

DEATH AND PHILOSOPHY

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DEATH AND DETACHMENT

Montaigne, Zen, Heidegger and the Rest

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It is all over.

Montaigne¹

Socrates' characterization of the philosophical enterprise as 'practising dying' epitomizes a major way of understanding the phenomenon of death in the Western tradition. This way, I evade death's sting by dying to the world in advance, dissociating myself from the body, so that when physical death arrives I am no longer home to receive it. Indeed according to the Orphic strain of thinking, so prominent in Plato's *Phaedo*, as soul I am *never* really at home in the body. Similar strategies are employed by several schools in the Asian traditions, where the idea is to die away from the world and detach from the body in order to identify with the ultimate, transcendent Reality, to be reborn into the world beyond, or cross over to the yonder shore of Nirvana. While this shift in my way of being offers, when well executed, a satisfactory way of dealing with my mortality, it is obvious that the victory over death is Pyrrhic—in so far as it deprives me of the full enjoyment of life.

In both Western and Asian traditions, however, we find ways of understanding death that are opposed to these modes of transcendence, and for which death is to be understood as an integral part of life, an ever-present aspect that is normally kept hidden. What is recommended is a detachment from life that somehow reverses itself, such that one re-enters life with heightened vitality—as in the Zen master's exhortation to 'live having let go of life'. The ability to *live* 'having let go of life' (to live, rather than merely exist) turns out to depend on an understanding of the radically *momentary* nature of human existence.²

Though it is not immediately obvious how one could be fully *in* this world having taken one's leave of it, or live a truly vital life after severing one's attachments to the body, a number of thinkers have developed such an existential conception (and practice) of death: namely, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in Europe, and Dōgen, Shōsan, and Nishitani in Japan. Comparisons admittedly lose some of their force when the thinkers and ideas are abstracted from their historical contexts, and scepticism is generally justified in cases where disparate philosophers are said to be 'saying the same things about the same things'. But even though death can be regarded as a cultural construct, the similarities in attitude and response to the prospect of death are striking. There is a sense in which the engagement with death as what Jaspers called a 'limit-situation' reaches something basic in human existence.

A matter of life-and-death

A cursory survey of philosophical views of death in the Western and East-Asian traditions reveals a general contrast between regarding death as an event external to life and which brings it to an end, and seeing it as a constant complement or concomitant to life. In classical Daoism, for example, life and death are considered interdependent opposites that belong together as *yang* and *yin*. In the *Daodejing* ordinary people are said to miss these close relations, ignoring death or treating it lightly because of their preoccupation with life and its largess.³ The interdependence of life and death is a prominent theme in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, as exemplified in the line ‘Simultaneously with being alive one dies’, in the words put into the mouth of Laozi concerning ‘recognising death and life as a single strand’, and in the attribution to death and life of ‘the constancy of morning and evening’.⁴

There are some remarkable parallels to these ideas in the thought of a near-contemporary of Laozi’s in Greece, namely Heraclitus, where life and death figure prominently among various pairs of independent opposites. Fragment 88 (Diels), for example, reads: ‘The same: living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old. For these transposed are those, and those transposed again are these.’⁵ But although Plato adduces some Heraclitean arguments from opposites in his discussion of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, the general drift in subsequent Western thinking has been away from understanding existence as a continual cycle of generation and destruction (as seems natural to Buddhist as well as Daoist thinkers) in the direction of seeing death as something absolutely other than life. This drift was encouraged by most Christian thinking on the topic—though it was resisted by a few heterodox figures, some of whom were influenced by Presocratic thought.

In Buddhist philosophy one of the ‘three characteristics of existence’ is *impermanence* (Sanskrit: *anitya*; Japanese: *mujō*); a refrain that echoes throughout the tradition being: ‘All dharmas [elements of existence] are impermanent.’ All existence—human life naturally included—is understood as a beginning- and endless cycle of arising and perishing, generation and extinction, being born and dying away (what the Japanese call *shōmetsu*) at every moment. This idea, as expressed in the dictum *setsuna-shōmetsu* (‘Everything perishes as soon as it arises’), is central to the philosophy of Dōgen Kigen (1200–53), who reiterates frequently: ‘Life arises and perishes instantaneously from moment to moment.’⁶ Regarded as the founder of the Sōtō School of Zen Buddhism, Dōgen is perhaps the profoundest thinker in the Japanese tradition.

Given the centrality of the idea of arising-perishing, when Dōgen says that ‘to understand birth-and-death [*shōji*] clearly is the matter of the greatest importance for a Buddhist’, he means that birth-and-death is to be understood not only on the traditional model of *samsara* as the ‘macro-cycle’, as it were, of death-and-rebirth, but also as conditioning every moment of each human life.⁷ This means that life and death (the Japanese *shō* means ‘life’ as well as ‘birth’) are not mutually exclusive opposites but are rather deeply interfused:

There is life in death, and there is death in life... This is not contrived by man wilfully but acted by Dharma [cosmic law] naturally... Although we have not left life, we already see death. Although we have not yet

discarded death, we already meet life. Life does not obstruct death, death does not obstruct life.’⁸

