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LINJI AND WILLIAM JAMES
ON MORTALITY

Two Visions of Pragmatism

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Buddhist teachings have often been interpreted as pragmatic, and there seems to be a *prima facie* similarity between certain strands of Buddhism and American pragmatism in that both seek to address the world as it is experienced and both advocate a nonfoundationalist philosophy geared toward results. Such similarities make potential cross-cultural fertilization a promising and exciting philosophical endeavor. However, different traditions can exhibit drastically different sensitivities toward certain experiences, and one advantage of comparative study is to help highlight and bring into sharper focus some taken-for-granted premises within a system, challenge the traditions involved to rethink their project, and enrich the parties involved by expanding their horizons and sensitivities.

A case in point is the topic of mortality. Death is a subject that is front and center in almost all schools of Buddhism as it occupies an important place in the Buddhist diagnosis of the nature of existence as suffering. In contrast, the subject does not seem to have garnered a similar kind of attention within the classical pragmatist tradition. Maybe it is because death constitutes the ultimate limit of experience, hence rendering it an impossible target for an experience-based philosophical inquiry. Or, perhaps in American culture there is simply a division of labor such that this subject is left to various religious traditions, most of which transform the problem

of death into the promise of a life to come, which some might see as subverting the very nature of the question of mortality.

However, William James stands out among his fellow pragmatists in that he explicitly takes up the issue of death and struggles with it in his works, especially later in his life. His writings offer a unique and precious opportunity to examine a pragmatist perspective on mortality and immortality and to engage the Buddhist on this subject. Such a comparative endeavor promises to be revealing in terms of exposing the fundamental difference between these two traditions, which share a pragmatic inclination on many other issues; this is indeed what I hope to accomplish in this essay. On the Buddhist side, I will use the teachings of the Chan (Zen) Buddhist Linji 臨濟, who lived in ninth-century China and is best known for using mind-boggling pedagogical devices known as *gong'an* (J. *Kōan*) 公案 to instruct his disciples. I will look into what issues motivate James and Linji in their confrontations with mortality, how those issues are formulated, and why they are important to them respectively and comparatively. In covering the what, how, and why through contextualization and recontextualization in my study of James and Linji, I hope that this comparative context can shed new light on both thinkers in regard to their responses to human mortality and desire for immortality, as well as to the traditions they represent.

I will make the case that the motivating drive for James in his struggle with mortality and immortality is his hope to accommodate a whole host of human experiences, as well as the various modes of experience, while seeking to promote people's spiritual and ethical well-being; on the contrary, Linji questions the variety of modes of experience in implicating the problematic role of a reifying mind in those experiences and confronts ignorance and attachment in his teachings with the hope of bringing our confused, chaotic, and ignorant mind into a state of clarity, peace, and enlightenment. Furthermore, James's approach to the problem of mortality and immortality is fundamentally metaphysical, whereas Linji's is primarily metapragmatic. Let us start with James's treatment of the subject in his lecture "Human Immortality," delivered as part of the Ingersoll lecture series at Harvard in 1898.¹

WILLIAM JAMES ON MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY

James begins his lecture "Human Immortality" with the acknowledgment that "[i]mmortality is one of the great spiritual needs of man" (2). In a number of respects, this acknowledgment sets the tone for his subsequent deliberations; that is, people have a spiritual need for immortality, even though he confesses that "my own personal feeling about immortality has never been of the keenest order, and that, among the problems that give my mind

solicitude, this one does not take the very foremost place” (2). In other words, his motivation in considering this subject is not primarily personal, at least not at this point of his life. Rather, the concern for others’ spiritual and ethical wellbeing pervades his deliberations on immortality.

In the lecture, James defends the possibility of human immortality by countering two objections: the dependence of our spiritual life on the brain as defined by modern science and the traditional selectiveness of the immortality of the aristocratic few. To counter the first objection, James works with the scientific hypothesis “*Thought is a function of the brain*” (10, James’s italics) and addresses whether such a hypothesis necessarily leads to the denial of the possibility of human immortality. He contends that even if such a hypothesis is true, it does not necessarily mean that the brain *produces* thought (13). Instead, he makes the case for a possible transmission model of dependence between our spiritual life and the brain: “My thesis now is this: that, when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; *we are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function*. And this the ordinary psychophysicist leaves out of his account” (15, James’s italics). He goes into some detail in laying out scenarios in which the transmission model of the brain is imaginable and indeed possible without sacrificing either common sense or logic. Indeed, it is very much in line with certain idealist philosophies. For James, the transmission model has several advantages over the productive model of the brain, as far as our spiritual life is concerned.

On the production-theory one does not see from what sensations such odd bits of knowledge are produced. On the transmission-theory, they don’t have to be “produced,”—they exist ready-made in the transcendental world, and all that is needed is an abnormal lowering of the brain-threshold to let them through. In cases of conversion, in providential leadings, sudden mental healings, etc., it seems to the subjects themselves of the experience as if a power from without, quite different from the ordinary action of the senses or of the sense-led mind, came into their life, as if the latter suddenly opened into that greater life in which it has its source. The word “influx,” used in Swedenborgian circles, well describes this impression of new insight, or new willingness, sweeping over us like a tide. All such experiences, quite paradoxical and meaningless on the production-theory, fall very naturally into place on the other theory. We need only suppose the continuity of our consciousness with a mother sea, to allow for exceptional waves occasionally pouring over the dam. Of course the causes of these odd lowerings of the brain’s threshold still remain a mystery on any terms. (26–27)

According to James, the transmission-theory of the brain, and—more importantly—its implication of the possible existence of a transcendental spiritual world with which our consciousness is continuous, has more explanatory potential in accounting for certain “mystical” experiences that various religious traditions describe. James was certainly knowledgeable of the accounts of those experiences at that point, demonstrated in his classic titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which was published four years after this lecture on human immortality.

