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Echoes of No Thing: Thinking between Heidegger and Dōgen

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Everything is Nothing

In the late Joan Stambaugh's comparative study of three Japanese philosophers — Dōgen, Hisamatsu (whom we will regrettably not write about), and Keiji Nishitani, she begins her thinking of Nishitani with a discussion of his view of the difference between the "I" and what Nishitani calls "the self itself," or the "the self as such." This self — what Stambaugh calls the "true self" — is the originary ground for the "life process." The "I" works as a construct, a something projected forward, as a "frame of interpretation that is added to experience," while the true self is "the *source* of the life process."¹ This self is only understood from *beyond* an ordinary consciousness; it cannot be apprehended by our logical, rational, prosaic selves — it cannot be conceived of within the everyday. This original self, for Nishitani, is *no (particular) thing*; it is an originary and felt ground, one which cannot even be thought but perhaps, with Heidegger, only surrendered into.

While comparing Heidegger's thinking of being with Dōgen's conception of *Buddha-nature* is a dangerous exercise (as already admitted), finding, within Nishitani, echoes of Heidegger's thinking is not so farfetched. Indeed, Nishitani studied with Heidegger in Freiburg from 1937 through 1939 and his teacher Nishida Kitaro was in communication with Heidegger prior

¹ Joan Stambaugh, *The Formless Self* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 101.

to that time. The entire Kyoto school, of which Nishitani was a major participant, openly recognized their debt to the original thinking of Heidegger. But this is not to say that they were mere Heideggerians in any sense of the word; indeed, what the Kyoto school managed to do was to offer, perhaps for the first time, an intellectual bridge between two conceptions of being, two thinkings towards the question of somethingness and nothingness. In 1937, when Nishitani began studying with Heidegger, the German was already struggling with issues of nihilism as well as ideas towards the clearing, ideas echoed, as we have already seen, in the works of Dōgen.

For Nishitani, as for Heidegger and Dōgen, how things “are” is of a concern, and, even more so, how things are in relation to how *we are* is even more of a concern. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani describes the limited way we normally relate to phenomena only from our own “field of consciousness,” a consciousness that always perceives from within the “citadel of the self,” a kind of aporetic Platonic cave without exit. Nishitani writes that

to look at things from the standpoint of the self is always to see things as merely as objects, that is, to look at things from without from a field within the self. It means assuming a position vis-à-vis things from which self and things remain fundamentally separated from one another. This standpoint of separation of subject and object, or opposition between within or without, is what we call the field of “consciousness.”²

So far at least, Nishitani is following a familiar problem; that of how things *present* themselves to us, and to how we *represent* them. Nishitani writes that “for all our talk about the reality of things, things do not truly display their *real* reality to us.”³ What Nishitani describes is a dilemma that we are already familiar

2 Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 9.

3 Ibid.

with; the world, on a prosaic, everyday level, resists our entrée into it. What we experience as things are mere *representations* of entities, and, from within the self, we look out to a field of things. We remain constantly separated — not only from other things — but from our very selves. Nishitani presents this existential dilemma in a stark light. He writes:

The field that lies at the ground of our everyday lives is the field of essential separation between self and things, the field of consciousness, within which a real self-presentation of reality cannot take place at all. Within it, reality appears only in shape of shattered fragments, only in the shape of ineluctable self-contradictions.⁴

Nishitani is well aware of the echoing of basic psychological principles that his ideas draw on, evoking both Descartes and Freud in describing an essential dualism between self and world, and critiquing the conception of a world exemplified by the thinking of the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. He is also acutely aware of the impositions that such thinking from the within have. The “ineluctable self-contradictions” of modern, ordered, scientific life epitomized in a duality separating subject and object, and thing from world, destroy what is most human, what is most natural, most original in our relationship to the world. Echoing Heidegger’s ruthless critique of the overtaking by science of the original impetus of thinking in *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*,⁵ Nishitani writes that this self-contradiction causes man

to surround himself with a cold lifeless world. Inevitably, each individual ego became like a lonely but well-fortified island floating on a sea of dead matter. The life was snuffed

4 Ibid., 10.

5 The original date of publication of *Shūkyō to wa Nanika* is 1961, while *Zur Sache des Denkens* appeared in German in 1969, though it was published first in French in 1966.

out of nature and the things of nature; the living stream that flowed at the bottom of man and all things, and kept them bound together, dried up.⁶

Nishitani seeks to move us beyond that thinking which “dries up,” to get beyond the objectification of the thing by a subject, a thinking which leaves us always separate from an authentic and real encounter with the world. As long as we are encased within what Nishitani calls the “person-centered person,” we remain, for Nishitani, “well-fortified islands floating on a sea of dead matter.” The empirical, scientific thinking which promotes this duality and disallows for an integral, unified conception of the world is not immune to the nihilism which both Nishitani and Heidegger claim is the basis of a movement “towards a new beginning.” Nishitani writes that “the horizon on which such doubt occurs [...] is a horizon opening up to the ground of human existence itself.”⁷ Like Heidegger, Nishitani sees in the aporia of rational thinking a “way out,” a way beyond the nihilism of modern, scientific thinking, a thinking which leads — if unchecked — directly, for both thinkers, to Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Nishitani describes Dostoevsky’s evocation of the struggles in *Notes from the Underground* as “a paradoxical position from which the world makes itself present to us,” in which we are “unable to affirm, unable to deny, and [have] no recourse left but to bang one’s head against it.”⁸ And yet, it is precisely at the point where the Underground Man bangs his head, at the point when the “awareness of nihilism penetrating deep beneath the world of natural laws and human rationality with which science is preoccupied”⁹ that an opening occurs. This “awareness of nihilism opens up a horizon that enables a freedom beyond necessity and life beyond rationality.”¹⁰ Nishitani’s focus is on moving through or beyond this limit of nihilism, but the process itself is

6 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 11.

