

The Idea of Life-Death

Glimpses from Daoism and Japanese Tradition

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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? (ZHUANGZI 1968, 47)

In reflecting on immortality, longevity, death, and suicide from the standpoint of certain central concepts in the Sino-Japanese philosophical tradition—for example, impermanence (無常 *C. wuchang*, *J. mujō*)—the philosophical methods developed in the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian tradition are not always very suitable. The contrast presents one more challenge for “philosophy,” which has traditionally regarded itself as a European (and, in an even less acceptable variation, as a “Western”) phenomenon. For the fact is, in our day the very borders of philosophical discourse known in European history as *philosophia* are being reconsidered.

Rethinking the history of philosophy as a single narrative may help approach movements related to the levels of consciousness that were central to the reflections of a number of Asian philosophical schools. Japanese Zen and Chinese Daoism are instructive here, since they have sought from the beginning and throughout the stages of their develop-

ment to put the inexpressible into words. Awareness of the inadequacy of words brought with it a number of original ideas. In Song China, for instance, philosophers and practitioners represented their theories through a variety of diagrams (*tu* 圖), often based on meditation techniques and therefore not fully transmittable through language alone. The illustration of the nine-step process (known in Japan as *kusō* 九想) is one such representation. We may take it as a starting point for approaching the concept of impermanence and death in the Japanese philosophical context, contrasting it with the ways in which impermanence—and in particular, its relationship to the phenomenon of death—has been perceived in the European tradition.

EUROPE AND IMPERMANENCE

The European Middle Ages developed the so called *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, represented in sayings such as “My Lord, it is a great art to die well, and one to be learned by men in health,”¹ as well as in numerous variations of the Death Dance (*danse macabre*). The awareness of mortality was also spread through texts, the following of which is typical:

The one who has not learned how to die, will die against his will. Learn how to die and you will know how to live, since nobody will learn how to live, who has not learned how to die. The path of all the paths (the supreme path) is the one that teaches a man how to die. (COMPER 1917)²

None of this succeeded, however, in establishing among Europeans any kind of permanent discipline related to the idea of impermanence and death. Rather, it left them caught up in the dizziness of everyday life. The *ars moriendi* vanished from consciousness, only to arise, if at all, as circumstances required—most often at the moment of death when people were terrified at the impending loss of ego.

1. *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (London, 1651) and *The Book of the Craft of Dying* (London, 1917).

2. Cited from *Das tibetanische Totenbuch* (Zürich: Rascher, 1953), VI.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when he was developing his theory of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud focused on suppressed libido as the source of “complexes” that took the form of emotional and sensorial phenomena in human consciousness, disturbing the harmony of an individual’s life and blocking the path to personal freedom. This aspect of Freud’s work is familiar. Less well known are his theories concerning the death instinct (*Todestrieb*), which he began to develop in 1920. In a 1923 essay he explained its function this way:

The death instinct, Thanatos, returns the organic life to the inorganic one. Eros (life instinct) on the other side is constantly trying to unite the dispersed parts of matter into more complicated structures. (FREUD 1960, 38)

Freud’s latent assumption seems to be that death is not just the result of unfavorable circumstances in which the human organism together with its subjective correlative, consciousness, is subdued. It is also the pre-programmed outcome of a process of decomposition that is inherent in human beings from birth but gets occluded in adulthood by manifestations of organism and spirituality, that is to say, of life. It returns to the foreground in advanced age and by the end of one’s life is predominant. The subjective dimension of the force that drives this process, working predominantly on the non-conscious level, is the death instinct.

If this aspect of psychoanalysis—Thanatos as opposed to Eros—did not become a general part of Freudian theory and praxis, neither did he or many of his students return to it. A clear exception was Karl A. Menninger who built his theory of “accident proneness” on this instinct. European analytical thought in general relegated Thanatos to the subconscious. While eroticism and sexuality are no longer taboo subjects, death has not achieved equal attention. As William Epsom has written:

Otherwise I feel very blank towards this subject, and think that though it may be important and proper for anyone to bring it up, it is one that most people should be prepared to be blank upon. (EPSOM 1983, 35–6)

“Blank” seems to suggest here “showing no attention, interest or emotion; discontented.”³ It also carries a feeling of avoidance and anxiety.

