

# IMPERMANENCE AND SOTERIOLOGY

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## 1. Introduction

Impermanence (Chinese: *wuchang*; Japanese: *mujō*) is understood here as the basic human condition and as an entrance into the study of soteriological techniques and various practices of achieving immortality and the liberating approaches to the fact that everything that comes into existence eventually vanishes. There are differences of the notion of freedom through transitoriness among the people who have grown up in different cultural traditions. The focus of this paper are Sino-Japanese ways of approaching impermanence, the Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist<sup>1</sup> and their search for an elixir of longevity and their ways of salvation.

Dialogue is vital for transcending the European approaches (sometimes rather narrow) to life, death, freedom and the ethical dilemmas of the illusionary life preservation techniques. The European approach has proven itself prone to classify life and death as independent states, which results in death ordinarily emerging as an unwelcome and shocking event. The Daoist attitude is markedly different from the one displayed in the prime development of European philosophy, which has since been lost. The notion of philosophy (love of wisdom) is distinctly Greek in origin and has been cultivating interesting approaches to impermanence and eternity in its period of cultivation of wisdom. However nowadays it seems that the “philosophy” limits its complex activity primarily to rationally mastered undertakings, which as such are not the suitable tools for approaching the topic of impermanence. One of the main philosophical themes in Asian philosophical traditions is the inseparable unity between philosophical insight and meditation. Philosophy is not only developed on

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<sup>1</sup>The *Pinyin* transcription for Chinese characters has been used, therefore, Daoism instead of the older transcription Taoism, *dao* instead of *tao*, etc.

an intellectual level, but also on a physical level. The truth is not only a method of thinking about the world, but also a way of existing within the world. The discovery of the truth is an activity beyond pure intellect; it is a psycho-physical awareness in which all instances of knowledge are simultaneously practical and theoretical. Such an approach to Truth and Reality is vital for our understanding of life-death continuum.

It is important to acknowledge that human beings grow to realise the necessity of death when they reach the age of nine or ten.<sup>2</sup> It is even more important to distinguish between knowing this fact and the emotional and personal assimilation of this realisation. Our own death and the death of others are very much connected. With any death that we experience, a part of us dies as well. The process of assimilating this fact is something which one has to do alone, by oneself and within oneself. However, this might be a long process for which a single human life may not be sufficient. That is why, in the history of different cultures, we see the emergence of various teaching methods to help people cope with this realisation. These methods arose from the anticipation that human beings had to become familiar with death. An example of this is the medieval text *De Arte Moriendi*, “Against his will he dieth that hath not learned to die. Learn to die and thou shalt con to live, for there shall none con to live that hath not learned to die; and he shall be cleped a wretch that cannot live and dare not die.”<sup>3</sup>

In soteriological techniques in different religious and philosophical streams two particular motivations are present when solving problems and regulating relationships within social groups: firstly, specific external material demands, and secondly, subjective motivations from within. The present topic concentrates mainly on the latter. The methods of cultivation of the personality and purification might help us in finding the Way to salvation and enable us to open up to new perspectives free from the whirlpool of everyday life. We co-create our world and our graceful exit from it. It is up to us to find the best way to survive by forgiving and accepting all the limitations, preparing for death and attaining our freedom, to open our hearts to what is coming and to face the here and now without reservations, considerations or choosing, as we usually do when we are caught in a web of mere discursive perception, associations and assimilation of things.

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<sup>2</sup>Maria H. Nagy, “The Child's Theories Concerning Death,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 73 (1948), 3-27.

<sup>3</sup>*The Book of the Craft of Dying*, trans. Frances M. M. Comper, London, 1917, 127.

## 2. Epic of Gilgamesh as an Illustration

One of the earliest texts describing the traumatic realization of the inevitability of death is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh is overwhelmed with deep sorrow as Enkidu, his friend, lies dying. “I wept for him seven days and nights till the worm fastened on him. Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness. His fate lies heavy upon me. How can I be silent, how can I rest?”<sup>4</sup>

Gilgamesh asks “Oh, father Utnapishtim, you who have entered the assembly of the gods, I wish to question you concerning the living and the dead, how shall I find the life for which I am searching?”

Utnapishtim replies, “There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever; do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever? Does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between the master and the servant when both have fulfilled their doom? When the Anunnaki, the judges, come together with Mammentun, the mother of destinies, they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose.”<sup>5</sup>

Even the great king Gilgamesh is not spared the experience of death.