7 *Ibid.*, 46.

8 *Ibid.*, 48.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

one which must be arrived at. It is a universal that all of us, “even the scientist,” must eventually face as we experience our limits, the horizon of our finitude.

But the difficulty, faced so often in contemporary thought — whether by Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and even Heidegger — is that nihilism risks becoming a final limit, a horizon in which the destructive energies of such thinking do not allow one to pass through to the other side, but which root us instead in an unsustainable position of doubt and resignation. The leap which Heidegger proposes, and which Nishitani finds support for in both Western thought (notably in the thinking of Meister Eckhart) as well as in the thinking of his own native Japan, involves a surrender into *ekstasis*. However, Nishitani’s understanding of the process of ecstasy is different from Heidegger’s; while Heidegger understands *ekstasis* as the process through which Dasein projects itself onto the horizon, a “towards which” the temporal ecstasies reach, Nishitani views ecstasy as the “mode of being wherein the self *is* in itself at the point that it has stepped over itself.”¹¹ The self then is eclipsed or occluded by the presence of the self left behind. Nishitani cautions, however, that this is not enough. Ecstasy is the movement of the self to the opening of the self, to finding the ground of the self; it is through what Nishitani calls negation-*sive*-affirmation where understanding moves from a recognition of nothingness towards an authentic encounter with being as being. In effect, Nishitani is returning *ourselves* to ourselves, not as emaciated echoes of real beings — which might be the case in Western nihilism, and which *is* the case for Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man — but as complete, fully present individuals.

While nihilism comes to mean the rejection of all things, and becomes, via its rejection, *something*, the concept negation-*sive*-affirmation is what Nishitani calls absolute — or true — nothingness. Absolute nothingness, Nishitani is at pains to make clear, is not just something behind a person or a phenomena, nor is it a metaphor. “True nothingness,” he writes, “means that there is

11 Ibid., 68.

no thing that in nothingness, and this is *absolute nothingness*.¹² With absolute nothingness, Nishitani is taking us to the edge of possible comprehension; indeed, he writes that this is a concept that cannot be conceived as such. He writes, “absolute nothingness, wherein even that ‘is’ is negated, is not possible as a nothingness that is thought, but only *as a nothingness that is lived*.”¹³ To experience this requires “an existential conversion, a change of heart within man himself.”¹⁴ And it is through this conversion, this moving through the self, that one can arrive at an authentic and real encounter with the self as a self (and not as a constructed, artificial self).

The concept that Nishitani points us towards — a view of absolute nothingness not as a nihilistic dystopia but rather a nothingness which is both liberatory and soteriological — has a long history amongst traditional Buddhist thinkers. Dōgen grapples with it, but even prior to Dōgen, the concept of *śūnyatā*, or absolute nothingness, is a fundamental idea on which Buddhism itself is grounded, and it remains the fundamental difference in ontological understanding of world between the East and the West. In philosophical terms, the concept is perhaps first and best dealt with by Nāgārjuna in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* from the 2nd century CE. The *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, or *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, works through a series of ontological and epistemological contradictions which amount to arguing that the world, or world, is first empty of essence, and that no thing or *dharma* has independent being; that all thoughts, things, emotions and phenomena arise from a vast flux of interdependent origination, a wellspring of influences which have no original source. This dependent origination, or *pratītyasamutpāda*, points to the essential emptiness of each “thing” or phenomena. For if no thing has a unique, discrete “self,” and is instead a mere gathering point — a *gathering towards* — of influence, of phenomena, of echoes and traces (to

¹² Ibid., 70.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

echo Derrida), then each thing is empty of inherent existence. Nāgārjuna writes in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* that what ever comes into “being dependent on another,” that is, all phenomenological occurrences,

is not identical to that thing

Nor is it different from it.

Therefore it is neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.¹⁵

While Nāgārjuna is detailing here a brief re-examination of the concept of dependent origination, that is, that it is impossible to separate one phenomena from another, that indeed each thing is intimately connected to each other, a deeper reading reveals that emptiness itself, if dealt with ontologically, must be “neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.” If Nāgārjuna had stopped there, we could dismiss him as being a mere materialist, or a nihilist committed to the negative. He goes further, however, and reveals that we can’t rest in simply saying that “this is empty,” and “that is empty,” (to abide in emptiness would be the same as abiding in the essential). Nāgārjuna writes that emptiness must be a concept that is itself treated as empty of essential existence. To treat it otherwise would be to fall into the same trap of metaphysical thinking that has bedeviled and beguiled so many. We can’t abide in emptiness, we can’t take refuge in the concept as a substitute for fullness, for essence, but we must overthrow the very idea of emptiness as well. To say emptiness “is” is to “grasp for permanence.” To say “it is not” is to fall into “the view of nihilism.” Nāgārjuna counsels instead that a “wise person does not say “exists” or “does not exist” and simply allows for phenomena, empty of all inherent essence, to simply be, to perdure without counsel. To do otherwise is dangerous; he warns that “by a misperception of emptiness, a person of little intelligence

