

Buddhist Reflections on Life and Death

Suk-Ku Song

Philosophy has been understood as the rational understanding of human beings through the issue of death or of overcoming the death.

In the West, they see the soul as immortal, whereas they see the body as transient and imprisoning soul in it. In short, death signifies only “the death of the body.” This is the moment from which the death or the liberation from the body takes its affirmative momentum in the tradition of western philosophy. Even though western philosophy and religion represent different forms and ideas, the starting point for them is the premise of human overcoming of the death.

In the East, Confucianism understands human death from the practical and Real standpoint. According to Confucian philosophy, life and death belong to the natural process. Taoists regard death and life as the trace of all things that change naturally just like the process of day and night.

Buddhism tries to understand all the sentient beings sustain their lives in the interrelationship with other beings. In Buddhism, human beings are neither complete nor determined, they based upon the concept of “life.” Also, there is a formular which consists of previous life, this life, next life or life after death. Buddhism attempts to overcome the death through the metempsychosis. This

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process of overcoming the death through metempsychosis will be followed by ethical consciousness.

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I. Introduction

Philosophy has been understood as the rational understanding of human beings in relation to nature, society, and self, whereas religion as the non-rational or supra-rational one. These two different disciplines have trod different paths in the field of understanding human mind, although these two have a common starting point: the issue of death or of overcoming the death.

Once Confucius happened to overlook the passing water that flowed down in a brook, and exclaimed, "Every passing thing is like this. It passes whether it is day or night."¹ I would argue that searching for the permanence in this evanescent world is the common part in both western and eastern philosophy and religion.

Man is a great being on the one hand, and he/she is a tiny little being on the other hand. Blaise Pascal said, "Man is a thinking reed." Man plans a blueprint of his/her course of life through his/her thinking power. Therefore, each individual leads one's own distinctive life. This tells us of the greatness of man. Nevertheless, all men die. Man is helpless in front of death. This tells us of the smallness of man.

However, every living being with life, including human beings, are mortal. In this respect, human beings are equal to other living beings. Some argue that man knows he will die, and that, therefore, he is different from other living beings. It is true that some animals know that they will die. So it is not enough to find the human characteristics only in the fact that man

¹ 子在川上曰, "逝者如斯夫, 不舍晝夜" (*Lunyu: The Analects of Confucius*).

knows that they will die.

Human beings know not only that they will die, but also that death is one of all the evanescent things in the world. At the same time, human beings know that death is not the end of everything. My contention is that this understanding of human beings is closely related to the issue of overcoming the death. And I quote:

Fish is what I want. The sole of bear's foot is also what I want. If I cannot get both, I give up fish, but choose the sole of bear's foot. Life is what I want. Righteousness is what I want. If I cannot choose both, I will choose righteousness instead of the sole of bear's foot. Life is what I desire. Since I desire something better than life, I do not want to beg my life miserably. Death is what I dislike. However, since there is something other than death which I dislike the more, I do not want to avoid the death willy-nilly.²

For man, death does not mean only the unavoidable mortality, according to which every human being will cease to exist. That is, death does not mean the physical extinction of our lives. Rather, death has an influence upon us as a moral being. There will be time when we have to choose death during our lifetime, confronting the critical moment of making a moral decision. Death, then, is the touchstone for revealing the authenticity of our moral action. Sometimes, one can reach the authentic self by confronting death, thereby revealing the true human nature.

By becoming aware of death, man accepts the fact that his life course cannot be changed and that his action is irrevocable. This fact deepens death with a new dimension, "a dimension of depth." Therefore, the knowledge that every living being has an end or that the dread of the non-being or extinction overwhelms us does not only constitute a facticity. Rather, this self-awareness transforms itself into a decisive questioning of whether we human beings make optimal use of the opportunity given by the life as well as of whether we

² 魚，我所欲也；熊掌，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍魚而取熊掌者也。生，亦我所欲也；義，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍生而取義者也。生，亦我所欲，所欲有甚於生者，故不為苟得也；死，亦我所欲，所惡有甚於死者，故患有所不辟也 (Mengzi).

waste our opportunities. Death, sometimes, forces us to feel that our living is not centered upon ourselves, but dependent upon the something other in external sources. After all, the issue of death is that of “spiritual peace and enlightenment.”

Philosophy and religion in relation to this issue of death can be commonly endowed with the dimension of social nature as well as that of “solitariness.” Therefore, death or the overcoming of death is one and the same for every being, but produces various solutions depending upon one’s social position and circumstance. To speak broadly, this issue and its solution will create the difference between eastern and western culture.

II. Death in Western Philosophy and Religion

According to Plato, “True philosophy is the practice of death.” What he meant is that philosophy is the discipline of overcoming the death and of consoling the death. At any rate, to Plato, death means the death of the body. But he thought that death does not mean the end of everything. What remains is the thought that the body will be extinct. Plato calls this thought “soul.” This explains Plato’s theory of the immortality of the soul and that of body-soul dualism.

Plato’s body-soul dualism goes in tandem with the dualistic worldviews of sensual world and immortal world of perfection. Sensual world is the phenomenon world, a world of change, whereas the world of immortality transcends the sensual world, thereby becoming the Idea, the prototype of the phenomenal world. The phenomenal world is nothing more than a replica or copy of the Idea or Eidos.

