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THE DOCTRINE OF THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REASON (TRAIRŪPYA) IN DIGNĀGA'S LOGIC

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Abstract

The doctrine of the Three Characteristics of the Reason (trairūpya) holds a central position in Dignāga's theory of inference (anumāna) and has exerted a profound influence on the development of Indian Buddhist logic and epistemology. This paper examines the origin, structure, and epistemological significance of the three conditions that constitute a valid reason (hetu), namely: pakṣadharmatā → the reason must be present in the subject of inference; sapakṣasattva → the reason must be appropriately present in similar instances; and vipakṣāsattva → the reason must be completely absent in dissimilar instances.

Based on a comparative examination of the Pramāṇasamuccaya, textual fragments of Dignāga collected by H. N. Randle, and studies by Masaaki Hattori, Richard P. Hayes, and B. K. Matilal, this paper shows that trairūpya did not originate entirely with Dignāga; its premises had already appeared in the logical tradition prior to him. Dignāga's primary contribution lies in systematizing these conditions, placing them within the pakṣa - sapakṣa - vipakṣa structure, and developing the Hetucakra (Wheel of Reasons) to distinguish valid reasons from fallacious ones.

The paper also compares trairūpya with the Nyāya theory of hetu, thereby demonstrating similarities regarding fundamental conditions alongside differences in the organization and orientation of inferential theory. While Nyāya developed a system of five characteristics of the reason and situated inference within the five-membered structure (pañcāvayava), Dignāga focused on the cognitive value of the inferential sign and the capacity to exclude counterexamples. Consequently, trairūpya marks a crucial transition from debate techniques to the determination of the epistemic conditions of valid inference, while laying the foundation for the subsequent developments of Dharmakīrti.

Keywords: Dignāga, Three Characteristics, trairūpya, hetu, anumāna, pakṣadharmatā, sapakṣa, vipakṣa, Hetucakra, Nyāya, Buddhist logic, Eastern logic, Indian logic.

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1. Introduction

In Indian logic, to prove a proposition or a valid property, the reason (*hetu*) is a key element in verifying the correctness of the object to be proven (*sādhya*), making it one of the central issues in the theory of inference. Various schools of Indian philosophy have addressed the mechanics of this inferential process. However, each school developed its own theory regarding the conditions that enable a reason (sign or ground - *hetu*) to produce valid knowledge.

In the Nyāya system, inference is articulated within the framework of the theory of inference (*anumāna*) and the five-membered syllogism (*pañcāvayava*), which consists of *pratijñā* (thesis/proposition), *hetu* (reason), *udāharaṇa* (example), *upanaya* (application), and *nigamana* (conclusion). In the *Nyāyasūtra* (1.2.8), it is stated: *sādhyāviśiṣṭaḥ sādhyatvāt sādhyasamaḥ*.

Translation: A reason that is indistinguishable from the predicate to be proven in terms of still needing proof itself is called a reason identical with the predicate to be proven [7, 47]. That is to say, a reason (*hetu*) indistinguishable from the target of proof is called *sādhyasama* (≈ sharing the same predicament as the target of proof) because it requires proof itself.

This indicates that in Nyāya inferential theory, the *hetu* does not function as an isolated reason. Instead, moving from the *hetu* to the *sādhya* requires an associative rule or a relation of implication between the two sides within the Nyāya syllogism. This relation is expressed in the example member (*udāharaṇa*), where the rule is stated alongside an illustrative instance.

With this theory dominating inferential thought among debaters for several centuries, the emergence of Dignāga (c. 480 - 540) marked a major turning point in logic and epistemology - not only for Buddhism but for Indian logic as a whole. His most notable contribution was the theory of the three characteristics of the reason (*trairūpya*). The *trairūpya* consists of three necessary conditions to prove a thesis:

1. The reason must be a property of the subject under consideration (*pakṣadharmatva* / *pakṣadharmatā*).
2. The reason must be present in similar instances (*sapakṣe sattvam*).
3. The reason must be completely absent in dissimilar instances (*vipakṣe 'sattvam eva*).

Hattori observes that "it was precisely Dignāga's systematization of the possible relationships between the reason (*hetu*) and the property to be proven (*sādhya* - *dharma*) into the Wheel of Reasons (nine types of reasons - *Hetucakra*) that clarified under which conditions a reason is valid and under which it is invalid" [5, 4]. Thus, *trairūpya* can be understood not merely as three traits of a correct reason, but also as a mechanism for evaluating the cognitive validity of an inferential sign.

