

THE METAPHYSICS OF PLURALISTIC MANIFESTATIONS IN JAMES AND EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM

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*The universe is, as it were, an awaking Mind.*¹

C. S. Peirce

I. INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the approach, it is impossible to discuss the full range of James and East Asian Buddhism in a brief article. Accordingly, I call the reader's attention more to striking similarities between James' metaphysics of experience and East Asian Buddhism—especially represented by Zen Buddhism—rather than overstating obvious and predictable disparities. It should be noted that there is no uniformity across East Asian Buddhism, including Zen, in terms of doctrine or pedagogy. Zen itself is historically, geographically, and culturally diverse, besides the fact that it is one among many forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in East Asia.

This paper frames itself thematically by first focusing on the fluidity of experience as understood by James and Zen. I proceed to consider the subtle balance between the philosophy of a pluralistic universe—where 'universe' is considered in singular form—and a more straightforward, ontological pluralism. From James' side, my take is that the ordinary pluralism/monism dichotomy does not work. From the East Asian Buddhist side, I consider the 13th century Japanese Zen master Dōgen [道元1200-1253], whose works have been translated extensively into English. Following Xuansha Shibeī [玄沙師備 835-908] from Tang Dynasty [唐朝] in China, Dōgen argues that the universe is neither one nor many, hence supporting a view comparable to that of James.

The big picture following from this comparative approach is that phenomenal manifestations are *pluralistic* for both James and Dōgen, which does not necessarily imply ontological pluralism. I endeavor to illuminate the peculiar kind of semantics that underlies James' pluralistic universe and Dōgen's dynamic yet subtle worldview, which may offer one of the most interesting topics when comparing James and East Asian Buddhism. If the reader is familiar with Zen through the works of D. T. Suzuki, who was editorial assistant to Paul Carus (1852-1919) during James' most remarkable period of philosophical development,² we will focus on Sōtō [曹洞] Zen founded by Dōgen, not Rinzai [臨濟] Zen,³ which may provide us with a fresh perspective.

II. FLOWING MOUNTAINS

Let us start with a famous *koan*, a Zen conundrum, that drives us to the heart of Zen, namely the *fluidity of life*, which is nearly where Zen begins and ends. A monk asks the Master, "Does a dog have Buddha nature [仏性]?" The Master replies, "Yes, it does." Another monk asks the Master the same

question. This time the Master replies, “No, it does not.” This *koan*, which records a dialogue between two monks and Master Zhaozhou [趙州 778-897] in the Chan [禪] tradition, where Chan is the original Chinese form of Zen Buddhism, is known as *Zhaozhou Gouzi* [趙州狗子],⁴ which has been used widely in Zen practice, especially in the Rinzai tradition. As one may observe, Master Zhaozhou gives opposite answers to the same question, “Does a dog have Buddha nature?”

Although hundreds of lines can be spent on this *koan* alone—and ideally we must meditate on its meaning in cross-legged posture—there is at least one point shared across virtually all interpretations: The Master should not offer a straightforward answer to the learner because the answer must ultimately issue forth from the learner’s inner flow of life itself, or what would be for James the immediate stream of pure experience. In other words, Zen verbalism deflects the ordinary structure and function of language to fluidize life of the learner from within. The question and answer are *actional verbs, gerunds, or adverbs* constitutive of the flow of life rather than “adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions,”⁵ to borrow a familiar expression from James.

Koans operate in dynamic, concrete, fully embodied contexts. The dialogues, stories, and statements are not meant to suggest that verbal contradictions are particularly entertaining,⁶ nor do they intend to say that depending on perspective, a question may simply receive different answers. This matter is worth addressing since Zen is often thought of as praising illogicality; “something illogical, something irrational, something that does not yield itself to an intellectual treatment is to be the special feature of Zen,”⁷ writes D. T. Suzuki, for example. However, Dōgen, founder of Sōtō Zen, suggests the opposite: “How sad that they [Zen monks] do not know about the phrases of logical thought, or penetrating logical thought in the phrases and stories! [...]. Their idea about illogical words is only a distorted view.”⁸ These words appear in Dōgen’s magnum opus *Shōbōgenzō* [正法眼藏], more specifically in a fascicle titled “Mountains and Waters Sutra [Sansuikyō 山水經],” which is not only one of Dōgen’s most aesthetic compositions, rich of poetic imagery, but also noticed by scholars for Dōgen’s strong emphasis on the intelligibility of Zen discourses, including *koans*. Hence, Dōgen cites the following saying from Furong Daokai [芙蓉道楷], a restorer and promoter of Sōtō [or Caodong] Zen in the Song Dynasty [宋朝] in China: “The green mountains are always walking; a stone woman gives birth to a child at night.”⁹ Quick as a flash, Dōgen then says to his assembly, “You should examine in detail this quality of the mountains’ walking.”¹⁰

