

# THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL AND THE PROBLEM OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE ZEN-BUDDHIST THOUGHT OF DOGEN

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In this paper I would like to consider above all Dogen's refutation of the Indian, non-Buddhist theory of the immortality of the soul and the transitoriness of the body, which is based upon the distinctions between essence and appearance and between soul and body. At the same time I will especially develop his basic concept that life and death as nirvana form a non-duality, which for its part is based on the idea of the absolute present as the time of current action.<sup>1</sup> In order to accomplish this, I will address, first, the theory of the immortality of the soul; second, Dogen's refutation of it on the basis of the non-duality of essence and appearance and that of soul and body in all things; and third, his interpretation of the relationship of life and death as nirvana (calmness) in every moment of action. In conclusion, I will explain how the theory of the absolute present as the time (moment) of present action is related to the idea of karma, which implies a kind of causal and historical action theory, and whether there is a contradiction here. The paper is structured as follows: 1) The problem of the immortality of the soul, 2) Dogen's refutation of the theory that the body is transitory and the soul immortal, 3) The problem of life and death as nirvana in Dogen, and 4) Action in the absolute present and its historicity.

## 1. The Problem of the Immortality of the Soul

What is the soul? What is the spirit? What is the self? Upon what is the self or spirit based? Although we can presume the existence of the soul or spirit from the awareness of the self, bodily actions, and different sensations that are considered to be effects of the soul or spirit, we can by no means know what it is. For we can neither see nor touch the so-called soul, as we can the body. It could

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the following investigations of the immortality of the soul and of the problem of life and death: K. Arifuku, *Shôbôgenzô ni shitashimu: Dogen no shizenshisô* [Introduction to *Shôbôgenzô: Dogen's Theory of Nature*] (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1991), pp. 19-39; K. Arifuku, *Shôbôgenzô no kokoro* [The Spirit of *Shôbôgenzô*], NHK Books, No. 701 (Tokyo: Nihon-hôshô-shuppanyôkai, 1994, pp. 79-100.

be that there is really nothing behind the self or mind, no substance, as is commonly meant by the word "soul." We humans, however, necessarily ask about it when we wish to know, according to causal laws, about the reason and the cause of the effects of our thinking, acting, and feeling self.

These questions are related to the additional question whether the soul or mind ceases to function after the death of the body? That must be true, if the soul and the body are inseparable from one another. In that case, the soul must stand and fall with the body. But if one thinks of the soul as the substratum of mental effects, it is not so simple to clarify the situation. In the religions, the salvation of the soul alone was, is, and remains the eternal mission and final end. It is a completely natural and common way of thinking, on one hand, to consider the body indeed to be mortal, but on the other hand, to regard the soul as immortal and non-transitory. The further one goes back in time, the more certainly one can find this belief in the immortality of the soul. However, not only primitive people, but also even European philosophers since Plato have wanted to believe in and prove it.

What is the soul, understood as the subject of immortality, anyway? According to a standard Japanese dictionary<sup>2</sup> the Japanese word "*tamashii*" or "*tama*" ("soul") means the entity and its principle that indwells mostly human persons and animals, but now and then also plants, that produces the effects of the spirit and gives life, and that can, according to general belief, exist persistently by itself apart from the body after the body's death. There is an on-going debate concerning whether plants possess souls. Beyond that, it is not so easy to argue about the existence of the soul and its immortality in more detail and more precisely. In reference to the definition of the soul, the contrast and close connection of body and soul are interesting and characteristic, which is why one acknowledges the soul above all in animals. For, although the animal as a moving thing (*Dô-Butsu*) is a corporal being, one presumes a soul in its body, because its movements are thoroughly self-controlled. Therefore, another Japanese word for "soul" is "*tama*," which actually means "ball." The ancient Japanese imagined the soul to be a round entity, self-enclosed and perfect, which could fly in the air like a bird.

Aristotle defines the essence of the soul, for example, as "the principle of animal life" and "the cause or source of the living body."<sup>3</sup> The English verb "animate," which is derived from the Latin "*anima*," means "support," "inspire," "encourage," etc. The adjective "inanimate" means "lifeless," "inorganic," "non-living." Furthermore, Aristotle identifies movement and sensation as the two most important characteristics distinguishing things that have a soul

<sup>2</sup> *Nihon-Kokugo-Daijiten*, 20 Vols. (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1972-76); *Kôjien* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul (De Anima)*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 402a, 415b.

from things that do not.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the soul designates the properties that make up a living being or life itself, so that the soul is seen as the impulse and source of corporal and living activities. Thus, the soul is that by which we live, perceive, and think in the primary sense.<sup>5</sup>

I will attempt to explain this interplay of separation and relationship by looking at the three following *tanka* (Japanese poems with thirty-one syllables), in which the separation of the soul from the body and the influence of the soul on the body play a role.

Hyôbukyo-no-miya writes: "*Tamashii ya kusamura goto ni kayou ran, nobe no mani mani naku koe zo suru.*"<sup>6</sup> This means: "Oh my soul! It would reach you through the bush. Here and there in the field I hear chirping voices that correspond to it." I must explain this poem in more detail: Could the voice of my soul reach you? I hear chirping voices here and there in the field, as if they sympathize with my soul. Here the author understands by the word "*tamashii*" ("soul") a being that can influence all things in general, in this case the chirping animal. This means that the soul is clearly distinguished from the self, in so far as the latter can operate only with my body.

