

## VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### Imaginary Dialogue between Heidegger and a Buddhist with apologies for possible implausibilities of the personalities

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*Buddhist:* Professor Heidegger, in the interest of a future dialogue between East and West, I think it admirable that a Western philosopher has finally placed death in the center of the existential situation, unmitigated by hopes for Platonic immortality or Christian promises of an afterlife. I personally am particularly interested in your emphasis on nothingness, a question, of course, not unrelated to the question of death. Today I should very much like to pursue what you say about the question of nothingness and your related conception of the clearing. You yourself have referred to “the inevitable conversation with the East Asian world.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we might begin by discussing your dialogue between a Japanese and a questioner on the subject of language.<sup>2</sup> I have just re-read it, and it is still fresh in my mind. In it the Japanese referred to emptiness, which for us is the highest name for what you perhaps mean by the word “being.” How do you understand the term “emptiness?”

*Heidegger:* I believe the Japanese called emptiness “*kū*,” the emptiness of the heaven, what is without limits.

*Buddhist:* Yes.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> In *On the Way to Language*.

*Heidegger*: What makes me uneasy is the expression “without limits.” When the Greeks spoke of nothingness, they made a sharp distinction between *me on*, relative nothingness, and *ouk on*, absolute nothingness. By absolute nothingness I understand sheer nugatory nothingness, which is indicative of the common aversion to anything not “positive” and “life-affirming.” This conception of nothingness is totally blind to the deeply “affirmative,” “creative” possibilities of nothingness that are expressed in *me on*, relative nothingness. This nothingness is a *definite*, unique nothingness and belongs to the heart of being.

*Buddhist*: Your objection to absolute nothingness sounds very much like your objection to Rilke’s conception of the Open, which you criticized in “What Are Poets For?”

*Heidegger*: Precisely. Not only is Rilke’s conception metaphysical, but, beyond that, it is curiously close to the Christian idea of the Infinite. The Open is without all bounds. In the essay you mentioned, I stated that Rilke’s Open is precisely what is closed up, uncleared, what draws on in boundlessness, so that nothing can be encountered in it. I myself often used the term “the Open,” but I gradually came to abandon it in favor of the term “clearing.”

*Buddhist*: What is the difference between the Open and the clearing? This seems to me to be an essential question.

*Heidegger*: You are right. Just think of the image of a clearing in the forest. It is a *defined*, open space in which something can presence and be encountered. In contrast, Rilke’s Open is completely indefinite, without all bounds, and nothing can presence or be encountered in it. Rilke’s Open is uncleared, opaque, so to speak. It is a boundless, mute, opaque in-finity in which nothing can presence or happen. Presencing must have limits and be defined. The clearing must be structured and attuned (*gefügt und gestimmt*).

*Buddhist*: And yet you yourself consistently say that the Nothing belongs to being. You are one of the first Western thinkers to assert this, and that is partly what draws many Easterners, Buddhists in particular, to your thinking.

*Heidegger*: But by the Nothing I have never meant boundless emptiness.

*Buddhist*: What do you have against the term “emptiness”? It is an absolutely central word for Buddhists.

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*Heidegger:* There can be no presencing in emptiness. Emptiness precludes presencing.

*Buddhist:* It is astonishing to hear you say that. Let us try to discuss this further. Buddhists are now speaking about relative nothingness or emptiness and absolute nothingness or emptiness.

*Heidegger:* That would correspond to the Greek *me on* and *ouk on*. *Ouk on*, absolute nothing, means what I call nugatory nothingness, nothing at all; I reject this concept which coincides with the common understanding of nothing, an “understanding” that exhausts itself in simple aversion. *Me on*, relative nothing, on the other hand, denies something to a thing which belongs to it, and is thus related to it: a kind of keeping at bay, a rejection, a prevention. But the denial or the not remains related to the thing rejecting it and keeping it at bay, thus it is through and through a definite lack, denial, nothingness. It is *this particular* lack.

*Buddhist:* We may mean by relative nothingness pretty much the same thing. Wherein we differ is in regard to absolute nothingness. Far from regarding absolute nothingness as merely nugatory nothingness or even any kind of *absence* at all, Buddhists experience absolute nothingness or emptiness as the only possibility of experiencing totality, wholeness, fullness.

*Heidegger:* Could you perhaps elucidate that?

*Buddhist:* As you yourself know, the experience of something or any particular thing precludes the experience of anything else. When I look at a tree, particularly if I objectify it as we all, East and West, tend to do, I see only that tree; I do not see, for example, the flowering bush next to it.

