

Non-being-Being versus the Non-being of Being

Heidegger's Ontological Difference with Zen Buddhism

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I

IN *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger poses the question, "Is there an attitudinal understanding in *Dasein* in which *Dasein*, in a remarkable way, is disclosed to itself?"¹ Heidegger's answer, of course, is affirmative, and that attitudinal understanding, that gateway to self-discovery, we soon learn, is anxiety. Anxiety differs from fear in that, whereas fear occurs in confrontation with an object (or if not an object, a phenomenon, however intangible, which is comprehensible), anxiety always occurs in the presence of nothing—anxiety itself being this presence (of an absence)—the presence of that which is totally incomprehensible. Still, that which anxiety confronts is not merely nothing, for even nothing, Heidegger contends, has a ground. This ground is twofold: on a narrower level it is the world, which is indicative of *Dasein's* being in that world, and on a broader level, the worldhood of the world—Being—to which the world is ontologically bound. More summarily, we read, in Heidegger's hyphenated phrasing, *Dasein* is "an anticipatory drive-towards-Being, thrown-as-yet-to-be-realized (in-the-world) with beings (it encounters in the world)."²

¹ "Gibt es eine verstehende Befindlichkeit im *Dasein*, in der es ihm selbst in ausgezeichneter Weise erschlossen ist?" (*Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927], p. 182). Hereafter cited as *SZ*.

² "Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in-(der-Welt-) als Sein-bei (innerweltlich begegnendem Seienden)" (*Ibid.*, p. 192).

Still, though anxiety is most certainly a realization of the world and can lead to the realization of Being, it is more fundamentally a realization of Non-being. What *about* Non-being?³ Non-being is not an additive to beings, nor does it, because of its power, annihilate them, but is most inextricably bound up with them. We must recall one of Heidegger's most formidable statements: "In the bright night of the Non-being of anxiety, there arises for the first time the primordial openness of beings as such: that they are, in fact, beings—not Non-being."⁴ And if both beings and Non-being are disclosed, it is obvious that they are bound integrally in such a way that Non-being becomes the ontological source for the illumination of beings; moreover, that, in this illumination, they "are" for the first time genuinely and more vividly than they ever have "been." Non-being, then, is the manifestation of the awareness of beings as beings (something we usually take for granted). As Heidegger puts it, "only when oppositeness is allowed to arise and be cast into Non-being can a conception, rather than Non-being and within it, allow what is in fact not Non-being, that is, such a thing as being, to reach an encounter, given that such a being empirically discloses itself."⁵

Though Non-being is responsible for the illumination of beings, it serves an even more profound and puzzling task: the illumination of Being. Though Non-being shakes the foundations of *Dasein* with its voidness, forcing *Dasein* into the realization that beings "are" and that *Dasein* (as a very special mode of being) "is," *Dasein* can then extend this very elementary sense of "is" to a higher level—to Isness, to Being; for if there can be an ontological source beyond beings which, because of its voiding power, can force *Dasein* to realize beings in their elementary

³ Heidegger uses these very words, without my italics: "Wie steht es um das Nichts?" (*Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951], p. 71). Hereafter cited as *KM*.

⁴ "In der hellen Nacht des Nichts der Angst ersteht erst die ursprüngliche Offenheit des Seienden als eines solchen: dass es Seiendes ist—und nicht Nichts" (*Was ist Metaphysik?* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1955], p. 34). Hereafter cited as *WM*.

⁵ "Nur wenn das Gegenstehenlassen von . . . ein Sichhineinhalten in das Nichts ist, kann das Vorstellen anstatt des Nichts und innerhalb seiner ein nicht Nichts, d.h. so etwas wie Seiendes begegnen lassen, falls solches sich gerade empirisch zeigt" (*KM*, p. 71).