However, despite the advantages of the transmission model of the brain over the productive model, James is keenly aware of the problems that are generated in conceptualizing the brain this way:

[I]n what positive way does this theory help us to realize our immortality in imagination? What we all wish to keep is just these individual restrictions, these selfsame tendencies and peculiarities that define us to ourselves and others, and constitute our identity, so called. Our finitenesses and limitations seem to be our personal essence; and when the finiting organ drops away, and our several spirits revert to their original source and resume their unrestricted condition, will they then be anything like those sweet streams of feeling which we know, and which even now our brains are sifting out from the great reservoir for our enjoyment here below? . . . But into these higher and more transcendental matters I refuse to enter upon this occasion. (29–30)

In other words, if human immortality lies in such a transcendental spiritual world, immortality would necessarily mean that we forsake the finitude and individuality that are essential to our identity. In James’s account, the tension between immortality and identity presents the most fundamental challenge as we imagine the possibility of human immortality.

His second point “is relative to the incredible and intolerable number of beings which, with our modern imagination, we must believe to be immortal, if immortality be true” (31). He objects to what he calls an aristocratic view of immortality that grants immortality only to a select few, an elite group (32). This is the genuinely democratic James in full display, advocating the replacement of the aristocratic view of immortality with the democratic one. Indeed, in James’s immortal world, there will be non-Christian Chinese! “For my own part, then, so far as logic goes, I am willing that every leaf that ever grew in this world’s forests and rustled in the breeze should become immortal” (43–44). This is James, the poet, speaking.

The first problem James has to counter is essentially a scientific one, whose challenge to traditional religious faith was profoundly felt during

James's time and reflected in his own life. James was struggling with two conflicting legacies in the American (and Western) intellectual tradition at the turn of the twentieth century; namely, the conflict between science and enlightenment on the one hand and religion and spirituality on the other—or, more specifically, between Darwin's evolutionism and the Puritan (or Calvinist) faith. His pragmatism is a way to reconcile, if not resolve, such a conflict. For him, a religious faith, even in the absence of evidence (but not in the presence of counterevidence), can be justified and considered rational if it promotes ethical wellbeing for people who subscribe to it. This is his notion of the *will to believe*, which, as we shall see, might be understood more appropriately as the right or warrant to believe. What James essentially does here is carve out a space in the face of the overwhelming scientific dominance over nearly all aspects of modern life for at least the possibility of faith in a nonprovable but ethically and spiritually efficacious and meaningful invisible world. His rejection of the productive model of the brain as the only viable one can be seen as an attempt to maintain at least the possibility of faith in an invisible spiritual world. Gerald Myers's comment on the *Varieties* is relevant here: "His declaration . . . that his approach was pragmatic, his focus on consequences, succeeded only in putting aside the question of how science might outdo philosophy in clarifying the sources of religious feelings."² As James's other writings would reveal, such an unseen world is conceived primarily as a moral world from which our values originate.

The second issue James deals with in "Human Immortality" clearly reflects the ethical dimension of his pragmatism. It is a defense of democratic value being extended to the spiritual realm of immortality. However, his presentation here does not map out the practical effects the belief in human immortality has on the way believers lead their lives. For this, we need to turn to some other reflections scattered throughout his writings, most notably in *Varieties*, *Pragmatism*, *A Pluralistic Universe*, and *The Will to Believe*.

As a pragmatist, James is primarily concerned with the ethical consequences of philosophical deliberations, and this is fully displayed in his treatment of the problems of mortality and immortality; his primary concern in regard to this subject is the practical impact any view of mortality and immortality has upon the way life is lived. Accordingly, James advocates choosing the most ethically desirable and satisfying views, as a conscientious pragmatist would and must do. Wayne Proudfoot's observation is relevant here, even though he is not explicitly commenting on James's treatment of immortality: "The most general characterization of the religious life, James writes, is 'the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.'"³ Sami Pihlström echoes this observation:

Respect for human life and its moral demands required, in his view, a recognition of the possibility of immortality. This fundamentally *ethical* position took, in James's writings, a *metaphysical* shape: we should, according to James, adopt such a conception of reality that immortality will turn out to be possible for us, because faith in immortality may be required for life to maintain its meaningfulness in an ethical sense of the term.⁴

Indeed, it is important to see how ethical reasoning is central to James's approach to human immortality. To this extent, we may appreciate Myers's reflection that it is moral arguments both for and against religious faith that have motivated James's pragmatic pursuit:

It is almost certain that James was tempted by the moral arguments for religious skepticism, that an inner voice suggested to him that one is obligated to withhold belief when there is no evidence. But pulling from the other side was an intense need to believe, and to deny that need by being skeptical was to run an enormous psychological risk. James described the risk as a moral one as well, intimating that he felt a duty to believe because one has a moral obligation to preserve one's own inner integrity.⁵

Put simply, on the one hand, to be intellectually honest in philosophical deliberation is an ethical issue that requires evidence to be presented in rational thinking; on the other, the need to believe even in the absence of evidence is also a moral issue in terms of its effects on preserving one's own inner integrity as well as serving people's spiritual need. James's way of resolving this moral dilemma is to resort to the will or the right to believe, which allows people to make a perfectly rational decision to believe when there is an urgent need for the decision in the absence of evidence for or against the belief, provided that such a belief is a genuine option that is "forced, living, and momentous."⁶ In *The Will to Believe*, James argues persuasively that in many cases the will to believe can actually help to bring about the desirable result, even though it obviously does not guarantee such a result.