*Heidegger:* But what if I am able to see a tree, for example, the way Van Gogh painted it? Then I would not objectify it, and the experience of the tree would not rigidly exclude other things.

*Buddhist:* Agreed. But there are not many of us who can see a tree the way Van Gogh saw it; the experience is admittedly rare.

*Heidegger:* Rare, but possible.

*Buddhist:* But what if there is a way of seeing the world that opens up and infinitely expands that possibility?—then it would not be rare.

*Heidegger:* That sounds intriguing, but in our period of what I call the history of being, I tend to doubt that it is possible. In the epoch of Framing and technology, it may not be possible to see the world that

way. Framing blocks any pristine kind of presencing.

*Buddhist:* I cannot argue with that. What you are speaking of is predominantly an epoch of Western history, and yet it has profoundly affected the East as well. What you call Framing or technology has its roots in the West, but the growth has spread over the entire globe. Nothing can be isolated any longer. Yet you yourself have expressed the hope for an “end” to Framing and technology, and also to objectifying, calculative thinking.

*Heidegger:* That is true. I have expressed the hope for a more primordial belonging together of man and being, experienced as the Fourfold, the Fourfold of earth and heaven, the godlike ones and the mortals.

*Buddhist:* But how is the Fourfold to be *experienced*? In your language, where does it presence?

*Heidegger:* The Fourfold presences in the thing, whether that thing be a jug, a bridge, a tree or whatever.

*Buddhist:* But how, according to you, can four different “things” presence in one thing? With this question I am not digressing; I am getting back to a discussion of emptiness. You will see what I mean.

*Heidegger:* I think I already have some idea. Initially, I would answer that the Fourfold does not consist of “things” in the ordinary sense, nor is the thing in which they presence any kind of object, but more of a possibility, a possible site for the Fourfold to presence. I have tried to describe how earth, heaven, the godlike ones and mortals presence in a jug in my essay “The Thing.”

*Buddhist:* Yes, I know that fine essay. We are agreed in what we reject: the separateness of reified objects. What we yet have to try to clarify is how it is possible for a totality. I take it that the Fourfold is a kind of totality, to presence in a thing. In that essay you even say that what does the vessel’s holding, what holds the wine is the *emptiness* of the jug.

*Heidegger:* Yes, but by emptiness I did not mean indefinite emptiness, but rather the *specific* emptiness of *that* jug.

*Buddhist:* Thus, in your terminology, a *me on*, not an *ouk on*. Buddhists feel that in order to attain true affirmation, the negation must itself be negated. In other words, relative nothingness, *me on*, must be negated in order to arrive at absolute nothingness or emptiness.

*Heidegger:* You mean to arrive at some kind of Hegelian synthesis.

*Buddhist:* No. By negating the negation you arrive at, so to speak,

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another dimension of the same reality you started with. There is no “position” (thesis) or positing whatever involved. There is no progression (from thesis to antithesis to syntheses); it is a matter of *penetrating* to the very reality of the thing in question, be it a jug, a tree or a pebble.

*Heidegger:* You mean the *being* of the thing?

*Buddhist:* I suppose *you* might want to put it that way. But you must remember that Buddhists and also Taoists begin, not with being, but with non being, with nothing. What matters is nothing, not being. But you may not wish to go that far.

*Heidegger:* I would want to somehow get beyond the opposition of being and nothingness.

*Buddhist:* Bravo! There we agree completely. But consider this. If you negate relative nothingness, *me on*, the negation yields the specific thing negated. If you negate non-tree, you wind up with tree again. You end up with the reality of this definite thing. But if you negate absolute nothingness, *ouk on*, the negation of the lack of everything yields everything, absolute reality and fullness.

*Heidegger:* It sounds good, but I would have to have some experience of that.

*Buddhist:* Absolutely. Without the experience of absolute nothingness or emptiness all you have are meaningless words. You become one of Dōgen’s “word-counting scholars.”

*Heidegger:* But at best absolute nothingness sounds like it might be some kind of *universal*. Absolute nothingness as the universal then subsumes, swallows up, as it were, all the particulars. What I mean by being is absolutely singular and unique.

*Buddhist:* In Buddhism emptiness goes together with *tathatā*, suchness. Suchness or all the suchnesses are not subsumed under emptiness nor are they swallowed up by it. Particular things absolutely remain as they are (as-it-isness, suchness), yet they are paradoxically “identical” with emptiness.

*Heidegger:* To me, suchness or as-it-isness sounds a bit like Meister Eckhart’s *Istigkeit*, isness. If the two are related or indeed are “the same,” then I have an inkling of what you are talking about.