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givenness, it seems only likely that there is just as great an ontological source (closely bound up with this great "Not") which allots beings the power of being. Non-being, thus, is the ontological catalyst which first allows beings to be realized as beings, only to further promote the realization of beings in their beingness. As Heidegger explains, Non-being "reveals itself as belonging to the Being of beings."⁶

Nonetheless, though one would think that, because one confronts Non-being and because Non-being reveals not only beings as beings, it is "likely" that there is also a beingness of beings (I am trying to understand how Heidegger's mind has construed this), this is not a normal occurrence. The fact is—the more prevalent fact is—that Being is concealed. It is concealed because, according to Heidegger, on the ordinary level of consciousness we deal entirely on the plane of beings, oblivious of Being, and Being therefore hides behind or within them. But just as Being is responsible for the presence of beings (in its Beingness for the fact that they "are"), it is also just as responsible for the concealment of itself within them; and this concealing process is none other than the power of Non-being—what Heidegger refers to, most pertinently, as "the veil of Being" (*der Schleier des Seins*).⁷ Non-being, then, is both the revealer and the concealer of Being, both the "not" of beings (in the sense of being antithetical to all that they "are" and, in turn, the catalyst for the realization of the fact that they "are") and the "not" of Being in its hiddenness.

It is evident in Heidegger's philosophy that Being and Non-being are integrally connected. Although it is true that Non-being is the catalyst which awakens *Dasein* to the awesome fact that beings "are" and by further implication that Being is the Beingness of their being, when he addresses himself to this integrality, he usually speaks of Non-being as concealment, that is, the concealment of Being, making synonymous, thus, Non-being as concealment (*Verborgenheit*) and Being as unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*). In other words, it is the nature of Being, despite its appropriation of beings, to conceal itself (as Non-being) within them; and, thus, on that ontological plane, a constant dialectical interplay exists

⁶ "Enthüllt sich als zugehörig zum Sein des Seienden" (*WM*, p. 99).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

between Being and Non-being—to the point where Heidegger can speak of them as a “unity,” despite the obvious diversity. Heidegger feels justified in positing this unity because Non-being is never, in the finite sense, pure negativity, but transcends negativity, in the sense of being prior to negativity. As Heidegger explains, “Non-being is more original than the ‘not’ and ‘negation.’”⁸ Non-being’s concealment transcends negativity in the finite sense because, existing on that higher ontological plane, and integrally bound with Being, Non-being can never “negate” Being, only conceal it. Unconcealment and concealment are part of the same ontological process: even though Being can be concealed, it can never be negated, for even in its concealment it always “is”; and even though Non-being conceals Being, Non-being itself is never “not.” On this ontological plane of unconcealment and concealment, thus, both Being and Non-being “Are.”

Because Being and Non-being “Are,” one cannot come to terms with them through the level of thinking that one associates with beings, that is, on the level of finitude. But it is precisely through spectacles of finitude that Western philosophy, Heidegger contends, has attempted to deal with Being. Western philosophy—more specifically, Western metaphysics—has not reached out to the level of Being—to ontology—but has confined itself to ontic matters at the *expense* of ontological ones. Not only that, the *very nature* of metaphysics, Heidegger insists, excludes it from the matter of Being,⁹ and metaphysics, therefore, “in essence is nihilism.”¹⁰ This is why Heidegger has repeatedly referred to his philosophy as an endeavor to transcend metaphysics, to get back to the “ground” of metaphysics, to “foundational thought” (*das wesentliche Denken*). But this is not easy, for as Heidegger contends, not only metaphysics, but all logical and rational thought normally associated with metaphysics must also be transcended. Reason itself. In fact, “foundational thinking starts only when we have experienced that reason, ex-

⁸ “Das Nichts ist ursprünglicher als das Nicht und die Verneinung” (*Ibid.*, p. 28).

⁹ “Als Metaphysik ist sie von der Erfahrung des Seins durch ihr eigenes Wesen ausgeschlossen” (*Ibid.*, p. 20).

¹⁰ “In ihrem Wesen aber ist die Metaphysik Nihilismus” (*Holzwege* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950], p. 245). Hereafter cited as *HW*.

tolled for hundreds of years, is the toughest obstacle to thought."¹¹ This brings us to another dimension in Heidegger's philosophy, one that, though most frequently cited by critics, is most frequently misunderstood: *Dasein*.