15 Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of The Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36.

is destroyed like a snake incorrectly seized.”¹⁶ Equally, “for him to whom emptiness is clear, everything becomes clear.”¹⁷

Nothingness’s Fullness

For Nishitani, the understanding of *śūnyatā* is the central ground from which to view all things, and to stand there is, with Nāgārjuna, to see clearly. While Heidegger seemed to struggle with the concept of transcendence, viewing the leap as at times a leap to “somewhere,”¹⁸ a leap which “jettisons and leaves behind everything conventional,”¹⁹ for Nishitani “such a field cannot lie on a far side, beyond *this* world and *this* earthly life of ours, as something merely transcendent.” The leap must be resolutely fixed to “this side,” and paraphrasing Eckhart, Nishitani claims the ground for an authentic becoming lies “nearer to the self than the self is to itself.” Our question then, is where to locate it?

Śūnyatā for Nishitani is “the point at which we become manifest in our own suchness as concrete human beings,”²⁰ but it is also, at the same time, the point “at which everything around us becomes manifest in its own suchness.” Being as absolute nothingness is, therefore, a locus through which suchness (such as it is) manifests itself, if only temporally, into form in a spatio-temporal context. It is the ground through which something comes to be, but it is a something devoid of independent essence. This standpoint of absolute nothingness serves as a break from a false identification with self-attachment and notions of perpetuity as it denies and distances itself from any sense of the self being shackled or tied to being. Like the grasping of phenomena in

16 *Ibid.*, 68.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Heidegger’s views are not this clear. At times, he seems to locate the leap as leading to another place, a transcendent movement, at others, as in the case of *das* often the location seems resolutely already here.

19 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 179.

20 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 90.

Heidegger, where the object constantly withdraws from itself, so emptiness, whenever confronted, withdraws as well. Each time we turn to face emptiness, it defies objective representation; no sooner have we named it than it withdraws into hiding like an octopus behind a cloud of ink. Emptiness confounds and disassembles any notion of fixity or permanency. Nishitani writes:

As a valley unfathomably deep may be imagined set within an endless expanse of sky, so it is with nihility and emptiness. But the sky we have in mind here is more than the vault above that spreads out far and wide over the valley below. It is a cosmic sky enveloping the earth and man and the countless legions of stars that move and have their being within it. It lies beneath the ground we tread, its bottom reaching beneath the valleys bottom. If the place where the omnipresent God resides be called heaven, then heaven would also have to reach beneath the bottomless pit of hell: heaven would be an abyss for hell. This is the sense on which emptiness is an abyss for nihility.²¹

Emptiness exceeds any understanding of itself, and while Nishitani readily acknowledges the failure of language in describing *śūnyatā*, the most we can hope for is an oblique description of emptiness's continual withdrawal. *Śūnyatā* as absolute emptiness is contrasted to the ontological conception of nihilism. Nihilism as an idea has, as a belief or understanding of nothingness, a political, and ontological significance as something in the world, *even if that something is nothing*. *Śūnyatā* is distinguished in the quote above by its empty vastness, the extent of its self which, rather than being nothing, is *no thing*;²² no thing which, if named, becomes something. *Śūnyatā* must remain withdrawn, and yet is ever present, absolute in its absence.

²¹ Ibid., 98.

²² In Advaita Vedanta, there is an expression — *neti, neti* — which is an analytical meditation used to help a practitioner identify what “is not” Brahma. *Neti, neti* means “not that, not that” and the practice corresponds to *the via Negativa* tradition in the West.

Śūnyatā is the abyss through which nihility comes to be, it is the ground for nothingness.

Nihility as a concept alienates and divides one from the other, object from subject, name from phenomenon, man from woman; it is the abyss across which almost nothing can pass, and we abide separate from each other, from things, from world, rather than in community. For Nishitani, people give names to persons and things, in part to bridge the unbridgeable abyss, and by naming, “suppose that if they know the names, they know that which the names refer to.”²³ By naming world, we claim world, we claim ourselves. But this naming is premised in falsehood and inauthenticity, and while the ambiguous becomes certain through language, through rational thinking, the reality of nihility, the reality which says “the flower in my garden is an unknown entity,”²⁴ becomes instead covered over by an everyday world “which is in its proper element when it traffics in names.”²⁵ The horror of contemporary nihilism is dissolved by an opiate of language.

Nishitani, however, cautions us that though *śūnyatā* encompasses nihilism, it is not in fact the “desolate and bottomless abyss [which] distances even the most intimate of persons or things from each other.”²⁶ *Śūnyatā* as absolute emptiness “points directly to a most intimate encounter with everything that exists.”²⁷ There is, as in Dōgen and even in Heidegger, a sense of soteriological liberation within an honest encounter with emptiness, within an authentic grasping — a perceptive seeing — of *śūnyatā*. To Nishitani, this encounter “takes place at the source of existence common to one and the other and yet at a point where each is truly itself.”²⁸ The field of emptiness becomes the eventual site for a self-appropriation by a thing to itself. It is only through a direct experience, a direct, lived insight, into the emp-

23 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 100.