*Buddhist:* The Heart Sutra has the well-known, recurring phrase: Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. This is a highly paradoxical identity. It is not an identity of mediation of the kind you find in Ger-

man Idealism, but an immediate identity. Nevertheless, it is not an “initial” identity; no one starts out with it; this identity has to be *realized*, yet the realization, when it occurs, is immediate.

*Heidegger*: If you have negation, you have mediation.

*Buddhist*: You have perhaps heard the saying: Before enlightenment mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. During enlightenment mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. After enlightenment mountains are *really* mountains and rivers are *really* rivers. This does not describe a *process*: you have not gone anywhere. You are *really* where you were in the first place.

*Heidegger*: I believe I can follow that. But why is it not mediation?

*Buddhist*: Because in this case you have not negated anything. All that happens is that a certain habitual, constrained way of seeing drops away; it is shattered. But let us return to the question of negation and emptiness. That, after all, is our main topic.

*Heidegger*: Yes. We must not get off the track.

*Buddhist*: Let us go back to Rilke’s Open. You said that in it nothing could presence or be encountered. I assume that by “be encountered” you do not mean a subject encountering an object.

*Heidegger*: No, no. In boundlessness or the Open, things, if we can even speak of things in this case, would simply drift about endlessly. There would be nothing to halt them or bring them to a stand. I cannot encounter something that drifts endlessly. I cannot catch up with it, so to speak. It never achieves a presence. This has nothing to do with subject or object.

*Buddhist*: I follow that. But if the thing were brought to a stand by some kind of limit or barrier, then it would stand opposite, over against me as an object. As far as I understand the term “object,” an object does not presence; it stands opposite, over against me.

*Heidegger*: I am not talking about an object. For me, the thing is, so to speak, the meeting place for the dimensions of earth, heaven, the godlike ones and the mortals. There is nothing objective about that.

*Buddhist*: When a Buddhist sees, truly sees, a thing, he does not encounter the thing; he becomes the thing.

*Heidegger*: You would have to explain that.

*Buddhist*: It cannot be explained; it can only be seen. But let us return to your mention of Van Gogh. If we take a Chinese landscape painting, what do we see? Not several or many things as in most

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Western art, say, a landscape, portrait or still life, but a vast expanse of emptiness and somewhere, perhaps in a corner, a twig or a leaf.

*Heidegger:* I have seen such paintings. They are very fine.

*Buddhist:* You respond to a painting of emptiness; it is the concept that somehow repels you.

*Heidegger:* I must admit that for me boundlessness and any kind of presence or being absolutely preclude each other. What about the twig?

*Buddhist:* The twig could be suchness. The twig, the suchness, lets you see boundless emptiness; boundless emptiness lets you see the twig.

*Heidegger:* So there is a presence within emptiness?

*Buddhist:* Not quite. To go back to the Heart Sutra, form *is* emptiness, emptiness *is* form. It is not the case that one sees form *within* emptiness or emptiness *within* form. You yourself have polemicized in *Being and Time* against this kind of “within.”

*Heidegger:* Yes, yes. I am beginning to see what you mean. I guess it is the immediate identity that gives me trouble. Could you say that emptiness is immanent within the form?

*Buddhist:* That is just another “within,” an “in which.” Emptiness *is* form.

*Heidegger:* You are right. I think we are beginning to realize that the traditional central concepts of immanence and transcendence are no longer adequate to capture the relation of God and world or, in my language, of being and beings. I myself would no longer state, as I did in *Being and Time*, that being is the absolute *transcendens*. Being is neither transcendent nor is it absolute. All of that belongs to metaphysics and ontotheology.

*Buddhist:* Now we are beginning to get somewhere. Then why does immediate identity cause you so much trouble?

*Heidegger:* Once one has studied Hegel and his critique of Schelling and intuition, it is difficult to be content with immediacy. Above all, Hegel believed in “the hard labor of the concept,” in short, in the transformation of nature or immediacy by Spirit. Immediacy, as it is, is nothing; it only attains significance by being negated and transformed.

*Buddhist:* At least we agree about the necessity of negation.

*Heidegger:* But I don’t think we are negating the same thing. Hegel is negating immediacy. You are not.

*Buddhist:* Hegel *believes* he is negating immediacy.

*Heidegger:* Immediacy is what we start out with. What is so meaningful about that? Surely meaning enters in with Spirit.

*Buddhist:* Immediacy is precisely *not* what we start out with. For example, when we first see a tree, we normally think: this is a tree, not a bush. It is a birch tree, not an oak tree. In other words, we classify and categorize the tree. This is not immediate experience.

*Heidegger:* Then what would immediate experience be?

