



Being and Emptiness in Martin Heidegger and Indian Madhyamika Buddhism

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Similarities between the thinking of Martin Heidegger and traditions of Asian philosophy have long been noted. A significant body of literature on this subject has appeared since the 1960s. Most of what has been written reflects Heidegger's affinity with East Asian Buddhism and Daoism. This is not surprising given Heidegger's contact with representatives of East Asian Buddhism¹, his indebtedness to East Asian philosophy², his enthusiasm for Daoism³ and the enthusiastic reception his work has received in Japan⁴. Heidegger himself is reported as saying, on reading D. T. Suzuki on Zen Buddhism, "If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings."⁵

Far less has been written about Heidegger in relation to Indian Buddhist tradition.⁶ This is a pity because, in many ways, the philosophical traditions of India and Europe are closer than the traditions of East Asia and Europe. One obvious connection is the common Indo-European language basis. Classical Greek (which Heidegger so admired) and Sanskrit are closely related. The Germans embraced Sanskrit and Indian studies with greater enthusiasm than any other group in Europe.⁷ Furthermore, the German Romantic tradition, to which Heidegger is indebted, looked to India as one of the sources of European civilisation and as an inspiration for a possible European cultural renaissance. Some of the Romantics looked to the East, particularly India, for an alternative vision to replace the "single-vision" of the rationalism and empiricism so prevalent in Europe. The Romantics, and later Heidegger, were concerned that this limited vision, which



was finding expression in an increasingly mechanical and technological civilisation, eroded our understanding of our own humanity.⁸

A further connection between Heidegger and India is that there is a strong current of thought, especially within Buddhism, that is critical of any metaphysical thinking which attempts to ground reality in a reified absolute, or tries to build an ontology on the basis of enduring substances or essential natures. The Mahayana Buddhist idea of emptiness (*sunyata*) is central to this critique. It was the philosophy of *sunyata* that opened the way for the East Asian interchange between Buddhism and Daoism, the fruits of which are most evident in Zen (Chinese “Chan”) Buddhism.

This paper considers Heidegger primarily in relation to *sunyata* (emptiness) as understood in Indian Mahayana Buddhism, particularly as articulated by the philosophers of the Madhyamika school headed by Nagarjuna (circa 200 C.E.). Both Heidegger and the Madhyamika thinkers (Madhyamikas) are concerned with being or existence and our relationship to it. Their central question concerns the way things (including ourselves) “are” and what makes their existence possible and intelligible. For Heidegger this entails an investigation of the Being of beings; for Madhyamikas it involves an understanding of emptiness and being. The two approaches converge on a number of points, particularly in their respective understanding of Being and emptiness as “no-thing”. For both, without this “no-thing”, nothing is possible. According to Madhyamikas and Heidegger our own mode of being in the world is crucially determined by our understanding of this issue.

The investigation into the nature of being is fundamental to Heidegger. This is not a question about any particular being or existent, but about being as such; it is about that which makes any being possible.⁹ It is equally a question of what it means to be, or how being can be meaningful to us. For Heidegger these questions and their variants, such as “What is the meaning, truth or essence of being?” or even “What are beings?” lie at the heart of philosophy. The ancient Greeks were struck by these questions. In their encounter with being philosophy was born. For Plato, philosophy begins with wonder at being. Heidegger, although he was to take issue with Plato’s understanding of being, begins *Being and Time* (1927) with



a quote from Plato about the meaning of “being”.¹⁰ For Heidegger, it is an indictment of Western civilisation that many who call themselves thinkers and philosophers regard these questions as meaningless or trivial.¹¹ For him the history of Western metaphysics is in large measure a forgetting of the question of Being. He argues that it is urgent for our understanding of what we are as humans and for the future of Western civilisation that we restore the question of Being to its proper place.¹²

For Heidegger, unless this question of the nature of being is tackled from the beginning we will overlook the metaphysical presuppositions which shape all our enquiries, whether into science, art, psychology, or any other domain. Our metaphysical assumptions, which often go unquestioned, determine both the kind of questions we ask and the kind of answers that make sense to us. We are accustomed to begin our enquiries with epistemology, the theory of knowledge. For example, we ask, “How can we be certain that our knowledge of the world is correct?” “How can we even be certain that the objective world exists?” Such questions often disguise a number of assumptions about the subject, the world, the nature of thought and so on. Heidegger believes we need a more fundamental enquiry. We need to begin not with epistemology and the search for certainty but rather with an investigation into the conditions in which anything at all can have meaning or make sense to us. This involves an investigation of our existential situation, of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*.

According to Heidegger we should not conceive of ourselves as isolated individuals or disembodied subjects but rather as *Dasein*, “being-there” or being-in-the-world. We always find ourselves embedded in a “world”. The “world” in which we find ourselves is not a thing or a being; rather it is that in which all things “are” and which is necessary for their disclosure. Only because we have “horizons” is a “world” possible. Past, present and future are “horizons” in which things can reveal themselves to us or make sense to us and in which we can understand ourselves. *Dasein* is temporal. It is not so much that we are necessarily “in” time (as Kant would have it) as that we, and all beings, are time. The very disclosure of things and ourselves is the disclosure of being and time.¹³

Our mode of being in the world is “being-with.” We are being with





other people, and with things, and through this we are being ourselves.¹⁴ Through our activities, which are often preconscious or prereflective, and through our interaction and dialogue with others, we establish meaning. To take an example from Heidegger, what a hammer is cannot be separated from what it is 'for' (e.g., building a bookshelf) and what it is 'to us' (to be a craftsman) which, in turn is related to the wider context of concerns, expectations etc. by which we understand our life. We cannot know what a hammer is simply by looking at it.¹⁵