Not only are Being and Non-being, because of their distinctive ontological character, a transcendence, *Dasein* too is a transcendence. It is true that *Dasein* is an entity, but a very special entity, Heidegger reminds us, in that its being is an issue for it, and in the fact that it comports itself toward Being. And because *Dasein* has this affinity toward Being, though itself a being, it cannot be said to reside exclusively on the ontic plane. What is interesting about *Dasein*—yet confusing for many critics—is that it is both ontic *and* ontological. That this aspect of *Dasein* is confusing is evident even in the attempts at translation. Michael Gelven, for example, tries to correct Macquarrie and Robinson's famous translation of "being there" with "being here" on the supposition that "here" is more suggestive of the immediacy which Heidegger intended.¹² Yet, if we examine *Sein und Zeit* closely, Heidegger contends unequivocally that "the ontic character of *Dasein* lies in the fact that it is ontological";¹³ moreover, that *Dasein* is that "thereness which is ontologically farthest."¹⁴ It would seem, then, that Gelven's rendition of "being here" as opposed to "being there" is still not sufficient. A more genuine rendition of *Dasein* would be one that would suggest *both* "being here" and "being there."

This is not superficial, semantic disagreement, for it has to do with the very important business of not only defining but *locating* *Dasein*. Too often *Dasein* is equated with man. Critics usually assume that when Heidegger uses *Dasein*, he means man. But this is not Heidegger's inten-

¹¹ "Das Denken beginnt erst dann, wenn wir erfahren haben, dass die seit Jahrhunderten verherrlichte Vernunft die hartnäckigste Widersacherin des Denkens ist" (*Ibid.*, p. 247).

¹² *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 22-23.

¹³ "Die ontische Auszeichnung des Daseins liegt darin, dass es ontologisch ist" (*SZ*, p. 12).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

tion at all. The "there" of *Dasein* (literally, there-Being) is not something man possesses, but what is bequeathed to him—ontologically—as he is thrown (*Geworfenheit*) in the world. As Heidegger explains, "more original than man is the finiteness of *Dasein* in him."¹⁵ *Dasein*, thus, has ontological priority over man's anthropological givenness, and it has this priority precisely because *Dasein* is the gateway to Being, or if you will, the threshold between beings and Being. But just as *Dasein* cannot be equated with man, neither can it be equated with human consciousness. Consciousness, by anyone's definition, is psychological, exclusively associated with the psyche. But *Dasein*, transcending consciousness, is not psychological; it is ontological: the ontological realm which exists between beings and Being, the vehicle, in fact, through which Being may be unconcealed or concealed. Thus, just as there is an integral connection between Being and Non-being in Heidegger's philosophy, there is also an integral connection between *Dasein* and Being, between *Dasein* and Non-being.¹⁶

II

Like Heidegger, Zen bases its realization on what might be called an attitudinal understanding (if attitudinal not be restricted to consciousness, which is to say, to a psychological perspective). Also like Heidegger, Zen recognizes anxiety as being instrumental to self-realization. Zen differs from Heidegger, however, in that anxiety is only a precursor to self-discovery, a stage to be endured before arriving at ultimate realiza-

¹⁵ "Ursprünglicher als der Mensch ist die Endlichkeit des Dasein in ihm" (*KM*, p. 207).

¹⁶ This is not the extent of Heidegger's ontological circuitry. In his final writings, Heidegger poses an even higher ontological dimension than Being and Non-being. Just as there must be an ontological source for beings, there must be an ontological source for Being and Non-being; and in naming that highest, appropriative ontological source he employs the extremely problematic term, *Ereignis*. This is *the* ontological source for Heidegger, for it is the source out of which everything—beings, Being, and Non-being—must necessarily arise. For a discussion of *Ereignis* and its relation to Zen, see my article, "Transmetaphysical Thinking in Heidegger and Zen Buddhism," which appeared in *Philosophy East and West* (July, 1977).

tion.¹⁷ As I have explained elsewhere,¹⁸ despite Heidegger's quest for the "Homeland" and for "quietude," restlessness is the most pervasive feature of his philosophy. One is led to believe (at least this writer is led to believe) that Heidegger's philosophy is enmeshed in—but never succeeds in overcoming—the "great doubt block"¹⁹ of Zen; moreover, that the "great doubt block" is never overcome because of Heidegger's failure to reconcile what he hoped to reconcile: the duality of beings and Being, and the duality between Being and Non-being.

