

TRANSCENDING DEATH

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1. Introduction

“It’s human nature to resist death.”¹

“How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?”²

How is it possible to explain the phenomenon of death, the over-cultured natural phenomenon which has been deprived of its natural *wu-wei* (non-interference principle in Daoism³) dimension, and which after all remains the only realistic and certain stance for anyone in the face of the future? The future itself, being deprived of certainty, gave many possibilities for speculation on the significance of the Land which is the best, because it is nonexistent. As such it meant the hope for the Other, the chance to evade the paradigms of the present and already realized forms of the community.

2. The Case of Japan

In Japanese Buddhism the concept of hell was elaborated in the minutest detail, at least, as far as the Buddhist universe is concerned, during the Heian period, and Genshin has emphasized the necessity of grasping the reality of the “six paths” (rokudō) – the six lower states of existence, i.e.,

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¹Jingsheng Wei, “The Courage to Stand Alone,” *The Free China Journal* (July 5, 1997), 7.

²Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 47.

³In the paper now accepted pinyin transliteration of Chinese characters is used (therefore, Daoism instead of Taoism, Zhuang Zi instead of Chuang Tzu, etc., are used).

hell, and the realms of hungry spirits, animals, asuras, men and heavenly beings; or modes of existence permeating the world of illusion, six levels to be ascended on the way towards deliverance. These six modes belong to the world of illusion through which all forms of existence perpetually transmigrate unless, of course, one enters the “way of the Buddha” and thereby opens up a finite future, extinction, a goal to be reached through four further, successive stages of enlightenment. This vision of the future in “ten realms” (*jikkai*), which, on a general level, also contain the advent of the Buddha Miroku, sets an optimistic note since it provides a prospect for escape from the eternal cycle of transmigration.

Kojiki and Nihonshoki, written in the beginning of the 8th century, are the chronicles of the time from the 4th century on when the Yamato dynasty started to conquer various smaller states. The mythological elements in the chronicles act as justification for the Yamato subjugation of all the other states; therefore, the emperor is believed to have received the power from the gods. Besides the Takama-ga-hara (The Plain of High Heaven, High Celestial Plain), the heavens far in the sky believed to be inhabited by the gods, and the actual Japan of that time which was in the middle, there was also the notion of Ne-no-kuni (The Root-Land), the place to which the dead people were supposed to retire. In this well known pantheon of the Yamato dynasty, the myth of handing over the land is included, as well as the image of an alien deity, not known among the heavenly and local deities – the architect and constructor of Japan, a small being which was believed to have come from across the sea and to have retired there as soon as the work had been accomplished. With him is connected the image of Tokoyo-no-kuni, the everlasting land. The land of bliss, which existed once and was gone forever, is, according to some explanations, also the land of rice, the paradise from where the cereals were brought. A far away land over the sea, which is actually a pre-Yamato construct, was most probably related to Daoist elements and beliefs in eternal youth and immortality.

If one divides people into ranks the lowest is he who values his head. Those who endeavor only to amass as much knowledge as possible grow heads that become bigger and so they topple over easily, like a pyramid standing upside down. They excel in imitating others but neither originality nor inventiveness nor any great work is theirs.

Next come those of middle rank. For them the chest is most important. People with self-control, given to abstinence and asceticism belong to this type. These are the men with outward

courage but without real strength. Many of the so-called great men are in this category. Yet all this is not enough.

But those who regard the belly as the most important part and so have built the stronghold where the Divine can grow – these are the people of the highest rank. They have developed their minds as well as their bodies in the right way. Strength flows out from them and produces a spiritual condition of ease and equanimity. They do what seems good to them without violating any law. Those in the first category think that Science can rule Nature. Those in the second have apparent courage and discipline and they know how to fight. Those in the third know what reality is.⁴

In Japanese intellectual tradition, various techniques, known as *gyō*, formed an important part of any real philosophical undertaking, which aimed at putting into words the Absolute truth, which in its essence is inexpressible. The above quotation is just one in the vast tradition which has been re-examining the nature of the intellect; by its nature it cannot carry out its function if the distinctions among things are not created and fixed so that they appear as independent entities which are divided among themselves. The Japanese philosophical tradition, however, has been trying to overcome the one-dimensionality of rationality. It still cannot be labeled as irrational as is often thought, but must rather be considered as a-rational, transrational, or on the other side of experience and creativity.