The ability to know something as something, e.g., a hammer as a hammer, requires the more general capacity to recognise entities as entities. That is to say to notice that they "are". According to Heidegger this means that we must have some, not necessarily articulated, understanding of being as such (Being), as opposed to mere understanding of particular beings. Heidegger argues that our basic understanding is demonstrated by our capacity to use language. We could not have language without understanding "to be" and "being" in all their diverse uses. Heidegger says, "Suppose that there were no indeterminate meaning of Being, and that we did not understand what this meaning signifies. Then what? Would there just be one noun and one verb less in our language? No. Then there would be no language at all."¹⁶ The very fact that we can ask the question of what being means, or question ourselves about our own being, suggests we have some inkling of what kind of answer we are seeking.

The question of being is not just an abstract question. The issue of existence is disclosed in our moods and feelings, most notably in angst, that sense of anxiety which is not directed towards anything in particular but in which we encounter our own nothingness, the possibility of our non-existence, our own finitude, our death. Our awareness of Being also opens the possibility of an attempted escape or "fleeing from" our own finitude. It opens the possibility of "inauthenticity", which expresses itself in forgetfulness of Being and distraction. A second order forgetting is also possible which "not only forgets the forgotten but forgets the forgetting itself."¹⁷ Our awareness of Being also opens the possibility of "authenticity" in recollectedness and attunement to being.¹⁸

The fact that we can pose questions about the meaning of Being and





our own existence is, of course, only possible because of language. It is also only because of language that we can have the moods and feelings that are part of our humanity.¹⁹ According to Heidegger, language is not merely the means of asking questions about Being; it is inseparable from the questioner and the questioning and must be understood as constitutive of our humanity. We are not humans who use speech; rather speech enables us to be humans.²⁰

More radically, language (or thought) is inseparable from the existence of things. The pre-Socratic Greek thinker, Parmenides, in a statement which Heidegger reflected upon extensively, said, "thought and being are the same." By this Heidegger understood not a strict identity but a "going-together" or inseparability. In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger says, "it is in words and language that things first come into being and are."²¹

Without the distinction, the difference, between Being and beings, nothing is. Also, in the distinction of Being and beings lies the possibility of language. If we had no understanding of Being (of "is") we could not understand beings, the things that are, (or even "nothing") or relate ourselves to them.²²

So we can say that the difference that lies between Being and beings, makes any particular being (and nothing) possible. A thing must both "be" and "be something" i.e., different. The same difference comes to pass in language. The difference is between "is" (Being), without which we cannot say anything, and "something is" (beings). The same difference is actualised in *Dasein*, that is to say, allows *Dasein* to take itself as different to the world, to place itself outside the world, to *ek-sist*.²³ Because of this difference, *Dasein* can "step forth" into the world, establish a relationship with it (realise the difference), and make itself something.²⁴ Heidegger calls this difference "ontological difference".²⁵

In Heidegger's early philosophy humanity is understood to take the initiative by the speaking which sets apart Being and beings and opens a space for, or allows, the presencing of beings. That is to say, humanity's speaking allows the presence of things as things. In Heidegger's later philosophy humanity is less central as the initiator of speech. Rather, Being takes the primary role and in its self-unfolding "speaks" humanity.





Humanity not so much speaks as is spoken by Being. "Speaking takes place as that which grants an abode for mortals."²⁶ That is to say, the ontological difference between Being and beings comes to pass as speech (or thought) and allows humanity to be humanity.

In his earlier philosophy Heidegger focussed on Being. In large measure he did this because he believed that Being had been forgotten in philosophy which had come to concern itself only with beings. Being had to be retrieved. The course of forgetting needed to be retraced. Most of Western metaphysics had participated in and furthered the forgetting. Being needed to be remembered, and bought back to the centre of philosophy. In broader terms, humanity had to be bought back to itself (awakened to Dasein), or in historical terms, (since direct retrieval is impossible) given the possibility of a fresh encounter with Being and humanity's own possibilities.

In his later philosophical writings Heidegger shifts his focus from Being (the forgotten term in the relation of Being and beings) to the relation between Being and beings itself. The relation is bought about by, or presupposes, the difference between them. Thus difference itself becomes central, as it is in some sense prior to Being and beings.

How we understand Being also determines how we understand beings (things). In his analysis Heidegger is concerned with both being as such (Being) and with beings. The question of how particular things exist is inseparable from the question of being as such. Heidegger believed that Western metaphysics had gone astray in its understanding of both. By forgetting Being it had failed to understand beings. It had failed to answer the question "What are beings?"

According to Heidegger, Being is not a being or entity. It is not one being among beings nor is it some kind of super entity. The notion of God as a being is thus rejected, as is the dogmatic theology based on this idea.²⁷ Nor is Being to be conceived in terms of eternity as opposed to time. The Platonic notion of eternal, incorporeal forms at once beyond becoming, yet the source of it, is rejected. Being is not Reality as opposed to appearance. We cannot go beyond the appearance of things to the reality (Being) which lies behind or beyond them.





Being is not a thing. Strictly, it cannot even be a concept. The kind of thought that can “think” Being becomes a major concern of Heidegger’s later philosophy, as does the kind of language (or silence) that can “speak” it. Although Being is not to be conceived as a thing, it is not a nothing either. Being encompasses both. As Michael Inwood explains, “being extends to whatever is supposed to contrast with it.”²⁸ Nor is being an empty cipher or a mere copula. Without Being, beings would not be possible.