One finds a similar emphasis on death in the teachings of a later Zen master, Suzuki Shōsan (1579–1655), who became a monk only in his forties, having lived the first part of his life as a samurai, during which time he served and fought in the army of the great Tokugawa Ieyasu. Though he himself was ordained—he ordained himself in fact—he did not especially recommend the reclusive life to his audience, advocating the practice of Buddhist compassion in a more secular form of Zen. Thanks to his earlier career as a warrior during one of the bloodier periods in Japan’s history, and since his primary audience consisted of the common people, Shōsan made the engagement with death—as something every human being has to face—central to his teachings. He exhorts his students to ‘rouse death-energy [*shiki*]’ since this process can be ‘the beginning of freedom from birth and death’.⁹ The juxtaposition of *shi* (death) with *ki* (energy) is striking, in so far as *ki* (Chinese: *ch’i*, or *qi*) is the vital energy that sustains the living body. However, since *ki* animates not just human beings but the entire universe, the dissolution of a living body signifies (as it does for the Daoists) a reconfiguration rather than an extinction of vital energies.

It was perhaps thanks to the revisioning of death that had taken place during the Renaissance in Europe that the ideas of a near-contemporary of Shōsan’s, Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), should have been so revolutionary in that context. Montaigne’s *Essays* are remarkable not only for the existential attitude toward death they embody (a stance strikingly similar to Shōsan’s), but also for the author’s conception of human existence as a flux of discontinuous moments or instants, on which consciousness imposes an appearance of duration (a conception strikingly similar to Dōgen’s). Although the title of Montaigne’s classic essay ‘That to philosophize is to learn to die’ invokes the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, and most of the many quotations are from the Stoics, there is a distinctive strain in his thinking about death that, as it were, brings it *back to life*. Near the end, the voice of ‘Nature’ takes over and addresses Montaigne’s audience, as she has presumably advised the author:

Death is the condition of your creation, it is a part of you; [in being frightened by death] you are fleeing from your own selves. This being of yours that you enjoy is equally divided between death and life... The constant work of your life is to build death. You are in death while you are in life...during life you are dying.¹⁰

There is a remarkable anticipation here of a modern conception of death that is quite different from ancient and medieval understandings of the phenomenon. For the ancients, in the words attributed to Thales, *to pan empsuchon*: the entire universe is ensouled, animated by life; and thus death is the puzzling counterweight to the vital thrust of the cosmos. But, as Nietzsche observes of us moderns: ‘Our “death” is a quite different death.’¹¹ Since Descartes deflated the world soul, *anima mundi*, by denying that even animals (let alone plants and stars) had souls, clearing the way for the modern scientific conception of the cosmos as lifeless particles in motion, the universe has become a less hospitable place. As one of Nietzsche’s crazier characters asks of the inhabitants of the

post-Copernican world: ‘Are we not wandering as through an infinite nothingness? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Hasn’t it become colder?’¹² After such a shift it is *life* rather than death that seems to call for an explanation—or perhaps only if one insists on understanding them as opposites. ‘Let us be wary of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a species of the dead, and a very rare species.’¹³ Nietzsche suggests that we misunderstand the nature of the dead world because we consider it only from the perspective of the sentient beings we ourselves are. From the proper perspective, the prospect of our return to the inorganic state becomes the opposite of depressing—as is clear from a number of notes Nietzsche wrote around the time he was working on the *The Gay Science*:

The ‘dead’ world! eternally in motion and without erring, force against force!...It is a *festival* to go from this world across into the ‘dead world’...Let us see through this comedy [of sentient being] and thereby *enjoy* it! Let us *not* think of the return to the inanimate as a regression!...*Death* has to be reinterpreted! We thereby *reconcile* ourselves with what is actual, with the dead world.¹⁴

If we see through the comedy of human existence to its inorganic backdrop, we realize that the return to the inanimate is not a regression that takes place at the end of life but rather a recurrence going at every moment.

One of the heirs of Nietzsche’s thinking about death is Heidegger, even though he rarely mentions Nietzsche in connection with that topic. The early ‘existential conception’ of death developed in *Being and Time* may be summed up in the statement: ‘*One does not look far enough* when “life” is made the problem and death considered *occasionally in addition*.’¹⁵ And in a later essay Heidegger cites a poetic evocation of the complementary relationship between life and death, in the form of a passage from a letter of Rilke’s from the early twenties.

Like the moon, so life surely has a side that is constantly turned away from us, and which is not life’s opposite, but its completion to perfection, to plenitude, to the truly whole and full sphere and globe of *Being*. I shall not say that one should *love* death; but one should love life with such magnanimity, and without calculating exceptions, that one involuntarily always includes death (as the averted half of life) and loves it along with life...It is thinkable that death stands infinitely nearer to us than life itself.¹⁶

One is reminded here not only of Heidegger’s contention that what is nearest to us (*das Nächste*) is not beings but Being, or Nothing, but also of the Buddhist conception of nothingness that is central to the work of Nishitani Keiji—for whom ‘the field of emptiness’ opens up on the ‘absolute *near* side’ of human existence.¹⁷ Correspondingly, there is nothing nearer to life than death:

From the very outset life is at one with death. This means that all living things, just as they are, can be seen under the Form of death...The aspect

of life and the aspect of death are equally real, and reality is that which appears now as life and now as death.¹⁸

The death in-breath

Dōgen is known as an ardent advocate of sitting meditation, which he calls ‘zazen-only’ (*shikantaza*), as an indispensable element in Buddhist practice. He instructs his students to sit in an upright position, with ‘ears and shoulders, nose and navel’ vertically aligned. ‘After the bodily position is in order, also regulate your breathing. If a thought arises, take note of it and then dismiss it.’¹⁹

