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## Echoes of No Thing: Thinking between Heidegger and Dōgen

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## The Practice of Thinking

We ended the previous chapter with a discussion of Heidegger's enigmatic thinking of the enframing, and with a call towards the freedom that be-comes the one who listens, and its opposing "unfreedom" to the one who merely obeys. It must be noted that it is rather easy to profess an understanding of nothingness and emptiness as a scholastic exercise, as a writing on a subject, but it is far harder to internalize the thoughts of Heidegger and Dōgen, to truly take up, as a practice, *and as an ethics*, what they have proposed. For neither thinker would accept mere book learning, mere cogitation on a subject already known, as authentic understanding. The thinking that they call us to take up is transformative, and in that sense, according to at least these two, it is then vital. Contemporary philosophy, as it is studied in most universities (and unfortunately this the only place it is too often studied) is far removed both from the exertions of Dōgen (and of many religious practitioners), as well as the thinking about thinking taken up, and practiced, by Heidegger. Indeed, Schopenhauer, quoted in an essay by Pierre Hadot entitled "Philosophy as a Way of Life," described this type of scholastic exercise as "mere fencing in front of a mirror."<sup>1</sup> In the essay, Hadot draws out the movement of philosophy from a "practice" of

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 270.

antiquity in which philosophy “was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant,” towards its inevitable co-optation by Christianity and the intellectual scholastic tradition in which philosophy becomes a “purely theoretical and abstract activity.”<sup>2</sup> This trend continues and is seen today in the modern university, where, instead of a practice, philosophy becomes a discourse and one in which education is “no longer directed towards people who [are] to be educated with a view to becoming fully developed human beings, but to specialists, in order that they might learn how to train other specialists.”<sup>3</sup> This results in a discursive “construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists,”<sup>4</sup> which, for Hadot as for Heidegger and Dōgen, is a far cry from the vital nature that thinking calls us towards. In opposition to this stultification, Hadot writes that in ancient philosophy, “[thinking] is a conversion, a transformation of one’s way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom.”<sup>5</sup> Philosophy then, to Hadot, is a critical practice of thinking which takes up thought as a craft to be handled with the express purpose of deepening the human experience. Philosophy is, for Hadot, overly enmeshed in technical jargon which permanently deracinates and impoverishes thinking. In the same quote by Schopenhauer listed above, Hadot closes by writing “And yet, if there is one thing desirable in the world, it is to see a ray of light fall onto the darkness of our lives, shedding some kind of light on the mysterious enigma of our lives.”<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, we hope to begin to unpack what it means to listen, or rather, what it means to avail oneself to the opening of the event of truth, whether this is a thinking of *alētheia*, a “standing-in” in the abyssal between, or a practice of remaining within *śūnyatā* of radical emptiness. This thinking demands a practice towards thinking, which in turn is a thinking towards practice, a practice which is the only way of approaching, or

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2 Ibid., 265.

3 Ibid., 270.

4 Ibid., 272.

5 Ibid., 275.

6 Ibid., 271.

thinking, with Heidegger, the new beginning. What Heidegger proposes in *Contributions* is not possible from the comfort of a desk, or from the lectern of a classroom; it is a thinking towards a new beginning, an inceptual leap into an abyssal between, and as such can only be taken up *by the rare*. As long as these words are kept safely within a text, as long as they are safely isolated as mere theory, they can never have the revolutionary import that Heidegger seems to demand. We take action towards the practice of thinking, by invoking the world to find ourselves with/in the world. This can never happen within the desiccated leaves of books, in words set in ink long ago dried; it must be a practice taken up and taken into the world.<sup>7</sup>

A similar requirement is made by Dōgen, and in a sense this is easier to practice. Buddhism is, after all, on one level a religion,<sup>8</sup> and as such there are clear rules for practice already laid down. We avoid the pitfalls and risks in Buddhism that exist in philosophy, in that there is a soteriological authority already knit into the fabric of Buddhist philosophy. That said, however, perhaps precisely what gives Buddhism its soteriology is the form of practice. Simply reading about Buddhism will never result in anything beyond Schopenhaurian “fencing.” Buddhism, in whatever sect, must be taken up in order to be “understood.” Indeed, the Buddha’s last words are said to have been “achieve completion through *appamāda*.”<sup>9</sup> *Appamāda* in Pali (the original language of the Buddha, and in which his original teachings were transcribed) refers to heedfulness, or diligence, or even conscientiousness; while none of these words directly refer to

7 Of course, we must also be cautious here, considering Heidegger’s past with the political philosophy of National Socialism. It is impossible to ignore that one key aspect of this philosophy was taking action in the world, and so, with the history of the Holocaust (and of the Japanese imperial occupations), we must engage with these thinkers with a delicate caution, ever mindful of the horrendous pitfalls that lie in wait.

