

# Martin Heidegger's Thinking and Japanese Philosophy

KŌICHI TSUJIMURA

Translated by Richard Capobianco and Marie Göbel

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**M**ost honored Professor Heidegger!  
Most honored Mrs. Heidegger!  
Honorable Mayor Schühle!  
Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great honor not only for me alone, but also for Japanese philosophy that I may deliver an address here today at the celebration of the 80th birthday of our great thinker. For this opportunity, I very sincerely thank those who have organized this celebration.

The reason that this honorable task has been given to me, an unknown Japanese, is presumably that I, a Japanese student of Heidegger, am coming from *afar*, if I may say so. Yet, in the background of this coming from afar lies quite a long path, along which up until now many Japanese have tried, indeed are trying more and more today, to come into the nearness of the place where the thinking of our master sojourns. For this reason, please allow me to recall briefly some important predecessors along this path.

It was in 1921 when for the first time a Japanese studied with our thinker, who was lecturing in Freiburg at the time. His name is T. Yamanouchi, who later founded the seminar on Greek philosophy at the University of Kyōto. One year later in 1922, my teacher H. Tanabe came to Freiburg. He was, as far as I can tell, the first to discover the importance of Heideggerian thinking—not only in Japan, but perhaps in the entire world as well. In his essay from 1924 *The New Turn in Phenomenology—Heidegger's Phenomenology of Life*, one can already recognize a first version of *Being and Time*. Tanabe continued his thoughtful dialogue with

Heidegger's thinking up until his death in 1962 and has remained the leading thinker in Japan. He once said to me in his last years: "In my opinion, Heidegger is the *only* thinker since Hegel." Then Baron Sh. Kuki came to see Heidegger in Marburg. To him we Japanese owe the first reliable elucidation of *Being and Time*. Unfortunately, he died too early—in 1941. In the troubled time of the thirties, my teacher and my predecessor as the Chair at the University of Kyōto, K. Nishitani, attended Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche in Freiburg. Through Nishitani's profound interpretation, Heidegger's later reflections, as for example in his essay on the *Origin of the Work of Art*, became accessible to us. As far as I can see, he is today among those who understand Heidegger's thinking most deeply. Thus, in Japan, and particularly at the University of Kyōto, there has been an appropriation and tradition of Heideggerian thinking that has continued for almost half a century already. And so, also on behalf of my teachers and predecessors whom I have just mentioned, I must here express our heartfelt admiration and gratitude to Professor Heidegger.

The rather long path that I have indicated shows that, for us, Heidegger's thinking stands in a particularly important relation to Japanese philosophy. Hence, the title of the address, which for our part would like to be an address of thanks: "*Martin Heidegger's Thinking and Japanese Philosophy*."

In order to shed some light on this relationship, we must first proceed from a determination of the essence—and the want of that essence [*Wesensnot*]—of Japanese philosophy. If one understands Japanese philosophy in the sense of philosophy *in* Japan, then in Japan there are also almost all of the movements of contemporary philosophy. Nearly all of them have been introduced to us from Europe and America, and, consequently, are not for us a home-grown thinking. If, however, we understand by Japanese philosophy that thinking endeavor which does not arise from the place of Western-European philosophy, but rather springs from the ground source [*Quellgrund*] of our own spiritual tradition, then this philosophy is something very rare. In what follows, I understand Japanese philosophy in the latter sense—and this philosophy finds itself in an essential want [*Not*].

From the most ancient times, we Japanese have been close to nature in a specific sense. Namely: we do not have the will to dominate nature, but instead we want to live and die as far as possible in a way that is in accord with nature. On his death-bed, a simple Japanese said to those around him: "I am dying now, just as the leaves fall in the autumn." And a Zen Buddhist master, who was, so to speak, the grandfather of my own Zen practice, refused an injection when he was dying and said: "What is the point of such a forcing and, thereby, of a prolonged life?" Instead of taking the medicine, he drank a sip of his favorite rice wine and died calmly. Rightly understood, here already is evident a stark contrast between the age-old Japanese spiritual tradition and a life determined by the European

spiritual tradition and by European science and technology. In short, to live and die in accord with nature was, we may say, an ideal of the ancient Japanese wisdom of life.

