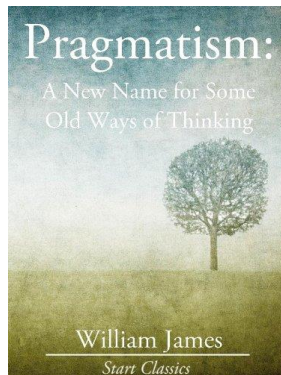


Buddhism and Pragmatism—A Three Part Series

Part 1

May 2014



[See photo credits at end of article](#)

Buddhism is a 2,500 plus year old religion that began in India. Pragmatism is a philosophical system that began in America in the late 19th century. Surprisingly enough, they have some core elements in common. The bottom line, Buddhism is consistent with the traditional aspirations of Americans (and among members of other cultures as well) and offers the means to attain them and more. If you search for the adjective “pragmatic,” you will get a definition describing a realistic or practical approach to ideas rather than a theoretical one. In other words, a pragmatic approach produces real world results or implies common sense. As you might expect, the adjective comes from the framework of the philosophy. Similarly, Buddhism (as practiced by the author) has a documentary and theoretical basis, but as noted in the background explanation to one of Nichiren Daishonin’s letters to a follower, written in 1275—quite a long time before the development of Pragmatism,

"[W]hile documentary and doctrinal evidence is important in considering the efficacy of a Buddhist teaching, far more important is 'the proof of actual fact,' that is, the power of a religion to positively affect the human condition."^[1]

What Nichiren (a 13th century Japanese monk; more on him and this school of Buddhism later) is referring to is the value of the practicing a Buddhism with the

tenets of faith he articulates—enlightenment and absolute happiness. This is a simplistic connection, but I will enlarge upon this in subsequent articles on Buddhism and Pragmatism.

First, a little more background. As a major world religion, Buddhism is the only one not associated with war, imperialism or violence in general. We all know of the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the conflicts between the Jewish state of Israel and Muslim-led states in the Middle East, the Crusades of centuries ago, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims along the Pakistan/India border, etc. You will find few examples of such conflict in the history of Buddhist-led states. Notably, however, there is the issue of the Chinese occupation and control of Tibet--an exploration of that topic is beyond the scope of this article. But it is fair to say that most people regard Buddhism as a religion of peace rather than one used as a justification for war. Peace is something which we could certainly use a little more of throughout the world from east to west and north to south. Not only that, but Buddhism is a religious philosophy focused on enabling individual happiness. If you don't think so, perhaps it is due to some abundant misconceptions.

So let's dispense with some of those notions. Buddhism is an accessible belief system practiced by millions of lay people throughout the world. What it's not is Shaolin priests practicing martial arts as you will see in the movies. While you can find saffron robed monks with shaved heads living in monasteries or sitting along the street with beggar's bowls, that's not the predominant reality of modern Buddhism. It's not all about the bald guy with a huge belly you frequently see in Chinese restaurants. It's not just a meditative methodology for removing oneself from the vicissitudes of day to day life, although there are those whose practice is limited to that. What it actually is, at least among the fellow believers of the lay organization Soka Gakkai International (with over 12 million members in 192 countries and territories), is an active practice for achieving happiness, overcoming life's obstacles and realizing one's dreams by becoming a Buddha. That's right, becoming a Buddha. A Buddha is not a supernatural being or some guru sitting on a mountaintop providing esoteric advice to supplicants who make a pilgrimage to visit him or her. Everyone has the ability to activate the Buddha nature within and to see things as they really are—to understand the workings of cause and effect, allowing him or her to make wiser choices in life and thereby achieve better results.