According to Plato, Soul knows the world of Idea which is Truth, before she (Soul) is imprisoned in the Body, leading the life of underworld. Once Soul is married to the Body, and seized with sense, the Soul came to forget about Truth.

However, man can understand the Idea through Anamnesis. To

understand Idea, Soul should be liberated from the Body by means of “philo-sophie” or philosophical efforts while the Body-Soul complex live on the earth. Eventually, according to Plato, this understanding comes from the death.

As we have seen in the above, the main characteristic of Plato’s thinking lies in the distinction between Soul and Body as well as in the transience of the body and the immortality of the Soul. After all, the human body dies and human beings try to overcome the death of the body by means of the Soul. Plato’s philosophy was born as a speculation to overcome the inescapable death after all. Plato came to grasp the fact that the understanding of the immortality of the Soul is the same as the understanding of Idea as Truth, and that the Anamnesis of the Idea can never be reached through the bodily sensation. Here, Plato suggested “pure speculation” by means of human reason, demanded pure speculation which excludes any sensual connotation, and understood the ascetic ethical life style as the superior one.

It is said that Plato put a placard on the entrance gate to his school he established, which says “Those who do not know geometry shall not enter this gate.” Because he thought one can understand the Soul through pure speculation such as geometry.

Aristotle criticized the theory of Idea which implies the body-soul dualism, and proposed the concept of “universality” as an alternative. The issue from Aristotle’s standpoint is that if one becomes a human being only by imitating the human being of Idea, then there must be “a third man” who is common to the actual human being and the human being of Idea. Then the number of the human beings existing in the phenomenal world should be equal to the number of the ideal Idea. In this respect, Aristotle thought of the “universal concept.” The universal concept cannot exist by itself, but can exist only within a particular thing. Aristotle’s metaphysics as such is well presented in his theory of “form” and “matter.”

Scholars reveal their different opinions concerning whether Aristotle argues for the theory of the immortality of the Soul. Averroes argues that

Aristotle did not teach the immortality of the Soul. Those who agreed on Averroes's argument and extended this to the extreme is called the Epicurean school. Dante discovered the exemplar of this in the Inferno.

The Epicurean school views a human being as a solitary being who is unrelated to the universal being such as nature, and argues that pleasure is good, and pain is evil, and therefore the purpose of life is pleasure. However, the pleasure the Epicurean school advocates is not the physical or sensual please, but "ataraxia" or the tranquility of the mind which can be interpreted in terms of positive, perpetuating, and mental pleasure. In fact, the Epicurean school tried to connect the sensual pleasure with the mental pleasure, but they did not mean to elaborate the idea of the immortality of the soul.

Meanwhile, Platonic tradition of overcoming the death continued in the thoughts of the Stoic school, according to whom human beings lead their lives in accordance with nature, thereby being released from all fires of passion and reaching toward the spiritual tranquility or "apatheia."

The fundamental common ground of the thoughts so far discussed is that they demand ethical life for the human being despite their differences in their arguments. "Ethical" means to restrain natural emotion and will and to free oneself from the external binding, thereby leading a solid human life as a human being.

Nevertheless, this kind of ethical life style is extremely difficult for those who are endowed with limited human capabilities. Thus, human beings lost their belief that man can achieve mental tranquility by himself. As a result, human beings come to depend upon supernatural authority, but not upon human reason in attempts to satisfy their mental demands. Philon (160 BCE? - 80 BCE?) is the example. As a Jew, he established a unique system which combines Greek philosophy with Jewish theology.

The fundamental concepts in the philosophy of Philon are God, Transcendent Being, Infinite Absolute Mover, Origin of All Beings, and Creator of the World of Beginning with No End. Philon argues that the world is maintained by the power of God the Creator, and that the material is

the reason for evil's existence in this world. Human beings become depraved of their souls and imprisoned in the body that is the origin of the evil, and so they need to be liberated from the restraint of the body. However, this kind of redemption is possible only through God's power, and therefore by means of the belief in the Absolute Creator. Philon calls this state of liberation "exstasis."

Plotinus (205-269 CE) regards the origin of the cosmos as God, and names this God as the Absolute who transcends all the binary oppositions and at the same time as One Being or First Cause who is the origin of all beings. Plotinus is the precursor of the theory of emanation or outward flux, according to which all beings emanate from God or One Being. He explains the process of emanation in the order of Nous or wisdom, soul, world soul, and individual soul, and argues that the world soul constructs the most imperfect sensible materialistic phenomenal world, in accordance with the prototype of Idea which has been maintained by Nous. Thus, from the perfect God, Nous, soul, material world are sequentially emanated. Depending upon the degree of distance from the perfect God, the degree of perfection of each entity is determined. The ultimate ideal of the imperfect emanated beings lies in the return to God the One Being, and, therefore, the souls of human beings set their goals in returning to God the original home where one came from.

However, Plotinus also sees that asceticism is the only way to liberate soul from the confinement of the body. He argues that the soul liberated from the bonding of the body through asceticism can reach the exstasis by means of the unity with God.