## 3. Confucianism

When facing the unavoidable fact of human impermanence mainstream European philosophy grasped and manipulated it in various ways which usually manifested themselves as a sort of a defence mechanism against the incomprehensible phenomenon (ranging from an emotional reaction to a more precisely formed mechanisms of avoidance, evasion and rationalization of the fact of human mortality). In contrast to this, the Chinese line of thought usually presents life and death as parts of a correlate life-death where one element necessarily and expectedly always follows the other. Death was accepted as a natural, inevitable second half that follows birth, meaning that life and death were not understood as linear opposites. Conversely, they are comprehended as intertwined in a

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<sup>4</sup>N. K. Sandars, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 103.

<sup>5</sup>Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 106-107.

life-death continuum. Consequently, facing impermanence and death in China is profoundly different, gentler and less traumatic. There are some basic principles that created such *genius loci* which has supported an acceptance of death and that presents death as something inevitably common, fulfilling the path of every individual. In contrast with the European avoidance of the topic, Chinese philosophers courageously faced the problem of impermanence and used it for guidance on the path of salvation and enlightenment. They intentionally cultivate the awareness of human mortality in order to help the development of specific soteriological systems.<sup>6</sup> An attitude of such maturity is supported by several thousands of years of spiritual tradition, which has developed philosophical views that allow every individual to face his/her eschatological life events.

Self-cultivation is the central aim of the Confucian philosophy. Self-cultivation and self-transformation should lead to the state of moral consciousness and social integrity. The character of the superior man is shaped by the three main Confucian virtues *ren* (benevolence, humanity), *li* (proper conduct, ritual) and *yi* (sincerity). Confucius understood the process of self-cultivation as related to the process of becoming a superior man (*junzi*). From the soteriological aspect it is the awakening of that special attention which leads to the concentration and focus on that realm of the human state of mind which gradually enriches also one's spirituality. In this context, Confucius' practical philosophy is taken as a turning-point to something new and reverent. It represents also the initial cleansing process, which helps to focus the scope of interest on the new attention which will help eliminate the whirlpool of everyday life in which we are caught and enable us to take a realistic approach to life and death. The main concern of Confucius was good and virtuous life here and now. When asked about life after death and how the spirits of the death and the gods should be served, he answered that the one who is not able even to serve man, can also not serve the spirits. When asked about death, he answered: "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?"<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Daoism

The main concern of the Daoists was focused around the question of where the dao is, which besides theoretical reflections included also a certain way of leading one's own life and accepting one's death. It represents the highest degree of ethical commitment characteristic of the True Man.

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<sup>6</sup>Maja Milčinski, *Soteriology and Freedom*, New Delhi: World Buddhist Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Yang Bojun, ed., *Lunyu yizhu*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980, 113.

The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call the True Man.<sup>8</sup>

To reach the point where life and death become “unimportant” to us, so that we look upon them with equanimity, we have to dive into the void. With the Daoists, it is not directly connected with the dialogue about emptiness; instead, the debate is about Dao, nothingness, the search for truth, and the meaning of life and death. At the beginning of all these quests, the illusion of a stable ego that continues on and on appears as an obstacle. Around this illusion, a system of categorizing phenomena builds up, trapping a person in stereotyped evaluations of things and events.

So it is said, with the sage, his life is the working of Heaven, his death the transformation of things. /.../ His life is a floating, his death a rest. He does not ponder or scheme, does not plot for the future. A man of light, he does not shine; of good faith, he keeps no promises. He sleeps without dreaming, wakes without worry. His spirit is pure and clean, his soul never wearied. In emptiness, nonbeing, and limpidity, he joins with the Virtue of Heaven.<sup>9</sup>

The Daoists teach us about something close to Meister Eckhart's<sup>10</sup> “Abgescheidenheit” (or “Abgeschiedenheit”), translated as “detachment,” but might be explained with the sense of separation, objectivity, self-reliance, and equanimity. Some would describe this as a complete standstill, freedom, and rest in oneself; to be with oneself in the soul, in regard to the people and the world to remain withdrawn. However this state is not the same as that practised by a stoic who has withdrawn from life and is keeping himself far from the reach of any emotion, joy or suffering. “The detached person,” according to Meister Eckhart is the way

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<sup>8</sup>*Zhuang Zi ji shu*, Beijing: Zhong hua shu ji, 1985. For English translation, see B. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 78.

<sup>9</sup>Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 168-169.

<sup>10</sup>Maître Eckhart, *Du détachement et autres textes*, ed. J. Laborriere, Paris: Payot, 1995.

