



## **Awakening to Language in Heidegger and Zen**

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### **1. Introduction**

¶1. A number of authors have noted the similarities between Heidegger's writings on releasement (*Gelassenheit*) and the accounts of awakening or *satori* provided by some Zen Buddhists.<sup>[1]</sup> However, at first sight, there would seem to be a crucial difference between the two ideas: surely, while Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* involves a 'poetic' awakening *to* language, *satori* involves nothing less than a release *from* the confines of language to a translinguistic reality. Joan Stambaugh, Charles Wei-hsun Fu and John Caputo all see this as a fundamental difference between the two ideas:

¶2. Stambaugh:

I do not wish to oversimplify Heidegger's relation to language, but it seems to me that a Buddhist would never say that 'language is the house of Being', if indeed he would speak of 'Being' at all. Is not, for instance, the function of the *koan* precisely to break through language by posing logically unanswerable questions? And since the dialogues between master and pupil take place in a language not branded by metaphysics, they presumably aim at something forever beyond language, or *satori*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Fu:

Against Heidegger's conception of language that functions as the historical house of (the truth of) Being or as the primordial Saying of Being itself, the Zen man insists on the transmetaphysically naturalistic and pedagogically provisional nature of Zen language or expression.[\[3\]](#)

Caputo:

Language for Zen is like a finger pointing to the moon; it must be disregarded in favour of a 'direct pointing' without fingers, or words--lest we see the finger instead of the moon ... where Bodhidharma says, 'No dependence upon words and letters', Heidegger says that language is the house of Being: 'Where words give out no thing may be.'[\[4\]](#)

- ¶3. At first glance, these claims seem justified. In his writings on the 'speaking' of language or its status as the 'house of Being' Heidegger is certainly according a primacy to language quite alien to Zen traditions.[\[5\]](#) Yet before any possibility of correspondence between the two positions is dismissed it must be noted that, in some of his writings, Heidegger himself seems to call for a transcendence of language, namely, when that language takes the form of the 'idle chatter' (*Gerede*) which marks inauthentic existence.[\[6\]](#) Moreover, just as *Gelassenheit* can be read as an awakening to language, so recent scholarship suggests that *satori* can be interpreted in a similar manner. In the light of such considerations, I argue in this paper that the objections of Stambaugh et al to comparing Heideggerian and Zen modes of awakening[\[7\]](#) are not compelling. On the contrary, I suggest that in certain respects both positions accord language a remarkably similar role *vis à vis* awakening.

## 2. Language and Awakening in Heidegger

- ¶4. I do not wish to challenge the interpretation Stambaugh et al provide of Heidegger: according to Heidegger, awakened existence, like indeed all human life, is indelibly linguistic.
- ¶5. For Heidegger, language is neither a system of utterances and written words nor a catalogue of labels attached *post hoc* to an immediate non-linguistic presentation of things (relatively coherent and stable bundles of perceptions, Lockian ideas, or whatever). Rather, the 'language' of Heidegger's later writings is nothing less than the basic articulation through which things in the world (verbal utterances and written words included) are, so to speak, 'lit up' as things. Things come to be through language; for Heidegger, language is the 'house of Being':

- ¶6. It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word 'well', through the word 'woods' even if we do not speak the words and do not even think of anything relating to language. [\[8\]](#)
- ¶7. For Heidegger, we find ourselves 'thrown' into a world already articulated through language into significant things. In his later philosophy, Heidegger emphasises that this linguistic articulation of the world is not effected by human beings--he is fundamentally opposed to the idea that it is *we* as humans who carve the world up by means of language. On the contrary, he maintains that this linguistic articulation of the world is 'not anything human', and it is this radical idea which forms the basis for his startling assertion that 'Language speaks'. Before we speak, language has already spoken. [\[9\]](#)
- ¶8. We will return to these ideas in later sections. For the moment, it will suffice to note that for the later Heidegger awakening (*Gelassenheit*) involves, not the transcendence of language, but a mode of 'poetic' being wherein one, as it were, entrusts oneself to the speaking of language. [\[10\]](#) Since this speaking of language is nothing less than the genesis of the world, this awakening involves the subject's becoming in some sense acquainted with the coming-to-be or disclosure of things, what Heidegger calls the Being of beings.

