A Preliminary Examination of the Similarities between American Pragmatism and Buddhism
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Buddhism, an Eastern philosophical approach, emphasizes practicality over theory. The philosophy Buddha preached to his followers was not one in which they would sit around pondering over the meaning of life and its ultimate questions. His philosophy had one simple objective which was to overcome the suffering in one’s life. Pragmatism, a uniquely American philosophy, traces its beginnings to philosophers such as Charles Pierce, John Dewey, and William James. Pragmatism, in the same way as Buddhism, is much more practical than theoretical in nature and avoids pondering over abstract metaphysical questions. Instead pragmatism looks at how philosophy can make a person’s life better. In these ways, pragmatism and Buddhism are quite similar in nature. In the following paper, this position will be defended by providing specific examples, and the reasoning behind this position will be illustrated.

One specific reason pragmatism and Buddhism are similar is their approach to the concept of truth in philosophy. There are those throughout the history of philosophy that have attempted to provide some theoretical understanding of truth--some clear understanding of what exactly makes something true. Theories of truth range from an absolutist claim that there is one objective standard by which all things can be understood, on one end of the spectrum, to the relativist
claim that anything can be true, depending on the person. Richard Rorty in his book, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, defines relativism as “…the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other” (166).

Clearly, there are problems with both of these views as one is far too inclusive and the other much too exclusive. Somewhere in between on this continuum of truth lies a pragmatic theory of truth. This is only one context in which pragmatism can be applied in philosophy, but probably the most significant. For the pragmatist, truth is what works and truth is what useful in a person’s life. If a belief or way of life is useful to person, then it is true for them. This may sound a bit like a relativism in which practically anything can be true. However, pragmatism stresses utility for a person. An intriguing aspect of the pragmatist’s conception of truth is that the belief might need to be tested several times before a person knows how useful it really is. Truth, for the pragmatist, is like a hypothesis that is tested and experimented with before it can be verified. Indeed, as William James writes in *Pragmatism*: “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, and corroborate. False ideas are those that we cannot.” (92). Now, how is this relevant to Buddhism?

The Buddha wanted his followers to overcome suffering by following his teaching in a very practical way. As Christopher Gowans writes in his book *The Philosophy of the Buddha*, “The Buddha’s teaching is primarily practical rather than theoretical in its orientation” (30). This point is then further exemplified by Gowans as he references a
story that the Buddha told one his followers. The story is known as the parable of the poison arrow. The story is that a man who is wounded by an arrow will not allow a doctor to treat him unless the man knows everything about the man who shot him with the arrow. However, how does the information about the man's attacker assist the doctor in getting the arrow out? It obviously has no pertinence at all; this information is completely useless towards the goal of becoming healed. This story highlights the irrelevance of this quest for answers to questions of concern to much of Western philosophy. The Buddha wanted his followers to only seek relevant truth that was concerned with overcoming suffering and achieving a state of enlightenment. Gowans further writes that “The teaching of the Buddha does not consist of answers to any and all philosophical questions that might occur to us. Rather, it consists of answers that are needed for a practical purpose” (30). This is commensurate with pragmatism on a very basic level. Both philosophical approaches avoid asking questions that are time consuming and have no real use in a person’s life. In no way does either of these philosophies claim to have the absolute or final answers to anything. Both are simply to be used as guides in order to try and live the best life that one can. However, an important distinction should be made between the degrees of practicality each suggests.

Buddhism is much more proscriptive as a philosophy; the Buddha lays out specifically in the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths ways to overcome suffering. Pragmatism on the other hand is less proscriptive and more descriptive as to how things are. Pragmatic
philosophers differed greatly in their approach to philosophy in comparison to their contemporaries and predecessors, but they did not lay out a specific plan like the Buddha’s Eightfold Path for transcending unhappiness.