Buddha Miroku⁵ is believed to have descended from the Buddhist heaven in order to save the people. After 552 AD when Buddhism was introduced to Japan, it was a religion of the ruling elite meant to protect the land and the ruling class. Only at a later stage it was recognized as having a soteriological function. In the 10th century there arose the belief in the Western paradise where Amida, who was supposed to help any individual to salvation, ruled. The five colored strings that lead from the fingers of the dying person to Amida's statue were believed to help and direct one into Amida's Pure Land, Western paradise, *Ōjō* (birth in a Buddha or bodhisattva's land, especially Amida's Pure Land), salvation, or *gokuraku* – utmost pleasure, that which possesses ease and comfort.

⁴K. Graf von Durckheim, *Hara: The Vital Center of Man*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1971, 176.

⁵Sk. Maitreya, "Benevolent." The bodhisattva who will appear in this world to become the next Buddha after 5,670,000,000 years when he ends his life in the Tusita Heaven (*Tosotsuten*). See H. Inagaki, *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms*, Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1985, 206.

Gokuraku-jōdo became a synonym for Amida's Pure Land of Utmost Bliss.

3. Chinese Daoism

Japanese Buddhist philosophers, who are dealt with in relation to Chinese Daoists,⁶ introduce with their works essential changes in our dualistically educated minds, since they confront us with a completely different way of experiencing language, thought, nature and reality. What has in European tradition been understood as certainty, as a standpoint, has been seen through in Sino-Japanese tradition as the "illusory dust of the world" (Zhuang Zi). The emergence and occurrence of the voidness and the transcendence of Ego are inextricably connected with the question of the inexpressible. When Zhuang Zi poses an explicit demand of "not to talk, not to be silent," he also brings into play the difference between conventional and absolute knowledge. The real certainty can be based only on the absolute knowledge, on the level of Absolute Truth. There is a difference between knowledge as used in Buddhist and Daoist texts and the notion of knowledge in the European tradition. The difference is illustrated with the demand "abandon knowledge" (Dao de jing). Thus, the Daoist is questioning oneself about the value of knowledge and not whether or not we have it. The fact that we are supposed to abandon knowledge constitutes the basis of certainty and the way to approach the Dao and voidness, both of which are set into the realm of Absolute Truth and, therefore, the sphere of the inexpressible. The dependence on the logical and discursive function of the language, which is supposed to express the absolute Truth, is denied. In Zhuang Zi silence becomes the only real language of voidness. Silence is the strongest expression of the void relations. It is not just any silence, but Silence as such. It is not the silence of ignorance, hostility, intimidation, but it is *prajñā*, the wisdom, which is indifferent to the formulation and the rejection of formulation.

4. Buddhism and Daoism Contrasted

When the differences among the ontological categories (being, non-being, etc.) are denied, in regard to certainty new problems arise, as well as original solutions to the old problems. The Daoist as well as Buddhist philosophers demand a radical negation as the basis for the achievement of

⁶Sk. Maitreya, "Benevolent." The bodhisattva who will appear in this world to become the next Buddha after 5,670,000,000 years when he ends his life in the Tusita Heaven (Tosotsuten). See Inagaki, *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms*, 206.

certainty, Absolute Truth, which is beyond the beginning and the end, Being and non-being, something and nothing. For the Daoists, Being and non-being are just two aspects of the inexpressible Dao. Buddhist voidness, on the other hand, is a dynamic whole which evades distinctions. The methodologies of Kōans in Zen and the paradox in Daoism demand an intuitive structure of understanding which assures meaning in the combination of concepts which would otherwise be understood as logically inconsistent. Metaphorical thinking in the Daoist and Buddhist philosophical tradition is not understood as something inferior to conceptual thinking, which is itself put into question, especially in the undertakings, such as the path to certainty. In Japanese Buddhist philosophy, as well as in Daoism, the demand for deontologisation has been strong. The notion of voidness, the central philosophical concept in Buddhism, is precisely the one which tests the nature of various attachments (to the Ego, etc.). Therefore, the demand for discovery of the nature of non-attachment, which forms the basis of certainty, is posed. Certainty, acquired in such a way, opens up new perspectives of existence. When the enlightened one, the one who has reached the basis of certainty, sees everything in the light of voidness, protection against the appearance of ontological entities is established, which then opens up this astonishing realm of suchness of Being. Although this means a temptation, the concept of voidness can neither be brought to the metaphysical level nor reduced to ontology. The voidness, therefore, is not the antithesis to Being, neither is it the position between nothingness and Being. Voidness is transcendence of all standpoints and positions. It provides certainty which leads to the liberation from thinking, and from substantiating the Self and the imprisonment in the Ego.

