

Nothingness and Death in Heidegger and Zen Buddhism

JOHN STEFFNEY

Heidegger's Nichts

ACCORDING TO HEIDEGGER, Nothing's cataclysmic disclosure imparts that *Dasein's* existence is not fully realized, that its fully-realized existence as *Dasein* is a possibility to be achieved. In an average, everyday mode of existence, one is preoccupied exclusively with beings. Only through dread can one be jarred out of one's everydayness and into an awareness of a dimension other than beings. This awareness is facilitated because dread (in contrast to fear) is confrontation with Nothing. By facing Nothing, one is forced to deal with an entirely foreign realm, one that eludes one's ordinary transaction with beings. Nothing not only has none of the characteristics of being, it is incomprehensible, defying everyday reflective formulations, every notion one ever had about beings. It discloses the fact that there is "more" than beings, that there is a dimension which "transcends" beings: "This 'being-beyond'," Heidegger writes, "we call transcendence."¹

Dread, however, is not only intrinsic to the revelation of what is "beyond" beings, but also is intrinsic to the genuine revelation of beings per se—"it alone brings *Da-Sein* face to face with beings as such"²—and by vivid contrast (to Nothing) beings "are" beings: "Only in the bright night of the Nothing of dread are beings as such revealed in their original openness: that they are beings and not

¹ *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1958), pp. 84-85.

² *Was ist Metaphysik?*, 5th ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1949), p. 32.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

Nothing."³ Moreover, Nothing not only discloses beings as such, it discloses to *Dasein* *Dasein's* own Being. As Heidegger explains, "If *Dasein* were not projected from the beginning into Nothing, it could never relate to beings, not even to itself."⁴ *Dasein* does not exist because of an objective world or because of a confrontation with other beings; it exists because of a confrontation with Nothing. Nothing, thus, is the transcendental *a priori* for the vivid realization of beings, and for *Dasein's* ownmost potentiality for Being.

By dread Heidegger does not mean the usual sort of "anxiousness" (*Ängstlichkeit*) associated with "nervousness" (*Furchtsamkeit*); whereas anxiousness takes place within the realm of beings and is a response to beings, dread is a response to Nothing. In dread one feels "uncanny" (*unheimlich*), one is in "suspense" (*schweben*), and "there is nothing to hold on to,"⁵ suggesting that one cannot rely on rational resources—any resources—before Nothing's onslaught. In dread *Dasein* is not attracted to Nothing, but having felt its presence (the presence of an absence), recoils. The very nature of Nothing, Heidegger contends, is "repelling" (*abweisend*). This is not *merely* a repelling, however, for in being repelled, *Dasein* is then turned towards beings and Being. This is why Heidegger maintains that "repelling from itself is essentially an expelling into"⁶—an expelling into an awareness of beings in which they are suddenly more vivid than they ever have been, and an awareness of a dimension entirely "other," the dimension of Being. This also accounts for Heidegger's description of *Dasein's* retreat from Nothing as "spell-bound peace" (*gebannte Ruhe*). After the dread of Nothing, after the discovery of beings and Being genuinely for the first time, there is this peaceful repose.

Since logic is only capable of treating beings, in Nothing's presence logic collapses. Part of the difficulty of thinking is the dilemma of raising questions. Thinking's genuineness, according to Heidegger, is a measure of its ability to raise questions; and the problem with Western thinking in general is not so much a failure to provide adequate answers, but more fundamentally a failure to raise adequate questions.

³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

This is the gist of Heidegger's contention that "the very notion of 'logic' disintegrates in the whirlpool of a more original questioning."⁷ For Heidegger, logic is not "the highest court of appeal" (*die höchste Instanz*); in fact, the most elementary tools of logic—"question and answer" (*Frage und Antwort*)—he insists "are equally nonsensical in themselves in a concern with Nothing."⁸ Reason is inadequate for treating Nothing because Nothing is the "ground" of one of reason's facets: negation.