Sano-no-otogame-no-otome writes: "*Tamashii wa ashita yûbe ni tamauredô, aga mune itashi koi no shigeki ni.*"<sup>7</sup> This means: "I receive your soul in the morning and in the evening. But my heart pains me, for my love for you is all too strong." I explain this as follows: Although your soul reaches me, I can do nothing to you, for my love for you is so strong that it pains me as if my heart were breaking. From that one can derive the idea that the soul could exist alone in itself separated from the body, so that the soul of the loving friend could come to me.

Shôin Yoshida, a patriot of the last period of the Shogunate, who was sentenced to death for violating the Japanese law of that time concerning sealing out the external world, wrote the following *tanka* shortly before his execution: "*Mi wa tatoï musashi no nobe ni kuchinu tomo, todome okamahi yamato damashii [= tamashii].*"<sup>8</sup> This means: "Although my body must be ruined on the scaffold in only the twenty-ninth year of life, I would nevertheless like to wish that my Japanese soul (i.e. my idea or form) will still remain and continue to function after my death" This implies that the soul could exist eternally in separation from the body. That is precisely Shôin Yoshida's desire and hope. In this way, one believed and expected that the soul, completely distinct from the body, would be immortal. From that one can assume that we humans have a yearning

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 403b.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 414a.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Utsubo-Monogatari, "Saga no in," in *Nihon-Kotenbungaku-Taitei*, Vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1952), p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> *Manyôshû*, Vol. 15; in *Nihon-Kotenbungaku-Taitei*, Vol. 7 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1962), p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Shôin Yoshida, *Ryûkonroku*.

for the immortal, because our human body is a finite being, which comes into existence, grows, constantly changes, and finally disappears. Consequently, we invented words like "soul" and "*tamashii*" in order to express the hope in eternal life.

Plato famously has Socrates – after he was sentenced to death, because he supposedly corrupted the youth with heresy and, according to the law of Athens, had to drink poison and journey into the hereafter, the realm of the dead – explain the immortality of the soul in the dialogue "*Phaedo*." After Crito had listened to Socrates' hypothetical proof of the immortality of the soul, the following exchange took place between them:

But in what way would you have us bury you? – In any way that you like; only you must get hold of me, and take care that I do not walk away from you. Then he turned to us, and added with a smile: I cannot make Crito believe that I am the same Socrates who have been talking and conducting the argument; he fancies that I am the other Socrates whom he will soon see, a dead body – and he asks, How shall he bury me? And though I have spoken many words in the endeavor to show that when I have drunk the poison I shall leave you and go to the joys of the blessed, – these words of mine, with which I comforted you and myself, have had, as I perceive, no effect upon Crito.<sup>9</sup>

In this dialogue both Crito and Socrates recognize that Socrates' body will necessarily die. But the central point is the question of the immortality of the soul. The necessity of bodily death is a motivation to the question of the immortality of the soul, but is not at all its central point. In other words, the question is whether the proposition "All humans are mortal" is valid for human persons only as corporal beings, but not as spiritual beings. Therefore, Socrates teaches the immortality of the soul with the following words:

And the same may be said of the immortal: if the immortal is also imperishable, the soul when attacked by death cannot perish; for the preceding argument shows that the soul will not admit of death, or ever be dead, any more than three or the odd number will admit of the even, or fire or the heat in the fire, of the cold.<sup>10</sup>

According to this theory, immortality is the essential characteristic of the soul. Furthermore, immortality and mortality are opposing concepts. Plato is of the opinion that the soul is immortal, although the body is mortal, so that this immortal soul of a person departs from the body after its death, wanders in search of a new home, and finally arrives at the appropriate place corresponding to the change in its life. This thought originates from the universal religious be-

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. and ed. Jowett, 4th Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 115c-d.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 106b.

lief of the Greek populace at that time.

In the tradition of the history of Western philosophy it was Descartes who took over the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul. But he approached this question from the inner self-consciousness of the thinking I-subject. Thus, he called the proposition "*cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am") the "first and most certain of all knowledge"<sup>11</sup> and "the first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking."<sup>12</sup> He concluded

that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think, and that for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this "me," that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is.<sup>13</sup>

This conclusion is as surprising to our common human understanding as a bolt of lightening out of a blue sky. According to Descartes' sharply distinguished dualism of body and spirit or soul, only a mechanistic movement drives the human body, in so far as it is an extended being (*res extensa*). Accordingly, thought (*pensée*) belongs only to the soul (*l'âme, animus*), which is to be distinguished fundamentally from the body. Since Descartes understood the thinking self as a substance to be distinguished absolutely from matter and the body in this way, the thinking self had to become a completely objectively and abstractly separated entity. Kant saw in that a paralogism of pure reason. It consists in the fact that Descartes leaped from the properties of the merely thinking self-subject (independence from the mechanistic material body, purity, intellectuality, spirituality, etc.) to the presumed, substantial, separated existence of the self as a soul. In any case, Descartes identified the self not only with the thinking self, but also with the spirit (*l'esprit, mens*), the soul (*l'âme, animus*), reason (*la raison, ratio*), and the intellect (*l'entendement, intellectus*). From this way of thinking, Descartes argued quite naturally for the immortality of the soul:

I have here enlarged a little on the subject of the soul, because it is one of the greatest importance. For next to the error of those who deny God, which I think I have already sufficiently refuted, there is none which is more effectual in leading feeble spirits from the straight path of virtue, than to imagine that the soul of the brute is of the same nature as our own, and that in consequence, after this life we have nothing to fear or to hope for, any more than the flies and ants. As a matter of fact, when one comes to know how greatly they differ, we understand much

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<sup>11</sup> René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, I-7.

<sup>12</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences*, Part IV, trans. Elizabeth. S. Haldane, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part IV.

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