This brings us to a troubling dilemma regarding the belief in immortality within James's thought: on the one hand, if immortality is a guarantee, as some absolute idealists conceive it to be, this would render human effort pointless and meaningless as James argues; on the other hand, if human mortality is an absolute obstacle that cannot be overcome by human effort in any shape or form, human effort and life would appear to be pointless and meaningless too, since all of their fruits will be lost eventually and the vital human need will be left unaddressed. As a way to accommodate

both the meaningfulness and fruitfulness of human ethical actions and the possibility of human immortality, James proposes the doctrine of meliorism, which “treats salvation as neither necessary nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”⁷ As Pihlström aptly points out, “From the Jamesian point of view, the actuality of the world, including the reality of death and/or immortality, ought to be seen as dependent on, or even constructed by, the needs, purposes and interests of personal human beings engaged in their various practices.”⁸

However, the danger in such an approach is that it does not seem able to account for the fact that “being tied to our finitude, there is a sense in which we obviously cannot be immortal without the help of a non-human reality that can only open itself to us in mystical experience.”⁹ This tension is on clear display in James’s imagined scenario:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying, “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operation work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”¹⁰

James calls upon us to participate in such an exciting adventure. However, a considerable problem with this scenario is: How can we even be sure that the world has an author?

At the heart of James’s struggle is his attempt to accommodate a whole host of human experiences as well as the way they are experienced. Indeed, according to Richard Gale, James advocates a way of life that seeks to maximize the satisfaction of human desires:

The best way to characterize James’s philosophy is that it is a passionate quest to have it all, to grab with all the gusto he can, which, for James, means achieving the maximum richness of experience. This requires having each of his many selves, which includes the scientist, moralist, and mystic, fully realize itself. Unfortunately, this grand quest is thwarted by the apparent tensions and conflicts between the perspectives of these different selves. The scientist accepts determinism and epiphenomenalism in a world that is stripped of everything that would give it human value and purpose. But for the moralist there are undetermined acts of spiritual causation in

a nonbifurcated world. The mystic, in opposition to both of these perspectives, eschews concepts completely so that it can achieve at least a partial unity with the conscious interiors of not only other persons, including supernatural ones, but nature at large. The clash between his mystical self and these other selves will turn out to be the deeper and more intractable division within James. For whereas his pragmatism could serve as a reconciler but not as a unifier between his scientific and moralistic selves by showing that they both employed concepts to gain a promethean power to control their environment, with truth being based on how successfully they did this, it is of no avail in resolving this clash. For the mystical stance requires overcoming this Promethean self.¹¹

In Gale's eyes, such an attempt to have it all is "James's boldest and most original contribution to philosophy."¹² The central tension identified by Gale in James's thought between what Gale calls James's Promethean self—including the scientist and moralist self—and his mystical self is in full play in James's approach to the problem of mortality and immortality. In many ways the subject of human mortality and immortality tests the very limits of Jamesian pragmatism, so much so that some James scholars have expressed suspicion as to whether he is still committed to pragmatism on issues such as this.¹³

What James is attempting can be seen as an admirable effort to maintain what I call "the democracy of human experiences," which respects and accommodates, to the extent possible within pragmatically acceptable ethical boundaries, what is experienced (from the everyday lived experience to mystical experiences) and how it is experienced (by average folks to religious geniuses). However, due to his earnestness in embracing the varieties of human experiences, both secular and religious, James is forced to engage the inherent tension and conflict of values between drastically different domains. According to him, the apparent incoherence of our experiences is to be tolerated, so much so that as a pragmatic reconciliation a pluralistic universe should be envisioned that can accommodate the plurality of our experiences metaphysically. However, for Buddhists like Linji, such an accommodationist strategy is problematic because it simply deflects the tensions in our experience instead of engaging them. For Linji, the very tensions among the various modes in which we experience the world need an explanation and a solution. For this, let us turn to the teachings of Linji.

LINJI ON MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY

Linji, a ninth-century Chinese Buddhist, was the last of the four major figures (Mazu 馬祖, Baizhang 百丈, Huangbo 黃檗, Linji 臨濟) in the

famous Hongzhou lineage (*Hongzhou zong* 洪州宗) of Chan Buddhism. In Heinrich Dumoulin's words, "with Lin-chi [Linji] Chinese Zen attained its unsurpassed zenith."¹⁴ Linji is well known for his teaching of the true person with no rank (*wuwei zhenren* 無位真人), intimating an enlightened person of genuine spiritual freedom who is unbound by social norms and conventions.¹⁵ The *Linji Lu* 臨濟錄 (*Recorded Sayings of Linji*)¹⁶ offers a vivid portrait of such a person. Linji is almost legendary for his blasphemous, iconoclastic teachings and unconventional pedagogies such as shouting at his disciples and hitting them with a stick, all of which have now become, rightly or not, stock images of Chan enlightenment. His teaching represents the Chan ideal of self-reliance in the embodied expression of enlightenment and spiritual freedom.