Although Dōgen does not himself draw the analogy, the rising and falling of the breath and the arising and subsiding of thoughts—a primary focus of awareness in many forms of Buddhist meditation—are mimetic of the continual birth and death of human existence as well as the generation and extinction of the cosmos in general. As Nietzsche notes, in a brief meditation on night: ‘As soon as the night breaks in, our sensation of the nearest things is transformed...The breathing of the sleeper, its terrifying rhythm...[in which] when the breath sinks and almost dies out into the stillness of death...night persuades us to death.’²⁰ The utter contingency of the breath, its rise and fall; its inevitable, final fall; the lack of necessity linking exhalation and the next breath, which may always be the last. The moment between, the still, turning point between in and out, shadowed in the chiasm—and always potential chasm—between systole and diastole, and the *on* that comes after an *off* in the firing of neurons. (‘Brain death’ as a criterion, all systems stop—just as one is said to ‘breathe one’s last’.) And so the alternating current of life appears to flow on, oscillating over the abyss, and flowing off continually.

If meditation practice often focuses on the breath, it is not exclusively the breath of life. Shōsan, for instance, talks of being on occasion ‘oppressed by death-energy’ such that it is ‘difficult to breathe’.²¹ In describing the phenomenon of *Angst*, in which one comes face-to-face with the nothingness of one’s existence, Heidegger says that it ‘constricts and oppresses one’s breathing’.²² (Similarly, for Freud, anxiety stems from a constriction of the flow of vital forces or a blockage of sexual energies.)

Death in life

When Nietzsche wrote that we should be wary of saying that death is opposed to life, this advice is based on his readings in the biology of his time; and advances made in the biological sciences shortly after his death appear to have corroborated and encouraged further philosophical thinking about death along existential lines. In the course of characterizing in *Being and Time* what he calls ‘biological-ontical’ research into death, Heidegger cites a work from 1924 by a former colleague at Marburg, Eugen Korschelt, *Lebensdauer, Altern und Tod* (‘Life-span, ageing and death’), which argues for the essential ‘immanence’ of death in higher organisms.²³ This idea, which appears to be confirmed by subsequent biological research, makes nonsense of the view that would see individual life as only contingently limited by death in the faith that progress in medical technology might come up with means to prolong life indefinitely.

Nietzsche was intrigued by the power that the shift from a fantasy of mere contingency to a conviction of absolute certainty leads to ‘the thought of death’ (the title of one of his most moving aphorisms): ‘It gives me a melancholy pleasure to live in the midst of this jumble of little lanes, of needs, of voices: how much enjoyment, impatience, and desire, how much thirsty life and intoxication with life comes to light at every moment!’²⁴ He was living in Genoa when he wrote this, having come to appreciate the exuberant vitality of life on the Mediterranean coast, which contrasted so strongly with the more sepulchral tone in his original home in the north of Germany. But the contrast with the goal toward which that exuberant life is headed is even greater:

And yet it will soon be so still for all these noisy, living, life-thirsty people! How his shadow stands behind each one of them, as his dark fellow traveller! It is always as in the last moment before the departure of an emigrant ship: there is more to say than ever before, the hour is at hand, and the ocean and its desolate silence are waiting impatiently behind all of this noise—so covetous and certain of their prey. We are shadowed all along the way by this silent fellow traveller, though we prefer to ignore its presence, though ever surrounded by the ocean of death.²⁵

This thought is echoed by Nishitani in a discussion of the Zen saying, ‘Death’s heads all over the field’ (of existence), which alludes to the skull possessed by all living humans. Nishitani invokes a ‘double vision’ of places burgeoning with life, such as the Ginza in Tokyo or Broadway in New York, as being simultaneously fields of death: ‘A hundred years hence, not one of the people now walking the Ginza will be alive, neither the young nor the old, the men nor the women...We can look at the living as they walk full of health down the Ginza and see, in double exposure, a picture of the dead’²⁶. He goes on to quote the lines from Eliot’s *The Wasteland* that allude to the procession of the dead in Dante’s *Inferno*:

Under the brown fog a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.²⁷

In the not too distant future, it will surely have undone us all: the departure is already underway, and soon we all join the ranks of the departed, flowing over to the dead world.

And each and every one of them supposes that the heretofore means little or nothing and that the near future is everything: hence this haste, this clamour, this drowning out and overreaching of each other! Everyone wants to be the first in this future—and yet it is death and deathly silence that are alone certain and common to all in this future!²⁸

It is as if we trip over our own skulls in our clattering eagerness to get to that state. ‘*One does not look far enough,*’ as Heidegger says. And yet Nietzsche is bemused by the way most of us ignore the opportunity for solidarity that our common mortality provides:

How strange that this sole certainty and commonality do almost nothing for people, and that nothing is *farther* from them than the feeling that they form a brotherhood of death! It pleases me to see that people want at all costs to avoid the thought of death! I should very much like to do something toward making the thought of life a hundred times *more thoughtworthy* for them.²⁹