However, it is important to understand that the difference between Dignāga and Nyāya should not be reduced to a simple contrast between "three conditions" and "five members." The deeper issue lies in how the two traditions interpret the relationship between *hetu* and *sādhya*, and how that relationship establishes the validity of an inference. In Dignāga's system, the *pakṣa* - *sapakṣa* - *vipakṣa* structure and the *Hetucakra* become tools for examining the entire range of distribution possibilities of the reason.

Accordingly, this paper raises three main questions:

1. How are the three characteristics of the reason structured and operated by Dignāga in his theory of *anumāna*?
2. What is the function of the *Hetucakra* in converting the three conditions of the reason into a method for classifying valid reasons (*saddhetu*) and fallacious reasons (*hetvābhāsa*)?
3. In what ways is Dignāga's doctrine of *trairūpya* similar to and different from the Nyāya theory of *hetu*?

Based on a comparative reading of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, textual fragments collected by Randle, and studies by Hattori, Hayes, and Matilal, this paper argues that Dignāga's major significance lies not merely in stating the three attributes of a reason, but in restructuring them into a system for verifying inferential signs based on the relations among *pakṣa*, *sapakṣa*, and *vipakṣa*. This shift helped move Buddhist logic from the realm of debate techniques into a deeper inquiry concerning the epistemic conditions of valid inference, laying the groundwork for the subsequent developments of Dharmakīrti.

2. The Context Behind the Formation of the Trairūpya Theory

When evaluating Dignāga's contribution to the three characteristics of the reason (*trairūpya*), one must avoid the simplistic presentation that he was the first to invent the doctrine entirely from scratch.

One of Dignāga's crucial contributions is the doctrine of the Three Characteristics of the Reason (*trairūpya*). This established Dignāga's fame because it occupies a central position in his theory of inference. However, from a historical perspective, this theory underwent a process of development and was not created out of nothing by Dignāga. Research in the history of Indian logic shows that the premises of this doctrine had appeared before him in both the Buddhist tradition and in logical circles associated with Nyāya - Vaiśeṣika. Most notably, predecessors such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu had proposed theories regarding these three conditions of the reason.

Professor Masaaki Hattori notes that "prior to Dignāga, the fundamental conditions of a valid reason were already known in the Buddhist tradition, including in the works of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. What is special about Dignāga is that he placed those conditions into a systematic logical structure and developed them through the *Hetucakra* (Wheel of Reasons), in which the nine possibilities of distribution of the *hetu* with respect to the *sādhya* are examined to distinguish valid from invalid reasons." Hattori further evaluates that "Dignāga succeeded in constructing this matrix by examining each individual case of valid and invalid reasons as presented in Vasubandhu's logical treatises. Dignāga simply took one step further than Vasubandhu" [5, 4].

Therefore, Dignāga's contribution should be recognized not as the mere "invention" of the three conditions of the *hetu*, but as their systematization, the determination of their logical function, and their placement within an inferential theory with a clearer epistemological foundation.

Professor H. N. Randle strongly affirmed the historical nature of the three characteristics. He argued that "the fact that Praśastapāda himself cited a verse stating this doctrine and attributed it to 'Kāśyapa' (i.e., the Vaiśeṣika school) ... shows this doctrine was already implicitly present in Vātsyāyana's *Bhāṣya* commentary on

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Nyāyasūtra V.1.34, and even in that *sūtra* itself." Nevertheless, H. N. Randle also suggested that Dignāga was likely the first to explicitly formulate the Nine-Fold Wheel of Reasons (*hetu-chakra*) [8, 66-67]. This indicates that by Dignāga's time, the question of the conditions for a valid *hetu* was part of an inter-school debate environment rather than an exclusively internal Buddhist affair.

Therefore, when assessing Dignāga's role, two extremes should be avoided: on the one hand, he should not be viewed as having created all elements of *trairūpya* from scratch; on the other hand, finding precedents prior to him should not lead us to downplay the significance of his logical reform. His role lies precisely in the level of systematization he achieved. If before Dignāga the three conditions appeared mainly as criteria for checking a reason brought forward in debate, in his system they were placed in a tight relationship with the theory of inference (*anumāna*), particularly inference for oneself (*svārthānumāna*).