Now, of course, this does not mean that we Japanese have no will, but it says that at the ground of the will nature prevails. The will is in the first and last instance born out of nature and will vanish into nature, this nature which assuredly withdraws from every scientific objectification and yet remains everywhere present. Nature, in Japanese "*shizen*" or "*zinen*," means: being as something is from itself forth—in brief: being-itself and being-true. For this reason, "nature" in the olden Japanese language was almost synonymous with "freedom" and "truth." This view of nature has been deepened by the Buddhist "insight into the transience and emptiness" of all things.

In order to bring to light the want of essence of Japanese philosophy in the sense just given, let us briefly turn our attention to the other side of the matter. Ever since the Europeanization of Japan that began some 100 years ago, we have with all our might introduced European culture and civilization into almost all spheres of our life. The Europeanization has been an historical necessity for us so that we Japanese can maintain our independence in the modern world, that is to say, in the sphere of power that is determined by the will. Yet, at the same time, therein lies the danger that we can lose our ownmost essence which has been indicated. In order to avoid this consequence in the past, the Europeanization of Japan happened on the whole without an inner connection to our own spiritual tradition. Since then we have had to suffer a deep conflict at the core of our Dasein, namely, the conflict between our own way of living and thinking in accord with nature and the strongly will-determined Western way of living and thinking that has been imposed on us from outside. This conflict first of all remains veiled in an optimistic way, and yet visible all the same, in a slogan that appeared back then, namely: "Japanese spirit with European ability." What is meant by this ability is above all modern science and technology. The conflict still exists today in our everyday life. We "Europeanized Japanese" must more or less lead a double life.

To bring this conflict in some way into a primordial unity should be, in my opinion, the authentic task of a Japanese philosophy. However, apart from a few attempts, it has not yet succeeded in accomplishing this. Instead, Japanese philosophy has itself remained for the most part in the same unmediated conflictedness of the "Japanese spirit with European ability" and, indeed, to an even greater degree. The many and diverse movements of European philosophy that we have tried to transplant in our country since the second half of the past century could not take root in our ground. Rather, nearly all of them remained merely imitated by us like a fashion or at most employed in a limited area of our societal life such as in science and technology. Consequently, the term "Japanese philosophy" is

already a marker for its originary want of essence. This want issues, on the one hand, from the fact that we adopted European philosophy without an essential engagement of the aforementioned ground source of our own spiritual tradition, and, on the other hand, from the fact that most of the philosophical movements were not able to touch us and shake us right down to this very ground source of our spiritual life.

Yet, with Heidegger's thinking the matter stands altogether differently. What becomes worthy of questioning through his thinking is what we always already are and so what is already somehow understood by us in a non-objective way, and thus is always overlooked in science and philosophy. It seems to me that the matter [*Sache*] of Heidegger's thinking always preserves this character. For this reason, the matter of his thinking withdraws itself in its truth as soon as we simply want to represent, grasp, and know it. And, therefore, his thinking remains in principle inimitable. The ultimate matter of his thinking, which perhaps may be indicated by the ancient Greek word *Alētheia* (un-concealedness), could be understood in view of Western philosophy, and that means here metaphysics, as a ground that is concealed to metaphysics itself. Thus, the matter itself would have demanded from the thinker a transformation of thinking—namely, the transformation of philosophical thinking into “another thinking.” Only by this other thinking—and that means by “the step back from philosophy”—has what is “proper” to philosophical thinking—and that means here what is proper to the essence of the Western world and of its humanity—been “properly” glimpsed. That is an extraordinary appropriating event [*Ereignis*]. In this sense, we Japanese see in Heidegger's thinking a glimpsing-of-itself of what is “proper” to Western humanity and its world.

In view of this thinking, we Japanese, too, necessarily had to be thrown back onto the forgotten ground of our own spiritual tradition. If I may offer something personal here: Right after my first encounter with *Being and Time* when I was still in secondary school, I sensed that at least for us Japanese the only possible access to a genuine understanding of this work of thinking is concealed in our tradition of Zen Buddhism. And this is so because Zen Buddhism is nothing other than a seeing-through [*Durchblicken*] to what we ourselves are. For this seeing-through, we first have to let go of all representing, producing, adjusting, altering, acting, making, and willing, in short, all consciousness and its activity, and then, following along such a way, to return to its ground source. As one of the greatest Japanese Zen masters, Dōgen, says as well: “You shall first learn the step back . . .” (Dōgen, *Fukanzazengi*).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, what does Heidegger's thinking have to do with East-Asian Zen Buddhism at all? From the perspective of this thinking, perhaps nothing since it is an altogether independent thinking. Yet, from our perspective, we have a great deal to do with that thinking. For now, we must limit ourselves to mentioning

only a few things concerning the peculiar relation between Heidegger's thinking and our Zen Buddhism; this may be accomplished by turning to the example of the "blooming tree" that Heidegger speaks about one time (cf. *Was heißt Denken?* p. 16ff.).<sup>3</sup>