### 3. Language and Awakening in Zen

- ¶9. In this respect, then, the readings of Stambaugh et al are spot on: for Heidegger, awakening is indelibly linguistic. But what of the other side of the equation? Does *satori* involve a transcendence of language? [\[11\]](#)
- ¶10. Dale S. Wright has provided a convincing argument that it does not. *Satori*, he suggests, should not be thought of as a transcendence of language to some form of pure or uninterpreted perception of reality. [\[12\]](#) This understanding, he argues, rests upon the notion that language acts on the raw data of an uninterpreted 'given'. [\[13\]](#) Such an 'instrumentalist' picture allows the possibility that language be somehow detached or abstracted from its raw data to achieve an undistorted view of reality. However, as Wright points out, such a theory of language has been the target of an array of criticisms from linguistically-inclined philosophers. In this context, one could cite 'Continental' critiques of the possibility of objective translinguistic truth from Herder to Nietzsche and then through Heidegger to Derrida, et al, and 'analytic' critiques of the possibility of transcending language from Wittgenstein to Davidson and Sellars. Nonetheless, in Wright's view this does not constitute grounds for rejecting the notion of *satori* altogether. On the contrary, he contends that *satori* can

be alternatively interpreted as ‘an awakening *to* rather than *from* language’.[14]

Although the awakened Zen Buddhist finds herself released from ‘self-conscious reflection’, Wright contends that the structure of her experience will continue to be shaped by the ‘forces of linguistic shaping that are communicated through the institutions, practices and beliefs of the community and the underlying [Zen] tradition’.[15]

- ¶11. Wright draws his inspiration for this account of the fundamental linguisticity of the world from Heidegger’s arguments in *Being and Time* for the primordial nature of interpretation.[16] He points out that from the standpoint of Heidegger’s thought a thoroughly uninterpreted world would be one that had absolutely no significance for the subject.[17] If *satori* did, in fact, involve a genuine transcendence of language (and not mere inexpressibility), the enlightened Zen Buddhist would not even be able to understand the significance of such everyday objects as chairs and pens: a chair would not be ‘lit up’ as something to sit on, a pen would not disclose itself as something to write with. Truly to ‘see everything for the first time’--an ability T. P. Kasulis once ascribed to the awakened--would be to be profoundly alienated from the world, to find oneself floundering in a literally meaningless world.[18]
- ¶12. *Satori*, however, is not described in such terms. Far from being alienated or uprooted from the world, the awakened Zen Buddhist finds herself entirely ‘at home’ in the world.[19] Hence the various descriptions of the enlightened Zen Buddhist expressing her awakening in her everyday worldly dealings--making tea, sweeping the floor, washing up, and so on.
- ¶13. Wright’s thesis that *satori* involves an awakening to a linguistically-structured world squares nicely with these accounts. Although the enlightened Zen Buddhist might well be released from what Wright calls ‘self-conscious reflection’, *things*--the structures of the world with which she interacts--are still ‘lit up’ for her through language. She recognises the ringing of the monastery bell as, say, a call to meditate (rather than as a call to breakfast) because her experience is shaped in the language of the particular culture of a Zen nun.

#### 4. Awakening as a Homecoming

- ¶14. Yet on the face of it this account of *satori* as a return to everyday familiarity is problematic. The notion that *satori* involves a ‘return home’ to the linguistically-articulated world we are prereflectively familiar with implies that we must be in some sense *removed* from that world. Is that idea coherent?