This difference notwithstanding, here is another illustration of the similar nature of both pragmatism and Buddhism. As previously mentioned, pragmatism appears to be a kind of mediating position that lies between relativism and absolutism with regard to such concepts as truth, morality, or ethics. Relativism appears to be far too liberal in its orientation towards what it considers as true, and absolutism is conversely far too conservative with its claim on one truth. Therefore, it is fair to refer to pragmatism as a kind of middle way. The Buddha, similarly, thought that his philosophy was a kind of middle way between two extremes. This middle way was what the Buddha and scholars of Buddhism refer to as dependent origination. This concept can be a bit difficult to understand, but it is one of the most important concepts in Buddhism. This is the idea that nothing exists on its own apart from anything else. There are no permanent things in the universe, except maybe for the presence of this process. It is this realization that nothing exists on its own, independent of something else that is very important for the follower of Buddhism. If one is able to make this realization and avoid attachment to non-permanent things, then one can overcome the suffering in his or her life. This idea seems to be a mediating position, like pragmatism, between two extremes which are annihilationism and eternalism (Gowans, 162).
Eternalism is a philosophical approach to metaphysics suggesting that even after death, a person’s soul lives on. Annihilationism is the counter view that suggests when a person dies, there is nothing left; nothing is eternal. *Dependent origination*, or “the middle way,” stands between these two extremes. It does not suggest that nothing is eternal, but it also does not imply that everything is eternal. It seems to, as previously mentioned; mediate these two positions with regard to metaphysics. However, it should be noted that the Buddha was not attempting to rectify any type of metaphysical problem by teaching this middle way. If this was the case, it seems as though somehow the Buddha was concerned with solving some type of metaphysical problem; when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. By teaching the middle way, the Buddha was trying to show his followers the importance of avoiding extremes in their life. David J. Kalupahana writes the following in his book on Buddhist psychology: “By avoiding the extremes of metaphysical or absolute identity, the Buddha laid the foundation for non-metaphysical explanation of experience” (21).

If a person lives too much in one direction or too much in another direction, then happiness is bound to elude them. However, if one can locate a place that is in the middle consisting of attributes from both positions, then perhaps happiness can be achieved. The cliché statement “Too much of one thing is not good” would seem to be completely applicable and appropriate to both the Buddhist and pragmatic philosopher. This very basic idea of a middle position can be seen in a number of contexts.
Within politics, one never wants to be too far to the right or too far to the left. A good religious person will not be too dogmatic in their views, but also not completely secular in their views. An incorporation of ideas from both sides in any situation seems to be the best approach to take. This position allows individuals to hold onto their own beliefs while being able to at least consider or open their mind to other possibilities.

In a specific chapter out of *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty (when discussing William James’s definition of pragmatism) writes that James “... was reminding us that that our glory is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects, not in our obedience to permanent non-human constraints” (166). This again points to the aforementioned idea that the pragmatist does not start claiming to know what is true or trying to discover truth before acting. Rather, the pragmatist treats different beliefs and ways of living as hypotheses to be tested before discovering which one is best. Pragmatists are aware and secure in the knowledge that several attempts might be necessary before discovering what makes them happy. There is not one distinct theoretical framework by which the pragmatist can live, because the pragmatist might need to test and experiment with different theories before finding out which works. This can be thought of as focusing on impermanence and advising that people should avoid attaching themselves or clinging to specific doctrines or ways of living when they no longer work.

The Buddha emphasized the fact that one of the greatest sources of our suffering is clinging or attachment
to things that are impermanent. Intriguingly enough, the Buddha believed that we should not cling to the teaching itself; that once we had achieved a state of enlightenment, the teaching would no longer be useful. As Gowans writes “…the Buddha’s teaching is not something to adhere to or cherish or possess. These are all forms of clinging or grasping, of attaching ourselves to the teaching.”(60). If a person, once they have achieved a state of enlightenment, still rigidly adheres to the teaching, then the person is probably not truly enlightened. Again, it should probably be noted that pragmatic philosophers were not attempting to proscribe ways in which a person could achieve enlightenment, but they too placed much importance on avoiding a permanent attachment to one way of living or one idea.

It would seem, based on the striking similarities between these two philosophies, one could argue that Buddhism begat pragmatism. That is, the philosophy of pragmatism was born out of the very ideas of Buddhism. Indeed, such Buddhist concepts as the stream of consciousness were specifically used by William James in his writings on psychology.

In summary, we can say that although many Western approaches to philosophy differ from the philosophy of Buddhism, at least one exception is pragmatism. Both Buddhism and pragmatism are much more practical than theoretical in nature, and they both emphasize not solving metaphysical problems, but instead attempt to dissolve these problems. By this dissolution, one is able to get beyond the theoretical and discover how philosophy might be used to make life better.
Works Cited