as a boy was perfect in the syllogistic procedure, his intellectual kit of tools was held to be complete.<sup>8</sup>

This classical and medieval way of teaching logic, Peirce goes on to say, is wholly inadequate for modern science. Science has an entirely different purpose from the intellectual inquiries of the ancients and the medievals. Science is the relentless pursuit of truth for the sake of truth alone. The pursuit of truth, properly done, cannot be contaminated by other pursuits, such as the pursuit of financial gain, the pursuit of economic justice, the pursuit of social stability or the pursuit of fame and recognition. Society as a whole is normally not concerned with truth, says Peirce; rather, it is concerned with sustaining a body of “pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth,”<sup>9</sup> 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. In another article, 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

<sup>6</sup> Peirce, 1877, *Popular Science Monthly*, 12, 1–15

<sup>7</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12, no. January (1878): 286–302.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12, no. November (1877): 1–15.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justin Buchler, (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 8.

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.<sup>10</sup>

In his 1878 article, “How to make our ideas clear,” Peirce builds upon the principles laid down in “The Fixation of belief.” In the 1878 article he explores the Cartesian concern with “clear and distinct” ideas, observing that Descartes’s notions of “clear and distinct” are neither clear nor distinct. In trying to clarify these notions, Peirce distinguishes three levels or grades of clarity in ideas, which he summarizes by noting that a belief has three properties, which he describes as follows:

First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*. As it appeases the irritation of doubt, which is the motive for thinking, thought relaxes, and comes to rest for a moment when belief is reached. But, since belief is a rule for action, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought. That is why I have permitted myself to call it thought at rest, although thought is essentially an action. The *final* upshot of thinking is the exercise of volition, and of this thought no longer forms a part; but belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking.

The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. If beliefs do not differ in this respect, if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere differences in the manner of consciousness of them can make them different beliefs, any more than playing a tune in different keys is playing different tunes. Imaginary distinctions are often drawn between beliefs which differ only in their mode of expression; —the wrangling which ensues is real enough, however.<sup>11</sup>

So here we get to the heart of Peirce’s Pragmatism. It is an observation about ideas and beliefs, and in particular it is the claim that what distinguishes one idea from another is the difference in actions that ensues when the beliefs are acted upon. If one belief does not produce a different action than a second belief, then there is really only one belief. An example that Peirce uses is the different formulations about the nature of the wine and the host in the Christian eucharist. Roman Catholics and Protestants argued about this matter for centuries, and yet, says Peirce, at the end of all their wrangling, they both recommended the

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<sup>10</sup> Peirce, “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism,” 45.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, ed. Max Harold Fisch and Christian J. W. Kloesel, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 263–264.

same course of action: eat the bread and drink the wine. Peirce's summary of the Pragmatist approach to any scientific, philosophical or theological question was this:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.<sup>12</sup>

As is well known to historians of Pragmatism, Peirce eventually abandoned the term "pragmatism" and 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 kidnappers."<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup>

Although it was Peirce who set the Pragmatist movement in motion, it is really the way that William James used the word that gave the movement its shape in the early part of the twentieth century. It is to that account that we now turn.

## 2.2. William James

In his second lecture on Pragmatism, entitled "What Pragmatism means," James offered this explanation of the term:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.<sup>15</sup>

If this pragmatic method were applied, he goes on to say, a great deal of philosophical disputation would simply disappear.

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Essentials of Pragmatism," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 255.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>15</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. Bruce Kuklick, (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 25–26.

There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.<sup>16</sup>

A person who follows the pragmatic method, says James, views theories as instruments by which one moves from one realm of one's experience to another.<sup>17</sup> Rather than being absolute claims about reality, they are ways in which the person who forms the theory adapts to the world as experienced and makes tentative predictions about what sorts of experiences might result from acting in various ways. The emphasis is always on acting.