Though Heidegger contends that Non-being is not an additive to beings and that Non-being is not an additive to Being, he nonetheless postulates a *connection*, even though, as he stipulates, the connection is not spatial. Though Heidegger's connections are qualitative, not quantitative, though they are to be understood ontologically as moods or dwellings, they are connections nonetheless. Though Heidegger contends that one "dwells" in the world in such a way that one is "in" the world not the way a book is in the library but the way a doctor is "in" a profession, the relation between person and profession is still one of connection, although it be an integral connection (both person and profession being necessary to preserve the ontological status of being "in"). In Heidegger's philosophy, Being and Non-being are always *enmeshed*, never *absolutely the Same*. Though Non-being "is" (never abandoning its status as Being), he could never say that it is absolutely Being; and he could never do this because, as we have seen, Non-being is always "concealment" in contrast to Being, which is "unconcealment." Integral they are, but never absolutely the Same. In Zen, however, let us say briefly for now, they are absolutely the Same.

¹⁷ According to Suzuki, "when Hui-neng speaks of the Unconscious in Consciousness, he steps beyond psychology" (*The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, ed. Christmas Humphreys [London: Rider and Company, 1969], p. 61).

¹⁸ See my article, "Transmetaphysical Thinking in Heidegger and Zen Buddhism."

¹⁹ As Richard DeMartino explains, "the great doubt block" is a "radical contradiction" which the ego must "come to be," a contradiction, moreover, in which the "ego in ego-consciousness" is "totally and exhaustively exacerbated" (*Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* [New York: Grove Press, 1960], p. 164). But this, of course, is not the final goal, for the ego must die a "great death," which leads to a "great awakening" in which the ego becomes "ego-Self, or Self-ego" (*Ibid.*, pp. 167, 170).

Just as Heidegger could never affirm that Being and Non-being are absolutely the Same, neither could he affirm that Being and Non-being are *absolutely Different*. Non-being, he maintains, always "is," in the sense of never abandoning its sense of Being (beyond beings), and in the sense of always presupposing beings, for Non-being is but the "veil" of Being, as Being conceals itself. Again, integral they are, but never absolutely Different. In Zen, however, it must be said (again briefly), just as they are *absolutely the Same*, they are, paradoxically, *absolutely Different*; thus, whereas Heidegger postulates the *integral connection* of the *Non-being of Being*, Zen postulates the *paradox of Non-being-Being*.²⁰

For Zen, Non-being is not a principle of ontological oscillation,²¹ but a principle of ontological negation and affirmation at the same time. Only he who can assert that Non-being absolutely is and is not Being understands Non-being in Zen. Ultimately, of course, "is" and "is not" cannot adequately transmit this paradoxical nature of Non-being, and before this paradox language seems to crumble. In fact, Zen would go so far to say that as soon as one thinks of Being or Non-being as either "separate" or "one" or even "united," one has reduced them to phenomena, stripped them of their ontological status. Only when Being and Non-being enter phenomenality can they take on such discernible properties, but this is precisely why Heidegger has never really advanced beyond the phenomenal plane, never succeeded in transcending metaphysics. All of this is not to suggest that Zen's understanding of Being and Non-being is "beyond" the phenomenal world; for that most certainly would be dualistic! Rather, Being and Non-being ultimately *Are* beings, just as they *Are Not* beings. Zen's ontology is not reserved for a special sphere above beings, but *Is* beings in a way that transcends the

²⁰ "Form (*rūpa*) does not differ from the void (*śūnyatā*)," it is written in the *Heart Sūtra*, but with the qualification, "nor the void from form. Form is identical with void (and) void is identical with form" (Quoted in Charles Luk, *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, First Series [Berkeley: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1970], p. 213). And this is essentially the meaning of Richard DeMartino's paradoxical term, "non-dualistic dualism" (*Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 169).

²¹ What Suzuki refers to as timeless time (*Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Series XLIV [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959], p. 239).

meaning which our ordinary usage of "is" implies.