8 Though at its core Buddhism is a philosophy, and perhaps even the first psychology, the rules and rituals surrounding it anchor it firmly as a religion.

9 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “The Practice in a Word,” *Access to Insight* (BCBS Edition), 5 June 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/inaword.html>.

practice as such, they seem to point us towards an implementation of ethical principles which, when undertaken, result in a deeper, more profound experience of life.

### Simply Sitting

An imprecation towards transformative change must emerge in any authentic reading of Dōgen, if we take what he says seriously; with Dōgen, theory is never a substitute for the fundamental practice of *zazen* or “just sitting.” For Dōgen, the awareness of the dharma, of the emptiness of all things, is based first in *physical* practice, the practice of *sitting*, a practice we should go towards “as unhesitatingly as you would brush a fire from the top of your head.”<sup>10</sup> In sitting, we begin to attune our mind towards, ultimately, absolute emptiness.

In the “Zazengi” fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, or “The Principles of Zazen,” a document as close to an instruction manual as we can find in philosophy, Dōgen instructs that, in addition to finding a “quiet place” and “not allowing drafts of air, mist, rain, or dew to enter,” we must cast aside “involvements of any kind.” With Dōgen, it is clear; there is nothing in the *kōans*, nothing in the philosophy to replace the simple practice of *zazen*, or “just sitting.” Sitting is a preparation *towards*, a strengthening and quieting which will allow one to enter the realm of “just seeing,” or true perception, of *śūnyatā*. In explicit directions, he tells us to sit in the quiet space, upright, “in correct bodily posture.” We are told not to lean to the left or the right, and neither forward nor backward. These are the basic instructions, and do not involve mind at all. In full or half lotus, we exhale deeply and begin. Dōgen advises that “[z]azen is not thinking good; it is not thinking bad. It is not mental activity of any kind; it is not contemplation or reflection. [...] you must cast off your sitting [so that nothing remains].”<sup>11</sup> *Zazen* is about availing yourself to

10 Eihei Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 110.

11 *Ibid.*

the ground of absolute stillness, of coming to *that* clearing in which what is manifest may manifest itself, may come forward. Dōgen cautions that *zazen* is not about thinking; instead he proposes a movement that, through practice, goes beyond thinking. He writes that “as you sit, meditating silently and immovably, think of not thinking. What is thinking of not thinking? Non-thinking. This, in and of itself, is the art of *zazen*.”<sup>12</sup> “Not thinking” is merely a negation of thought, an intellectual exercise that may be practiced by anyone; it is simply a nihilistic rejection of thought; “nonthinking” evokes that which is not perceived by mind, by our senses, that which is not, but is. For Dōgen, *zazen* is not just meditation; by engaging in nonthinking within the field of absolute nothingness, we pass through the “gate of great repose and bliss.” The understanding of body-and-mind-falling off, of self becoming non-self is the attainment of “undefiled practice-realization.”<sup>13</sup>

### Words Fail Us

Though less explicit directions are given by Heidegger, a sense of the central role practice plays in both thinking and *be*-coming resound through Heidegger’s work, whether in the early lectures on Aristotle and *Being and Time*, or in the later discourses and dialogues, all which seem to revolve around, or at least echo, a central theme of surrender, or *lassen*. In *Contributions*, Heidegger warns us, numerous times, that it will not be enough to think our way towards a new beginning. Indeed, a new beginning requires a beginning without words precisely because

Words fail us; they do so originally and not merely occasionally, whereby some discourse or assertion could indeed be carried out but is left unuttered, i.e., where the saying of something sayable or the re-saying of something already said is simply not carried through. Words do not yet come

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

to speech at all, but it is precisely in failing us that they arrive at the first leap. This failing is the event as intimation and intrusion of Being.<sup>14</sup>