Thus, when discussing the history of this theory, the appropriate view is not that Dignāga invented the Three Characteristics, but that he inherited the pre-existing conditions of the reason and restructured them into a systematic theory of the inferential sign. It was precisely this restructuring that marked a turning point, making *trairūpya* a foundational element of Buddhist logic.

3. The Structure of the Three Characteristics

In Dignāga's theory of inference, the Three Characteristics of the Reason (*trairūpya*) are three conditions that an inferential sign (*hetu*) must satisfy to be capable of establishing the property to be proven (*sādhya*).

The *Pramāṇasamuccaya* text itself shows that *trairūpya* is directly linked to Dignāga's theory of inference for oneself (*svārthānumāna*). In reconstructing the structure of Chapter II of the work, H. N. Randle cites: *anumeye 'tha tattulye sadbhāvo nāstitā 'sati* Translated as: "The reason (middle term) is present in the object to be inferred; it is also present in instances similar to the object to be inferred; and it is absent in instances dissimilar to that object." [8, 6-7].

With this explanation by Dignāga, it is understood that the validity of an inference cannot be determined merely by proposing a reason that seems appropriate for the thesis. For a *hetu* to truly become a valid reason, it must be examined in three relational modalities: the subject under consideration (*pakṣa*), where the property to be proven (*sādhya*) needs to be determined; similar instances (*sapakṣa*), the homologous cases where the *sādhya* is established; and dissimilar instances (*vipakṣa*), the contrasting cases where the *sādhya* is absent. Therefore, the focus of *trairūpya* lies in determining the distribution of the inferential sign, thereby excluding the possibilities where the *hetu* might be present but the *sādhya* is not.

The doctrine of the three characteristics of the reason does not consist of three isolated rules. They form a unified verification process responsible for verifying the validity of the property to be proven. The first characteristic identifies the *hetu* directly on the subject being inferred, the second characteristic examines its presence in the domain of instances possessing the *sādhya*, and the third characteristic checks its absence in the domain lacking the *sādhya*. Thus, the structure of *trairūpya* can be generally outlined as follows:

- pakṣa → checks the presence of the *hetu*.
- sapakṣa → checks the concordant/positive relation between the *hetu* and the *sādhya*.
- vipakṣa → checks the exclusion of cases where the *hetu* is present without the *sādhya*.

It is precisely the coordination of these three domains of verification that transforms a sign from a merely observed property into a reason with inferential validity.

3.1. The First Characteristic: *Pakṣadharmatā*

The first characteristic is *pakṣadharmatā* (originating from the Sanskrit पक्षधर्मता), translated as the property of the reason being an attribute of the thesis (the subject - *pakṣa*), or in the terminology of Sino-Buddhist Logic (Hetuvidyā) as "the property of being a universal attribute of the subject" (遍是宗法性 - *biến thị tông pháp tính*). This means that the attribute used as the reason (H) must be present/exist in all instances of the Subject under consideration (*Pakṣa*).

Structurally, *pakṣa* refers to the thesis or the subject under consideration, *dharma* means attribute/property, and *-tā* indicates a state or quality. Therefore, *pakṣadharmatā* requires that the reason (sign – *hetu*) must actually be present in the very subject in which we wish to establish the property to be proven (*sādhya*).

Common example: *The mountain has fire, because it has smoke.* Here:

- *pakṣa* = the mountain (thesis or subject)
- *sādhya-dharma* = possessing fire (the property to be proven)
- *hetu* = smoke (the reason, also called the sign).

Before asking how smoke and fire are related in other instances, the first condition is to ascertain that: *the mountain under consideration actually has smoke.*

If smoke is not present on the mountain, or if its presence has not yet been ascertained, then "smoke" cannot fulfill the function of a reason (*hetu*) for the thesis "the mountain has fire." For this reason, the first characteristic links the reason (*hetu*) to the specific subject of inference, rather than directly establishing a universal relationship between the reason and the property to be proven (*hetu* and *sādhya*).

Hayes interprets this condition by stating that the inferential sign must be a property of the subject of inference. Legitimate evidence as described in Dignāga's formula clearly indicates that the property used as evidence must belong to the class to which the subject of the inference belongs. Presumably, the intent here is that the property used as evidence must belong to every member of the class to which the subject belongs [6,122].

We can see that the epistemology of the first characteristic is quite clear: inference must begin from an ascertained fact. One cannot use a property whose existence in the *pakṣa* is unknown as a basis for inferring another property. If we designate P as the *pakṣa* and H as the *hetu*, then the first characteristic can be simply expressed as: H (P), meaning: H is present in P.

