

**Maja Milčinski**  
*Certainty in Daoism and in Japanese Buddhism*

»It's human nature to resist death.«<sup>1</sup>

»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?«<sup>2</sup>

How did the Japanese explain the phenomenon of death, 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 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.

In Japan the concept of hell has been 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. 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. The 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Wei Jingsheng. The Courage to Stand Alone. In: *The Free China Journal*. July 5, 1997, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Watson B.: *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Columbia University Press. New York 1968, p. 47.

*Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, written in the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> century, are the chronicles of the time from the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 where 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 by 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.«<sup>3</sup>

In Japanese intellectual tradition, various techniques, known as *gyō*, formed an important part of any real philosophical undertaking, which

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<sup>3</sup> Sayings of Master Okada. In: K. Graf von Dürckheim: *Hara. The Vital Center of Man*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1971, p. 176.

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 reexamining 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 can not be labeled as irrational as is often thought, but must rather be considered as arrational, transrational or on the other side of experience and creativity.

Buddha Miroku<sup>4</sup> is believed to descend from the Buddhist heaven in order to save the people. After 552 A.D. when Buddhism was introduced to Japan, it was a religion of the ruling elite meant to protect the land and the ruling class. Only after all these aspects was it recognized as having a soteriological function. In the 10th century rose 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. Gokuraku-jōdo became a synonym for Amida's Pure Land of Utmost Bliss.

Japanese Buddhist philosophers, who will be dealt with in relation to Chinese Daoists<sup>5</sup>, introduce with their works essential changes in our dualistically educated minds, since they confront us with a completely different way of experiencing language and thought. What has in European tradition been understood as certainty, 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. As for Daoism, the quotation from the concluding lines of chapter 25 in Zhuang Zi is illustrative: »The perfection of the Way and things – neither words nor si-

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<sup>4</sup> 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). Inagaki H. *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms*. Nagata Bunshodo, Kyōto, 1985, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Influences of Daoism in Japan are immense, especially as the concepts of fate, after-life future and the problematisations of certainty in Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi penetrated the Japanese way of thinking. Therefore it is important to discuss the Daoist philosophical credos in relation to Buddhism.

lence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent – this is the highest form of debate.«<sup>6</sup>

For a Buddhist philosopher on this level of approach, the question of a venture which is akin to what the later Wittgenstein has called a »language-game« is raised. The actual question which follows from these two is the position of the critic of language in the Buddhist philosophical tradition. Is a name logically independent of the characteristics of the thing named? If we try to illustrate this with the Daoists:

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*). The Daoist namely 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 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.

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

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<sup>6</sup> Watson B.: *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Columbia University Press. New York 1968, p. 293.

thing inferior to conceptual thinking, which is itself put into question, especially at 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 never be brought to the metaphysical level or 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 the certainty which leads to the liberation *from* thinking, and from substantiating the Self and the imprisonment in the Ego.

Among 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 based 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 illu-

sion (*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, however 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<sup>7</sup> 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 center 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 can not 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.<sup>8</sup>

The image of paradise, as well as the paradisiacal dimension 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 liberation, yoga, while not denying the efficacy of knowledge, advances several ancillary techniques.<sup>9</sup>

The formation of the images of paradise 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

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<sup>7</sup> Milčinski M.: On Approaching Wabi-Sabi. In: *Inde-Europe-Postmodernité*. Noel Blandin, Paris, 1993, p. 298.

<sup>8</sup> Nakazawa S.: Gokuraku. In: *Cibeto no Mozuaruto*. Seikaido. Tōkyō, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Chapple C.: The Unseen Seer and the Field: Consciousness in Sāmkhya and Yoga. In: *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. (Ed. Forman R.), pp. 62-3. 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«.

the saviour who will come to rescue all living beings with his overabundance of compassion, is reserved for the devotees that are, due to the Nembutsu<sup>10</sup> practice, bound to the world of being and the realm of language.

The certainty, however, is in Sino-Japanese philosophical context 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 inexpressible are the effects of the transition to the level of *citta-vrtti-nirodha*. This is the level of mantra and 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.

In the moment of loss of philosophical centrality, we are facing 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 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. 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 unseparably connected in One. The word on the other hand 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 deal 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

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<sup>10</sup> Nembutsu: »Thinking of or meditating on Buddha«, »*buddhānumṛiti* in skrt. 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*. Notes Lamenting Differences. Ryukoku University, Kyōto, 1990, p. 15.

it, the certain one, which is spoken of (or kept silent about) in the sense of the first chapter of the *Dao de jing*.<sup>11</sup>

The Japanese mind-body concept is based on radical transformation of subjectivity and with it the notion of rationality. 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 transrational and trans-linguistic experiences upon which any kind of certainty is grounded. The 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 to read the autonomous philosophical productions of China and Japan from the standpoint of the tradition 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 pondering of Zhuang Zi:

»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.«<sup>12</sup>

Daoism and Buddhism, two of the Asian deontological philosophical traditions, which managed to ask and answer vital philosophical questions, nurtured the 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 idea of truth, certainty and causality, the inquiring into being and substance – the nominal world – was therefore not seen as relevant philosophical preoccupation.

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<sup>11</sup> »As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.« In: Lao-Tzu: *Te-Tao Ching*. Translated by Henricks R. Ballantine Books. New York, 1989, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Watson B.: *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Columbia University Press. New York 1968, pp. 44-5.