The passage is not too difficult to understand when one listens to Dōgen further. “Mountains’ walking is just like human walking,” he says, continuing, “Accordingly, do not doubt mountains’ walking even though it does not look the same as human walking.”¹¹ If we say that everything in the universe comes and goes, seemingly unchanging mountains no doubt become and perish, though their change is slow on the human timescale. In Dōgen’s view, objects are *events*, with their own course of history, as active and transient as human experience. Viewed from this angle, we may say with John Dewey that “objects are events *with* meanings,”¹² but James also expresses it well when he urges that *activity* is nearly synonymous with *life*: “Bare activity [...] means the bare fact of event or change. [...] . The sense of activity is thus in the broadest and vaguest way synonymous with the sense of ‘life.’”¹³ For Dōgen, the *presencing* of mountains and waters is nothing but the unfolding of life itself.

This leads to the second half of Furong Daokai’s saying: “a stone woman gives birth to a child at night.” Dōgen rephrases “child [ko 兒]” as “*sanji* [山兒]” several paragraphs later in the same fascicle, which literally means

‘mountain-child.’ As long as mountains are dynamic processes here and now, followed by future processes, the child of the mountains—or ‘mountain-child’ in Dōgen’s wording—continues the presencing (and re-presencing) of the mountains into the future. Dōgen writes, “Hence the accumulated virtue of mountains in full dynamic manifestation constitutes its form and name [*gyōmyō* 形名], or its life-stream [*meimyaku* 命脈]. There is walking, there is flowing, and there is a moment when a mountain gives birth to a mountain-child.”¹⁴ Since the phrase ‘stone woman [*sekijo* 石女]’ often refers to sterile or barren women, the meaning of the passage is clear. Lifeless, barren mountains are ongoing life processes in Dōgen’s view.

It is easy to associate this with James’ admiration of the metaphysics of Gustav Fechner (1801-1887), a worldview filled with Earth-Mind and Earth-Consciousness. “Fechner’s imagination,” James writes, “tries to make our picture of the whole earth’s life more concrete. [...]. Think of her beauty—a shining ball, sky-blue and sun-lit over one half, the other bathed in starry night, reflecting the heavens from all her waters, myriads of lights and shadows in the folds of her mountains and windings of her valleys [...].”¹⁵ Dōgen strikes a sympathetic chord in contemplating the living world from a similar perspective: “Mountains and waters have been active since before the Empty Eon, such that they are activities alive at this very moment.”¹⁶

III. MANY OR ONE—IS THIS A GOOD PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION?

“I shall ask,” James however writes, “whether the abstractly monistic turn which Fechner’s speculations took was necessitated by logic.”¹⁷ The point is interesting since there are monistic and pluralistic sides to Dōgen’s metaphysics as well. The monistic side is simple. Plainly put, we are part of a larger cosmic life, and replacing substance ontology with the Buddhist functionalist view of things, we may say that the *working* that gives rise to mountains and waters, *not* the ‘ontological stuff,’ is not a divisible activity. For Dōgen, the world always works as an undivided whole.¹⁸ Particular mountains come and go, but the cosmic working, the ongoing actualization, the *presencing* [*genjō* 現成] of the world in its entirety here and now, does not.

As for the pluralistic side, a quick comparison of Dōgen’s view with Leibniz’s monadology facilitates understanding.¹⁹ We may remind ourselves that for Leibniz, “there is a world of creatures, of living beings, of animals, of entelechies, of souls in the least part of matter,” and that “each portion of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish.” Leibniz continues, “But each branch of a plant, each limb of an animal, each drop of its humors, is still another such garden or pond,” such that worlds upon worlds of life unfold as we proceed into the details of the material world. A parallel, ‘nested-world’ philosophy appears in Dōgen’s writings, too. He states:

It is not just that there is water in the world; there are worlds in the realms of water. There are also worlds of sentient beings in clouds, there are worlds of sentient beings in wind, there are worlds of sentient beings in fire, there are worlds of sentient beings in earth, there are worlds of sentient beings in phenomena, there are worlds of sentient beings in a single blade of grass, there are worlds of sentient beings in a single stick.²⁰

As we may observe, Leibniz and Dōgen are philosophical allies here, not only in focusing on the intertwined structures of pluralistic worlds, but also in rejecting the common bifurcation of worlds into those of dead matter and those of living organisms. There are, however, crucial respects in which Dōgen differs from Leibniz. For the Buddhist, finite beings are not created by ‘God,’ nor are there ‘possible worlds’ out of which God selects the best. Further, the Buddhist concept of emptiness marks a fundamental difference from *substance ontology*, including that of Leibniz, such that Dōgen’s view of inter-nested worlds must be distinguished from the more straightforward ontological pluralism of the monadology. In this regard, James stands nearer to Dōgen. As long as *change* is essential to pure experience, as it is for James, fluid phenomenism must take over traditional metaphysics of simple, unchanging substances. This makes James’ radical empiricism interpretable within a broadly Buddhist framework.²¹

