

2003

The semiotics of signlessness: A Buddhist doctrine of signs

Mario D'Amato

Rollins College, mdamato@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#)

Published In

D'Amato, Mario. "The semiotics of signlessness: A Buddhist doctrine of signs." *Semiotica* 2003, No. 147 (November 2003): 185-207.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

The semiotics of signlessness: A Buddhist doctrine of signs

MARIO D'AMATO

In his formulation of the doctrine of signs, Charles Sanders Peirce makes the claim that the 'meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation' (1.339).¹ According to Peirce, three elements are necessary for semiosis to occur: sign, object, and interpretant. Regarding this last element, Peirce states, 'the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series' (1.339). Klaus Oehler, in interpreting Peirce's semiotic doctrine, states that because 'every sign must, as a matter of definition, be interpretable', this 'presupposes the existence of at least one other sign', which 'presupposes another sign . . . ad infinitum' (1987: 7). Oehler refers to this argument as 'the semiotic proof of the interminability of every process of interpretation' (1987: 7). Jacques Derrida, reflecting on Peirce's formulation, states that the '*representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move' (1976: 49). Umberto Eco, reflecting on Derrida's reading of Peirce's formulation, states that while Peirce does put forward the idea of what Eco calls 'unlimited semiosis', Peirce also holds that there is 'a true conclusion of semiosis and it is Reality (5.384). . . . There is an ideal perfection of knowledge (5.356)' (1990: 40). In this paper, I consider a Buddhist response to the issue of unlimited semiosis: In other words, I offer a Buddhist account of how unlimited semiosis should be understood. I do this by following the doctrine of signs offered in an Indian Buddhist text of the Mahāyāna from circa the fourth century CE, a text known as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* (*Ornament to the Scriptures of the Great Vehicle*; hereafter, 'the *Ornament*'). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Buddhist semiotics, from both a historical and a philosophical point of view, is that in its theorizing of the semiotic process, Buddhist semiotics is directed toward bringing this process to its end or terminus—whether this means its ultimate perfection or its complete cessation. In Buddhist discourse, the ultimate end of semiosis is conceived in terms of a soteriological goal: one that is understood to be

salvific in some final sense. In considering these issues, I offer this paper as a contribution to the general history of semiotics.

Contextualizing a Buddhist doctrine of signs

Assuming with Charles Morris that the history of semiotics is 'useful both as a stimulus and as a field of application' for semioticians (1971: 65–66), we may note that inadequate attention has been given to the history of non-Western traditions of the doctrine of signs. John Deely in particular has called attention to the gaps in our understanding of the history of semiotics in India and China—areas where Buddhist intellectual traditions have certainly played a decisive role.² Thus, in order to come to a more complete view of the history of the doctrine of signs, it is necessary to develop further perspectives on Buddhist semiotic traditions. Another reason for conducting work in Buddhist semiotics may be found in the occasional appropriation of Buddhist terms, concepts, and themes in certain Western texts on semiotics. Here, for example, we might mention Roland Barthes's use of the Zen Buddhist term *satori*,³ or Floyd Merrell's description of semiosis in relation to 'nothingness' and 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*).⁴ A closer analysis of a Buddhist formulation of the doctrine of signs would, then, both expand our view of the general history of semiotics and allow us to deepen our reflections on the possibility of adopting or adapting Buddhist semiotic terms, concepts, and themes.

Some work on Buddhist semiotics has already been carried out. Because this work has not to my knowledge been comprehensively reviewed, it might be useful to make the initial moves toward doing so here. First, however, I would like to delimit the kind of work that I have in mind. In his writings, Morris proposes a distinction between pure and descriptive semiotics. He states that this distinction 'simply marks the difference between the formative discourse of semiotic [i.e., pure semiotics] and its designative discourse [i.e., descriptive semiotics], that is, the difference between semiotic as logic and semiotic as scientific discourse' (1971: 303). In his foreword to Deely's *Introducing Semiotic: Its History and Doctrine*, Thomas Sebeok offers the metaphor of two tracks in semiotics, one that is 'inward-turning', concerned with 'the *doctrina signorum* for its own sake', and another that 'leads outward into the general culture . . . with incursions into all the humanities and social sciences' (Deely 1982: x–xi). While the former track is akin to Morris's pure semiotics, the latter is akin to descriptive semiotics. In the context of the study of Buddhism, we might reformulate the distinctions between pure/descriptive and inward-turning/outward-turning as a distinction between an analysis of Buddhist semiotics

and a semiotic analysis of Buddhism: While the former would be an analysis of a Buddhist doctrine of signs (as, for example, is given in this paper), the latter would be a semiotic analysis of Buddhist cultural forms. Acknowledging the difficulties involved in any attempt to rigorously establish the ultimate validity of such distinctions, I offer this one as a heuristic device for situating the present discussion of the *Ornament's* doctrine of signs within broader conversations in semiotics. So given the topic of this paper, in my brief overview of other relevant work, I pick out only studies that I consider to be primarily concerned with the analysis of a Buddhist doctrine of signs.

The most thorough overview of the topic of Buddhist semiotics is Fabio Rambelli's article on Buddhism in the *Encyclopedia of Semiotics* (Rambelli 1998). In this article, Rambelli discusses Buddhist philosophy of language and semiotics,⁵ pointing out that the Yogācāra tradition may present 'the most influential Buddhist model of semiosis' (Rambelli 1998: 96). According to his account, Buddhism offers two semiotic models, one for ordinary knowledge that 'confuses a presumed ontological reality . . . with the ordinary psychomental phenomena and processes (modalities and functions of the mind) that create that reality', and one for 'true and absolute knowledge . . . *prajñā* or *bodhi*' (Rambelli 1998: 97). Rambelli points out that the attainment of this true knowledge, according to Buddhism, involves the transformation of cognition and the end of semiosis.⁶

Peter Harvey's detailed study (1986) is a lucid monograph on the various 'signless' (*animitta*) states that occupy an important place in conceptions of the path to nirvāṇa. As Harvey points out, according to a standard trope in Buddhist discourse, there are three entrances to nirvāṇa: emptiness (*sūnyatā*), signlessness (*animitta*), and desirelessness (*apraṇihita*).⁷ In his study, Harvey identifies the range of meanings for the term *nimitta* ('sign') in Pāli materials. Some of the meanings he specifies are:

- i) A deliberately made sign . . .
- ii) A natural sign or indication . . .
- iii) A specific type of natural sign — a sign of what is to come . . .
- iv) A marker . . .
- v) A (male or female) sexual organ . . .
- vi) Characteristic . . . (Harvey 1986: 31–32)

Harvey summarizes by stating that a *nimitta* is a 'delimited object of attention, that may, or should be taken as indicating something beyond itself or the general features of that to which it belongs' (1986: 33). He indicates how Pāli texts link the signless states to the characteristic of impermanence, and writes that according to a Buddhist account of such

states, 'When the mind thoroughly contemplates any item of becoming . . . as impermanent, it overcomes the sign of permanence, etc., so as to perceive merely a stream of changing sense-objects not "indicative" of anything but themselves' (Harvey 1986: 43); furthermore, in a later state there is not even the perception of the sign of sense-objects. In fact, Harvey concludes that according to these texts, the ultimate goal of nirvāṇa (Pāli, *nibbāna*) is an entirely objectless consciousness; he states that in the realization of the highest goal, 'consciousness (*viññāṇa*) has *no* object, not even a signless one, but *is* nibbāna' (Harvey 1986: 48).