The final chapter of the lectures on Pragmatism was devoted to the topic of Pragmatism and religion, a topic to which James had devoted the Gifford lectures in Edinburgh in 1902, five years before he delivered the eight lectures on Pragmatism in Boston. The Gifford lectures, of course, were eventually published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, one of the enduring classics of the discipline of religious studies. In his discussions of religion, James made a distinction that appeared throughout his writings of this period. In *Pragmatism* James claimed that in the field of philosophy one can distinguish between two personality types, which he called the tender-minded and the tough-minded. The tender-minded are those who tend to gravitate toward principles, toward intellectual theorizing, toward idealism, toward optimism, toward an emphasis on free will and toward dogma. The tough-minded are those who seek unifying principles and themes that tie together and make sense of all the multiplicity of experience. The tough-minded, on the other hand, are those who gravitate toward empirical observation, the world of the senses rather than the world of the intellect, toward materialistic explanations, toward a view that all conduct is so influenced by factors beyond any individual's control that it is absurd to say that people have free will, and toward skepticism. While the tender-minded philosopher constantly seeks single theories that will explain everything, the tough-minded philosopher is more inclined to be a pluralist, that is, someone refuses to reduce the myriad of things to a single cause, and who is inclined to regard all-encompassing theories to be so abstract and impoverished of important and interesting detail as to be meaningless.<sup>18</sup> Applying this two-fold schema to religious personalities, James wrote:

So we see concretely two types of religion in sharp contrast. Using our old terms of comparison, we may say that the absolutistic scheme appeals to the tender-minded while the pluralistic scheme appeals to the tough. Many persons would refuse to call the pluralistic scheme religious at all. They would call it moralistic, and would apply the word religious to the monistic scheme alone. Religion in the sense of self-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> Instrumentalism is discussed in lectures two and five. See Ibid., 26, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

surrender, and moralism in the sense of self-sufficingness, have been pitted against each other as incompatibles frequently enough in the history of human thought.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Features in Buddhism that resemble Pragmatism

It is probably inevitable that writers presenting Buddhism to European and North American audiences avail themselves of philosophical terminology from Western traditions to convey less familiar ideas originating in ancient and medieval Asian settings. There are enough resemblances between Buddhism and Pragmatism to have enticed some authors to present Buddhism as a kind of Pragmatism *avant le mot*. There is nothing in principle outrageous about this, for William James himself insisted that “Pragmatism” is a new name for a very old method.

There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means. Shadworth Hodgson keeps insisting that realities are only what they are “known-as.” But these forerunners of pragmatism used it in fragments: they were preluders only. Not until in our time has it generalized itself, become conscious of a universal mission, pretended to a conquering destiny.<sup>20</sup>

It could be argued that it would be legitimate to consider adding either the Buddha or at least some of his followers to the list of pre-modern pragmatists that James offers. There are other resemblances as well. Like the pragmatists, some Buddhists were suspicious of authoritarianism. Like the pragmatists that both Peirce and James describe, the Buddha explicitly warned his disciples not to concern themselves with doctrines that are not demonstrably relevant to the concerns of living people who experience disappointment in and alienation from the world as they experience it. Like the pragmatists, almost all Buddhists operate on a belief that virtue and good character are not innate but can be acquired—a belief that results in an emphasis on the development of good character through the influence of education. It is not at all difficult to imagine many Buddhist philosophers agreeing wholeheartedly with James’s middle path between optimism and pessimism, which he describes in the eighth lecture in *Pragmatism*:

Midway between the two there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism, tho it has hitherto figured less as a doctrine than as an attitude in human affairs. Optimism has always been the regnant *doctrine* in european philosophy. Pessimism was only recently introduced by Schopenhauer and counts few systematic defenders as yet. Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 128.

Let me now turn to two specific features of Buddhist doctrine that seem to be congruent with pragmatism, namely 1) the spirit of meliorism, and 2) the tendency to be wary of intellectual pursuits that do not have what James would call a practical “cash value.”

### 3.1. The spirit of meliorism

As we saw above, in the final lecture on *Pragmatism* William James saw meliorism as a middle way between optimism and pessimism. Just after the passage cited above, James goes on to say this:

It is clear that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism. Some conditions of the world's salvation are actually extant, and she cannot possibly close her eyes to this fact: and should the residual conditions come, salvation would become an accomplished reality. Naturally the terms I use here are exceedingly summary. You may interpret the word “salvation” in any way you like, and make it as diffuse and distributive, or as climacteric and integral a phenomenon as you please.

Take, for example, any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes, and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world's salvation. But these particular ideals are not bare abstract possibilities. They are grounded, they are *live* possibilities, for we are their live champions and pledges, and if the complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier, in the second lecture of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James quoted at length a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s address at Harvard Divinity College in 1838. Let me repeat just the first part of that lengthy quotation of Emerson:

These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance: Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God, do enter into that man with justice.