- ¶15. I am, let us suppose, ‘at home’ in the relevant sense in my kitchen. That is to say that in my kitchen I tend to act fluidly and unreflectively: making a cup of tea or operating the pedal bin are not theoretical exercises--in normal circumstances (that is, after around 9 o’clock in the morning) they do not require reflection. But if we are to justify the idea that *satori* involves a ‘homecoming’ then it must be that I am somehow estranged from the familiar contours of this kitchen-world. How can this be?
- ¶16. In response to this question it is important to note that, in normal circumstances, things show up for us as familiar against a background of practical significance (a ‘referential totality’, as Heidegger puts it), which for the most part remains implicit or hidden. (It is this fact which allows me to act unreflectively. If it were not the case I would run the risk of boiling my watch instead of my egg.) *Satori*, I suggest, involves this normally hidden background becoming perspicuous.
- ¶17. This is not to say that *satori* must involve the thematisation of some aspect of our perception which formerly constituted an element of the background. Trivially, once an element of the background is thematised it moves into the foreground and, hence, ceases to be background. So if I contemplate the toaster or the frying pan as an object of theoretical contemplation--as a thing ‘present-at-hand’, in Heidegger’s sense--I am not illuminating the background in the sense required for *satori*. The background remains hidden. In this respect, then, the background is a slippery customer; accordingly, its disclosure must be attained through a concomitantly unfamiliar route.
- ¶18. But, whatever its exact meaning--and this is something I will try to explain presently--it can be noted that the idea that *satori* involves the disclosure of the ever-present yet generally hidden background chimes with the accounts of awakening provided not only by Zen Buddhists, but also by Heidegger. In this connection, one can recall the central Zen Buddhist claim that we are already enlightened and need only awake to the fact. In Heidegger, one encounters a similar idea, albeit one articulated in characteristically more abstruse terms. As ‘language beings’, Heidegger contends that we are party to the coming-to-be of things. In *Being and Time*, he makes this point by claiming that to be human is not to be a particular sort of thing--a rational animal, for instance, or a conjunction of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*--but to be a ‘clearing’ wherein things come-to-be or disclose themselves, through language, as things. But even though this is our essential nature as human beings, we are not necessarily aware of the fact. In order to become so aware, Heidegger claims that our nature as a clearing must *itself* be disclosed. This poses a problem. As the context within which things disclose themselves as things, the clearing is not itself a thing. The requirement that human being’s existence as a clearing be disclosed therefore amounts to the bizarre requirement that disclosure be itself disclosed, that the clearing itself become perspicuous. In Charles Taylor’s pithy phrase, it is the requirement that ‘showing up ... show up’.<sup>[20]</sup> The fact that the clearing is not *already* perspicuous indicates that humans are somehow removed or estranged from this, their essential way of being.

## 5. Substantialistic Thinking and Nihilism

- ¶19. I have suggested that both *Gelassenheit* and *satori* involve our becoming aware of the linguistically structured background with which we are prereflectively ‘at home’. Moreover, the background is, so to speak, our default position--we are already ‘at home’ in it; already, in a sense, awakened. Perhaps this is part of what Zen Buddhists mean when they refer to awakening as an ‘original state’ to which we are blinded by ‘delusions’. In this section, I will examine two such delusions, two ‘veils’ of the background, ‘substantialistic thinking’ and ‘nihilism’.[\[21\]](#)
- ¶20. As its name suggests, substantialistic thinking involves substantialising the thing--abstracting it from its context, and setting it up as a substance, an *ens per se existens* as the Medievals had it, an entity existing through itself. But an utterly independent thing would seem to have no need of a background of understanding to provide the context in which it can show up. Thus, to substantialise the thing is, I suggest, to remain blind to the background.
- ¶21. Substances, however, play little part in the accounts of reality one associates with Heidegger and Zen. For both these positions, things are not defined as such by virtue of their possessing intrinsic ‘self-natures’; on the contrary, things take their various identities from their contexts.[\[22\]](#)
- ¶22. Heidegger’s opposition to substantialistic thinking finds expression in his commitment to holism. According to Robert Solomon, ‘*Being and Time* is almost unique in Western philosophy in its unrestricted emphasis on holism.’[\[23\]](#) However, the kind of holism found in *Being and Time* is not of the naturalistic variety one might associate with a scientific picture of the world; Heidegger’s point is not that all things in the world are *causally* dependent upon their contexts. The holism of *Being and Time* is rather founded on the phenomenological significance of things--the way in which the significance of any particular element of our experience is a function of relations it has to other such elements. Thus the world of *Being and Time* is a ‘referential totality’ wherein the computer mouse, say, shows up as a thing in so far as it is part of a field of practical significance composed of the computer keyboard, the screen, the mouse pad, my desire to get this article finished, and so on. This basic commitment to holism is retained in Heidegger’s later work. For instance, in various post-war essays, Heidegger claims that a thing, rather than being a substance, is in fact an ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering’ of the four phenomenological dimensions of the ‘world’. Thus, in his later essays, Heidegger presents a richer account of a thing as gathering not just a field of practical significance, but the four dimensions of ‘earth, sky, mortals and gods’.[\[24\]](#)