So what of Pragmatism? Like other philosophies, it attempts to explain reality, how human beings interact with it, how we think and how we interpret what we see. Unlike many other philosophies, it entails a process or methodology—not

just a world view. The perspective of Pragmatism lies in examining the practical consequences of actions. William James, one of the prominent founders of Pragmatism is famously quoted as saying,

“You can say of it [an idea] then either that it is ‘useful because it is true’ or that it ‘it is true because it is useful.’ Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified.”^[2]

Without context, one will have difficulty with that, (and so did some critics from other philosophical perspectives) but we will provide that context in the next installment in this series. Pragmatism as a philosophy rejects determinism, the notion that while we may have free will, it is essentially irrelevant given that the options for choice presented to us are constrained by our prior actions. We won’t get into hard versus soft Determinism here, but suffice it to say that the latter is less constraining than the predestination of, for example, the Puritans. Pragmatism is more comfortable with empiricism than rationalism, as suggested by the quote above.

For a succinct description of Pragmatism, that is as accurate as we need for now, there is this from Wikipedia:

“Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that began in the United States around 1870. Pragmatism is a rejection of the idea that the function of thought is to describe, represent, or mirror reality. Instead, pragmatists develop their philosophy around the idea that the function of thought is as an instrument or tool for prediction, action, and problem solving. Pragmatists contend that most philosophical topics—such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science—are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes rather than in terms of representative accuracy.”^[3]

In the remainder of this segment, we provide a brief history and some core concepts of Buddhism. In August, we will do the same for Pragmatism. We won’t cover every facet of either—just offer a rationale for why Buddhism is actually a wholly American-style religion. For those of you elsewhere in the world, Buddhism is certainly an equally valuable practice, but its roots and connections with popular philosophies or histories will likely vary from those of American traditions.

The Beginnings of Buddhism

Shakyamuni (prince of the Shakya clan), given name Siddhartha and family name Gautama, was born into a royal family in India. Bored, inquisitive or just plain tired of being cooped up behind castle walls, he ventured out among the people without. There he saw the suffering of birth into poverty, sickness, old age and ultimately death. Shakyamuni wondered why such things occurred. So he left the protection of his family home and began a pursuit to understand what collectively became known as the four sufferings. He became an ascetic. He became a beggar. He tried a variety of meditations and practices in an effort to understand life amidst the chaotic world of human beings. Eventually, sitting under the proverbial Bodhi tree, he realized the meaning of it all, the impermanence of life, attaining his own enlightenment. For 40 years he preached the understanding he had attained, accumulating many followers.

Underlying the impermanence of life is causation. We continually make choices; some are trivial while others are of major import: what to have for breakfast, which route to follow to work, which person to attach ourselves to and perhaps marry. Those choices have consequences or effects. Getting healthier or less so. More traffic or less. Happiness or conflict in a relationship—depending on subsequent interactions. We expect happy times to endure, but the winds of change ensure they will not. We will all get older. We will all get sick. We will all die. We attach ourselves to things and people, hoping and expecting their present state will remain as it always is. Then the flood, the fire or disaster claims our dream home. We lose the job or the boss becomes a jerk. The prince turns back into a frog. The sufferings we all endure are a consequence of being born into the world. Because we crave things we do not have, we suffer. To eliminate the suffering and get off the wheel of birth and death Shakyamuni initially taught that one must extinguish all desires—a seriously difficult (really impossible) task, thereby achieving nirvana. To extinguish all desires, at best, would require lifetime after lifetime of a strict regimen of practice (the Eightfold Path, which we will not go into here) to elevate one's life condition a little bit at a time. Over the course of the decades, Shakyamuni expounded the practices essential for enlightenment. But the practices he expounded were not accessible to or attainable by more than a few, who could abandon ordinary workaday life for a community of monastic believers dependent on others for food and support.