Jesus Christ was able to live his passion in complete detachment. He was able to live, suffer and rejoice while remaining detached (“ledig”) from everyday outer reality. In the same way we do not deny reality as it is offered to us, but accept it. In the Daoist ecology of mind its approach towards death-life is important. It is the consciousness of our own transience that brings us to the field of action. How to function in our optimal way and still practice the deep awareness of our own impermanence which is the only topos of our absolute freedom? It is enlightened self-interest that enables us to achieve the unity with our inner and outer environment and between mind and body. This can be experienced only on the basis of enlightenment, a state in which the consciousness has liberated itself from any form of theoretical rumination and has reached the natural simplicity very close to the Daoist practice of *wu-wei*, the absence of any form of intentional activity, which influenced also their attitude towards death:

I received life because the time had come; I will lose it because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the ‘freeing of the bound.’ There are those who cannot free themselves, because they are bound by things. But nothing can ever win against Heaven – that’s the way it’s always been. What would I have to resent?<sup>11</sup>

Concerning the question of longevity and death, Lie Zi’s work *On Emptiness* contains an informative discussion between Master Yang Zi and Mengsun Yang who wishes to be instructed.

Meng Sun Yang asked Yang Chu: “Suppose that a man values his life and takes care of his body; may he hope by such means to live forever?”

“It is impossible to live forever.”

“May he hope to prolong his life?”

“It is impossible to prolong life. Valuing life cannot preserve it, taking care of the body cannot do it good. Besides, what is the point of prolonging life? Our passions, our likes and dislikes, are the same now as they were of old. The safety and danger of our four limbs, the joy and bitterness of worldly affairs, changes of fortune, good government and discord are the same now as they were of old. We have heard it already, seen it already, experienced it already. Even a hundred years is enough to satiate us; could we endure the bitterness of still longer life?”

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<sup>11</sup>*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 84-85.

Meng Sun Yang continued:

“If it is so, and swift destruction is better than prolonged life, you can get what you want by treading on blades and spear points, rushing into fire and boiling water.”

Yang Zi answered:

“No. While you are alive, resign yourself and let life run its course; satisfy your desires and wait for death. When it is time to die, resign yourself and let death run its course; go right to your destruction, which is extinction. Be resigned to everything, let everything run its course; why need you delay it or speed it on its way?”<sup>12</sup>

One can see from this conversation how the Master opposes his student’s potential decision to opt for suicide in the shortest way possible because life offers no prospects. But to perceive life and death as “insignificant,” one must dive into the emptiness or at least bathe in it. This idea is encountered in other authors as well, although they may not discuss emptiness per se: among Daoists and also in Buddhism when they discuss the path, nothingness, search for the truth and purpose of life and death. At the beginning of these searches, the obstacle along the path is an idea or illusion of some kind of persistent self, around which grows a system for the categorisation of phenomena which keeps the person caught in a stereotype of everyday evaluation of things and events. Masters who know this dynamic warn us that one should not cling to the idea of nothingness or emptiness again in our attempts to overcome this problem.

Lie Zi introduces us to the process of forming and cultivating personality that requires effort and focus, which in itself constitutes relinquishing that which is less important. This is a long-term mental and physical undertaking which necessitates persistence to accomplish something which is certainly not an intellectual acquisition or an object, but an experience in which a person transcends him/herself as well as time and space, a feeling of liberation or salvation.

## **5. Ego Emptiness versus the Void in Sino-Japanese Buddhism**

Asian cultures have traditionally been more accepting of the void and have encouraged self-cultivation techniques that open the doors to the void without the fear of it. The void is a necessary prerequisite for successful training and the success of the soteriological project. The void

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<sup>12</sup>*Lie Zi ji shi*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985, 229. For English translation, see *The Book of Lieh-tzu*, trans. A. C. Graham, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 147-148.

accompanying death also presents a challenge to the European philosophical project, since it questions the tradition of discursive thinking and it develops various techniques of embodiment through which the body “talks” to itself as well as to the consciousness. It is essential to become acquainted with such methods and to comprehend the communication between body and mind, especially when engaging in any serious salvific project. Not only do we measure our world through language, language also provides the basic orientation through which we structure our perception and through which we enter the world and the world enters us. For this reason, long-standing traditions which have developed self-cultivation techniques for which the practice of acute non-(trans)sensory cognition is typical are interesting. The quest to attain the non-real requires that we overcome the limits of body and the sensory realm. Such methods demonstrate how liberation from the suffocating ego can be achieved.