In European thought mortality and impermanence remain matters of frustration and trauma, which does little to help those facing the inevitable but only seems to prolong resistance and repulsion, as in Camus's *Caligula*:

The truth is a very simple, clear and rather foolish one, which is not easy to discover and very painful to bear, namely, that “people die and are not happy.” (CAMUS 1958, 140)

Various Asian philosophical traditions show a more mature attitude to impermanence and death, relating them to the meditative and mystical dimensions of the cognitive process which have always been part and parcel of their philosophies. In Europe, where logical and discursive reasoning has been the rule, such approaches tend to be dismissed as “unscientific.” A careful contrast of the Sino-Japanese approaches to their counterparts in the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian tradition challenges this simple judgment.

JAPAN AND IMPERMANENCE

European thought came very close to relating Thanatos to Eros, not as a terrifying elimination but as an anticipated inevitability that at times is even welcomed as a complement to Eros. It is precisely this step that created a metaphysical conception of impermanence (*wuchang*, *mujo*) to support the Buddhist idea that all material things are considered to have come into existence through some cause and are subjected to the process of creation, abiding, transformation, and extinction. This process, moreover, is cyclical: all things are born and die—over and over again. The cycle of rebirth can be escaped only by eliminating all desire and thus attaining nirvana or enlightenment, the only stable, non-transient state. Such a conception helps us to understand works like *The Tales of Ise*. It also makes it possible to find beauty in the ephemeral and to accept the fact that impermanence enhances the beauty of things.

3. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Portland House, New York, 1989) offers the following explanation: “not written or printed on, void of interest, disconcerted.”

The key is not to cover one's eyes to the reality of death, but to enjoy the world as it is presented to us in all its aspects. If this procedure is often alien to mainstream European philosophy and psychology, there are clear traces of it in poetry and the arts.

At various stages of Japanese history it was felt necessary to educate people to confront the inevitability of physical death. Its counterparts to the frescoes of the Middle Ages in Europe are various treatises reminding human beings of their mortality. The images we find there are more naturalistic and therefore even more persuasive than the frescoes of the Death Dance in Europe, where death takes the form of a skeleton. The Japanese images have a somewhat different idea behind them. The fact that humanity is sentenced to death and to impermanence is depicted by temple images that follow the process of decay of the human corpse from death to final disintegration. Believers are expected to respond in a prescribed way to the repulsiveness of these pictures.

The process is illustrated as follows: after the body is put into the soil, it becomes bloated and ugly within one or two days. It then becomes blue-black and ulcers erupt on the skin from which blood and pus begin to ooze. Birds and other animals start to bite the corpse and feed on it, and what they leave becomes food for worms. Soon nothing remains but dust, which eventually mixes with the soil.

A very valuable picture, portraying this process, is kept in a collection of Rokudō pictures at Shōjūraigō-ji (Shiga prefecture). The picture is of Ono no Komachi, a renowned beauty, who was said to have charmed many a man during her lifetime. The act of visualizing her rotting corpse became a kind of medicine for men obsessed with female charms. It is still used for didactic purposes for novice monks, and has become a recurrent theme in contemporary philosophical works.⁴

How did the Japanese explain the phenomenon of death, whose inevitability remains the single greatest certainty regarding the future? The

4. Michael Kelsey describes the process this way:

Her body had turned to a yellowish color and was quite frightening. The bridge of her nose had caved in, causing her nostrils to flare out. Because her lips had become wrinkled up like thin paper her upper and lower teeth seemed to be biting sharply into one another. When he looked at that face he felt both disgust and fear, and covered it up and fled the room. The odor entered his

details remain unclear, of course, giving rise to speculations that evade the paradigms of the present.