As we have seen in the above, western philosophers tend to divide human beings into the binary opposition of soul and body. They see the soul as immortal, whereas they see the body as transient and imprisoning soul in it, that is, as the prison which corrupts the soul. In short, death signifies only "the death of the body." The death of the body becomes the borderline to cross for the liberation of the soul. This is the moment from which the death or the liberation from the body takes its affirmative momentum in the

tradition of western philosophy.

In Rome, Greece, we can find catacomb (underground grave). It is said that it took about two hundred years from 1st century till 3rd century CE to construct Catacomb. Christianity was officially accepted as a religion during Constantinus I's reign in the year 313 CE. Before this, those who believe in Christianity were not allowed to live on the ground. They had to live and die in the underground, and this caused the construction of the gigantic catacomb in the underground. When we consider the fact that the dead bodies were kept in the original shapes, we can learn that they thought these bodies are closely related to the heavenly world of God. St. Paul also talked about the resurrection of the body and the soul. Accordingly, we can discover that Christianity is in line with the Aristotelean tradition in which body is not separated from soul.

According to the myth of Edenic garden, there are three turning points in human nature: 1) "faultless human nature" of Adam before the fall; 2) "corrupted human nature" as the result of Adam's sin; 3) "redempted human nature" which was recovered in the grace of Christ. In the Christian tradition, foundation of original goodness of human nature was traced back to Adam before the fall. In fact, the issue of evil can be significant once it is combined with that of self-perfection and of self-transcendence.

In short, we can find a common structural framework for any philosophy or religion: 1) the understanding of the current actual state which human beings encounter (here and now); 2) various concepts concerning the goal and the ultimate state which human beings are to reach (in this world and in the future); 3) the method transferring from the state 1) to the state 2).

The first fact is the situation concerning human beings. The narration about human situation in accordance with Christian tradition is as follows: 1) narration about the creation of the world from the philosophical premise; 2) narration about the Christ's redemptive power from the theological standpoint; 3) narration about moral imperatives such as "Do love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your energy" and "Do to others as you would be done by."

Religion is a dynamism working toward the finalization of the phenomenon which derives from the resistance against the attitudinal tendency of status quo. Human beings as non-perfected being should not remain still as they are. They should transform and change themselves in order to reach the state of what the Christianity calls “redemption.”

According to Augustine (335-430 CE), human beings were at first endowed with the free will thanks to God’s love. However, Adam misused this free will and betrayed God’s will. As a result, all the human race fell into the state of the original sin. Thus, human beings lost freedom on account of the first human Adam’s sin, the original sin, so that human beings cannot redeem themselves. Thus, Augustine maintained the theory of predestination, according to which man can be redeemed only through God’s grace, and the redemption depends upon God’s decision.

According to Augustine, man can be rescued by the church which mediates God’s love to man. What is demanded from the church are the practices of belief in God, hope, and love. Man can overcome the death of the body by way of these practices, and man’s soul can be redeemed.

In short, even though western philosophy and religion represent different forms and ideas, the starting point for them is the premise of human overcoming of the death.

III. Death in the Eastern Religion and Philosophy

To seek for the perpetuity in this extremely transient world is the same in the East. In *The Chunqiu zuoshichuan (Spring and Autumn Annals with the Commentary of Zuo)*, two men were discussing “things that do not rot.” Fan Xuanzi argues that his own family lineage is one of the things that do not rot. Shusun Bao argues against this by remarking that the family lineage is kind of a worldly given so that it cannot help being rotten away, and suggests as alternatives three incorruptible things: virtue, achievement, and words. In short, the debate is actually about the issue of value of life. In

their different answers to this issue of rotting away, there are two good points:

1) Both Fan Xuanzi and Shusun Bao kept the human affairs or the influence upon their posterity in mind. In other words, to seek for “the things that do not rot” does not mean to depend upon the other transcendent world, but rather to end up with this real human world. It also means to seek for the permanently incorruptible things, not for the ephemeral satisfaction.

2) There is a great difference between the two. Fan Xuanzi’s argument is based upon the thinking that the prosperity of his own family and the continual practice of family ritual are the touchstones for the “the things that do not rot.” That is, he seeks for the continuation of the life and development of the family clan. Meanwhile, Shusun Bao’s items of virtue, achievement, and words may signify an individual’s contribution to and influence upon the society.

Despite these differences, both are deeply interested in preserving the cyclical movement of nature perpetually, thereby creating and maintaining the world continuously. They also regulate human thinking and action in order to adjust themselves to that natural cycle. Their common ideas are: 1) the invisible power may influence the human destiny; and 2) it is possible to communicate with the power either to be blessed or to be prevented from the disasters.

Now, I would like to turn to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

1. Confucianism

Zhang Zai (Zhang Hengqu, 1020-1077) said in his “The Western Inscription,”

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.³

This statement reveals the dramatization of the identification of Heaven and Earth as One, the identification which represents the Chinese philosophy.