Matilal also explains that in Dignāga's inferential structure, certainty first requires that the sign be ascertained in the cases under consideration, that is, the specific case being investigated.

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Only then can information from other cases be introduced to examine the relationship between the sign and the inferable property [7, 71].

Therefore, the first characteristic, *pakṣadharmatā*, ensures the empirical starting point of the inference. But this condition alone is not enough. A mountain can possess countless properties: having trees, having rocks, having birds, being green, having smoke... Not all of these properties can serve as a reason to prove fire. Therefore, after establishing the *hetu* in the *pakṣa*, Dignāga must go on to ask: how is that reason (*hetu*) related to the *sādhya* in other instances? This is precisely the function of the second and third characteristics.

3.2. The Second Characteristic: *Sapakṣasattva*

The second characteristic is *sapakṣasattva* (from the ancient Sanskrit सपक्षसत्त्व) , often expressed as two combined words: *sapakṣe sattvam*), which means the presence of the reason in similar instances (*sapakṣa*). In Sino-Buddhist Logic (Hetuvidyā), this principle is usually termed "the property of being definitely present in similar instances" (同品定有性 - *đồng phẩm định hữu tính*). This means that the reason (*hetu*) must be present in cases/examples that are of the same class as the conclusion (*sapakṣa* - similar instances, i.e., those that also possess property B, where B is impermanence).

The most crucial point to clarify is that *sapakṣa* is not defined primarily by the reason (*hetu*), but by the predicate to be proven (*sādhya*). Those cases in which the property to be proven (*sādhya-dharma*) is already established constitute the domain of *sapakṣa*; only then do we examine whether the *hetu* is present within that domain. A similar instance (*sapakṣa*) is a case of similarity with respect to the property to be proven (*sādhyadharma*). Thus, in the smoke–fire example, a kitchen possessing fire can serve as a *sapakṣa*; after determining that it belongs to the domain of fire-possessing cases, we examine whether smoke is present there.

The second characteristic can be understood more precisely in terms of quantification: the inferential sign must be known to be present in at least one instance other than the subject (*pakṣa*) where the property to be proven (*sādhya*) exists. We should note that if we were to demand that the reason (*hetu*) be present in *all* instances possessing the property to be proven (*sādhya*), the condition would be overly rigid. For example: *Sound is impermanent, because it is produced.*

"Being produced" is not present in all impermanent things; there can still be impermanent things that are not produced in the same sense (e.g., lightning). Therefore, the second characteristic does not require the scope of the reason (*hetu*) to be completely coextensive with the scope of the property to be proven (*sādhya*). What is required is an appropriate presence of the reason (*hetu*) in similar instances.

Hattori articulates the second characteristic by stating that the *hetu* "must exist in all or some homogeneous instances for the subject" (*sapakṣe sattvam*) [5, 4]. The function of *sapakṣasattva* is to provide the concordant/positive relation (*anvaya*) between the reason (sign - *hetu*) and the property to be proven. In the example: *The kitchen has fire → smoke is present there,* the observation of such cases shows that "smoke" is not a property completely unrelated to "fire." However, this concordant co-presence is still insufficient to guarantee the inference, because the decisive question can still be asked: *Are there any cases where smoke is present, but fire is absent?*

That question leads directly to the third characteristic.

3.3. The Third Characteristic: *Vipakṣāsattva*

The third characteristic is *vipakṣāsattva*, expressed in two words as *vipakṣe 'sattvam*, meaning the absence of the reason (ground, sign - *hetu*) in dissimilar instances (*vipakṣa*). In Sino-Buddhist Logic, this is termed "the property of being universally absent in dissimilar instances" (異品遍無性 - *dị phẩm biến vô tính*). This means that the reason (*hetu*) must be completely absent in all cases/examples contrary to the conclusion (*vipakṣa* - dissimilar instances, i.e., those that are not - B, where B is impermanence).

If *sapakṣa* is defined by the presence of the property to be proven (*sādhya*), then *vipakṣa* is defined by the absence of the *sādhya*. Therefore, one must avoid the simplistic understanding that *vipakṣa* is merely "a thing of a different class" from the subject (*pakṣa*). In terms of logical function, the decisive definition is: vipakṣa = instances lacking the property to be proven **(*sādhya*)**. After defining this domain, we check whether the *hetu* occurs there or not.