- ¶23. Zen can also be associated with a holistic account of reality. That is not to say that Zen subscribes to holism as a *thesis* (it does no such thing) but that the Zen tradition has its conceptual roots in a form of Buddhism which can be associated with a radically holistic account of the world, namely, Madhyamaka or ‘middle way’ Buddhism (which is not to say that Zen does not have conceptual roots in other places as well--in the Yogācāra school, for example). The holism of Madhyamaka is evident in its central commitment to demonstrating that all things--selves, entities, thoughts, etc.; in short, anything you care to name--are ‘empty’ of self-existence, that, in other words, none of these things should be regarded as completely independent. Without entering into a discussion of the intricacies of this deceptively profound idea, it is clear that the Madhyamaka account of reality is radically holistic. Moreover, as for Heidegger, this holism is not purely causal. For the Madhyamika, the dependence between things referred to is ‘conceptual’ or logical’ so that it does not make sense even to imagine an abstract whole, for instance, existing independently of its parts or an abstract ‘now’ existing independently of a past and a future.
- ¶24. So do Heidegger and Zen enjoin us to relinquish our deluded perception of putative substances in favour of a perception of their relations? Certainly, at least on the face of it, their respective commitments to holism would seem to impel one to negate things completely, to deny them not just substantial form but indeed any degree of being whatsoever. Doesn’t Heidegger’s thing entirely ‘dissolve’ into its context of earth, sky, mortals and gods just as, for the Madhyamika, all things dissolve into emptiness?
- ¶25. But these concerns are misguided. The conception of nihilism to which they refer represents the goal of neither Heidegger nor Zen but the flipside of the error of substantialistic thinking, what one might call the error of ‘nihilism’. For while one could say that substantialistic thinking involves thematising the foreground of things at the expense of the background, nihilism would seem to involve the opposite error, namely, thematising the background at the expense of the foreground of things. In losing the foreground of particular things, we lose our familiarity with the world. If I see only context, only relations, then the toaster, the frying pan and the kettle all cease to be ‘lit up’ as significant things. They dissolve into the empty vapour of the background; they die, as it were, to their contexts. With one’s eyes fixed on the background nothing discloses itself as significant or familiar.
- ¶26. This seems to be the sort of experience Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* as *Angst*. In *Angst* one encounters the eerie presence of the ‘world-as-such’, the ‘clearing’ which provides the context for the disclosure of all things, but which is not itself a thing. Accordingly, *Angst* is an *unheimlich* or literally, ‘unhomelike’, mood in which, Heidegger tells us, ‘[e]veryday familiarity collapses’.[\[25\]](#)

- ¶27. Yet the mood of *Angst* is therefore quite distinct from the experience of homecoming associated with either *Gelassenheit* or *satori*. There are, I think, grounds for supposing that an experience of something like *Angst* serves as a precursor to awakening,[\[26\]](#) but the two experiences are clearly distinct.