Eventually, his "84,000 teachings," as they became known, spread from west to east along the Silk Road, into China and Japan as well as down into Southeast Asia. As they did, adherents grabbed onto varying elements of his teachings. As the centuries wore on, many schools of Buddhism developed, as has occurred within most other major religions of the world as seen in the doctrinal schisms they have endured. Thus, the Buddhist schools diverged in practice and belief. There is the

introspective and meditative Zen, which some movies associate with martial arts. There is the Tibetan Buddhism, led by the Dalai Lama; with movies and celebrity supporters influencing much of its popular image. Then there are Pure Land, Shingon, and many others most people outside Asia have never heard of. As our purpose here is not to provide a comparative religion analysis, we will not go further down that path. But the two major streams to be noted are Mahayana (greater vehicle), which is concerned with attaining enlightenment via the practice of a Bodhisattva (assisting others in achieving enlightenment) and Theravada (Teaching of the Elders, pejoratively referred to as Hinayana or Lesser Vehicle by adherents of Mahayana) which is focused on strict regimens and discipline to purify one's own life in order to attain individual enlightenment. Although not restricted to that part of the world, Theravada believers predominate in Southeast Asia.

Chih-I, a Chinese monk, known in Japan as T'ien-T'ai, systematized Shakyamuni's teachings in the fifth century. T'ien-T'ai, among other things, emphasized Shakyamuni's penultimate teaching, known as the Lotus Sutra (sutra means teaching). This teaching, for the first time, indicated that one could attain Buddhahood in one's current life—not be required to be reborn over and over again to attain enlightenment. Moreover, men and women were equally able to attain enlightenment without any distinction. T'ien-T'ai and Dengyo, a Japanese scholar following him left unclear, however, a means for ordinary people to get to that level of understanding. If you had the money and or time to retreat from life in order to pursue this goal, fine. If you wished to be a beggar sitting on a street that could possibly work as well. Otherwise you were basically out of luck. It remained for Nichiren Daishonin, a man born in 1222 in Japan to reveal a practice accessible to anyone.

Shakyamuni predicted a time would come when his teachings were distorted and no longer effective. At that time, a votary would appear who would reveal the essential practice for the "latter day of the law." Nichiren asserted that he had fulfilled all of the characteristics and conditions associated with being the votary of the Lotus Sutra. That law, or the dharma, is the universal law of life to which all of us are connected. In order to activate our innate Buddha nature, see things as they really are and make use of our connection to that law Nichiren explained, entails the practice of daimoku reciting the title of the Lotus Sutra, which in Japanese is Myoho-Renge-Kyo. By chanting the words Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, one becomes a Buddha. Nam is a Sanskrit word meaning devotion. Myoho refers to the mystic law of life and death (mystic because it is not commonly known and comprehended) which entails the eternity of life—we live, we die and we do it all over again. Renge literally refers to the lotus blossom. The lotus is unusual in bearing both a flower and seed at the same time and as rengo is used here, it is a metaphorical reference

to the simultaneity of cause and effect. In other words, having made a cause through our actions, words or thoughts, we are immediately inscribing an effect in our lives—whether that effect becomes manifest presently or only much later. Kyo refers to sound or teaching. So Nam-myoho-renge-kyo means devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect. Only by a rather large leap of faith can one accept the notion that by chanting these words, one can somehow manifest wisdom, activate an innate Buddha nature and become absolutely (not relatively) happy through this practice. We will pick this up again in the context of Pragmatism. For now, note the simple analogy that should your name be Sally or Fred; while walking down the street you hear someone call out, “Hey Sally” (or Fred), you are likely to at least turn around to see if you should respond—but not, of course, if they called out the name Mary or Bob. So it is with calling upon the Buddha within.

[1] Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Volume 1: Three Tripitaka Masters Pray for Rain [No.68, Page 603, col 1, paragraph 39, Background]

[2] William James, Pragmatism, page 575, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, volume compilation copyright 1987 by Literary Classics of the United States, New York, New York

[3] Pragmatism (wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism)

Lotus image: <http://www.everystockphoto.com/photo.php?imageId=3896189> Pragmatism
book: <http://www.amazon.com/Pragmatism-Thinking-Unabridged-Start-Publishing-ebook/dp/B00H3RP86Y>

Buddhism and Pragmatism--Part 2

August 2014

The Beginnings of Pragmatism

Primary sources are always better than secondary, say your professors, but for simplicity, let's begin with some secondary before proceeding to the primary. As noted previously, Pragmatism began in America around 1870.