In the example *"The mountain has fire because it has smoke," vipakṣa* consists of cases determined to lack fire. The third characteristic requires that wherever fire is absent, smoke must not be present in the sense of serving as an inferential sign. If a single instance were found where smoke is present without fire, "smoke" would no longer suffice to guarantee "fire," and the *hetu* would become fallacious/inconclusive with respect to the *sādhya*.

This is why the third characteristic carries a stronger universal force than the second. Hayes clearly distinguishes the quantificational scopes of the second and third characteristics: while the second characteristic only requires the inferential sign to be established in at least one instance outside the *pakṣa* where the *sādhya* exists, the third characteristic must be understood in a universal sense - that is, the *hetu* must not exist in *any* instance where the *sādhya* is absent. According to Hayes, if the third characteristic were understood merely in a particular sense, clearly fallacious arguments could still satisfy this condition [6, 120-121].

When viewed as a whole, the three characteristics constitute an interconnected verification mechanism. The *pakṣadharmatā* characteristic establishes the presence of the sign in the subject under consideration. The *sapakṣasattva* characteristic establishes the support for the sign within the domain where the *sādhya* exists. And the *vipakṣāsattva* characteristic excludes the sign from the entire domain where the *sādhya* is absent.

- If we only have the first characteristic, we merely know that an attribute exists in the *pakṣa*, but not whether it has any relation to the *sādhya*.
- If we add the second characteristic, we have evidence of co-presence, but we still have not eliminated counterexamples.
- Only when the third characteristic is fulfilled is the possibility of the *hetu* being present while the *sādhya* is absent completely ruled out.

Therefore, the philosophical value of *trairūpya* does not lie merely in the number "three." The three characteristics establish three levels of verification for a sign: identification at the subject,

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verification within the scope of similar instances, and exclusion from the domain of dissimilar instances. It is through this structure that Dignāga transformed the question *"Does a reason seem plausible?"* into the much stricter question: *"Is the distribution of the hetu sufficient for it to become a reliable sign of the sādhya?"*

From here, the natural next development was the Wheel of Reasons (*Hetucakra*), in which Dignāga combined the possibilities of presence and absence of the *hetu* in *sapakṣa* and *vipakṣa* into nine cases, thereby distinguishing valid reasons from inconclusive and contradictory ones.

4. Conclusion

The doctrine of the Three Characteristics of the Reason (*trairūpya*) represents one of the major achievements in the development of Indian Buddhist logic. However, historical examination reveals that this doctrine should not be understood as an absolute creation without precedent by Dignāga. Scholars have pointed out that the basic conditions for a valid reason were already known to Vasubandhu and even Asaṅga, with corresponding elements existing in the theories of the Nyāya -Vaiśeṣika school.

We can clearly see that Dignāga's distinctive contribution lies in systematizing and restructuring those pre-existing conditions into a rigorous theory of the inferential sign. Within that structure:

- *Pakṣadharmatā* ensures that the *hetu* is actually established in the subject under consideration;
- *Sapakṣasattva* situates the *hetu* in relation to instances where the *sādhya* exists;
- *Vipakṣāsattva* excludes the presence of the *hetu* in instances where the *sādhya* is absent.

The three conditions are thus not three isolated rules, but form an interconnected verification mechanism through which an ordinary attribute can be determined to possess - or lack - the status of a valid inferential sign. Dignāga's development of the Nine-Fold Wheel of Reasons (*Hetucakra*) from this foundation further demonstrates that *trairūpya* functions as a systematic classification between valid reasons (*saddhetu*) and fallacious reasons (*hetvābhāsa*).

From the perspective of the history of thought, the value of the *trairūpya* theory lies in marking a crucial transition from evaluating reasons in debate to evaluating signs as the foundation of inferential knowledge. Nevertheless, Dignāga's theory still left behind a deeper question: *What guarantees that the relation between hetu and sādhya is necessary, rather than merely an observed distribution free of counterexamples?*

Although this question lies beyond the scope of the present paper, it paved the way for Dharmakīrti to develop his theory of essential connection (*svabhāvapratibandha*) and explain inferential relations through identity (*tādātmya*) and causal origination (*tadutpatti*). Thus, Dignāga's *trairūpya* stands both as a pinnacle of Buddhist logical reform prior to Dharmakīrti and as the launching pad for the next phase of development in the Pramāṇa tradition.

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