What is striking to a scholar of Buddhism about the words of Emerson quoted approvingly by James is that those words are unwittingly an excellent description of one of the most important contemplative practices in Buddhism, the so-called *brahmavihāras*. The name of those exercises means dwelling with Brahmā, or we could say dwelling with God. The explanation of how those exercises began is that a young man once told the Buddha that his goal in life was to see God face to face. The Buddha asks whether the young man has good reason to believe that anyone has ever seen God face to face. The answer was No. Then the Buddha asked the young man what kind of mentality he thought God would have to make him so worthy of wishing to see face to face. The response was that God would have

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



unconditional love for everyone, would delight in the good fortune of all sentient beings, would be responsive to the tribulations of all sentient beings, and would remain impartial and neutral in all conflicts among sentient beings. The Buddha then says to the young man that one need not meet God to find those qualities, for it is possible to develop them oneself. In short, the Buddha anticipates Emerson's claim that "if a man is at heart just, then in so far as he is God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God, do enter into that man with justice."

### **3.2. Warning against irrelevance**

The second specific resemblance between Buddhism and Pragmatism to explore is the warning against irrelevant pursuits. As is well known and often repeated, the Canonical tradition of Buddhism records that the Buddha refused to answer fourteen questions. These questions are called the undetermined or unexplained issues. According to the texts, the Buddha said

I have not determined whether the world is eternal, the world is non-eternal, the world has boundaries, the world is unbounded, life is the physical body, life is one thing and the physical body is another, one who knows the truth exists after death, one who knows the truth does not exist after death, one who knows the truth both exists and does not exist after death, one who knows the truth neither exists nor does not exist after death, discontent is caused by oneself, discontent is caused by another, discontent is caused by both oneself and another, or discontent, being caused neither by oneself nor by another, arises spontaneously.

As for *why* the Buddha did not determine these matters, the texts portray him as saying this about his silence on these issues:

Because...this is not connected to a purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the life of purity, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvana. Therefore, I have not determined.

We shall return to a discussion of the Buddha's explanation and how it squares with Pragmatism in a moment.

## **4. Possible differences**

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James claimed that he knew very little about Buddhism, but did approve of at least one aspect of the religion, namely, the theory of karma. In the postscript of *Varieties* he wrote:

I am ignorant of Buddhism and speak under correction, and merely in order the better to describe my general point of view; but as I apprehend the Buddhistic doctrine of Karma, I agree in principle with that. All supernaturalists admit that facts are under the judgment of higher law; but for Buddhism as I interpret it, and for religion generally so far as it remains unweakened by transcendentalistic metaphysics, the word “judgment” here means no such bare academic verdict or platonic appreciation as it means in Vedantic or modern absolutist systems; it carries, on the contrary, *execution* with it, is *in rebus* as well as *post rem*, and operates “causally” as partial factor in the total fact.<sup>23</sup>

In both *Varieties* and *Pragmatism* he portrays Buddhism as pessimistic about the possibility of happiness in this life and therefore directed toward some sort of transformation whereby one either leaves this world behind for another world or one’s familiar personality behind for another radically improved mentality. And so we find James saying this in the final chapter of *Pragmatism*.

Nirvana means safety from this everlasting round of adventures of which the world of sense consists. The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life.<sup>24</sup>

James goes on to say that this fear of life, which he says characterizes both Hinduism and Buddhism but also Christianity, is naturally associated with absolutism and monism—in other words, with the tender-minded thinkers of the world. For such people, he says,

There can be no doubt that when men are reduced to their last sick extremity absolutism is the only saving scheme. Pluralistic moralism simply makes their teeth chatter, it refrigerates the very heart within their breast.<sup>25</sup>

From these passages we could safely conclude that William James did not see Buddhism as a natural ally of the pluralistic, tough-minded, empiricist sort of philosopher that he describes in the first lecture in *Pragmatism*, and that he confesses himself to be. This leads us naturally to ask whether James misperceived Buddhism entirely—he does, after all, admit he knows little about it—or whether he correctly perceived some forms of Buddhism but was unaware of other forms that might be exemplars of his tough-minded pluralistic kind of thinker. Can there be a form of Buddhism that is both Pragmatist in a Jamesian sense and still recognizable as Buddhism? It is to this question that we turn in the concluding section of this lecture.

## 5. Will the marriage last?

Let us begin by returning to the Buddha’s explanation for not feeling moved to find answers to the fourteen questions mentioned above. There are two observations we can make about

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<sup>23</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience; a Study in Human Nature*, (New York: New American Library, 1958), 393–395.