However, there are two examples that can properly explain the general tendency in dealing with the metaphysical issues of the Chinese philosophy. The general tendency is the proof of the existence of the ghosts, and can be demonstrated by Mozi and *Shuoyuan* (Moral Tales) edited by Liu Xiang (79 BCE? - 8 BC?). Mozi, in his “Revealing the Existence of the Ghost,” said:

Those who were born first will die first. If so, those who die first will be my parents or my brothers or my relatives. Suppose we will have a family ritual in filial piety, preparing wine, sidedishes, and the like. If ghosts will be real, they will drink and eat the food and wine. If they do not exist, food and wine we prepared will be useless. Even if they are useless, we will not trash them. Rather, our relatives inside and the village people outside will eat and drink the food and wine. As a result, we will reach a fruitful goodwill relationship among one clan on the one hand and village people on the other hand. It is good.⁴

In “Speculating Being” of *Shuoyuan*, Confucius and his disciple Zigong exchange the following question and answer:

One day Zigong asked “Do men have perception after they die?” Then, Confucius answered: “If dead men have perception, those who have filial piety will sacrifice their lives for the funeral of their parents. If dead men do not have perception, those who do not respect their parents will discard the funeral of their parents. Therefore, Zigong, it will never be too late to confirm slowly whether dead men have perception after you die actually.”⁵

3 乾稱父，坤稱母。豫茲藐焉，乃混然中處。天地之塞吾其體，天地之帥吾其性。民吾同胞，物吾與也 (Zhangzi quanshu).

4 曰，先生者先死。若是則先死者非父則母，非兄而姪也。今絮為酒醴饗盛，以敬慎祭祀。若使鬼神請有，是得其父母姪兄而飲食之也，豈非厚利哉。若使鬼神請亡，是乃費其所為酒醴饗盛之財耳。夫費之，非特注之汗壑而棄之也。內者宗族，外者鄉里，皆得如具飲食之，雖使鬼神請亡，此猶可以合羸聚眾，取親於鄉里 (Mozi).

5 子貢問孔子，“死人有知無知也？”孔子曰，“吾欲言死者有知也，恐孝子孫妨生以遂死也，欲言無知，恐不

The speculation of Mozi is an extreme example of the way of thinking in the Chinese philosophy, a way which transforms the issue of truth-false into that of the efficiency in the practicality. What Liu Xiang introduced in this conversation can be interpreted as follows: When Confucius was asked a question concerning “death” by Zigong, he answered that “Since I do not know life in this world, how can I know the death?”⁶ Confucius’s answer is an extreme representation of the way of thinking, which tries to experience the understanding and perception of the metaphysical issues from the realistic and practical standpoint.

In short, Confucianism can be characterized by the development of the philosophical theory through the unity of heaven and man. Confucianism understands human death from the practical and Real standpoint. Here, the theory of the immortal soul does not exist. According to this, there will be no soul, no body, after human dies.

According to Confucian philosophy, life and death belong to the natural process. However, Confucianism invents the wisdom to accept death in a tranquil state of mind in relation to this objective truth. The tranquility can be interpreted in the following way from *Xunzi*:

Zigong asked Confucius, “I want to take a rest by serving the King, since I am exhausted from studying.” Then, Confucius replied: “According to *Shijing* (*The Book of Odes*), serving the King requires careful handling of the public affairs with modest and polite manners day and night, then, how can serving the King be regarded as taking a rest?” Then, Zigong answered: “Then, I will take a rest by serving my parents.” Confucius said: “According to *Shijing*, if a dutiful son makes every effort to serve his parents, he will be blessed until he die. Serving parents is not an easy job, as you know. Then, how can you regard serving parents as relaxation?” Then, Zigong said: “I will take a rest with my wife and children.” Then, Confucius answered: “According to *Shijing*, man must show a

孝子孫葉不葬也。賜欲知死人有知將無知也，死徐自知之猶未晚也” (*Shuoyuan*).

6 “敢問死。”子曰，“未知生，焉知死？” (*Lunyu: The Analects of Confucius*).

good example of himself so that he can give impact upon his wife and brothers thereby leading his family and further his country. Therefore, to take a rest with one's wife and children is not an easy job. How can it be a repose?" Zigong replied: "Then, I will take a rest by making friends with people." Confucius said: "According to *Shijing*, friends help each other and help with dignity. Therefore, to make friends with is a difficult job. How can it be a rest?" Zigong answered: "Then, I will plough the field and take a rest." Confucius said: "According to *Shijing*, you cut the grass during the day, strand a straw rope at night, mend the roof, and ploughed rows in a field. In short, farming is such a difficult job. Then, how can it be a rest?" Zigong said desperately: "Then, is there any way that I can take a rest?" Confucius said: "To look at the future site of my own graveyard, it looks high, or like the summit of a mountain, or a cauldron installed upside down. I feel like I know where I can take a rest." Zigong said: "Grand, you death! A wise man can take a rest there, and a small mind can take a rest there as well."⁷

The typical approach to death in Confucian philosophy can be interpreted as the understanding of death in terms of repose, that is, the tranquil rest as the last moment of the painstaking toil of a lifetime. One more example is from *Lunyu (The Analects of Confucius)*.