Within the abundant Pure Land theoretical heritage, Genshin – with his basis of ‘amidist’ doctrine and the ‘ōjōden’ texts, legends of a good death – is interesting when treating the problem of certainty. The obsession of having one’s life and death under complete control reached its peak with a new genre of descriptions of the people who were certain to have had a good death, i.e., have gone to the Pure Land of Amida to be reborn there. In the imaginative geography, one reaches the model death by passing over the sea of uncertainty, landing in the Pure Land, which is conceptually beyond both hell and heaven. It is an illusion created and transferred beyond one’s own death, a dream of a certainty reached in a paradise far away in the West. The moment of death becomes the sole possibility of attainment of the certainty sought for during the entire lifetime.

When analyzing the Pure Land theories of Heaven, we see that in most of them the transcendental voidness is present. The situation, described in the texts as Heaven, is the state of undifferentiated consciousness. Since the language is rooted in the differences, here the void space comes into play. The unusual vision, which might be a product of mystical experience, appears in the spiritual eyes as a vast, limitless space, where things exist in an amorphous, dreamlike mode of existence, always changing and flowing into each other. The Pure Land Heaven can, therefore, be named as the highest point of uncertainty, where everything flows in a dreamlike insecurity and indetermination. The borders and limits are fluid. It is only the veil of illusion (*māyā*) which constitutes the form of language. The primal function of the intellect is that it holds to these mobile and flowing borders, and fixes them into quiet entities. As a result, clearly defined and rigidly fixed distinctions are formed, though these do not correspond to the paradisiacal absence of the formation of meaning. The veil of illusion forms the totality of being and meaning by which, in our minds, the image of so-called reality is formed. This reality, however, is just a surface reality, just a phenomenon, an appearance, a distorted reality of a real unity of reality, which lies at the deepest level, hidden from the eyes of a common human being.

The Buddhist Land of Supreme Bliss,⁷ the field of freedom and salvation has no spatial form. According to the Amitābha Sūtra, the land of Supreme Bliss is a world located infinitely far away in the West, reached after passing over one thousand billion lands of Buddhas, and in it dwells the Buddha known as Amitābha, who continues to preach the Law to this day. As seen in the pre-buddhist notions, the earthly paradise of supreme bliss is located in a fixed geographical position on a high mountain at the far end or at the centre of the world, or on an island far out in the ocean. It is a non-place, which does not allow for easy approach, surrounded by walls which cannot be penetrated, walls of ice, a permanent shroud of thick clouds, or blazing flames. But as Shambhala, this paradise, although situated on the same plane as our own world, it cannot be found situated on any map. Why? It slips through the grasp of language.

The image of paradise, as well as the paradisiacal dimension of a free existence itself, are formed on the level of consciousness so well described in the Yoga Sūtra. In contrast with other pre-Buddhist Indian systems that focused exclusively on the cultivation of knowledge as the means to

⁷Maja Milčinski, "On Approaching Wabi-Sabi," *Inde-Europe-Postmodernité*, ed. Rada Iveković and Jacques Poulain, Paris: Noël Blandin, 1993, 298.

liberation, yoga, while not denying the efficacy of knowledge, advances several ancillary techniques.⁸

The formation of the images of paradise in the strategies of liberation is, therefore, connected with altering the state of consciousness through the use of various physical techniques. It is the state that transcends the *citta-vrtti-nirodha* and is, therefore, indescribable. The popular image of the Amitābha in the Pure Land doctrine, as the one who dwells in the Western Land of Supreme Bliss and as the saviour who will come to rescue all living beings with his overabundance of compassion, is reserved for the devotees who are, due to the Nembutsu⁹ practice, bound to the world of being and the realm of language.

5. Mind-Body Concept and Death

In Sino-Japanese philosophical context, however, the certainty is formed with the body, with the transformation of the body into a base for the formation of meaning from which visions of the Pure Land arise, through the use of mental and physical techniques for the visualization of the Land of Supreme Bliss: the land situated in the farthest depths of infinity.

From the early Middle Ages onwards, accounts of rebirth in the Land of Supreme Bliss started to appear in the Japanese philosophical and religious texts. As we have seen, the theory of the Pure Land gives rise to a problem of language and the mind-body theory in Japanese Buddhism. The absence of Ego, the selflessness and the problem of the inexpressible are the effects of the transition to the level of *citta-vrtti-nirodha*. This is the level of *mantra* and of some of the Kōans that slip through the clutches of silence and language – the situation described by Zhuang Zi, and the one which originates and derives from the voidness, as the basis of certainty and *prajñā* or supreme wisdom.