The expression of pleasure is ironical: the point is that if people were to stop avoiding the thought of death they would find that their lives provide far more food for thought than they ever imagined.³⁰ As Nietzsche wrote earlier, addressing ‘the priests’ on the salutary effects of thanatonic contemplation: ‘The certain prospect of death could infuse every life with a delicious and fragrant drop of lightheartedness—and you wonderful apothecary-souls have turned it into a bad-tasting drop of poison which then makes the whole of life repugnant.’³¹

Such an infusion throughout the whole of life is encouraged by one of the best known proponents of ‘life philosophy’ (*Lebensphilosophie*), Georg Simmel, who argues on the basis of contemporary biological discoveries for the *immanence* of death in all living organisms. In an essay from 1918 entitled ‘Death and Immortality’ he writes:

In actuality death is bound up with life from the very beginning and from within...[Death] this opposite of life derives from nowhere else than life itself! Life itself has produced it and includes it...In every single moment of life we *are* the ones that will die, and that moment would be different if this [dying] were not our co-given condition that is somehow at work in the moment. Just as we are not already there [*da*] at the instant of our birth, but rather something of us is born continuously, so we do not first come to die in our last instant.³²

Heidegger cites this essay in developing his ‘existential conception’ of death—and indeed the discussion of death in *Being and Time* is very much grounded in this idea of Simmel’s.³³ Anticipating Heidegger’s understanding of death as an indeterminable, ever-present possibility rather than a future actuality, or certainty, Simmel considers the way death gives *form* to life: ‘It is not that [death] limits or forms our life only in the hour of death, but it is rather a formal moment of our life which colors all its contents: the limitation by death of the total life affects each one of its contents and instants.’³⁴ He sums up this theme with the statement: ‘Death reveals itself as that apparently exterior to life which is actually interior to it.’³⁵ It is interesting that Simmel should later refer to Buddhism, and to the ‘profound teaching’ of later Buddhism concerning karma and rebirth, which denies the existence of an I persisting through various configurations of actions and effects: ‘There are only thoughts and deeds, natural and impersonal as it were, which come together in a given moment into an aggregate. A later aggregate, connected with the earlier by a causal nexus, consists of precisely the ensuing effects of those earlier elements or states.’³⁶ This is the Buddhist teaching of *anatman*, or no-self, expressed in terms of the idea of the ‘codependent arising’ (*pratītya-samutpāda*) of all phenomena. This idea is equivalent to the Mahayana Buddhist notion of emptiness

(*śūnyatā*, nothingness), which is connected with the conception of the momentary nature of all existence.

For Heidegger it all hinges on our understanding of time and human ways of being in time. Our being is a 'stretching' (*Erstreckung*) through time, in so far as we always exist 'between birth and death'.³⁷ It is not, he stresses, that we exist 'actually' at one point in time and are in addition 'surrounded' by the nonactuality of our birth and death. Rather we exist 'natally' and are always 'already dying natally in the sense of being toward death'. We are thus always open in the present to the temporal horizons of the past and future; in particular, our birth and death are here now, too. For a full understanding of our being here and there—what Heidegger calls *Dasein*—as a spatio-temporal 'clearing' (*Lichtung*), we have to understand our death not as an *actual* event that will take place at some time in the future (and not right now), but as an *ever-present possibility* (a phenomenon possible at every moment). In other words death is not something we have to wait for: it already 'stands into' (*hereinsteht*) our present existence, and is 'always already included [*einbezogen*]' in our being here now.³⁸ As Nishitani puts it, at the beginning of his major work:

In the case of death, we do not face something that awaits us in some distant future, but something that we bring into the world with us at the moment we are born. Our life runs up against death at its every step; we keep one foot planted in the vale of death at all times. Our life stands poised at the brink of the abyss of nihilism, to which it may return at any moment.³⁹

Departing life

Nietzsche formulates one of the basic principles of hermeneutic distance as follows: 'Whatever you want to know and measure, you must take your leave of, at least for a while. Only when you have left the town do you see how high its towers rise above the houses.'⁴⁰ The idea is that to properly understand something one needs to distance oneself from it, at least for a time. But this is especially true of life itself: if I want to know and measure my life, I must depart it, take my leave, at least for a while. Again there is no need to wait for the end, since it is already here. This is why Nietzsche's Zarathustra is not talking about literal reincarnation when he speaks of the 'bitter dying' and being 'born anew' that are necessary for creative existence: 'Truly, through a hundred souls I went my way, and through a hundred cradles and pangs of birth. I have already taken many a farewell; I know the heartbreaking final hours.'⁴¹ And those final hours come at any and every moment.

Similarly, for Montaigne, there may be no need actively to depart, since we are already leaving at every moment as it is: 'Every minute I seem to be slipping away from myself.'⁴² The appropriate response to this condition is after all to take one's leave: 'I unbind myself on all sides; my farewells are already half made to everyone except myself. Never did a man prepare to leave the world more utterly and completely, nor detach himself from it more universally, than I propose to do.'