## 6. The Central Problem

- ¶28. I have suggested, on the one hand, that to thematise the foreground of things at the expense of the background is the error of everyday perception. I referred to it as ‘substantialistic thinking’. On the other hand, I have proposed that to thematise the background at the expense of the foreground of significant things is to fall into something similar to Heidegger’s *Angst*. I referred to it as ‘nihilism,’ and argued that for neither Heidegger nor Zen was it to be confused with awakening.
- ¶29. If awakening is to consist of a ‘homecoming’ yet be more than a mere unawakened being in the world then, I suggest, it must involve an experience wherein the background becomes perspicuous but *not* at the expense of the ‘linguistically-articulated’ foreground of distinct and familiar things. In awakening, background and things must be disclosed *together*.
- ¶30. On the face of it, this would seem to be problematic. Surely the disclosure of both foreground and background would have to involve some kind of paradoxical or contradictory perception? Maybe it would, but perhaps one ought not to be surprised by this possibility. After all, the literature of Zen abounds with paradoxical accounts of awakened experience. Moreover, there would seem to be a certain air of paradox or tension about Heidegger’s notion of the co-disclosure of the thing *and* world, the thing and the background in the context of which the thing shows up. Indeed, in this regard it is interesting to note that Heidegger associates the co-disclosure of world and thing with ‘pain’ (of which I will have more to say presently).[\[27\]](#)

## 7. Two Moments of Holism

- ¶31. In order to make sense of these paradoxes (if that is the right phrase), it may help to recall that Heidegger and Zen seem, on the face of it, to subscribe to singularly holistic views of reality. As such, they can both be associated with the general idea that the properties of any particular element of reality (thing, event, word, self or whatever) depend on that element's context.<sup>[28]</sup> However, with this idea the problem presents itself as to how to limit the context upon which those properties, and indeed the thing itself, depends. Holism entails not only that the thing depends for its existence on its local environment, but also that that environment in turn depends on its environment, and so on. Indeed once an overarching and unconditional commitment to holism is in place, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that any element ultimately depends for its existence upon the whole of reality.
- ¶32. This startling conclusion can, I suggest, be pictured in two ways. On the one hand, one could imagine the thing 'dissolving' into reality entire (perhaps, in line with Sankara, say, or F. H. Bradley, one could think of its dissolution into an undifferentiated Absolute). On the other hand, one could reflect that just as any particular thing dissolves into reality entire, so any change in a particular thing will reverberate, as it were, throughout the entire system. There will be a 'knock-on' effect so that the influence will spread through the system like cracks in a pane of glass or ripples in a pond. Accordingly, one can juxtapose the picture of the thing dissolving into reality entire with another picture wherein the existence of all things depends on the existence of a single thing. I will refer to these pictures as two 'moments': a moment of 'dissolution' in which a thing 'dissolves' into the whole, and a moment of 'condensation' in which the whole, so to speak, 'enters into' or is 'gathered' by the thing.
- ¶33. The presence of these two moments is, I think, evident in many Buddhist writings. For instance, alongside their many pronouncements on the emptiness of all things, some Buddhist thinkers (notably, those of the Hua-yen and T'ien-t'ai schools) came to emphasise the idea that any particular thing, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is a manifestation of reality entire. Thus, like Blake, D gen claims that '[1]f we have true perception, a speck of dust ... can be seen to ... contain all other worlds of experience.'<sup>[29]</sup> Moreover, it is tempting to interpret the following passage from the 'Sayings of Daikaku' in terms of the co-disclosure of the moments of dissolution and condensation:
- ¶34. Realisation makes every place a temple; the absolute endows all beings with the true eye. When you come to grasp it, you find it was before your eyes. If you can see clear what is before your very eyes, it is what fills the ten directions; when you see what fills the ten directions, you find it is only what is before your eyes.<sup>[30]</sup>

- ¶35. Heidegger's account of the thing can, I think, be understood in similar terms. As we saw earlier, from one angle a Heideggerian thing can be thought of as, so to speak, dissolving into the four dimensions of the world: from this perspective, a thing just is a particular coming-together or gathering of earth, sky, mortals and gods. Yet Heidegger writes that although world 'grants' things, things also 'bear' world, and that '[t]he world suffice[s] itself in the thing'.<sup>[31]</sup> In these statements, Heidegger is trying to articulate the idea that the thing is not just *a* gathering of earth, sky, mortals and gods, but that it actually *gathers* them. He is, I suggest, trying to convey the idea I have referred to as the moment of condensation.
- ¶36. These speculations have a threefold significance for our purpose of understanding the co-disclosure of background and foreground. First, to say that a particular thing exists as a condensation of reality is to *deny* that that thing depends for its existence on anything else. This is one reason why Zen cannot rightly be said to subscribe to a holistic thesis, according to which all things must be understood in terms of their relations to other things. Second, the presence of a moment of condensation alongside a moment of dissolution prevents things from dissolving entirely into the background. For this reason, neither Heidegger nor Zen ought to be accused of nihilism. Third, as I shall try to explain in the next section, the idea of the co-disclosure of the two moments of dissolution and condensation gives some insight into the paradoxical nature of the co-disclosure of foreground and background.