24 *Ibid.*, 101.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, 102.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

tiness of everything (explicitly not, however, into the *meaninglessness* of everything) that we are free to become that which we authentically are. Through the grasping of the essential nature of true emptiness, we become who we are, not who we have crafted and formed ourselves to be.

With an understanding of Nishitani, it is perhaps time to return to a passage of Dōgen's that we've already considered. He writes in the *Shōbōgenzō* that

to learn the Buddha way is to learn one's self. To learn one's self is to forget one's self. To forget one's self is to be confirmed by all things. To be confirmed by all things is to effect the dropping off of one's body-and-mind and the mind-and-body of others as well.²⁹

Examining the etymological roots of “Buddha-way” first in Sanskrit (*bodhati*) where it means “to awake, know, perceive,” and secondly in Pali (*budh*), where it means, “observes, understands,” respectively, we can read the above passage as a description of the process through which one realizes, or awakens, to the field of absolute emptiness, to *śūnyatā*. When we awaken to the authentic nature — whether through sudden realization as in the Rinzai tradition of Zen, or through subtle practice as in Dōgen's Soto, or even through the deep, abiding perception and thinking of the essential nature of things as Heidegger would have us do — of the self, we learn the self. But this awakening involves intimately grasping that the self is not the self; and in doing that, we come to forget the self. By forgetting the self, we understand that the self, such as it has been formulated, is empty of inherent existence, that is, it is a mere formation of other forces, a collecting of phenomenological events which serve to, temporarily, come together to form the self. This realization — prosaic if we resist it, yet devastatingly transformative if we allow ourselves to “awaken” to it — is the “dropping off of

29 Eihei Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

one's body-and-mind and the mind-and-body of others as well." If we are seriously to interact with *śūnyatā*, then we must understand that within absolute emptiness, there can be no *thing* as we understand a thing to be. Without thing, there can be no perdurance, without perdurance, no time. Without time, there can be no transformation. In an instant, we can do away with Heraclitus's river; for without a thing to change, how can some thing change? How can no thing (what was not there) become some thing (a thing that is there)?

Nishitani describes this stance, via Dōgen, as the "knowing of non-knowing." It is, as played on the field of emptiness, a position of authenticity in which, to borrow from Heidegger, one's own appropriation takes place; it is then the eventual exposure of the self to the self, without interference. Nishitani writes:

It is the point at which the self is truly on its own home-ground. Here plants and trees have penetrated to the bottom to be themselves; here tiles and stones are through and through tiles and stones; and here, too, in self-identity with everything, the self is radically itself. This is the knowing of non-knowing, the field of emptiness itself.³⁰

Nishitani describes a dropping-down into the field of absolute emptiness, a distancing of the rational from world itself, which, in *śūnyatā*, opens one up to the possibility of something other, something which radically already exists, but is empty of inherent existence; that is world as an un-reified concept. Nishitani describes the authentic experience not only of the self *coming to the self*, but of all things — not only tiles and stones and plants and trees but also desks and coffee cups — universes and plastic bags even — coming to their original selves, which of course is not a "self" at all, but rather the event of *śūnyatā*. Heidegger seems to lead us in this direction as well when he writes in *Contributions* that inceptual thinking (as meditation) is "the carrying out and preparing for the resonating and the interplay, first

³⁰ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 110.

of all as a transition [*Übergang*] and as such is a down-going [*Unter-gang*].”³¹ While neither description can satisfy the analytic, both point us towards a new understanding of world; a world that is not formed by materialist, discrete, atomistic entities, not simply from Platonic ideas which resist apprehension. Rather, both direct us to an understanding of world which is radical in its uncertainty, which resonates in inter-penetration of phenomena, and which points to an experience of nihility as a mere passing-through, a moving past, and which prepares us for, with Heidegger, a “new beginning,” and, with Nishitani, the field of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*.

Nishitani conceives of this field as “a field that goes beyond consciousness and intellect.”³² Therefore, beyond language, and even a conception of nothingness; this is the ground on which the “knowing of non-knowing” can take place. It must be a ground where *thing* as an un-grasped, un-taken, un-seized concept is able to come into being (whatever that looks like), a ground where a *thing* is allowed to be, *as it is*. This is different from mere, everyday nihility. Nihilism, for Nishitani, is constrained by always “being viewed from the side of existence.” That is, we are limited in viewing nothingness always from the perception of being, from something, and as such, nihility is always seen in “opposition to being, *a relative nothingness*.”³³ Nihilism is the experience of nothingness from the experience of essence, and as such is always negatively contrasted to it. Nihilism can never be authentic because by stating that something is nothingness, it denies the something which describes it; it remains, therefore, a logical impossibility. For Nishitani, absolute nothingness, or *śūnyatā*, is emptied even of the representation of emptiness; there is no thing that is not already always empty of inherent existence, *including the concept of nothingness itself*. In Nishitani, this root emptiness — universal and infinite, resistant to any formulation — is key; *śūnyatā* binds nothingness’s

31 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 53.

32 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 121.