⁸C. Chapple, “The Unseen Seer and the Field: Consciousness in Saamkhya and Yoga,” *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 62-63. While the author presents the five fluctuations (*vrtti*) of the mind (*citta*) as described in the *Yoga Sūtra*, he comes to the conclusion that “for the *yogi*, the goal is to transcend all five by entering the state of *citta-vrtti-nirodha*. Hence, by definition, the practitioner of meditation is entering into a state of being that cannot be described in the same way one would describe conventional sensory or mental experience.”

⁹Nembutsu, “Thinking of or Meditating on Buddha,” (*buddhaanusmriti* in Sanskrit). It also means “uttering Buddha’s Name.” In Amidist tradition, it means utterance of Amida’s Name, i.e., “*Namu-Amida-Butsu*.” See also *The Tanni Shō*, Kyōto: Ryukoku University, 1990, 15.

In the moment of loss of philosophical centrality, we face a radical critique of the long lived dream to attain a foundation of knowledge, certainty and an absolute basis for Truth. The topics discussed above from the Buddhist and Daoist philosophical schools call the rational argumentation itself into question. The obsession about whether or not something could be subsumed under the concept of Truth becomes irrelevant. One of the challenges that we face when approaching the Buddhist and Daoist texts is the problem of language, of the status of words, and of the spheres of silent language and the language of silence in the process of liberation. Language as the indispensable tool of intellect helps to create the distinctions of everything and the borders among the myriad things, which from the viewpoint of the *citta-vrtti-nirodha* are inseparably connected in the One. The word, by contrast, is a symbol, a sign of something that has been in the thoughts. The meaning itself is, on the other hand, the symbol of something which is beyond the grasp of logos and is indescribable, inexpressible, certain, since it manifests itself in everything. Here we are dealing with two levels: the surface one, in which reality manifests itself in the form of the ten thousand, myriad things; and the other one, beyond it, the certain one, which is spoken of (or kept silent about) in the sense of the first chapter of the *Dao de jing*.¹⁰

The Japanese mind-body concept is based on radical transformation of subjectivity, and with it the notion of rationality and approach to death. The notion of Heaven, as understood and described in the way of transformation of consciousness, demands the opening up of the established governing positions of European metaphysics to deeper dimensions of truth, often related to the trans-rational and trans-linguistic experiences upon which any kind of certainty is grounded. The earlier quoted division of the people into ranks where the lowest is the one who values one's head has implications for the philosopher's interest. Namely, how should one read the autonomous philosophical productions of India, China and Japan from the standpoint of the European traditions which has been called *philosophia*, the love of wisdom, a discipline that in its development sought in the name of Truth a "pure" starting point, a foundation of Absolute Truth, the ground of certainty. Such undertakings have also in the Buddhist context been brought close to the reflections of Zhuang Zi:

¹⁰“As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.” Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. R. Henricks, New York: Ballantine Books, 1989, 188.

The Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken; Great Benevolence is not benevolence; Great Modesty is not humble; Great Daring does not attack. If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice. If benevolence has a constant object, it cannot be universal. If modesty is fastidious, it cannot be trusted. If daring attacks, it cannot be complete. These five are all round, but they tend toward the square. (All are originally perfect, but may become “squared,” i.e., impaired, by the misuses mentioned.)

Therefore, understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest. Who can understand discriminations that are not spoken, the Way that is not a way? If he can understand this, he may be called the Reservoir of Heaven. Pour into it and it is never full, dip from it and it never runs dry, and yet it does not know where the supply comes from. This is called the Precious Light.¹¹

6. Cultivation of Life in Death

Daoism and Buddhism, two of the Asian deontological philosophical traditions, which managed to ask and answer vital philosophical questions, such as the approach to freedom and the acceptance of death, nurtured the cultivation of life, vital energy, principle of becoming and constant change. In the horizon, where nothing is permanent and there is no such thing as substance, the words, concepts, theories or knowledge are transient, as well. The ideas of freedom, truth, certainty and causality, the inquiring into being and substance – the nominal world – was, therefore, not seen as a relevant philosophical preoccupation.

As for the problem of life in death, two of Zhuang Zi’s thoughts are vital

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.¹²

¹¹The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, trans. Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 44-45.

¹²Chuang-tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, trans. A. C. Graham, London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981, 168-69.