## 8. Suchness/The Rift

- ¶37. From a Buddhist standpoint, the paradoxical co-disclosure of foreground and background only discloses itself as a paradox if one attempts to represent it 'theoretically'. After all, its two 'poles' are the twin errors of substantialistic thinking and nihilism--the tendency to focus on the foreground at the expense of the background and on the background at the expense of the foreground, respectively. But, as a Zen teacher might point out, talk of 'poles' is a characteristic of unawakened dualistic discourse; awakening, by contrast, is conventionally said to be non-dualistic. Hence one is led to presume that whatever paradox afflicts the 'theoretical' account of awakening would not show up in the experience of one who has actually awakened.
- ¶38. What of Heidegger? Well, as we noted earlier, Heidegger associates the paradoxical disclosure of background and foreground, of world and thing, with 'pain', a notion he describes in the following enigmatic passage:

- ¶39. [Pain] does not tear apart into dispersive fragments. Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same time it draws everything to itself, gathers it to itself. Its rending, as a separating that gathers, is at the same time a drawing which, like the pen-drawing of a plan or sketch, draws and joins together what is held apart in separation.[\[32\]](#)
- ¶40. It would seem that pain stands not only for a paradox, a schizoid tension at the heart of reality, but also for some sort of basic *articulation* of the world. It signifies not only the paradoxical co-disclosure of thing and world, but also the drawing together of thing and world into ‘intimacy’, and into ‘their very nature[s]’.[\[33\]](#)
- ¶41. It is, I think, illuminating to compare Heidegger’s writings on this basic articulation of the world with the various mentions in his later works of a state wherein each thing is held to fit, as it were, into its allotted place. For instance, in his 1943 essay ‘Remembrance of the Poet’ he writes of the state in which each thing is allotted that ‘place of existence where by its nature it belongs’;[\[34\]](#) in his 1950 lecture, ‘The Thing’, he writes of a state in which ‘...each present thing, modestly compliant, fits into its own being’.[\[35\]](#) On the face of it, these statements might remind one of Heidegger’s affiliations with totalitarian thought. But whether or not this comparison is justified, it is interesting to note the resonance between Heidegger’s words and Buddhist discussions of the ‘thusness’ of things (*tathat* ). It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that, in speaking of the thing as fitting into its own being, Heidegger is trying to convey the as-it-is-ness of the thing, the way in which, by freeing one’s perception of distortions, the thing can be allowed to disclose itself as it ‘really is’.
- ¶42. Experiencing things in this way need not involve a transcendence of language – and this, I believe, is a point that has been well demonstrated by Heidegger. In his 1950 lecture, ‘Language’, Heidegger identifies pain with what he calls ‘the rift’.[\[36\]](#) He had introduced the idea of the rift over a decade previously in his lectures on art where he had written that it not only designates a Heraclitean opposition or ‘strife’ at the heart of things, but also some sort of basic articulation of the world, a ‘rift-design’ (*Aufriss*) ‘hidden in nature’ (and, incidentally, brought forth in great works of art).[\[37\]](#) For the purposes of our present discussion of language, it is interesting to note Heidegger’s claim, in his 1959 lecture ‘The Way to Language’, that the rift-design is ‘the unity in the essence of language’.[\[38\]](#) This claim is surely significant: it leads one to wonder whether the world articulated by the rift-design is the *linguistically* articulated world one awakens to in *satori* or *Gelassenheit*.