<sup>24</sup> James, “Pragmatism,” 131.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

this explanation. First, it is obviously not in keeping with Peirce's observations about the nature of scientific inquiry, for the matters of greatest importance to the Buddha are precisely the issues that Peirce's ideal scientist sets aside in the pursuit of knowledge for the pure sake of knowing. Second, we can observe that the Buddha's stated motivation in setting these questions aside is not quite the same as James's statement of the pragmatist's motivations. The Buddha says the answers to these questions are not relevant to the pursuit of virtue and of nirvana. If a Pragmatist in the mold of William James were to reject these questions, the reason would be that no difference in conduct would result if one answered the question one way as opposed to the other.

### 5.1. Buddhism and science

In his lecture entitled "Pragmatism's conception of truth," James observed that most of us are content to live within a framework of beliefs that give all the appearances of working for us in the practical world. Our notion of truth is some kind of practical agreement with reality. An idea agrees with reality, he says, when we can guide our actions by the idea and arrive at the goal that we expect our actions to lead us to. James goes on to say:

And often agreement will mean only the negative fact that nothing contradictory from the quarter of that reality comes to interfere with the way in which our ideas guide us elsewhere. To copy a reality is, indeed, one very important way of agreeing with it, but it is far from being essential. Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustration, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality.<sup>26</sup>

Because there may be many different ideas that, if acted upon, will lead to expected results, it can be said that there are many truths. For most people most of the time the pragmatic truths they learned as children will serve them for most of their lives, and there will be no need to change in any significant way from their childhood system of beliefs. Occasionally, however, experience, says James, "has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas."<sup>27</sup>

The majority of people of European descent who have taken an active interest in Buddhism have operated most of their lives within the context of a scientific worldview. They are accustomed to thinking of events in the physical world in terms of the laws of mechanics and the laws of thermodynamics. They think of the universe as billions of years old and constantly changing with no discernible purpose, or at least with no human-made purpose. They are used to thinking of the consciousness of sentient beings as being intimately, although perhaps mysteriously, connected with biochemical events in a very complex neurological system. They are used to thinking of many issues as complex beyond human

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 96–97.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 100.

understanding, and therefore they are used to seeing human explanations of both microscopic and telescopic events as nothing better than approximations, as heuristic models. This is the intellectual framework of most educated Westerners, and for most of us experience has not boiled over sufficiently to require that we adopt an entirely different framework, a framework that seems alien to the perspective of the framework we learned as children. For the kind of person I am describing, it makes far more sense to understand Buddhist theories and practices within the scientific framework than to jettison both scientific method and the always-tentative working hypotheses that have not yet been shown untenable by controlled experimental investigations.

A further consideration to be borne in mind is that Western people who have grown up in an atmosphere of science tend to feel comfortable with the notion of doctrines as heuristic models, that is, as propositions that can be accepted provisionally in the hopes that such provisional acceptance will eventually lead to the discovery of a more refined and accurate proposition. Students of science are also relatively at home in the explanatory world of completely fictitious notions, such as perfect vacuums, friction-free surfaces, uniformly distributed gases, constant temperatures and pressures and so forth. Knowing that such fictions can prove to be of great benefit in coming to a better understanding of the nature of things no doubt plays a role in how readily Westerners can grasp such Buddhist staples as the theory of two truths and the concept of *upāya*, that is, an ultimately false doctrine that leads one to a truth that might have remained entirely inaccessible had one not provisionally entertained the false doctrine.

For many Western Buddhists it is difficult to imagine a collision course between science and Buddhism of the same magnitude as that which has had such an impact on the evolution of Christianity during the past century and a half. After all, as we have already observed, most of the questions that scientists choose to investigate fall into the category of those questions that the Buddha said he had no interest in answering, for the simple reason that nothing that he taught would be affected one way or another by the answer that might be given to these questions. One of the questions that remained famously unanswered by Gotama Buddha had to do with the way the universe came into being, and another had to do with the temporal and spatial extent of the universe. Both cosmology and cosmogony were seen as studies the results of which could have no bearing at all on the bare fact of frustration (*duḥkha*), nor on the causes of frustration or the means of eliminating it.

A further factor that makes for a comfortable congruence between science and Buddhism is that there is no commitment in Buddhist teachings to the human species having been created by an intelligent agent to hold a special place among the other creatures. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine any scientific work shaking the foundations of the Buddhist world to the same extent that Charles Darwin's work on the origin of species challenged the foundational principles of at least some Christians. Since the foundations of Buddhism are relatively secure regardless what scientists might discover about the world, it seems unlikely that within

Buddhism a fundamentalist movement would arise in response to the challenges of prevailing scientific hypotheses.