33 *Ibid.*, 123.

vacuum with beingness's exhaustiveness. For Nishitani, absolute emptiness is resolutely not the affirmation of nothingness; rather, "the field of emptiness stands opened at the very point that things emerge into being."³⁴ And it is this emergency of being that restores to being its *essential being* which nihility denied it. This is not to say that we have done away with absolute nothingness; in fact, we have embraced it all the more fully, giving the field of *śūnyatā* an ontological presence, if only as the birthplace of authentic being. On the field of *śūnyatā*,

each and everything that is recovers once again its power of concentration by gathering itself into itself. All are returned to the possibility of existence. Each thing is restored anew to its own virtues — that individual capacity that each thing possesses as display of its own possibility of existence.³⁵

Nishitani describes a return of a thing to itself through the clarifying and transformative process of arriving at an authentic experience of its own *possibilities*. He writes that

emptiness might be called the field of "be-ification" (*Ichtung*) in contrast to nihility which is the field of "nullification" (*Nichtung*). To speak in Nietzschean terms, this field of be-ification is the field of the Great Affirmation, where we can say Yes to all things.³⁶

In this way, he returns being to being through the exposure of being to its own nullity, to its own inherent substancelessness, and by so doing, gives back to being substance (though transformed), gives back what Nishitani calls *selfness*. The thing, reunited with its self-nature, after passage through the field of absolute emptiness, is, at first glance the same as it was before; the cup, the person, the forest, all seem to be the same, but ac-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 124.

cording to Nishitani, a fundamental change has occurred. Prior to its transformation, when it was still viewed as either *merely* an object in the material world, or as a representation of an *eidōs* or experience of the *noumena*, a thing was viewed solely in terms of it being there for one, or as an object in space; after traversing the field of absolute nothingness, a thing is expressed no longer as a single, discrete phenomenon, nor even as a rendering of something else (as in Plato and Kant); rather, it “is disclosed precisely as something that cannot be so expressed.”³⁷ Selfness cannot be expressed within quotidian reason; it exceeds language, and it is only through an authentic experience of absolute nothing that something (be it a person or a cup) attains its understanding — its self-being — fully.

On the field of *śūnyatā*, a thing emerges as itself, and beyond such categories as substance, quality, quantity; it emerges in absolute nothingness and becomes “master of itself.”³⁸ In this sense it is as a mode of being which Nishitani calls “autonomous,” but not in the sense that a thing is free to choose which “face” to show us. Rather, it is a

mode of being that has nothing to do with our representations or judgements; yet it is not on the back side, or hidden aspect of things. Such expressions already imply a view of things from where *we* stand. On its own home-ground, a thing has no front and no back. It is purely and simply itself, as it is in its selfness and nothing more.³⁹

With the recognition of *śūnyatā* as the “home-ground,” which, with Heidegger we can see as the *Abgrund*, as that ground below the ground, as the primordial, the abyssal ground, the thing becomes — is allowed to be — itself, and is neither substance nor subject; *it is in its selfness and nothing more*. If we are, with Nishitani, to imagine this “nothing more,” it must resist language, and

37 *Ibid.*, 124.

38 *Ibid.*, 127.

39 *Ibid.*

even perhaps imagination. Nishitani turns to the poet Bashō to clarify the concept. Bashō writes:

From the pine tree
learn of the pine tree,
And from the bamboo
of the bamboo.

Nishitani explains that if we are to practice an authentic learning, or thinking, about the pine tree, we must place ourselves in the mode of being of the pine tree. If we attempt instead to codify and name the bamboo (*Acidosasa chinensis*), placing it in the context of something else, or in relation to another, we imprison it within a context of scientific knowledge which denies, or at least elides, the bamboo as it is in that moment, as it is now. Nishitani writes that what Bashō describes is a form of “becoming” the pine tree and the bamboo, of “taking after” the bamboo to stand in its mode of being.

The mode of being of things in their selfness consists of the fact that things take up a position grounded in themselves and settle themselves on that position. They center in on themselves and do not get scattered.⁴⁰

When the bamboo is denied its selfness, and represented (and thus known and understood) as *Acidosasa chinensis*, it is represented from the standpoint of something external. Even when I make a reference to “bamboo” (or “sunset,” “leaf,” “lover,” “moon” or indeed any *thing*) I am making reference to something external, and from a position of perpetual exteriority, and thereby deny or ignore something essential. In contrast, “bamboo,” resting in its own essential selfness, unmediated by my demands upon it, frees the bamboo from being there *for me*. The bamboo, on the field of absolute nothingness, becomes its own inherency, without reference to an other.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 128.

With Nishitani's contemporary description of *śūnyatā*, we can return again to Dōgen's conception of absolute emptiness and understand it more deeply. Dōgen writes:

Hence every piece of *mu* [*Buddha-nature*] is a touchstone to articulate emptiness; emptiness is the capacity to articulate *mu*. This is not the emptiness of "form is emptiness." "Form is emptiness" does not mean form is forced into emptiness, nor is it making form out of emptiness. It has to be the emptiness of "emptiness is emptiness." The emptiness of "emptiness of emptiness" is a piece of rock in emptiness.⁴¹

The Buddha-nature (*mu*) of a thing (that is, *all things as all things* have Buddha-nature) encompasses all facets of an apparent phenomenon, revealing the abyssal ground from which it emerges as much as its quantifiable surface, and, as such, form is a pointer (*at that which withdraws*) and is used to "articulate" emptiness, to make manifest that which resolutely remains withdrawn, intangible. We find ourselves again at the very edges of language, attempting to use words to describe some thing that is not (a) thing, and we make it, again, some thing. Our every attempt at a descriptive destroys the concept. Dōgen does not conceive of the destruction of form; form is not merely empty, it is always abyssally empty, bottomless and both existent and non-existent at the same time, present and withdrawn. The field of *śūnyatā* as endlessly withdrawn ground finally allows a thing to perdure in its own selfness, becoming emptiness as emptiness of emptiness.