Janet Gyatso makes a related point in her discussion of Rdo Grub-chen's theory of *dhāraṇī* (a 'literal formula, perhaps with "magical" powers') (1992: 173). In her article, Gyatso posits that Rdo Grub-chen's theory also looks to the potential end of the semiotic process in Buddhism. Interpreting *dhāraṇī* in relation to Peirce's three categories of signs — icon, index, and symbol — she argues that we may understand the 'very special type of semiosis that would operate in Rdo Grub-chen's *dhāraṇī* practice' as one in which 'the sign reaches full iconicity', and hence 'semiosis self-destructs (or, better, attains a "zeroed semiosis")' (Gyatso 1992: 194).

A number of other studies are also relevant to an analysis of a Buddhist doctrine of signs, even though they do not directly address that topic. David Zilberman offers thoughts on 'the starting conditions of semiotic theorizing and why in principle they can differ' (1988: 247).⁸ He posits that 'the skeptical state of mind seems to be the only genuine pre-condition of semiogenesis' (Zilberman 1988: 248) and reflects on the implications of considering Buddhism to be a form of skepticism. Alexander Piatigorsky (1984), in his study of the Abhidharma theory of *dharmas* ('phenomenological units'), makes use of concepts and methods in Western semiotics to explore this important Buddhist theory. Mention should also be made of two studies relating Derrida's work to Buddhism: Magliola (1984), which discusses the methodology of Derrida in relation to that of the Madhyamaka Buddhist thinker, Nāgārjuna; and Wang (2001), which compares Derrida's account of semiosis to the accounts of three Buddhist thinkers, Kumārajīva, Paramārtha, and Xuanzang. And if we accept Peirce's architectonic of the sciences, wherein logic is understood as a branch of semiotics — the branch which comprises 'the formal science of the conditions of the truth of representations' (2.229) — then to the works listed here we must also add the extensive research on Buddhist logic.⁹ Richard Hayes's book (1988) may be pointed out as a study of Buddhist logic that highlights the semiotic dimensions of Dignāga's system.¹⁰

Because the text I am discussing is a specifically Indian Buddhist one, in order to situate its doctrine of signs more fully in its historical context, it

might also be useful to highlight some studies of Indian semiotics. An excellent overview of Indian sign conceptions is offered by Bimal K. Matilal and J. C. Panda (1997). The authors state that the ‘earliest reference, in Indian thinking, to signs as cognitive and communicative tools’ may be seen in the Lokāyata philosophy of circa the sixth century BCE; they specify that the important term translated as ‘sign’ here is *liṅga*, or ‘whatever stands out from an object in direct observation’ (Matilal and Panda 1997: 1827). They also state that other terms translatable as ‘sign’ may be found in Indian literature, including the Vedic term, *lakṣma* (‘specific characteristics, marks and indications’), a term which contributed to the formation of the word *lakṣaṇa* (Matilal and Panda 1997). The authors introduce Indian semiotics in the areas of logic and theory of argumentation, grammar and semantics, poetics and aesthetics, and the sciences of geometry, mathematics, and medicine. Insofar as the article reads as a concise introduction to the history of Indian thought, it serves as a testament to the possibility that semiotics may be seen as an underlying concern of diverse discourses. While acknowledging the ubiquitous importance of signs in Indian intellectual culture, the authors express their surprise that in the history of Indian thought ‘there is no text which deals with the (abstract) theory of signs’ (Matilal and Panda 1997: 1853). In what follows, however, I hope to show that at least one section of one Indian text — viz., the *Ornament* — explicitly offers such a theory.

Piatigorsky and Zilberman focus on identifying ‘the earliest, textually confirmable situation which . . . can be understood as *the* emergence of sign-manipulation’ in Indian thought (1976: 256). Through an examination of uses of various forms of the term *lakṣaṇa* (‘sign’) in the Upaniṣads, the authors conclude that the term is unknown in Upaniṣads dating from the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE, but emerges as a term meaning ‘sign’ in Upaniṣads from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE. The authors proceed to hypothesize that the emergence of the term *lakṣaṇa* as ‘sign’ may have been a result of ‘the appearance of Buddhism and other heterodoxical teachings . . . [whose] exponents . . . refused to follow the esoteric Brahmanical path . . . and so forced the masters of [the] *Upaniṣads* to burst out with unprecedented semiotic activities, in order to assimilate or eliminate the newcomers’ (Piatigorsky and Zilberman 1976: 260).¹¹ Thus the authors posit a crucial role for Buddhism in the emergence of the doctrine of signs in India. Piatigorsky also offers a short discussion of ‘Indic sign conceptions’ in Sebeok’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Sebeok 1986, vol. 1),¹² which covers some of the same ground as his article with Zilberman. In it, he states that the ‘two main terms denoting “sign” (or “mark”) in practically every Indian philosophical, religious or scientific school were *lakṣaṇa* and *nimitta*’ (Sebeok 1986: 346); and these are indeed

the two terms for 'sign' that are relevant to our discussion of the *Ornament's* semiotic doctrine.

Edwin Gerow (1984) looks at Peirce's trichotomy, *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*, in relation to Indian conceptions of *gauṇī*, *lakṣaṇā*, and *dhvani*, respectively. He explains that according to the Mīmāṃsaka conception of Kumārila and others, in the case of *gauṇī* (lit., 'relating to a quality') the meaning of an assertion is found in 'the isolation of a *quality* common to both terms [of the assertion]'; for example, the assertion 'Devadatta is a lion' means that Devadatta is fierce (Gerow 1984: 247). In the case of *lakṣaṇā* ('secondary signification') the meaning of a word 'is not the direct "relation" of signification itself [viz., of word to object] . . . but an additional relation to a third term'; for example, the word 'spears' may signify 'spear-having men' through the relation of 'possessor-possessed' (Gerow 1984: 246). Gerow then states that according to the theory of Ānandavardhana (ninth century CE), *dhvani* (lit., 'sound, tone'; 'suggestion') may involve secondary signification while 'arriving at still another sense', which is exemplified by irony (Gerow 1984: 252). He concludes that the difficulty in mapping the three Indian conceptions onto Peirce's trichotomy 'points to the problem that Indians have had with a genuine notion of "thirdness" apart from "similitude" and "opposition"' (Gerow 1984: 254). I would suggest that this is perhaps not the case, and that the concept of *lakṣaṇā* may indeed be understood as participating in the category of thirdness.¹³

Edward Small examines the 'emphasis upon, or seeming disregard for, "reference"' in the traditions of American and Continental semiotics, respectively (1987: 447). He reflects on Saussure's distinction of 'signifier-signified' in relation to the Sanskrit concept of *nāma-rūpa* ('name and form') in the hopes of an 'increased insight into the a-referential hermeneutic of Saussure's "sign"' (Small 1987: 457). Indeed, both formulations emphasize the relation between two elements, rather than the cooperation of three elements, as in Peirce's doctrine of signs. Small makes the point that on a Saussurean account, 'each attempt to exhibit a possible sign-referent only realizes another sign' (Small 1987: 451), which hints at a Saussurean doctrine of unlimited semiosis.