But the remarkable effect of such detachment—at least as practised by Montaigne, for whom ‘Death mingles and fuses with our lives throughout’⁴³—is that one finds oneself come back fully to life. ‘When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep,’ he writes, in the manner of a Zen master. As Jean Starobinski puts it: ‘Montaigne, having taken his leave, is able to see *human* life and *this* world in a new light: while still alive he enjoys a posthumous pleasure.’⁴⁴

Indeed the interplay here between letting go and retaining, and between numerous other contrary movements, is remarkably reminiscent of the attitude adopted and advocated by Dōgen in his affirmation of this ephemeral world of phenomena as Buddha-nature:

Just understand that birth-and-death itself is nirvana, and you will neither hate one as being birth-and-death nor cherish the other as being nirvana...This present birth and death itself is the life of the Buddha. If you attempt to reject it with distaste you are thereby losing the life of the Buddha. If you abide in it, attaching to birth-and-death, you again lose the life of the Buddha.⁴⁵

We find a fuller description of the process of departure and return in the writings of a later Zen master, Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), who constantly urged his readers to see into their own true nature by seeing through the illusory nature of the ego-self:

If you are not a hero who has truly seen into his own nature, don’t think that [non-ego] is something that can be known so easily...you must be prepared to let go your hold when hanging from a sheer precipice, to die and return again to life...Supposing a man should find himself in some desolate area where no one has ever walked before. Below him are the perpendicular walls of a bottomless chasm. His feet rest precariously on a patch of slippery moss, and there is no spot of earth on which he can steady himself. He can neither advance nor retreat; he faces only death.⁴⁶

The abyss gapes. One is reminded of Heidegger’s account of *Angst* in the essay ‘What Is Metaphysics?’ where he says: ‘There is no hold left...Anxiety reveals nothingness. We ‘hover’ in anxiety...Only pure being there [*Da-sein*] in the shaking of this hovering, in which there is nothing to hold on to, is still there...Being-there means: being held out into nothing.’⁴⁷ But if one sustains that hovering, letting the question ‘Why is there anything at all, and not rather nothing?’ pose itself, there comes a turn, or return, in which the terror of the experience is transformed. ‘For close by genuine anxiety as the terror of the abyss dwells awe. This clears and protects that realm of human being within which the human being dwells at home in the enduring.’⁴⁸ For Hakuin, too, the suspense, or fall, brings one—miraculous to relate—back to life: ‘Then when suddenly you return to life, there is the great joy of one who drinks the water and knows for himself whether it is hot or cold...This is known as seeing into one’s own nature.’⁴⁹ Seeing that one is, at bottom, ‘held out into nothing’, as Heidegger puts it.

Learning dying

In line with his predecessors in the Zen tradition, Hakuin takes impermanence as basic and so understands our 'own nature' as essentially *mortal*:

If you should have the desire to study Zen under a teacher and see into your own nature, you should first investigate the word *shi* [death]. If you want to know how to investigate this word, then at all times... merely investigate the koan: 'After you are dead and cremated, where has the main character gone?' Then...you will obtain the decisive and ultimate great joy.⁵⁰

In the course of a prolonged meditation on death elsewhere in his writings, Hakuin quotes Suzuki Shōsan's exhortation to concentrate on the Chinese character for 'death' (*shi*, Chinese *si*). 'Make the one graph *death* master in your heart,' writes Shōsan, 'observing it and letting go of everything else.'⁵¹

Shōsan often speaks of 'learning death' (*shi o narau*) as well as of 'guarding death' (*shi o mamoru*). As with Heidegger, who stresses that 'understanding death as an ever-present possibility' does not refer to some abstract process of thinking about or contemplating death, in talking of 'learning' death Shōsan means an experiential 'learning how' rather than an objective studying. Commenting on the use of the term *narau* by the poet Bashō, who advocates learning of the pine tree from the pine tree itself, Nishitani observes that 'it carries the sense of "taking after" something, of making an effort to stand essentially in the same mode of being as the thing one wishes to learn about'.⁵² This is just what Shōsan means by exhorting his readers to 'learn death': we can learn from death by entering into its way of being, its falling away at every moment, and thereby come to 'live having let go of life'.⁵³ Aware of how easy it is to be distracted from one's focus on death by the attractions and obligations of everyday life, Shōsan exhorts his students: 'Don't forget death and lose yourself to this world!'⁵⁴ For Heidegger, it is anxiety in the face of the nothingness of our death that brings us back from our absorption and self-dissipation in the world of our concerns.⁵⁵ 'Your vital energy wanes because you forget about death,' Shōsan tells his students. 'At this moment,' he reminds them, 'death is right before your eyes.'⁵⁶ Montaigne arrives at a similar conclusion regarding the need to familiarize death, to become a familiar of the shadow fellow traveller through a radical departure from life for its supposed opposite:

Let us rid death of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death. At every moment let us picture it in our imagination in all its aspects...It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere. Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom...He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint.⁵⁷

These are anticipations of Heidegger's notion of the optimal way of being toward one's death. For Heidegger the engagement with death as ever-present possibility liberates one

from superficial and self-deceptive conceptions of life. It is above all a dynamic encounter in which we are said to ‘precur’ or ‘preempt’ death, not just by looking forward but by *running forward* to it—an activity that goes hand in hand, or step by step, with the ‘openedness’ (*Erschlossenheit*) which ‘grants death the possibility of assuming power over’ our existence and ‘destroying every self-concealing at its root’.⁵⁸ And yet there is hardly a need to run forward to death since it already ‘stands into’ the clearing of our being here. Just as in Zen the ‘Great Death’ leads to the ‘Great Liberation’, so for Heidegger when one ‘lets death assume power’ in one’s existence, one can understand oneself ‘free for death, in the preponderant power of one’s finite freedom’.⁵⁹

Back to the moment

The crux, then, is to understand the time of our lives as *momentary*. In Nishitani’s words: ‘Life consists of a chain of “births and deaths” and in every moment arises anew and again perishes.’⁶⁰ Something very like this basic insight of the Zen tradition—that frustration comes from the attempt to hold on to the arising and dying moment, to forge the successive instants of existence into a continuity, or to impose duration onto the radically episodic flux of life—is expressed by Montaigne in terms of the illuminating pulsations of human awareness.