When Cengzi got sick, he summoned his disciples and said: "Roll up the bedclothes, and look at my hands and feet. *Shijing (The Book of Odes)* warns us to be on a full alert in apprehension, approaching the deep pond carefully as if you tread on a thin ice. Now I feel that I am away from the apprehension that my body might be injured. Y'all."⁸

7 子貢問於孔子曰，“賜倦於學矣，愿息事君。”孔子曰，“詩云 溫恭朝夕，執事有恪，事君難，事君焉可息哉？”“然則賜愿息事親。”孔子曰，“詩云 孝子不匱，永錫爾類，事親難，事親焉可息哉？”“然則賜愿息於妻子。”孔子曰，“詩云 刑於寡妻，至於兄弟，以御於家邦，妻子難，妻子焉可息哉？”“然則賜愿息於朋友。”孔子曰，“朋友攸攝，攝以威儀，朋友難，朋友焉可息哉？”“然則賜愿息耕。”孔子曰，“詩云 晝爾索綯，亟其乘屋，其始播百穀，耕難，耕焉可息哉？”“然則賜無息者乎？”孔子曰，“望其墉，臯如也，嶼如也，鬲如也，此則知所息矣。”子貢曰，“大哉死乎，君子息焉，小人休焉”(*Xunzi*).

8 曾子有疾，召門弟子曰，“啓子足，啓子手，詩云，戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰，而今而後，吾知免夫，小子”(*Lunyu: The Analects of Confucius*).

The original intention of the Confucianists is that although death means repose, one should tread the right path without resorting to makeshift measures until one dies. Let's take an episode in *The Liji (The Book of Rites)* for example:

When Cengzi got sick, Lezhengzi Chun sat below the bed, Ceng Yuan and Ceng Shen sat below Cengzi's toes, and an errand boy sat in the corner with a candlelight. The errand boy said, "Does this luxurious and beautiful bed belong to my Lord's?" Cengzi was startled by this and exclaimed: "Alas!" Then the boy said again: "Does this luxurious and beautiful bed belong to my Lord's?" Then, Cengzi said: "Yes, it was given by Jisun, and I cannot replace it because I got sick. Yuan, stand up and replace the bed!" Ceng Yuan said: "Since you are seriously ill, we cannot replace it. We can replace it hopefully in the morning." Then, Cengzi said: "Your love for me is less than the errand boy! A wise man loves others by virtue, but a small mind loves others by a makeshift manner. What can I seek? I am going to die in the manner of the Tao (the Way), following the right path. This will be enough." After this conversation, the disciples replaced the bed and helped their Master by holding his arm to a replaced mediocre bed, but Cengzi died without feeling at ease.⁹

This example of Cengzi demonstrates an important Confucian attitude in which one should tread the right path without resorting to a makeshift measure until one dies. We can find a dramatic representation of this attitude in the example of Mengzi's ideal of righteousness at the risk of life.

Zhang Zai (1020-1077) of The Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) said: "As far as I am alive, I will follow whatever works given to me. When I die, I will repose and relax."¹⁰ Zhu Xi also remarked:

9 曾子寢疾病，樂正子春坐於床下，曾元曾申坐於足，童子隅坐而執燭。童子曰，“華而斂，大夫之篋與？”子春曰，“止。”曾子聞之，瞿然曰，“呼！”曰，“華而斂，大夫之篋與？”曾子曰，“然。斯季孫之賜也。我未之能易也。元起易篋！”曾元曰，“夫子之病革矣，不可以變，幸而至於旦，請敬易之。”曾子曰，“爾之愛我也，不如彼。君子之愛人也以德，細人之愛人也以姑息。吾何求哉？吾得正而斃焉，斯已矣。”舉扶而易之，反席未安而沒 (*Liji*).

10 “存，吾順事。沒，吾寧也” (*Zhengmeng*).

Man is endowed with many reasons and principles. Therefore, man will construct himself into a complete being eventually. In that sense, man does not have flaws in his being. Having said so, one must leave no stones unturned to valorize one's potentiality if one were to free himself from flaws. When one reaches death, the principles of life come to an end. Then, one comes to feel at ease without feeling any disgrace.¹¹

Wang Shouren of the Ming Dynasty said:

The scholarly works and research will have leaking gaps in the integrity of the whole scholarship, when one finds something concerning life and death weigh on one's mind. This happens even though one transcends all the sounds and colors, and fame and taste, that is, all the worldly temptations. Thoughts of life and death come along with the living body and life breath, and they are inseparable. Therefore, it is not easy to free oneself from these thoughts. If one can break the perception in this world and look into the heart of the matter, the real entity of this mind will have a natural flow without stoppage. Then, the mind will valorize the Nature to the utmost, and reach the state of enlightenment by understanding the meaning of life, thereby constructing the authentic learning.¹²

From this observation and argument, we will understand the positions of the Confucianism as such. The fact that once one is born, one is to die is the vast changing process of the universe. Death is one thing we are to grieve over. However, it is not to be worried about nor to feel fear of. Mourning is the other expression for valuing life above anything else as well as for taking pity on the sudden discontinuation of life. To be anxious about death implies that one does not understand the principle behind the new development and new change.

This principle is what *Zhouyi (The Book of Changes)* states. The

11 人受天所賦許多道理，自然完具無欠闕。須盡得這道理無欠闕，到那死時，乃是生理已盡，安于死而無愧 (Yulei).

12 學問工夫，於一切聲利嗜好，俱能脫落殆盡，尚有一種生死念頭毫髮掛帶，便於全體有未融釋處。人於生死念頭，本從生命根上帶來，故不易去。若於此處見得破，透得過，此心全體，方是流行無礙。方是盡性至命之學 (Chuanxilu).

interaction between yin and yang constructs the controlling principle of the Way. Inheriting this principle and giving birth to next generation continuously will be the nature of goodness. Human beings should keep this in mind and inherit their forefather's nature in terms of yin and yang, thereby forming a lineage. This inheritance will produce the posterity, and the human race will continue to exist through this family lineage. This will bring the state of peacefulness the human race.