"The most important of the 'classical pragmatists' were Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James

(1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952). . . The core of pragmatism was the pragmatist maxim, a rule for clarifying the contents of hypotheses by tracing their 'practical consequences'. In the work of Peirce and James, the most influential application of the pragmatist maxim was to the concept of truth." [1]

Or, from another source:

"[Pragmatism] has significantly influenced non-philosophers—notably in the fields of law, education, politics, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism . . .

[T]heories and models are to be judged primarily by their fruits and consequences, not by their origins or their relations to antecedent data or facts. The basic idea is presented metaphorically by James and Dewey, for whom scientific theories are instruments or tools for coping with reality. As Dewey emphasized, the utility of a theory is a matter of its problem-solving power; pragmatic coping must not be equated with what delivers emotional consolation or subjective comfort. What is essential is that theories pay their way in the long run—that they can be relied upon time and again to solve pressing problems and to clear up significant difficulties confronting inquirers."[2]

All right then, let's get back to that quotation from the May article, about an idea being, "useful because it is true or that it is true because it is useful." The context of that observation by William James can be fleshed out by these other statements:

"Grant an idea or belief to be true, . . . what concrete difference will its being true make in one's actual life? . . . What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"[3]

James goes on to explain how, while a truth may well be empirically validated, (and must be if it is in fact to be concluded as true) the existence of such truths may have present value only when exigent circumstances (need) bring them to the forefront. He uses this analogy:

"If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human

habitation at the end of it, for if I do and follow it, I save myself. . . I may on another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant, . . . Yet since almost any object may [someday] become temporarily important, the advantage of having a general stock of *extra* truths, of ideas that shall be true of merely possible situations, is obvious.”[4]

So, while this all might seem common sense to most people of normal intelligence, in the world of philosophers, when dealing with epistemology (the meaning of truth) the statement from the first installment caused no end of criticism. Philosophers can be an odd bunch.

Philosophy, like religion and politics, is rife with divergent opinions, claims and counterclaims as to which has a better grasp on truth and on the way things really are—how they got that way and what should we make of them. Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Descartes, Hume, Locke, Kant, Schopenhauer and many others had their day in the philosophical sun of Western thought. We will get into the convergence of East and West in the third installment of this series when we consider the intersection of Buddhism and Pragmatism in modern times. Meanwhile, suffice it to say that as Peirce, James and Dewey put forth their respective positions, they did so having to distinguish and set themselves apart from rationalists and those with other perspectives. Note the current battles still being fought over Darwin by those whose biblical beliefs influence their demands for a creationist curriculum in the public schools—despite the many decades of scientific evidence of the validity of Darwin’s analyses. But that’s not the topic here.

All of philosophy offers conclusions or perspectives on reality. Reality, of course is the nub. Early stages of Western philosophy came predominantly from conceptions—thoughts or ideas formulated by the mind that were meant to explain the world around us. Conceptions of God, creation and ethics consistent with religious belief colored those perspectives. Later, the realization came that it is through our human interaction with the world in the form of sensation and perception which necessarily influences our conclusions about reality. By the time Pragmatism came along, the viewpoints were not so far away from those we hold today. James says,

“*Reality is in general what truths have to take account of;* [footnote in James: ‘Mr. Taylor in his *Elements of Metaphysics* uses this excellent pragmatic definition’] and the *first* part of reality from this point of view is the flux of our sensations. . . *They* are neither true nor false; they simply *are*.

. . . The *second* part of reality, as something that our beliefs must also obediently take account of, is the *relations* that obtain between our sensations or between their copies in our minds. This part falls into two sub-parts: 1) the relations that are mutable and accidental, as those of date and place; and 2) those that are fixed and essential because they are grounded on the inner natures of their terms—such are likeness and unlikeness. Both sorts of relation are matters of immediate perception. Both are ‘facts.’ But it is the latter kind of fact that forms the more important sub-part of reality for our theories of knowledge.

. . . The *third* part of reality, additional to these perceptions (tho largely based upon them), is the *previous truths* of which every new inquiry takes account.