During Japan's Heian period, the Buddhist concept of hell was elaborated in the most minute detail. Genshin in particular emphasized the necessity of grasping the reality of the "six paths" (*rokudō* 六道) or lower states of existence or modes of existence permeating the world of illusion: hell, and the realms of hungry spirits, animals, *asura*, men and heavenly beings. One had to pass through these six stages on the way to deliverance. As such, 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 the finite future of extinction, a goal to be reached through four further stages of enlightenment. This vision of the future in "ten realms" (*jikkai* 十界), which, on a general level, also contain the advent of the Buddha Miroku, sets an optimistic note in that it holds out the prospect of escape from the eternal cycle of transmigration.

The *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, compiled in the beginning of eighth century, chronicle the time from the fourth century on when the Yamato dynasty began to conquer various smaller states. The mythical elements in the chronicles act as justification for the Yamato subjugation of all the other states, and hence the emperor is believed to have received his power from the gods. Besides the Takama-ga-hara (Plain of High Heaven, High Celestial Plain), the heavens far in the sky believed to be inhabited by the gods, and the actual land of Japan in the middle, there was also the idea of a Ne-no-kuni (Root-Land), a place where the dead were supposed to retire. Included in this well known pantheon of the Yamato dynasty is the myth of handing over the land. There we find also the image of an alien deity, not known among the heavenly and local deities, who is said to have been the architect and constructor of Japan, a small being believed to have come from across the sea and to have returned there when his work had been accomplished. Associated with

mouth and nose and the stench was without limit; he felt as though he had a lump in his throat.

From that time on he could think only of the remains of that face, and a religious faith arose from deep in his heart. (KELSEY 1976, 346–7)

him is the image of Tokoyo-no-kuni, the everlasting land. This land of bliss, which existed once but disappeared forever, is explained elsewhere as the land of rice, the paradise whence grains were brought. A far-away land beyond the sea, which is actually a pre-Yamato construct, was most probably reliant on Daoist 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. (OKADA 1971, 176).

In Japanese intellectual tradition, various techniques known as *gyō* 行 formed an important part of authentic philosophical undertakings. These techniques were aimed at putting into words an inexpressible absolute truth. The above quotation is just one example in a vast tradition of the attempt to rethink the nature of intellect. By its nature, the intellect cannot function if distinctions among things are not fixed in such a way that they appear as independent entities distinct from one another. The Japanese philosophical tradition, however, has been trying to overcome this one-dimensionality of rationality. This is not to say it simply opts for the irrational, as is often thought to be the case. Rather, it insists on an arational or transrational dimension beyond experience and creativity.

The Buddha Miroku (INAGAKI 1985, 206)⁵ is believed to descend from

the Buddhist heaven in order to save people. When Buddhism was introduced to Japan around 552 CE, it became a religion of the ruling elite and was seen as a protector of the land and its rulers. Only secondarily was it recognized as having a universal soteriological function. The tenth century saw the rise of belief in a Western paradise ruled over by Amida, who was thought to lead all individuals to salvation. The five colored strings that lead from the fingers of the dying person to Amida's statue were believed to guide one into the Western paradise of Amida's Pure Land, the Western paradise, to promote *ōjō* 往生 (birth in a buddhahood or bodhisattva's land, especially Amida's Pure Land), salvation, or *gokuraku* 極樂—the utmost pleasure, ease, and comfort. *Gokuraku-jōdo* became synonymous with Amida's Pure Land of Utmost Bliss.

Among the riches of the Pure Land heritage of ideas, we may single out Genshin, with his fundamental Amidist doctrine, and the *ōjōden* 往生伝 texts with their legends of a good death, as important sources of certitude regarding life after death. The obsession of having one's life and death under complete control culminated in a new genre of descriptions of those said to have secured a good death, that is, those who have gone to the Pure Land of Amida to be reborn there. In the imaginary geography, one achieves a model death by passing over the sea of uncertainty and landing in the Pure Land, which is conceptually beyond both heaven and hell. It is an illusion created and transferred beyond one's own death, a dream of certainty reached in a paradise far off in the West. The moment of death becomes the sole possibility of attainment of the certainty sought for during one's lifetime.