According to Heidegger, the history of Western metaphysics beginning with Plato, and perhaps even before him, is, in large measure, a history of “forgetting” of Being and, in consequence, a misunderstanding of how things exist. This forgetting takes on a particularly perverse form in the philosophy of Descartes, whose thought not only marks the beginning of modern philosophy, but also articulates a way of understanding being which is characteristic of modernity in general. The understanding of Descartes, which was prefigured in Galileo’s “mathematical projection” of reality, opens the possibility of “technology” which Heidegger understands not merely instrumentally but more essentially as a way of “enframing” the world. Technology is essentially a particular comportment toward “things” which cuts them off from their link with Being. The world, understood to be radically separated from the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) is, in accordance with Descartes’ mathematical method, reduced to one homogenous type, subject to measurement or quantification (*res extensa*). Descartes’ way of understanding does not involve the discovery of new facts but rather involves a new vision, a new blueprint, or projection (*Entwurf*), whereby, as Guignon puts it, “entities come to be seen as interchangeable bits with no inner principles or internal relations to other components of nature.”²⁹ As a result things come to be taken as mere objects, as a “standing reserve” or a “resource” whose value lies in meeting human needs.³⁰ One consequence of this stance is that humanity itself comes to be regarded as a resource whose value comes to be understood in terms of utility. Thus the decline in our understanding of Being and beings also involves a loss in our understanding of our own humanity.

As a consequence of objectifying things the idea of truth as correspondence between our ideas or mental representations and states of





affairs in the world becomes entrenched. The question of how we can be certain in our knowledge becomes central to philosophy.³¹ Hume, Kant and others accept this priority of certainty, and take up the question of whether the subject has a true picture of the world: whether our ideas, perceptions and other “inner” experiences correspond to the reality “outside” us.³²

But for Heidegger the fundamental sense of truth is not correspondence. More fundamentally, truth is a matter of revealing or “unconcealment” (aletheia) which requires a “clearing” (lichtung) in which the possibility of things disclosing themselves is realised. In the “clearing”, the presencing of entities takes place. Correspondence is one way in which beings may reveal themselves, it is one comportment towards things, but it involves alienating ourselves (as isolated subjects) from our more original way of being and from the world (now taken as object). Correspondence involves the representation (Vorstellung) of things as objects (Gegenstände) which stand against us. According to Heidegger if we take this particular comportment as the essence of truth, as the correct way that beings reveal themselves, as the only way to inhabit the world, we have succumbed to an impoverished understanding of truth, of the world, and of ourselves.³³ Attunement or openness to Being allows other possibilities for Being and beings to reveal themselves; it allows for a more fundamental presentation (as opposed to representation) of beings to take place. While calculative thinking objectifies things and only deals with them at an ontic level (as things), meditative thinking allows movement from the ontic to the ontological level of Being and leads into the mystery (Geheimnis) of Being.³⁴ This can never be captured or represented by objectifying thought. In his later philosophy Heidegger stresses Gelassenheit, “letting-be” or “releasement” from our usual willing, most particularly the willing which manifests in our attempt to comprehend, to take hold of, to grasp, things conceptually or by representational thought. “Letting-be” lets go of constrictive thinking and allows a clearing or opening in which Being can reveal itself in a more primordial way.³⁵

The Buddha was first and foremost concerned with the problem of dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) and its end.³⁶ The Buddha’s approach can be described as pragmatic in that he urges that we eschew





metaphysical speculation about the origin of the world, the destiny of an enlightened person after death, and so on. Instead, he urges that we pay immediate and close attention to those factors that keep us enmeshed in a painful process of becoming (samsara) with no apparent possibility of peace or finality. Through developing insight into this process we can experience the end of suffering (nirvana) for ourselves. Despite the pragmatism, the Buddha's approach is metaphysical insofar as his analysis involves a fundamental enquiry into the nature of our "selves" and the "world" and the "things" which constitute it.

The Buddha's approach is existential in that it starts with a primary given of our own experience, namely *duhkha*, and provides a path for the transformation of ourselves and our experience, culminating in the realisation of nirvana. It is not primarily concerned with theoretical knowledge of the world or ourselves.

The Buddha's approach is also broadly phenomenological in that it deals with the world as we experience it. As the Buddha says, "within this very fathom-long body, with its perceptions and inner sense, lies the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path that leads to the cessation of the world".³⁷ The Buddha does not consider what things might be "in-themselves" apart from their being experienced by us.³⁸

We can immediately see points of contact with Heidegger's approach, which has its roots in phenomenology and which involves an existential analysis of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. Heidegger's concern is not with theoretical knowledge (which he understands as derivative) but with the conditions for intelligibility, which must be discovered in *Dasein* itself. Unlike the Buddha, Heidegger is not primarily interested in the transformation of the self. Nonetheless any change in *Dasein*'s self-understanding necessarily involves change in *Dasein*. That is to say, self-understanding is intrinsic to what *Dasein* is.³⁹ As Heidegger says, *Dasein*'s being is always an issue for it.⁴⁰ Also, just as *angst* can serve to awaken *Dasein* to its possibilities, or be an occasion for escape into distraction and inauthenticity, so the encounter with *duhkha* can mark the first stage on the path to awakening, or can result in denial and attempted escape.





Angst and duhkha are linked respectively by Heidegger and the Buddha to our temporality and finitude.⁴¹

The Buddha identifies three “root causes” of suffering: ignorance (avidya, moha), craving (trsna) and aversion (dvesa). Of these, the primary cause is ignorance or delusion, the precondition for the operation of the other two. The Buddha taught that the most critical aspect of ignorance is our mistaken understanding of who we are. According to his teaching, we take ourselves to be fixed or enduring independent “selves” (atman) when, in fact we are no such thing. On this mistaken basis we become involved in a frustrating process to secure, protect, enhance and satisfy this “self”.