What interests us here is Linji's take on human mortality. True to his Buddhist heritage, Linji frequently invokes the impermanence of life as a way to urge disciples to seek awakening: "Fellow believers, 'There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house.' This is no place for you to linger for long! The deadly demon of impermanence will be on you in an instant, regardless of whether you're rich or poor, old or young" (24). Here, Linji appeals to the famous image of a burning house in the *Lotus Sūtra* to characterize the treacherous nature of life. Clearly mortality, or impermanence of life, is a central consideration in his teaching. But what does he propose to deal with it?

Interestingly, instead of envisioning another perfect world of immortality or relying on some extraordinary religious experiences, Linji turns to ordinary, everyday experiences for the answer. For example, we find him saying:

The way I see it, there's no call for anything special. Just act ordinary, put on your clothes, eat your rice, pass the time doing nothing. You who come from here and there, you all have a mind to do something. You search for Buddha, search for the Dharma, search for emancipation, search for a way to get out of the threefold world. Idiots, trying to get out of the threefold world! Where will you go? (53–54)

For most Buddhist practitioners, to be emancipated and enlightened means entering into a better world somewhere else that provides the comfort of happiness and eternal life. In sharp contrast with James's accommodationist inclination (as well as similar tendencies within the Buddhist tradition itself), however, Linji resolutely rejects the very idea of a salvific world somewhere else and regards such an idea as untenable and absurd.

An obvious question is in order: According to Linji, what exactly is problematic with the idea of a salvific world different from the one we dwell

in? A careful examination of the *Linji Lu* reveals that he is concerned with the reified and projected nature of the ideal of a salvific world, thus creating a tension and dissonance within our everyday experiences. This tension indicates a certain level of unease and discomfort we have in our daily life and fuels our aspiration for a better world somewhere else. In other words, our hope for another world is not, as James would have it, the ground for the possible existence of such a world. Rather, it is reflective of our state of mind here and now in this world and is responsible for the genesis of such an ideal. That is, instead of entertaining the ideal of another world as a genuine expression of human spirituality, Linji sees it as an indication or symptom of a conflicted and dissonant state of mind pervaded by distorting passions and ignorance. In this way, Linji transforms the problem of mortality and immortality into the problem of desire and attachment of our reifying mind.

In order to overcome the tension and dissonance in our lives, Linji advocates an awakened state of mind that transforms our ignorant mode of living in this world and puts the conflict and tension to rest in living a peaceful and enlightened life. Accordingly, for Linji, to be awakened is not to ascend to a salvific world somewhere else. Rather, genuine awakening leads us back to the ordinary since, for Linji, the ordinary is in fact the extraordinary, following his dharma predecessor Mazu Daoyi's 馬祖道一 famous teaching "ordinary mind is the Way" (*pingchang xin shi dao* 平常心是道). This clearly begs the question: Why is the ordinary mind so attractive? For this, let us take a look at Linji's own experience of great awakening recorded in the *Linji Lu*.

After studying for years at a temple, Linji was one day invited to raise questions to the abbot, Huangbo. However, Huangbo struck Linji several blows before the student was even able to finish speaking. Unable to understand what the problem was, Linji felt discouraged and frustrated, and he decided to leave the temple. However, he was instructed to see another teacher, Dayu 大愚, at a different temple for clues to Huangbo's blows. After Linji recounted what had happened to him, Dayu said: "[Huangbo] is such a kind old grandmother, wearing himself out on your account, and then you come here and ask whether you did something wrong or not!" (105–106)

Upon hearing this, Linji experienced a great awakening, acclaiming, "There wasn't much to Huangbo's Buddha-Dharma after all!"¹⁷ In Yanagida Seizan's interpretation: "According to the traditional explanation, although this can be seen as Linji's going beyond his teacher in his realization that Huangbo's Buddha-Dharma is not that great, 'not much' does not mean without value; rather it refers to the immediacy in the realization of Buddha-Dharma or the self-evident nature of the Dharma."¹⁸ In Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's elaboration:

It is said that the True Dharma is in no way mysterious. Contrary to what people might think, *not* to awaken is strange, and when we

do in fact awaken, we realize there's nothing mysterious involved. Our being awakened is most ordinary and matter-of-fact. Such ordinariness is the True Self. An awakened person finds it rather strange that he or she had ever been deluded, for to that person Awakening is ordinary and natural.¹⁹

This experience of the awakening to the ordinary is crucial in Linji's approach to Buddhism. That is, according to Linji, to be awakened from the ignorant state of mind is not to have some extraordinary experiences that afford glimpses into a perfect world somewhere else. Rather, it is a new perspective on the ordinary and a new way of living in this world; that itself is extraordinary. In other words, the awakened mode of living has nothing to do with what is experienced but everything to do with how it is experienced. By contrast, the unenlightened person seeks the extraordinary in order to replace the ordinary, favoring an otherworldly ideal over a this-worldly ordinariness.

Reaching Buddhist ideals, such as the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Pure Land, is often construed by many devout followers as the equivalent of achieving immortality of the soul. For them, especially those entering the monastic order in search of enlightenment who are clearly the primary audience of the *Linji Lu*, Buddhist ideals can become something absolute. Regarding such ideals as absolutes is an expression of the pernicious human tendency to reify what is considered to be desirable. Reification is indicative of a grasping mind at work, and it breeds attachment. That is, devout Buddhists become, naturally enough, intensely attached to certain Buddhist ideals. Although it is easy and convenient for them to reject attachment to materially desirable objects as impediments to spiritual well-being, it is much harder to see the problematic nature of reified moral and spiritual objects. Therefore, for those devout Buddhists, intense attachment to Buddhist ideals needs to be overcome.

