

Thorsten Schirmer

The Certainty of Non-Knowledge of the Highest Truth

Reflections on Enlightenment in the Mirror of Daoism and Zen Buddhism

Humans are distinguished by an extraordinary level of creative intelligence and consciousness compared to the rest of the species on our planet. On the one hand, these characteristics are the prerequisite for the unprecedented success of *Homo sapiens*, but on the other hand, they are also its greatest problem, since consciousness raises questions that the mind, despite all its intelligence, cannot answer. What is the ego? What happens after death? No one has ever been born into this world with a sound mind who has not asked himself these two existential questions. All forms of worship arose out of man's insatiable need to confront these questions with answers. This is how he created his first primitive world views, gods and fantasies of the afterlife. From the depths of a naive or even blind faith to the peaks of philosophy, ranges the spectrum of human attempts to make peace with oneself and these questions. While the masses seek support in having their beliefs confirmed by the community of like-minded people, the lonely seeker is confirmed by the knowledge alone. Even though we have been to the moon and have been able to send robots to Mars, we still do not know why we are in this world. All science does not help us in this crucial question, our knowledge reaches an insurmountable limit.

We acquire knowledge through learning, observation and reflection on it, based on our ability to think. In the Chinese philosophy of Daoism as well as in Indian Buddhism, later propagated above all by the school of Zen, the thesis was put forward about 2,500 years ago that all this was useless to break through that last and decisive boundary that separates us from the recognition of the primordial ground of all being. In order to understand this, it is first necessary to look at these two traditions and their basic statements.

Daoism

2,500 years ago, China was exposed to enormous social changes. The Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100-221 BC) had lost its central power in the country, and individual principalities sought for the land of their neighbors. The court of the House of Zhou in the capital Luoyang only existed because none of the more or less independent states was powerful enough to seize supremacy in the empire. The discovery of iron production in the 6th century BC further favoured the expansion plans of many local princes, who were now able to gear up their armies with more effective military equipment. In the wake of this development, many scholars moved to the individual courts to serve as advisors to the princes on their different philosophical views of government, expanding and securing power. The most famous of this guild was without doubt Kongzi (lat. Confucius, 551-479 BC), whose work was only of very moderate success during his lifetime, but who was to exert the greatest influence on the ethical foundations of state and society throughout the entire development of the later world empire. In this climate, which was characterized by lust for power and armed conflicts, Laozi wrote the *Daodejing* (lit. The Book of the Way and its Virtue). Not surprisingly, his verses devote a great deal of space to reflections on society, war, and power, as well as to the outline of a worldview guided by the Dao. What is this Dao around which the entire teaching of Laozi and his successors revolves? "The Dao that can be described is not the right Dao" is the first sentence of the *Daodejing*.¹ If we

¹ Cf. various. Attempts to translate the saying 1 in: Jerven, Walter (trans.): *Lao Tzu. Tao Te King. The Book of the World Law and its Work*. Bern, 1967, and Wilhelm, Richard (trans.): *Lao Tzu. Tao Te King*. Jena, 1911

nevertheless try to explain this concept, then according to all the explanations in the Daodejing it stands for a universal lawfulness that encompasses all being into oneness. We can describe it as an abstract principle of creation that is far removed from the belief in gods. The emptiness of being in the sense of a missing subject is at the center of the Dao teachings. Here it extends hands to Zen Buddhism at the highest level. The phenomenal world is seen only as a surface under which a universal creative spirit works. In contrast to Buddhism, Laozi does not describe the recognition of these connections as a sudden awakening, but it also represents a consciousness-altering experience in Daoism. Brought into the life process, the awakened mind strives for complete absorption in the Dao. The term Wuwei (lit. do not act) expresses this highest principle of doing as a "not resisting the Dao". All self-centeredness is to be abandoned in order to live and act in complete harmony with the Dao. So essential are the parallels to the teachings of Buddha that Daoism and its key work Daodejing became an important precursor for the successful spread of Buddhism in China.

The history of its creation and its author Laozi (lit. Old Master) are the subject of legend. Neither the date of the Daodejing nor the dates of the author's life are known. Some sources place it in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, others tell us of an encounter between Kongzi and his contemporary Laozi, who was later stylized as the spiritual counterpart of Chinese philosophy. We also hear that this "Old Master" is said to have worked as the archivist of the King of Zhou. The origin of the Daodejing is also attributed to its later emmigration to the land "west of the border" (meaning the region of today's autonomous region of Xinjiang, which is dominated by Uighurs and other minorities). According to legend, he wrote down the 81 verses at the request of a border guard in order to pass on his wisdom to posterity. From a scholarly point of view, critical observers have even raised the question of whether there could not be an entire group of authors behind the pseudonym of Laozi. When, where and by whomever the 5000 words of the Daodejing were written remains unknown. In any case, it is undisputed that this is the most profound philosophical work of purely Chinese authorship. It is also indisputably one of the highest peaks of spiritual tradition in the history of mankind.