The tree there blooms. Regarding this simple situation Heidegger speaks as follows: "We stand before a blooming tree—and the tree stands before us." Anyone can say this. Heidegger restates this matter then in this way: "We place ourselves [*stellen uns*] face-to-face with a tree, before it, and the tree presents itself to us [*stellt sich uns vor*]." Here already appears the peculiarity of his thinking. As I understand it, one usually says in German: We present to ourselves (dative) a tree. Instead of this Heidegger says: "We place ourselves (accusative) face-to-face with a tree, before it." What happens in this restating? Perhaps nothing other than the disappearing of the "we" as representing subject and, simultaneously, of the "tree" as represented object.

Since Descartes, thinking always means: *I think, that is, I present to myself*. This fact, that I *think*, Descartes understands from the: *I think. Cogito* means: *cogito me cogitare*. From this comes henceforth the philosophy of transcendental Idealism, and it informs the Schopenhauerian principle: the world is my representation. To the contrary, Heidegger restates the matter in the way just mentioned. The matter, that we stand before a blooming tree and the tree stands before us, our thinker thinks or sees no longer from the "I think," but from the "there" where the tree stands, which is the ground "upon which we live and die." In this restatement, we have "leapt out of the familiar territory of the sciences and even ... of philosophy." In view of the simple situation that the tree there blooms, we, as representing subject, and the tree, as represented object, must vanish into another kind of "representing." Otherwise, we would not be able at all to see in truth the tree there blooming. Zen Buddhism characterizes this matter in this way, for example: "The donkey looks into the well and the well looks into the donkey. The bird looks at the flower and the flower looks at the bird."

This other "re-presenting," wherein the tree presents itself and the human being places himself face-to-face with the tree, we could perhaps call a *released* representing, whereas that "I present to myself" can be called, as it were, a *willful* representing. From this to that we must leap. Concerning this leap, Heidegger speaks as follows: We must first "leap onto the ground upon which we live and die," that is, "upon which we truly stand." Only by this peculiar leap is a field opened in which "the tree and we *are*." In this field, called "regioning" [*Gegnet*], the tree presents itself to us as what it is and we place ourselves, such as we are, face-to-face with the blooming tree. Yet, this field is wherein already from the beginning we dwell and the tree stands there blooming.

I would like to cite now a somewhat corresponding example from Zen Buddhism. It is a very famous Kōan that is a Zen-question. Once a monk asked

master Chao-chou: "For what reason did the first patriarch Bodhidharma come to China?" To this Chao-chou answers: "cypress tree in the garden." The monk inquired further: "Master—please do not indicate with the help of an object!" Chao-chou said: "I am not indicating with the help of an object." Then the monk asked anew: "For what reason did the first patriarch Bodhidharma come to China?" Chao-chou answered: "cypress tree in the garden."

It is perfectly clear that the first patriarch came from India to China to convey the Buddhist truth. Therefore, the monk's question means: "What is the first and last truth of Zen Buddhism?" Chao-chou's reply quite simply is: "cypress tree in the garden." This answer illuminates like a bolt of lightning, which, with one blow, knocked to the ground the question along with the questioning monk and, at the same time, allows to flash up, completely unveiled, the truth that was sought. With such a manner of responding, the monk should have suddenly leapt onto the ground upon which he and the cypress tree already are. But the lightning did not penetrate the questioning monk. He did not pay attention to Chao-chou's answers themselves, but rather to what was said, that is, the "cypress tree in the garden" as represented object. Consequently, he had to request: "Do not indicate (the truth) with the help of an object." Since from the beginning Master Chao-chou has not shown the truth with the help of an object, his answer to the question posed again is precisely as before. But the monk does not make the leap; that is, he does not attain awakening. He remains chained to objectifying representing, seeing, and thinking.