To conclude this brief overview of work on Indian semiotics, we must also note that the extensive research on Indian logic—and here I especially mean the Nyāya tradition—would be indispensable to any thorough history of the doctrine of signs in India. Although various secondary sources ably introduce and discuss Indian logic, the second volume of Karl Potter's *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (1977) is a useful guide to the contents and philosophical concerns of primary sources of the Nyāya tradition up to circa 1350 CE.

The text I examine here, the *Ornament*, is a Sanskrit doctrinal treatise composed circa the fourth century CE. The text purports to be presentation of various Mahāyāna themes relevant to the path of a bodhisattva on the way to buddhahood. It is contained in both the Tibetan and the Chinese canons of Buddhist works — the only extant canons that include Mahāyāna Buddhist texts — and is classified by both as belonging to the Yogācāra school (lit., the school of the ‘practice of spiritual discipline’), one of the two major doctrinal systems of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. In contemporary historical-critical scholarship, the Yogācāra is usually identified in terms of its focus on the forms and functioning of consciousness, and discussions of the Yogācāra often make reference to its eightfold model of consciousness, which adds the store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and the afflicted mind (*kliṣṭa-manas*) to the standard six consciousnesses of Buddhism (viz., the visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental). Yogācāra discourse has its beginnings in perhaps the fourth century CE, with the formation of the *Samādhinirmocana-sūtra* and the *Yogācārabhūmi*. Our text postdates this early strata of Yogācāra materials, but almost certainly predates the classical formulation of Indian Yogācāra, as put forward in the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (circa 400 CE).¹⁴

The section of the *Ornament* that I examine occurs in the 11th of the text’s 21 chapters. It is not a long section, comprising only eight verses out of the text’s some 804 in total. Nevertheless, the concerns of the section are relevant to the central soteriological themes and aims of the text, and other sections of the text are brought into consideration. The 11th chapter of the *Ornament*, according to the title given in the commentary, is on the ‘Investigation of the dharma’ (here *dharmā* means ‘Buddhist teaching’). The section I examine focuses on an analysis of the ‘signified, signifier, and signification’ (*lakṣya*, *lakṣaṇa*, and *lakṣaṇā*, respectively). Because we are dealing with a discourse on signs that was not composed in a European language, a note on terminology is in order. The terms translated as ‘signified’, ‘signifier’, and ‘signification’ are all nominal forms from the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{\text{lakṣ}}$, which means ‘to mark, sign, characterize, define, indicate’. Thus, *lakṣaṇa*, here ‘signifier’, also means ‘symbol, characteristic, definition’, and even ‘a symptom or indication of disease’.¹⁵ As noted earlier, various Sanskrit terms may be translated as ‘signifier’ or ‘sign’ (e.g., *liṅga*, *nimitta*, *saṃjñā*). In this paper, I only focus on the terms *lakṣaṇa* and *nimitta* in restricted contexts, which I take to be relevant to the *Ornament*’s doctrine of signs. In order to distinguish the terms in my discussion, I translate *lakṣaṇa* as ‘signifier’ and *nimitta* as ‘sign’, although the decision here is somewhat arbitrary.

It should also be noted that the term *lakṣaṇā*—here translated as ‘signification’—is commonly understood in Sanskrit grammatical literature to refer to the secondary significance or metaphorical meaning of a word.¹⁶ K. Kunjunni Raja argues that while Pāṇini (circa fourth century BCE) does not actually discuss the role of *lakṣaṇā* (‘secondary sense, metaphorical transfer’) in his grammatical treatise, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, he was aware of such uses of words (1965: 177). In his monograph on *Indian Theories of Meaning*, Kunjunni Raja points out that analyses of secondary significance (*lakṣaṇā*, *upacāra*, etc.) may be found in Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* (a commentary on Pāṇini’s treatise from circa the second century BCE), the *Nyāyā-sūtras*, the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras*, and other influential texts (1963: 233–242). Given the long and distinguished understanding of *lakṣaṇā* as ‘secondary significance’ in Sanskrit literature, one might question why I have translated the term as ‘signification’. In response, I would point out that in the context of a Buddhist understanding of language, there is ultimately no distinction between a sign’s secondary significance and its signification. As Kunjunni Raja points out, according to Buddhist logicians, ‘there is no primary referent for a word’ in the first place—all objects are ultimately empty of inherent nature—hence, the significance of every word is secondary or metaphorical (Kunjunni Raja 1963: 247). Thus, in the absence of a primary significance, we may refer to the so-called ‘secondary significance’ as the ‘signification’.¹⁷

So again the doctrine of signs in the *Ornament* that we consider here is found in the text’s discussion of the ‘signified, signifier, and signification’. Before turning to that doctrine, it would be useful to specify precisely in what I understand any doctrine of signs to consist. As should be clear from the opening paragraph, I intend to situate this analysis of a Buddhist doctrine of signs in the context of Peirce’s semiotics. While the semiotic tradition in the West may be traced from the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, through the Stoics, Augustine, and medieval scholastics, to Locke, Leibniz, and Hume, I believe that Oehler is right in emphasizing the importance of Peirce’s formulation of a ‘triadic structure of the concept of the sign’ for contemporary semiotics (Oehler 1987: 8).¹⁸ Whereas other thought on signs often focuses on the binary relation of the signifier to the signified,¹⁹ Peirce points out that a complete account of semiosis necessarily involves not two but three elements: the sign, the object, and the interpretant.²⁰ He states, ‘by “semiosis” I mean . . . an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs’ (5.484). So on Peirce’s account, in order for semiosis to occur it is not sufficient for there to simply be a sign and that which it stands for; there must also be the third element, that of

the interpretant. Thus, in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (published 1901–1905), Peirce defines 'sign' as follows: 'Anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*' (Peirce 1991: 239).²¹ Regarding the sign, Peirce offers various classifications, including, for example, the three classes of icon, index, and symbol (2.304), and the ten classes based on three trichotomies (2.254–264).²² Regarding the object, Peirce states that it need not be an actually existent object, it may be something 'only imaginable' (2.230), and Eco points out that in the case of a proposition about a fictional character, 'its object is only an imaginary world' (1979: 181). And regarding the third element necessary for semiosis, the interpretant, Peirce defines it as 'the proper significate outcome of a sign' (5.473) or the 'proper significate effect' (5.475). As Eco emphasizes, '*The interpretant is not the interpreter* (even if a confusion of this type occasionally arises in Peirce); rather it is '*another representation which is referred to the same "object"*' (1976: 68). Following Peirce's account (8.184), Oehler offers a lucid statement of the classification of three sorts of interpretants:

(1) the immediate interpretant, that is the interpretant which manifests itself in the correct understanding of the sign, i.e., what is called the meaning of the sign, (2) the dynamic interpretant, that is, the actual effect of the sign, the reaction which a sign provokes, and (3) the final interpretant, that is, the effect that the sign would have in every awareness if circumstances were such that the sign could evince its full effect. (Oehler 1987: 6)

Thus, the interpretant is the meaning of a sign, the actual effect of the sign, and the idealized full possible effect of the sign — or in Peirce's own words, 'that which *would finally* be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached' (8.184). As we turn to the *Ornament's* doctrine of signs with its elements of the signifier, signified, and signification, I would suggest that these three be considered in relation to Peirce's sign, object, and interpretant, respectively.