- ¶43. It is also significant that Heidegger writes of awakening as ‘poetic’. The released individual, he says, releases himself to the ‘speaking of language’ and so derives a poetic inspiration from the pulse of Being itself. Zen Buddhists would be suspicious of any such references to ‘Being’; however, in other respects there are similarities between their views and those of Heidegger. For instance, it seems plausible to suggest that just as the awakened Zen Buddhist finds wonder in even the most mundane phenomena, so Heidegger’s ‘poet’ comes to see poetry in all things. That is to say that in ‘liv[ing] in the speaking of language’<sup>[39]</sup> the awakened individual comes to see all things as redolent with world.

## 9. Conclusions

- ¶44. To recap: I have suggested that awakening – by which I mean either *satori* or *Gelassenheit* – lies on a middle path between the twin pitfalls of substantialistic thinking and nihilism. It can be associated with a comportment wherein both the foreground of things and the background of our understanding are revealed together in a single harmonious disclosure. The disclosure of *things* ensures that awakening does not involve an *Angst*-like ‘nihilistic’ state: the awakened world, like the everyday world, contains those significant things with which a subject will be able to interact. Thus awakening might be legitimately described as a ‘homecoming’. However, to the awakened eye, these things are imbued with a newfound significance, which, I have suggested, is a function of their now disclosing themselves alongside the background of understanding against which they stood out as things in the first place. I have tried to explain this co-disclosure of foreground and background in terms of the commitments to holism of both Heidegger and Madhyamaka Buddhism. In the light of Heidegger’s enigmatic comments on ‘pain’ and ‘the rift-design’, I have suggested that the co-disclosure of two ‘moments’ of holism--of dissolution and of condensation--results in a ‘poetic’ vision of a linguistically articulated world. More work will be needed to ascertain whether this interpretation holds water. But, if it does, then both *Gelassenheit* and *satori* ought to be considered awakenings *to* language.

## END NOTES

1. See for example John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, Ohio University Press (1984), 205 ff.. See also Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, translated by Graham Parkes, London/New York: Routledge (1996); and *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, translated by Graham Parkes, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1987).

2. Joan Stambaugh, [Commentary on Takeshi Umehara's 'Heidegger and Buddhism'](#), *Philosophy East & West*, 20(3) 1970, 286.
3. Charles W. Fu, [Heidegger and Zen on Being and Nothingness: A Critical Essay in Transmetaphysical Dialectics](#) in N. Katz (Ed.), *Buddhist and Western Philosophy* New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers (1981), 187.
4. John D. Caputo, [The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought](#), Ohio University Press (1984), 216.
5. Dogen may be an exception. Noting Dogen's claim that 'words and phrases liberate discriminating thought', David Loy points out, pace Stambaugh, that for Dogen the function of a *kan* is emphatically not to 'break through language'. David R. Loy, [Language Against its own Mystifications: deconstruction in Nagarjuna and Dogen](#), *Philosophy East and West*, 49(3) 1999, 256.
6. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, [Being and Time](#), translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers (1962), 343/296. (References to Being and Time give the page number in Macquarrie and Robinson's translation, followed by the page number in the later German editions of the work.)
7. I will refer to both *Gelassenheit* and *satori* as modes of 'awakening' from some form of inauthentic or 'samsaric' condition (whilst, for the moment, suspending judgement on the similarity of these ideas as much as possible).
8. Martin Heidegger, [Poetry, Language, Thought](#), translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 132.
9. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 207,210. It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a thorough explication of Heidegger's views on language. For an illuminating account, see Charles Taylor, [Heidegger, Language and Ecology](#) in H. L. Dreyfus and H.Hall (Eds.), *Heidegger A Critical Reader* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell (1992).
10. On *Gelassenheit*, see  
  
Martin Heidegger, [Discourse on Thinking](#), translated by John Anderson and E Freund, New York: Harper&Row (1966), 54, n. 4.