According to the Buddha, we are mistaken not only about ourselves but also about the world. We believe that world is made up of “things” with an enduring essence or identity (atman) when, in fact, “things” are impermanent and without essence or identity, just as we are. Our attempts to grasp the world and find permanent satisfaction in it are as futile as our attempts to establish ourselves.

From the Buddhist perspective, our wrong view of self involves a reification of ourselves. We take ourselves as things, with an individual existence and essential nature. We imagine that we have svabhava. Svabhava can be literally translated as “own-being”, and conveys both the sense of independent existence and essential nature. Our reification of objects in the world also involves taking them to exist independently and substantially, i.e., with svabhava. In the language of the Buddhist philosophical schools, the teaching of non-self (anatma) is understood as absence of “own-being” or absence of self-existence (nihsvabhava). In Mahayana Buddhism, where the implications of absence of own-being are probed most deeply, all things (selves and objects) are said to be “empty” (sunya) in the sense that they are devoid of, or lacking, independent existence, individual identity and essential nature.⁴² Emptiness (sunyata) is understood primarily in terms of the absence of svabhava.⁴³

Two points can be made here in connection with Heidegger’s thinking. These points not only relate to what has just been stated but also throw light on the discussion of sunyata which follows. Firstly, it is in representational thinking, that things are taken to exist objectively (i.e., in themselves).





Secondly, representational thinking involves introducing a split between subject and object. Both Buddhism and Heidegger would agree that the dualism is linked with an attempt to control the world (as an object for the self's satisfaction or as a "resource"). They would also agree that this mode of being is constrictive and conceals a more fundamental way of being in the world. According to Heidegger it is only through a letting go (*Gelassenheit*) of representational thought that this more fundamental mode of being can be realised. According to Buddhism, by letting go of all clinging to selves and things we can experience the freedom of nirvana.

The emptiness of all things (including nirvana) is declared repeatedly in the *Prajñāparamita* ("Perfection of Wisdom") Sutras of Mahayana Buddhism but no systematic account of *sunyata* is given within the sutras (circa 100 B.C.E.). It was Nagarjuna (circa 200 C.E.) and the other philosophers of the Madhyamika ("Middle Way") School who provided cogent argumentation against self-existence (*svabhava*) and fully explored the implications of *sunyata*. Nagarjuna declared the outlook of the school and demonstrated its methodology in the foundational text, the *Madhyamakakarika* ("Verses on the Middle Way"). The Madhyamikas resisted and criticised any tendency towards substantialism or essentialism in Buddhism. They argued that these tendencies deviate from the "middle way" which must avoid the extremes of permanent identity on one hand or incoherence or complete negation on the other.

In the *Madhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna takes the principle of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), found in Buddhism from the earliest period, and declares its true import to be emptiness (*sunyata*). The doctrine of dependent origination reflects the Buddhist emphasis on relationship and process. It aimed to provide a coherent account of the process of becoming without resort to individual entities, enduring states or substances. According to this principle, things never arise or are found by themselves, but always with others. According to Nagarjuna, when properly understood, this entails their lack of essential nature or self-existence (*svabhava*) and shows that they are empty (*sunya*). All things arise in mutual dependence and, on analysis, cannot be found apart from the causes and conditions of their arising and persistence. An individual





thing or being (bhava), Nagarjuna declares, is an abstraction (vikalpa), thought construction (kalpana) or conventional designation (prajñapti) through which a 'thing' is made to appear different to and more than the sum total of its causes and conditions.

Some early Buddhist philosophers had argued - incorrectly according to Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas - that all conditioned things, both subjective and objective, could be analysed in terms of an irreducible number of momentary qualities or dharmas, which might be regarded as the ultimate constituents of all 'wholes'.⁴⁵ This understanding of dharmas was, the Madhyamikas argued, contrary to the principle of dependent origination (pratityasamutpada) according to which all conditioned things, dharmas included, arise and perish in dependence on others. That which arises in dependence on others cannot have an essence or being of its own (i.e., independent of others) and thus cannot be regarded as ultimate, the Madhyamikas argued.

The Madhyamika philosophers asserted that all things are in fact no-thing or empty (sunya). Wholes are empty and so are the constituent dharmas.⁴⁶ Reality is not to be understood in terms of "building blocks". Those philosophers who maintained the ultimacy of dharmas were guilty, according to the Madhyamikas, of a subtle kind of clinging to 'things' under the guise of dharmas. In our ordinary understanding things may appear to exist individually but on closer investigation cannot be found "in-themselves" separate from the matrix of causes and conditions in which they arise or exist.

Furthermore, the Madhyamikas argued, the notion of an ultimate (i.e., independent) particular is incoherent. According to them the notion of a particular involves the notion of difference and to be different necessarily involves another (to be different from). This means a particular cannot exist without another and hence is not independent or ultimate. As Nagarjuna in Madhyamakakarika XIV, 5 writes, "A thing is different insofar as it is different from an other; it is not different without being different from the other."