A Buddhist doctrine of signs

The *Ornament's* verses on the doctrine of signs, as mentioned above, occur in the 11th chapter of the text, immediately following a two-verse section that deals with the doctrine of representation-only (*vijñāpti-mātratā*), according to which it is only the mind itself that constructs the appearance

of subject and object — i.e., there is no ultimate distinction between a perceiving subject and a perceived object, although the mind mistakenly takes there to be. This thesis highlights the importance of a doctrine of signs for the text: On a Mahāyāna Buddhist account, through seizing on the signs or characteristics of things, mind functions according to a conceptual matrix that is not in accordance with the way things really are, and this occurrence is the very basis of suffering. Thus, to give a semiotic interpretation to the three entrances to nirvāṇa — signlessness, desirelessness, and emptiness — if signs and semiotic processes were to be properly understood, signifying could be brought to an end, seizing on things would terminate, and the ultimate emptiness of all phenomena would be realized.

The first element in the *Ornament's* doctrine of signs is the signified (*lakṣya*); the text states:²³

sadṛṣṭikaṃ ca yac cittam tatrāvasthāvikāritā/
lakṣyam etat samāsenā hy apramāṇam prabhedataḥ//

Mind along with what is observed, the conditions therein, and the unchanging: this concisely is the signified. But with respect to its subdivisions, it is unmeasurable. (*Ornament* 11.37)

Although this verse may seem concise to the point of being abstruse (a situation not uncommon in Indian Buddhist śāstras, or technical treatises), the commentary accompanying the text makes matters more perspicacious. The commentary takes the four categories of the signified according to the text and relates them to a standard Buddhist set of five categories of existents, as follows:²⁴

Terms Used at 11.37	Corresponding Categories of Existents
mind	consciousness (<i>viññāna</i>) and form (<i>rūpa</i>)
what is observed	mental factors (<i>caittasika-dharmas</i>)
the conditions	factors not associated with mind (<i>citta-viprayukta-dharmas</i>)
the unchanging	the unconditioned (<i>asaṃskṛta</i>)

This fivefold set of categories of existents may be found in traditional Abhidharma texts, a genre that includes some of the earliest strata of systematic doctrinal thought in Indian Buddhism. In commenting on the fivefold categories of existents, Erich Frauwallner states that this scheme 'represents an attempt to record exhaustively all the elements of being and order them systematically' (1995: 146); hence, we may understand the signified in the *Ornament's* semiotic doctrine to encompass all possible existents. Taking our cue from a restatement of Quine's dictum in a

semiotic key — ‘To be is to be a signified’²⁵ — we may consider the text’s presentation of the signified in relation to its ontological doctrine. There are two specific points I want to make in this regard. The first is that the text reduces the traditional category of form or materiality to a sub-category of mind, which indicates the tendency toward ontological idealism in the *Ornament*’s classification of the signified. The second point is that although the text identifies four categories of signifieds (which map onto the standard five categories of existents), we should not understand the text’s final position on the question of ontology to be that there are ultimately four categories of existents. According to a standard Abhidharma account, a distinction must be made between secondary and primary existents: While secondary existents (e.g., the conventional objects that make up the world, including persons, medium-sized objects, etc.) are mere designations or conceptual constructions, primary existents (viz., the momentary events that comprise secondary existents) are the actually existent objects of reality.²⁶ According to the Mahāyāna Buddhist conception of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), however, all phenomena are without inherent nature, and hence from the ultimate point of view, there are no objects at all: From an ultimate point of view, there is nothing to be signified.²⁷ Thus, the four categories of signifieds are to be ultimately understood as mere designations or conceptual constructions. This position will have important implications for the *Ornament*’s doctrine of signs, because it hints that signs may actually function as empty signifiers.

Here, I would like to pause in my exegesis of the text’s doctrine of signs, and say a few words on Peirce’s categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. These three categories were offered by Peirce as an attempt to construct a fundamental classificatory scheme, not unlike the categories of Aristotle or Kant (1.300). Briefly, firstness refers to the characteristics of feeling, quality, immediacy, freedom, independence, something in itself without relation to an other (1.302–311; 6.32);²⁸ secondness refers to action, causation, resistance, constraint, dependence, in short something in relation to an other, for example, the relation of ego to non-ego (1.322–334); and thirdness refers to representation, mediation, meaning, process, continuity, in short something as it mediates between something else and an other (1.337–349).²⁹ As I stated above, Peirce draws on these categories in order to arrive at his threefold classification of signs. What I wish to emphasize here, however, is *not* the congruence of Peirce’s threefold classification of signs with the types of signs found in the *Ornament*, but rather the utility of Peirce’s fundamental categories in interpreting the *Ornament*’s classification of signs.

So turning to the second element in the *Ornament*’s doctrine of signs — viz., the signifier (*lakṣaṇa*) — we see that the text identifies three forms

of signs, offering two verses on the first and one each on the remaining two. The three signs discussed by the text correspond to the three natures (*tri-svabhāva*), which comprise what is perhaps the most significant ontological doctrine in Yogācāra philosophy.³⁰ According to this doctrine, the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) refers to the appearance of unreal objects which are imagined in terms of a subject-object duality, an ultimately false and illusory duality according to Yogācāra philosophy; the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*) refers to the occurrence of any unreal imagination, an occurrence which is dependent on causes and conditions; and the perfected nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*) refers to thusness, reality as it is in itself, which is understood to be entirely inexpressible.³¹

On the first of the three signs, the imagined signifier (*parikalpita-lakṣaṇa*), the text states:

yathā-jalpārtha-saṃjñāyā nimittam tasya vāsanā/
tasmād apy atha vikhyānaṃ parikalpita-lakṣaṇam//

yathā-nāmārtham arthasya nāmaṃ prakhyānatā ca yā/
asaṃkalpa-nimittam hi parikalpita-lakṣaṇam//

The imagined signifier is the sign of the conceptualization of objects in terms of discourse, the habits of that [discourse], and moreover the distinct perceptions from those [habits].³² The imagined signifier — the sign of a false construct — is the perception of name and object as name and object. (*Ornament* 11.38–39)

In considering what is stated about the imagined signifier in these two verses, I think it is important to note that this type of sign is described in terms of three aspects, which I take to imply that this sign should properly be understood in terms of Peirce's category of thirdness. The three aspects of the imagined signifier are (1) the conceptualization of objects in terms of discourse, which the commentary explains as the mental function of conceiving of an object in terms of language (*yathā 'bhilāpam*); (2) the habits (*vāsanā*) that arise due to that discourse,³³ the various tendencies that occur as a result of such discourse; and (3) the distinct perceptions — the perceptions of distinct objects — that arise based on those habits. In the second verse, the imagined signifier is defined in terms of the 'perception of name and object'. According to this verse, an imagined signifier is one in which there is a perception of a given name in relation to some posited object. So, here again, three elements are associated: name, object, and perception. I would suggest that these three elements correspond to (1), (2), and (3), respectively: The name is what occurs in discourse; the occurrence of an object *qua* object — that is, as some particularly delimited, definable, distinct object — is a result of the habits of discourse;

and the perception of name and object is simply a distinct perception of some particular object. When there is a sign with these three aspects (with the threefold structure of name/object/perception), then such a sign is imagined: It is constructed through a process of unreal imagination. According to the *Ornament*, then, such signs are to be known for what they really are, viz., the results of imaginative constructions which impute reality where there is none.