2. Taoism

Taoists and Taoism regard death and life as the trace of all things that change naturally. We can interpret this as the theory of nature. In "The Great Teacher" of *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi the Taoist said: "Life and death are due to fate and their constant succession like day and night is due to Nature, beyond the interference of man. They are the necessary character of things."¹³ Life and death is just like the process of day and night. Everything was destined to change naturally. Since man's power cannot interfere this natural process, it is needless from the beginning to have this in mind.

In *Zhuangzi* again, the Taoist remarked:

Life is the same as death, and death is the beginning of life. But who knows its origin? The life of a human being is the condensation of the material force (qi). When qi is condensed, it becomes life. When qi is scattered, it becomes death. If life and death are like this, what is the use for the anxiety? Therefore, all things belong to One. Because although the beautiful things are exquisite and the ugly things are dirty among all things, the dirty can transform themselves into the exquisite, and the exquisite into the dirty. Therefore, "The real thing that exists in the whole universe is only qi (material force)."¹⁴

13 "死生，命也。其有夜旦之常，天也。人之有所不得與，皆物之情也" (*Zhuangzi*).

14 生也死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其紀？人之生，氣之聚也。聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為徒，吾又何患？故萬物一也。是其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐。臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐，故曰“通天下—氣耳” (*Zhuangzi*).

In “The Equality of Things” of *Zhuang Zi*, Zhuang Zi said:

How do I know that the love of life is not a delusion? How do I know that the hate of death is not like a man who lost his home when young and does not know where his home is to return to? Li Chi was the daughter of the border warden of Ai. When the King of Chin first got her, she wept until the bosom of her dress was drenched with tears. But when she came to the royal residence, shared with the king his luxurious couch and ate beef and pork, she regretted that she had wept. How do I know that the dead will not repent having previously craved for life?¹⁵

In short, *Zhuangzi* insists that there is nothing to be sad about death. *Zhuangzi*'s argument is closely related to the following idea: “nature embodies me, makes me labor by giving me life, makes me comfortable by aging, and lets me take a rest by giving me death. Therefore, when I take life good, I mean to take death good.”¹⁶ Death is the same as life, and the difference between life and death depends upon the gathering and scattering of qi. Therefore, life and death both of which are inscrutable¹⁷ cannot change me,¹⁸ nevertheless, and I have reason neither to rejoice in life nor to hate death.¹⁹ This is all about the death and life from the Taoist standpoint. Taoism inherits the naturalism of Taoists, and attempts to understand and transform the Taoist view of unity (unity of life and death, unity of object and subject) into a religion of “spiritual peace and enlightenment.”

Taoism is intimately related to the basic structure of Chinese culture. First of all, Taoism derives its origin from the Huang Lao religious movement in the early Han Dynasty. Taoism is also connected to such traditional beliefs

15 予惡乎知說生之非惑邪？予惡乎知惡死之非弱喪而不知歸者邪？麗之媼，艾封人之子也。晉國之始得之也，涕泣沾襟，及其至於王所，與王同筐床，食芻豢而後，悔其泣也。予惡乎知夫死者不悔其始之蘄生乎？(*Zhuangzi*).

16 “夫大塊載我以形，勞我以生，佚我以老，息我以死。故善吾生者，乃所以善吾死也”(*Zhuangzi*).

17 死生無變於己 (*Zhuangzi*).

18 死生亦大矣，而不得與之變 (*Zhuangzi*).

19 不知說生，不知惡死 (*Zhuangzi*).

as nature worship, ancestor worship, ghost worship, and is mixed with Confucian ethical principles, Mozi's realistic utilitarianism, the theory of cosmic dual principles and five elements, and the theory of prophecy based upon the former cosmic theory. In their practices, Taoism applies such methods as shamanistic spiritualism, prophecy, ritual for rain, curing diseases, astrology, and invocation of the dead spirits.

Taoists value the magical practices of Taoist hermits, and they believe in the allegorical stories of the hermits which appeared in *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*, and search for the evidence in their research. Above all, Taoists paid attention to those practical methods for becoming the hermits, such as body discipline though breath control and physical exercises, taking mysterious medicinal herbs, and developing abdomen breath exercise, and what not. They also lay stress on the hygienic food.

One can find the central ideology of the Chinese philosophy, in the ideals and practical methods of Taoism. The central ideology is based upon the belief that man and nature are in good harmony because they are same in their nature and structure. Man is a microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm. To investigate the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm is the crux in Chinese thoughts. In this context, Taoism attempts to investigate this corresponding relationship in the appearance of human beings in this world as well as to believe in the results of this investigation. The purpose of the breath control and the method of taking hygienic food is to comply with the cosmic rhythm.

Man and nature do not happen to have a mechanical and superficial relationship by accident. Rather, they are organically interrelated. Therefore, a mere incident between them will cause a great impact upon the whole. Man's slightest individual fault will block or reverse the whole flow of the nature. Meanwhile, if man observes spontaneously the natural law of being, the cosmos will reach an harmonious state, all things in nature will become bountiful, and human beings will live in peace. Thus, the ground of Taoism does not lie in the spiritual transcendence, but rather in human attempts to lead righteous and happy lives as well as to solve various practical problems

in mental desire and daily lives.