*Buddhist:* First, I have to negate my habitual categorizing and conceptualizing. Then I have no tree, no thing, relative nothingness, not this tree. Finally, I must negate this negation to arrive at absolute nothingness.

*Heidegger:* What is it you then *see*?

*Buddhist:* Suchness.

*Heidegger:* Hegel, of course, could not accept that. What is real for him is the concept, not immediacy. But I think I see what you are getting at.

*Buddhist:* Of course we must not cling to words like suchness and absolute nothingness. They remain fingers pointing at the moon. Words and concepts point to something; as long as we realize that words are not themselves It, they can be helpful. Even, no, *especially* emptiness has to empty itself out. Emptiness itself is empty, nonsubstantial.

*Heidegger:* I completely agree with that. Not with everything you say, but with nonsubstantiality.

*Buddhist:* Now, can we fit nonsubstantiality together with what you mean by Being? Surely for you being is not substance.

*Heidegger:* Not at all! That is why instead of the term “being,” which is heavily burdened with scholastic and ontotheological connotations, I have come to prefer more “poetic” terms such as Appropriation, the Fourfold and Clearing of self-concealing.

*Buddhist:* The last term, Clearing of self-concealing, baffles me. Why concealing?

*Heidegger:* Being does not unconceal itself completely. We do not have clearing alone; we have clearing of self-concealing.

*Buddhist:* I am aware that you say that we *haven't* had pure clearing, that being withdraws and abandons us in the course of the history of being, and that now even this abandonment has been forgotten. But does that mean that there *cannot* be pure unconcealment and clearing unmitigated by concealing?

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*Heidegger:* Concealing is essential. It is true that in the course of the history of being concealing has approached distortion, but concealing belongs to being. In fact, you could almost abbreviate and say: being is self-concealing. If self-concealing is cleared, then we have an appropriate “relation” to being.

*Buddhist:* But why is concealing so essential?

*Heidegger:* There is no answer to that; no “why.” It just is.

*Buddhist:* I beg your pardon. I was not asking for a reason why, a *logos*. I merely fail to understand why concealing is essential. I do understand “clearing.” It is a beautiful word. It lets me see transparency, openness.

*Heidegger:* We may have reached an *impasse* here. I cannot explain. You would have to *see* it.

*Buddhist:* I know just what you are saying. But I cannot *see* concealing. At the end of your lecture “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” you ask the question whether the name for the task of thinking reads clearing or opening and presence instead of being and time. There it is clearing that names being. Where is concealing?

*Heidegger:* I admit it is absent in that particular formulation. But it still belongs to being. I suppose self-concealing has to do with what I call the Mystery. Being is never completely unconcealed; it remains Mystery.

*Buddhist:* I like mystery better than self-concealing. I read somewhere that mystery comes from *muein*, to close the mouth. According to that, mystery simply means something that cannot be conceptually expressed; self-concealing, on the other hand, seems to indicate a kind of “deliberate willfulness” in being, almost a niggardly refusal to unconceal itself.

*Heidegger:* I never intended that with self-concealing. Let us try to get back to seeing, nonobjectifying seeing or even what you spoke of as absolute nothingness, as the possibility of experiencing totality, wholeness, fullness.

*Buddhist:* Yes. That is perhaps more fruitful for us at this point.

*Heidegger:* I have discussed the experience of nothingness in *Being and Time* as the experience of anxiety and in a lecture course on *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics*, as the experience of boredom. Both experiences are completely objectless. In anxiety things or objects slip away and cease to be of any concern or interest to us. The same thing

happens in boredom, but more gradually and imperceptibly with a different feeling-tone from that of anxiety. In fact, I got so fascinated by the phenomenon of boredom that I went on about it for weeks in the lecture course. I heard that one of my colleagues remarked that the discussion of boredom (*Langeweile*, a long while) went on for such a long while that it demonstrated phenomenologically what it was talking about!

*Buddhist:* Why not? We could bore people right out of objectifying, reifying and substantializing!

*Heidegger:* What I was talking about with both of these phenomena is *mood*. Mood affects and attunes the way in which we see things. It seems to me that Western philosophy has ignored the importance and influence of mood. Its emphasis has all been on rationality and reason. By “mood” I do not just mean feelings and emotions, although they are in some way derivative of mood. Mood comes from mode, way.

*Buddhist:* Way? Oh!

*Heidegger:* These two moods, anxiety and boredom, let us experience the world in a different way. They are absolutely non-objectifying.

*Buddhist:* That is a step in the right direction. But do they allow us to experience totality?

*Heidegger:* In a way, yes. I have always spoken of beings *as a whole* (*das Seiende im Ganzen*). This “as a whole” overcomes us in the experience of anxiety, boredom or joy.