When analyzing the Pure Land theories of heaven, we find in most of them a transcendental void. This void, or the emptiness described in the texts as heaven, is a state of undifferentiated consciousness. Whereas language deals with differences, emptiness passes beyond language. It is envisioned with the spiritual eye, in a kind of mystical experience, as a vast, limitless space where things exist in an amorphous, dreamlike mode of existence, always changing and flowing in and out of each other.

5. Sk. 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* 兜率天) (see INAGAKI 1985, 206).

The Pure Land heaven can therefore be described as the overcoming of uncertainty, where everything flows in a dreamlike insecurity and indeterminacy, where borders and limits are fluid. It is the veil of illusion (*māyā*) that gives shape to language. The primary function of intellect is to grasp this mobility and fix it into stable entities. As a result, clearly defined and rigidly fixed distinctions are formed, none of which corresponds to the paradisiacal absence of the formation of meaning. The veil of illusion forms the totality of being and meaning by which mental images of “reality” are formed. But this reality is no more than a surface reality, an appearance, a distortion of the true unity of reality, which lies deep within, hidden from the eyes of ordinary mortals.

The Buddhist Land of Supreme Bliss has no spatial form (MILČINSKI 1993, 298). According to the *Amitābha sūtra*, it is a world located infinitely far away in the West, accessible by passing through a thousand billion Buddha lands. In it dwells the Buddha known as Amitābha, who continues to preach the Law to this day. As witnessed in pre-Buddhist notions, the earthly paradise of supreme bliss is located in a fixed geographical position, high on a mountain at the far end (or at the center) of the world, or on an island far out in the ocean. It is a non-place, not easily accessible and surrounded by impenetrable walls of ice, a permanent shroud of thick clouds, or blazing flames.

Images of paradise and the whole paradisaical dimension itself are formed on the level of consciousness 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 liberation, yoga, without the efficacy of knowledge, proposes several ancillary techniques.⁶

The imagination of paradise is therefore connected with altering the state of consciousness through the use of various physical techniques. As a state that transcends the *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, it is beyond description. The popular image of the Amitābha in the Pure Land doctrine, as the

6. CHAPPLE presents the five fluctuations (*vṛtti*) of the mind (*citta*) as described in the *Yoga sūtra*, concluding that “for the yogi, the goal is to transcend all five by entering the state of *citta-vṛtti-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” (1990, 63).

savior who dwells in the Western Land of Supreme Bliss and who will come to rescue all living beings with his overabundance of compassion, is reserved for the devotees who, even in their practice of the *nenbutsu*,⁷ are bound to the world of being and the realm of language.

In the Sino-Japanese philosophical context, certainty is related to the body, whose transformation grounds the formation of meaning from which visions of the Pure Land arise. This is accomplished through the mental and physical techniques for visualizing the Land of Supreme Bliss, the land situated at the farthest reaches of infinity.

From the early Middle Ages on, accounts of rebirth in the Land of Supreme Bliss began to appear in 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 and the notion of inexpressibility are effects of the transition to *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, the level of the mantra and certain *kōan* that slip through the clutches of silence and language—the situation described by Zhuangzi and the one that originates from emptiness as the basis of certainty and of *prajñā* or supreme wisdom.

THE DAOISTS

Japanese Buddhist philosophers, like the Chinese Daoists,⁸ posed essential challenges to our dualistically educated minds, confronting us with a completely different way of experiencing language and thought, death and life. What has in European tradition been understood as a standpoint of certainty, has been seen through in Sino-Japanese tradition as “illusory dust of the world” (Zhuangzi). The emergence and occur-

7. *Nenbutsu*: “Thinking of or meditating on Buddha.” The Sanskrit equivalent *buddhānusmṛti* means “uttering Buddha’s Name.” In the Amidist tradition it means utterance of Amida’s Name: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*. See also *The Tanni Shō: Notes Lamenting Differences* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1990), 15.