Being comes forward in the space between words, between constructed thoughts. Heidegger does not discuss nonthinking *per se*, but as has already pointed out in “What Calls for Thinking,” that which is most thought-provoking is “that we are still not thinking.”<sup>15</sup> That this kind of thinking — the thinking of the scientific, rational world — and the thinking of nonthinking — are deeply different is made brilliantly clear in the above quotation. By words failing us, by allowing ourselves to wander or be carried to the edge of the abyssal beyond, our thinking has brought us to that point whereby words cannot save us, and we achieve the point where, at least to Wittgenstein, “one must be silent.”<sup>16</sup> This silence is the “intimation of [...] Being,” the coming to the fore of the unnameable, of the primordial silence that *be*-comes.

In Heidegger’s “Memorial Address” from 1955, he discusses the difficulty of attuning oneself to the new thinking towards the new beginning which he has already discussed in *Contributions*. While careful not to dismiss entirely “calculative thinking” (he says that both are indeed needed), it is “meditative thinking” that the “contemporary” human being is in flight from. The contemporary human being too often eschews the pause and the space that true thinking requires. This is not to say that inventiveness and industry are not happening, only that reflective thinking — meditative thinking — escapes one who is too committed to “progress.” In response to the criticism that meditative thinking both “loses touch” and is “worthless for dealing

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14 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 30.

15 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 370.

16 The full quotation, as the final line of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, reads “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden [New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922], 189).

with [...] business” as well as being “above the reach of ordinary understanding,” Heidegger advises that to achieve this meditative pause requires practice. “At times,” he says, “it requires a greater effort. It demands more practice. It is in need of even more delicate care than any other genuine craft.”<sup>17</sup> Thinking here is a craft, and a craft requires training. It requires a practice, a training towards thinking, and yet, science, as a calculating, amassing form-of-thinking denies thinking even this. In the “Address,” Heidegger says that this type of thinking need not be “high-flown.” Rather, “it is enough if we dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now.”<sup>18</sup> Though he does not say this explicitly, we can hear the echo of Dōgen when he advises, in the “Genjōkōan” that this “inexhaustible store”—this closest of worlds is “present right beneath our feet and within a single drop of water.”<sup>19</sup>

The practice of meditation for Heidegger first requires a willingness to let go, to *lassen*. Heidegger describes the process of letting-go in relation to technology as a “releasement toward things” (*Die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*). We must, he seems to be saying, hold technology very loosely; we must use it to build where we dwell, but also “deny [it] the right to dominate us.” While this address focuses on the danger of becoming seduced by technology (to the detriment of that other form of thinking), we can see that Heidegger is also pointing us towards something else. He says in the “Address”:

Releasement towards things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 47.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 43.

20 *Ibid.*, 55.



To open ourselves to the mystery of *be*-coming, to the mystery of Being's incipient arrival, first requires a releasing of the certainty of being. To locate ourselves on a new ground means we must first abandon the other, old ground, entirely. This movement returns us, if briefly, to the horror of the leap; there is a letting go here, and to let go fully means to risk, or even to welcome utter abandonment, to find oneself alone (as absolute emptiness). This abandonment is dealt with extensively by Heidegger in *Contributions*; he describes the abandonment as "the forgottenness of being and the breakdown of truth."<sup>21</sup> These, Heidegger writes, are essentially the same thing, yet each must be deeply thought, each "be brought to meditation."<sup>22</sup> It is much safer never to think what Heidegger calls the "plight," but this plight, the greatest plight that is "the lack of a sense of plight in the midst of this plight,"<sup>23</sup> must be thought — thinking here *becomes* the leap, a leap necessary to break through the rigid, ossified world *we still inhabit*.

For Heidegger then, the practice of thinking is a surrender of the certainty of being to the precisely uncertain nature of *be*-coming. Becoming transforms being from the concrete, knowable, absolute into the uncertain flowing of becoming, and with this transformation, everything changes. Nothing is authentically known if knowing is a learning of facts; this acquisition of knowledge is always seizing, a taking, a naming; if knowing (as opposed to knowledge; the verb in a state of action versus the staid noun) is instead a thinking-towards *be*-coming, a knowing that is allowed to become anything (even *nothing*), then knowing becomes an active practice, thought becomes a taking-up of thinking.