The fact that there can be something called negation is based on a more fundamental dimension of negation prior to logical negation, allowing logical negation to be possible. As Heidegger explains, "More original than the not and negation is 'Nothing'."⁹ By the same token, the "yea" of reason, its affirmative character, is based on a more fundamental process. Both Being and Nothing, therefore, are dimensions transcending reason, and a more original and primordial mode of thinking is essential if one is to have access to them. Because of logic's limitations, it cannot raise questions which surpass metaphysical matters. It is precisely *Dasein's* collision with Nothing, then, that challenges logic, forcing it to fathom the limits of rational intelligibility. Nothing is the necessary catalytic to Being's unconcealment, because a confrontation with Nothing is the only way rational thinking can recognize its boundary and fathom what beings are *not*, what transcends them. Thus Heidegger writes that "within the horizon of scientific conception, which only knows beings, that which is absolutely not beings (*Being*) is capable of presenting itself only as Nothing."¹⁰ Metaphysical thinking is essentially about "something." But how can metaphysics "think" when confronted with Nothing's vacuousness? Here is metaphysics' maelstrom: helplessly it whirls before an abysmal uncertainty, shedding its safe cogencies. Nothing, thus, reveals the boundary of metaphysics—metaphysics' ownmost edge—disjunctively disclosing that if one is to delve more originally or more primordially into ontological matters another dimension of thinking is in order.

Because Nothing is not a logical negation, it "is" on a higher plane

⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

than beings "are." If Nothing were negative nothingness—a "not"—it would have to be written as "nothing," the "not" among beings. But since Nothing "Is" in the sense of being on the same ontological plane as Being, it must be written in the higher case, which is why, in referring to both Being and Nothing, Heidegger capitalizes *and* italicizes his assertion, "*both Are*" (*Es gibt beides*). Nothing is not simply a "conceptual opposite" (*Gegenbegriff*) of beings, but "belongs originally to essence itself."¹¹ It is inextricably linked with Being and has equal status in the essenc-ing process, which is evident in Heidegger's contention that "in the Being of beings the nihilation of Nothing occurs."¹²

Although Nothing is catalytic to *Dasein's* awesome awakening that beings "are," and to the further implication that Being is the Beingness of beings, when he addresses this matter he invariably equates Nothing with "concealment" (*Verborgenheit*) and Being with "unconcealment" (*Unverborgenheit*). On that plane, thus, a continual dialectical interplay exists between Being and Nothing to the point where Heidegger can speak of a "unity," despite the obvious diversity. Concealment and unconcealment are parcels of the same confluence, for even though Being can be concealed, it can never logically be negated. Its concealment always "Is," and even though Nothing conceals, it never logically "is not." In that sense, Being and Nothing "Are." And precisely because they "Are," prior to logical affirmation and logical negation, they cannot be apprehended through logical thinking, through the rational spectacles Western philosophy has worn since its origins.

According to Heidegger, "the involvement with thought is in itself a rare thing, reserved for a few people,"¹³ a reservation which has nothing to do with the intentions of thinking, but everything to do with concealment and unconcealment inherent in Being: "Devoted thought is not something we produce and carry along. . . . When we think what above all must be thought, we then give thought to what this concern itself gives us to think about."¹⁴ That Heidegger believes Being conceals itself and that metaphysics is concealment's manifestness is evi-

¹¹ "Zur Seinesfrage," reprinted in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1967), p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1954), p. 86.

dent in his contention that metaphysics is not only a "veil" (*Verhüllung*), but also one which is "unavoidable" (*unumgänglich*). This is why he regards the preliminaries of Western metaphysics as "fateful beginnings" (*geschickhafter Beginn*) and as "destiny" (*Geschick*), and why he contends that the essential nature of thinking—any thinking—"is determined [*bestimmt*] by what there is to be thought about: the presence of what is present, the Being of beings."¹⁵