They say that the sun does not give off a continuous light, but that it incessantly darts new rays so thick on one another that we cannot perceive the intervals between them...Just so our soul diversely and imperceptible darts its rays...[Various things] seize our imagination and get it passionately involved for the moment, according to their character; but the turn is so quick that it escapes us...For this reason we are wrong to compose a continuous body out of all this succession of feelings.⁶¹

This is how human beings constitute a world of enduring things, things that might help foster the illusion that we, too, the composers, are enduring.

This process is a topic of frequent reflection for Nietzsche, who returns again and again in his thinking to the radically momentary nature of existence. Whereas the animal is fully absorbed in the rise and fall of the elements of existence, the human being has the capacity to remember, to experience connections between moments:

It is a wonder: the moment [*Augenblick*]*—*in a flash there, in a flash gone, before it nothing, after it nothing—nevertheless comes again as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment...The human being says ‘I remember’ and envies the animal, which forgets immediately and sees every moment really die, sink back into mist and night and be extinguished forever.⁶²

The notion of the moment is crucial to Nietzsche’s most important (and most affirmative) idea, the thought of the eternal recurrence. Understood existentially, Nietzsche’s first public intimation of this thought (in §341 of *The Joyous Wisdom*) formally anticipates

Heidegger's account of the encounter with the nothingness of death in the experience of anxiety. The crucial question there, after the demon has confronted us with the prospect of the eternal recurrence of our lives as we have lived them so far, is whether we would understand that thought as crushingly nihilistic, or else: 'Have you ever experienced an enormous moment in which you would reply to the demon: "You are a god and I have never heard anything more divine!..."'⁶³ The question, at every moment, is essentially: 'Can I act now in such a way, with an open perspective and clarity of insight into who I am, that I can will the eternal recurrence of this next moment and the entire sequence of moments that may succeed it?'

It is significant that when Nietzsche first announces this thought, in a letter to a friend, as something 'the like of which [he has] never seen before', the experience seems to instigate an unstable oscillation between life and death: 'I will have to live at least a few years longer! But at the same time, my friend, it occurs to me that I am actually living a highly dangerous life, for I am one of those machines that could *blow apart*! The intensity of my feelings makes me tremble and laugh.'⁶⁴ At the first mention of the thought of eternal recurrence in the unpublished notes, Nietzsche asks, as if enlightened by a confrontation with death: 'What are we going to do with the *rest* of our life—we who have passed most of it in a basic state of unknowing?'⁶⁵ A number of subsequent notes from this period deal with the moment and death, which prompts one to consider how this 'highest formula of affirmation' depends on a conception of time as the continual 'birth-and-death' of moments and the codependent arising and perishing of all phenomena.

In a draft for the first published announcement of the thought of eternal recurrence⁶⁶ Nietzsche imagines the cosmos as a dynamic 'world of forces' that suffers neither diminution nor equilibrium: 'it never has a moment of peace, its force and movement are equally great at all times'.⁶⁷ Assuming the cosmos is an eternal dynamism, we have to say of 'this moment': 'It was already here once, and many times before, and so will recur again, with all forces distributed exactly as they are now: and just the same for the moment that gave birth to this one, and for the moment that is the child of this one'. Here we have a vision of a world in which each moment is born from the preceding moment and dies as it gives birth to the next moment.

As if with the voice of God Nietzsche proclaims to his fellow human beings 'a great minute of time' before 'all the conditions from which you arose, in the cyclical course of the world, come together again. And then you will find again...the entire concatenation of all things.' Two notes later, he derides the human inability to think of 'becoming' as anything other than 'the transition from one enduring "dead" condition to another enduring "dead" condition. And we call what is "dead" motionless! As if there *were anything* motionless! The living is not the opposite of the dead, but a special case of it.'⁶⁸ Becoming is rather the arising and perishing of the entire concatenation of dynamic forces at every moment.

We are given a more vivid picture of individual existence within such a cosmos when Nietzsche invokes: '[T]he mystery that there is no individual, that in the smallest moment it is something different from in the next moment, and that its conditions of existence are those of countless other individuals: the *infinitely small moment* is the higher reality and truth, a lightning-image out of the eternal flux.'⁶⁹ This seems like such a classic presentation of the Buddhist idea of codependent arising that Nietzsche may be recalling

something from his earlier readings in Buddhism. In Nishitani's formulation of the Zen standpoint: 'Under every moment is...the eternity of *nothingness*...of *death* [but also] the field of emptiness as the field of the mutual interpenetration of all things.'⁷⁰

Subsequent passages in Nietzsche's notebook expand on our relation to the 'dead' world of the inorganic. Our physical constitution as living organisms makes us from the start intimate relations of this dead world: 'How distant and superior is our attitude toward what is dead, the anorganic, and all the while we are three-quarters water and have anorganic minerals in us that perhaps do more for our well- and ill-being than the whole of living society.'⁷¹ An idea that should make us slower to discriminate the quick from the dead. As 'our mother Nature' says, according to Montaigne: 'Water, earth, fire, and the other parts of this structure of mine are no more instruments of your life than instruments of your death.'⁷² Nietzsche again: 'The inorganic conditions us through and through: water, air, earth, the shape of the ground, electricity, etc. We are plants under such conditions.'⁷³ And the next note: 'My task: to dehumanize nature and then the naturalization of human beings, after they have attained the pure concept of nature.'