8. Influences of Daoism in Japan are widespread, especially as the concepts of fate, the future afterlife, and the problematizing of certainty in Laozi and Zhuangzi penetrated the Japanese way of thinking. It is therefore important to discuss the Daoist philosophical credos in relation to Buddhism.

rence of emptiness and the transcendence of ego are inextricably bound up with the question of the inexpressible. As for Daoism, the quotation from the concluding lines of chapter 25 in Zhuangzi is illustrative:

The perfection of the Way and things—neither words nor silence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent—this is the highest form of debate. (ZHUANGZI 1968, 293)

For a Buddhist philosopher taking this approach, a question arises of something akin to what the later Wittgenstein called a “language-game,” which in turn gives rise to a critique of language. Is a name logically independent of the characteristics of the thing named? Consider the question in a Daoist context. When Zhuangzi poses an explicit demand of “not to talk, not to be silent,” he also brings into play the difference between conventional and absolute knowledge. Real certainty can be based only on absolute knowledge, that is to say, only on a level of absolute truth. The difference in the way knowledge is understood in Buddhist and Daoist texts from the way it is used in the European tradition can be captured in the injunction of the *Dao de jing* to “abandon knowledge.”

The Daoist concern is with questioning the value of knowledge, not measuring to what degree of certainty we have acquired it. Abandoning knowledge is the foundation of certainty and at the same time a path to the Dao and emptiness, both of which are located in the realm of absolute truth, inexpressible and beyond life and death. Dependence on the logical and discursive functions of language in its attempt to express absolute truth is broken. In Zhuangzi, silence becomes the only real language of the void. Silence is the strongest expression of relationships in emptiness. It is not just particular instances of silence, but silence as such. It is not the silence of ignorance, hostility, intimidation, but *prajñā* wisdom, which is indifferent to formulation and even rejects it.

When differences among the ontological categories of being and non-being are denied, the question about certainty is reformulated and hence gives rise to new responses. Daoist and Buddhist philosophers demand radical negation as the basis for certainty regarding absolute truth, which has no beginning or end and transcends being and non-being. For the Daoists, being and non-being are merely two aspects of the same inexpressible Dao. Buddhist emptiness, on the other hand, is a dynamic whole

that eludes distinction. The use of *kōan* and paradox in Zen demands an intuitive understanding that secures meaning by combining concepts that would otherwise be taken as logically inconsistent. Metaphorical thinking in Daoist and Buddhist philosophies is not considered inferior to the conceptual thinking but questions it and raises doubts about it as a way to certainty.

In Japanese Buddhist philosophy, as in Daoism, deontologization has played a strong role. The notion of emptiness, the central philosophical concept in Buddhism, tests the nature of conceptual and emotional attachments (to the ego, for example) and offers non-attachment as a basis for certainty. This approach opens up new possibilities for human existence. Enlightened individuals who have reached the ground of certainty see everything in the light of emptiness. This safeguards them against the illusions of ontological phenomena and brings them to the “true suchness” of being. The temptation to embrace emptiness as a metaphysical concept or reduce it to ontology is always there. But emptiness is not a mere antithesis to being; neither is it a neutral point between being and nothingness. Emptiness transcends all standpoints and positions. It brings a certainty that leads to liberation from thinking, from the substantial self, and from imprisonment in the ego.

The loss of philosophical centrality entails a radical critique of the cherished dream of finding a solid, absolute ground for knowledge of the truth. As we have seen, the efficacy of rational argumentation itself is brought into question. The obsession with classifying ideas as “true” becomes irrelevant. This in turn brings us to one of the greatest challenges posed by Buddhist and Daoist texts: the use of language, the status of words, and the role of silent language and the language of silence.