. . . Now however fixed these elements of reality may be, we still have a certain freedom in our dealings with them. . . We read the same facts differently. ‘Waterloo,’ with the same fixed details, spells a ‘victory’ for an Englishman; for a Frenchman it spells a ‘defeat.’

. . . “We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves.”^[5] [*We will have more to say on this in the November Quarterly, in discussing correlations with Buddhism*].

Dewey has a somewhat different perspective, saying,

“It is often said that pragmatism, unless it is content to be a contribution to mere methodology, must develop a theory of Reality. But the chief characteristic trait of the pragmatic notion of reality is precisely that no theory of Reality in general, überhaupt, is possible or needed. . . Pragmatism is content to take its stand with science; for science finds all such events to be subject-matter of description and inquiry—just like stars and fossils, mosquitoes and malaria, circulation and vision. It also takes its stand with daily life, which finds that such things really have to be reckoned with as they occur interwoven in the texture of events.”^[6]

Further along in his essay on “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” Dewey demonstrates his agreement, at least in part, with James on the common understanding of Pragmatism. Dewey identifies the value of a pragmatic theory of intelligence thusly,

“The popular impression that pragmatic philosophy means that philosophy shall develop ideas relevant to the actual crises of life, ideas influential in dealing with them and tested by the assistance they afford, is correct.”. . . [T]he pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends—to free experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson.”[7]

The pragmatic premise of evaluating truth by its consequences necessarily relies upon an understanding of causality. James analogy of the man lost in the woods finding a cow-path and thereby saving himself implies that he takes an action (choosing the cow-path) and as a result winds up at the house. This is a very simple example of cause and effect. To philosophers, of course, nothing is ever so simple. Early into a discussion of the conceptual view of novelty and causation, James notes,

“The classic obstacle to pluralism has always been what is known as the ‘principle of causality.’ This principle has been taken to mean that the effect in some way already exists in the cause.”[8]

James notes that while the Scholastics adopted Aristotle’s four principles of causality,

“[W]hat one generally means by the cause of anything is its ‘efficient’ cause, and in what immediately follows, I shall speak of that alone.

An efficient cause is scholastically defined as ‘that which produces something else by a real activity proceeding from itself.’ This is unquestionably the view of common sense; and scholasticism in only common sense grown quite articulate. Passing over the many classes of efficient cause which scholastic philosophy specifies, I enumerate three important sub-principles it is supposed to follow from the above definition. Thus: 1. No effect can come into being without a cause. They may be verbally taken; but if, avoiding the word effect, it be taken in the sense that nothing can happen without a cause, it is the famous ‘principle of causality’ which, when combined with the next two principles, is supposed to establish the block-universe, and to render the pluralistic hypothesis absurd.

2. The effect is always proportionate to the cause, and the cause to the effect.

3. Whatever is in the effect must in some way, whether formally, virtually, or eminently, have been also in the cause. ('Formally' here means that the cause resembles the effect, as when one motion causes another motion; virtually means that the cause somehow involves that effect, without resembling it, as when an artist causes a statue but possesses not himself its beauty; 'eminently' means that the cause, though unlike the effect, is superior to it in perfection, as when a man overcomes a lion's strength by greater cunning.)

It is plain that each moment of the universe must contain all the causes of which the next moment contains effects, or to put it with extreme concision, it is plain that each moment in its totality causes the next moment. But if the maxim holds firm that [whatever is in the *effect* must previously have been in some way in the cause] it follows that the next moment can contain nothing genuinely original, and that the novelty that appears to leak into our lives so unremittingly, must be an illusion, ascribable to the shallowness of the perceptual point of view.