- [11.](#) I do not mean to imply that satori is the ultimate aim of Zen practices. For one thing, not all traditions of Zen emphasise satori (Some traditions tend not to, for example). For another, even those traditions that do tend to stress that notion seldom see experiences of satori as the be-all and end-all of practice. See, for instance, Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, London: Rider (1985), 9.
- [12.](#) Dale S. Wright, *Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience*, *Philosophy East & West*, 42(1) 1992, 113-38. Don Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell (1998) includes similar criticisms of modernist interpretations of mystical experience.
- [13.](#) *ibid.*, 114.
- [14.](#) *ibid.*, 133. Wright's emphasis.
- [15.](#) *ibid.*, 131.
- [16.](#) See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers (1962), Division 1, Part 5, Section 32.
- [17.](#) Dale S. Wright, *Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience*, *Philosophy East & West*, 42(1) 1992, 113-38, 122.
- [18.](#) *ibid.*, 120.
- [19.](#) Or perhaps I should say, the fully awakened individual finds herself at home in the world. As the writings of Hakuin and others make clear, while complete awakening may be described as a return home to the world, initial glimpses of awakening may have a more otherworldly feel. See note 26.
- [20.](#) Charles Taylor, *Heidegger, Language and Ecology* in H. L. Dreyfus and H. Hall (Eds.), *Heidegger A Critical Reader* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell (1992), 263. Heidegger, as ever, is less concise: '[What matters] is to bring out the Being of beings--though no longer in the manner of metaphysics, but such that Being itself will shine out, Being itself--that is to say: the presence of present beings [the disclosure of disclosed beings]' (Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by P Hertz, New York: Harper & Row (1971), p.31).

- [21.](#) In referring to these errors, I am drawing upon the work of Masao Abe (specifically, chapters 4 and 5 of Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1979)).
- [22.](#) Some readers will complain that Zen cannot be saddled with any such philosophical position. Zen, they will point out, is not a philosophy, and so does not subscribe to any particular view of the world at all. This complaint is entirely justified. However, if readers will bear with me, I hope to show, later in this paper, that the attempt to saddle Zen with any kind of thesis about the world, even a holistic one, would be misguided.
- [23.](#) Robert Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1988), 156.
- [24.](#) See, for instance, Heidegger's essays, 'The Thing', 'Building Dwelling Thinking' and 'Language' in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975).
- [25.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers (1962), 233/189.
- [26.](#) For Heidegger, the experience of *Angst* is closely linked to awakening (that is, in *Being and Time*, the attainment of authenticity). One could say that *Angst* prepares the ground for awakening (see *ibid.*, 358/310; cf. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, D. Krell (Ed.), London: Routledge (1996), p. 103 'In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings--and not nothing'). Similarly, some Zen Buddhists describe an *Angst*-like 'nihilistic' state wherein familiarity collapses as a precursor to awakening rather than awakening itself. This idea is brought out in the following oft-cited discourse given by the Zen master Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin: 'Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters." After I got an insight into the truth of Zen... I said, "Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters." But now, having attained the abode of the final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, "Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters."' (From Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1979), p.4. Annotations Abe's own.) Perhaps Heidegger's *Angst* can be identified with the second stage of Wei-hsin's progression; indeed, perhaps both *Gelassenheit* and satori may be preceded by a nihilistic stage. (In this connection, see Hakuin, *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, translated by Philip Yampolsky, New York:

Columbia University Press (1971), p.118.)

- [27.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 204.
- [28.](#) With the proviso given in note 22.
- [29.](#) Shobogenzo Dogen, *The Eye and Treasury of the True Law, Vol. 1*, translated by K Nishiyama and J Stevens, Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo (1976), 15. As David Loy explains, Dogen encapsulates this idea in his notion of *ippo-gujin*, the ‘total exertion of a single dharma’-the idea that each dharma is both the cause and effect of all other dharmas. Loy notes that the ‘application of *ippo-gujin* to language allows words too, to transcend dualism’ (David R. Loy, [Language Against its own Mystifications: deconstruction in Nagarjuna and Dogen](#), *Philosophy East and West*, 49(3) 1999, 256).
- [30.](#) Quoted in Tim Leggett, *Zen and the Ways*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1978), 61.
- [31.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 206.
- [32.](#) *ibid.*, 204.
- [33.](#) *ibid.*, 207.
- [34.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, W. Brock (Ed.), London: Vision Press (1968), 271.
- [35.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 182.
- [36.](#) *ibid.*, 204.
- [37.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, D. Krell (Ed.), London: Routledge (1996), 195.

- [38.](#) *ibid.*, 407.
- [39.](#) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 210.

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