As an indispensable tool of the intellect, language helps create distinctions among things and draw borders between things that, seen from the perspective of the *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, are inseparably connected as one. Words are signs that point to thoughts. Meaning, in contrast, is a symbol of something beyond the grasp of logos, something indescribable, inexpressible, and at the same time certain in that it manifests itself in everything. There are two levels here: the surface level, at which reality manifests itself in the form of myriad things; and the deep level of certainty that is spoken of (or kept silent about) in the sense described

in the opening chapter of the *Dao de jing*: “As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” (LAOZI 1989, 188).

The Japanese mind-body concept is based on a radical transformation of subjectivity as well as of the notion of rationality. Heaven, as understood as a transformation of consciousness, pries open the dominant views of European metaphysics and points to deeper dimensions of truth, often related to the trans-rational and trans-linguistic experiences on which all certainty is grounded. The oft-cited ranking of people in which those at the lowest level are the ones who value their heads is not without philosophical interest here. How are we to read the very different ideas of China and Japan from a standpoint of *philosophia* that has developed its search for truth through a fixation on a “pure” starting point, a foundation of absolute truth? To cite Zhuangzi again:

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.⁹

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. (ZHUANGZI 1968, 44–5)

The Daoists, whose works have provided us with many precious insights into the problems of impermanence and death, conclude:

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? (ZHUANGZI 1986, 235)

9. All are originally perfect, but may become “squared,” i.e., impaired, by misuse.

In Chapter 7 of *The Book of Liezi* (Yang Zhu) the basic problems of existence in classical China are discussed. The story begins as follows:

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 for ever?”

“It is impossible to live for ever.” (trans. from GRAHAM 1990, 147–8)

At the time, asking a Daoist philosopher for advice on how to become immortal may not have sounded as naive or absurd as it does to us today. Welch has remarked that the Daoist movement has always been a mixture of heterogeneous elements, including philosophy, everyday hygiene, church duties, and especially alchemy, without ever really being systematized into a single, coherent whole. Alchemical allusions include tales of a mystical island called Pen Lai that many voyagers set out to discover. It was believed that the island’s inhabitants did not know death, because they were in possession of an elixir of life discovered by alchemists, a concoction thought to be a compound of the normally poisonous ingredients of cinnabar and mercury-sulphide (WELCH 1957, 216).

Meng Sun Yang was not satisfied with the laconic answer of the master. The story continues:

“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?”

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 spearpoints, 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?" (trans. from GRAHAM, 1990, 147–8)

It is worth drawing attention to these final words. In effect, they declare that those attempting to retain their essence and dignity have to accept their own impermanence, without forsaking earthly pleasures while there is time for them. To combine these two approaches, one has to bid farewell to one's life when one is still alive. Yang Zi does not mean that one should commit suicide in one's youth. His injunction is closer to what Meister Eckhart called *Abgeschiedenheit* or a radical detachment that combines separation, objectivity, self-reliance, and equanimity. Some would describe this as a state of complete standstill, a coming to rest in oneself, a oneness in the soul that withdraws from other people and from the world.

This is not the same as the renunciation of the stoic who keep a distance from life beyond the reach of all emotion, of all joy and suffering. The detached person, according to Meister Eckhart, is like Jesus, who was able to suffer his passion in complete detachment. He was able to live, endure pain, and rejoice while remaining detached (*ledig*) from everyday outer reality (ECKHART 1995). The Chinese and Japanese view of impermanence enjoins a view of life *sub specie mortis* that embraces the endless cycle of life, as described by the Bengali philosopher and poet 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. (TAGORE 1913, 87)

As Meng Sun Yang had said, when death approaches one has to accept it as unimportant and submit to it. The final days of Socrates as described in Plato's *Phaidon* are exemplary here. Accused by the traditionalists, his defense was to submit himself to death as the fulfillment of his life. Death was the door to the essential matter—the truly "real"—that he strived for throughout life. At the same time, Socrates did not affirm suicide, but held to the notions of the Orphics and the Pythagoreans that people should be guardians of life and never leave it until they have been

dismissed. He insisted that one should not kill oneself until the gods have decreed it, the very situation that his inner voice (*daimon*) advised him he had come to.