In the Madhyamika analysis, things are not entirely negated, but understood to have a relative or conventional existence. This is to be





understood in two ways which are, in fact, related. Firstly, things have a relative existence insofar as they arise or exist in relation to other things. This follows from the principle of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) which can equally be translated as “co-dependent origination”. That is to say, things exist in a network of relationships but they cannot be identified without reference to that network since their existence is only relational. Secondly, and following from the first, things are understood to have a relative existence, or conventional existence, since their “identity” as individual existents is dependent on language and human usage (conventions).²⁷ It is only in language or abstract thought that a “thing” can be made to appear different to the matrix of causes and conditions in which it is embedded. Things have an identity through language and human conventional usage (*vyavahara*). In Heideggerian terms, only through language do they “exist” or stand apart. It does not make sense to ask what they are “in-themselves” in any metaphysical sense.

Nagarjuna warns against a reification of emptiness. Emptiness is not a thing; it is a no-thing. *Sunyata* is not one thing among many. In Heideggerian terms, it is not ontic. Nor is *sunyata* something that stands above things or transcends things in the sense of an ontological absolute. It is not a super entity or transcendental being existing in a supersensible realm. In fact it is not any kind of entity or existent (*bhava*) at all. Nor can it be understood as a ground, since it is not something underlying beings. It is not possible to “peel back” beings to see what lies behind, under, or over them. *Sunyata* is not a reality hidden behind that which appears or, in Heideggerian terms, that which presences.²⁸ It is not possible to negate or remove what appears or presences to uncover the absolute ground. While those who believe in “things” may have a problem, Nagarjuna says that those who believe in *sunyata* (as some kind of thing, even the most universal or absolute one) are incurable!²⁹ If we abandon things for *sunyata* taken as a reified absolute, we are in a worse position than before! On the other hand, nothing is possible or works (*yujyate*) without emptiness. Without it nothing makes sense.³⁰

The early Buddhist philosophers had set in opposition the world of conditioned dharmas (*samsara*) on one side, and the unconditioned





(nirvana) on the other. But this is rejected by the Madhyamikas. Samsara and nirvana are both empty. The Prajñāparamita Sutras say that if there were anything “higher” than nirvana that too would be empty. Only if one accepts a substance-based ontology where different kinds of things can be set against each other is the opposition possible. Once the notion of thingness breaks down and emptiness or no-thingness (*sunyata*) is realised this distinction can no longer be maintained. The realm of conditioned dharmas, the realm of birth and death, the realm of time, the realm of samsara, has no separate existence to, cannot be set apart from, the world of nirvana. Likewise the world of nirvana does not stand apart from samsara: the realm of nirvana is not a self-existent reality beyond the everyday world. Immediate reality is not to be negated for a hypostatised ultimate. Ontologically there is no difference between them. The difference is one of existential realisation. Nagarjuna writes, ‘The limit of nirvana is the limit of samsara. Between the two there is not the slightest difference whatsoever’.⁵¹ The realisation of nirvana does not require abandoning the world and hence is not opposed to authentic engagement in the world.

This distinction between things and emptiness is an expression of the doctrine of the “two truths” which became central to Buddhist philosophy through Nagarjuna’s explication of *sunyata*. The absolute truth (*paramarthasatya*) is the truth of emptiness (*sunyata*), the truth that all things are empty (*sunya*) whether they be wholes (trees, mountains, chairs, people etc) or constituents (dharmas). The relative or conventional truth (*samvrtisatya*) is that they are not entirely negated but are understood to have a relative or conventional existence.⁵² As seen above, things have an existence in relation to other things but not on their own (*svatah*); their existence is only relational. Things have an identity through language and usage. Only through this do they “stand out” as existents, or exist, and only through language, which is itself rooted in human practices, do they become what they are to us. One could say that both their existence (*astitva*) and their essence (*svabhava*) are conventional.

The distinction between the two truths has much in common with the “ontological difference” understood by Heidegger as the difference between Being and all beings. For Heidegger although this difference



is meaningful – it is in fact fundamental for Dasein and the source of meaning – nevertheless Being is not to be found separate from beings. Being for Heidegger is not a thing or existent but is closer to the sunyata of Nagarjuna which is not separate from things. Heidegger rejects the metaphysical understanding of the difference which would see Being as the One, the Absolute, as that which underlies all beings, and thus stands beyond them and separate to them. Being is better understood in terms of nothingness (das Nichts) or the openness which makes all being possible. Heidegger writes, “Nothingness is neither an object nor anything that ‘is’ at all; it occurs neither by itself nor ‘apart from’ beings, as a sort of adjunct. Nothingness is that which makes the disclosure of being(s) as such possible for our human existence.”⁵³ Likewise for Nagarjuna, sunyata is no-thing, but without it nothing is possible. To put it another way, if things had svabhava, presencing or existing would be impossible. If things had svabhava they could not enter into any relationship at all. Nagarjuna says if you postulate svabhava, “You will negate cause, effect, doer, means of doing, action, arising, cessation and result.”⁵⁴ Absence of svabhava (nihsvabhava) can be understood as the “crucial absence” through which emptiness and things inseparably reveal themselves.⁵⁵ As Heidegger might put it, emptiness is not a counterconcept of beings but belongs to their essential unfolding as such.⁵⁶

To turn from sunyata to things, or in Heideggerian terms, from Being to beings, if things are not just lying “there”, if they have no “identity”, in what manner are they? What can we affirm about them? This side is not developed by Nagarjuna. For him sunyata is taught as a medicine to overcome our wrong understanding, our clinging to “things” of any sort whatsoever. His task is to negate the view of independent existence and the whole network of concepts integral to such a view. Thus our elaboration of the world is broken down and we break through to awakened awareness (buddhajñana). This is the purpose of the Buddha’s teaching. As Nagarjuna says, nothing positive was affirmed by the Buddha, “No thing (or doctrine) (dharma) was pointed out (or taught) (desita) by the Buddha anywhere to anyone”.⁵⁷ Sunyata is the way out (nihsarana) of all views.⁵⁸