The second type of sign is the dependent signifier (*paratantra-lakṣaṇa*); the text states:

trividha-trividhābhāso grāhya-grāhaka-lakṣaṇaḥ/
abhūta-parikalpo hi paratantrasya lakṣaṇam//

The threefold-threefold appearance has the characteristic of object and subject; it is unreal imagination, which is the signifier of the dependent. (*Ornament* 11.40)

In considering the dependent signifier, note that this type of sign is described in terms of two aspects, which implies that it may be understood in terms of Peirce's category of secondness. The two aspects of the dependent signifier are its object aspect and its subject aspect. From the commentary to this verse, we may see that each of these two aspects is specified in terms of three further aspects, as follows:

Object Aspect	Subject Aspect
appearance of words	mind (afflicted mind, encompassing awareness of 'self')
appearance of meanings	apprehension (five sensory consciousnesses: visual, etc.)
appearance of forms	conceptual discrimination (mental consciousness)

So according to this verse and its commentary, a dependent signifier has the aspects of object and subject; hence, it has a twofold character. In terms of its object aspect, a dependent signifier is one that takes on the appearances of words, meanings, and forms (or referential objects); and in terms of its subject aspect, a dependent signifier is one that involves some form of functioning consciousness. Note, however, that a dependent signifier does not entail the imputation of actual existence to an object, but only the occurrence of some word, meaning, or form to some mode of consciousness. We might state this in other terms by saying that a dependent signifier represents a shift from the (imagined signifier's) trichotomy of name/object/perception to the dichotomy of representation/consciousness. So in a dependent signifier any element of an actually existent, external object is eliminated; as such, this type of sign is superior to an imagined signifier from a Yogācāra point of view, because it does not involve the imputation

of existence to an erroneous object. As the verse states, a dependent signifier is 'unreal imagination', but it does not involve the erroneous conceptualization of actually existent objects that occurs as a *result* of such imagination.

The third and final type of sign is the perfected signifier (*pariniṣpanna-lakṣaṇa*); the text states:

abhāva-bhāvātā yā ca bhāvābhāva-samānatā/
aśānta-śāntā 'kalpā ca pariniṣpanna-lakṣaṇam//

Having the quality of non-existence and existence as well as the identity of existence and non-existence, unpacified and pacified, and without construction: this is the perfected signifier. (*Ornament* 11.41)

In this verse, we see the perfected signifier described in terms of the dichotomies of non-existence/existence and non-pacification/pacification, and also in terms of being without construction. According to the commentary, this description offers the three specific characteristics of the perfected signifier. Its first characteristic is that a perfected signifier indicates the non-existence of the imagined nature of phenomena, but it also indicates what actually exists, viz., reality itself. In fact, this sign is indistinguishable from reality itself because, as the commentary states, the 'perfected signifier is thusness'.³⁴ And I take this to imply that the perfected signifier should be understood in terms of Peirce's category of firstness.³⁵ Its second characteristic is that it is unpacified because any afflictions that occur are only adventitious (*āgantukopakleśa*) — thus, it never needs to be brought to peace — and it is pacified because that is the fundamental nature (*prakṛti*) of the perfected signifier, because it is always already at peace. And its third characteristic is that it is not characterized by conceptual discrimination (in the commentary's terms, it is *avikalpā*), because it is free from conceptual proliferation (because it is *nisprapañcatā*).³⁶ Hence, according to the *Ornament*, the perfected signifier is so complete that it entirely encompasses that which it signifies: The perfected signifier is reality itself. Here, we should note that we are no longer dealing with a conventional conception of a sign that could designate some distinct object; rather here we have some sort of ultimate conception of an unlimited sign, one whose contours are not drawn where the signifier ends and the signified begins. We might even say that the perfected signifier is a sign whose contours are not drawn at all; it is understood as not participating in discursivity in any way. The perfected signifier does not involve the imagined signifier's trichotomy of name/object/perception, or even the dependent signifier's dichotomy of representation/consciousness, but rather arrives at the singularity of immediacy: The perfected signifier is

thusness itself, without the mediation of discursivity and without unreal imagination.

From this discussion of the three types of signs according to the *Ornament*, we now turn to the final element of the text's doctrine of signs: signification (*lakṣaṇā*). It is here that we see perhaps the most particularly Buddhist aspect of the *Ornament*'s semiotic doctrine. On signification, the text states:

niṣpanda-dharmam ālambya yoniśo manasi-kriyā/
cittasya dhātau sthānaṃ ca sad-asattārtha-paśyanā//

samatāgamaṇaṃ tasminn ārya-gotraṃ hi nirmalaṃ/
samaṃ viśiṣṭam anyūnādhikam lakṣaṇā matā//

Supporting the immovable teaching, fundamental mental application, abiding in the sphere of mind, observing existent and non-existent objects,

and arriving at equality therein, which is the noble spiritual lineage—which is untainted, identical, distinct, and neither deficient nor excessive: this is how signification is to be understood. (*Ornament* 11. 42–43)

Here, the commentary explains that these verses refer to the fivefold stages of spiritual discipline (*pañcavidhā-yoga-bhūmi*), which are the stages of support, applying, mirror, light, and basis (*ādhāra*, *ādhāna*, *ādarśa*, *āloka*, and *āśraya*, respectively).³⁷ These same stages of spiritual discipline are also given by Asaṅga in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, another important Yogācāra text, which postdates the *Ornament*.³⁸ A sub-commentary to the *Ornament*, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra-vṛtti-bhāṣya* by Sthiramati (circa 550 CE), relates each of these five stages to a standard set of five paths or progressive stages of spiritual development that are found in Yogācāra texts (including the *Ornament* itself).³⁹ These correspondences may be explained as follows: (1) The 'immovable teaching' is the 'support' of spiritual development, which occurs through listening to Buddhist teaching, and corresponds to the path of accumulation; (2) 'fundamental mental application' is 'applying' oneself to the teaching, and corresponds to the path of application; (3) 'abiding in the sphere of mind' is the spiritual discipline of functioning as a 'mirror' through the practice of the concentration of mind (*samādhi*), and corresponds to the path of vision; (4) 'observing existent and non-existent objects' is metaphorically like a 'light', which through supramundane wisdom is able to illuminate what is existent and what is not existent, and corresponds to the path of cultivation; and (5) 'the noble spiritual lineage' — the lineage of buddhas — is the attainment of buddhahood, which entails the transformation of the 'basis', and occurs on the path of completion. So here we see that signification (*lakṣaṇā*) is understood in terms of a fivefold process wherein one listens to the dharma

(i.e., Buddhist teaching), applies oneself to it, practices concentration, cultivates wisdom, and ultimately transforms oneself through the attainment of buddhahood. This set of processes, culminating in the 'transformation of the basis' (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*) is what the *Ornament* understands to be the 'proper significate effect' of signs. So according to this doctrine of signs, the 'final interpretant' of a perfected signifier — or in Oehler's words, 'the effect that the sign would have in every awareness if circumstances were such that the sign could evince its full effect' (1987: 6) — would be the complete transformation of the entire semiotic process, and the attainment of buddhahood.