These two concepts could be defined as:

emptiness in connection with ego-emptiness – deprived of any qualities, unimportant, without significance, meaningless, hollow;  
void – designating a completely unfilled space without borders or with only vague, undefined borders. Both concepts are connected to theoretical reflection on impermanence and death.

When approaching the question of human impermanence, the Sino-Japanese model begins with the mystical experience of the cosmic void. The second phase is the endeavour to formulate the experience into words and concepts which are used to describe this state to people who have not had the chance to experience it directly themselves. Such experiments, however, remain at the margin of its essence, on the level of metaphor. This is well expressed in the classical work – *Dao de jing*: “As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.”<sup>13</sup> The European model begins by developing the idea of the ego – the individual consciousness, which has its roots at the very beginning of this developing tradition, and which brought about the famous Cartesian “Cogito, ergo sum.” It created its tools – time and space, produced its own method – logically discursive discipline, and plugged into the endless cosmic void with the aim of defining it “scientifically” with words *in toto* and in all its detail. As this edifice grows ever larger, the solidity of the arguments which encompass the ego becomes increasingly weak.

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<sup>13</sup>Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Robert G. Henricks, New York: Ballantine Books, 1989, 53.



The ego is afraid of being swallowed by the void, but at the same time it wants to master it, therefore it builds around its axis a structure made up of scientific proofs and experiments with which it attempts to master the reality of life, and thus to penetrate the void. This process would extend infinitely and attempt to encompass the entire void. In the immense, consciously and logically edified structure, the ego considers itself to be a master throughout, and aspires to the ultimate position of a God. In the ideal case, the entire cosmic and infinite void would be mastered and the ego would become a God. When the entire void is mastered there is no void. There is no Ultimate, there is no God, nor anything which is not God. What remains is the cosmic void, and so this process, which starts with ego-consciousness, results in ego-emptiness. The ego travels all this way to be confronted at the end with its own antithesis – the void. Both paths finally lead back to the void – the European way slowly, since it is afraid of the void and constantly defends itself with logic and God, and the Sino-Japanese way directly, since the void is familiar and fundamental to it.

It would be wrong to try to view these two models as distinct spiritual edifices that have grown and developed separately in Europe and Asia respectively, since their parallel development can be traced in spiritual traditions throughout history. Depending on the culture, one of them is the dominant whilst the other is its counter pole, its subtle shadow. In the Sino-Japanese tradition of void and silence, the searching for and the finding of ways to come closer to the ineffable, through words and images, is the essence of its meditative-mystical search. The European tradition has had its share of mystics too, although it has often tried to repress them under the charge of heresy, and instead has encouraged its artists to portray their anticipations of the Absolute and impermanence.

The pattern of thinking offered by the European philosophy leads us to a dead-end where the ego and the so-called “reality” confront each other, precipitating a desperate struggle or a paralysing terror. This dispute can be represented by the image of Uroboros: a snake biting its own tail, representing *samsāra*, the infinite vicious circle of activities which encourage one another, the stampede for wealth and longevity which is soon revealed to be an illusion. In the Sino-Japanese pattern, the snake Uroboros is replaced by an open circle, which represents the acceptance of the idea that the reality of life is an illusion. Here, we cannot expect any forced logic to fit any neat philosophical conclusions, but rather a path of parables and metaphors as it has been practised by Chinese Daoists philosophers.

## 6. Conclusion

The notion of impermanence is a central to many Asian religious and philosophical traditions. Buddhism, for instance, considers life-death to be its most obvious aspect and retains it as a problem of soteriology and freedom. The notion of transience in Buddhism is part of the inevitable experience of death, which is rooted in the four ultimate limitations (based on the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism) among which the first is that birth is a necessary condition for the occurrence of death. In Buddhism, one cannot escape the cycle of painful reincarnations if one has not trained in detachment, lucidity and asceticism; only these abilities can open the door to salvation. The wise ones bow to the inevitable and the incurable. *Nirvāṇa*, the complete enlightenment, is possible only when one awakens to the truth of *saṃsāra*. Even the Buddha would have starved himself to death and wasted away in extreme asceticism had he not realised in time that his goal was not to die but to be awakened and to find the middle way. Therefore, in Buddhism, suicide is not the solution; in the cycle of reincarnations, suffering begins when a person commits suicide. Suicide itself is the proof of excessive attachment and unrealistic expectations without which there would be none of the illusions and disappointments that create suicidal tendencies in the first place.