Yang Xiong (53 BCE - 18 CE) of The Han Dynasty once remarked, “Every living being is to die, and things with a beginning will eventually have an ending. This is the Way (Tao) of Nature.”²⁰ He continues to say: “Someone said, ‘If a man regards life and death as the same, poverty and richness as the same, and nobleness and baseness as the same, then how do you think of him?’ Yang Xiong answered: ‘Do you think the man who said this feels any dread? If he truly does so, I would say I will make light of what the sages said.’”²¹ By saying this, Yang Xiong is suggesting that if a man have the attitude of enjoying life as he lives and of accepting death calmly when he dies, he will regard the man’s attitude as the right thing.

However, the origin of both Taoists and Taoism are based upon the idea that life results from the energy or vital force (qi) being gathered together, and that, therefore, there will be no pleasure in life, because life is something superfluous or a bump. Death is the result of the energy being scattered, and, therefore, nothing to worry about, because it is like a boil festered and broken. “They regard life as a ward or a bump, and death as a boil festered and broken. Then, how these people can know whether there will be a priority in terms of “better or worse” in death and life?”²²

Therefore, life and death is one and the same.²³ According to *Zhuangzi*, “One can neither avoid the life that is coming, nor prevent it from going.”²⁴ “Life is a temporary housing for a brief period, and it is because we rent it temporarily. Life is kind of dust or a particle. Death and life is like night and day.”²⁵

Then, the borders the Taoists desire to cross are: 1) they can understand

20 “有生者必有死，有始者必有終，自然之道也” (*Fayan*).

21 “或曰，‘人有齊死生，同貧富，等貴賤，如何?’ 曰，‘作此者其有懼乎? 信死生齊，貧富同，貴賤等，則吾以聖人為囂囂’” (*Fayan*).

22 “彼以生為附贅懸疣，以死為決疢潰癰。夫若然者，又惡知死生先後之所在?” (*Zhuangzi*).

23 以死生為一條 (*Zhuangzi*).

24 “生之來不能却，其去不能止” (*Zhuangzi*).

25 “生者，假借也，假之而生。生者塵垢也。死生為晝夜” (*Zhuangzi*).

the ecstasy or reach the state of enlightenment only after they forget their lives as the external things; 2) they can reach the state of the Way (Tao) only after they reach the enlightenment; 3) they can reach the transcendence in which there is no distinction between then and now only after they see the state of the Way as Oneness; 4) they can enter the state in which there is neither death nor life only after they transcend then and now.²⁶

3. Buddhism

Buddhism tries to understand human beings based upon the concept of “life.” All beings with life are sentient beings. According to *Zaahanjing*, “All the sentient beings are tinged, attached and tied up with color or form. Therefore, they are called sentient beings. All the sentient beings are tinged, attached and tied up with sense, perception, attitude, and response. Therefore, they are called sentient beings.”²⁷ In fact, all the sentient beings are those who are tied up with the metempsychosis or transmigration because of their attachment.

There are innumerable sentient beings and therefore many kinds of classifications. However, they are generally classified into six destinies and four lives. Six destinies include 1) the sentient beings who lead their painful lives in the inferno on account of evil doings in their previous lives; 2) famished devils who are always hungry; 3) all the beasts excluding human beings; 4) ill-natured querulous devils, named asura; 5) the sentient beings such as human beings; and 6) those beings in heaven. Four births include 1) oviparous birth (by egg); 2) viviparous birth by embryo; 3) birth by humidity such as mosquito, frog, and turtle; 4) accidental birth without trace such as ghosts or goblins. Accordingly, the life in Buddhism is very comprehensive to include all the lives ranging from all the animals and human beings in our experiential world to such religious beings as the sentient beings in the

26 1) 已外生矣，而後能朝徹；2) 朝徹而後能見獨；3) 見獨而後能無古今；4) 無古今而後入于不死不生 (Zhuangzi).

27 “於色染著纏綿，名曰衆生。於受，想，行，識染著纏綿，名曰衆生” (T.2.40a6-8).

inferno, asura the ill-natured devils, and sentient beings in heaven.

However, one should pay attention to the unique classificatory understanding of plants in terms of non-living beings in the early Buddhism. The classification system in Buddhism does not depend upon the living activity, but rather upon the mental function. This classification system is closely related to the concept of nirvana (Buddhist deliverance), the final point of Buddhistic directionality. Those beings that can practice for achieving karma, metempsychosis, and nirvana can be classified into living beings.

In Buddhism, there is no nature which cannot change in human beings. Human beings are destined to transmigrate in accordance with their karma or what they did in their lifetime, and they can free themselves from the bondage of metempsychosis by their own efforts.