Regarding ontological pluralism, we may also recall James’ recommendation that we “equally abjure absolute monism and absolute pluralism.”²² James is, of course, a pluralist in many important ways, but depending on whether we stress ‘a pluralistic universe’ or else “*universes*, each with its own grade of unity”²³—hence depending on whether we stress a *world* of pure experiences as a whole or a world of *pure experiences* in James—things may look slightly different. We could, for example, ask: In talking about a “comminuted *Identitätsphilosophie*,”²⁴ what is it that is supposed to be ‘comminuted’ in James’ view? A point to remember is that despite the “so many little absolutes”²⁵ James brought forward in his *radical empiricism*, there is always a delicate balance between the ‘many’ and the ‘one’ in his thought.

A similar question arises for Dōgen and his fellow thinkers in East Asian Buddhism. Buddhists in this tradition agree that each detail of the world is nothing but a concrete flux of experience, where conscious agency is not necessarily assumed. In particular, Dōgen regards everything—mountains, oceans, and even pine trees—as *time*.²⁶ Reflecting such a dynamic worldview, Dōgen writes, “Myriad phenomena, numberless grasses exist over the entire earth, while each of the myriad phenomena, each of the myriad grasses exists as entire earth. [...] At every moment of time within a multiplicity of times, the entire world is present, the entire being is present.”²⁷

But is Dōgen saying, *ontologically* speaking, that there are many universes, or is he suggesting one universe that allows for such pluralistic manifestations? Dōgen considers this question through the famous words of Xuansha Shibe, a monk from Tang Dynasty in China remembered for the saying, ‘The entire universe is one bright jewel in all ten directions.’²⁸ Dōgen explores this dictum in the following passage:

A body is present, the mind is present, but they are present only as the one bright jewel. Not as trees and grasses here and there, not as mountains and rivers under heaven and earth, but only as the one bright jewel are they present.²⁹

‘The entire universe is one bright jewel in all ten directions’—we do not say two, or three. The whole body is one true Dharma eye, the whole body is the true body, the whole body is one phrase, the whole body is radiant light, the whole body is the whole heart-mind.³⁰

Drawing a philosophical point from Xuansha Shibe, Dōgen writes:

The important teaching of the above is that the entire universe in all ten directions is not vast or large, not minute or

small; it is neither square nor round; it is not the mean, not straight, not the lively vigor of a leaping fish, neither unobstructed nor distinct all the way round.³¹

Aside from the vivid image and animated rhetoric, what Dōgen says here is simple. First, the universe is ‘one’ in some sense—we do not say two or three—though the world is nothing other than the multifold phenomenal manifestations themselves. Second, the ultimate nature of things—and here ‘things’ are not substances but events—cannot be predicated of size, shape, balance, concepts, animistic notions, conventional norms, etc. There is no ‘ontological stuff’ lurking behind phenomena. Saying this, Dōgen is certainly not trying to make a highly original point, for it belongs to common understanding of Zen (or Chan) that Buddha nature does not reside in things like an ‘essence.’ Buddha nature—and the self and world—cannot be objectified, measured, or predicated, let alone counted. The question *Many or One?* is, therefore, a misguided question for the Buddhist.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although different in perspective, this may remind us of James’ 1906 pragmatism lectures in which he wrote: “Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending.”³² To such interminable metaphysical questions, James and East Asian Buddhists may reply similarly that the questions are not formulated properly. However, they are likely to part ways in making the next move. James will propose that it is *pragmatism* that brings about reconciliation if a conflict between opposing views is to be settled, but without downplaying weak views as untenable. A traditional Buddhist can be more stringent and refute views that are judged delusive. A Rinzai Zen master might exclaim *kwatts* [喝]! and strike questioners with a stick. Dōgen is more likely to say that we only need to sit down and meditate, without bothering ourselves with such questions.

Throughout my discussion, I have focused on two themes. First, the fluidity of experience construed broadly, which I discussed through Dōgen’s interpretation of Furong Daokai’s phrase ‘the green mountains are always walking.’ Second, I turned to the question of ‘many or one.’ We have just seen Xuansha Shibe’s words, ‘The entire universe is one bright jewel in all ten directions,’ interpreted from Dōgen’s viewpoint and through his nested-world semantics. On the other hand, James thinks, correctly in my opinion, that from a worldview such as that of Gustav Fechner, *monism* does not necessarily follow. But I also consider that *ontological pluralism*, despite James’ earlier gestures toward it in his *radical empiricism*, does not need to follow from the kind of philosophy James reached in his later writings, including *A Pluralistic Universe*. The insight I wish to draw from this is that the universe is eventually neither one nor many for James and the East Asian Buddhists, which suggests a predication problem rather than a metaphysical problem in formulating the question.