Heidegger does not *condemn* traditional philosophy for its preoccupation with the metaphysics of beings or for thinking "onto-theologically" (*onto-theo-logisch*), a leniency evident in his remark that "the reference to what is unthought in philosophy is not a criticism of philosophy."¹⁶ What is unthought in philosophy is not due to philosophy's neglect, but to Being's concealment: "*Lethe* (concealment) belongs to *a-letheia* (un-concealment), not simply as an appendage, not as a shadow to light, but as the heart of *aletheia*."¹⁷ Heidegger, accordingly, does not view traditional metaphysics as a result of the miscalculations of earlier philosophers, nor a metaphysical doctrines as something "promoted by chance" (*zufällig vorgebracht*). The metaphysical principles of Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche are rather products of Being's self-concealment, and their writings are "words of Being as responses to a claim which speaks in the sending concealing itself [*sich selber verbergendes Schicken*]."¹⁸ That concealment and un-concealment are Being's bequeathment, that metaphysical thinking as well as original thinking (should it arise) are Being's manifestation, that being "on the way" is not a self-chosen journey but inherent in Being's self-disclosure, are all evident in his assertion that "Nietzsche, as well as any other philosopher, has neither made nor chosen his way. He has been sent on his way."¹⁹

The modern age is philosophically characterized by Heidegger as one which is not capable of thinking "what above all must be thought" (*Das Bedenklichst*). With biting irony he writes: "What above all must

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁷ *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1969), p. 76.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

be thought is that we are still not thinking."²⁰ But the fact that modern thinkers do not think "what above all must be thought" or most thought-provoking is not a human deficiency. It is an inherent character of the Being-process. If the dilemma *were* a product of human "neglect" (*Saumnis*), the neglect "could then be cured in human ways by appropriate measures."²¹ Unfortunately, that which "what above all must be thought," Heidegger explains, "turned away long ago."²² Still, Heidegger's implication is that as long as we recognize Being's self-concealment and think about this concealment rigorously, we are "on the way" toward thinking what above all must be thought, "on the way" toward original thinking. Because what above all must be thought withdraws from thinking, attentiveness to this withdrawal is an initial step toward original thinking: "The real nature of thought might show itself, however, at that point where it once withdrew, if we will only pay attention to this withdrawal."²³ Recognizing that we are not yet thinking, coupled with a recognition that what above all must be thought itself withdraws, is a prerequisite for original thinking.

Zen's Śūnyatā

Contrasting the Zen position with the Western position in which Being always has priority over Non-being, in which "the positive principle is understood to have the ontological priority over the negative principle,"²⁴ Abe Masao maintains that "only when the positive and the negative principles have equal force and are mutually negating is the dialectical structure of *Śūnyatā* possible."²⁵ One must consider, does this sense of "equal force" and "mutual negation" coincide with Heidegger's Being and Nothing, with unconcealment and concealment? Does not Heidegger's Being nihilate itself, so that Being-as-un-

²⁰ *Was heisst Denken?*, p. 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁵ "Non-being and *Mu*: The Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and West," *Religious Studies II* (June 1975), p. 186.

concealment becomes Nothing-as-concealment? And does not Nothing nihilate itself, so that Nothing-as-concealment becomes Being-as-unconcealment? Still, it must be said that even these radical Heideggerian notions do not coincide with what Zen means by "equal force" and "mutual negation." As Abe explains, "*Mu* [Nothingness] is not one-sidedly derived through the negation from *u* [Being]."²⁶ Zen's mutual negation is not Heidegger's alternating principle of affirmation and negation, but is a principle of simultaneous affirmation and negation in which the affirmation is the negation and the negation is the affirmation. According to D. T. Suzuki, "Zen is a philosophy of absolute negations which are at the same time absolute affirmations; unless one gains a certain insight into this dialectic of negation-affirmation one has no right to say a word about Zen."²⁷ When asked what it means "to be devoid of discriminative knowledge," Jōshū replied, "What are you talking about?"²⁸ Jōshū's reply is most paradoxical in that he refuses to indulge in such "discriminations" as discrimination and non-discrimination. In Zen's voiding of the Void, of its emptying of Emptiness, one cannot be attached to Void or Emptiness. Paraphrasing the Zen master Yung-chia, Chung-yuan Chang writes: "When we say that something is real it is not a relative reality. When we say that it is void, it is not a relative void. What is real is void, what is void is real. The identification of the void and the real is achieved by the absolute mind, which is free of all dichotomy."²⁹ Heidegger's Nothing, in contrast to Zen's *Sūnyatā*, is never itself absolutely identical with Being. Whereas Heidegger's affirmation-negation is a relative principle, in that one principle is always relative to what it is not, Zen's affirmation-negation is an absolute principle, in that there is nothing that either principle is not.