There is a more positive reading but it does not come directly from



Nagarjuna or the other Indian Madhyamika philosophers. According to the positive reading, given that things arise or exist in a network of relations, each thing necessarily involves every other thing. The being or coming forth of an entity is the coming forth of the totality. Any change in one entity implies change to the entire system. The totality is not “assembled” out of particulars; rather particulars have their meaning in relation to, and are an expression of, the totality.⁵⁹ This vision finds its most celebrated expression in the “Jewel Net of Indra” from the Avatamsaka Sutra which likens the totality to an infinite net with a jewel at every node: “since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.”⁶⁰

An influential contemporary writer on Buddhism, the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, reads the Prajñāparamita Sutras, which were the central inspiration for Madhyamika thought, in a similar positive way. In his commentary on the Heart Sutra, one of the shortest and yet most influential of the Prajñāparamita Sutras, he says, “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. ... If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the tree cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread ... To be is to inter-be. You cannot be just by yourself alone. You have to be with everything else.”⁶¹





Thich Nhat Hanh, relates this “fullness” to the emptiness (sunyata) which is the central message of the Heart Sutra: “If I am holding a cup and I ask you, ‘Is this cup empty?’ you will say, “No, it is full of water.” But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, “Yes, it is empty.” But empty of what? The cup cannot be empty of nothing. “Empty” doesn’t mean anything unless you know empty of what. My cup is empty of water but it is not empty of air. To be empty means to be empty of something. ... When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty he means empty of a separate, independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. ... It is empty of a separate self. But empty of a separate self means full of everything.”⁶² In this commentary Thich Nhat Hanh is expressing in more contemporary language the inseparability of dependent origination (pratyasamutpada) (which he calls “interbeing”) and emptiness (sunyata).

Heidegger’s later writings are resonant with this. After his “turn” from a more anthropocentric to a Being-centred approach, Heidegger focussed less on human existence and tended to see Dasein as part of the larger self-disclosure (and self-concealment) of Being. Human existence becomes the site for this disclosure of Being, and in some sense subordinate to it. In attempting to articulate the larger framework Heidegger spoke of the gathering together of mortals and gods, earth and sky. The gathering together and play or dance of the four (das Geviert) constitutes the unity of the World. The World is not caused and has no ground; it happens or opens out of its own “world-ing”. Humans realise their authenticity or authentic way of being by dwelling in and shepherding this relation with being. “We are in the strict sense of the term the be-thinged (die Be-Dingen, i.e., conditioned by our relationship with things).”⁶³

Things are constituted by this meeting or “gathering”. Heidegger considers a pitcher: “In the water of the spring the marriage of heaven and earth is present. This marriage is present in the wine which is the gift of the fruit of the vine; in the fruit the nourishing earth and the sun in the sky are joined together in marriage ... The gift of that which flows from it is the essence of the pitcher. In the essence of the pitcher are heaven and earth.”⁶⁴

In this paper some of the convergences in the thought of Heidegger





and Buddhism have been explored.⁶⁵ Particular attention has been given to how Heidegger and the Madhyamika philosophers have respectively presented Being and emptiness as the no-thing without which nothing can be. Although Being and sunyata have no reality of their own and are thus no “ground” as commonly understood, without them we cannot make sense of anything or, as Nagarjuna says, “nothing works”. For Heidegger and the Madhyamikas, how we understand the relationship of Being and beings, or emptiness and beings, is necessarily tied up with our conceptions of ourselves and of humanity. For Heidegger and the Madhyamikas, language and human practices have a vital influence on how things appear or are present. Letting go of our representational thinking and our clinging to the “things” represented by it opens the way to a more originary mode of being in the world in which phenomena appear or “shine forth” in their openness and interrelatedness.

NOTES

- 1 Interestingly, Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* begins with “A Dialogue on Language (between a Japanese and an Inquirer)”, translated by P. D. Hertz, Harper & Row, New York, 1971
- 2 See Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s hidden sources: East Asian influences on his work*, translated with a complementary essay by Graham Parkes, Routledge, London & New York, 1996.
- 3 Heidegger worked during the summer of 1946 with a Chinese student on a translation of portions of the Daoist classic, the *Daodejing* (*Dao Te Ching*). See Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, “Heidegger and Our Translation of the *Dao Te Ching*” in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Graham Parkes (ed.), University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987.
- 4 See Yasuo Yuasa, “The Encounter of Modern Japanese Philosophy with Heidegger” in Parkes (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 155-174. *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) has been translated into Japanese many times and was translated into Japanese three times before the first English translation was published in 1962.
- 5 Reported by William Barrett, Introduction to D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, Garden Doubleday, City, N.Y., 1956, p. xi. Suzuki (1870-1966), was the most influential interpreter of Zen Buddhism to the West.
- 6 Even a writer such as Nishitani Keiji (a prominent representative of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy which drew on both Buddhist and European traditions) who studied with Heidegger in Freiburg, makes little direct reference to Indian non-canonical sources when discussing *sunyata* (emptiness, absolute nothingness), preferring to draw most of his material from Chinese and Japanese Chan/Zen literature. His *magnum opus*, *Religion and Nothingness*, makes no reference to Nagarjuna, the foremost philosopher of emptiness in India.
- 7 The connections are not only linguistic but also cultural and historical. The notion of “Aryanism” which found perverted expression in National Socialism is one consequence of this.
- 8 See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, State University of New York, Albany 1988, ch. 5, and J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, Routledge, London, 1997, ch. 4. The expression “single vision” is borrowed