Due to limitation of space, we cannot discuss such topics as *Tiantai* [天台] and *Huayan* [華嚴] Buddhism in this paper, from which Zen or Chan Buddhism is not really separable. Besides, Zen in Japan and Chan in China have their own internal developments that involve considerable complexity for the historian. A similar challenge is found in Dōgen’s philosophical development, which recent scholarship has started to notice. Yet focus on Zen is nearly inevitable when one compares William James’ philosophy and Buddhism. As David Scott points out,³³ Mahāyāna Buddhism became prominent in America “partly through the greater degree of American contact

with Japan” and “subsequent Chinese and Japanese immigration to America,” which stands in contrast to Victorian Britain where Buddhism was associated more with Theravāda Buddhism. To discuss more details lies beyond the scope of this paper, but it is useful to note that classical American philosophy developed at a time when the West was awakening to Buddhism from East Asia.³⁴

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NOTES

¹ Charles S. Peirce, *The New Elements of Mathematics*, ed. by Carolyn Eisele, Mouton Publishers, 1976, Vol. 4, p. xxiv.

² D. T. Suzuki worked for Open Court from 1897 to 1909, after which he returned to Japan. Paul Carus was Suzuki’s supervisor.

³ Including Suzuki, most modern Japanese philosophers—especially those belonging to the ‘Kyoto school’—interpret Zen from the Rinzaï perspective, though they often relate themselves to Dōgen in special ways.

⁴ Based on *Congronlu* [從容錄], case 18. The *koan* is sometimes referred to as *Zhaozhou Wuzi* [趙州無字] and *Gouzi Foxing* [狗子仏性].

⁵ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Introduction by E. K. Suckiel and Preface by R. B. Perry, University of Nebraska Press, 1996, p. 94.

⁶ For example, there are versions of *Zhaozhou Gouzi* in which only one of the two replies—‘No, a dog does *not* have Buddha nature’ in particular—appears, demonstrating that a flat contradiction was not the general intent behind this *koan*.

⁷ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, Three Leaves Press, 2006, p. 180. Suzuki makes similar remarks in other writings as well.

⁸ Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. by Kazuaki Tanashi, North Point Press 1995, p. 101. The original text allows for slightly different readings, but we follow the English translation (for the original text in classical Japanese, see *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū* [道元禪師全集], Shunjūsha [春秋社], 1991, Vol. 1, p. 320).

⁹ Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 97. The original phrase of Furong Daokai 青山常運歩, 石女夜生児 is found in *Jiatāi Pudenglu* [嘉泰普燈錄], chapter 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, pp. 97-98.

¹² John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Dover Publications, 1958, p. 318.

¹³ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 161.

¹⁴ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 318; my translation.

¹⁵ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909, p. 162.

¹⁶ Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 97.

¹⁷ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 154.

¹⁸ This is the idea of *zenki* [全機], also a title of another fascicle in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*.

¹⁹ See sections 66-68 of the *Monadology*. For convenience, I use the following English translation: G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, ed. and tr. by Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991.

²⁰ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 327; my translation.

²¹ I consider this as part of James' foresight, if not something stated explicitly in his writings.

²² James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, Introduction by A. J. Ayer, Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 76.

²³ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 45 [emphasis added].

²⁴ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 135 [original emphasis].

²⁵ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 134.

²⁶ Discussed in Dōgen's famous fascicle "Being-Time [*Uji* 有時]" (see *Moon in a Dewdrop*, p. 81 and p. 78).

²⁷ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 241; my translation from the fascicle "Being-Time."

²⁸ 尽十方世界是一顆明珠. The original phrase derives from *Jingde Chuandenglu* [景德伝燈錄], chapter 18.

²⁹ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 78; my translation from the fascicle "One Bright Jewel [*Ikkamyōju* 一顆明珠]."

³⁰ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 80; my translation from "One Bright Jewel."

³¹ Dōgen, *Dōgen-zenji Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 78; my translation from "One Bright Jewel."

³² James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, p. 28.

³³ David Scott, "William James and Buddhism: American Pragmatism and the Orient," *Religion*, Vol. 30: 4 (2000), p. 333.

³⁴ I am grateful to Richard Hayes for providing me with insightful feedback on an earlier version of this paper. I thank John Holder, Joseph John, Lee McBride, and the audience at the American Philosophical Association, Central Division meeting, for comments that helped me clarify a few points that called for greater attention.