Though Heidegger treats Nothing in various ways—as a catalyst for the disclosure of Being, as the ontological source of negation, as ontological Difference, and as Being's dynamic concealment—Being nonetheless has ontological priority in Heidegger's thought. It is the Be-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁸ *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (London: Rider, 1969), p. 108.

²⁹ *Radical Zen: The Sayings of Jōshū*, trans. Yoel Hoffman (Brookline, Mass.: Autumn Press, 1978), p. 28.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

ing-question and the Being-process he is concerned with, not the Nothing-question or the Nothing-process. Zen would regard Heidegger's Being and Nothing as bifurcational, and would say that these must be emptied of themselves, to the point where one can say that Being is Nothing and that Nothing is being. Such a paradoxical assertion can be made not by virtue of a *Being*-process, but by virtue of a radical *Emptying*-process. Whereas Heidegger gives priority to Being, to a dynamic essenc-ing, Zen gives pedagogical priority to Emptiness, to a dynamic Empty-ing prior to Heidegger's relative Nothing. According to Ha Tai Kim, Zen "negates all the presuppositions of Being, thus making the concept of Nothing the *alpha* and *omega* of reality," adding that if there is a fundamental presupposition in Zen it is "absolute nothing."³⁰ And as Abe puts it, "the symbol of liberation is not 'Being' as the point of ontological priority of being to non-being, but the dynamism of 'Emptiness' which is simultaneously fullness."³¹ Zen does indeed embrace Being, but it does not give Being priority over Nothingness. Moreover, because Being is attained by virtue of absolute Nothingness, Being itself is transformed absolutely, and cannot be thought of in the way the West envisioned it, as being over against Nothingness, or even as Heidegger has envisioned it, as Being integral with Nothingness.

Not only are Heidegger's Nothing and Zen's Nothingness different, therefore, their understandings of Being are different. Abe's distinction between the Western notion of "Being" and Zen's notion of "Wondrous Being" is pertinent here: "The Buddhist idea of Wondrous Being is clearly different from the Western idea of 'Being'."³² Heidegger's Being is not Zen's "Wondrous Being," but the integral counterpart of Nothing. Whereas Heidegger's Being is integral with Nothing, Zen's "True Emptiness and Wondrous Being," according to Abe, "are completely non-dualistic: absolute *Mu* and ultimate reality are totally identical, although the realization of the former is indispen-

¹⁰ "Ch'an and Buddhism: Logical and Illogical," *Philosophy East and West* XVII (October 1962), p. 41.

³¹ "God, Emptiness, and the True Self," *The Eastern Buddhist* II, 2 (November 1969), p. 20.

³² "Non-being and *Mu*," p. 189.

sable for the realization of the latter."³³ In Zen, the realization of absolute Nothingness is paradoxically the realization of Wondrous Being, although in a pedagogical context Nothingness may be said to have priority. One may not proceed from Wondrous Being to Absolute Nothingness, because it is absolutely Empty-ing which dissolves all duality. Moreover, it is pedagogically not only through absolute Empty-ing that Wondrous Being is possible, it is through absolute Empty-ing—an absolute Empty-ing of Emptiness itself—that Wondrous Being and absolute Emptiness are identical. Even Abe's "primacy of Nothingness over Being," thus, must entail another transformation, another radical Empty-ing. Although one must functionally begin with Nothingness in order to realize the absolute identification of Being and Nothingness, in that absolute identification Nothingness abandons its functional primacy.

