Dialogue of Mīmāṃsā and Buddhism on the Buddha’s compassion and authority

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The present author re-examines the positions of Dharmakīrti as expressed in his earlier works, Pramāṇavārttika I and II, in particular with regard to the authority of scripture and of the Buddha, thereby shedding light on the possible influence of his opponent, Kumārila. Attention is also paid to theoretical and historical developments beginning from the Nyāyasūtra with Pakṣīlasvāmin’s commentary and Dignāga’s Pramāṇasamuccaya.

In criticizing omniscience, Kumārila proves that the Buddha, being free from desire, cannot undertake the action of teaching (and therefore his teaching cannot be his own). Dharmakīrti, in his first book, Pramāṇavārttika I, after formulating Kumārila’s syllogism stating that “the Buddha must have desire because he teaches”, criticizes it as a wrong inference of the type known as śeṣavat. He does this with the intention of criticizing in general Kumārila’s understanding of inference. He points out that Kumārila’s reason is inconclusive (anaikāntika) because in some cases even compassion may lead one to teach, and so one cannot necessarily infer the existence of a bad desire from the action of teaching. Then in Pramāṇavārttika II, commenting on the four epithets of the Buddha given in the Maṅgala verse of Dignāga’s Pramāṇasamuccaya, namely jagaddhitaisin, śāstry, sugata and
tāyin, Dharmakīrti proves that because of his teaching the Buddha must have compassion. He does so by establishing in order (anuloma) and proving in reversed order (pratiloma) the causal chain of the four: compassion (karuṇā), repeated practice (abhyāsa), the cognition of the four truths (catuḥsatyajñāna), and their teaching (upadeśa). Thus he shows that Kumārila’s reason “because the Buddha teaches” proves rather the Buddha’s compassion.

Kumārila criticizes Dignāga’s proof of scripture’s authority (āgama-prāmāṇya), which presupposes the Naiyāyika theory of truth, i.e. parataḥ-prāmāṇya-vāda. In Pramāṇavārttika I, Dharmakīrti abandons the parataḥ-prāmāṇya-theory and reinterprets Dignāga’s verse following the svataḥ-prāmāṇya-theory, which is Kumārila’s own, and thus defends the authority of the Buddha’s teaching. But concerning the authority of the Buddha himself, who is criticized by Kumārila as being not free from desire and not omniscient, Dharmakīrti in Pramāṇavārttika I does not explicitly prove the Buddha to be omniscient and compassionate. In Pramāṇavārttika II, however, he introduces two alternative definitions of pramāṇa from the perspectives respectively of the parataḥ-prāmāṇya-theory and the svataḥ-prāmāṇya-theory. At the same time he identifies the teaching of the four truths (or mārga) as the characteristic feature of a pramāṇa. Thus he succeeds in proving the Buddha to be a pramāṇa on the grounds that he fulfills the condition of a pramāṇa. And he proves the Buddha to be omniscient (in the sense that he knows the most important things, i.e. the four truths) by applying the causal chain ending with the teaching of the four truths.

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