This transformation of the basis is further described in other sections of the text, and in the commentary this transformation is specifically linked to the end of semiotic processes: the signless (*animitta*). For example, the commentary to 11.11 states that the transformation of the basis is being established in the signless;⁴⁰ and the commentary to 19.54 states that the transformation of the basis occurs when signs are not perceived (*nimit-tasyākhyānatā*), and when thusness is perceived (*tathatāyāḥ khyānatā*).⁴¹ This statement occurs in the commentary to 19.48–56, a section of the text on the topic of 'thorough knowledge in accordance with reality'. One of the more significant verses here for our purposes states:

purataḥ sthāpitaṃ yac ca nimittaṃ yat sthitaṃ svayaṃ/
sarvaṃ vibhāvayan dhīmān labhate bodhim uttamāṃ//

Eliminating everything — the sign that was previously established and the one that remains of its own accord — the wise one attains the highest awakening. (*Ornament* 19.50)

Here, the commentary explains that the first sign refers to the sign of persons (*pudgala-nimitta*), indicators of the existence of persons, and the second sign refers to the sign of all phenomena (*sarva-dharma-nimitta*), indicators of the existence of phenomena.⁴² To properly interpret this verse, we must recall the *Ornament's* ontological doctrine, and the distinction between secondary and primary existents. On the *Ornament's* account, it is important to realize the emptiness or lack of inherent nature of secondary existents (such as persons), as well as the emptiness of primary existents (the momentary events that comprise secondary existents). Thus, all phenomena (all signifieds) are to be ultimately understood as nothing more than conceptual constructions. And because there are ultimately no objects, there is nothing for signs to refer to. Hence, the highest awakening entails the end of semiosis.

So from what has been said above, we can see that according to the *Ornament's* doctrine of signs, the signified is understood as objects

classified according to the categories of existents, objects that are ultimately taken to be empty of inherent nature; the sign is classified into three types, the imagined signifier, the dependent signifier, and the perfected signifier; and signification (interpreted here in terms of Peirce's 'interpretant') refers to the fivefold stages of spiritual discipline, culminating in the transformation of the basis, which entails the end of semiosis.

On the semiotics of signlessness

I began this paper with a number of quotes identifying what we might, along with Eco, refer to as the doctrine of unlimited semiosis: the doctrine that signs lead to interpretants, which in turn become signs leading to interpretants, etc. Semiosis according to this doctrine is interminable, at least potentially. However, before proceeding any further, I believe it is important to attempt to clarify just what might be meant by the term 'unlimited semiosis'. It seems to me that there are at least three interpretations of this term that should be clarified and separated from one another. According to the first, semiosis is unlimited in the sense that any sign could in principle lead to any other sign; it is unlimited because there are no limitations or restrictions on the movement from one sign to another: There is only a free play of signifiers. This sense of 'unlimited semiosis' is one that is not endorsed by the *Ornament* — a perfected signifier would not lead to any other sign — and thus we need not consider it here. According to the second interpretation, semiosis is unlimited in the sense that it could in principle potentially be extended to infinity. And according to the third interpretation, semiosis is unlimited in the sense that it necessarily extends to infinity: It can in principle never be brought to an end. It seems to me that while our text would affirm the second sense of 'unlimited semiosis', it would reject the third sense.⁴³ Hence, I think it would be useful to maintain a distinction between a conception of semiosis as potentially unlimited and a conception of semiosis as necessarily unlimited. For a Buddhist doctrine of signs to uphold the latter conception would be to deny the very goal of Buddhism itself.

It should be clear from this analysis that while semiosis is indeed understood to be potentially unlimited on a Buddhist account, the proper Buddhist response to this unlimited process is to effect its end or terminus. In fact, semiosis is itself understood to be one of the most fundamental barriers — if not the most fundamental barrier — to awakening according to the *Ornament* (recall, e.g., 19.54). Hence, in order to reach the pinnacle of spiritual realization, viz., the unexcelled, complete awakening of buddhahood, it is necessary to bring semiosis to its end. And here an

interesting question might be raised: Because Buddhism is directed toward the end of semiosis, should it be understood as 'regressive' from a semiotic point of view? That is to say, should Buddhism be understood to be directed toward some state that is logically (but not necessarily temporally) prior to the possibility of semiosis? Although it might be tempting to respond in the affirmative here — and support for such a response might indeed be found in other quarters of the vast field of Buddhist discourse — I believe that the most reasonable reading of the *Ornament's* account would conclude that the ultimate goal is not to 'regress' to a pre-semiotic condition, but rather to arrive at a completely perfected mode of semiosis wherein there is no longer a barrier between the sign and reality itself: When everything has been signified, when the sign encompasses all possible interpretants (signs), then a state of semiotic perfection has been attained and semiosis has been brought to its completion.⁴⁴ So perhaps in the context of Buddhist semiotics, we are not so much speaking of the possibility of a 'transcendental signified' as we are about a 'transcendental signifier', or perhaps a 'signless signifier'. Just what such terms might mean is what I hope I have signified in all that has been said above.

Notes

1. Earlier in this passage, Peirce equates 'representation' with 'sign'. Following what has become standard practice in Peirce scholarship, references to writings in the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Peirce 1931–1958) are cited by volume and paragraph number. Note, however, that the multi-volume chronological edition of Peirce's work, which is currently in progress, is superior to the *Collected Papers* in scope, organization, and editing: *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Max H. Fisch et al., eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982–).
2. He states that Bochenski's *A History of Formal Logic* 'suggests that an archeology of semiotic consciousness comparable to the present effort might be done for the East, replacing the *Organon* with the *Nyāya-sūtra*, for example' (Deely 1982: 146, n. 3). Deely is rather optimistic about the possible effects of such an 'archeology', having claimed that 'semiotic historiography will be achieved only by upsetting and revising, often in radical ways, the conventional outlines and histories of thought', and that such historiography 'must inevitably take the form also of a *structuring anew* of the entire history of ideas and of philosophy' (Deely 1982: 1–2). Such claims must be understood, I believe, as based on Peirce's thesis that 'all thought is in signs' (Peirce 1991: 49; addressed in the fifth of his 'Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man').
3. 'Writing is after all, in its way, a *satori*: *satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful (though in no way formal) seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates *an emptiness of language*' (Barthes 1982: 4). Later in the book, Barthes speaks of the goal of Buddhism in semiotic terms, saying that perhaps *satori* is 'the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes, the breach of that internal recitation which constitutes our person' (Barthes 1982: 75).