It is this relative lack of incongruity between science and Buddhism that has drawn many Western people to Buddhism. Scientific discoveries are unlikely to make experience “boil over” in a way that would send Buddhists scurrying to repair or rebuild their raft. Similarly, Buddhist teachings present very little that would require anyone to question scientific method.

Despite this generally good fit between the hypotheses of science and the observations of Buddhism, however, there have been a few issues that have led to experience at least simmering if not entirely boiling over. One of the most important of these has been the question of whether the prevailing hypotheses of neurophysiology require a serious re-examination of the traditional doctrine of rebirth. To this we might add the more general question of whether scientific rational skepticism is a serious obstacle to the kinds of faith that some Buddhists see as important for progress along the Buddhist path.

On the whole, I am inclined to say that there is very little in traditional Buddhist theory and practice that has a strong affinity with the culture of modern science. On the other hand, the fact that science and Buddhism have such different projects probably means that there is little danger of a strong conflict arising between the principles of Buddhism and the methods of science. In other words Pragmatism’s strong affinity with science is unlikely to work to undermine the marriage between Pragmatism and Buddhism. What remains to be examined is one issue that could pose a threat to that marriage being a happy one.

## **5.2. Buddhism and dogmatic religion**

The best known resurgence of dogmatic religion in the past hundred years or so has been the movement of what has come to be called Fundamentalism. The Fundamentalist movement is a response to at least two strong currents in modernity. First, it is founded in part on a rejection of science; and second, it is founded on a rejection of the ecumenism, religious pluralism and moral relativism that naturally attend such movements as Pragmatism. As we have seen above, James saw Buddhism as one of the tender-minded philosophies that naturally gravitate toward dogmatism and what he called monism. He did not see Buddhism as a friend to pluralism. Recall that he said “Many persons would refuse to call the pluralistic scheme religious at all.” Would Buddhists be among those many persons who shy away from pluralism? Would Buddhists be among those whose teeth would chatter and whose hearts would be refrigerated when faced with pluralistic moralism?

The unsurprising answer to this question is that it depends very much on which Buddhists one asks. My impression is that hardly any of the Indian Buddhists I have studied would feel comfortable with the Pragmatist claim that there are many truths. Even though there is a doctrine of two truths throughout most of Buddhism, it is quite clear that the higher of these two truths always trumps the conventional truth and is taken as the uniquely right description

of how things are. Indian Buddhists from Vasubandhu to Ratnakīrti insisted that Buddhism was uniquely capable of leading people to the only goal really worth pursuing. Triumphalism was every bit as much a part of classical Indian Buddhism as it has been part of Christianity. But what of today? What of Buddhism in modern Western settings?

My own experience has been that there is a mixed response to religious and moral pluralism and relativism. Some embrace it. I see myself as one of those, and I do not have any reason to believe I am alone or even in the minority. The minority of Western Buddhists who do not embrace the religious pluralism and moral relativism associated with Jamesian Pragmatism (and even more in John Dewey's and Richard Rorty's brands of Pragmatism) include, if I understand them correctly, such influential Buddhist teachers as Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ugyen Sangharakshita, both of whom regard moral relativism as dangers in modernity. Sangharakshita has made it clear that one cannot really be his disciple and a member of the Western Buddhist Order that he established if one outright rejects the traditional Buddhist teachings of rebirth or if one dismisses his own emphasis on the importance of segregation of the sexes in most spiritual practices and on the traditional Buddhist emphasis of renouncing family; on the other hand, Sangharashita warns against being too rigid and doctrinaire about anything. My overall impression is that there is a tendency in such Western teachers as Sangharakshita, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ayya Khema to be among those whose teeth would chatter in the face of religious and moral pluralism. Sangharaskhita, for example, was recently asked whether members of his order might gain benefit by studying with other Buddhist teachers or even turning to other religious traditions. His response was:

I think it is difficult to do that. If you go to a teacher outside the movement, you don't usually get just the one particular teaching you want. Along with him comes the tradition to which he belongs and that informs what he says about the teaching that you are interested in. You can hardly involve yourself with him to any extent without becoming involved in his tradition. You will then find yourself immersed in a whole package that is unlikely to fit smoothly with the framework we have within the Order, and that will therefore take you out of the Order.

## 6. The final verdict

The question with which we began was “Will the marriage between Buddhism and Pragmatism last?” I cannot claim to have answered that question. In fact I believe it is still much too soon to know the answer to that question. It is something that we must all wait to see. I hope, however, that I have at least offered a few ideas on what signs to look for as one is studying the marriage and trying to determine whether it is a healthy relationship.

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