If I may add something further, Mr. Chao-chou did not have to give precisely this answer: "cypress tree in the garden." Where the tree is, as what it is, and where we are, such as we are, there presences [west] everywhere Buddhist truth, which, exactly for this reason, no longer needs to be designated specifically as *Buddhist* truth. The first patriarch did not have to come over the dangerous sea to China at all. *Nevertheless*, he had to come. Nevertheless, Mr. Chao-chou had to say expressly: "cypress tree in the garden." Nevertheless, Mr. Heidegger must think, question, and say expressly, for example: "We must first leap onto the ground upon which we live and die." Why is this "nevertheless" necessary? Because we must first leap onto the ground upon which we live and die. Because in the forgottenness of the ground upon which we tread, we always wander astray to and fro. Even Chao-chou's answer "cypress tree in the garden" can mislead us. We must make such an answer superfluous.

In short, between the "peculiar leap" that is spoken of by Heidegger and our "we do not need to at all—and nevertheless . . ." there is a deeply concealed relation, as it appears to me. Heidegger asks: "What comes to pass [ereignet sich] here that the tree presents itself to us and we place ourselves face-to-face with the tree?" With him, we could perhaps answer: "The region [or rather the regioning] gathers together, just as if nothing were coming to pass, each to each and everything

to one another into the abiding, while reposing in itself" (*Gelassenheit*, p. 41f.).<sup>4</sup> This "regioning," stated from our perspective, is the "field of the Buddha," that is, the field of truth. Assuming that the Japanese Zen master Dōgen had heard Heidegger's question, he would have perhaps answered: "In the very moment when an old plum tree comes into bloom, in its blooming the world comes to pass" (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, Ch. *Baika*).<sup>5</sup>

At the end of his example of the blooming tree, Heidegger had warned and challenged: "What matters before all else, and finally, is not to let fall away the blooming tree, but for once to let it stand there where it stands" (*Was heißt Denken?* p. 18).<sup>6</sup> We are also warned in Zen, although in another context but with fundamentally one and the same meaning, by that Kōan "cypress tree in the garden": "Do not fell, do not bring down that sprawling tree. Since in its cool shade human beings repose."

Taking into account what has been said, we can now perhaps summarize in the following manner: Heidegger's thinking and Zen Buddhism are, at the very least, in accord in knocking representational thinking to the ground. The field of truth which is thereby opened shows that in both there is a very intimate relation that has not yet been sufficiently clarified. However, while Zen Buddhism has not yet arrived at clarifying *in a thinking way* the field of truth, or more precisely, of un-truth with respect to its essential features, Heidegger's thinking unceasingly attempts to bring to light the essential features of *Alētheia* (un-concealment). This difference makes us aware of a shortcoming in Zen Buddhism—at least in its heretofore traditional form. What traditional Zen Buddhism is lacking is an epochal thinking and questioning of the world. Regarding this question of the world, we must learn and appropriate something decisive from Heidegger's thinking—in particular from his extraordinary notion of the "enframing" as the essence of technology. Otherwise, Zen Buddhism itself would have to become a barren tree. Otherwise, no path could be cleared from Zen to a possible Japanese philosophy.

This evening is a celebration. Our elder, great thinker has come home. In order to celebrate his homecoming, I would like to conclude this address of celebration and of thanks with an old poem of ours:

"Let us return home! Toward the south, north, east, and west. In the deep of the night, we see together the snow on thousand-layered cliffs."

FROM MARTIN HEIDEGGER'S REPLY IN APPRECIATION<sup>7</sup>

These days I often think back, and particularly now, on the celebration of my seventieth birthday that was so delightfully happy. To me, it seems as if it were today; and, yet, a decade lies in-between. In this short space of time, the restless world has been shaped by rapidly successive changes. The past expectation, admittedly already in doubt, that the homeliness of the homeland [*das Heimatliche der Heimat*] could still be immediately saved—this expectation we may no longer cherish. The expression that I wrote in 1946 to a French friend speaks more precisely to this point: "Homelessness is the fate of the world" [*Über den Humanismus*, Frankfurt a.M., first edition, 1949, p. 27].<sup>8</sup> Modern man is settling himself into this homelessness.