4. See Merrell 1991, especially chap. 8, sec. 1. Also see Merrell 1997: 338ff., in which he discusses the five *skandhas* ('heaps', 'aggregates') of Buddhist philosophy in relation to Peirce's categories. In looking at Buddhism in Western semiotic discourse, Rambelli (1998: 97–98) mentions Barthes, Merrell, and other semioticians who have used Buddhist metaphors and concepts.
5. Buddhist philosophy of language is an area that has been and continues to be of great interest to scholars of Buddhism. For an introduction to the topic, see Gómez 1987. Hamlin 1983 presents an interesting discussion of the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*'s views of language.
6. Rambelli is also the author of a number of pieces on the semiotics of esoteric Buddhism in Japan; see Rambelli 1991, 1994a, and 1994b.
7. For a discussion of these three entrances to liberation in the context of the *Ornament*, see D'Amato 2000a: 91–94.
8. This concern for the origins and necessary conditions for semiotic theorizing may also be seen in Zilberman's article with Piatigorsky, which is referred to below.
9. According to Peirce's architectonic, the study of semiotics has three branches: pure grammar, logic proper, and pure rhetoric (2.229). On this account, the study of semiotics is fundamental to the study of logic, and principles arrived at in the formal doctrine of signs would apply to logic proper.
10. In commenting on the process of carrying out an inference for oneself according to Dignāga's system — a system specifying that such an inference occurs through the cognition of a sign — Hayes states, 'The term "sign (*linga*)" refers to a property that serves as evidence for another property that shares the sign's locus' (1988: 231). Thus, such an inference may be understood as a carefully delimited and specific form of semiosis.
11. The implication here is that before these 'newcomers', Upanisadic knowledge was unquestioned and hence 'there was no need to signify ("mark") the knowledge for the sake of securing evaluative identification (=verification)' (1976: 257). Note that Piatigorsky and Zilberman's conclusion that 'semiotics . . . emerged in India somewhere in the sixth century B.C.' (1976: 264) need not be understood as opposed to the claim of Matilal and Panda that no Indian text deals with the abstract theory of signs (1997: 1853), because the latter authors — in using the term 'abstract' — seem to be referring to a formal doctrine of signs detached from any contextually specific field of application.
12. In the same work, J. Frits Staal offers discussions of 'Indic grammarians' and 'Indic logicians'. In *East and West*, Sergiu Al-George discusses 'Sign (*lakṣaṇa*) and propositional logic in Pāṇini' (1969). Again, according to Peirce's scheme, Indian grammar and logic would both be important branches of Indian semiotics; see n. 9.
13. Even in Gerow's own account of *lakṣaṇā* (1976: 246–247), and the example of 'spears' meaning 'spear-having men', there are the three elements of the signifier, the signified, and the relation of 'possessor-possessed'.
14. This information on the *Ornament* and the Yogācāra school is drawn from D'Amato 2000a, where other works on the history of the Yogācāra are also discussed.
15. It is perhaps no mere coincidence that the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first definition of semiotics is 'the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of symptoms'.
16. The standard example given in Sanskrit literature is the sentence *gaṅgāyāṃ ghoṣaḥ*, which literally means, 'The village is on the Ganges', but which is understood to mean — through the secondary significance of the word *gaṅgāyāṃ* — 'The village is on the bank of the Ganges'.
17. This is not to imply that Buddhists offer no account of 'secondary significance'. For example, in his commentary to the *Triṃśikā*, Sthiramati (who also composed a sub-commentary to the *Ornament*) specifies that three conditions are necessary for

the occurrence of metaphor (*upacarā*). However, such accounts must be understood as operating at the conventional level of everyday discourse, where the existence of objects is posited. On these points, see Kunjuni Raja 1963: 245–249.

18. On other triadic models of the sign, see Nöth 1990: 89–91.
19. Although Morris (who follows Peirce) acknowledges the importance of this dimension of semiotics—calling it the semantical dimension ('the relation of signs to their designata and so to the objects which they may or do denote')—he also emphasizes the syntactic dimension (the relation of signs to other signs) and the pragmatic dimension (the relation of signs to their interpreters); see Morris 1971: 28–54.
20. Fisch (1986) provides an excellent historical overview of Peirce's formulation of semiotics (or, as Fisch points out, in Peirce's terms, *semeiotic*, *semeiotics*, *semiotic*, or *semeotic*—but never *semiotics*). He divides the history of Peirce's doctrine of signs into three 'foundings': The first has its basis in Peirce's publication of 'On a new list of categories'; the second in his six articles on the 'Illustrations of the logic of science', including the pieces, 'The fixation of belief' and 'How to make our ideas clear'; and the third in his writings on pragmatism composed between 1903 and 1911. Fisch also states that 'the semeioticians who were soon to begin thinking of Peirce as founder of modern semeiotic had in mind chiefly his published writings of this last period' (Fisch 1986: 338). In my brief account of Peirce's doctrine of signs, I base myself primarily on writings from this third period.
21. Here again, we see the thesis of unlimited semiosis.
22. The three classes of signs and the trichotomies that are the basis of the ten classes of signs are laid out in terms of Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. On Peirce's classes of signs and attempts to diagram the sets of relations between them, see Farias and Queiroz 2000.
23. The quotations from the Sanskrit text of the *Ornament*, identified by chapter and verse, are drawn from Lévi's (1907) edition. All translations are my own.
24. See Lévi 1907: 64.
25. See Quine 1980: 15; 'To be is to be the value of a variable'.
26. On this distinction, see Williams 1981: 237ff. In this article, Williams also addresses the question of how there can be discourse about non-existent entities from an Abhidharma (specifically Vaibhāṣika) Buddhist point of view.
27. The *Ornament* states: 'All phenomena are without self; according to ultimate truth, there is emptiness' (18.101). Note, however, that this is not taken to imply that there is nothing at all. Rather, what there is, is an indescribable thusness (*tathatā*), a pure firstness in Peirce's terms.
28. In discussing the category of firstness, Peirce states that something belonging to this category cannot be compared to anything else, but rather 'is a suchness *sui generis*' (1.303).
29. These categories are discussed in various locations of Peirce's work. For an excellent discussion of the categories, and their historical development in Peirce's thought, see Esposito 1980.
30. The correspondence between the three signifiers (or 'three characteristics'; *tri-lakṣaṇa*) and the three natures (*tri-svabhāva*) in Yogācāra thought is so close that the two formulations may often be effectively treated as indistinguishable, as in Boquist's (1993) study of the three-nature theory. The three signifiers and three natures are not, however, explicitly equated either individually or collectively in the *Ornament* or its commentary. Thus, we can read the *tri-lakṣaṇa* as a semiotic doctrine, and the *tri-svabhāva* as an ontological one.
31. The account given here follows 11.13–29 and its commentary. A more detailed analysis of this section of the text and its commentary may be found in D'Amato 2000b.

32. The referents of the demonstrative pronouns here are provided by the commentary to the *Ornament* (see Lévi 1907: 64: *tasya jalpasya vāsanā tasmāc ca vāsanād . . .*).
33. Edgerton's *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* defines the term *vāsanā* as 'impression, result of past deeds and experience on the personality', and also as 'habit, inclination, propensity'. I have chosen 'habit' here in order to draw out the resonances with Peirce's thought. Peirce has much to say about habit in his writings; here I adduce only one passage: 'It is by virtue of mental association (we moderns should say), that things are in the mind *habitualiter*' (Peirce 1991: 126).
34. See Lévi 1907: 65: *pariṇiṣpanna-lakṣaṇaṃ punas tathatā*.
35. Recall that Peirce describes firstness as 'suchness *sui generis*' (1.303).
36. See Lévi 1907: 65.
37. See Lévi 1907: 65.
38. Asaṅga's account of the stages is in accordance with the account given in the commentary to the *Ornament*. Asaṅga's account is elaborated a bit further in the commentary to his text, known as the *Abhidharmasamuccaya-bhāṣya* (which Tatia attributes to Sthiramati); for this elaboration, see Tatia 1976: 100.
39. Sthiramati's sub-commentary is found in the Tibetan canon of Buddhist treatises, the Derge Tanjur (Tōhoku no. 4034); the relevant section here is at *sems-tsam* MI 189a2–4. A good overview of the five paths in Yogācāra literature is given by Davidson 1985: 342–361.
40. See Lévi 1907: 57.
41. See Lévi 1907: 170. Also note that the commentary to 13.1 links the perfected nature (which is related to the perfected signifier) to the signless (Lévi 1907: 84).
42. See Lévi 1907: 169.
43. According to W. B. Gallie's interpretation of Peirce, this would also be the sense of unlimited semiosis affirmed by Peirce; Gallie states that 'Peirce himself emphasizes repeatedly, that this endless series [of signs] is essentially a *potential one*' (Gallie 1966: 126).
44. Further support for this interpretation may be seen in the text's definition of buddhahood as an 'awareness of all modes of appearance' (*sarvākāra-jñatā*; 9.2).