The Unframing of Nature

In Heidegger's lecture from 1951, "Bauen Wohnen Denken" (and published as a book in 1954, though not translated into English until 1971) Heidegger takes up what we have already seen in Dōgen, Bashō, and Nishitani; to authentically allow something

41 Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, 72.

to be, and to authentically come into presence with a thing in an original encountering, we must first recognize it as an object there for itself, and *not* there for something or someone else. An object, coming to be on the field of absolute emptiness becomes open to its ownmost possibilities; it dwells in those possibilities. As Bashō counseled in the haiku mentioned above, that “from the pine tree,” we should “learn of the pine tree,” so Heidegger writes that to exist as a human being, “means to be on the earth as a mortal.” For Heidegger *being* on the earth is “to dwell.” To dwell means not only to exist, and to inhabit, but to, at the same time, “cherish, and protect, to preserve and care for.”⁴² Dwelling for Heidegger is not a passive act assumed by someone who lives in a place; to dwell means to be engaged with what it means to exist, what it means to perdure, if only for an instant. Through a series of etymological groundings, Heidegger describes dwelling first as a building or constructing, and of a residing, but more importantly, as the very foundation of who and what we are, *when we are*. Heidegger writes that “the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth is *Baun*, dwelling.”⁴³ We exist by being, and our being is caught up with a residing in, *a being in*, the world as mortals. We have seen Heidegger’s concept of being, or *Sein*, evolve from *Dasein* to *Mitsein*, from being-there to being-with; in dwelling, we find *Sein* engaged in a being-in, or *Insein*. In this way, we are distinct; as Heidegger observed early in his career, as human beings we are always already thrown into a world of mortality; it is our very observation of this that gives to us a sense of wonder, a sense of beingness. To exist in this space of finitude, to inhabit world as a finite object — brilliantly aware and attuned — is to dwell, undisturbed, within the ground of becoming.

As Bashō counsels a quiescent observation of the pine tree, allowing the pine tree to presence *as a pine tree* and *not as my expectation* of a pine tree, so Heidegger demands, for a being to live authentically, that one should allow things to be what they

⁴² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 349.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

are, not what we require them to be; to let the world come to be as the world *be-comes*, and not to, as he writes in “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” *turn day into harassed unrest*. To dwell is to be, perhaps, upon the field of *śūnyatā*; it is to exist within the field of absolute emptiness, undeclared, un-reified, unmade for someone, or something, other. It is to exist as the pine tree does, not in relation to, or for someone else; it is simply, purely, to be. There is an ethics at play — environmental or otherwise — here that is often overlooked in scholarship (indeed, to speak of Heidegger and ethics is too quickly to be received with a deep skepticism.) If I “allow” something to be — whether a pine tree, bamboo or even a person — and do not insist it to be something else, to be what I desire it to be, I let that something exist freely. I take up that thing’s very being and, by not interfering with it — by not insisting my position in relation to it — I “allow”⁴⁴ it to be. I grant it freedom, as it in turn grants me freedom. This is similar to what Nishitani would have us do on the field of *śūnyatā*; in absolute emptiness, a thing exists for itself only, emptied of inherent essence and projected requirements, and able to dwell, or to perdure, in its own essential freedom. In a similar fashion, Dōgen writes, in the “Busshō” fascicle, “the meaning of Buddha-nature is absolutely empty, clear and distinct.”⁴⁵

Heidegger takes up this idea of freedom in “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” linking the German word *bauen*, which means, in a contemporary reading of the word, “to build.” Heidegger links *bauen* to its high German origin, which Heidegger reads as “to dwell.” He then, in turn, reads this understanding with the Gothic *wunian*, which means “to be at, or to be brought to peace.” Returning once again to contemporary German, Heidegger writes that peace, *Friede*, means the free, *das Frye*, and that *das Frye* actually means: *preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something*. To be preserved from something means to be safeguarded, to be, in Heidegger’s terminology, therefore *spared*.

44 The language of permission, or allowing something to be is problematic here, yet that is exactly what is demanded of us in this case.

45 Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 81.

To free really means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature.⁴⁶

Accordingly then, to dwell means to be free, and to be free means to spare, or to be spared. Again, there is an interesting ethics at work here, between the one sparing and the spared; by being free, I am free to spare an other; this is different from the enslaved person who is freed by his master, who is *granted* freedom (a boon which, by the very nature of the master–servant relationship, can always be rescinded). Heidegger does not write that to be free means to be spared; rather to be free *is to spare*, it is to engage in “granting” permission, but in a very rare sense. In sparing we allow something to be preserved, but preserved by *itself*; we open the space for something to self-preserve. This is the active sense in which one spares an other (even an other pine tree). If I spare the pine tree my understanding of it, my *claiming it* (whether this claiming is instrumental through science or technology, or through the simple act of naming doesn’t matter; the result remains the same), I allow it to be, within its own time, in its own space. By refusing the claim, I allow it to come forward; I beckon it, and it *be-*comes. Not *through* my invitation, but *alongside* my invitation.