Impermanence is discussed in relation to the phenomenon of death and the illusions about immortality. These questions are important for understanding the conflict between accepting the inescapable fact of one's own impermanence at the rational as well as the emotional and spiritual spheres; it is equally important for us to recognize our own strategies of avoidance, evasion, suppression or indifference. The fact of impermanence is used as an entrance into the study of self-cultivation and soteriological techniques as well as the liberating approaches to the fact that everything that comes into existence eventually vanishes. The self-empowering methods might help us identify with the true part of our being, our inner self and soul. They are supposed to enrich the horizon of understanding the essence of the human condition. The contemporary world has developed the scientific, technological and organisational skills at the level of material demands. However, this tempo has not been accompanied by the progress on the subjective level. Therefore, many of the material achievements reflect the damage done later in terms of its consequences and effects. It is hoped that this development will be supplemented and an old gap in education and research will be filled by bringing about the methodological orientation towards the cultivation of personality, for

which the acceptance of impermanence and the orientation towards a soteriological goal are necessary.

If death is understood as a severance of life, a frightening experience devoid of meaning and explanation, this can have profound and far reaching practical implications in all areas of life. In accordance with this philosophy is given a more vital role in contemporary debates on topics concerning impermanence (the experience of death, the accompanying of the dying, the problem of a high suicide rate, fear of death; and ethical dilemmas such as the right to euthanasia, abortion, etc.). The questions are raised to enrich the horizon of understanding the essence of the human condition. The importance of self-cultivation and methodical meditation in human search for its essence and their incorporation into society is important.

Daoist offers methods of cultivation through which our ego becomes less active, less able to discriminate and analyse, and therefore the ego loses its grip on our consciousness. This enables the mind to become more receptive to the wisdom otherwise hidden to us. In this process of transformation, our whole body and being becomes an eternal spring, the source of circulating internal energy. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to liberate our spirit from the earthly realm so that we never mistake the impermanent for the real. In this regard impermanence is a very important didactic tool for spiritual evolvment. To break our attachment to the world and the material clutches of our earthly existence, sword as a spiritual symbol is used to cut through the illusions of ephemeral things and to seek the greatest treasures of all. Where there is ego, the true heart cannot emerge. It is only in stillness and the absence of craving that original nature can be cultivated. As long as the ego exists, the heart of the Dao cannot emerge. This process is based on the nonattachment to forms. If we cannot relinquish attachment to forms, then we will never tame our minds. The self-cultivation and self-empowering techniques remind us that life is short and that the time of death is uncertain. Therefore, we should apply ourselves immediately to attaining the psychic power, which should be guided by grace and compassion, and ignore the worldly pursuits that have but one unavoidable and inevitable end: sorrow. Such way of liberation cultivates the process of thinking, which goes beyond conceptual thinking. It means the move from the ontological to the soteriological level in the search for the essence; from the level of recognition to the level of liberation. It is only when one gains some measure of detachment from birth and death that one reaches a state of being alive and being aware of being alive.

Gilgamesh has been presented here as an example of didactic texts guiding its readers into the notion of impermanence, the acceptance of which is necessary for methodological orientation towards the cultivation of personality and the orientation towards a soteriological goal. The two Chinese philosophical texts, which were discussed, are instructive for the realization that the acknowledgement of one's self leads to the forgetting of it, which enables the recognition of the absolute self. Daoism encouraged transcendence of the mundane world for achieving the completeness of human life and the Absolute Good and harmony with nature.

It is selfhood that is the obstacle on the path of liberation, as Chinese Daoist philosophers teach us and try to help us grow up and accept the responsibility without resorting to any of the numerous techniques of withdrawal, and to perceive within ourselves the mechanisms that drive us to various actions. Daoists make us face the unavoidability of death, and the necessity of accepting one's own transience as well as the transience of the universe itself. Such an attitude can be attained only through the methodical cultivation of transcendental thinking, by sensory deprivation and spiritual consciousness as means of achieving the highest spiritual goals, a process in which physical consciousness undergoes gradual degradation. Achieving a higher (or different) state of consciousness is described by some authors as a mystic consciousness. The long path of ridding one's spirit of all conscious and disturbing unconscious content, such as desires, anger or self-deception, can only be successful when the spirit attains a high degree of attention, focus and peace, so that knowledge can be anchored, stabilized and assimilated. In this way, we may come to a new understanding of ourselves and the world, reaching a liberating insight that what actually liberates us (and what tends to enslave us) is the correct way of understanding ourselves and the world. This stage is described as an uninterrupted joy that is reached when one is no longer separated from one's core.

Creative living, which can be based on such standards, rejects the deadening dimension of spiritual and political stagnation and can bring us closer to the equilibrium of cosmic forces, human purpose and the Absolute.