The key to overcoming such an attachment to spiritual ideals is to see those ideals as ways of dealing with the conflict and tension in our lives; as such, those ideals have no ultimate value independent of the very conditions of tension and dissonance in the way our lives are led in this world. Furthermore, underlying our grasping mind is its dualistic structure of reification and attachment, reifying/reified and attaching/attached. What is central to Linji's teaching is that true awakening is to transform this very *structure* of attachment, not just to substitute one set of attached objects for another. An attachment to "spiritual" objects does not, ultimately speaking, make the attachment better, since what is changed is simply the object of attachment while the underlying structure of attachment remains firmly entrenched and intact. Much of Linji's teaching, as recorded in the *Linji Lu*, is geared toward helping his devout disciples to transform this structure of attachment.

By resorting to unusually sharp rhetoric to challenge the most cherished Buddhist ideals that some devout Buddhists have constructed in their minds, Linji hopes to assist them in overcoming the intense attachment and tries to let them see those ideals for what they really are, namely mental constructions:

Fellow believers, don't get so taken up with the robe! The robe can't move of itself—the person is the one who can put on the robe. There is a clean pure robe, there is a no-birth robe, a *bodhi* robe, a nirvana robe, a patriarch robe, a Buddha robe. Fellow believers, these sounds, names, words, phrases are all nothing but changes of robe. The sea of breath in the region below the navel stirs itself into motion, the teeth batter and mold it, and it comes out as a statement of an idea. So we know for certain that these are mere phantoms. (60)

The robe here symbolizes the Chan patriarchal lineage and represents the supreme spiritual authority of the one who wears it. However, Linji dismisses it as a mere phantom. As he sees it, even the most cherished ideals of Buddhism are nothing more than empty names in our verbal games and illusory projections in our mental games, albeit sophisticated and refined. To be awakened is to see the emptiness of all such games, which are the constructions of a reifying mind of attachment that thrives in dualistic thinking. The goal is to go beyond the trap of dualism: "If one could freely meander between the world of undifferentiated equality and the world of differentiated opposition, see no living nor death, one would transcend all such problems."²⁰

Once Linji's admonition against attachment to spiritual objects is understood, we will be in a better position to see through the manifestly blasphemous rhetoric in Linji's teachings, such as the following:

And things like the Three Vehicles and the twelve divisions of the scriptural teachings—they're all so much old toilet paper to wipe away filth. The Buddha is a phantom body, the patriarchs are nothing but old monks. You were born from women, weren't you? If you seek the Buddha, you'll be seized by the Buddha devil. If you seek the patriarchs, you'll be fettered by the patriarch devil. As long as you seek something it can only lead to suffering. Better to do nothing. (47)

Linji is rather ruthless in attacking Buddhist ideals. However, the core message he hopes to convey cannot be louder or clearer; that is, these ideals, once reified and ossified, obstruct rather than aid our spiritual awakening.

For Linji, seeking *anything* leads to suffering, even if one seeks a spiritual goal such as enlightenment. Furthermore, any *seeking* is problematic since it is precisely the seeking mind itself that reifies and ossifies those ideals. Linji's extraordinarily strong language indicates his full awareness of the level of difficulty that is involved in overcoming cherished Buddhist ideals for a devout Buddhist whose life has been oriented toward and guided by those very ideals.

What Linji proposes here is to do nothing instead. He elaborates on this in the following passage:

If there were such a thing as religious practice, it would all be just karma keeping you in the realm of birth and death. You say, "I observe all the six rules and the ten thousand practices." In my view all that sort of thing is just creating karma. Seeking Buddha, seeking the Dharma—that's just creating karma that leads to hell. Seeking the bodhisattvas—that too is creating karma. Studying sutras, studying doctrine—that too is creating karma. The buddhas and patriarchs are people who don't have anything to do. Hence, whether they have defilements and doings or are without defilements and doings, their karma is clean and pure. (43)

What, then, can Linji mean by this advice to do nothing? Given the rigorous and demanding Chan monastic life during Linji's time, it is inconceivable that Linji would instruct his disciples to do nothing at all.²¹ Traditionally, this passage is interpreted as Linji's warning against his disciples' attachment to various Chan practices, such as meditation, and to the possible result of enlightenment such practices are expected to produce.²²

How, then, should one practice nonattachment? Within the context of Buddhist practice, Linji's advice to do nothing at all can most appropriately be seen as a call for true renunciation in the Buddhist spiritual practice. Dale Wright's observation is right on the mark here:

Buddhist freedom is less an acquisition and an attainment than the result of a renunciation. Freedom is less an expression of power than an abdication of power, a letting go and a release of grip. . . . Zen freedom . . . evokes images of relinquishing autonomy and the will to power in their various forms—the will to explain, the will to certain knowledge, the will to control, the will to security, and so on. It is in this sense that the key to Zen freedom is the figure of renunciation. (135–137)

Renunciation is a long-cherished Buddhist practice that can be dated back to the historical Buddha himself, who renounced the comfort of family life

and other secular ideals in search of enlightenment. Indeed, renunciation within a religious context is usually understood as leaving behind worldly attachments in pursuit of otherworldly ideals. In the case of Buddhism, entering the monastic order is a form of renunciation. However, Linji and other Chan masters drastically radicalize the practice of renunciation when they propose the rejection of even Buddhist ideals.²³ If entering the monastery is a renunciation of worldly attachments, Chan awakening is a renunciation of spiritual attachments as well.