To dwell, then, is also to give, to offer over the space or clearing to allow something to come to be. Heidegger writes that that to dwell is to receive as well as to give.

46 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). 149.

Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as the sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day nor day into harassed unrest.⁴⁷

For Heidegger, “allowing” something to be is to receive it, is to enter into a relation with it that is free, and based on care and attentiveness, while at the same time not overwhelming it.

Heidegger writes that “the fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving.”⁴⁸ There is a sense of profound hospitality at play in the giving to something the space to presence itself authentically, to present itself within its own field. Heidegger writes that “to save really means to set something free into its own presencing.”⁴⁹ Dwell, then, comes to mean to allow for being to presence itself in its ownmost, authentic way; the pine tree comes to be when we offer it the space to be; until then, it is a dull representation of what I think a pine tree should be. However, it is only a dull representation for me; my experience of truth is hampered, but not the pine tree’s experience. This is perhaps what Heidegger meant when he wrote that “world worlds;” things come to be all the time, but it is only when we can clear our own dross, our own inauthentic experience of world, that we can experience it in its own utmost authenticity.

The way something comes into presence, the way world worlds, is, for Heidegger, through the “gathering” of “the fourfold” (*das Geviert*). A space or location comes to be in the presencing of a thing. The concept is difficult to comprehend, yet deserves our attention. *Das Geviert* is an all too often under-examined idea in Heidegger, and until recently, very little scholarship had been done on it; for the most part, the fourfold has been treated with suspicion and even derision by scholars. In more recent times, however, several philosophers, most notably

47 Ibid., 150.

48 Ibid., 149.

49 Ibid., 150.

Graham Harman among them, have begun to take seriously the challenge of the fourfold. For our own purposes, in our reading of Dōgen and in an attempt to open up an *allée* between the two thinkers, the fourfold is a crucial bridge to enjoin the two philosophers.

For Heidegger, a thing comes to be within the fourfold “gathering” of earth, sky, divinities and mortals. To separate one from each is impossible, and to treat one as its own entity is also a mistake; rather, what Heidegger proposes is that for the “simple oneness” of being to take place, it must take place at a confluence in the flow of *das Geviert*. Heidegger describes earth as “the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting...rising up into plant and animal” while the sky,

is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year’s season and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether.⁵⁰

The earth and sky are not discrete, however; each is “already thinking of the other three along with it.” It is impossible to separate earth from sky. Equally impossible would be to remove from the “simple oneness” the divinities and mortals. Like the first two, these second two are, though commonly in contrast, in fact, intimates, in that one cannot be without the other three. The gods are “the beckoning messengers of the godhead” while human beings are mortals, but mortal only in that “to die means to be capable of death as death.” Like earth and sky, the gods are not contrasted to mortals; rather each comes together, each gathers in the swirling lacunal absence of becoming, and it is through this gathering that the event of a thing occurs, that being *be-comes* and comes to fill the space.

Heidegger uses the description of a bridge to describe how each gathers to the other. A bridge *bridging* quite literally brings

⁵⁰ Ibid., 149.

together two opposing banks; it brings one to the other, but at the same time it also acts as something which denotes a separation. Heidegger writes that one side sets off the other, and in this setting off, the bridge brings the stream into becoming. Though the fourfold may seem a great distance from the Heidegger of the 1920s,⁵¹ we can hear in Heidegger's tool analysis something of the same. The analogy of the broken hammer from *Being and Time* calls to mind a similar dilemma; it is through its very brokenness that we become aware of the hammer, *in its absence*. With the bridge as a gathering, Heidegger writes:

It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream. Thus it guides and attends the stream through the meadows. Resting upright in the stream's bed, the bridge-piers bear the swing of the arches that leave the streams to run their course.⁵²

The bridge brings into being the stream as it does the banks. Though the bridge is constructed, its gathered self is gathered within a specific location, and brings into being everything else; earth, sky, gods and mortals interconnect and *be-come* through the bridge, with the bridge; the bridge connects, and inter-forms, co-cooperates with other *be-comings*. Heidegger writes that the bridge "*gathers to itself in its own way earth and sky, divinities and mortals.*"⁵³ This gathering brings into being the thingness of the bridge; without gathering earth, sky, gods and mortals, nothing is. It is only via gathering that lacunae are filled, if ever so briefly before being regathered. "*As this thing it gathers the fourfold.*" Through an inter-*be-coming* the bridge *be-comes* because it gathers, yet the gathering itself brings the bridge to

51 According to Andrew J. Mitchell's *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern Press University, 2015), Heidegger first uses the concept of the fourfold (*das Geivert*) in the *Bremen Lectures* of 1949.

52 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 152.

53 *Ibid.*, 153.

a *be*-coming; the two are inter-articulated events which both, through allowing for the one, allows for the other.

Through the gathering of the fourfold, a lacunate absence is filled with the thing, and this thing, through the gathering, takes place, *as an evental becoming of itself*. The relationship between the thing becoming and the event's location is intricate; neither presages the other, nor is one in an hierarchical relation with the other.