Nietzsche was deeply concerned with the task of renaturalizing the human being until the end of his career. In yet another passage from this notebook, he characterizes this process in terms of a realization of the imminence and immanence of death and of the momentary nature of existence in general.

We can protect ourselves only a little in the great matters: a comet could smash the sun at any moment...To the naturalizing of the human belongs readiness for the absolutely sudden and thwarting... The sudden is continuously there in the smallest thing, in every nerve; and it is precisely regular, even though it appears *to us* in time incalculable. What has *duration* is simply that whose changes we don't see, because they are too gradual and minute for us⁷⁴

At any moment to be ready for the absolutely sudden is to be, as a being with a nervous system, ready for life—as for death. Such readiness involves renouncing the immortality of the soul and also the substantiality of the ego by seeing through the illusion of duration, so as to realize our implication in the utter momentariness of natural processes, the constant Heraclitean flux of arising and perishing. Heidegger calls it 'readiness for anxiety' and a 'giving up of the self' in the realization that 'the uttermost possibility of existence' (the possibility of the absolute impossibility of any possibilities) is the innermost, the nearest possibility that stands into our existence at every moment, in the light of which all our other possibilities may be clearly distinguished.⁷⁵

If, finally, we map onto one another the views of death of the European and Japanese thinkers we have considered, a common pattern appears. Since death and life are inextricably intertwined, the best way to die is the best way to live: that is, to realize (in the dual sense of becoming aware of and making real) the radically momentary nature of our existence. If one refrains from grasping and trying to hold on, loosing attachments, the movements of departing and returning to life take place naturally. It is all over, as Montaigne says; but somehow—so far, at least—it is all back, too. And so for another moment, it is granted to us to be able to choose ourselves, in the light of the possibility of its being our last and of its eternal recurrence, once again (*da capo*).

- 16 Lama Anagarika Govinda, 'Introductory Foreword' in W.Y.Evans-Wentz (ed.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, op. cit., p. lxi.
- 17 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, New York, Samuel Weiser, 1974, p. 123.
- 18 This aristocratic conception of 'secret' is described in Alexandra David-Neel, *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1967, p. 3.
- 19 Lama Govinda comprehensively described these various realms of inner experience in *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*, Wheaton, Illinois, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1976.
- 20 See the excerpt cited in note 4 above.
- 21 Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa (trans.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, op. cit., p. 57.

9 DEATH AND DETACHMENT

- 1 Montaigne, *Essays*, 1:20. All references to Montaigne will be made by book and chapter numbers, using the translation by Donald Frame in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1958. Montaigne's ideas about time and death are illuminatingly discussed, in the context of a masterful exposition of his philosophy in general, by Jean Starobinski in his *Montaigne in Motion*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1985.
- 2 A graphic, though quite secular, example of this is to be found in Akira Kurosawa's magnificent film *Ikiru* (Living).
- 3 *Daodejing*, chapter 75—available in numerous editions, but see the translation by Robert G.Henricks, *Lao-tzu: Tao-te Ching*, New York, Ballantine, 1989.
- 4 *Zhuangzi*, chapters 2, 5, 6—see the translation by A.C.Graham, *Chuang-tz: The Inner Chapters*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981. For more on the Daoist understanding of death, see Roger Ames, 'Death as Transformation in Classical Daoism', this volume.
- 5 Fragment 93 in Charles H.Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979. In the same text, see also fragments 79 (Diels 48), 89 (D21), 92 (D62), 102 (D36) especially, as well as Kahn's helpful commentaries.
- 6 Dōgen Kigen, *Shōbōgenzō*, 'Shukke-kudoku' (Merits of monkhood) fascicle; as translated by Hin-Jee Kim in his *Dōgen Kigen—Mystical Realist*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1975, p. 198.
- 7 Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, 'Shoaku-makusa' (Not to commit evil), cited in Kim, *ibid.*, p. 214.
- 8 Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, 'Yuibutsu-yobutsu' (Only between Buddha and Buddha), and 'Shinjingakudō' (Understanding the Way through body-mind), both cited in Kim, *ibid.*, p. 226.
- 9 Suzuki Shōsan, *Warrior of Zen*, edited and translated by Arthur Braverman, New York, Kodansha International, 1994, pp. 30–1. This is a selection from *Roankyō* (Donkey-saddle bridge), a compilation of Shōsan's talks and stories about him by his disciple Echū.
- 10 Montaigne, op. cit., 1:20.
- 11 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §152. All translations from Nietzsche are my own and are based upon the texts in the *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, Munich, De Gruyter, 1980.
- 12 *The Gay Science*, §125.
- 13 *Ibid.*, §109.
- 14 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene. Fragmente 1880–1882, Sämtliche Werke*, op. cit., vol. IX, §11:70 (1881). The image of the festival appears in another passage from the same notebook: 'To be released from life and become dead nature again can be experienced as a *festival*—of the one who wants to die. To love nature! Again to revere what is dead! The dead is not the opposite

but rather the womb, the rule that has more meaning than the exception...’ (§11:125).