Although Heidegger's Being and Nothing are the primordial sources of affirmation and negation, these are treated relationally. By contrast, alluding to Nāgārjuna, Abe, explains that in Zen "Emptiness is not a mere emptiness as opposed to fullness. Emptiness as *Sūnyatā* transcends and embraces both emptiness and fullness."³⁴ Clearly, this is not what Heidegger means by Nothing. Heidegger's Nothing does not transcend and embrace itself and Being; rather it is integrally related to Being. For Zen, Nothingness not only transcends and embraces itself and Being, Nothingness *is* Being, which is why, again alluding to Nāgārjuna, Abe refers to "true Emptiness" as "Wondrous Being."³⁵

Heidegger's Nothing, despite its primordial ontological status, despite its radicality compared with traditional metaphysics, is a "relative" negation, not what Abe calls, synonymously, "absolute negation," "double negation," and "the negation of the negation."³⁶ Heidegger's Nothing does not undergo "double negation," does not negate itself, and is never absolutely identical with "Wondrous Being," so that "the negation of the negation is the affirmation."³⁷

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 186.

³⁷ Ibid.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

Translating this into more mundane language, one might associate ordinary affirmation with the notion that mountains are mountains, associate "relative" negation with the notion that mountains are not mountains, and associate "absolute" or "double negation" with the notion that mountains Are mountains. In philosophic language, again, Abe argues, "thus we may say that absolute negation is absolute affirmation and absolute affirmation is absolute negation."³⁸ This, Abe notes, is a "paradoxical statement."³⁹ But considering that Heidegger's Nothing is relational (with regard to Being) and, in Abe's sense, "relative," it would be misleading, from the Zen point of view, to refer to it as paradoxical. Although Heidegger's thought is often referred to as paradoxical in the light of traditional metaphysics, one could not refer to Heidegger's thought as paradoxical in the light of Zen. At best, despite its radicality, one would have to refer to it as relatively relational.

It is important to understand that Zen is not a radical negation of everything. If this were so, a charge of nihilism could be levied against it. Once the Zen student reaches the point of radical negation, once he reaches the point where negation and affirmation as ordinarily understood are emptied of their logical relationship, the Zen master will not permit him to remain at this dreadful precipice. Unless the student realizes that radical negation *is itself* radical affirmation, his realization is not complete. This in fact is why the master, on occasion, may slap the student. Just at that uncanny point where the student has the realization of radical negation, the master dramatically assists him in the realization of radical affirmation, not only *by way of* a slap in the face but *as* a slap in the face, disclosing that negation is itself affirmation, and that no amount of thinking, however dialectical, can represent this concrete fact. This is most illustrative in a dialogue between Sekkyō and one of his monks:

Sekkyō (*Shih-kung*) asked one of his accomplished monks,

"Can you take hold of empty space?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Show me how you do it."

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

STEFFNEY

The monk stretched out his arm and clutched at empty space.

Sekkyō said: "Is that the way? But after all you have not got anything."

"What then," asked the monk, "is your way?"

The master straightway took hold of the monk's nose and gave it a hard pull, which made the latter exclaim: "Oh, oh, how hard you pull at my nose! You are hurting terribly!"

"That is the way to have a good hold of empty space," said the master.⁴⁰

The thrust of this dialogue is that empty space is paradoxically full, that one cannot treat Zen Nothingness in the usual ways of affirmation and negation, and most vividly, that Zen is not only as life-like as the pulling of a nose, but *is* the pulling of a nose, that Zen is none other than life itself.

Although Abe has an in-depth understanding of Zen and has written about it brilliantly and informatively, it is doubtful that he has studied Heidegger as rigorously. Although one of his tasks has been to make important distinctions between East and West, especially between Zen and the West, he too hastily overlooks these distinctions with regard to Heidegger. Although one may be sympathetic with Abe's statement that "Martin Heidegger takes the issue of 'nothingness' seriously and, perhaps, the most profoundly in Western history,"⁴¹ his further contention that Heidegger's Nothing "is strikingly similar to Buddhist understanding of Emptiness"⁴² is off the mark. On the contrary, a careful, comparative explication of Heidegger's Nothing and Zen's Nothingness will show—as I have tried to show—that they are strikingly *dissimilar*. Though Abe recognizes that, in Heidegger's thought, "to encounter nothingness is to overcome the forgetfulness with regard to Being,"⁴³ and uses this as the basis for that striking similarity, Zen's Nothingness is more than a catalyst of disclosure. It is, rather—using

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Quoted in D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 84.