[T]he bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge. The bridge is a thing; it gathers the fourfold, but in such a way that it allows for a site for the fourfold.⁵⁴

Allowing a site for the fourfold creates space; location brings space into being, it opens up space, if only by defining it negatively. Space becomes in the wake of a thing's imposition upon it. Heidegger writes that the bridge, "as such a thing [...] allows a space into which earth and heaven, divinities and mortals are admitted."⁵⁵ These spaces become intervals, pauses in *be*-coming which allow, if only for a moment, for an phenomena intervening in space to become itself.

Man dwells amidst space, we exist amongst things, and we exist, as things, between things in spaces that open up between locatable and emerging points. Between the points exists an unlocatable other, something which is not me, nor you, nor desk, or lecture hall; rather it is un-gathered space, space which has yet to come.⁵⁶ And yet, for Heidegger, to say that mortals are, "is to say that in dwelling they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations." We exist as locatable gatherings which pervade and persist for limited becomings, reordered and always already becoming something else, tem-

54 Ibid., 154.

55 Ibid., 155.

56 The original term for the Buddha in Sanskrit was *Tathagata*, or "the one thus gone," yet *Tathagata* can also mean "the one not yet come." We can perhaps think of the ungathered space as that which has not yet come.

porally persistent, if only temporarily. As a result, we are never completely here, never merely here. I exist over there in a future direction as I exist still in a remembered past in the doorway I just passed through, in the eyes of a forgotten friend, or in the well I fell into as a child. *I am never merely here.*

In “Uji,” we encounter Dōgen exploring a similar idea. For Dōgen, it is clear that the self is never merely here; rather the self, is, as with all things, always already empty of inherent existence. And yet, as we have seen, this view of the self as empty is not the same as a nihilistic, dystopian outlook. For Dōgen, the self, as with all things, exists everywhere, as all things. Yet this is not mere holism; holism restricts us to imagining that there is no definite thing in the world — holism and nihilism are intricately linked, and, at least for Buddhism and Heidegger, neither can sustain itself. Rather, for Dōgen, “we set the self out in array and make that the whole world.”⁵⁷ By recognizing our entire extension as an infinite one, we thereby rid ourselves of the atomistic, determined locator of traditional ontology. *I am never merely here.* Dōgen, using time (*uji*) as being, writes:

We must see all the various things of the whole world as so many times. These things do not get in each other’s way any more than various times get in each other’s way. [...] We set our self out in array, and we see that.⁵⁸

Viewing the self not as merely a discrete, single entity, yet also refusing the view that sees the self as an amorphous extension of all matter, both Heidegger (at least here) and Dōgen (as well as the entire Buddhist canon, to a greater or lesser degree) view the self as both existent and non-existent, divisible and indivisible, as something and nothing; phenomena perdures, empty however of inherent existence, yet overflowing with extrinsic *event-ings* (each of which is equally empty of inherency.) This gives the effect of extensible solidity, of permanency, yet is as much in the

⁵⁷ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

flux and flow of *be*-coming as Heraclitus's river. Similarly, in the story of Indra's Net, in which all things are infinitely connected yet also actively enunciated as discrete, interstitial confluences of waypoints and gatherings, distinct and separate, finite in their being, yet infinitely perduring, makes more sense to our understanding of what is happening; a thing exists as a distinct, coming together, a gathering, and yet that existence, rather than being infinite, is in a constant process of change, of *re*-dispersal and *re*-gathering. Being here becomes not a fixed point, analyzable and able to be identified and named; rather, being is always a becoming, always a becoming something else.

This thinking of gatherings and dispersals should point us towards another concept of Heidegger's, that of enframing, or *Gestell*. While used in concert with his questioning of technology, the term itself, as a gathering, can help us in understanding Dōgen. For Heidegger, the process of enframing as a gathering is a process of, amongst others, "producing and presenting," in which "what presences [can] come forth into unconcealment."⁵⁹ This is deeply tied to the process of *alētheia*, in which that which has been forgotten, or covered up, is re-appropriated, made to come forward. Heidegger writes:

Enframing is the gathering together which belongs to that setting-upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve. As the one who is challenged forth in this way, man stands within the essential realm of enframing.⁶⁰

We are never free from the process of gathering and enframing — we stand within it — but it is in our disposition that allows for an authentic recognition of this realm. *Lethe* covers and disperses authentic becoming, but is through the exposure — the leap — that the event of gathering as truth takes place. While

59 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). 326.

60 *Ibid.*, 329.

this gathering unfolds primordially in the gathering of the mountain chain, it is in the ordered challenging that what actually is can be experienced.

Like Dōgen, who counsels that “you must not by your own maneuvering make it into nothingness; you must not force it into being,” so Heidegger cautions that the “destining of revealing” is “never a fate that compels.”⁶¹ The free, uncompelled unconcealment of that which is, is the essence of freedom. A thing must become revealed not through will, but through allowing of it to come forth. Heidegger writes:

Freedom is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing shimmers the veil that hides the essential occurrence of all truth and lets the veil appear as what veils. Freedom is the realm of the destining that at any given time starts a revealing on its way.⁶²

Through the gathering of the enframing, we avail ourselves to the opening of a being’s *be*-coming. The destining is our practice of becoming. Through this,

man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens, though not one who obeys.⁶³

In the following chapter, we will take up what the being who listens, as the being who practices, looks like.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