Scholasticism always respected common sense, and in this case escaped the frank denial of all genuine novelty by the vague qualification 'aliquo modo.' [one way or another] This allowed the effect also to differ, *aliquo modo*, from its cause. But conceptual necessities have ruled the situation and have ended, as usual, by driving nature and perception to the wall. A cause and its effect are two numerically discrete concepts, and yet in some inscrutable way the former must 'produce' the latter. How can it intelligibly do so, save by already hiding the latter in itself? Numerically two, cause and effect must be generically one, [***More in November on the correlation of this conclusion with Buddhism***] in spite of the perceptual appearances; and causation changes thus from a concretely experienced relation between differentials into one between similars abstractly thought of as more real."^[9]

[1] Hookway, Christopher, "Pragmatism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/pragmatism/>.

[2] Douglas McDermid, Trent University, Canada. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/pragmati/>.

[3] William James, Pragmatism, page 573, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, volume compilation copyright 1987 by Literary Classics of the United States, New York, New York..

[4] Ibid.

[5] William James, Pragmatism and Humanism, Lecture VII, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, *op cit.* pages 593-4.

[6] John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," originally published 1917 by Henry Holt [copyright expired]; this quote is from page 27, The Project Gutenberg Ebook of *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*, Release Date: September 14, 2010 [EBook #33727] Produced by Adrian Mastronardi, Turgut Dincer and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>.

[7] Ibid., page 30-1.

[8] William James, Some Problems of Philosophy, Chapter XII Novelty and Causation, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, *op cit.* page 1080.

[9] Ibid, pages 1080-1.

Buddhism and Pragmatism--Part 3

November 2014

The Correlations

We have set forth basic principles of both Buddhism and Pragmatism in the two previous articles. In the process, we gave some hints of the correlations between the two. In this concluding article we will elaborate on those connections. There is a long history of common conceptual understandings, even before the existence of Pragmatism as a philosophical theory. Most significantly there is a strong connection between the Buddhism practiced by Nichiren Buddhists as developed by the three presidents of the Soka Gakkai, the 12 million strong lay organization with members in 192 countries and territories.

Put simply, both Buddhism and Pragmatism place great stock in common sense. In fact, both Pragmatism and Buddhism in essence could *be* viewed as common sense, as noted in the first instalment of this series. So let's begin with a quote from the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of the sect of Buddhism on which we are focusing [See the [May Eagle Peak Quarterly--Buddhism and Pragmatism-Part 1](#) for more on the development of and tenets of Buddhism]:

"In summer it is hot; in winter, cold. Flowers blossom in spring, and fruit ripens in autumn. Therefore, it is only natural to sow seeds in spring and reap the harvest in fall. If one sowed in autumn, could one harvest in spring? Heavy clothing is useful in bitter cold, but of what use is it in sweltering heat? A cool breeze is pleasant in summer, but what good is it in winter? Buddhism works in the same way."[\[1\]](#)

Similarly, William James, as we noted last time in regard to Pragmatism, offers his analogy of a lost person finding a cow-path in the woods as an example of how the truth of the cow-path leading to a dwelling has value only because the person is lost. To be fair, there is some what we consider to be minor quibbling over James' linking of truth and value by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. Makiguchi is the founder and first president of the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value Creating Education Society; later shortened to Soka Gakkai—removing the "Education" limiter). [See more on the development of the Soka Gakkai and its role in the expansion of Nichiren Buddhism throughout the world here] Makiguchi argues James' point, that "You can say of it [an idea] then either that it is 'useful because it is true' or that it 'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified." [See [May Quarterly](#)] Rather, Makiguchi says,

"Saying that truth and value are in essence the same, differing in degree but not in kind, we have plunged into the worst sort of semantic morass. We will find ourselves confronting statements to the effect that on the scale of value, something can be true because it is useful. The imprecision here is obvious. To clear up this misuse of language, we must either demonstrate that utility in human life alone is enough to make things true, or draw a sharp line between truth and value so as to render them into distinct logical types or conceptual categories."[\[2\]](#)