⁴² "Non-being and *Mu*," p. 192.

⁴³ Ibid.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

Abe's own words—not “merely a gate to reach the hall of ultimate Reality. Instead it in itself is the hall of ultimate Reality.”⁴⁴

Heidegger's Sein-zum-Ende

In accordance with his concern for *Dasein's* anticipatory apprehension of its future, and in conjunction with his concern for *Dasein's* structural wholeness which begins with its “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*), Heidegger argues that *Dasein* must find its completion in death. But *Dasein's* death is most unique compared with non-*Dasein*-like beings in that it is ontological: though non-*Dasein*-like beings obviously partake of cessation as necessarily rounding out their structural wholes, *Dasein's* cessation is more dynamic by virtue of its existing or dying towards its cessation. Although the fruit's “not-yet” (*Noch-nicht*) is already included or even precluded in its very being (its “not-yet” being no more than a manifestation of its organic process, a “not-yet” of which it is obviously unaware), *Dasein* is aware of its cessation, a cessation which is not merely “finished” (*Zu-Ende-sein*), but more ecstatically, “Being-towards-the-end” (*Sein-zum-Ende*). *Dasein's* death, therefore, is not merely a teleological fact, but “a way to be” (*eine Weise zu sein*) in terms of “anticipation.” Although the fruit's death and *Dasein's* death are undisputably given, only *Dasein* (as a “who,” not a “what”) can ex-sist “towards” that death in such a way that death will serve as a disclosure about the authenticity or inauthenticity of its being; and whereas the cessation of the fruit if the “fulfillment” (*Vollendung*) of its being, *Dasein's* cessation usually ends up in “unfulfillment” (*Unvollendung*) meaning that in its cessation *Dasein* rarely realizes its ownmost potentialities. The importance of *Dasein's* existing “towards” death is that death may serve as a disclosure of unrealized potentialities and serve as a catalyst for authentic existing.

Death is always *Dasein's* “ownmost potentiality” (*eigenste Möglichkeit*). No *Dasein* can die another *Dasein's* death, and no individual *Dasein* can take refuge in the universal fact that all *Daseins* die, which is why Heidegger calls attention to *Dasein's* death as “non-relational” (*unbezüglich*) and as that which is not to be “outstripped” (*unüberholbar*). In fact, it is attempting to take refuge in the death of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

others which is indicative of an inauthentic mode of being towards death, according to Heidegger, a refuge which does indeed strip *Dasein* of its ownmost potentialities. In an authentic being towards death "one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can genuinely understand and choose among factual possibilities existing ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped."⁴⁵ It is for this reason that Heidegger equates "dread" (*Angst*) with an authentic being towards death, maintaining that "Being-towards-death is essentially dread."⁴⁶ Dread undermines the safeguards and consolations about death that may be imbibed from the "they" (*Man*) or from reflecting on death universally, by bluntly revealing that one will indeed die. Death, therefore, is a way to be which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is.

Zen's Mind Unborn, Mind Undestroyed

Dasein dies. It dies not in the way other beings die, that is, in merely ceasing to be, but exists "towards" its cessation. Its cessation is not strictly a cessation, therefore, but a "way to be." It is precisely this "way to be" towards an end, however, that Zen prefers to transcend. Reflecting on Heidegger's notion of death, Vincent Vicynas contends that "death is that which makes *Dasein* really *Dasein*, just as night makes day to stand out as day. Without night, day would never be perceived as day; it would lack its somethingness."⁴⁷ Whereas Heidegger argues that in order for *Dasein* to be authentic it must not only overcome its preoccupation with beings and comport itself towards Being, but must accept its inevitable dying, its ineluctable finitude, an acceptance which he calls "resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*), Zen would say that "acceptance" of death is not enough, that "acceptance" could not characterize what it means by resolution. For even when the Self "accepts" its own non-being, it is still immersed in the tension of opposites. Whereas Heidegger views death as *Dasein's* inevitable evanescence "which *Dasein* takes on as soon as it exists,"⁴⁸ referring to

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁶ *Zur Sache des Denkens*, p. 264.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

⁴⁸ *Earth and Gods: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p.55.