Heidegger, like Buber (although with an obviously more extensive ontological thrust), is concerned with relations: the relations between beings and other beings, between beings and Being, between *Dasein* and Being, between Being and Time, between Being and Non-being. But Zen refuses to dabble in such distinctions, even though they be, in Heidegger's sense, integral. Zen, in contradistinction to Heidegger, would never approve of Being's inseparable "relation" to Non-being or of *Dasein's* "relation" to Being. For Zen, rather, Being *Is* Non-being and *Is Not* Non-being in such a way that relation itself may be said to be shattered. Heidegger, therefore, never genuinely succeeds in his lifelong quest—the overcoming of metaphysics—because he never succeeds in overcoming a tendency that has pervaded metaphysics from the time of Plato (including thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Buber, Jaspers, and Tillich), a tendency of "piecing" opposites together, matching them up, as it were. This tendency represents the language of synthesis, not paradox. Zen differs fundamentally from all of Western thinking (except possibly Meister Eckhart) in its downright refusal to think in synthetic terms. Synthetic thinking can only be a precursor to paradoxical thinking (in the recognition of the inseparability of opposites), but ultimately synthesis (and the opposites it presupposes) must be transcended so that they *absolutely Are and Are Not each other at the same time*. Only when one can realize that Being *Is* Non-being, that Life *Is* Death,²² that I *Am* Thou can one enter Zen territory. The obvious reaction to all this by Western metaphysicians (including Heidegger) would be, "How can this be possible? How can Life *Be* Death? How can Being *Be* Non-being?" The problem is that Western metaphysics extends its vision only through the lenses of ordinary consciousness, and from that perspective these paradoxes *are* impossible. But Zen would say, on a higher level of consciousness—on a higher level of existence—these paradoxes are indeed possible. Zen does not restrict itself to the possible as understood by the

²² For a discussion of the Zen position on Life and Death—especially in contrast to Western thinking—see my article, "Symbolism and Death in Jung and Zen Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* (April, 1975).

ordinary mind, to the possible as understood by Heidegger's supposedly more probing mind (the fundamental thinking of *Dasein*), but deals in the Possible, in Impossible-Possibility,²³ in that which transcends the distinctions imposed by the ordinary mind.²⁴

Metaphysics is a speculative, theoretical kind of knowledge expressed and argued in onto-theo-logical terms—terms such as Being and Non-being, appearance and reality, existence and essence, particular and universal. On one level, Zen does engage in such a metaphysics by employing metaphysical terminology; but Zen does not stop there, with Being and Non-being in their exclusiveness, in their oneness, or in their integrality. In contradistinction to Western metaphysics in general, and in contradistinction to what I have elsewhere referred to as Heidegger's "quasi-metaphysics,"²⁵ Zen takes these metaphysical issues and elevates them to a transmetaphysical dimension in which the issues (though obviously serving as a starting point) must ultimately be transcended. Although beginning with a metaphysical foundation (what else is a student of Zen to do but start with the natural bifurcations of his conscious mind?), Zen transcends such a foundation by grounding it, not in an integral ontology, but groundlessly in what is transmetaphysically Differently-Self-Same prior to any metaphysical endeavor that would attempt to decipher such distinctions. In this sense, Zen's transmetaphysics, unlike Western metaphysics—unlike Heidegger's "quasi-metaphysics"—is *not* speculative and does not allow itself to get trapped in problematic distinctions. Zen does not suffer the interplay of endless

²³ In Yōka Daishi's "Song of Enlightenment," it is written: "Let others speak ill of me, let others spite me/Those who try to burn the sky with a torch end in tiring themselves out;/I listen to them and taste their evil speaking as nectar;/All melts away and I find myself suddenly within the Unthinkable itself" (Quoted in D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* [New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960], pp. 92-3).

²⁴ Even the seemingly minor concepts employed here to discuss major ones (major only in the sense of the focus of this study) must be taken paradoxically. For example, when it is said that concealment and unconcealment exist simultaneously, this is not to imply that they exist in a moment cut off from other moments but that time itself is transcended in such a way that every moment must be thought of as an Eternal-Present or a Timeless-Now. Everything—absolutely everything—must be subject to paradox in Zen.

²⁵ "Transmetaphysical Thinking in Heidegger and Zen Buddhism."

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speculation that arises in Heidegger's onto-theo-logical analysis but prefers to leave such a troublesome ground for what might be said to be a *trans-onto-theo-logical-groundless-ground* or, as I have put it, contrasting this with Heidegger, *Non-being-Being*.