What preceded the Daodejing? The religious practices of that time concentrated on the strictly ritualized ancestor cult, in which the patriarchal tribal line within the family, the ruling house, but also the legendary primeval emperors from the distant past or ultimately heaven (chin. Tian) as the supreme cosmological force of order. While at the beginning of the Zhou period there was still a very strong magical-occult force at work in these sometimes quite bloodthirsty ceremonies (human sacrifices were common in the preceding Shang dynasty), the terms and figures of worship became increasingly abstract as time progressed. A popular belief of the common people in spirits and gods with shamanistic influences could be found alongside this "intellectualized" cult form of the upper class. From it, starting from magical practices, early exercises of meditation and physical culture can be derived, which became important pillars of personal training in later Daoism. On the other hand, this folk cult absorbed the philosophical Daoism after Laozi, so that it soon merged into a religious belief in gods. At least in the hearts of the educated upper class, philosophical Daoism always retained a firm place as a worldly alternative to the social structure overloaded with conventions. After the turn of the era, religious schools emerged, which adopted much of Buddhism in their entire appearance. The first temples and monasteries settled in the sacred mountains of Daoism, where, in addition to naive popular belief, thoroughly profound traditions have been preserved in oral transmission from master to student under the strictest secrecy to this day. These were based on meditation exercises and complex systems of physical exercise in the form of breathing techniques, martial arts and medical methods of prophylaxis and healing. They are all summarized under the term Qigong. In these exercises, the universal energy Qi is to be experienced, cultivated and made usable in a controlled manner in one's own body. In Daoism, Qi is seen as an all-pervading cosmic force that also flows through the human body in a meridian system. Chinese medicine with its holistic treatment method is largely based on Daoist traditions. Acupuncture, for example, uses the millennia-old knowledge of the body's energy flow with great success. However, Qi is also a universal design in which the whole of being is considered as a reflection and effects of this power. It is divided into a positive primordial force Yang and a negative primordial force Yin.

The origin of this doctrine of the polar world forces goes far back into the time before the founding of Daoism. The religious ideas of the Zhou period were closely linked to nature. The population was shaped by farmers whose lives and feelings were inevitably inextricably linked to the seasons, the earth, the plants and animals. The Shijing (chin. Book of Songs), a collection of folk songs, rites and biographies from the early days of Chinese historiography, impressively documents the life of ordinary people with nature, which has been an important source for the development of Daoism. Even more than the Shijing, the Yijing (lit. Book of Changes) seems to be the most important pioneer for the emergence of Daoism. In Yijing, the throwing of yarrow stems is associated with oracular aphorisms that already point strongly in the direction of a Daoist worldview. Even the title of the book sounds like Daoism. Change as a decisive principle of the cosmological order, embedded in the field of tension between the polar primordial forces Yin and Yang. The thrown yarrow stems are separated into negative and positive results, to which one of a total of 64 hexagrams with a motto is finally assigned. From these vaguely worded comments, references to future actions or events were interpreted. The vagueness of written statements has a long tradition in China. In addition to this state, which is not at all comfortable for the rationalistically oriented people of the West, there is a pronounced preference for paradox. Here it seems to be almost self-evident that the highest wisdom and the deepest insights lie beyond knowledge and cannot be communicated. Thus, the questioner is sent on his way with cautious hints, coded answers and a quiet finger pointing in order to bring him closer to the unspeakable laws of being. This basic attitude later paved the way for the development of Zen Buddhism on Chinese soil.

What followed the work of Laozi? With the names Zhuangzi and Liezi we find two more eloquent preachers of the Dao, who - now in colored prose instead of verse - have left us wonderful parables about the principles of being. Zhuangzi are at least vaguely given historical features, in that one assumes his birthplace in eastern Hunan and his work in the 2nd half of the 4th century BC, but this authorship is also scientifically controversially discussed. What is certain is that, regardless of the question of authorship, this collection of parables represents the most important prose work of older Chinese literature. In terms of content, it condenses the verses of the Daodejing into vivid parables, which underpin Daoism's claim to be a philosophy of practice by referring to daily life. With the writings of Liezi we already leave the ground of pure Daoism in part, but there are also numerous parables that Zhuangzi repeats almost verbatim. Both the origin and the time of the writing show great ambiguities and temporal differences, which make Liezi difficult to grasp.