- from William Blake, "May God us keep from Single vision & Newton's sleep". ("Letter to Thomas Butts" 1802)
- 9 It is about the Being (*Sein*) of beings (*Seinde*). Heidegger distinguishes the "ontic" which relates to particular beings or the taxonomy of beings and "ontology" proper or "fundamental ontology" which relate to Being and what it is to "be".
 - 10 "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression '*being*'. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed." *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarie & Edward Robinson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, p. 1.
 - 11 For example, Rudolf Carnap, one of the leaders of logical positivism, regarded questions about the nature of Being as metaphysical nonsense caused solely by ambiguities in our use of the verb "to be". Charles H. Kahn furnishes another example from the English philosopher Bertrand Russell: "Russell once described it as 'a disgrace to the human race' that it has chosen the same word 'is' for two such entirely different ideas as predication and identity". Cited in Gregory Fried, "What's in a Word? Heidegger's Grammar and Etymology of 'Being'" in *A Companion to Heidegger's "Introduction to Metaphysics"*, Richard Polt and Gregory Fried (eds), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2001, pp. 125-142, p. 137.
 - 12 And for world civilisation given what Heidegger calls the "Europeanisation of the world".
 - 13 See *Being and Time* p. 415 ff. Heidegger does not discount clock time or our ordinary understanding of time but regards them as less fundamental and derivative from a more primordial existential time (i.e., time as existence).
 - 14 Heidegger distinguishes being "with" others (*Mitsein*), being "alongside" (*Sein bei*) things, and being-one's-self (*Selbstein*). Each presupposes the others. See Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1999, pp. 31-32.
 - 15 *Being and Time*, *op cit.*, p. 98. In our abstract thinking we tend to take our knowledge of the hammer as an object as primary and any question of what it is *for us* as belonging to secondary interpretation. But Heidegger reverses the usual priority given to knowledge over interpretation. For him interpretation (understanding) determines the possibility of knowledge. Our theoretical attitude and "objective" knowledge are only possible because of a particular way of taking or understanding things.
 - 16 *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2000, p. 86.
 - 17 *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, cited in Charles Guignon "Authenticity, moral values, psychotherapy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Charles Guignon (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 215-39, p. 227.
 - 18 In a "resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*) (stressed in Heidegger's early thinking) which squarely faces our finitude and refuses to forget itself in everyday concerns, or in a "letting-be" or "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) (stressed in Heidegger's later philosophy) which opens a space for beings to reveal themselves, to "be lit" or to "shine forth".
 - 19 For Heidegger language and thinking are definitely not limited to rationality. Heidegger struggled against the understanding of rationality (modelled on mathematics) as the essence of thinking. On the mathematical model and its influence on conceptions of the subject and thinking, see "Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics (from *What is a Thing*)", in David Farrell Krell (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1993, pp. 271-305, esp. pp. 295-305.
 - 20 "It is to say that only speech enables man to be the living being he is as man. It is as one who speaks that man is – man." "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 189. Guignon discusses the difference between "instrumentalist" and "constitutive" views of language in Charles B. Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 115-32. The latter view is brilliantly

- expressed in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.
- 21 Translated by Joan Stanbaugh, Harper & Row, New York, 1969, p. 37.
 - 22 As Inwood expresses it, "Everything, apart from being itself, is a being; anything that is red, a tree, or like something else must already *be*. Moreover, beings (unlike trees, red things or similar things) form a whole or a world. Our ability to regard anything as anything, and locate it or ourselves in the world, depends on our understanding of being: 'In every silent compartment to beings too the "is" speaks'." *Op. cit.*, p. 47.
 - 23 *Dasein* is *transcendent* but not in an *ontic* sense of going beyond to some *other* realm of things; the transcendence is *ontological* going "beyond" beings to Being.
 - 24 *Dasein* has no essence of its own. See Inwood, *op. cit.*, p. 60
 - 25 Ontological difference is unlike the ontical difference between one being and another.
 - 26 "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter *op. cit.*, p. 192.
 - 27 *Being and Time* was nevertheless received with great enthusiasm by those theologians who rejected dogmatic theology in favour of the factual Christianity of the New Testament. See John D. Caputo, "Heidegger and theology" in Guignon, *op. cit.* 1993, pp. 270-88.
 - 28 Inwood, *op. cit.* p. 48. We can say "something is" and "nothing is".
 - 29 Guignon *op. cit.* 1983, p. 163.
 - 30 Descartes (echoing Bacon) claims, "we can employ these entities for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature". *Discourse on Method*, vi. 62. What Heidegger means by *Entwurf* is clearly expressed by Kant: "reason only gains insight into what it produces itself according to its own project (*Entwurf*)". Cited in Krell, *op. cit.*, fn. p. 288.
 - 31 According to Heidegger, in Descartes' thought, the human subject becomes the ground of certainty only because mathematics is considered the basis of thought (reason) and the measure of reality. Rational thought is understood to be the essence of the human subject (*res cogitans*) and the principal of intelligibility. "Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics (from *What is a Thing*)", in David Farrell Krell (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1993, pp. 271-305, p. 298.
 - 32 For Kant, the question of whether we can know the external world as it really is, i.e., the thing-in-itself (*ding an sich*), becomes central. Again, he takes up the mathematical model as the grounds of that certainty and turns to Newton as the model for philosophy: "The true method of metaphysics is fundamentally the same as that which Newton has introduced into natural science, and which has there yielded such fruitful results..." Cited in E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Abacus, London, 1978, p. 19.
 - 33 Every revealing allows things to be taken in a certain way and also involves concealing other possible ways: there could be no revealing without concealing.
 - 34 On the distinction between calculative thinking and meditative thinking see Heidegger's *Discourse On Thinking*, translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, New York, Harper & Row, 1966.
 - 35 As John Caputo observes, "Being is not something that human thinking can conceive or 'grasp' (*be-greifen, con-cipere*) but something that can only be 'granted' ... The work that man can do is not to will but to not-will, to prepare a clearing and opening in which being may come." *op. cit.*, p. 282.
 - 36 'Two things I teach: suffering and the cessation of suffering'. *Majjhima Nikaya* I. 40. The Four Noble Truths are an elaboration of these: the universality and nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and path to the end of suffering.
 - 37 *Samyutta Nikaya* II, also *Anguttara Nikaya* IV, 46
 - 38 For an elaboration of these points see Joan Stambaugh, *The Real is not the Rational*, State University of New York, 1986, pp. 95-99.
 - 39 "Understanding of Being is itself a definitive characteristic of *Dasein's* being." *Being and Time*, p.32.

- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 The three characteristics of all conditioned things according to Buddhism are: unsatisfactoriness (*duhkha*), impermanence (*anitya*) and non-self (*anatma*).
- 42 The idea that things are empty is found in pre-Mahayana Buddhism but is not elaborated there. The doctrine of emptiness can be understood as a more comprehensive explanation of non-self (*anatma*).
- 43 There was disagreement about whether, and in what way, *sunyata* could be expressed positively.
- 44 Strictly speaking the school is “Madhyamaka” from which we get the adjective “Madhyamika” (“belonging to Madhyamaka”) which describes the doctrines or followers of the Madhyamaka School. However, in general usage, the term “Madhyamika” is used for both the School and what relates to the School and will be so used here.
- 45 These were predominantly Abhidharmikas who were, in the Abhidharma (“Higher Teaching”), attempting to give a concise and abstract account of the Buddha’s teaching (*dharma*) which had been given over a forty-five year period to diverse audiences.
- 46 Technically this is known as *pudgalasunyata* (emptiness of wholes) and *dharmasunyata* (emptiness of constituents). According to Mahayana philosophers the first kind of emptiness is common to all Buddhism; the second is fully explicated only in the Mahayana.
- 47 This understanding was summed up by Nagarjuna: “We explain that whatever is dependent origination, that is emptiness. It is a dependent designation (or thought construct – *vijñapti*). That is the middle path” *Madhyamakakarika* XXIV, 18
- 48 The distinction between reality and appearance as found, for example, in Plato and Hindu Vedanta (as usually explained), is not applicable here.
- 49 Or “incorrigible” (*asadhya*). *Madhyamakakarika* XIII, 8. *Sunyata* cannot be conceived of as a universal. To be a universal *sunyata* would have to differ from other universals and be something “specific”. To put it another way, even universals are things, albeit of an unusual kind, but *sunyata* is not a thing.
- 50 *sarvam na yujyate tasya sunyam yasya na yujyate. Madhyamakakarika* XIII, 14.
- 51 *Madhyamikakarika* XXV, 20.
- 52 Literally “truth of concealment”. This is interesting in itself given that Heidegger understands truth as “unconcealment” (*aletheia*).
- 53 From *What is Metaphysics* cited in Fred Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, p. 210. For an alternate translation see David Farrell Krell (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, p. 104.
- 54 *Madhyamakakarika* XXIV, 17.
- 55 I am indebted to Andrew McGarrity for the idea of “crucial absence”.
- 56 Heidegger actually says, “The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings, rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such.” From *What is Metaphysics* in David Farrell Krell (ed.) *op. cit.* p. 104.
- 57 This verse plays on the multivalence of the words *dharma* and *desita*. “*Dharma*” means a “thing” in the sense of an ultimate constituent and also the teaching of the Buddha. In roman script these are usually distinguished by the use of upper and lower case as “*Dharma*” and “*dharma*” but scripts used to write Sanskrit make no such distinction. “*Desita*” is the past participle of the verbal root “*dis*” “to point out” and can be translated as “pointed out” (or “affirmed”) or “taught”.
- 58 *Madhyamikakarika* XIII, 8.
- 59 Cf. Charles Guignon 1983, *op. cit.*, p. 46 ff. where Guignon discusses the Western “holistic views” in relation to Hegel and Dilthey and their influence on Heidegger’s understanding. Note that the Buddhist view is not teleological; things are not evolving towards some point.
- 60 Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1977, p 2. This metaphor became central to Chinese Hua-yen Buddhism.



- 61 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 3-4.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- 63 From *Das Ding*, cited by J. L. Mehta, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 221.
- 64 From *Vorträge und Aufsatz*, 1954, Cited in Ronald S. Valle and Rolf von Eckartsberg, "Heideggerian Thinking and the Eastern Mind" in Ronald S. Valle and Rolf von Eckartsberg (eds), *The Metaphors of Consciousness*, Plenum Press, New York, 1981, pp. 287-311, p. 293.
- 65 Space has precluded consideration of the many differences between Heidegger and Buddhism. Some of these are: Heidegger and the Buddhist thinkers operate within different worldviews. With the Buddhist view, for example, including notions such as rebirth and karma; the purpose of Madhyamika analysis is purely soteriological whereas Heidegger is, amongst other things, interested in giving an existential account of the possibilities of all knowledge, including scientific knowledge; Heidegger unlike the Buddhist thinkers is intensely interested in history and the historical encounter with Being; Heidegger gives greater emphasis to thinking whereas "non-thinking" is more prominent in Buddhism.