Worldly attachments and spiritual attachments share the structure of attachment. Buddhists like Linji recognize that the hurdle to an enlightened life is not just attachment to pleasure, permanence, and so on, but also attachment to the Buddha, the Dharma, enlightenment, and the like. This is due to an underlying structure of attachment operative in all of our activities, be they worldly or spiritual. Therefore, we can interpret the message in Linji's advice for his disciples to do nothing at all as his call for the renunciation of attachment to both material and spiritual objects. Furthermore, when Linji preaches that "there's no call for anything special. Just act ordinary, put on your clothes, eat your rice" (53), he is actually proposing a fruitful way to practice Buddhist renunciation, namely, by practicing mindfulness.

Historically, the mindfulness practice taught by the Buddha is the middle way between exterminating desire as certain ascetics attempted to do (the Buddha himself also tried to follow this path in his early renunciation days) and indulging desire as the materialists of his day advocated. The extreme ascetic attempt to eliminate desire is doomed to fail.

[D]esire to get rid of desire is simply one more desire, setting up a vicious circle of desiring to not desire and so on. Moreover, the original desire is a conditioned entity, and will continue to arise as long as its conditions are present. Adding one more condition—the desire to destroy it—will not eliminate it; the only thing that can eliminate it is to remove the conditions of its arising. And again, if eliminated, the desire remains unseen, unexamined, hence its conditions become even more hidden, and thus further entrenched. On top of all that, since the real desire is not for this particular object, but for selfhood, power, mastery, the suppression of any particular desire will be useless—it will simply change forms to find another way to prop up the notion of a self.²⁴

For example, our attachment to material objects can be switched to "spiritual" objects without effecting a transformation of the very underlying psychological structure of attachment. This might lead to the further entrenchment of desires since the mutation of desire from the desire for physical objects

to the desire for spiritual objects might be easily mistaken as a spiritual accomplishment. According to the Buddha, the real solution

resides in being “mindful” of the desire, closely attentive to it. . . . Since ignorance about this was one condition of the arising of the desire, this attentiveness removes one of the necessary conditions of its arising. Deprived of it, the desire fades and ceases. We have let the desire be what it is, be itself—i.e., conditioned, impermanent—and this *allows* its fading, rather than indulging it or destroying it.²⁵

That is to say, mindfulness practice is the practical way to transform the largely subliminal process of desire and its distorting influence on our mind. Such a practice would lead to the alignment of our mental activities, which leads to clarity, peace, and tranquility instead of confusion, ignorance, and tension. In other words, what is transformed in mindfulness practice, rather than the objects of desire, is the very structure of the psyche itself, which is pervaded by craving and attachment.

The *Linji Lu* is full of instructions to Linji’s Buddhist disciples on how to be mindful in their daily life. For example:

Just get so you can follow along with circumstances and use up your old karma. When the time comes to do so, put on your clothes. If you want to walk, walk. If you want to sit, sit. But never for a moment set your mind on seeking Buddhahood. Why do things this way? A man of old said, “If you try to create good karma and seek to be a Buddha, then Buddha will become a sure sign you will remain in the realm of birth and death.” (26)

For Linji, to be mindful is to be present with and aware of what is going on in one’s mind as well as the surroundings and to avoid the reifying activity of the flighty mind that conjures up the image of the “Buddha” and then mistakes it as a sign of spiritual progress without realizing that it is the result of one’s powerful mental construction.

To sum up our discussion of Linji’s take on the problem of mortality and immortality, we have seen that, for Linji, in order to deal with human mortality, we have to transform our mind from the state of delusion, ignorance, and attachment to the state of clarity, peace, and enlightenment. From his perspective, achieving enlightenment or spiritual freedom is at the core of any solution to a whole host of human ills and predicaments, including mortality. Following the Buddha, Linji does not regard human mortality itself as problematic. Instead, what is problematic is our reifying mind of attachment and craving. For a Buddhist, spiritual freedom, or, as

Linji puts it, the nondependence on anything whatsoever, or emptiness, is the realization that “Buddha or any being qua substance does not exist.”²⁶ Otherwise, as Takahashi Shinkichi points out, without such a realization, concepts such as “the Buddha” become nothing more than objects of attachment that obstruct a genuine perception of reality and a fruitful spiritual practice.²⁷

LINJI AND JAMES: TWO KINDS OF PRAGMATISM

It should be clear by now that Linji and James held vastly different attitudes toward the problem of mortality and immortality and, accordingly, offered drastically different ways of responding to and dealing with them. For James, since immortality is a great human spiritual need, ethical considerations require that such a need be accommodated pragmatically. In stark contrast, Linji refuses such accommodation. From Linji’s Chan Buddhist perspective, James’s accommodationist strategy does not address the underlying problem of craving and attachment with regard to the purported “spiritual” need of immortality. In other words, Linji would challenge James’s approach, which simply embraces what Linji considers to be people’s unenlightened mode of experiencing life and the world. From Linji’s perspective, the best way to deal with a spiritual crisis is to help awaken people from what Buddhists consider to be the deluded state of mind. That is, Linji is more interested in the transformation of the mind than simply validating the mind of conflicting desires and attachments since, for Linji, such an unenlightened mind is the very source of human suffering. Instead of trying to justify what desire and attachment crave, Linji calls attention to their problematic nature, acknowledges them through mindfulness practice, and transforms them through living a life of clarity, peace, and awakening.

The question for James and Jamesian pragmatists is whether the solution offered by Linji is palatable. If it is, do they want to simply follow Linji’s Buddhist path or should they offer an alternative path? If it is not, they need to deal with the tension within James’s thought by addressing the problems of desire and attachment more directly, instead of simply assuming that maximum satisfaction of human desires is self-evidently unproblematic. Without addressing the problem of desire in some fashion, James’s system not only suffers from a philosophical incoherence but, more seriously, remains inadequate as a source providing guidance to solving these conflicts in our daily life.