The School of Zen Buddhism

In the West, Zen Buddhism is one of the best-known schools of East Asian spirituality. In Europe and America, we know it by the Japanese name "Zen", although it is originally Chinese and is called "Chan" there. The countless publications on this topic concentrate largely on its Japanese form. Some authors just take note of his Chinese origin in passing and point out as a matter of course that he is ultimately only alive in Japan and only found his real home there. The long tradition that Zen can prove in Korea is just as little noticed by us as its tradition in the Southeast Asian region. In western literature, we often only know the names of the Chinese patriarchs and most important masters of Zen in their Japanese transcriptions, without a single line pointing to their Chinese identity. The reasons for this strange distortion of historical facts can be explained by the path taken by Zen Buddhism on its journey to the West. It was mainly the Japanese Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki who first introduced Zen in its Japanese form to the Occident. Japan, controlled by American forces after World War II, was easily accessible to the interested recipients of this message. China, on the other hand, had isolated itself internationally after 1949 by founding a communist-ruled state and largely sealed itself off until the end of the 1970s. Thus, Zen Buddhism initially appeared in the West exclusively in connection with the culture of Japan. The consequences of this error can hardly be corrected in our public consciousness. In the course of a general marketing of the term "Zen", it also

has to serve for the most absurd comparisons from lampshades to wellness drinks. Zen has become synonymous with Japanese culture in the public eye. However, what this term really means and, above all, what lies hidden behind its idealized facade, eludes the general public. A brief review of the history of the origin of Zen can give the picture sharper contours.

The Chinese name "Chan" is derived as an abbreviated phonetic rendering from the Sanskrit word "Dhyana" (lit. contemplation). In Buddhism, Dhyana describes a means of achieving Buddhahood in which man practices mental immersion in order to break through the barriers of his deluded self-perception. Dhyana plays a key role on the path to spiritual liberation (Sanskrit. Nirvana - lit. Extinction). Zen Buddhism refers directly to the way the historical Buddha Gautama Siddhartha (about 560-480 BC) achieved his enlightenment. The fact that it was an immediate sudden realization, like a kind of awakening, has special significance in Zen. Nothing less than this realization has been the goal of all efforts in Zen. Finally, the concept of oneness appears as a hint in the traditional words of the great Zen masters when they told of the Buddha's enlightenment. According to Buddhism, our perception of the phenomenal world as well as our awareness of an individual self are illusory states that must be overcome in order to reach a true state of being. In the rejection of an individual concept of the ego, the teachings of Zen Buddhism are based on the conviction that the phenomenal world is ultimately empty and impersonal. This insight is expressed by the Heart Sutra in its most famous passage: "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form."

The Zen Buddhists traced the line of their tradition directly back to Gautama Siddhartha and thus legitimized themselves exclusively through the direct knowledge of the Buddha, which each lineage holder is said to have experienced for himself. It is said that the direct transmission from one awakened spirit to the next began with Mahakasyapa. According to tradition, this venerable disciple of Gautama Siddhartha was sitting at the feet of the Buddha with numerous companions when the master picked up a flower and quietly twisted it between his fingers. No one paid attention to the gesture, only Mahakasyapa smiled. Then the Buddha is said to have designated him as his Dharma successor in front of all those present.² After this transmission of the Dharma, the trace of the Dhyana tradition is lost in the darkness of history. Only the names of those masters who confirmed their succession to each other have been handed down to the 28th patriarch. This, named Bodhidharma (ca.440-ca.528, chin. Damo, jap. Daruma), is said to have embarked for southern China in view of the decline of the pure Buddha teaching in Indian culture in order to sow the seeds of his teachings anew.

Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, an avid promoter of Buddhism in the country, heard the arrival of a great teacher from the Buddha's homeland. He invited him to his court and welcomed him with the highest honors. From this encounter, a legendary excerpt of their conversation has been handed down. The emperor is said to have asked Bodhidharma what merit for his salvation would be brought to him by the manifold promotion of Buddhism in the empire through his reign. The patriarch's answer was: "Not a single one!" Irritated, the emperor continued to investigate what the patriarch thought would be the sacred truth. He replied: "Open space - nothing sacred!" Completely uncertain, the emperor finally asked: "Who are you?" "I don't know," was Bodhidharma's reply.³ Although very brief, this tradition already reveals a special method that would later become characteristic of the Zen school: the spontaneous reaction in gestures or paradoxical answers to the questioners. Thought-based efforts for knowledge and ultimately the questioning of the highest truth in general were gladly reciprocated in this way. On the one hand, if the questioner was confronted with the

² The Sanskrit word "Dharma" cannot be translated precisely. In a figurative sense, it means universal principle, truth or Buddha teaching, depending on the context. The Dharma succession is conferred by the master on his disciple as a confirmation of the awakened, mature mind in the sense of Buddhahood. It includes formal permission to teach in the spirit of the Chan lineage transmitted from master to disciple.