Out of this taking up, for Heidegger, arises a sudden "resonating," a *be*-coming of everything. Being is abandoned as a certainty and in its wake vibrant life as epitomized by a resonating of all becomings takes place. This vibrant life — what Heidegger

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21 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 90.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

calls lived experience — emerges in the abyssal in between, providing, if not the certainty of something new, then at least the possibility of a new arrival, a new *be-coming*.

### Practice *qua* Practice

Nishitani echoes Heidegger's thinking *towards* when he describes the non-knowing of Buddhist practice as "a field that goes beyond consciousness and intellect."

It would have to be a field of *śūnyatā* or emptiness, appearing as the field of a wisdom we might call a "knowing of non-knowing." From this field we could even take a second look at conscious or intellectual knowing and see it reduced finally to the "knowing of not-knowing." Similarly, it would be a field of praxis that might be called an "action of non-action," whence we could take a second look at all our activity and see it as nothing other than an "action of non-action." And lastly, it would be a standpoint where knowledge and praxis are one, a field where things would become manifest in their own suchness.<sup>24</sup>

This non-knowing becomes known through the practice of deep, careful thinking, through an examination of the inherent emptiness of a world and by an elimination of the "false views" that crowd our knowing with false claims to beingness. The non-knowing of knowing becomes known through the practice of *samādhi*, or, as Nishitani writes later, "where the self can be absolutely itself." This is a point where "the eye does not see the eye, fire does not burn fire [...], where the willows are not green and the flowers are not red, [... at this point] it withdraws beyond all reason and *logos*."<sup>25</sup> World drops away, like Dōgen's body-and-mind, to a point of stillness — withdrawn but absolutely present — a space or clearing of no thing which welcomes all into it as possibility, as a resonating.

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24 Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 122.

25 *Ibid.*, 188.

For Dōgen, thinking becomes a practice when we take up a sustained sitting practice — for there can be no substitute — but it is also possible for the practice to be taken up as the everyday, from moment to moment. For Dōgen, “[w]e should continue in this way even further, because practice and realization, and for all that is possessed of life, it is the same.”<sup>26</sup> There is an emphasis on work as a practice, and within, the Buddhist tradition, the eight-fold noble path is just that, a *Holzweg towards* and not a level achieved.

For Heidegger, practice *qua* practice is not so clear. He favors a withdrawal, a stepping back clearly, but does not offer a guide towards a sustained, defined practice, beyond the practice of the leap. Through an authentic experience of the uncovering of truth as *alētheia*, through a willingness to leap into the uncertainty which rests (or doesn’t) between the banks of certainty, we are able to experience the world *as it is*, in the form(s) of a new beginning becoming again, but on the subject of how one is prepare for that leap, things are less clear.

Perhaps what comes through most clearly as a *practice* for Heidegger, as a stepping away from the seeing of *theōria* and into the doing of *praxis*, is for a “taking up” of the practice of withdrawal itself, an act of refusal towards the the given world, the world into which one has always already been thrown into. This stepping back, or letting go, is a “waiting.” In waiting we refuse to name, we *cannot* name (for to name would be to reify); rather we must wait “because waiting releases itself into the openness [...] into the expanse of distance [...] in whose nearness it finds the abiding in which remains.”<sup>27</sup> And so we wait, *as a practice*, and for Heidegger, that practice takes place in a “simple solitude.”

For what matters is to know that here, in all barrenness and frightfulness, something of the essence of Being is resonating and the abandonment of beings (as machination and lived

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26 Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 44.

27 Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 68.

experience) by Being is dawning. This age of questioning can be overcome only by an age of that simple solitude in which a readiness for the truth of Being is prepared.<sup>28</sup>

This age of the simple solitude, this age in which the retreat from the clamor of being in technology seems so important, this time of waiting *as a practice*, seems to me the closest we can come to following Heidegger's idea to the limit. He refuses to claim an answer, to make an absolute. He leaves us in silence, in the graceful — and attentive — waiting of the prisoners' dialogue. Heidegger ends *Contributions* with a small series of paragraphs on language. In them, he describes that language both humanizes and dehumanizes human beings. He writes that "language is grounded in silence."<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it is by embodying this practice of listening to the silence *as a practice* that we can find the clearing through which being comes, finally, to Being.

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<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