- 15 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York, Harper & Row, 1962., H316 (emphasis in original). This existential maxim of Heidegger’s is parallel to the ontological question he poses in ‘What Is Metaphysics?’: ‘Why is there anything at all, and not rather nothing?’ (‘Was ist Metaphysik?’, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. IX, *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1976, p. 122).
- 16 Letter of 6 January 1923, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe*, Wiesbaden, Insel-Verlag, 1950, pp. 806–7; Heidegger quotes the first sentence only in ‘Wozu Dichter?’ *Gesamtausgabe* vol. V, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1977, p. 278 (‘What Are Poets For?’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 124).
- 17 Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982; see the references to ‘near side’ in the index.
- 18 Nishitani, *ibid.*, pp. 50 and 52.
- 19 Dōgen, *Fukan-zazengi* (General advice on the principles of *zazen*), cited in Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- 20 Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, §8.
- 21 Suzuki Shōsan, *Warrior of Zen*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- 22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *op. cit.*, H186.
- 23 See David Krell’s discussion of Korschelt’s work, in his *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 91–3.
- 24 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §278.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Nishitani, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- 27 Nishitani, *ibid.*; the quoted lines are from T.S.Eliot, *The Wasteland*, ll. 60–2.
- 28 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §278.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Walter Kaufmann, in a note to his translation of this aphorism, misses the irony, since he asks the reader to note ‘the contrast with existentialism’ (*The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage Books, 1974, p. 225). This idea of Nietzsche’s seems perfectly congruent with Heidegger’s ‘existential conception’ of death, at least.
- 31 Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, §322.
- 32 Georg Simmel, ‘Tod und Unsterblichkeit’ (‘Death and immortality’), in *Lebensanschauung: Vier metaphysische Kapitel*, Munich, Dunker & Humblot, 1918, pp. 99–153, and pp. 100–1. Parts of this essay are cited and discussed by David Krell in the second chapter of *Daimon Life*, a rich source for thinking about Heidegger on the topic of death.
- 33 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *op. cit.*, H249. Heidegger’s ideas about death may also have been influenced by his conversations with the Japanese philosophers who visited and worked with him during the Twenties: see my essay ‘Rising Sun over Black Forest: Heidegger’s Japanese Connections’, in Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East-Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. Graham Parkes, London, Routledge, 1996, especially the section ‘Tanabe Hajime and a Philosophy of Death’.
- 34 Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.
- 37 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *op. cit.*, H374.
- 38 *Ibid.*, H248, H259.
- 39 Nishitani, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–4.
- 40 *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, §307.
- 41 Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, §2.2 (‘On the Blessed Isles’).

- 42 Montaigne, op. cit., 1:20.
- 43 Ibid., 3:13.
- 44 Starobinski, op. cit., p. 242. The whole section entitled ‘The Masterpiece of Living’ is a superb exposition of Montaigne’s attitudes toward death and life.
- 45 *Dōgen, Shōbōgenzō*, ‘Shōji’ (Birth-Death), in Kim, op. cit.
- 46 *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, trans. Philip B.Yampolsky, New York, Columbia University Press, 1971, p. 135.
- 47 Heidegger, ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’, op. cit., pp. 114–15.
- 48 Heidegger, ‘Nachwort zu: “Was Ist Metaphysik?”’, (1943)’, in *Wegmarken*, op. cit., p. 103.
- 49 *The Zen Master Hakuin*, op. cit., p. 133.
- 50 Ibid., p. 219.
- 51 Suzuki Shōsan, op. cit., p. 61.
- 52 Nishitani, op. cit., p. 128.
- 53 Suzuki Shōsan, op. cit., p. 59.
- 54 Ibid., p. 61.
- 55 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., H40.
- 56 Suzuki Shōsan, op. cit., p. 75.
- 57 Montaigne, op. cit., 1:20.
- 58 *Being and Time*, op. cit., H310.
- 59 Ibid., H384.
- 60 Nishitani, op. cit., p. 181.
- 61 Montaigne, op. cit., 1:38.
- 62 Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, §1.
- 63 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §341.
- 64 Nietzsche, letter to Heinrich Köselitz of 14 August 1881.
- 65 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene. Fragmente*, op. cit. §11 [141].
- 66 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §341.
- 67 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene. Fragmente*, op. cit., §11 [148].
- 68 Ibid., §11 [150].
- 69 Ibid., §11 [156].
- 70 Nishitani, op. cit., p. 230 and p. 159. The best source on Nietzsche’s acquaintance with Buddhism is Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1981. See also my essay ‘Nietzsche and East Asian Thought: Influences, Impacts, and Resonances’, in Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M.Higgins (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 356–83.
- 71 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene. Fragmente*, op. cit., §11 [207].
- 72 Montaigne, op. cit., 1:20.
- 73 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene. Fragmente*, op. cit., §11[210].
- 74 Ibid., §11 [228].
- 75 *Being and Time*, H264, H302.

10 DEATH AND METAPHYSICS

- 1 *Being and Time*, trans. J.Macquarrie and E.Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1973, H250–1. Numerals prefixed by ‘H’ refer to the pagination of the seventh German edition given in the margins of this translation.
- 2 For a more detailed discussion of the role of death in making possible Dasein’s authentic