Yet, this homelessness conceals itself behind a phenomenon that my friend Tsujimura has already indicated and that I call for short "the world civilization," which a century ago broke in upon Japan as well. World civilization, that means today: the dominance of the natural sciences, the dominance and primacy of the economy, politics, technology. Everything else is no longer even a superstructure [*Überbau*], but merely an utterly run-down annex [*Nebenbau*].

We find ourselves in this world civilization. The engagement of thinking is dedicated to this. In the meantime, this world civilization has reached across the whole earth. Therefore, Mr. Tsujimura, our want [*Not*] is the same as yours. You have demanded quite a bit from the people of Messkirch and from myself with your attempt to make Zen Buddhism "understandable" through a few examples. I cannot say more about that here; however, I would like to mention a fact that is perhaps also familiar to you.

In 1929, as the successor of my teacher Husserl at Freiburg, I delivered my inaugural lecture with the title *What is Metaphysics?* In this lecture, the "nothing" was discussed; I made the attempt to point out that "Being," in contrast to all "beings," is no "being" and, in this sense, is a "nothing." German philosophy, as well as philosophy abroad, characterized this address as "nihilism." In the following year, 1930, a young Japanese man by the name of Yuassa, who was as old as your son perhaps and of the same build, translated into Japanese this lecture that he heard—he was in his first semester. He understood what this lecture wanted to show. This shall suffice as a reply to your address. I thank you and ask you to greet the Japanese friends and, above all, your trusted teacher, Professor Nishitani, whose successor you are, and with me to treasure the memory of his teacher, Professor Tanabe, who in 1922, when I myself was still a beginner, came to Freiburg where I tried to familiarize him with the basic features and methods of "phenomenological thinking." He became Japan's most significant thinker and died a solitary man in the mountains, probably in the manner as you have just sketched it.

## NOTES

1. Kōichi Tsujimura, born in 1922, is one of the most prominent figures of his generation in the so-called Kyoto School of thought in Japan. He is also widely regarded as the foremost Japanese interpreter and proponent of Martin Heidegger's thinking. From 1956 to 1958, Tsujimura studied with Heidegger in Freiburg, and in the subsequent years, he translated and commented upon a number of Heidegger's texts. Furthermore, in his own published work he was much concerned with attempting to show the close connection between Heidegger's thinking and the tradition of reflection in Zen Buddhism and in the Kyoto School.

In 1969, the German town of Messkirch, Heidegger's birthplace, invited Tsujimura to give the keynote address at the town's celebration of Heidegger's 80th birthday. In the evening of September 26, Tsujimura delivered an engaging talk in German titled *Martin Heideggers Denken und die japanische Philosophie*; this address, along with other speeches and Heidegger's *Reply in Appreciation (Dankansprache)*, was originally published by the town in the volume *Martin Heidegger—Ansprachen zum 80. Geburtstag am 26. September 1969 in Messkirch* (Messkirch: Heuberg-Druckerei F.G. Aker). Twenty years later, Tsujimura's text and a selection from Heidegger's reply (relating to Tsujimura's address) were published by Jan Thorbecke Verlag in a collection of writings titled *Japan und Heidegger* in commemoration of Heidegger's 100th birthday in 1989. Our translation of these two texts follows the Thorbecke Verlag edition (except for minor typographical errors that we have corrected), and we are grateful to the publisher for granting us the translation rights.

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Please note that all of the citations in the body of the texts are as they appear in the Thorbecke edition and are not the translators' interpolations. We have added corresponding notes.

2. Trans.: The *Fukanzazengi* is Dōgen's earliest teaching statement on Zen meditative practice (1227). This cornerstone text has been translated into English many times, variously titled along the lines of the *General Recommendation for the Practice of Zazen*.
3. Trans.: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 37–44.
4. Trans.: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 66.
5. Trans.: The reference is to the fascicle "Plum Blossoms" (*Baika*) written by Dōgen in 1243 as part of his life's work and masterwork *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye (Shōbōgenzō)*. Cf. "Plum Blossoms" in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1995), 114–23.
6. Trans.: Cf. *What is Called Thinking?* 44.
7. *Aus Martin Heideggers Dankansprache*, in *Japan und Heidegger*, 166. See initial note for complete information.
8. Trans.: This citation appears in the Thorbecke Verlag edition only. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism in Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 258.