Yang Zi, who had been trying to describe to Meng Sun Yang the situation “when death is approaching,” may be compared to Socrates who drank the hemlock and yet, even as he awaited his approaching death, continued to teach. This is reflected in the irony of his words to the pragmatist Crito: “Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius, will you remember to pay the debt?” (PLATO 1956, 189). Why should he have any debt to the God of medicine, Asclepius, and his subordinates? Could it be because they had discovered such a practical method of euthanasia?

CONCLUSION

The approaches to impermanence and death treated above, although spanning great distances of time and space, share certain basic elements. There is a certain overlap of Sino-Japanese ideas and their European counterparts, particularly in didactic elements regarding the progress of the human body from conception to decay. At the spiritual level, however, the two diverge noticeably. On the Sino-Japanese model of the open circle, the phenomenon from which one takes leave at the time of death is an illusion, just as the reality that surrounds us and the very ego we use to conceive it are illusory. Still, it does not amount to a simple denial of objects and the world presented to us in consciousness. In transcending what we understand as “reality” and “ego” in everyday life, a flood of words and clever neologisms are of no use. What is essential to this model is a transition from logical, discursive thinking to meditative, mystical experience. The paradox is that the illusion of everyday existence is at the same time an important means to effect the transition, a kind of practice ground for learning to surpass the ego along with its convictions and desires. This is clearly different from Heidegger’s tense insistence on being-unto-death (*Sein zum Tode*), and from the kind of coming to terms with the absurdity of life we find in Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus*.

The open circle of the Sino-Japanese approach to death and imper-

manence, which we have illustrated with citations from Chinese and Japanese philosophers, is reflected in the words of Vivekananda: “When death approaches, Bhakta will accept it with a smile. ‘I am honoured that all come to me, all are welcome’” (VIVEKANANDA 1938, 93). The transition from logical, discursive thinking to meditative, mystical experience, which is so often central in the philosophical traditions of China and Japan, may seem a considerable, if not insurmountable, obstacle to those wishing to remain faithful to the style of philosophy dominant in the European tradition. Here it is important to keep in mind the preparatory steps already taken by the medieval mystics, who were exiled to the fringes by both the Church and mainstream philosophy. In this connection we may also mention modern scientific studies working in the borderlands between psychology and philosophy. Among these is K. Albrecht’s classic work *Psychology of Mystical Awareness* (ALBRECHT 1976), which is still a valuable resource for us today. Taking his lead from the phenomenological approach of Karl Jaspers’s widely referenced *General Psychopathology*, Albrecht concludes that awareness has several levels and that the path to mystical experience requires passing through the state of “deep thinking” (*Versenkung*), followed by the “sunken state” (*Versunkenheit*) of spiritual concentration that preserves and enhances spiritual clarity.

When it comes to considering impermanence and death, Albrecht’s idea of mystical experience, which is central to various philosophical schools in the Sino-Japanese realm, is especially useful for acknowledging the appearance of something “coming” (*das Ankommende*), something foreign to the ego, something from outside that reveals the “universal” capacity to experience the “numinous” (*das Umfassende*) that is both sought after and feared by the human spirit. Albrecht’s complicated approach may be condensed as follows: Freed of misleading distortions, mysticism can give us an authentic experience that removes all doubt and that therefore represents a healthy, normal, and natural process.

The passages cited above from Sino-Japanese philosophy, particularly the *Dao de jing*’s insistence on the inexpressibility of the supreme Way and the Buddhist insistence on the indescribable quality of enlightenment, bring us closer to theoreticians who claim:

Notions of the all-encompassing power of language and word have been ubiquitous in the history and philosophy of religions. So too, has been a recognition of the inability of language and word to give full expression to the realities that constitute and engage human beings and the world in which they live. (REYNOLDS 1993, XI).

The approach of the Sino-Japanese tradition to basic philosophical notions like impermanence and its manifestation in the phenomenon of death suggest that it is only through a combination of the uroboros-like logical, discursive style with the meditative, mystical style of the open circle that they can be dealt with.

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