In Buddhism, man is understood as a being that consists of five factors: form, sense, perception, attitude, and response. Form or color consists of four elements such as earth, water, fire, and wind. Sense refers to all the physical and mental sensibility plus sensation that is constructed as a result of the combination of six sense organs (such as eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and six sense objects (such as image, sound, smell, taste, and touch). Perception refers to the function of understanding. Attitude signifies tendency or intentionality, and it is the subject which begets karma or retribution for the deeds of a previous life. Response is a reaction which occurs as a result of meeting an object that corresponds to one among the six sense organs and six sense objects. Among these five factors, there is nothing permanent. Thus, “anatman” or no-self. No self is permanent. Self only exists as one flow that changes and sustains. This means that there is no determined nature. So all the sentient beings are not predetermined beings, but beings to be constructed. All sentient beings can reach nirvana by means of their own karma, or they can fall into the inferno.

All the sentient beings are not endowed originally with a certain predetermined nature and appearance. Then, how does the human beings of the present day exist with particular nature and appearance? Because of karma. According to *Abhidharmakośa-śāstra* (*Abhidharma Storehouse*

Treatise), there are three kinds of karma: physical activity, linguistic activity, and mental activity. Besides, karma can also be divided in accordance with the motivation of the subject into three: 1) that which occurs from the external stimulation, 2) that which occurs from the conscious motive, and 3) that occurs from the unconscious motive.

The most important factor in karma is the thinking and intention of the agent who acts. However, not everything can occur in accordance with the will of the agent. The agent is continuously influenced by and influencing many surrounding conditions simultaneously. While undergoing this process, the conditions of the agent will change incessantly. The appearance of a man at each moment is what he has constructed in the interrelations among the surrounding conditions of himself, that is, the karma. Therefore, metempsychosis has occurred always already. It does not mean only the transmigration of the body after death.

Then, what is the proper way to become a true being to free oneself from metempsychosis? Eight right ways (right view, right thought, right words, right action, right lifestyle, right endeavor, right memory, and right meditation) and three practices (discipline, meditation, and wisdom) are the answer. These eight right ways and three practices should be done by oneself. In fact, man is a being who can free himself from metempsychosis by his own effort.

All the sentient beings including human beings sustain their lives in the interrelationship with other beings. Here we can raise a question of what might be a proper attitude in dealing with other sentient beings. In short, the proper attitude of Buddhism is: “Do not torment or hurt other living beings.” I would like to quote a statement in *Dhammapada*:

All living beings are afraid of violence /
 All living beings are afraid of death.
 Keep this in mind,
 And do not kill or let others kill innocent living beings.

All living beings are afraid of violence /

All living beings love life per se to the utmost.
Keep this in mind,
And do not kill or let others kill innocent living beings.

As we have seen in the above, Buddhism grasps human beings as autonomous beings who construct themselves by means of their own willful decisions and actions, and suggests non-violence and no killing among living beings as ideal virtue. All the living beings are not closed beings. They are open for potential transformations. Human beings are neither complete nor determined. It depends upon how to use one's mind.

How does Buddhism overcome the death? In Buddhism, there is a formula which consists of previous life, this life, next life or life after death. Buddhism is very rational in this formula. This formulation articulates that "Your past can be known when one sees your present, and your future will be seen when one sees what you are doing now." This is what you call "metempsychosis" or the transmigration of souls. Buddhism attempts to overcome the death through the metempsychosis. This process of overcoming the death through metempsychosis will be followed by ethical consciousness.

IV. Closing Remarks

So far, we have an overview of how the issue of death or of overcoming the death has been reflected in the philosophy and religion of the east and the west. The deeper and the better we understand the issue of the death, the farther and the more we can extend our lives. Death is the other side of the coin of life. One must not be afraid of death. One must not make light of it, either. The bottomline is that death is as much worthwhile as life. Behind this key point is required the ethical consciousness which is based upon pure sentiment. However, the pure sentiment has been changed now, so that the new ethical consciousness should be arranged in accordance with the degree of change.

Abbreviation

- T *Taisho shinshu daizokyo* (大正新修大藏經: *Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon*), Ed. by Takakasu, Junjiro, et al (高楠順次郎). Tokyo: Taisho Issaikyo Kankokai, 1924-1935.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

- Chuanxilu* (C) 傳習錄
 Ceng Shen (C) 曾申
 Ceng Yuan (C) 曾元
 Cengzi (C) 曾子
Chunqiu zuoshichuan (C) 春秋 左氏傳
 Fan Xuanzi (C) 范 宣子
 Fayan (C) 法言
 Han (C) 漢
 Huang Lao (C) 黃老
 Jisun (C) 季孫
 Lezhengzi Chun (C) 樂正子 春
 Liezi (C) 列子
Liji (C) 禮記
 Liu Xiang (C) 劉 向
Lunyu (C) 論語
 Mengzi (C) 孟子
 Ming (C) 明
 Mozi (C) 墨子
 Qi (C) 氣
Shijing (C) 詩經
Shuoyuan (C) 說苑
 Shusun Bao (C) 叔孫 豹
 Song (C) 宋
 Wang Shouren (C) 王 守仁
 Xunzi (C) 荀子
 Yang Xiong (C) 揚 雄

- Yulei* (C) 語類
Zaahanjing (C) 雜阿含經
Zhang Hengqu (C) 張 橫渠
Zhang Zai (C) 張 載
Zhangzi quanshu (C) 張子全書
Zhengmeng (C) 正蒙
Zhouyi (C) 周易
Zhu Xi (C) 朱 熹
Zigong (C) 子貢