NOTHINGNESS AND DEATH

death as the "absolute impotence of *Dasein*" (*schlechthinnige Dasein-sunmöglichkeit*) and as the "absolute negation of *Dasein*" (*schlechthinnig Nichtigkeit des Daseins*), from the Zen viewpoint nothing can negate the Self because ultimately the Self is Selfless, beyond positivity and negativity, beyond the tension that dualities necessitate. As Hui-hai expressed it when he was asked what is meant as to perceiving the real state of Buddhahood: "It means no longer perceiving anything as existing or not existing."⁴⁹ Huang-po similarly maintains, "Where nothing is sought this implies Mind unborn; where no attachment exists, this implies Mind not destroyed; and that which is neither born nor destroyed is the Buddha."⁵⁰ And as Yung-chia tersely phrased it in his *Song of Actualizing Bodhi*, "Neither life nor death concerns me."⁵¹

Heidegger is not concerned with *Dasein*-lessness in the way that Zen is concerned with Self-lessness, with Not-*Dasein* in the way that Zen is concerned with Not-Self. When Heidegger writes, "Not-*Dasein*" (*Nicht-dasein*) in *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, he is referring to the inevitable possibility of *Dasein* no longer being the There of Being. Moreover, this sense of Not-*Dasein* reinforces the notion of "mutual challenge" between *Dasein* and Being. Given the priority of being over *Dasein*, a priority in which *Dasein* may be "smashed to pieces" (*zerbrechen*), *Dasein*'s only way of responding to this overwhelming power is to accept it. The only "triumph" (*Sieg*) it can have is to cease to be: "Not-being-*dasein* is *Dasein*'s highest triumph over Being."⁵² This "triumph," however, from the Zen point of view, is at best a Pyrrhic victory. It is by no means as radical or as resolute as what Zen means by the "great Death," a Death which is "the total negation of life-and-death and is beyond a realization of death as distinguished from life."⁵³

⁴⁹ *Sein und Zeit*, 10th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963), p. 245.

⁵⁰ John Blofeld, trans., *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 71.

⁵¹ John Blofeld, trans., *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 40.

⁵² Quoted in Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1971), p. 17.

⁵³ *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, p. 136.

STEFFNEY

Though in *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger speaks of *Dasein* as “transcendence” (*Transzendenz*) in that it represents a dimension unavailable to other beings, capable of surpassing its own essence as a being and realizing a more essential relation to Being, this surpassing cannot be taken in any supraphenomenal or supraimmanental sense. For though Heidegger describes *Dasein* as “transcendence,” he also refers to it as “finitude” (*Endlichkeit*). *Dasein* is a being among beings and therefore finite; yet it is a most unique being that it can exist in a way that non-*Dasein*-like beings may not. This quality of *Dasein*, which allows it to be a being among beings and also to partake of a “dimension” (*Dimension*) unavailable to non-*Dasein*-like beings, Heidegger calls “the deepest finitude of transcendence.”⁵⁴ It is what William Richardson refers to as “the radical finitude of man.”⁵⁵ Still, by recognizing a radical finitude that stands over against that which might be regarded as infinity, by recognizing what Richardson aptly refers to as “the *finite* There of *finite* Being,”⁵⁶ Heidegger cannot provide a resolution to death in Zen’s sense. In fact, it is precisely this dichotomy of the finite and the infinite that Zen prefers to transcend.

⁵⁴ “Non-being and *Mu*,” p. 190.

⁵⁵ *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951), p. 214.

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p. 33.

⁵⁷ *Through Phenomenology to Thought*, p. 539.