Life is the companion of death, death is the beginning of life. Who understands their workings? Man's life is a coming together of breath. If it comes together, there is life; if it scatters, there is death. And if life and death are companions to each other, then what is there for us to be anxious about.¹³

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. This idea we also meet elsewhere. With the Daoists and in Buddhism, 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.

The Daoists and Buddhists teach us about something close to Meister Eckhart's "*Abgescheidenheit*" (or "*Abgeschiedenheit*"),¹⁴ translated as "detachment," but might be explained with the sense of separation, objectivity, self-reliance, equanimity. Some would describe this as a complete standstill, freedom, 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 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 with a certain reserve not in tune with Ecclesiastes' pessimism, namely when he gives his toast to the young, encouraging them to take joy in life, he darkens this very stimulative passus with the perspective that one has to pay for the joys:

Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement.¹⁵

¹³Chuang-tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, 235.

¹⁴Maître Eckhart, *Du détachement et autres textes*, ed. J. Laborriere, Paris: Payot, 1995.

¹⁵Ecclesiastes 11:9.

He remains bitter to the end of his life. The joys of life are darkened in advance with the perspective of death and final judgement after it. Since he was not able to accept the endless cycle of life and impermanence, the one that has been so clearly described by Rabindranath Tagore: "... And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well. The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation."¹⁶

As the texts quoted above teach us, when death approaches one has to perceive it as unimportant, as well, and give in. We can borrow the illustration of this phase in human life from the final days of Socrates as described in Plato's *Phaidon*. When accused by the traditional, conservative stream in Athens in 399 BC, it is obvious from his defense that his attitude is to let himself be killed and thereby fulfill his last mission.¹⁷ That was the door into Freedom, the Essential – the Real – and all that for which he was striving in his life. However, he did deny suicide and kept to the notions of orphics and Pythagoreans that the people should be like guardians in life, and never leave the place until we are dismissed. His attitude was that one should not kill oneself until God notifies him, which was the situation that he himself was in. It is time to die – that was also what his inner voice (*daimonion*) had been telling him.

One of the most important Japanese Buddhist philosophers, Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253), has developed his theoretical insights on the basis of the daily practice of *zazen*. In his philosophy, birth and death (*shōji*) are understood as the first and the last of the four sufferings (birth, ageing, illness, and death) which are common to all sentient beings, which are able to experience suffering.

7. Conclusion

The negation of the ontological doctrine of the ego in Buddhism and the Daoist techniques that are supposed to bring one into real connection with the vital sources of the universe by transcending one's limitations, are two notorious ways of liberation in the vast tradition of Asian philosophies. The ways of achieving freedom in Daoist and Buddhist philosophical traditions discussed above can teach us about the illusions of the superiority of philosophical speculation as understood in the Judeo-Christian-Greek heritage.

¹⁶R. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, London: Macmillan, 1913, 87.

¹⁷R. Guardini, *Der Tod des Sokrates*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1958, 171.

Lao Tzu said, “Ah-the basic rule of life-preservation. Can you embrace the One? Can you keep from losing it? Can you, without tortoise shell or divining stalks, foretell fortune and misfortune? Do you know where to stop, do you know where to leave off? Do you know how to disregard it in others and instead look for it in yourself? Can you be brisk and unflagging? Can you be rude and unwitting? Can you be a little baby? The baby howls all day, yet its throat never gets hoarse – harmony at its height! The baby makes fists all day, yet its fingers never get cramped – virtue is all it holds to. The baby stares all day without blinking its eyes – it has no preferences in the world of externals. To move without knowing where you are going, to sit at home without knowing what you are doing, traipsing and trailing about with other things, riding along with them on the same wave – this is the basic rule of life-preservation, this and nothing more... The Perfect Man joins with others in seeking his food from the earth, his pleasures in Heaven. But he does not become embroiled with them in questions of people and things, profit and loss. He does not join them in their shady doings, he does not join them in their plots, he does not join them in their projects. Brisk and unflagging, he goes; rude and unwitting, he comes. This is what is called the basic rule of life-preservation... The baby acts without knowing what it is doing, moves without knowing where it is going. Its body is like the limb of a withered tree, its mind like dead ashes. Since it is so, no bad fortune will ever touch it, and no good fortune will come to it either. And if it is free from good and bad fortune, then what human suffering can it undergo?”¹⁸

In the above described examples of Japanese and Chinese ecologies of mind their 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 that 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.

¹⁸Guardini, *Der Tod des Sokrates*, 253-5.