As noted in the August article on the Beginnings of Pragmatism, a contextual analysis of the quote to which Makiguchi objected shows that James may have overstated his thesis; James went on to say that, "Grant an idea or belief to be

true, . . . what concrete difference will its being true make in one's actual life? . . . What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"[3] So, in our opinion, James is not actually asserting that truth and value are synonymous; simply that bare truths without connection to a present value are of little more than academic value—much like the rote learning to which Dewey and Makiguchi took great exception. But the fact is that Makiguchi, James and Dewey were all pragmatists in their own way. Dewey and Makiguchi were interested in making education a practical, value oriented pursuit—not a means of packing rote learning into the heads of students. In a paper submitted to the Center for Dewey Studies, Daisaku Ikeda, third president of the Soka Gakkai and current president of the Soka Gakkai International, had this to say:

“As contemporaries, Dewey and Makiguchi shared and were shaped by the intellectual milieu of the latter half of the nineteenth century, the legacy of Durkheim, Darwin, Hegel and Kant. In particular, both struggled to come to terms with the influence of the idealism of the neo-Kantian and Hegelian schools, and to develop a philosophy capable of guiding actual life toward optimal experience. For Dewey, this signified continual growth; Makiguchi defined this way of life as one of ‘value creation.’

. . .

There are important parallels in their attempts to extend the realm of pragmatic thinking; to take it beyond the classroom and the institutions of education to the broader framework of building communities and societies; to look with fresh eyes at the role of religion in propelling that effort. Both Dewey and Makiguchi focused on the growth and development of the student into a fully realized human being actively engaged in society and the world at large.”[4]

Similarly, Professor Dayle M. Bethel said of Makiguchi and Dewey, “It is my view that Makiguchi stands today as the chief spokesman for Japanese pragmatism. . . The ideas of both James and Dewey were introduced into Japan as early as 1888. [5]

More to the point, consider this passage from Daisaku Ikeda's paper to consider how trivial the objection and how close the connection between the three,

“Central to Makiguchi's Pedagogy was his theory of value. In his schema he modified the neo-Kantian value system of truth, goodness

and beauty dominant in Japan at the time, and reordered it as beauty, benefit (also translated as gain or utility) and goodness.

. . .

Makiguchi removed "truth" from his list of values, seeing truth as essentially a matter of identification and correspondence; value, in contrast, is a measure of the subjective impact a thing or event has on our lives. While truth identifies an object's essential qualities or properties, value may be considered the measure of the relevance or impact an object or event bears on the individual. Makiguchi explains that:

Value arises from the relationship between the evaluating subject and the object of evaluation. If either changes relative to the other, it is only obvious that the perceived value will change. The differences and shifts in ethical codes throughout history provide but one of the more outstanding proofs of the mutability of value [footnoted to Bethel's book, *Education for Creative Living*, page 61; see endnotes]

Dewey expresses a similar sense of historical and social contingency: "No longer will views generated in view of special situations be frozen into absolute standards and masquerade as eternal truths." (Public, 203 [see works cited in link to Ikeda's paper]) This aspect of Makiguchi's thought also parallels Dewey's critique of the centrality of epistemology in traditional philosophy and his focus on honing the tools of practical inquiry." [6]

Regardless of whether the focus is on truth or value, the point of both Buddhism and pragmatism (in the lower case, practical application usage) is in a methodology that works. In other words, you take an action and expect that the desired results will follow. This should be obvious by now in the explanations of Pragmatism we have offered. Then too, in the writings of Makiguchi and the explanations of Ikeda. Going back to Nichiren, the founder of the school of Buddhism which we are discussing had this to say with respect to judging the merit of the various Buddhist doctrines, "I, Nichiren, believe that the best standards are those of reason and documentary proof. And even more valuable than reason and documentary proof is the proof of actual fact." [7]

As we said in the August instalment, all of philosophy offers conclusions or perspectives on reality. Reality, of course is the nub. James says,

“[H]owever fixed these elements of reality may be, we still have a certain freedom in our dealings with them. . . We read the same facts differently. ‘Waterloo,’ with the same fixed details, spells a ‘victory’ for an Englishman; for a Frenchman it spells a ‘defeat.’