Let me conclude my comparative study of Linji and James by probing a bit more into possible rationales for their different attitudes and approaches to the problem of mortality and immortality. The questions that interest me are the following: Why are there such dramatic differences between the two, other than the obvious historical and cultural reasons, and how are their differences reflected in the ways they formulate the problem of mortality and

immortality? These two questions are closely related, and I will treat them together here. I would like to suggest that a fundamental reason for their differences is the fact that James tries to solve the problem metaphysically whereas Linji treats it as a problem of practice.

James, the pragmatist, is obviously interested in human experiences, both in terms of what is experienced and how it is experienced. Due to the inherent conflict between different domains and aspects of human experiences, often derived from conflicting human needs and desires, James is confronted with the thorny issue of how to reconcile these tensions within our experiences. In order to accommodate as many human needs and desires as possible, James envisions a pluralistic universe as the metaphysical solution to take care of human moral, aesthetic, and spiritual needs. Put simply, James turns to metaphysics to solve the practical problem of human mortality and desire for immortality.

On the contrary, for Linji, human mortality and desire for immortality are practical problems that are derived from the dissonance and tension in the deluded human mind. How such problems are solved cannot be logically or intellectually constructed since our mind is itself distorted by ignorance, passions, and cravings. As Wright puts it, "Buddhists envision a systematic distortion that pervades all human understanding. Rather than establishing a framework for the discrimination of truth and falsity, Buddhists entertain the possibility that the frameworks we employ for the process of securing truth are themselves subject to the distorting impacts of desire and ignorance."²⁸ Therefore, what needs to be done is to transform the mind from the state of delusion and attachment to the state of clarity, peace, and enlightenment. Such a transformative orientation in Linji's way of diagnosing and solving the problem is what Thomas Kasulis calls "metapraxis."

The notion of metapraxis is developed by Kasulis in his ambitious effort to make sense of the unique mode of reasoning in the savific projects of various religious traditions in the world. Kasulis contrasts metapraxis with metaphysics. While the former mode of reasoning attends to concrete religious praxis in bringing about the spiritual transformations of practitioners, the latter mode focuses on working out some philosophical formula that captures truth and reality. Kasulis defines metaphysics and metapraxis this way:

By "metaphysics," we will mean simply the development of a philosophical theory about the nature of reality. Basing our sense of the term on its philological components instead of historical etymology, we can say metaphysics theorizes about what lies "behind" or "beyond" (*meta*) "natural things and powers" (*physis*). By analogy, "metapraxis" is the development of a philosophical theory about the nature of a particular praxis, in this case, religious praxis.

It theorizes about what lies behind or beyond the practices of a religious tradition.²⁹

Kasulis is adamant that the distinction between metaphysics and metapraxis is *not* that between theory and praxis: “Philosophy within a religious tradition can as readily reflect on the nature of the religion’s praxis as on its understanding of reality.”³⁰ This means that they are both theories, but with different concerns. He further elaborates what constitutes metaphysical and metapragmatic *thinking*:

both metaphysical and metapragmatic thinking are responses to the human situation. When we go beyond asking what things are to asking why they are that way, or whence they came, and whither they go, we discover metaphysical issues. When we encounter, or devise on our own, competing answers to those questions and try to decide rationally which of those answers is better, we are doing metaphysics.

When we go beyond asking what we do as members of that community and start asking why we do it, we undertake metapragmatic considerations. When we encounter, or devise on our own, competing answers to those questions and try to decide on rational grounds which answer or which praxis is the better one, we start doing metapraxis.³¹

To apply this understanding to the case at hand, for Buddhists in general, and Chan Buddhists such as Linji in particular, human suffering and ignorance are practical problems that call for solutions in the direction of practice. The Buddha is famous for keeping silent when he was asked to answer some metaphysical questions. Chan Buddhists, including Linji, take such a practical orientation to heart. All of their effort is geared toward finding effective ways to reach an enlightened state of mind; such an orientation is metapragmatic in Kasulis’s definition.

James, to the contrary, is more interested in finding ways to accommodate various practices. This does not mean that James is not interested in praxis—far from it. His book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a perfect illustration of his scholarly interest in various religious practices and experiences. However, James’s pragmatic intellectual orientation is not metapragmatic, even though he has demonstrated quite a bit of interest in theories of praxis. According to Kasulis, “a metapraxis may relate to, but is not the same as, a ‘theory of praxis’”: “A theory of praxis tries to interpret the nature of praxis in general instead of within a particular religious tradition. Although such a theory may advocate its interpretation of praxis, it does not advocate

one praxis over another (except insofar as any theory is, in one sense, the expression of an academic praxis)."³² Put differently,

a metapraxis arises out of the reflection on one's own praxis as a way of understanding and justifying that particular praxis. A theory of praxis, on the other hand, is a reflection on the purpose and significance of praxis in general. . . . A metapractical theory . . . arises from within the praxis itself for the sake of the people involved in that praxis. It justifies their activity at least to themselves and possibly to some outsiders. It explains not a general theory of dietary restrictions as a religious phenomenon, but why that little girl might decide to maintain those restrictions throughout her entire life. It explains to her what she as an individual can derive from that particular praxis. It appeals to her as a member of one community rather than another. It explains her particular Jewishness, not just her universal humanness.³³

Even though James, as a good pragmatist, is obviously interested in praxis, he does not engage in the business of advocating any particular form of praxis, whereas Linji, as a Chan Buddhist master, is an unapologetic advocate for the kind of Chan Buddhist praxis discussed earlier. Clearly, the mode of reasoning for Linji is metapractical while the mode of reasoning for James is metaphysical. Such different modes of reasoning have significantly shaped the ways Linji and James approach the subject of human mortality and immortality.