*Buddhist:* I do not recall that you ever elaborated upon the experience of joy. An experience of great, indescribable joy usually accompanies the experience of totality. It seems difficult to reconcile joy with anxiety or boredom.

*Heidegger:* What they have in common is the fact they are objectless.

*Buddhist:* But objectlessness is not sufficient. The experience of release accompanied by great joy is lacking in the experiences of anxiety and boredom.

*Heidegger:* Release? If in anxiety and boredom things are of no concern to you, are you not released from them?

*Buddhist:* Yes, released *from* them. Now, released *where to*?

*Heidegger:* Well, I suppose to no-thingness.

*Buddhist:* Relative no-thingness or absolute no-thingness?

*Heidegger:* I don’t think one can say to relative no-thingness.

*Buddhist:* Thus, released to absolute no-thingness.

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*Heidegger:* I'm afraid in this case I'll have to concede that. There is nothing specific or definite about the negation taking place in anxiety and boredom.

*Buddhist:* Now I should like to ask something about the Fourfold.

*Heidegger:* Fine. And since our time is getting short, I also have one more question for you.

*Buddhist:* I shall try to keep my question short. It concerns mirroring, the mirror-play of the Fourfold. I know that one of your major concerns is to step back out of metaphysics. Surely the Fourfold accomplishes this. It is truly not metaphysical.

*Heidegger:* That is true. It is also the reason why it is not readily accessible to everybody, particularly not to the philosophers. A poet would probably understand it immediately.

*Buddhist:* In the essay "The Thing" you stated that mirroring does not portray a likeness. How, then, is mirroring to be thought?

*Heidegger:* Each of the four dimensions of the Fourfold mirrors in its own way the presencing of others. Mirroring thus clears and frees each of the four; none of them insists on its own separate particularity. In this manner the four dimensions of the Fourfold interpenetrate each other. The best way I have found to describe this is to say they mirror each other. It is a dynamic, totally nonsubstantial interrelating.

*Buddhist:* That is extraordinary. You may not realize how close this is to a school of Chinese Buddhism. Close to, not identical with.

*Heidegger:* I cannot judge that. Now, it is perhaps time to ask my final question.

*Buddhist:* Yes.

*Heidegger:* I want to know how absolute nothingness can yield *totality*. How is an experience of totality possible and how is it that precisely absolute nothingness should give it to us?

*Buddhist:* Let me first say that if there is self-concealing it is not possible. Self-concealing and experience of totality are incompatible. You will not be able to agree with that, but it has to be said. As for totality, if it is to be experienced, it has to presence at one time and one place. We cannot experience totality or wholeness cumulatively as a sum by traveling over the entire globe or by living one hundred years.

*Heidegger:* Agreed. Traveling over space and living through time are discursive. When I am in Hong Kong, I am not in Tübingen; when I am eighty years old, I am no longer forty. No discursive experience of

totality is possible. Discursiveness precludes totality. Totality can only be experienced simultaneously.

*Buddhist:* Good. The experience of totality or wholeness must be all at once right now and right here. It is not *exclusively* in this right now and right here, but if I am going to experience it, it has to be in *some* right now and here.

*Heidegger:* I understand that. I have just been reading Meister Eckhart who says something like the following: (I quote approximately from memory.) “Many masters thought that the soul is only in the heart. That is not so, and great masters have been wrong about this. The soul is wholly, and indivisibly totally in the foot and totally in the eye and in every member. If I take a piece of time, that is neither today nor yesterday. But if I take the *now* (*das Nun*), it embraces *all* time within itself. The now in which God created the world is in this time as near as the now in which I am speaking, and the last judgment is as near to this now as yesterday.”<sup>3</sup>

*Buddhist:* That is indeed astonishing! This man experienced totality in the absolute eternal now. I should think that the time encompassed by the creation of the world and the day of last judgment ought to qualify as a totality! I now see that this experience is not absolutely an Eastern prerogative. Professor Heidegger, we have just touched upon a few extremely crucial and highly intriguing topics. For today, let me conclude our conversation with the following quote on boundless openness:

“You shouldn’t set up limits in boundless openness, but if you set up limitlessness as boundless openness, you’ve trapped yourself. This is why those who understand emptiness have no mental image of emptiness.

If people use words to label and describe the mind, they still don’t comprehend the mind.”<sup>4</sup>

*Heidegger:* Remarkable insight.

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<sup>3</sup> *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, München: Hanser Verlag, 1955, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Zen Essence*, trans. Thomas Cleary, Boston: Shambala, 1989, p. 50.