. . . “We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves.”[8]

To the practitioner of Buddhism, this is a fundamental element of faith—the belief that given an apparent set of facts he or she can choose how to respond to that reality. The appearance of a wall suggests there is a room on the other side, which can be accessed through a door. It is not an impenetrable barrier. A fever could suggest a fatal case of Ebola or a run of the mill infection. Absent a trip to West Africa or a recent encounter with a traveler from there it is more likely the latter illness. But assuming the worst can adversely impact the body’s immune system through the effects of the mind/body connection and make even the simple infection more severe. So one’s choice in carving the block of marble can be optimistic and purposive or pessimistic and resigned. Buddhism offers not only the perspective, but the tools by which to effect change. More on that below.

The pragmatic premise of evaluating truth by its consequences necessarily relies upon an understanding of causality. In August we cited this exposition by James on the conceptual view of novelty and causation,

“The classic obstacle to pluralism has always been what is known as the ‘principle of causality.’ This principle has been taken to mean that the effect in some way already exists in the cause.

. . .

A cause and its effect are two numerically discrete concepts, and yet in some inscrutable way the former must ‘produce’ the latter. How can it intelligibly do so, save by already hiding the latter in itself? Numerically two, cause and effect must be generically one, [emphasis supplied] in spite of the perceptual appearances; and causation changes thus from a concretely experienced relation between differentials into one between similars abstractly thought of as more real.” [9]

This is yet another of the strong correlations between Buddhism and Pragmatism. The Lotus Sutra is so named for the lotus, which blooms in a muddy swamp producing a beautiful blossom (consider the discussion of the block of

marble in that light). More importantly, the lotus has the unique quality of bearing both a blossom and a seed at the same time. The significance of this to Buddhism is that it represents the simultaneity of cause and effect. Embedded within the cause is the resulting effect, which James discusses. Two but not two; one of many dualities in Buddhism—oneness of mind and body, oneness of self and environment to name two others.

In the first instalment of this series, we explained that the accessible practice of Buddhism introduced by Nichiren in 13th century Japan entailed the chanting of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. At once the name for the Lotus Sutra and the universal law of cause and effect, invoking this law through daimoku (the Buddhist chant) is what enables shaping all those blocks of marbles with which one is presented. It enables activation of the Buddha nature which allows one to see things the way they really are and to take the most appropriate action to effect a desired outcome or to overcome an obstacle in one's path. Accepting such a notion, that the power of the chant, can have such an effect requires a leap of faith to be sure. But once again, it is the correlation with the pragmatic method and the words of Nichiren that supplies the conviction—either it works or it doesn't. Of the three proofs, actual is the most important, says Nichiren. Read over what James says again; is there a practical utility or not?

This concludes our series on Buddhism and Pragmatism. We hope you will agree that while this Buddhism we were discussing spread from India through Japan and seems foreign to Westerners in general and Americans in particular, the wholly Western and predominantly American philosophy of Pragmatism demonstrates it really isn't so foreign at all.

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[1] Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. 1: [On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings](#) [No. 42, Page 394]

[2] Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Education for Creative Living, Page 59, Iowa State University Press, 1989. Translated by Alfred Birnbaum, edited by Dayle M. Bethel.

[3] William James, Pragmatism, page 573, reprinted in [William James Writings, 1902-1910](#), volume compilation copyright 1987 by Literary Classics of the United States, New York, New York..

[4] Daisaku Ikeda, *John Dewey and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi: Confluences of Thought and Action*, paper submitted to Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, [The cited link is broken; awaiting updated link from SIU]
http://deweycenter.siu.edu/scholarship_papers_makiguchi.html

[5] Dayle M. Bethel, *Makiguchi the Value Creator*, pages 78-79. Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo. 1973.

[6] Daisaku Ikeda, *John Dewey and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*, op. cit.

[7] Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Volume 1: *Three Tripitaka Masters Pray for Rain* [No.68, Page 599]

[8] William James, *Pragmatism and Humanism*, Lecture VII, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, *op cit.* pages 593-4.

[9] William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter XII Novelty and Causation, reprinted in William James Writings, 1902-1910, *op cit.* page 1080-81.