To return to the premise of our comparative study, we now can see with greater clarity that, despite the pragmatic outlook shared by Linji and James as well as the larger Buddhist and pragmatist traditions they represent, Jamesian pragmatism is ultimately grounded in metaphysical speculations, whereas Linji's Chan Buddhist tradition is fundamentally metapractical in its orientation. Put simply, if we were to call the traditions they represent forms of pragmatism, Jamesian pragmatism can be labeled metaphysical pragmatism while Linji's is a form of metapractical pragmatism.

As a result of this comparative study, we can pose a somewhat different sort of challenge to the two traditions James and Linji represent. From Linji's Chan Buddhist perspective, can the classical pragmatist tradition deal with philosophical issues metapractically so that it can fulfill its promise of being a philosophy of human experience? On the other side, Jamesian pragmatists can question the malleability of Linji's Buddhist praxis, challenging it to be more democratically open. Unfortunately, we cannot begin to address these questions without going considerably beyond the themes of mortality and immortality that are the focus of this essay.

NOTES

1. William James, *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1899). Further references to this work will appear within the text in parentheses.
2. Gerald Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 466.
3. Wayne Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order," *Harvard Theological Review* 93.1 (2000): 51–66. Online version.
4. Sami Pihlström, "William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality," *Transaction of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 38.4 (2002): 606. Pihlström's italics.
5. Myers, *William James*, 452–453.
6. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 3.
7. William James, *Pragmatism* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1995), 125.
8. Pihlström, "William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality," 614.
9. Pihlström, "William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality," 618–619.
10. James, *Pragmatism*, 127.
11. Richard Gale, *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–2.
12. Gale, *The Philosophy of William James*, 3.
13. For example, Gerald Myers observes, "His [James's] own mystical interpretation was hardly pragmatic, for it ran not from phenomenon to consequences but from phenomenon to inferred origins, such that there was no way for such an interpretation to be tested. His philosophy of religion is indeed intriguing, but it is certainly not pragmatic" (*William James*, 466).
14. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol. 1, *India and China* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 180.
15. Contemporary scholarship has questioned the veracity of this Chan rhetoric of freedom by pointing out the all-pervasive hierarchical structure of traditional Chinese society as well as Buddhist monasteries. As Dale Wright points out:

Collective labor, collective meditation, collective meals, collective *dharma* discussions, collective sleeping arrangements—all of these came to be institutionalized with the new codes [namely, the "Pure Regulations" (*qinggui* 清規) of Chan monastic life adopted in the Song dynasty], thus possibly giving Zen a more thorough "collective" character than any previous form of Buddhism. Virtually no dimension of Zen monastic life depended upon individual preference and personal decision making. Freedom, in the form of autonomy at least, was not an important consideration. . . . Nevertheless, in the midst of this "community of constraint," "freedom" came to be an essential defining feature of the community's purpose. (*Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 123)

I will not discuss the institutional aspect of Linji's teachings in this essay.

16. Unless noted otherwise, I use Burton Watson's translation, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi lu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); page numbers appearing within the text refer to this translation.

17. 元來黃檗佛法無多子! Watson's translation is: "There really wasn't anything so hard about Huang-po's Buddha-dharma after all!" (106) Upon the suggestion of Philip J. Ivanhoe, I am using a slightly revised translation here in order to be more accurate as well as supportive of my interpretation of Linji.

18. Seizan Yanagida, *Rinzai roku* (Kyoto: Kichūdō, 1961), 201.

19. Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Critical Sermons of the Zen Tradition: Hisamatsu's Talks on Linji*, trans. and ed. Christopher Ives and Tokiwa Gishin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 17.

20. Mumon Yamada, *Rinzai roku* (Kyoto: Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1984), 2:12–13.

21. I will not discuss the aspect of this teaching that has clear resonance with the classical Daoist ideal of nonaction (*wuwei* 無為). Instead, I will interpret this instruction within the context of Buddhist teachings since Linji himself is, more than anything else, a consummate Buddhist master.

22. Seikō Hirata, *Teishō Rinzai roku* (Tokyo: Hakuju-sha, 1984), 1:171.

23. This does not mean that Chan Buddhists were the first to radicalize the Buddha's teachings. We can clearly see Nāgārjuna's effort in the *Mūlamamadhyama kakārikā* in a similar light.

24. Brook Ziporyn, *Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 6.

25. Ziporyn, *Being and Ambiguity*, 6–7.

26. Sōgen Asahina, *Rinzai roku* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1935), 60.

27. Shinkichi Takahashi, *Rinzai roku* (Tokyo: Hobunkan, 1970), 50–51.

28. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, 137.

29. Thomas Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," in *Discourse and Practice*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 174.

30. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 174.

31. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 174–175. Kasulis is very clear that metapraxis is just as philosophical as metaphysics: "we are considering them as philosophical activities. By that we mean that they present and defend a position about what is the case with some appeal to rational justification. A simple description is neither metaphysical nor metapragmatic. A metaphysics or a metapraxis must include an attempt to show why it is better than competing views of reality or of religious praxis" ("Philosophy as Metapraxis," 174).

32. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 175.

33. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 179.