³ This battle of words, presumably invented by later Zen masters, can be found in various works of classical Zen literature. See, for example, Gundert, Wilhelm (trans.): Bi-Yän-Lu. Vienna, 1960, Volume 1, 1st Example

absurdity of all conceptual and intellectual approach to the highest truth, spontaneous and sometimes violent reactions were on the other hand just as suitable to shake the pupil to the foundations of his imagined self. Paradoxical answers, as we find them extensively handed down in the source texts of Zen, were like a coded signpost that could not be overcome by intellectual reflection. These short question-and-answer dialogues are called Kongan (jap. Koan). The sudden and unpredictable reactions, in their rousing effect, were intended to help the matured mind of the pupil to gain immediate enlightenment.

The Zen doctrine found its final form under the sixth and last Chinese patriarch Huineng (638-713). The transfer of the Dharma from the fifth patriarch Hongren (602-675) to Huineng took place through a competition for the succession of Hongren, which he himself had proclaimed among his disciples. Shenxiu, his master student, finally, after much deliberation, out of fear of his teacher's judgment, wrote on the wall in the middle of the night in front of the patriarch's bedchamber with charcoal:

The body is like the Bodhi tree,
the heart is a clear mirror.
Always sweep it eagerly,
so that no dust collects on it.

However, the master rejected the answer as inadequate. Huineng served as a kitchen helper in the monastery at that time. Since he could neither read nor write, he spontaneously asked a boy to write an answer on the wall for him, which read:

Originally, there is no Bodhi tree
and no clear mirror either.
In truth, there is nothing that exists,
what should dust be able to collect on?

When the patriarch saw the verse, he quickly erased it from the wall, explaining that this disciple had not found the truth either. Later, however, he gave Huineng his alms bowl and robe as a sign of Dharma succession and urged him to flee from the Shenxiu's followers at night.⁴ Following Huineng, two leading schools of Zen emerged that still exist today. They trace themselves back to important masters and are named Linqi (jap. Rinzai, d. 867) and Caodong (jap. Soto) named after Caoshan (839-901) and Dongshan (807-869). While the Linqi lineage works predominantly with paradoxical parables, the Caodong school places greater emphasis on quiet contemplation.

The Certainty of Non-Knowledge of the Highest Truth in Daoism and Zen Buddhism

Certainty must necessarily first be achieved – regardless of whether it applies to knowledge or non-knowledge. The latter plays a special role in both Daoism and Zen Buddhism. For the first time, Laozi speaks out about the principle of non-knowledge. In the Daodejing it is said: "To know non-knowledge is the highest goal."⁵ Zhuangzi also follows in his footsteps when he declares: "Free from knowledge, I have become one with the one that permeates everything."⁶ In these two quotations, it is not only clear that the concept of non-knowledge is firmly anchored in the Daoist teachings, but both also

⁴ S. Hui-neng: The Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch. The Life and Zen Teachings of the Chinese Master Hui-neng (638-713). Bern, 1989, p. 27 ff.

⁵ S. Wilhelm, Richard (trans.): Lao Tzu. Tao Te King. Jena, 1911, Spruch 71

⁶ S. Wilhelm, Richard (trans.): Dschuang Dsi. The true book of the southern blossom country. Jena, 1910, Book IV, Parable 7

emphasize the principle of an active process for the attainment of non-knowledge or the certainty of it: Laozi, by speaking of the knowledge of non-knowledge, Zhuangzi, by emphasizing that becoming one with the Supreme presupposes liberation from knowledge. Non-knowledge is thus declared a cardinal virtue in Taoism. What is to be understood by this is interpreted in the essential virtue of not wanting or not acting (chin. Wuwei), the abandonment of all self-cherishing. It is important to practice this, as it does not correspond to our familiar concept of lifestyle. To practice it means to renounce oneself in an active process of knowing and willing, not to cling to knowledge, not to wanting, not to the ego, in order to finally become empty and the vessel of the Dao. Here we encounter an elementary difference to the occidental image of non-knowledge. While in the West non-knowledge is always understood as a lack or absence of knowledge, Daoism declares the attainment of non-knowledge to be an intermediate goal on the way to the actual knowledge of being, even a necessary prerequisite for this, which must be actively developed. Only when we have certainty about the uselessness of knowledge for the attainment of the highest knowledge can we detach ourselves from it. So this renunciation is at the same time a return to the primordial ground of all being.