References

- Al-George, Sergiu (1969). Sign (*lakṣaṇa*) and propositional logic in Pāṇini. *East and West* 19 (1/2), 176–193.
- Barthes, Roland (1982). *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. (Originally published as *L'Empire des Signes* in 1970.)
- Bishop, Donald H. (1981). Peirce and Eastern thought. In *Proceedings of the C. S. Peirce Bicentennial International Congress*, K. Ketner et al. (eds.), 265–270. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.
- Boquist, Åke (1993). *Trisvabhāva: A study of the development of the three-nature-theory in Yogācāra Buddhism*. Lund, Sweden: Department of History of Religions, University of Lund.
- D'Amato, Mario (2000a). *The Mahāyāna-Hīnayāna distinction in the Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra: A terminological analysis*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
- (2000b). *The trisvabhāva in the Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. Unpublished paper.
- Davidson, Ronald M. (1985). *Buddhist systems of transformation: Āśraya-parivṛtti-parāvṛtti among the Yogācāra*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

- Deely, John (1982). *Introducing Semiotic: Its History and Doctrine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1976). *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. [Originally published as *De la Grammatologie* in 1967.]
- Eco, Umberto (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (1979). *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (1990). *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Esposito, Joseph L. (1980). *Evolutionary Metaphysics: The Development of Peirce's Theory of Categories*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Farias, Priscila and Queiroz, João (2000). Notes for a dynamic diagram of Charles Peirce's classifications of signs. *Semiotica* 131 (1/2), 19–44.
- Fisch, Max H. (1986). Peirce's general theory of signs. In *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism: Essays by Max H. Fisch*, Kenneth Laine Ketner and Christian J. W. Kloesel (eds.), 321–355. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frauwallner, Erich (1995). *Pañcaskandhaka and pañcavastuka*. In *Studies in Abhidharma Literature and the Origins of Buddhist Philosophical Systems*, trans. by Sophie Francis Kidd with Ernst Steinkellner, 135–147. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gallie, W. B. (1966). *Peirce and Pragmatism*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Gerow, Edwin (1984). Language and symbol in Indian semiotics. *Philosophy East & West* 34 (3), 245–260.
- Gómez, Luis O. (1987). Buddhist views of language. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume 8*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), 446–451. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Gyatso, Janet (1992). Letter magic: A Peircean perspective on the semiotics of Rdo Grubchen's dhāraṇī memory. In *In the Mirror of Memory*, Janet Gyatso (ed.), 173–213. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hamlin, Edward (1983). Discourse in the *Lañkāvatāra-Sūtra*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 11, 267–313.
- Harvey, Peter (1986). 'Signless' meditations in Pāli Buddhism. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9 (1), 25–52.
- Hayes, Richard P. (1988). *Dignāga on the Interpretation of Signs*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Ketner, Kenneth Laine (1988). The importance of religion for Peirce. In *Gedankenzeichen*, Regina Claussen and Roland Daube-Schackat (eds.), 267–271. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag.
- Kunjunni Raja, K. (1963). *Indian Theories of Meaning*. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre.
- (1965). Pāṇini's attitude towards *lakṣaṇā*. *Adyar Library Bulletin* 29, 177–187.
- Lévi, Sylvain (ed. and trans.) (1907–1911). *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra*, 2 vols. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.
- Magliola, Robert (1984). *Derrida on the Mend*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Matilal, B. K. and Panda, J. C. (1997). Sign conceptions in India. In *Semiotik: ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur*, Roland Posner, Klaus Robering, and Thomas A. Sebeok (eds.), 1827–1855. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- McCarthy, Jeremiah E. (1984). Semiotic idealism. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 20 (4), 395–433.
- Merrell, Floyd (1991). *Signs Becoming Signs: Our Perfusive, Pervasive Universe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (1997). *Peirce, Signs, and Meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Morris, Charles (1971). *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*. The Hague: Mouton. [Includes his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* of 1938 and *Signs, Language, and Behavior* of 1946.]
- Nöth, Winfried (1990). *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Oehler, Klaus (1987). An outline of Peirce's semiotics. In *Classics of Semiotics*, Martin Krampen, Klaus Oehler, Roland Posner, Thomas A. Sebeok, and Thure von Uexküll (eds.), 1–21. New York: Plenum Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders (1931–1958). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks (eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1991). *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, James Hoopes (ed.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Piatigorsky, Alexander M. (1984). *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought*. London: Curzon Press.
- Piatigorsky, Alexander M. and Zilberman, David B. (1976). The emergence of semiotics in India: Some approaches to understanding *lakṣaṇā* in Hindu and Buddhist philosophical usages. *Semiotica* 17 (3), 255–265.
- Potter, Karl H. (ed.) (1977). *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. II: Indian Metaphysics and Epistemology: The Tradition of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika up to Gaṅgeśa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman (1980). On what there is. In *From a Logical Point of View*, 1–19. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rambelli, Fabio (1991). Re-inscribing *maṇḍala*: Semiotic operations on a word and its object. *Studies in Central & East Asian Religions* 4, 1–24.
- (1994a). The semiotic articulation of *hosshin seppō*. In *Esoteric Buddhism in Japan*, I. Astley (ed.), 17–36. Copenhagen: Seminar for Buddhist Studies.
- (1994b). True words, silence, and the adamant dance. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21 (4), 373–405.
- (1998). Buddhism. In *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, Paul Bouissac (ed.), 93–99. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. (1976). *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*. Bloomington: Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies.
- (ed.) (1986). *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, 3 vols. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Small, Edward S. (1987). Semiotic referentiality: Saussure's sign and the Sanskrit *nāma-rūpa*. *The American Journal of Semiotics* 5 (3/4), 447–459.
- Tatia, Nathmal (ed.) (1976). *Abhidharmasamuccaya-Bhāṣyam*. Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute.
- Wang, Youxuan (2001). *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Williams, Paul (1981). On the Abhidharma ontology. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9, 227–257.
- Zilberman, David B. (1988). Is the *bodhisattva* a skeptic? On the trichotomy of 'indicative', 'recollective', and 'collective' signs. In *The Birth of Meaning in Hindu Thought*, Robert S. Cohen (ed.), 247–262. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Mario D'Amato (b. 1969) is Visiting Assistant Professor of Asian Religions and the Philosophy of Religion at Hampshire College <mdamato@hampshire.edu>. His principal research interests are Buddhist philosophy and the philosophy of religion. His major publications include 'Review of Jay L. Garfield's *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*' (2003) and 'Can all beings potentially attain awakening?' (2003).

Copyright of Semiotica is the property of Walter de Gruyter & Co. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Semiotica is the property of De Gruyter and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.