Zen Buddhism also represents this attitude. About a thousand years after Laozi, Bodhidharma replies to the emperor's question as to who he is standing in front of him: "I don't know." What the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism answers could also have come from the mouth of the Daoist philosophers. A few generations later, the Zen master Yongjia Xuanjue (665-713) leads us on the trail of Bodhidharma's enigmatic "I don't know" in his "Song of Enlightenment". In his poem he says, "The true essence of non-knowledge is the Buddha's own essence."⁷ This is an important statement. Yongjia Xuanjue claims that non-knowledge and supreme knowledge, represented in verse by the Buddha's own essence, are one. Zen Buddhism once again advocates the thesis of the oneness of being. Oneness dissolves all differences, so non-knowledge and knowledge are only two sides of the same coin, just like the intertwined halves of the yin and yang symbol that complete the circle.

The renunciation of knowledge demanded by the Daoist philosophers as well as later by the Zen Buddhist masters is based on the uselessness of thinking for the attainment of the highest knowledge. In one of his most beautiful parables, Zhuangzi describes how the "Yellow Emperor", a legendary ruler of prehistoric times, loses his magic pearl, a symbol of the highest knowledge. In the course of the search, he sent out various virtues to find it. The text says: "He sent out knowledge to seek it, but did not get it back. Finally he sent out non-knowledge which found the magic pearl. The Yellow Emperor said: 'Strange, indeed, that it was non-knowledge which was able to find it!'"⁸ This parable builds a bridge to the historical Buddha, who, according to tradition, made the breakthrough to the knowledge of the highest truth while sitting oblivious to himself under a tree in deep contemplation. From then on, he preached the illusion of our ego concept, which must be overcome in order to advance to the knowledge of the highest truth by means of intuitive insight into the primordial ground of being. So by forgetting my self, whose illusory image is built up of thoughts that, nourished by supposed knowledge, want to explain the world to us, I penetrate into the realm of non-knowledge, behind which the gate to the knowledge of the highest truth is hidden.

Like Daoism, Zen Buddhism also judges thought, impressively handed down by the "Hymn of Sudden Enlightenment" by the Chinese Zen master Shenhui (668-760):

Non-knowledge - that is the true doctrine.
Non-doing- that is the deepest ground.
True emptiness is the body of all things.
Miracles and beings are their doings.

⁷ S. Weber-Schäfer, Peter (eds.): Zen. Sayings and verses of the Zen masters. Frankfurt/M., 1982, p. 21

⁸ S. Wilhelm, Richard (trans.): Dschuang Dsi. The true book of the southern blossom country. Jena, 1910, Book XII, Parable 4

True so-being knows no thinking;
Knowledge never recognize it.⁹

The Japanese philosopher Koichi Tsujimura (1922-2010), in his essay "The Truth of Being and the Absolute Nothingness", indicates how this door to enlightenment can be opened according to the tradition of Zen Buddhism: "The 'truth of Zen' is this: Striking self, world and history into one lump, one becomes a great mass of doubt and in the place where this ends, where language is lost beyond thought, it collapses and melts like ice; it is precisely in this place that this 'truth of Zen' becomes one's own. Consequently, it is the truth that cannot be reached with any thought and cannot be expressed in itself with any language."¹⁰

From the point of view of Zen Buddhism, it is therefore true that the gain in knowledge of the highest truth, as experienced by the Buddha and countless of his followers, lies beyond knowledge, beyond thinking and beyond rational consciousness. By renouncing all these supposed virtues of being human, we free ourselves from the shackles of our ego concept and become able to open ourselves to the intuitive process of cognition.

Conclusion

The certainty of non-knowledge of the highest truth is firmly anchored in the East Asian spiritual world of Daoism and Zen Buddhism and a central element of their teachings. Non-knowledge is understood there as a virtue that needs to be cultivated in order to penetrate below the surface of our ego concept. Only where we no longer rely on our knowledge and thinking can we intuitively approach the highest truth. Finally recognizing them can be experienced individually, but cannot be shared with others. This is precisely what prevents it from becoming part of our collective wealth of knowledge. The last step on the way to the highest knowledge, to true insight into the essence of all things, must be taken by everyone alone.

⁹ S. Weber-Schäfer, Peter (eds.): Zen. Sayings and verses of the Zen masters. Frankfurt/M., 1982, pp. 18-19

¹⁰ S. Ohashi, Ryosuke (eds.): The Philosophy of the Kyoto School. Texts and Introduction. Freiburg i.B., 2011, p. 414